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Edwin Arlington Robinson

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About this Person
Born: December 22, 1869 in Head Tide, Maine, United States
Died: April 05, 1935 in New York, New York, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Poet
Other Names: Robinson, E.A.; Robinson, Edwinn Arlington; Robinson, Edwin
WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

Selected Books

- *The Torrent and The Night Before* (Cambridge: Privately printed, 1896).
- *The Children of the Night* (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1897).
- *Captain Craig* (Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902; London: A.P. Watt, 1902; enlarged edition, New York: Macmillan, 1915).
- *The Town Down the River* (New York: Scribners, 1910).
- *Van Zorn* (New York: Macmillan, 1914).
- *The Porcupine* (New York: Macmillan, 1915).
- *The Man Against the Sky* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
- *Merlin* (New York: Macmillan, 1917).
- *Lancelot* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1920).
- *The Three Taverns* (New York: Macmillan, 1920).
- *Avon's Harvest* (New York: Macmillan, 1921).
- *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1921; London: Cecil Palmer, 1922).
- *Roman Bartholow* (New York: Macmillan, 1923; London: Cecil Palmer, 1923).
- *The Man Who Died Twice* (New York: Macmillan, 1924; London: Cecil Palmer, 1924).
- *Dionysus in Doubt* (New York: Macmillan, 1925).
- *Tristram* (New York: Macmillan, 1927; London: Gollancz, 1928).
- *Collected Poems,* 5 volumes (Cambridge, Mass.: Dunster House, 1927).
- *Sonnets, 1889-1917* (New York: Crosby Gaige, 1928).
- *Fortunatus* (Reno: Slide Mountain Press, 1928).
- *Modred* (New York, New Haven & Princeton: Brick Row Bookshop, 1929).
- *Cavender's House* (New York: Macmillan, 1929; London: Hogarth Press, 1930).
- *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).
- *The Glory of the Nightingales* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).
- *Selected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).
- *Matthias at the Door* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).
- *Nicodemus* (New York: Macmillan, 1932).
- *Talifer* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).
- *Amaranth* (New York: Macmillan, 1934).
- *King Jasper* (New York: Macmillan, 1935).
- *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1937).
- *Selected Early Poems and Letters,* edited by Charles T. Davis (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960).
- *Uncollected Poems and Prose,* edited by Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1975).

Letters

- *Selected Letters,* edited by Ridgely Torrence (New York: Macmillan, 1940).
- *Untriangulated Stars: Letters to Harry de Forest Smith 1890-1905,* edited by Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947).
- *Edwin Arlington Robinson's Letters to Edith Brower,* edited by Richard Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:
One of the most prolific major American poets of the twentieth century, Edwin Arlington Robinson is, ironically, best remembered for only a handful of short poems. Aside from a few that he complained were "pickled in anthological brine"--"Richard Cory," "Miniver Cheevy," and "Mr. Flood's Party"--most of his work is not widely known. The 1,500-page collected edition of his work (1937) contains the twenty volumes of poetry published during his lifetime, including the thirteen long narratives which critics have ignored or denigrated but which he regarded as among his best work. Indeed, the long poems that occupied his energies during the last dozen years of his life were not designed for popular appeal, and his stubborn insistence on traditional forms at a time of extraordinary technical experimentation led to the critical attitude that his work is anachronistic, a throwback to the nineteenth-century triumphs of Robert Browning , Alfred Tennyson , and Matthew Arnold. Such a view and the concommitant lack of interest in his work is unfortunate, for Robinson was a true innovator within the constraints of the traditional forms; his attitude, tone, and eclectic subject matter genuinely anticipate the main thrust of twentieth-century American poetry. As Robert Frost , in his introduction to *King Jasper*, put it, Robinson was "content with the old-fashioned way to be new."

In an age when other prominent poets were engaged in many other pursuits, Robinson stood alone in his unmitigated devotion to writing poetry. T.S. Eliot with his career in publishing, William Carlos Williams with his medical practice, Wallace Stevens with his executive position in an insurance company, and Frost, seemingly the most "professional" poet, with his teaching jobs and his speaking tours--all had other interests and accomplishments. Robinson, on the other hand, did virtually nothing in his life save write poetry: he neither married nor traveled; he neither taught nor gave public readings; he neither had professional preparation nor any extended occupation other than the writing of poetry. On the occasion of his fiftieth birthday he was treated to an encomium in the *New York Times Book Review* (21 December 1919), which published comments by sixteen writers, including this statement from Amy Lowell : "Edwin Arlington Robinson is poetry. I can think of no other living writer who has so consistently dedicated his life to his work." Hermann Hagedorn used as the epigraph for the first and still the most valuable biography this quotation from Robinson:

> In the great shuffle of transmitted characteristics, traits, abilities, aptitudes, the man who fixes on something definite in life that he must do, at the expense of everything else, if necessary, has presumably got something that, for him, should be recognized as the Inner Fire. For him, that is the Gleam, the Vision and the Word! He'd better follow it. The greatest adventure he'll ever have on this side is following where it leads.

