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Winfield Townley Scott

TO SEE ROBINSON

THIS MORNING—more than a quarter-century afterward—is dark with sultry rain, but the day I drove to Peterborough was a deep summer day full of sun and cicadas. It was August 22, 1929, and I remember it well. I was nineteen years old and, self-invited, I was on my way to see Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Robinson in his sixtieth year was then the most eminent poet in America. I suspect he was that all his working life, from the 1890's to his death in 1935; but my point is that at the time of my pilgrimage he had recently come into general acceptance as head man in what he once termed his "unaccredited profession." Among his few elders, Edwin Markham had a decorative and George Santayana (as poet) a spurious value. Among his near-contemporaries, Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg were not sustaining the excitement of their earlier, best work; Amy Lowell had died four years before; the first *Collected Poems* of Robert Frost, which would consolidate his challenge for eminence, was still a year away. Among younger poets there were several who had real fame—for example, Edna Millay, Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, and Robinson Jeffers; and Stephen Benét the year before had published *John Brown's Body*; but William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens and E. E. Cummings and Marianne Moore and even the expatriated Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were not in 1929 publicly famous—they were not even in terms of poetry widely read or really assessed and established; they were not assimilated. Everybody, having just forgotten Hilda Conkling, knew about another child-poet named Nathalia Crane, but few had heard of a young man

named Hart Crane. And there were, as always, the annual strong boys whose names you don't remember now.

Everybody at last had heard about Robinson since the success two years before of *Tristram*. His sparse way of life, though eased, was not essentially different. His way of writing had not altered; and there were still some critics who disapproved of it or, at least, preferred other poets'. Nevertheless Robinson as American poet then had incomparably the status of great and famous man; his life, like that August day, had come to high tide of summer.

How I felt that day had been said, exactly forty years before, by Rudyard Kipling in a letter written out of Elmira, New York, to India:

You are a contemptible lot over yonder. Some of you are Commissioners and some are Lieutenant-Governors, and some have the V. C., and a few are privileged to walk about the Mall arm in arm with the Viceroy; but I have seen Mark Twain this golden morning, have shaken his hand . . . and talked with him for more than two hours! Understand clearly that I do not despise you; indeed, I don't. I am only very sorry for you, from the Viceroy down. . . . Blessed is the man who finds no disillusion when he is brought face to face with a revered writer.

I was—I insist upon attention to the fact—nineteen years old; for on this black, sopping morning so long afterward I cannot avoid divulgence of exactly what I was up to. I had written an essay on Robinson's work, a largely ecstatic essay to be published that autumn in an undergraduate magazine. I had then discovered that Peterborough, New Hampshire, where Robinson spent his summers at the MacDowell Colony, was only seventy miles from Haverhill, Massachusetts, where I spent mine. I had then written him a letter in which I said—simply—that I should like to call on him and show him my essay and find out what he thought of it.

Among my yellowed notes which still preserve the details of all this I find just here one tiny glimpse of grace: "I waited for an answer nervously and with expectation of being disappointed."

Peterborough N. H.

August 18, 1929

Dear Mr. Scott,

I shall be glad to see you here any time before the middle of September—or it may be more convenient for you to see me in Boston after that time. If so, a word sent to 257 West Newton Street will find me. I should be glad to see your article.

Yours sincerely

E. A. Robinson*

Over Peterborough the first mountains were hazed lavender in the August noon. Roads coiled uphill and fled zigzagging down between green slopes of shade, and then beyond the town there was the MacDowell Colony—its studios hidden and scattered among the woods but the square, white Colony Hall fronting the road. So there I was, more nervous now, thin, with wavy yellow hair, pimpled face, the manuscript of my essay, and five of Robinson's books. Also, I may have been hungry, but stopping for lunch that day would have seemed to me a wild waste of life. The emptiness of the big room in the Hall was frightful, and helplessly I returned to the open veranda.

I spotted a tall man coming across a field. For an instant I thought he might be Robinson, whose face I knew intimately from the photographs I had clipped and which were, in fact, right there with me—pasted on the endpapers of those books; but the man came nearer and I saw he was not. He gave me directions to the Veltin Studio, then said "Of course, you know Mr. Robinson isn't to be disturbed."

