RECONSIDERATION

Edwin Arlington Robinson: Tilbury Town Revisited

Louise Dauner

I AM GOING BACK to Tilbury Town. The first time I went via the 1,500 pages of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Collected Poems. The second time, on a fellowship to study Robinson’s poems, to interview some of his friends, and, as the first midwesterner to work in Maine on his papers and effects, to try to get a feel for late nineteenth-century New England, I went to Gardiner, Maine, where Robinson spent all but two of his first thirty years. Gardiner is also generally assumed to have been the model for Tilbury Town, though Robinson, with his customary caution, said it could be “any small New England town.” Now, again, I visit Tilbury Town, in retrospect.

The town of Gardiner rises four-square where the Cobbossee River joins the oil-black, ponderously-flowing Kennebec. In the latter half of the nineteenth century lumber and paper mills lined the Cobbossee, and along the Kennebec waterfront four-masted schooners loomed as important intimate links with the culture and business of the Orient. Farmers, shippers, mill workers mingled here in New England industry. Not far from the river are dense forests of pine and spruce. In summer, Robinson swam in the river, and at times in the winter he joined the “River Gang” to sound its depths. And he liked to walk in the forests. Later, both river and forests furnished imaginative locales for some of his poems.

So I walked the streets of Gardiner, talked with Linville Robbins, ex-schoolman, with whom in his twenties Robinson smoked a pipe and discussed Carlyle and Emerson. I called on Miss Alice Jordan, neighbor, whom Robinson would visit as a youngster, shouting, “I’ve got a new word!” Later, he wrote a poem, “Pasa Thalassa Thalassa,” about his sea-captain friend, Israel Jordan, who went down with his schooner when Robinson was fourteen. I visited Miss Rosiland Richards in the “Yellow House,” as Robinson affectionately called it, which had entertained some of the New England literary Great. Grand-daughter of Julia Ward Howe, Miss Richards handed me the manuscript of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” a ruler of Emerson’s, and other literary relics.

I walked through the Robinson home, a congenial elm-shaded house on Lincoln Avenue, and entered the small upper room with slanting low eaves where a young poet wrote and destroyed and re-wrote early attempts at poetry and fiction. I stood on the Robinson plot in the Gardiner Cemetery 200 yards be-

Louise Dauner is Professor Emeritus of English Literature at the University of Indiana, Indianapolis, and has published widely.
hind the house, and contemplated the Robinson headstone, beneath which now lie Edward, the father, Mary Palmer Robinson, the mother—through whom Edwin is distantly related to Anne Bradstreet, our first American poet—and the three brothers, Dean, Herman, and Edwin. I saw the abandoned mills that testify to the decline of the small New England businessman in the late nineteenth century, and I remembered "The Mill," that classically-restrained poem of despair and double suicide. Finally, I noted the hills and the rocky acres of farms that spelled the hard work and discipline of generations of New Englanders.

Here, a note on Tilbury Town itself. More than a unique literary creation, it is a prototype for a number of small American literary towns, which it preceded by fifteen to twenty years. These include Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), and of course Faulkner's *Jefferson* of the Yoknapatawpha short stories and novels. Indeed, the tradition continues today in the small-town locales of current soap operas, such as Genoa City of *The Young and the Restless*. The Town carries both sociological and psychological weight, as a force opposing the protagonist. It is portrayed as conservative, stuffy, gossipy, materialistic, and stifling to the independent spirit. Also, it may appear as something like a Greek chorus, reflecting popular attitudes and making its (often wrong) interpretations of the protagonist's motives and behavior.

From 1896, when his first poems, *The Torrent and The Night Before*, appeared, to 1969, the centennial of Robinson's birth, Tilbury Town has had many "visitors." Some 600 reviews, interviews, and critical articles have defined aspects of the poetry, as well as 25 doctoral dissertations. In 1969, Richard Cary edited *Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, a collection of 28 interpretive essays, investigating many aspects of Robinson's poetry—his "philosophy," religious beliefs, theories and practice of poetry, his mastery of forms and prosody, his interest in fiction and drama. (This is not a complete summary.) One of the most widely adopted American literature anthologies, *American Poetry and Prose* (1957), edited by the American neo-humanist and literary critic Norman Foerster, devoted 19 pages to 16 Robinson poems. In brief, thousands of words, both written and spoken, have been directed to Robinson as poet and man. And the horizons of Tilbury Town have accordingly expanded.