The expense of Robinson's single-mindedness was virtually everything else in life that people strive for, but it eventually won for him both fortune and fame, as well as a firm position in literary history as America's first important poet of the twentieth century.
The time and place of Robinson's birth contributed both positively and negatively to that position. Born in the tiny hamlet of Head Tide, Maine, and growing up in the somewhat larger town of Gardiner, he lived in a remote corner of the nation that was nevertheless relatively close to the cultural center, Boston. Also, he had the advantage of a neighborhood that helped to cultivate his literary interests at an early age. Born in 1869, at the threshold of the gilded age, when the industrial revolution was making an irreversible impact on his surroundings, he was deeply aware of and later recorded the dichotomy of material wealth versus emotional and spiritual health as values in his society. Robinson reached his majority in 1890, that decade notorious in American literary history because of its poetic aridity. When he published his first volume in 1896, he could admire no living American poet, much less enjoy membership in a literary community.

Robinson's immediate family also helped and hindered him. Both of his parents, Edward and Mary Elizabeth Palmer Robinson, were of old New England stock, although his mother's family was the more illustrious as well as the more thoroughly traditional in that she had bona fide Puritan ancestors. It is often noted that Robinson is related on the distaff side to Anne Bradstreet , the first genuine American poet. The stronger influence in Robinson's home was his father, Edward, an eminently practical man of Scotch-Irish descent, who had a strong sense of civic responsibility and sufficient business acumen to retire from his mercantile business with a fortune of $80,000, in 1870, at fifty-one. It was then that he moved his family from Head Tide to Gardiner, where his three sons could receive a better education. Edward Robinson had nothing against education so long as it enabled a person to improve his financial opportunities. He sent his studious eldest son, Dean, to medical school but prevented his continuing in medical research; he groomed his affable middle son, Herman, to take up the family business ventures, principally land speculation; and he advised his youngest, Edwin, called Win, to follow the scientific (or non-college-preparatory) track in high school, although he did send him, eventually and somewhat grudgingly, to Harvard as a special student. Although business success was Edward Robinson's chief goal, he was not without cultural interests. He often spent his evenings singing with the others around the family piano or reading excerpts from William Cullen Bryant 's *Library of Poetry and Song*. It has been said that memories of childhood constitute a writer's capital. Robinson's memories are generally those of an upper-middle-class, rural, Calvinistic upbringing in which the arts were part of his home environment but secondary to an emphasis on the practical necessities of earning a living. He both represented and rebelled against that background.

Robinson's only published autobiographical account is a magazine piece, "The First Seven Years," which appeared in the December 1930 issue of *Colophon* and is now included in *Uncollected Poems and Prose* (1975). In it he pointed out his early enthusiasm for poetry and his parents' lack of awareness that that interest was developing into a serious career goal. He acknowledged the influence of his neighbor, Dr. Alanson T. Schumann, an amateur versifier who encouraged metrical exercises for Robinson during his high school years. He reported that when he was seventeen he "became violently excited over the structure and music of English blank

verse" and made several metrical translations from Cicero, Vergil, and Sophocles. He went on to say, "It must have been about the year 1889 when I realized finally ... that I was doomed, or elected, or sentenced for life, to the writing of poetry." The seven years to which the title refers is the period between that realization and the publication of his first book in 1896. In that period he published a few poems in the local newspaper, the *Harvard Advocate*, and in two or three magazines. He also noted that he collected a pile of rejection slips "that must have been one of the largest and most comprehensive in literary history." Eventually he decided to publish his poems on his own and paid fifty-two dollars to the Riverside Press in Cambridge to print 312 copies of a forty-four-page pamphlet "named, rather arbitrarily, from the first and last poem: *The Torrent and The Night Before*." With that pamphlet Robinson's poetic career was launched.

Ever the restrained New Englander, Robinson did not record the dismal family circumstances of those first seven years. His brother Dean, thwarted in his ambition to become a pathologist and, by dosing himself for facial neuralgia, acquired a drug habit that lost him his medical practice and led to his eventual suicide. His brother Herman met Win's putative fiancée, Emma Shepherd, and married her. Win managed to go to Harvard for two years partially because he needed medical treatment in Boston for his lifelong difficulties with one ear. His father died of a stroke in 1892. Much of the family fortune was lost during the recession of 1893. Finally, in 1896, his mother died of black diptheria, a disease so contagious that the undertaker would not set foot in the house and her sons were required to make the burial preparations themselves. A few weeks after his mother's death Robinson received in the mail the surprise he had planned for her--the copies of his first book. He did not open the package for a day, he reported to his friend Harry Smith, and when he did the books "looked so small and devilish blue" they made him sick, but, he went on, "now I am feeling better and beginning to foster my same old ridiculous notion that they may amount to something some day." They have.