"I didn't know, but I'm not sure what to do. I had a letter from Mr. Robinson saying to come 'any time before the middle

* For permission to publish Robinson letters in this essay I am gratefully indebted to Mrs. Ruth Nivison, Head Tide, Maine.

of September'—and I wrote him saying I would come about two o'clock this afternoon."

"Are you by any chance the young man from Haverhill? . . . Oh, yes! Mr. Robinson was speaking of your letter the other night at dinner. I had had a similar letter from a fellow down Maine. Well, wait a minute. Mr. Robinson sometimes comes up with his lunch basket about this time."

Ten minutes went by before the tall man reappeared and said "I'll go down with you"; and we drove a narrow road into thick pine and hemlock woods. It was quiet there and cool. He said his name was "Brown—that doesn't mean anything." He kept looking off through the trees in case Robinson were on his way to the Hall. He said, "I thought that if you had an appointment with Mr. Robinson you'd have told me. If we didn't keep tourists out we'd be pestered to death. At the Hall, Mr. Robinson and I share opposite bedrooms. And the other day a woman got up in there and wanted nothing less than to get into Mr. Robinson's room and lay her hands on his bed!"

He told me to stop the car down a hillock near a studio built heavily of boulders. "You know," he said, "we've not daylight-saving time here, so it's only about one o'clock. Mr. Robinson may be eating his lunch. I'll go in and see." I was alone again, waiting in the car, and empty with not having known about standard time.

Mr. Brown came back with a tallish, spare-built man in gray who peered up the hillock through plain spectacles. When I reached them, Mr. Robinson said No, I wasn't intruding—if I didn't mind watching him eat lunch; had I had mine? I said I had. Mr. Brown nodded and departed, I ran back to the car for my load of books and manuscript, Robinson waited with apparent patience and no apparent curiosity, and when I drew aside for him at the studio screendoor he made an insistent, understated wave of the hand for me to precede him.

It was, outside that woodland road I had driven through, a

hot day, and Robinson remarked on it; for all that, there was a small blaze going in his fireplace. I took a chair at the far side of it, he a rocker at the other, and beside him on a third chair he had a little open lunch basket, a thermos, and some food done up in wax paper. He busied himself with these.

"Is that man Ro-lo Walter Brown?"

"Rollo. They say his latest book is very good. Haven't read it, though."

Presently he said, "They've sent me more than I can eat" and, scraping chicken off two of the slices of rye bread, he threw them in the fire. "Burning up-food."

His unpressed jacket, vest and trousers were of separate vintages, none of the grays matched. He wore a blue shirt, large and odd looking blue cufflinks, white collar and red tie, brown shoes with gum soles. I regarded, in that unformulated confusion one has upon first confronting famous buildings and people, the familiar face which I had never seen before: the thin gray hair, clipped mustache, the long and Darwinian-lobed ears, the pink-flushed but rather pale skin. His hands were long and slender and made more dramatically so by his habit of holding his fingers close together, straight out and stiff. They were beautiful, masculine hands and his most striking feature except his eyes, which were brown and large. He stared forth, downward, preoccupied.

In the silence I became aware the gaze was now directed at the pile of books beside my chair on the pink concrete floor. After several moments he said—in a clipped New England voice, gentle, with a trace of twang in it, (my notes say, but I cannot recall his voice)—he said: "Bring all those books with you?"

"Yes. —Do you mind autographing books, Mr. Robinson?"

He chewed a sandwich and continued to gaze at the floor.

"Sometimes," he said slowly, "I do and sometimes I don't. I've had people come to me as though their one desire in life was to have me autograph their books. And then I've found out they'd sold 'em for two or three dollars more the next week!" He looked

up with a sudden grin; a foolish, boy-caught-with-the-jam grin, the unimpressive chin drawn further in, the eyes brightening with an amused kindness.

He withdrew again into profile and dickered with another slice of bread. He poured tea from the thermos into a glass and stirred in sugar rapidly.

"Have you any particular message for young men who want to be poets?"

Robinson chuckled. "Well, no," he said. "If you've got yourself into that trap there's nothing I or anyone else can say to get you out."

"People say a lot of things, among them that poets don't earn money."