But in the last 25 years there have been few if any visitors. Today, Robinson is something of a literary anomaly. Mention him to the average reader of American poetry and you will probably elicit only a blank stare. Even the rare reader who recognizes Robinson's name will probably be over fifty years of age, and will likely connect it with those characters he once met in what Robinson called "anthological pickle"—Eben Flood, Richard Cory, Miniver Cheevy, Flammonde. It is possible he might remember *Tristram* (1927), the third of the Arthurian narratives and the third of the thirteen long blank verse poems. It brought Robinson his third Pulitzer Prize, and became the first American poem to be a best-seller. But the poet who was eulogized at his death in 1935 as "America's most distinguished 20th century poet,"—his only peer, T.S. Eliot,—has become a kind of literary Lost Atlantis, sunk beneath the waters of oblivion. (A recent check on the Internet turned up no critical considerations of Robinson since 1970, and a recent American literature anthology contains not one Robinson poem.)

It is not unusual for even a distinguished artist to suffer a decline in interest or temporary neglect after death. To
some extent this has occurred to our Dr. Johnson of the twentieth-century literary world—T.S. Eliot. But such neglect as has happened to Robinson since 1970 provokes questions: Why has this happened? And why should anyone now read Robinson? To attempt to find answers entails looking at Robinson’s themes, verse forms, and intention, and throwing them against prevailing tastes and patterns. For indeed styles in poetry have drastically changed since the first part of this century.

How, then, does Robinson’s poetry fit in with present modes and themes? Simply put, it does not. In brief, much modern poetry appears largely formless, often close to prose, not particularly distinguished in language or imagery, generally not didactic, and mainly concerned with private experience, though sometimes also reflecting social and racial attitudes. The break with the past came in the teens and twenties, with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and their followers, and their concern with the metaphysical poets, and with myth, paradox, and irony. In the thirties, Robinson confessed that he could not make much of Eliot’s poetry, and Eliot termed Robinson “negligible.” In fact the two poets have more in common than has been generally recognized. “A poem should not mean but be,” said the poet and critic, Archibald MacLeish. Robinson had always “meant.” And Eliot, as he aged, came increasingly to treat his poetry as a vehicle for defining a spiritual quest and modus operandi, as in the great Four Quartets.

Just how does Robinson’s poetry depart from contemporary patterns? With due regard for the varying effectiveness of the short lyrics and the long narrative poems, some of this poetry is as distinguished as any works in American literature. As I hope to suggest, many of these poems speak to our hearts, our minds, and our human condition. We need now simply to consider aspects of Robinson’s poetry: his mastery of his craft, his control of tone, and of various poetical forms, and the moral edge of the poetry. His aesthetic and ethical values, then. To examine these is to suggest simultaneously some reasons for today’s neglect, and some suggestions as to why today’s reader might, with both pleasure and profit, “discover” this poetry.

Because of space limitations I shall make only casual allusions to the much-studied long narratives. And I shall not deal with Robinson’s early griefs—the shocking death of his mother from black diphtheria, the deaths of his brothers, Dean and Herman, from drug and alcohol addictions, his father’s decline and death, and the loss of most of the family finances, as well as his own prolonged frustration and poverty. I mention this now simply because it probably partially explains the sombre shading of many of the poems, a tone possibly not too acceptable to today’s vigorous materialistic society.

I suspect that not many poets today practice their craft—do what a musician would call scale work—as Robinson did. Much contemporary poetry suggests that its author is simply not concerned with form; the result being too often that the present work seems to resemble what Robert Frost called “prose chopped up to look like poetry.”

In his teens, Robinson began to practice verse forms. When he was 17, he turned Cicero’s First Oration into English blank verse. Later he wrote of it:

It may not have been poetry and probably it wasn’t, but many portions of it had music and rhythm and an unmistakeable presence of what nowadays is called punch. ... It was written and rewritten with a prodigality of time that only youth can afford, with an elaborately calculated variation of the caesura. ... When this rather unusual bit of minstrelsy was accomplished, and followed by a similar
treatment of long passages from Vergil, I had the profound and perilous satisfaction of knowing a great deal more about the articulation and anatomy of English blank verse than I had known before.