The forty-six poems in *The Torrent and The Night Before* present an impressive variety in theme, subject matter, and technique. Consistent with his future practice, all the poems are in rhymed or blank verse. (All his life Robinson strenuously objected to free verse, replying once when asked if he wrote it, "No, I write badly enough as it is.") These early poems, however, are distinguished from his later practice in that there are more examples of elaborate verse forms: villanelles and ballades appear along with the more conventional quatrains and the form of which he was to become a modern master, the sonnet. One of the sonnets is "The Clerks," the poem whose rejection by the editor of the *New York Sun* Robinson cited as the final impetus for him to publish his own book. It is in many ways representative of his early work:

> I did not think that I should find them there When I came back again; but there they stood, As in the days they dreamed of when young blood Was in their cheeks and women called them fair. Be sure, they met me with an ancient air,--And yes, there was a shop-worn brotherhood About them; but the men were just as good, And just as human as they ever were.
>
> And you that ache so much to be sublime, And you that feed yourselves with your descent, What comes of all your visions and your fears? Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time, Tiering the same dull webs of discontent, Clipping the same sad alnage of the years.

The deceptive simplicity of the words tends to obscure the artistry of the work, with the commonplace scene of the octet transfigured into a striking metaphor in the sestet, where the tone, subject matter, theme, diction, and technical mastery are all quintessentially Robinsonian. The combination of the realistic, narrative mode and the more romantic, expository mode is deftly indicated by the switch from first person narration to the generalized address at the end. These two forms are not always in the same poem, but the combination of narrative and expository writing is perhaps Robinson's most characteristic trait. The undeniably gloomy "message," or theme, of the poem, couched as it is in a deliberate matter-of-fact and unpretentious tone is also typical. The self-consciousness of the climactic line, "Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time," however, is indicative of Robinson's earliest work.
Charles T. Davis, in his introduction to *Selected Early Poems and Letters* (1960), says, "The odd fact about Robinson is that he began, in a sense, as a mature poet, almost immediately conscious of his artistic goals and aware of his own powers and weaknesses." This notion has become a critical commonplace, with some validity. His first brief character sketch of the sort that are now called his Tilbury poems is placed second in *The Torrent and The Night Before*: "Aaron Stark," the miser with "eyes like little dollars in the dark." And the name Tilbury is first mentioned in this volume in "John Evereldown," a dialogue between a man and his wife. Two of his best-known poems, "Credo" and "Luke Havergal," appear in this volume, along with several others that are highly regarded. Nevertheless, this earliest collection also contains poems that may legitimately be considered juvenilia, and, while it would be difficult to consider these efforts derivative, some do indicate a dependence on earlier poets that does not appear in Robinson's more mature work. In fact, more individual poems from this volume than any other were omitted from the first *Collected Poems* (1921). To say that Robinson was at the height of his powers in 1896 implies that no development occurred in the remaining forty years of his career. Such a claim is a distinct disservice to the poet and his art.

When Robinson received his packet of pamphlets in December 1896, he literally gave them away, both to local acquaintances and, more important, to editors of journals and to writers who he thought might be sympathetic to his work. Richard Cary, former curator of the Robinson collection at Colby College, included in *Early Reception of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (1974) nineteen reviews from journals which received the volume and named twenty-five other recipients--such as Robert Bridges , Thomas Hardy , and Algernon Charles Swinburne--who did not respond publicly to the book. The nineteen reviews are, if somewhat tentative, generally favorable, since editors rarely take up valuable space by panning an unsolicited, privately printed book of poems. Many of them were noncommittal notices that quoted a sample poem, but some were quite extensive, the most thorough and thoughtful one being that of William Peterfield Trent , in the April 1897 issue of the *Sewanee Review*. Trent suspected that the writer was young and noted some poems that seemed derivative, but he also offered the book "some ungrudging praise."

The most noteworthy review of *The Torrent and The Night Before* was that of Harry Thurston Peck , published in the February 1897 issue of the *Bookman*. Peck found many of the poems too somber for his liking and said that Robinson's "humour is of a grim sort, and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house." In response to that comment Robinson wrote a letter of rebuttal, published in the March 1897 *Bookman*, which has become as well known a critical statement as he was ever to make: "I am sorry that I have

painted myself in such lugubrious colours. The world is not a prison house, but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."

Certainly Robinson was anything but pessimistic regarding his career during this period. As his letters indicate, he was buoyed by the critical success of *The Torrent and The Night Before* and had a second manuscript ready within months of his first publication. A vanity press in Boston, Richard G. Badger and Company, solicited his business and promised promotion and distribution as well as an attractive product, all advantages over the situation of the book he had printed privately. Although Robinson was unable to pay the costs of vanity publishing, he accepted the offer of his friend William Butler to do so. Using a vanity press rather than the "respectable publisher" for which he had originally looked also gave Robinson the advantage of speed. Almost exactly one year after his first book appeared, *The Children of the Night* was printed attractively in two formats, a 500-copy trade edition bound in light tan cloth with a red and green art nouveau design, as well as a 50-copy limited edition printed on vellum. The book was designed and marketed for the Christmas trade, and the strategy was successful: 300 copies had been sold by January.