"Well"—he looked up—"if you keep at it for forty years you may have about half as much as a good carpenter." Teaching, he surmised, might with its three months' vacation be all right "if you keep your eye on it. You've got to get money from some other source, whether you steal it or inherit it." The grin flickered again, he chewed more sandwich and presently said "Then there's getting married."

I waited awhile as he stared again at the fireplace. "I suppose it would be better," he said, "if you taught something other than literature. But I don't imagine you're inclined any other way." Then suddenly, energetically: "Don't go into journalism! It hurts a man's style every time. Even Kipling," he added a few moments later. "His things have been marred by journalism." But book reviewing, he thought, wouldn't hurt anyone.

Robinson tossed another bit of bread into the fire and remarked, "Nine-tenths of poetry is *how* it's done, anyway."

I began to talk about the superiority of his three Arthurian poems over Tennyson's *Idylls*. Robinson said nothing whatsoever. And then I began to make murmurs about my essay. "I thought I'd simply read it to you and you might correct me if you like when it's necessary." Robinson still said nothing. I

fished the manuscript from the pile of books and sat looking at him.

"Is it in print?" he asked.

"No." I waited again. He had finished his lunch and begun smoking his Sweet Caporal.

"Go ahead," he said.

And so in a sort of naked terror I read it. As often as I dared I glanced over at the profile. Two or three times he did correct me. The essay referred to his early sonnet "On the Night of a Friend's Wedding" as "one of Robinson's few personal utterances," and at once he spoke:

"Now! Don't look for me in my poetry, because you won't find me. . . . Of course, the mood—the thought, but you won't find me. . . . In that one, to be sure, there's a little, but not much."

The era—that is, circa 1929—was one in which Shelley was being dished up as Ariel, Whitman as a super Boy Scout leader, and so on; and it may be Robinson, listening to my adolescent essay, feared I was about to dish *him* up as Tristram; which, at least, I was not. Hermann Hagedorn, in his *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, says Robinson got the poem while "listening to church-bells ringing for a wedding. He had not the remotest interest in the bride and her man, and he disliked church-bells." Nonetheless the sonnet is a young poet's blue mood about his work. In *Next Door to a Poet*, Rollo Walter Brown reports Robinson's apparently startled uneasiness over Miguel de Unamuno's theory "that all fictional characters are somewhat autobiographical." Robinson so frequently used the triangle theme that many readers, knowing he was a lifelong bachelor, assumed on no other evidence there must have been a similar situation in his life. Now, twenty years after his death, no evidence has been published, but it may as well be said in print that rumor persistently maintains a tragic involvement in his early life is being suppressed. As to "a woman in his life" (since I seem here to have wandered into the subject): Robinson's old and close

friend Lewis M. Isaacs told me—and this was all he seemed to know—he thought the best evidence was the portrait of Vivian in *Merlin*.

To go back to that August day in the Veltin Studio: Soon I was quoting Robinson's statement, made in his young years, that the world is a place where people are all, like children, trying to spell God with—I said—"different" blocks. He said "I'm not very fond of that quotation, but it is 'wrong' blocks, not 'different'—if you care to correct it."

Then: "When Clement Wood says that Robinson's message is 'that mankind has failed'"—Robinson waved a hand and exclaimed with gusto "Oh, that's nonsense—sheer nonsense. . . . He errs." I continued: "Robinson says that mankind has failed *so far*. The very essence of the Robinsonian message is that there is somewhere a Gleam, a Light; that all the measures we have so far used . . ." and so on. I paused and asked "Is that sheer nonsense, too?" He continued regarding the fire, then said "Well, perhaps I've said that. I don't know."

I went on reading all the resounding rest of it. Through at last, I asked, in the silence, "Have I done a bad job?"

He said "No. I think, looking at it impersonally, you've done a very good job. . . . Of course, all those things you've said there—" but did not complete the sentence which, I presumed, would have had to comment on the flood of praise I had let loose. But then for a few minutes he discussed his work.