Blank verse was to become for him like a long parenthesis, extending from those early exercises, through the dramatic monologues, such as "John Brown," "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," "Lazarus," "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," to the thirteen long verse narratives which, though not always his best work, comprise the bulk of his poetry. Under the aegis of his poetry-bitten neighbor, Dr. A. T. Schumann, Robinson practiced forms of both English and French poetry. Critics commented often on his use and control of the couplet, quatrain, ode, ballad, ballade, triolet, villanelle, free verse, and sonnet. The latter deserves some detail.

Of the 44 poems in his first formal publication, The Children of the Night (1890-97), 27 are sonnets. Robinson revived a "dead" form, which Eliot said could not be done, by turning the traditional love-lyric into a vehicle for thumbnail portraits memorable still for their precision and perception. We remember Aaron Stark, the miser, "with eyes like little dollars in the dark," and Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unexpected sensitivity. Here are "The Clerks"—one of the finest of the sonnets—those "shopworn" denizens of trade, still there, when the writer returns to his old haunts:

... just as good
And just as human as they ever were

(How good? How human?)

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,
Stripping the same sad alnage of the years.

And here we are, you and I, come of age now, with our dusty dreams and ambitions, reduced to common humanity by time and practice.

Another notable conversion of the sonnet makes it an instrument for submerged drama. Here, for instance, is "Haunted House:"

There was a place where none would ever come
For shelter, save as we did from the rain.
We saw no ghost, yet once outside again
Each wondered why the other should be dumb;
For we had fronted nothing more than gloom
And ruin, and to our vision it was plain
Where thrift, outshivering fear, had let remain
Some chairs that were like skeletons of home.

There were no trackless footsteps on the floor
Above us, and there were no sounds elsewhere.
But there was more than sound; and there was more
Than just an axe that once was in the air
Between us and the chimney, long before
Our time. So townsmen said who found her there.

Here nothing at all happens. There is only silence, but fraught with sinister suggestion, as in ghost, ruin, fear, skeletons. Then, withheld until nearly the end, an axe, and a long legend: an atmosphere that belies the apparently simple situation. This is murder. The stuff of a novel. Packed into fourteen lines, it will be extended in that Jamesian ghost story, Cavender's House (1929), in which Cavender returns to his "house" after twelve years to face himself as his wife's murderer. To some critics, this is the
finest of the long narratives.
And here is “The Sheaves,” a poem of extraordinary texture and unity and those unforgettable “golden girls:”

Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled
Green wheat was yielding to the change assigned:
And as by some vast magic undivined
The world was turning slowly into gold.
Like nothing that was ever bought or sold
It waited there, the body and the mind;
And with a mighty meaning of a kind
That tells the more, the more it is not told.

So in a land where all days are not fair
Fair days went on till on another day
A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,
Shining and still, but not for long to stay—
As if a thousand girls with golden hair
Might rise from where they slept and go away.

Here is an almost mystical sense of a power that controls the seasons of both nature and man, timeless and irresistible. The _adagio_ flowing of the poem recalls some of the arias of Bach. Robinson was something of a musician, playing the clarinet. His musical ear is often evident in his metrical usages, and in long sustained movement, as in “The Dark Hills”—an exquisite elegy for evening, which has been set to music by six composers. Some of Robinson’s sonnets, even the earliest ones, may be among the finest in American literature; and they persist into his latest collections, reflecting such subjects as Christmas Eve on the sidewalks of New York City, or chance meetings with derelicts who bring memories of other days: a panorama of persons and places and predicaments.

Today, all of this seems quiet and polite and old-fashioned. But Robinson was new in his own way, too, a little ahead of Eliot in time, if not so dramatic on the page. His first collection, _Torrent and The Night Before_ (1896), had already broken with some accepted poetical patterns. First, in subject matter. Not the ocean, or the daisy, or Nature with a capital N. Of course he does use woods, the sea, night, and probably Mount Monadnock, as in “The Man Against the Sky,” but generally, Nature is not particularly important in the poems. Frequently one has no sense of a specific locale. The situation or character could occur anywhere. It is a truism but worth repeating: Robinson looked at human beings. He did not go to school to Freud or Jung, but he analyzed human motives and reactions with keen psychological probing that revealed dark crevices in the soul.