Included in *The Children of the Night* are forty-four of the forty-six poems published the previous year as well as forty-three additional poems. The new poems are in much the same vein as the earlier ones, but there are some important additions. One has become Robinson's best-known poem, "Richard Cory," notable for its contrast between the aloofness of the eponymous character and the down-to-earth quality of the unusual narrator who speaks in the first person plural, "We people on the pavement"; the effectiveness of the surprise ending in which the sensational event is related in understated diction; and the consistent image pattern of royalty. Also added are twenty-seven "Octaves," an eight-line, blank verse form, usually written as one sentence, that Robinson claimed was more difficult to write than the sonnet. The octaves are somewhat somber philosophical speculations or pronouncements whose generalizations are given force by a striking image or an unusual choice of words. "Octave XVII," for example, uses a quite ordinary travel metaphor but concludes with a startling oxymoron:

> We lack the courage to be where we are:--We love too much to travel on old roads, To triumph on old fields; we love too much To consecrate the magic mix of dead things, And yieldingly to linger by long walls Of ruin, where the ruinous moonlight That sheds a lying glory on old stones Befriends us with a wizard's enmity.

Reviews of *The Children of the Night* were mixed, with some critics providing only lukewarm notices, apparently because of the vanity imprint. With a few exceptions the notices were extremely brief and in local newspapers rather than in journals with national circulations. But the prestigious Thomas Wentworth Higginson , writing for the *Nation* in June 1898, found that the poet "does his work deftly and thoroughly." Allen Tate , in an essay collected in his *On the Limits of Poetry* (1948), called this book "little noticed at the time but one which marks the beginning of a new era in American poetry."

Until 1897 Robinson lived in his childhood home in Gardiner, sharing the house, after his parents died, with his two brothers, Herman's wife, Emma, and his three nieces. According to one biographer, Chard Powers Smith, he left the house in the fall of 1897 after a dispute with Herman over Emma, a triangular situation that Smith maintains is the biographical impetus for the predominance of triangular love affairs in Robinson's poetry. In November of 1897 Robinson "discovered" New York, sharing an apartment with a friend and encountering a cosmopolitan society he had not known theretofore. One of his new acquaintances was the erudite derelict Alfred H. Louis, an English Jew with a checkered legal and literary career, a pianist, philosopher, and impromptu orator who had no visible means of support. Louis became the prototype for the title character in Robinson's long poem "Captain Craig."

The story of the difficulties attendant upon the publication of "Captain Craig" is symptomatic of Robinson's early struggle for recognition. In the spring of 1900 he wrote a friend that he had finished the work and was satisfied with it, but that he might not be so pleased after it came back from "six or seven publishers." The comment proved prophetic, for the poem was examined by five publishing houses before it was finally accepted. For three months the manuscript languished in a Boston brothel, having been left there by a reader for Small, Maynard and Company and the thoughtful lady of the house having kept it until the client returned. Robinson almost despaired of ever getting "Captain Craig" into print and wrote a group of shorter poems to be published under the title "Isaac and Archibald." Eventually, however, two of his friends, by agreeing to contribute to the publication costs of the long poem, persuaded Houghton, Mifflin to publish the volume under its imprint. In 1902 *Captain Craig*, a volume comprised of the title poem and fifteen shorter poems, finally appeared.

Originally, "Captain Craig" was just over 2,000 lines long, the first of the long narratives that were to dominate his poetry in the last half of his career. In the first of the three sections of the poem, the narrator and his drinking cronies in Tilbury Town meet Captain Craig and presumably save him from starvation. A confessed failure, the captain is unable even to beg:

There was a time
When he had fancied, if worst came to worst
And he could work no more, that he might beg
Nor be the less for it; but when it came
To practice he found out that he had not
The genius.

He has a large capacity for conversation, however, and the narrator is fascinated. When the narrator leaves to go on a six-month trip, the captain writes him voluminous letters, which the narrator saves "for the jokes." Among the jokes are frequent classical and literary allusions, reminiscences of old acquaintances, the recounting of dreams, criticism of poetry, and comments of a vaguely philosophical sort. The third section recounts the narrator's return to Tilbury and the death of the captain, who bequeaths to his benefactors "God's universe and yours." In the funeral procession the Tilbury band "Blared indiscreetly the Dead March in Saul."

As in all of Robinson's long poems, unity in "Captain Craig" is achieved through theme rather than structure, with the personality of the Captain far more significant than the action described. In his first speech to his group of admirers he makes what may be considered a thesis statement:

"You are the resurrection and the life"
He said, "and I the hymn the Brahmin sings;
O Fuscus! and w'll go no more a-roving."
This quotation is a pastiche of references to the Bible, Emerson, Horace, and Byron, the juxtaposition of which creates an extraordinarily dense texture and anticipates the early work of T.S. Eliot . It is an illustration of the complexity of this fine poem.
The critics were not kind to *Captain Craig*. Praise was reserved for some of the short poems included in the volume, such as "Isaac and Archibald," "The Klondike," and "Sainte-Nitouche." "Captain Craig" was either ignored, noted as a difficult and puzzling poem, or derogated. Bliss Carman in the December 1902 *Reader* called it "worse than Browning ... a mistake rather than a failure." And in the March 1903 *Critic* Clinton Scollard suggested that "the volume might have been vastly improved from an artistic standpoint had the author so willed it." According to the biographers, especially Emery Neff, Robinson realized that he was taking a risk in writing so experimental a poem as "Captain Craig," but when the critics did not respond as he had hoped, he was devastated.