Merlin and *Lancelot* were "World War poems. If you read them with that in mind you'll get more out of them. The passing of an old order and the beginning of a new. I didn't intend to write *Tristram*, but somehow it couldn't be denied." (Since I was a little intrigued to learn from Virginia Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* that Thomas Hardy called *The Dynasts* the "dinnasts," it may be worth recording that Robinson pronounced his famous book just as spelled: "tris-tram," not "tris-tr'm.")

"I was hoping this summer to write short things and have a

new collection next year, but I've another long poem on the way." He chuckled. "I don't seem to have much to say about it."

He spoke again of *Tristram*. "I read Swinburne to avoid collisions. Swinburne follows the French version and I rather hit off both French and English. I go back, more, to Malory."

He said of "The Man Against the Sky" that "The whole ending of the poem is ironical, even sarcastic. Of course, the implication is that there *is* an existence [after death]." And speaking of what so many critics had found to be a "philosophy of failure" in his poetry, he said "I've always rather liked the queer, odd sticks of men, that's all. The fat, sleek, successful alderman isn't interesting." He smiled and said again, "He isn't interesting."

Then he spoke of his most recent book, *Cavender's House*, that haunting monotone (it is one of Robinson's best long poems) of a tortured man's interview with his dead wife: he had murdered her but still he was not sure of her infidelity. Robinson, at the moment, sounded uncertain that I understood the status of Laramie Cavender. "She is a projection of Cavender's brain. Such things do happen, you know." He grinned, again like a boy caught in something tricky: "Though I don't suppose one ever happened that was as long as that. But that's artistic license."

I said "I don't have to tell you—do I?—that if you autograph these books they won't be sold next week, or the next?"

He smiled. "No!" he said, and went to the desk where he signed them amidst the litter of envelopes, the fine-lined small sheets of his manuscript in progress (*The Glory of the Nightingales*), and a couple of dictionaries. A couch and the windowsills were also strewn with a miscellany of papers. A long, cape-like black coat hung from one wall. Robinson wandered about, gathering things into the lunch basket, and he put on a shapeless, white canvas hat. He would ride up as far as the Colony Hall with me.

Behind Colony Hall he stood outside the car a moment, stoop-

ing to peer in and shake hands. He twinkled, and said "Don't publish a book till you're thirty. Thirty's time enough." No, he hadn't been bored: "I've had a good time," he said. Lunch basket in one hand, trailing his stick with the other, he paused at the Hall door, spat, and went slowly in.

THE ROBINSON LETTERS I have are largely without intrinsic value; many of them are no more than brief confirmations of dates I made to see him, once or twice a year. But here is one worth publishing because it has the feel of Robinson, his great courtesy, his modesty, his reticent but real kindness. It came just after that first meeting in Peterborough which I had promptly followed up with a sonnet.

Peterborough N. H.

August 31, 1929

Dear Mr. Scott,

I never know how to thank people properly when they write poems to me, but it is easy for me to say that you have written a very good sonnet, regardless of my part in it. Your lines have music, and your sonnet has a pattern, which most so-called sonnets have not. My only objection is to "and" in the second line.* Sometimes this use of "and" is effective, but it isn't so here—not for me, at least. I should prefer "With none" or "shall see"—perhaps the latter.

With many thanks and all good wishes,

Yours sincerely

E. A. Robinson

And, in a letter of August 12, 1932, he apparently replied to some remarks of mine about reading his two published but unheralded prose plays:

. . . The plays were written years ago, and I hardly ever think of them. They seem to have a sort of life. I am not sure that Van Zorn should not have been a long poem, but I hadn't thought then of writing them. Captain Craig is different. . . .

* I.e.—the line began with "And."

It should be remembered that Robinson in his early to middle decades was associated with several turn-of-the-century poets all mad to create an important American drama: among them, Ridgely Torrence, Percy MacKaye, William Vaughn Moody.

Hagedorn relates Robinson's disproportionate excitement when *Van Zorn* did have a one-week, obscure production in Brooklyn; also his attempt to rewrite the play as a novel and a similar attempt with his other play, *The Porcupine*. In *Edwin Arlington Robinson and His Manuscripts*, Esther Willard Bates reveals Robinson's wistful longings toward the theater. He told Miss Bates he ought to have "D. D." cut on his gravestone—"Defeated Dramatist."