But it is time to look at our four characters. In portraying these characters and their relatives, as they reflect our human diversity and our abilities for spiritual blindness and its consequences, Robinson used a conversational, at times colloquial, diction which then seemed unconventional or flat. All of this placed him in a paradoxical position: too “new” for the still traditional early twentieth century, by the teens and twenties he began to seem old-fashioned. There were Pound and Eliot and their followers, and _The Waste Land_ (1922), with its complexities, its scaffolding of myth and allusion, and its technical and metrical innovations. Mr. Flood’s country road and its autumnal moonlight contrasted sharply with Prufrock’s Boston evening, “like a patient etherized upon a table”; as Mr. Flood, sturdy old New Englander, contrasts with the effete and self-distrustful J. Alfred Prufrock.

Critics were beginning to feel that Robinson was remote from the times, with his formal structures, modes, metrics, and his focus on long narrative poems, especially the Arthurian narratives, _Merlin_ (1917), _Lancelot_ (1920), and _Tristram_ (1927). Harriet Monroe, of _Po-
etry Magazine, felt that in treating such materials Robinson was distancing himself from contemporary concerns. But Robinson saw in the disintegration of Camelot and Arthur's Round Table a metaphor and a reflection of a world fast approaching the tensions of the thirties. So he continued to focus in the long poems upon self-satisfied materialists with fat bank accounts and slim spiritual savings; and already he had scented danger from Hitler. Dying in 1935, he did not live to see the ensuing chaos, the wars, the concentration camps, the genocide, the atomic bomb, the increasing violence, vulgarity, and intellectual and spiritual vandalism that characterize today's world. But I do not think he would have been surprised. Good Greek that he was, with his Puritan-Calvinist-New England heritage, he firmly believed that actions have consequences; and that those who violate moral laws, whether individuals or nations, will inevitably suffer punishment.

But now to our four characters—"chestnuts" if you like, but memorable, for all that. I have wondered whether these characters may not be distant relatives of the "Characters" of Theophrastus, for in each case we have salient qualities, poised around one notable character trait. Each of Robinson's characters here is, it seems to me, finally remembered for one outstanding trait or essence or action.

So we have Mr. Flood, trudging up that lonely New England road, to the "deserted upland hermitage" he calls home. He carries a magic jug—magic, because it provides both solace and a temporary rejuvenation. As he hails a younger Mr. Flood, and as together they toast the fleeting bird of time, he breaks out, appropriately, into "Auld Lang Syne," "secure, with only two moons listening." When his song is ended, the jug is empty, and he is again alone.

Mr. Flood is not heroic. There is a semi-humorous reference to Roland's "ghost," winding a silent horn. But he is not negligible, either. Like that valiant knight, he endures to the end. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...Robinson is flatly realistic about it:

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.

So he passes from our sight. But he leaves us something, too. He dramatizes for us the timeless pathos of lonely old age—a condition far more prevalent today than when Mr. Flood appeared in 1921. To have outlived one's friends, to go home at day's end to an empty house, knowing it will continue to be empty, is not the most comforting of life's offerings. One thinks of analogies: Robert Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night" and Theodore Dreiser's "The Lost Phoebe," the touching story of an old man who wanders the countryside for several years hunting for his dead wife.

Mr. Flood has something else. His situation and character would set an aesthetic trap for a less aware poet; but they are "toned"—half humorous, half ironic, by the title, "Mr. Flood's Party" (a party of one?), by his name (ebb and flood), and by the lovely two moons. Emotionally, the poem is balanced on a knife-edge: a tip in one direction would have smudged it into sentimentality; in the other, into caricature. Further, Mr. Flood is perfectly aware of life's hazards. As he sets that jug down at his feet, "with trembling care, knowing that most things break," we remember, too: youth, love, beauty, dreams, health, life. What stays with us here is the depth of Robinson's perception, and the compassion of this portrayal of an ordinary old man who, simply by staying the course, by facing what he has to face, assumes a stature...
larger than life.

Further, Mr. Flood leads a vanguard of lonely people, each of whom confronts and meets his own challenge. Few poets, I think, have so fully explored this theme of loneliness and given to its characters such courage and dignity. Both timeless and timely, this situation is one of the dominant aspects and concerns of today’s society. It is of particular interest now because of the break up of the traditional family patterns, in which age used to hold a respected place.