The poor critical response to *Captain Craig* is sometimes cited as the reason for the eight-year lapse in Robinson's creative efforts, but other reasons may account for his period of diminished activity. For long periods between 1898 and 1905 he was nearly destitute, living for the most part in a tiny room in a fourth-floor, walk-up apartment house in New York. He held intermittent jobs: as office assistant at Harvard for six months in 1899, as an advertising editor in Boston for two months in 1905, and most notoriously, as time-checker for the construction of the IRT Subway in New York for nine months in 1903-1904. Also, he began to drink heavily; frequenting bars was not only a way to forget his troubles but also a way to get a free lunch, since dispensers of liquor were required by law to provide food with the drink. During this period he came perilously close to falling into permanent dissolution, as both his brothers had done. His whimsical "Miniver Cheevy," the poem about the malcontent modern who yearned for the past glories of the chivalric age and who, finally, "coughed, and called it fate,/And kept on drinking," is presumably a comic self-portrait.

It was President Theodore Roosevelt who almost single-handedly pulled Robinson out of the gutter. In 1904 his son, Kermit, brought home a copy of *The Children of the Night.* Roosevelt read it, voiced his approval sufficiently for Charles Scribner's Sons to republish it in 1905, and wrote a review for the *Outlook* in which is included the statement "I am not sure I understand 'Luke Havergal'; but I am entirely sure that I like it." He also granted Robinson a sinecure in the New York Customs House, a post he held from June 1905 until Roosevelt stepped down from office in 1909.

The $2,000 he received annually for his nondemanding job gave Robinson financial security, but it had a debilitating effect on his writing. He published a few poems in magazines and worked on a new interest, the writing of drama, but he produced no new volume of poetry until after he had resigned his post. In 1910 he at last discharged the debt he felt he owed the former president by producing *The Town Down the River* , named for New York and dedicated to his most prestigious sponsor, Roosevelt.

The Town Down the River is a collection of thirty-three short poems, similar in form to *The Children of the Night* but differing from those in the earlier volume in the predominance of objective, psychological portraits. Some are portraits of public figures: poems to Lincoln and Roosevelt begin and end the volume, and in the middle is a lengthy dramatic monologue, "The Island," spoken by Napoleon on St. Helena. The most prominent theme in the book is one that has come to be associated with all of Robinson's work, private failure. "Clavering," for example, is one of a group of interrelated poems having to do with a circle of friends. It begins,

I say no more for Clavering
Than I should say of him who fails
To bring his wounded vessel home
When reft of rudder and of sails.
"Miniver Cheevy" appears in this volume, as does the only slightly lesser-known "How Annandale Went Out," the dramatic monologue in sonnet form that deals with euthanasia and probably is based on the suicide of his brother Dean. Other themes represented in this volume are satires on the writing of poetry, "Momus" and "Shadrach O'Leary," and elegiac verse, notably "Leonora" and "For a Dead Lady," whose final stanza is surely an example of what Robinson called "unmistakable" poetry:
The beauty, shattered by the laws
That have creation in their keeping,
No longer trembles in applause,
Or over children that are sleeping;
And we who delve in beauty's lore
Know all that we have known before
Of what inexorable cause
Makes Time so vicious in his reaping.
The variety of topics and the artistic control demonstrated in this volume indicate a marked step in Robinson's poetic development.
The Town Down the River received more reviews than any of the preceding volumes. None was negative, but most were only mildly approbative. Joyce Kilmer 's review-essay in the *New York Times Book Review* (8 September 1912) is important, however, because it is an overview of Robinson's work. His reputation was growing in England as well as the United States. One of the most interesting opinions was voiced in a *Boston Sunday Post* interview (2 March 1913) with British poet Alfred Noyes . When asked about current American poets, Noyes told the reporters that Robinson was the second-best poet writing in America. (Noyes's nomination for the foremost Yankee poet was somebody named Brian Hooker.)

Ever since Robinson had moved from Gardiner, he had lived in a variety of furnished rooms or made extended visits to friends. In 1911 Hermann Hagedorn persuaded him to try summering at a place where a small group of artists lived and worked, the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. In 1911 Robinson reluctantly accepted the invitation, bringing with him a telegram to show as an excuse to leave before the season was over in case he did not find the situation to his liking. The reverse was true, however; he found the place so congenial to his work that he returned to Peterborough every summer until his death, and one of his rare prose pieces is an encomium to the MacDowell Colony entitled "The Peterborough Idea."