He would now and then (the verb is almost fulsome) discuss his work though usually, I think, in response to my hero-worshipping proddings. He spoke of a forthcoming book of short poems—this was *Nicodemus*, his last collection—when I next saw him, late in November of 1931, in Boston. "Well, not so short."

"Do they come longer as you get older?"

"Yes; seem to. The lyric jumps, you know. . . . People seem to read these long things I write. I don't know just why."

Two long things had been published in the interim: *The Glory of the Nightingales* and *Matthias at the Door*. "I sold all mine for someone else to lose—Which is finance," I quoted from the *Nightingales*. "That's smart," I said. "Well," he replied, "I don't know whether it's poetry."

"Yes, yes, *Matthias* is better than *Roman Bartholow*," he agreed. "But not better than parts of *Bartholow*. Parts of that are as good as anything I've done."

The Glory of the Nightingales is dedicated to the memory of Alfred H. Louis, about whom there exists a considerable, scattered, and still mysterious record. The Robinson biographies—Hagedorn's and Emery Neff's primarily—have material on this

New York derelict with a clouded but glamorous past; Denham Sutcliffe has written an article about him, and he appears in one of Alexander Woolcott's pieces as possibly the illegitimate son of Disraeli. Richest of the sources on him is Algernon Blackwood's *Episodes Before Thirty* which also, by the way, is dedicated to this curious wreck of a brilliant man. In any case, his importance to American literature is his reincarnation as one of Robinson's great poems. Robinson always maintained, as he did to me that evening in Boston, that "The only model I ever used was an old English Jew for Captain Craig. I just transferred him to my mythical town [Tilbury], which is more or less Gardiner. —Of course, people are always thinking I use models." My recollection is that Robinson admitted slight borrowings for the young men in *Captain Craig*, but beyond that one poem he insisted there were no originals for his impressive assemblage of characters.*

He remarked of Gardiner, Maine, his home town, that he had not visited there since 1924. "It makes me blue to go back. All the people I knew are dead or tottering."

The West Newton Street house, where he stayed each spring and fall with his friend George Burnham, I never saw. On this and later occasions in Boston I would find him at Lilla Cabot Perry's studio, Room 411, 30 Ipswich Street. A brick warehouse of a building, and the room itself dwarfed even the tall and magnetic Robinson. The door to the studio let in upon a gallery, the stairs descending into a vast space bounded by three walls hung with Sargentish portraits and a windowed north wall. There were —diminutive when first seen from the head of the stairs—a few chairs, a sofa, and a desk grouped around a rug near the fireplace.

* Cf. the extraordinary yet widely-held notion that "For a Dead Lady" refers to Robinson's mother. This beautiful lady who "no longer trembles at applause" was evidently an actress and further—an old folksay—the "breast where roses could not live" means she was promiscuous. Robinson himself once observed with amused dismay that his poem "The Gift of God," an ironical presentation of excessive mother-son devotion, had been taken as "a tribute to Our Saviour."

Robinson's composing—"all of it," he said—was done during his Peterborough summers, but he may have done some revision, proof-reading or whatever at Mrs. Perry's.

She lent him the place for many years, spring and fall, while he made his Boston stopovers. In 1916 she had painted the portrait of him reproduced as the frontispiece of all the editions of his *Collected Poems*, and she was the wife of the brilliant Thomas Sergeant Perry whose *Letters* Robinson had edited in 1929—no doubt a labor of friendship; it was the only task of the sort he ever turned aside from his poetry to do.

Robinson, wearing a green eyeshade, looked like one of the immutable clerks he had once celebrated. But he also looked tired and aging; he had had some sinus trouble and he said he was "Off my feed." He had been "on the wagon for six-years," and he minded it: "Of course. But,"—a masterpiece of Robinsonian understatement—"I had a tendency to take too much." He quoted Dr. Johnson on the immediate riddance of bad habits. Sweet Caporals, "the best cigarette ever made," he smoked pretty steadily. "I used to smoke a pipe," he said, regarding mine, "but it bit my tongue. Smoking a pipe is a kind of career, you know."

He had an old-fashioned phrase for characterizing people who lived what seemed to his simple ways a gaudy existence: his young friend Lucius Beebe was "a high roller," and presently, speaking of Isadora Duncan, "She was a high roller, too."