Many of these Robinson “singles” are women. Indeed, in his poetry we have a sort of compendium of the Unloved Woman. Look at “Veteran Sirens”:

The burning hope, the worn expectancy,  
The martyred humor, and the maimed allure,  
Cut out for time to end his levity,  
And age to soften its investiture.10

The poem’s six stanzas contain many paradoxical terms for those who must continue to exhibit “the patient ardor of the unpursued”: and the paradoxes underline the perverse situation of these pathetic aging prostitutes.

“The Poor Relation” has enough money to live high above the city, but not much else. She has had beauty, and a hint of romance hovers about her. But now only a few come, stay for a bit, and then, having done “what penance or the past requires,” go again, leaving her “to count her chimneys and her spires.” She, too, is realistic, knowing that “Pity, having played, soon tires.” And while she waits, “and Death forgets, and faith forgives,” “the small intolerable drums/Of Time are like slow drops descending”:

...With no illusion to assuage  
The lonely changelessness of dying—  
Unsought, unthought of, and unheard,  
She sings and watches like a bird,  
Safe in a comfortable cage

Do not miss the irony of the “comfortable cage,” with its expanding implications. This is a poignant, relentless poem. Put it with two others of Robinson’s finest lyrics, “For a Dead Lady” and “Eros Turranos,” and we have the basic facts we like least to look at: loneliness, age, and death.

Another solitary soul is “Aunt Imogene,”12 an early poem (1902). Denied the experience of a family of her own, she recognizes that it is given to her to be Aunt Imogene to her sister’s three children. The poem is perhaps partly based on Robinson’s annual visit from New York City to Gardiner, which he had left in 1899. Robinson never married, and possibly this is partly a self-portrait. Legend offers a life-long devotion to his brother Herman’s wife, Emma, to whom, ironically, he had introduced Herman.

“Eros Turranos,” by common consent one of Robinson’s finest lyrics, noted by Yvor Winters as “a universal tragedy in a Maine setting,” combines the themes of age and loneliness with that of marital betrayal. It is a poem of entrapment, of the fears of age and aloneness, and the fatality of illusion.

She fears him, and will always ask  
What fated her to choose him;  
She meets in his engaging mask  
All reasons to refuse him.  
But what she meets and what she fears  
Are less than are the downward years  
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs  
Of age, were she to lose him.13

Victim of pride, illusion, and love, the wife retires into the seclusion of her home, while the Town speculates and gossips.

What needs emphasis here is the poem’s structure; the language is tight, often ambiguous: fears, fated, engaging, mask, weirs, and the noun clauses—all set the stage for the domestic drama.
Particularly, we note the metrical and rhyme patterns. Consistently, during the six eight-line stanzas, the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 7th are “normal” iambic tetrameter. But the 2nd, 4th, and 8th lines are iambic trimeter, with an extra final short syllable. Also, in any eight lines there are but three rhymes.

This metrical “imbalance” is maintained throughout the poem without a flaw. It suggests an inner-outerview. The conservative “usual” tetrameter gives us the external view, the conventional marriage. But the trimeter suggests the Interior, the real situation, the wife’s imbalance, turmoil, and desolation. Robinson employs an expert shifting of the caesura, especially in the tetrameter lines, to avoid the monotony of a too-continuous rhythm. And the limited rhyme-scheme gives a unity which concentrates our attention on the details at hand. The opposing tetrameter-trimeter lines may even hint of the two actors in this domestic betrayal.

In Robinson’s depiction of loneliness we must note one more of these memorable Unloved Women, Isolt of the White Hands, in Tristram. Half child, half woman, she loves Tristram, who of course loves Isolt of Ireland. We meet Isolt at the beginning of the poem as she looks out at

“...a blank ocean and the same white birds Flying, and always flying, and still flying. Yet never bringing any news of him That she remembered, who has sailed away The spring before—saying he would come back. Although not saying when...”

The effect of the waves and the repetition of the flying birds suggest the recurrent empty rhythms of Isolt’s life, as she waits for Tristram who will never return. And when it is all over, we see her with her sad knowledge, still watching the waves and the white birds.

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.

Surely part of the notable success of Tristram is due to the tenderness with which Robinson depicts the doomed love of this Isolt for the doomed Tristram. Such sympathy must have been rooted in Robinson’s own understanding of the solitary psyche, and his sensitivity to suffering.