Although Robinson had begun to acquire a reputation as a poet, he was still in need of an adequate income, and for a few years he tried his hand at fiction and drama. The fiction has not survived, but two plays, *Van Zorn* (1914) and *The Porcupine* (1915), were brought out by Macmillan after Scribners refused them. The plays were neither popular nor critical successes, but by accepting them, as well as bringing out a new edition of *Captain Craig* in 1915, Macmillan was able to publish his next volume of poetry, the one which established Robinson as a major poet.

The Man Against the Sky , published in 1916, marks the midpoint of Robinson's publishing career and is his most-important single volume. Of the twenty-six poems included, fourteen had received prior magazine publication, and almost all of them are representative of Robinson's mature work. Among the most noteworthy are "Flammonde," the brief reworking of "Captain Craig" which opens the volume; "Cassandra," an attack on American capitalism; Ben Jonson a lengthy dramatic monologue in which Johnson reminisces about his friend Shakespeare; and the title poem, which describes a variety of ontological stances. Robinson maintained that "The Man Against the Sky" was the most succinct statement of his philosophy, but it is a somewhat unsatisfactory meditation emphasizing transcendental idealism in negative terms. (The final line of the poem, "Where all who know may drown," has frequently been misinterpreted as a straightforward statement; Robinson insisted that it was meant to be ironic.) Four of the eleven short poems which Yvor Winters called Robinson's greatest are in this volume: "Hillcrest," "Veteran Sirens," "The Poor Relation," and "Eros Turannos." Louis O. Coxe has persuasively argued that "Eros Turannos" is archetypically Robinsonian.

The immediate critical response to *The Man Against the Sky* was overwhelmingly positive. Amy Lowell 's enthusiastic review for the *New Republic* (27 May 1916) was republished as the first chapter in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (1917), the first book of criticism which included a serious discussion of Robinson. Harriet Monroe sanctified him through a strong review in *Poetry* magazine (April 1916). And William Stanley Braithwaite , long a Robinson champion, proclaimed in the *Boston Evening Transcript* (26 February 1916) that "In this man American poetry has its deepest vision, its most enduring utterance." Richard Cary has pointed out that the wide critical acceptance of Robinson after 1916 indicates a change in critical taste rather than a substantive change in Robinson's method or manner. With *The Man Against the Sky*, Robinson arrived.

One year later, in 1917, Robinson published the first of his single, book-length poems, *Merlin* , a 2,500-line blank verse narrative which retells that part of the Arthurian legend involving Merlin's relationship with Arthur and with Vivian. Robinson presents Merlin realistically, as a prophet without magical powers, whose personal interests are in conflict with his public responsibilities as adviser to the king. It was intended to provide a symbolic commentary on World War I.

The critics who had found *The Man Against the Sky* so appealing were dismayed by the new direction Robinson had taken. Harriet Monroe wondered in *Poetry* (July 1917) why Robinson had bothered to use so threadbare a subject as the Arthurian romances, and Odell Shepard in the *Dial* (11 October 1917) objected to the Jamesian quality of the writing. Later critics have given only faint praise to the poem.

While Robinson was preparing *Merlin* for the publishers, he was already working on its sequel, *Lancelot*. Because Macmillan had lost money on *Merlin*, it refused to publish the second Arthurian poem, necessitating the finding of a new publisher. Eventually Samuel Roth, an editor for the Thomas Seltzer Publishing Company, agreed to take it, and the book appeared under the Seltzer imprint in 1920. It was the last time Macmillan was to refuse a Robinson manuscript.

In contrast to their reactions to *Merlin*, critics applauded *Lancelot* , some insisting it was better than *Merlin* , some ignoring the earlier poem altogether. Most later critics have paid little attention to the volume, although Chard Powers Smith, who quoted *Lancelot* in the title for his critical biography of Robinson, *Where the Light Falls* (1965), claims that *Merlin* and *Lancelot* should be considered a single entity representing Robinson's most important work, both in conception and in autobiographical significance.

In 1920 Robinson also published a substantial collection of short and medium-length poems, *The Three Taverns* . Among the twenty-nine poems are sonnets and short, rhymed narratives, the most notable being "The Mill," an often-anthologized piece which conveys to the careful reader the story of a double suicide. The most distinctive quality of this collection, however, is the abundance of biblical references and subjects: the title poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by Paul just before he gets to Rome, and the concluding one, "Lazarus," is principally a blank-verse conversation among Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Other medium-length poems such as "Tasker Norcross," a Tilbury poem, deal with fictional characters and with characters from American history, as in "John Brown," which concludes with the line that is inscribed on a plaque on Robinson's studio at the MacDowell Colony: "I shall have more to say when I am dead." Reviewers generally wrote favorable notices of *The Three Taverns*; later critics have almost entirely ignored it.