"Did you know her well?"

"No, not well"—with a suggestion of a smile. "She wasn't beautiful."

"She was supposed to have preferred a diet of champagne and oysters," I said.

There was a typical pause. "Well," he said, "she didn't refuse whiskey."*

I am sure he considered Amy Lowell a high roller. He habitually spoke of her with mingled alarm and amusement. "She was

* See Hagedorn, pp. 230-232, for Isadora's attempt to seduce Robinson.

really quite medieval," he informed me. "She should have lived in Renaissance Italy. She'd have enjoyed poisoning people. A grand talker. But always slaying six or eight people an evening." He thought Joseph Auslander had written "a very good portrait" of Miss Lowell in *Letters to Women*: "though," he went on, "I don't know if it's always in good taste. —But then, neither was Amy." He chuckled about her. "O yes, she had a personality all right. But I'm afraid when her work is sifted there's not much there."

He was in a mood that night to speak of other poets. As Carl Van Doren says in *Three Worlds*, you rarely if ever got an extended, illustrated judgment out of Robinson: he was most apt to utter an opinion briefly and be done. There was another aspect which I think I understand now as I could not have at the time. His estimates of fellow poets struck me as consistently unenthusiastic, though neither his personal character nor his assured position as a poet seemed to me to admit any possibility of jealousy. I don't know: there still survive those who knew him better than I and were fond of him and who think he was troubled by others' fame. And maybe nobody is immune to such twinges. At any rate, a poet arrived, in fact or as he supposes, at his own way of expression is almost bound to be unenthusiastic about his contemporaries—their ways are not his and he has, in a sense, neither the time nor the attentiveness to be greatly interested. It can be just as simple and noncompetitive as that, and I feel Robinson's distant estimates are probably thus explainable.*

He ticked off a lot of poets, alive or dead. Vachel Lindsay,†

* See *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, by Edwin S. Fussell, p. 51: "His comments on his contemporaries are, by and large, unsatisfying, one reason being that Robinson had contemporaries worthy of his attention only after his tastes were formed and his responses less eager than they had been earlier. Another reason is that Robinson disliked to speak of living poets; when he did, it was generally with guarded courtesy."

† Who that very evening lectured triumphantly but exhaustedly in Springfield, Illinois, and five nights later was to kill himself; see p. 359 of Edgar Lee Masters' *Vachel Lindsay*.

Robinson thought, would last for two poems: "The Chinese Nightingale" and "General William Booth Enters Into Heaven." Masters was "bitter—he's bitter as gall." Sandburg he had once met and liked but "I don't care so much for his poetry. But then, we can't help those things."

He first mentioned Frost: "He's a good fellow." Robinson particularly liked "Nature's first green is gold" and in general preferred Frost's lyrics to the longer poems. "Going back to those *North of Boston* poems, I find they don't wear so well," he said. "Well, Frost is a kind of professional farmer. He is a bit self-conscious, but harmlessly so. He's a good fellow—a good fellow.

"You know," he went on, "I understand they teach Frost and me in the schools now." He thought that over, then smiled blandly. "I don't know which one they teach first." ("Did he say that? Did he say that?"—Mr. Frost, whacking his thigh in delight, when he heard of this some years later.)

He mentioned some of "the older boys." Whittier might be a "sounder poet" than Longfellow, but Robinson went on to speak glowingly of Longfellow's sonnets. "Longfellow was more of an artist than Whittier. If it weren't for those sonnets we'd be very different poets." Characteristically, he neglected to enlarge on this. Emerson—"He had the real juice," but when Robinson had lately tried rereading Lowell it was no go—not as good as Holmes. Still, he had been impressed to learn that it was Lowell, as editor of *The Atlantic*, who had deleted the "—al" in Emerson's original line, "Daughters of time, the hypocritical days."

Poe, he thought, had achieved a music no one else ever had, "without jingle, too. But I never have read a poem of his in which something didn't strike me wrong." He wondered, too, if Whitman were "as great as some people think he is." Parts of *Leaves of Grass* were all right and "some of the shorter things he wrote as an old man were good." When I spoke of an early Robinson "sonnet" commemorating Whitman's death, (not included in the *Collected Poems*), he said "It wasn't a sonnet; it was a piece

of blank verse. I was very young when I wrote it, but I knew all the time I was writing it that I didn't really mean it."

