Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poet's Life

(Scott Donaldson)

October 17, 2017

I have zero creative talent. The pinnacle of my own ability to draw is stick figures, and not good ones. I cannot sing or play an instrument. I cannot write fiction. I do not understand iambic pentameter. Thus, I tend not to express any opinion about poetry, and I certainly don't write any. But I have always liked the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, which when I was young was still included in older anthologies of poetry. Whether they were directed at children or not I cannot say, but I read some of his poetry at around five years old, and it has stuck with me. I doubt very much if children, or adults, are exposed to him today, even though a hundred years ago he was the nation's most famous poet. This biography, written ten years ago, is an excellent corrective to today's ignorance.

Robinson had, in many ways, the stereotypical harsh and difficult life of a great poet. His family life as a child was grim; he never married and the love of his life instead married his brother; for decades he lived on the edge of starvation; he was famously shy and reticent; he struggled with alcoholism. Remarkably, though, he doesn't seem to have minded all that much. He was consistently a positive and optimistic man, he had fewer vices than most men, and he was singularly devoted to two things: his craft and his many friends. And, showing that virtue is sometimes rewarded, by the end of his life he was both lionized and economically comfortable.

Robinson was born in 1869 and died in 1935. He thus overlapped the late Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning, as well as Longfellow in America. He was roughly a contemporary of Kipling and A. E. Housman, and, most importantly, Robert Frost, who was his frenemy. This was a time when poetry mattered—when every newspaper and opinion magazine regularly reviewed poetry, when those reviews counted for something, and when normal educated people bought and discussed poetry, with many trying to write it themselves. Nothing of the sort happens today. I hesitate to guess why, not paying any attention to modern poetry myself (and little to older poetry). Almost certainly it's because modern poetry, like almost all modern visual art, is worthless,

because it's ugly, because actual talent isn't recognized or rewarded, and most of all because ideology trumps beauty, so ordinary people have no interest in it, and its only devotees are debauched specimens of end-stage decadence who perversely see some value in one or more of its negative characteristics.

But in any case, Robinson was regarded by his contemporaries as modern himself, in that he represented a clean break from the late Victorian poets. Frost wrote the introduction to Robinson's last poem, a long story in verse published posthumously, *King Jasper*. "It may come to the notice of our posterity (and then again it may not)," he wrote, "that this, our age, ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. . . . Robinson stayed content with the old-fashioned ways to be new." He stuck to conventional forms of rhyme and meter, but dropped the sentimentality, archaic words, excessive ornamentation, and schmaltz that characterized most poetry of the time (none of it read today), instead focusing on the inner lives of ordinary people, often with irony, frequently with a sense of tragedy, but always with sympathy. Famously, he tended to be opaque about those inner lives, expecting the reader to fill in the blanks, not with his own random thoughts, but by following the story and clues Robinson inserted in the poem. "There are basically two kinds of poetry. One is represented by Hart Crane's line 'The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise,' the other by Robinson's 'And he was all alone there when he died.' "

The author of this biography, Scott Donaldson, worked on it for many years, uncovering a vast array of sources not available to earlier Robinson biographers (and the last previous biography was decades ago). These include Robinson's letters, which are nearly illegible (Donaldson includes photographs of Robinson's handwriting), but another biographer (the late Wallace Anderson) had spent twenty years collecting, deciphering, editing, and annotating them, after he published his own Robinson biography in 1968. Anderson's work had never been published and was "languishing in a warehouse." Donaldson tracked it down and had it transferred to and organized at the Colby College library, and then used this new resource to add substantially to his own work.

Robinson was often accused of having a bleak and pessimistic outlook. He wholly rejected this characterization, but certainly his upbringing might have excused such a view on life. He grew up in Gardiner,

Maine, then a rapidly growing ice exporting and wood processing center, where his father, a successful businessman, had moved in semi-retirement. Robinson was the third of three boys, and an unexpected arrival. His parents didn't name him until he was six months old, when his name was drawn from a hat, chosen on a whim from suggestions by a group of lady acquaintances of his mother. Not that his parents mistreated him; they simply largely ignored him in favor of his brothers—the eldest of whom, Dean, became a doctor, and the other, Herman, the golden child, became a promising businessman, along the way stealing and marrying the woman Edwin loved, Emma Shepherd.