Actually, during the early 1920s reviewers barely had time to review one volume before another appeared. In 1921 Robinson published two more volumes. *Avon's Harvest* is a book-length poem that deals with a macabre situation: Avon believes himself to be haunted annually by the ghost of an old school enemy who had been drowned when the *Titanic* sank; the morning after he relates his story he is found dead, and the narrator says, "He died, you know, because he was afraid." Reviews were scanty but positive. Although John Farrar in the *Bookman* (May 1921) called it "a dime novel in verse," he approved of it. An interesting piece of scholarship is "A Note on 'Avon's Harvest,'" by David Brown in *American Literature* in 1933, in which he explains that substantial revisions in the poem were made after reviewers misinterpreted it.

Robinson had a chance to publish a revised version of *Avon's Harvest* that same year, for his first *Collected Poems* also appeared in 1921. "Captain Craig" was the one other poem that underwent extensive revisions. In *Collected Poems* some forty-three poems were dropped from *The Children of the Night* (including the title poem), and fourteen previously uncollected poems were added at the end of the volume. Otherwise, the title *Collected Poems* means what it says: it is a collection of the poetry which had appeared in nine previous volumes. One curiosity of *Collected Poems* is that the volumes are not presented in chronological order. *The Man Against the Sky* (1916), his biggest critical success, comes first. Thereafter the volumes are arranged so that the book-length poems are interspersed among the volumes of short pieces.

Among the new poems in *Collected Poems* are three of his best known: "Mr. Flood's Party," "The Tree in Pamela's Garden," and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt." These three represent Robinson's work at the height of his powers: "Mr. Flood's Party," the rhymed narrative dealing with a lonely but valiant old man, is one of the best of the Tilbury poems. "A Tree in Pamela's Garden" is one of the cryptic, perfectly constructed sonnets which demonstrates Robinson's ability to empathize with women, and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," whose subject is a historical figure and whose theme is a meditation on aesthetic theory, closes *Collected Poems* and is one of Robinson's most celebrated blank verse poems of medium length. The 592-page volume indicated to those who had been unaware of Robinson the extent of his achievement, and reviewers were duly impressed. In the following year this volume earned for Robinson the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded for poetry.

The publication of *Roman Bartholow* in 1923 marks the beginning of Robinson's later phase, that period in which he wrote hurriedly and concentrated on book-length narratives almost to the exclusion of other forms. In the last fourteen years of his life he published eleven books, nine of them single poems. *Roman Bartholow* , with more than 4,000 lines, is second only to *Tristram* in length and presents the sort of domestic situation that was to intrigue Robinson in his later years. The title character, recuperating from an illness, is visited by his old friend, Penn-Raven. Bartholow's wife, Gabrielle, realizing that Penn-Raven is the more attractive of the two men, commits suicide. The triangular relationship is then discussed at length by the two remaining principals and an outside observer, Umfraville. The poem is flawed by lack of clarity in characterization and a plethora of unrelated images. It is perhaps Robinson's least successful poem, and both reviewers and later critics have written predominantly negative assessments.

The Man Who Died Twice , published in 1924, is different from its immediate predecessor in almost every respect and won for Robinson his second Pulitzer Prize. Here the narrator finds Fernando Nash beating a drum for the Salvation Army. Nash had once been a good musician and a promising composer, but his career has been cut short by debauchery. One night he hallucinates a symphony performed by rats in his room and shortly thereafter imagines his own magnum opus. He is unable to complete it, however, before his physical collapse, and when he recuperates he is spiritually regenerated and resigned to spend the rest of his days as a street musician. This poem is a variation on the theme of "Captain Craig," although the grotesque imagery is more controlled than in the earlier poem. The combination of down-to-earth diction, classical allusion, and understated humor contributes to its success. Occasionally excerpts from this poem are anthologized, a measure of its acceptance among scholars.

In 1923 Robinson had made his one trip abroad, spending six weeks in England. An impetus for his making the trip at that time was his dismay at the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. He observed in a letter to Witter Bynner that prohibition should be placed along with free verse and motion pictures as a "triumvirate from hell." He reported having a good time in London and Oxford, but he cut short his trip so he could spend two months at Peterborough, where he began to work on a book of short poems. The result was *Dionysus in Doubt* , published in 1925. The title poem and "Demos and Dionysus" are propagandistic poems decrying the curtailment of individual freedom through the imposition of behavioral standards. Also included are eighteen sonnets, notably "The Sheaves" and "Karma," as well as two poems of medium length, "Genevieve and Alexandra" and "Mortmain." Reviewers generally preferred any of the other poems to the Dionysus ones, objecting to their didacticism.

Robinson's single popular triumph, *Tristram* , appeared in 1927. His longest poem and reminiscent of his previous treatment of the Arthurian legends, it received elaborate praise and sold 57,000 copies in the first year. Robinson's lifetime appreciation of opera, especially those of Richard Wagner , perhaps contributed to his interest in the topic. As he had done with his earlier Arthurian poems, he made his characters' actions realistic rather than the result of their having drunk a magic potion. The poem is tied together with carefully unified imagery, and the portrait of Isolt, looking out over the sea after hearing of Tristram's death, is justly celebrated:

And white birds everywhere, flying, and flying;
Alone with her white face and her gray eyes,
She watched them there till even her thoughts were white,
And there was nothing alive but white birds flying,
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
And the white sunlight flashing on the sea.