To return to Tilbury Town—for Isolt has taken us to Brittany and Cornwall—we remember that Mr. Flood is going home. Another townsman is also going home. He is an eminent citizen, with a courtly manner which bespeaks a wide experience. He is also rich, charming, and he “glittered” when he walked. (Is this a faint echo of Hawthorne’s Judge Pyncheon? In Richard Cory’s “time,” Robinson writes to his friend Harry de Forest Smith, that he has just been reading The House of theseven Gables [March 7, 1896] and, “I am completely soaked in it.”) Cory had everything to excite the envy of the “people on the sidewalk.” And one night he shoots himself. We can only surmise that whatever Cory had, it was not enough to compensate him for what he did not have. Possibly that Light, for Robinson a major symbol.

The Light, which Robinson said was a “different thing for every person,” seems to be a compound of both classical and Christian elements: knowledge, wisdom, love, grace; the ability to know oneself, to understand others, and to act accordingly. It has been noted that Light, and its counterpart, Dark, “occurs in one form or another more than 500 times.” There are many degrees or qualities of light, symbolic suggestions of insight or blindness. We think of bright, shine, flash, gleam, glimmer or dim, flicker, shad-
owry, dark, gloom, night, etc. The Light is associated with Robinson's idealism.

As for Richard Cory, his significance lies not in the "shock" ending, for once experienced, the story is over. Cory's value lies in the fact that he is a prototype twenty years early for those protagonists in the long poems who come to tragedy because of spiritual blindness with regard to themselves or others. This kind of betrayal takes many forms, which are the details of the narrative plots. The players are the much-noted Robinson Failures, who appear in both the short and the long poems. They include the materially successful like Cory, and, in reversal, those like Robinson's Bowery friend, "Captain Craig," who, though down and out materially, still possess a vision and a wisdom that give their lives meaning.

Another townsman, Miniver Cheevy, is Dickensian in both name and nature. A "child of scorn," he is a man born out of his time. An incurable romantic, he would prefer a "steed" to any twentieth-century mode of transportation, and "the medieval grace of iron clothing" to a khaki suit. Born too late, and given to too much introspection, his only comfort comes out of a bottle. Miniver "dreamed and rested from his labors"—

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;

Miniver thought, and thought, and thought
And thought about it.18

In Miniver and his problems an attentive ear may catch sly echoes of his creator. All of this has been frequently noted. But I want to recognize how effectively Robinson uses metrics here for both situation and characterization. In each of the eight stanzas, the 1st and 3rd lines are "normal" iambic tetrameter. But the 2nd line has an extra final short syllable, and the last line is a dimeter, with an extra final short syllable. In addition, the poem begins with MIN-i-ver CHEE-vy—a dactyl, followed by a troche, followed by an omitted unaccented syllable, and a regular iambic foot. The total effect of this irregularity is to underwrite and emphasize the teeter-tottering movement that suggests Miniver's lack of adjustment to his world. It is somewhat like coming downstairs and stumbling over an unexpected extra step. The entire kinesthetic off-balance mirrors Miniver's out-of-stepness with his time. It demonstrates Robinson's use of a rhythmic rubric.

Finally, here is Flammonde, who had come to Town out of mystery. He has the gift to promote talent, tolerance, and peace among his fellows. Yet he walks as an enigma.

His courtesy beguiled and foiled
Suspicion that his years were soiled....
He never told us what he was
Or what mishance or other cause
Had banished him from better days
To play the Prince of Castaways.

His services to the town are many. But what of him—

So firm in every look and limb?
What small satanic sort of kink
Was in his brain? What broken link
Withheld him from the destinies
That came so near to being his?

Flammonde intrigues us with unanswerable question, but questions that may give some hints. It is a question of identity, which persists to the end. For, Robinson says,

Rarely at once will nature give
The power to be Flammonde and live.19

A suicide or a transient? Flammonde—light of the world. He helped others, himself he could not help. An inverted Christ-figure? Robinson made many allusions, direct and indirect, to the figure or image of Christ. (See the
early sonnet, "Calvary" from The Children of the Night.) Perhaps he found in Christ a symbol for the Ultimate Failure and the Ultimate Success.

Flammonde plays an expanding role: the person of charm and talent whose abilities, we think, should have placed him on a peak of distinction. What is the "small satanic kink" that prevented this? For there usually is one. As the Prince of Castaways, he suggests the Satanic pride—what the Greeks called *hybris*—spiritual arrogance, or a violation of divine laws. And finally, Flammonde’s mysterious *persona* masks the mystery that each of us poses, not least to ourselves.