Early on, in high school, Robinson had set his heart and mind on the vocation of poet. He received invaluable encouragement from local notables interested in poetry, some of whom had contacts in the larger literary world centered around New York and Boston. And even though he was famously un-talkative, to the point of often seeming rude, he began his lifelong habit of cultivating diverse friendships, which were extremely important to him—though he for the most part carefully separated his groups of friends, such that many only found out about others after Robinson died. He seemed stuck in Gardiner as a young man, kicking around home after graduating high school, not getting a job. He did spend two years as a non-degree student at Harvard, then at the peak of American intellectual dominance. It was at Harvard that Robinson began making his poetic mark; in 1892 the *Harvard Advocate* published "Supremacy":

> There is a drear and lonely tract of hell
> From all the common gloom removed afar:
> A flat, sad land it is, where shadows are,
> Whose lorn estate my verse may never tell.
> I walked among them and I knew them well:
> Men I had slandered on life's little star
> For churls and sluggards; and I knew the scar
> Upon their brows of woe ineffable.
>
> But as I went majestic on my way,
> Into the dark they vanished, one by one,
> Till, with a shaft of God's eternal day,

The dream of all my glory was undone,—
And, with a fool's importunate dismay,
I heard the dead men singing in the sun.

For the most part, though, nobody would publish his poems. "But if the form was familiar, the language and subject matter marked a revolution in American poetry. 'Robinson was the first American poet of stature,' Irving Howe wrote, 'to bring commonplace people and commonplace experience into our poetry.' He was convinced there was poetry in all types of humanity, and he set out to prove it." As Robinson said, "I merely present people as I seem to know them after inventing them."

Therefore, in 1896 he self-published his first book of poetry, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, and sent nearly all of the 312 copies he paid to have printed to famous critics and writers. In return, he received a variety of generally favorable reviews, though with the frequent criticism his poetry was too pessimistic. Perhaps it was—the book contains one of his most famous poems, "Luke Havergal," in which a spirit tempts a man to suicide—but perhaps much of his sense of tragedy was simply misinterpreted. Robinson himself saw himself as having "invincible optimism."

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,
And in the twilight wait for what will come.
The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall;
But go, and if you listen she will call.
Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies
To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes;
But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise.

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—
In eastern skies.
Out of a grave I come to tell you this,
Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss

That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds you to the way that you must go.
Yes, there is yet one way to where she is,
Bitter, but one that faith may never miss.
Out of a grave I come to tell you this—
To tell you this.

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

Then everything went downhill, rapidly. His mother died suddenly of diphtheria as Robinson awaited his copies of *The Torrent and the Night Before* (his father had declined and died a few years before). His brother Herman failed in business in St. Louis and returned in dire economic straits to Gardiner with Emma, sinking into alcoholism and kicking Edwin out of the house they shared (admittedly, an odd arrangement, since Herman knew very well that Edwin loved Emma). His brother Dean had become a morphine addict, similarly returning to Gardiner and dying (probably a suicide) in 1899. So Robinson moved to New York, no longer able to live in Gardiner—and more or less proceeded to starve.

While starving, though, he met all sorts of new people, made all sorts of new friends (although his real friendships were deep rather than many), and kept writing poetry, some of which was published, but very little of which sold. His material wants were minimal, throughout his life, but he was only able to eat because of the generosity of friends (which he carefully accounted for and later repaid when he became

successful). Robinson even took a job as a timekeeper on the subway being constructed, but he was temperamentally unsuited for manual labor, and he started drinking far too much (he had always drunk a fair bit, only becoming voluble when he did, and he had an enormous capacity to hold his liquor).