For the only time in his life Robinson was lionized: he agreed to attend a dramatic reading of the poem in New York and allowed a reception to be given for him after it. The royalties made him financially secure at last, and the book earned him his third Pulitzer Prize. Although Robinson was to write seven more volumes, he experienced his final triumph with *Tristram*.

Cavender's House (1929), *The Glory of the Nightingales* (1930), and *Matthias at the Door* (1931) are all reworkings of earlier themes. *Cavender's House* is similar to *Avon's Harvest* in that Cavender speaks with a ghost, in this case the wife he has murdered after he suspected her of infidelity. The other two long poems are principally variations on the theme examined earlier in *Roman Bartholow* --domestic tragedies dealing with flawed friendships, unfaithful wives, and suicides. These later poems are, however, more carefully composed than the earlier ones. Although critics treated them with respect, they almost always compared them to *Tristram* and found them wanting.

Nicodemus , a volume of ten medium-length poems, appeared in 1932. Nine of the ten are character sketches of biblical, historical, or Tilbury figures. Most often noted by the reviewers were "The March of the Cameron Men," "Ponce de Leon," and the title poem. "Annandale Again," the third poem Robinson wrote on the character of Annandale, summarizes his much earlier poem "The Book of Annandale."

With *Talifer* (1933) Robinson attempted a new mode of writing--a domestic comedy rather than a tragedy. Instead of his usual triangular situation, this poem involves two women and two men who change partners. After an unsuccessful marriage to the intellectual Karen, Talifer weds the more pliant Althea. Talifer's friend, Dr. Quick, then takes Karen as his wife, but he soon leaves her to her books in Oxford and returns to admire the success of Talifer's second marriage. Karen perhaps represents Robinson's opinion of independent women. Most of the reviewers did not like the poem and politely said so. Richard Crowder, however, has written an article in the *Personalist* (January 1962) reassessing the poem and suggesting an allegorical interpretation.

Allegorical interpretations of Robinson's last two poems, *Amaranth* (1934) and *King Jasper* (1935), are inevitable. *Amaranth* is cast in the form of a dream, in which Fargo, a former painter who is now a pumpmaker, visits the "wrong world" guided by his host, Amaranth, "the flower that never fades." The people they meet are primarily failed artists or writers who, when they look into Amaranth's eyes, can see the truth about themselves. Several casually commit suicide, actions which do not detract from the grotesque comedy of the piece. Reactions to his poem were mixed, though many critics greeted it enthusiastically, and several later critics, such as Floyd Stovall in his *American Idealism* (1943) and Dolores Brien in *Research Studies* (June 1968), have presented various interpretations of this ironic and ambiguous poem.

In January 1935 Robinson was diagnosed as having an inoperable cancer. During his stay in the hospital he read galley proofs of his final poem, *King Jasper* , completing the corrections only hours before he sank into his final coma. *King Jasper* is a complex, highly symbolic work which is an appropriate culmination of Robinson's career, for it combines the themes of personal failure, artistic endeavor, materialism, and the inevitability of change. It deals with Jasper and his family--his wife, Honoria; his son, Jasper, Jr.; his son's wife, Zoë; and Jasper's old enemies, a father and son both named Hebron. Jasper's empire comes crashing down on him, but Zoë, so named because she represents the life force, prevails. The same sort of dreams and grotesque images Robinson had used in earlier works appear in this poem, as well as lengthy conversations attempting to analyze motivations. Although the poem is set in modern times, it has a vaguely Arthurian air about it. It has been interpreted as a commentary on American politics as well as a philosophical construct. Although the poem is not entirely successful because it tries to do too many things, it is nevertheless a fitting conclusion to the Robinson canon. Published posthumously, the book was introduced by a now well-known essay by Robert Frost , who wrote in glowing terms of his contemporary and chief rival, commenting particularly on Robinson's profundity, humor, and technical skill. It is a Robinsonian irony that Frost does not mention the poem he set out to introduce.

Magazines and newspapers throughout the country took elaborate notice of Robinson's death, reminding their readers that he had been considered America's foremost poet for nearly twenty years and praising his industry, integrity, and devotion to his art. During his lifetime Robinson suffered the extremes of obscurity and fame, but Robinson the poet maintained a steadfast course in spite of both of those encumbrances. He often said that a poet cannot be definitely placed until he has been dead half a century. While he is no longer considered the brightest star in the poetic firmament, part of his work remains among the greatest American poetry.

In an interview with Joyce Kilmer (*New York Times Magazine*, 9 April 1916) Robinson once defined poetry as "a language which tells us, through a more or less emotional experience, something that cannot be said. All real poetry, great or small, does this. And it seems to me that poetry has two characteristics. One is that it is, after all, undefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable." With his metrical control, precise diction, and keen observation of human triumphs and frailties, Robinson's poetry remains unmistakable.

Papers:
Substantial holdings of Robinson papers are in the Colby College Library, the Houghton Library at Harvard University, the New York Public Library, and the Library of Congress.

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