As for his juniors, he appeared to think a lot of them were not doing as well at forty as they should. Eliot he thought "certainly the best of the younger men, but of course most of his best lines were written by other people." He could make nothing out of Crane's *The Bridge* and he was baffled by Cummings. He asked me attentively what I "made of" Cummings, and after listening to my praise he said "If I were younger maybe I'd like that sort of thing. Well, they think I'm an old fogey, and I guess I am an old fogey."

After dinner at the Lenox he scuffed slowly along the chill, dark Boston streets, to see me off at the Back Bay Station. He peered into a book shop window. "I have a set of Crabbe," he said. "Somebody thought I was crazy about him because I wrote a sonnet about him, and gave me a set. . . . There are good things in him." That went for Cowper, too. Browning he said he rarely went back to and, speaking of critics' comparisons of his own work with Browning's, he insisted he couldn't see it. He thought he would have done the dramatic monologues whether or not there had been a Browning.

He relaxed often over detective stories, and in the station bought one by J. S. Fletcher. "You haven't time for trash now," he solemnly advised me. "Stick to the good things. Read these when you get rickety."

ROBINSON HAD SAID that night as we walked from Mrs. Perry's studio toward the hotel that the older he got the more he liked Boston. "I don't like New York now. Wouldn't go there if my friends didn't have the bad taste to live there. I've got so many friends there that my days are filled up." He seemed always most at ease at Peterborough, for him most nearly expansive. But he had the habit of his yearly round and each winter he went to his sculptor friends Mr. and Mrs. James Earle Fraser.

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In those latter years of Robinson's the Frasers lived at 328 East 42d Street. He had a room and bath at the top of the slender house—besides the bed, just a couple of chairs, a small desk, and quite a lot of shelved books for I remember his telling me they were not his books. "Haven't a place to *keep* anything!" he would exclaim, wherever he was; but with no real exasperation, I thought.

He had his unique sameness anywhere, yet he did seem to age more than most men in their early sixties. How long a pituitary cancer worked in him before the operation and its discovery in early 1935, I do not know. But he seemed frail and tired and never altogether well; though I do recall an afternoon of talk once again in the Veltin Studio at the MacDowell Colony—how, when we made some motion to leave after an hour, Robinson said to my wife and me with customary consideration, "I don't believe in urging people to stay—but if you are in no hurry and don't have to go—" and seemed content and lively. Mount Monadnock thrust up before his door as ever, and man and all seemed for that little while permanent, eternal.

But the poetic energy too was failing those last six years in which I knew him. If he added to his richest work it was with the surprisingly imaginative and vigorous *Amaranth*, a satirical nightmare of the self-deceived in the arts. (How many he must have seen in more than thirty summers at an artists' colony!) But with that penultimate book, as so often during his long career, he was worried by misunderstandings. ("Why don't they read one word after another?")

257 West Newton Street
Boston, October 7, 1934

Dear Mr. Scott

This is to thank you for your very friendly and intelligent review of *Amaranth*. Most of the notices that I have read have been altogether misleading, to put it kindly. Some of them don't even see

that it is a dream, and one of them finds in it a Catholic Purgatory—
—which is about the last thing to call it. . . .

Yours very truly
E. A. Robinson

In January 1935 I saw him at New York Hospital a few days after his operation. He was brilliant-eyed, thin, and motionless. His teeth showed small, yellow and pitted. His right arm hurt him and he apologized for not being able to shake hands. I stood touching the bedspread and I noticed he noticed me doing it. It was harder now, even than the first awesome time at Peterborough six years before, to think of much to say. I was sure I should never see him again.

"I mustn't tire you, Mr. Robinson."

He said "It's not so much a matter of your tiring me as it is of my tiring you."

His last room overlooked the East River and I remember how the flashing air across the water in the winter sunlight was wreathed with all those white gulls of his deserted Isolt—"flying and always flying and still flying." I had turned for a moment with my back to him and watched them; but I cannot say whether from his bed he could see them or knew that they were there.