In a time almost obsessed with the problems of self-identity, as reflected in contemporary literature, the media, and popular writings, Robinson’s poems mirror the quest and the definition of the true self. Sometimes the character achieves this redemptive knowledge, sometimes he does not; but we are wiser for observing the attempt.

In this brief overview, I have noted aspects of Robinson’s aesthetic qualities, focusing especially upon his metrical acuteness—as important in poetry as in music. Now, what about his moral edge? He disclaimed philosophic labels, being technically undisciplined in logical rigors. But he read widely and listened keenly, especially in his later years, to philosophical and scientific discussions. Long aware of what Wallace Stevens has called “the mortal no”—he had early seen evidence of that in the griefs of his family and in his own long personal and literary frustrations—he tackled the basic religious concepts of sin, God, soul, and immortality. He had no trouble with the first, which is a cornerstone for both the short and the long poems. The three other concepts of belief challenged his twentieth-century skepticism and his transcendental heritage. Unlike his scientifically-oriented contemporaries, he could not simply “throw out” these troubling questions. So he continued to struggle with repeated assertions of “Something Else” or of a purposive universe. If not, if all was chaos, if there was nothing after this life, we are all “caught like rats in a trap.”

Robinson attempted to communicate his position in a 344-line "Horation Ode," the title poem of his 1916 volume, The Man Against the Sky. The poem was dedicated to his Harvard friend, William E. Butler, who had committed suicide in 1912. It asks the basic question, Why live? This volume, and for a time, this poem, marked the turning-point in Robinson’s career. Both were critically acclaimed. One critic stated of the poem that, “in its qualities of intellect, human understanding, and art, it towers above any other poem written on American soil.” This fulsome praise has, however, been variously countered. Today the poem may be seen as prolix and inconclusive.

It begins with a Wagnerian Overture to a new *Götterdämmerung*, that presents the opening image of the Man (Everyman) silhouetted in the sunset against a darkening hill, which he is descending, presumably to death. Thus it is a poem about man’s destiny. Robinson sets up various symbolic types, the materialist, the scientist, the skeptic, the determinist, the unreconciled sufferer, as alternatives to his own transcendentalist position.

The poem, he said, represents his “inability to accept a mechanistic interpretation of life.” It has some syntactical and linguistic difficulties, but it also has some magnificent lines and images. The basic mode of the poem is subjunctive.... “He MAY ... [the symbolic man].” There is no final rational answer to a universe in which, with all our fantastic scientific accomplishments, we still can not control the weather—either inner or outer.

Meditative and speculative, the poem is not for those who read as they run. It
poses scientific materialism against Emersonian transcendentalism, and it concludes:

If, after all that we have lived and thought
All comes to Nought,
—If there be nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that,
—why live?
'Twere sure but weaklings' vain distress
To suffer dungeons where so many doors
Will open on the cold eternal shores
That look sheer down
To the dark tideless floods of Nothingness
Where all who know may drown. 21

I think the "know" is ironic, and implies rationalism, scientism, and materialism.

Robinson's concern with the unanswerables links him with the great writers of Western civilization, from Plato and Aristotle to T.S. Eliot. Horace tells us that the poet "is to combine together both pleasure and applicability to life." If Robinson is unable to stand flat-footed on the ground of faith, I still suggest that his basic impulse is religious. And that he shares with some of our greatest American authors—Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, and Faulkner—the moral imagination. His literary ancestors in-
clude the Greek dramatists, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. He might not have agreed with Arnold that poetry might take the place of religion; but as we have seen, Robinson's concerns are both aesthetic and profoundly ethical. He invokes both in his keen psychological treatments of the always fascinating inner landscape.

My attempt here to convey some of Robinson's poetical virtues is admittedly partial. I have not dealt with either the dramatic monologues—some of the finest of the poems—or the long narratives. And surely it may be suspected that some 600 writings about this poetry in our century may have left little new to be critically noted.

Nevertheless, a reader who values form, perception, expert craftsmanship, and a voice sometimes ironic but always humane may wish to discover, or rediscover, this "perennially unfashionable and valuable poet." 22 One might suggest that he read "with pen in hand." For there is wisdom to be found here. Perhaps we should leave it at that. In the meantime, Tilbury Town welcomes visitors.