Robinson's big break came in 1905 when Theodore Roosevelt took an interest in him, as a result of his son Kermit "discovering" Robinson, more particularly his book *The Children of the Night*, published in 1897. Roosevelt publicly praised and promoted Robinson (although this caused some criticism of both), and, more importantly, got him a Customs House sinecure, the only such job Roosevelt obtained for anyone, that enabled him to escape utter poverty, though it hardly made him rich. That job only lasted as long as Roosevelt, until 1909, but it allowed Robinson to regain an even keel. His brother Herman died in 1908, alone of tuberculosis in a Boston hospital, Emma having kicked him out some years before. Robinson asked (it appears) Emma to marry him, but she declined for reasons not entirely clear, but which at least included a recognition by both of them that domesticity was certain to erode the poetic excellence to which Robinson had devoted his life. Still, for the rest of his life, he remained close to Emma and her three daughters, playing the role of "Aunt Imogen," another one of his famous poems, about a spinster aunt loved by, but never quite part of, her sister's family. It reads in part, "Aunt Imogen / Was there for only one month in the year, / While she, the mother,—she was always there; / And that was what made all the difference. / She knew it must be so, for Jane had once / Expounded it to her so learnedly / That she had looked away from the child's eyes / And thought; and she had thought of many things." As a result, he continued to write and publish, with somewhat more public success than before, though hardly enough to give him financial security.

But around 1910, the literary world, and thereby the (at that time more educated) popular world, began to turn toward Robinson, having tired of the old style of poetry, and recognizing in Robinson what had always been there. Moreover, a group of friends banded together to provide him a modest stipend, obviating the need for constant financial worry, and he swore off alcohol. In the 1910s Robinson turned to writing longer-form poetry, much of it inspired by Arthurian legend, as well

as a handful of plays. His plays were not successful, and regarded as not very good, since while well-crafted, they featured the same opacity and focus on internal lives that often characterize Robinson's poetical characters, a trait which does not carry over well into a form where the story arc is important. Still, he also kept publishing shorter poetry, including, in 1920, one of his best-known poems, "Mr. Flood's Party," of friendship, and times and people gone by.

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused warily.
The road was his with not a native near;
And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,

For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:
"Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird." He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,
And answered huskily: "Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will."

Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn,
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.
Below him, in the town among the trees,
Where friends of other days had honored him,
A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eben's eyes were dim.

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,

He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
In a long time; and many a change has come
To both of us, I fear, since last it was
We had a drop together. Welcome home!"
Convivially returning with himself,
Again he raised the jug up to the light;
And with an acquiescent quaver said:
"Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

"Only a very little, Mr. Flood—
For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do."
So, for the time, apparently it did,
And Eben evidently thought so too;
For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang—

"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,
The last word wavered; and the song being done,
He raised again the jug regretfully
And shook his head, and was again alone.
There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below—
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.

In his last fifteen years, Robinson wrote almost all long poems, little remembered today, but some of which (particularly *Tristram*, in 1927, again from medieval legend) were very commercially successful, finally

making Robinson financially secure (and able to repay all those who had "lent" him money over the years). He won the Pulitzer Prize, twice. He was widely praised. He continued to work, mostly during the spring and summer months at the MacDowell art colony in New Hampshire, then new and still extant today, while he lived in New York the rest of the year, socializing with different groups of friends and enjoying art and theater.

The poet's work ethic was rigorous, though he did not write quickly, but with effort and great attention to precision and detail. Donaldson recounts the story of a young poet who "waxed expansive at dinner about the two thousand words he'd written that day. 'How about you, Mr. Robinson?' he asked. 'Did you have a good day?' 'This morning,' Robinson dourly replied, 'I removed the hyphen from hell-hound. And this afternoon, I put it back.' " This sort of pithy conversation was apparently typical of Robinson—he talked little, but it was all worthwhile talk, at no time idle or uninteresting, and often humorous and self-deprecating. He never married, although he maintained quasi-romantic relationships with more than one woman, particularly the painter Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones. Robinson died of pancreatic cancer in 1935, working until the very last moment correcting proofs on his last poem, keenly aware "as the inscription on Dr. Johnson's watchcase warned, that 'the night cometh, when no man can work [John 9:4].' "

We could all use a good dose of Robinson today. In his sympathy for ordinary people of every type and circumstance are to be found valuable lessons for today's social and political bitterness. In his frank grasp of reality is to be found a solution for ideological flights of fancy. In his sympathetic portrayals showing that each of us, at one time or another, fights an existential fight invisible to others, is to be found the antidote to the curated lies of social media. I doubt if he'll have a renaissance, but if any American poet deserves to have one, it's Robinson.