EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

THE THREE TAVERNS. *By Edwin Arlington Robinson. 16 mo. 120 pages. The Macmillan Company. New York.*

SEVERAL centuries of misplaced enthusiasms having made of English poetry an Appian Way of sepulchres, the present-day critic, with an excess of caution, always begins by setting up his own particular pretension to foresight and discrimination. Depreciation, naturally enough, ministering, as it does, to the critic's self-esteem, has always been the easiest short-cut to criticism. And somewhat for the same reason, praise is difficult—sometimes only slightly less so than actual performance.

Mr Robinson, and I believe intentionally, forgoes much applause that meaner men might covet. Less than that of almost any of his contemporaries has his poetry depended on the accidents of time and manner; not because he wears fashions of the past with the awkward carriage of the present—doing so, he would achieve only the whimsical but cheap singularity of the isolated instance. The verse of Mr Robinson is distinguished, primarily, because it has been created under the austere mastery of character; as with the sonnets of Milton: no single one suffices; each is a minute portion of one and the same portrait of the man himself. We need not necessarily impute the major virtue to this method merely in order to understand it. But verse so written, though it be seldom, if ever, the vogue, dies hard.

For one thing, popularity is scarcely apt to lure Mr Robinson on to his own destruction, the claret of The Three Taverns being rather too cool for most palates. Poems that must, and shall, be read for the honour and glory of each word will never own a vast apostledom. Consequently, a poem in blank verse on the subject of Saint Paul's advent to Rome is almost incredible in these days of peep-show poetry. It remains only for some critic to liken it to Browning's Cleon to corroborate the philosopher who writes that

they who compare two things have never felt the heart of either.

In a fashion, all the volumes of the verse of Mr Robinson have been books of silhouettes. The outline of the idea seems to be his passion. To the casual eye of them who read poetry at a glance all these poems will look alike in their neat black and white; in the absence of high colour, only examination can distinguish one from another by means of the peculiar feature or characteristic posture that is the appropriate merit of each. In such books there is no best poem, and scarcely a worst. But it is in the sonnets that Mr Robinson speaks in his most intimate, even wayward and at times disdainful mood. The direction of the thought is oblique, seldom, if ever, direct in its splendour, the inevitable artistic habit, possibly, of an age generally thought to be heavy with the accumulated learning of books. One dare not be too open and above-board these days. As in the sonnets of Shakespeare, here speaks the gracious, measured voice of thought looking on nearly all, if not all things, with a mind at peace—but something too subdued at moments as if the lips themselves betrayed their conscious dread of folly or exaggeration. Just here Mr Robinson is in and of his own times, more genuinely than the superficial tricks and manners of expression (which he neglects) would ever indicate: in all his poems fall the shadows of men who are brave in their dislikes and timid in their admiration.

The vessels of this verse: its form, its metre, its rhythm, are not unfamiliar; we have seen the like for many days; as for some men clothing is a part of character, for others it remains a trivial, inconsiderable item. One would wish only that Mr Robinson had chosen to abstain from combat in such matters, taking as his text the very words he has put into the mouth of his own character:

> "myriads will be done
> To death because a farthing has two sides,
> And is at last a farthing."

Expert as men have often been at boring themselves with disputes about methods of literature, their unhappy faculty of being miserable over the question of categories has never yet made them interesting. Mr Robinson should have remembered that of all things there is nothing more ponderously transient in its futility

than earnest discussion of the forms of art; possibly he did remember, and for having done so, is the wiser and the greater poet. The age that asks questions about poetry may learn anatomy, in time, but it will never reproduce itself.

What is commonly called a vital objection might be offered against the work of Mr Robinson: austere and conventional—many poets have been so—his failure is his neglect to express the spirit of his time; whatever that may mean. But a glib certainty as to that spirit has cost more than one poet dear these last seven hundred years; were Mr Robinson to exercise a conscious choice—and he, of course, would not—the hollow accusation that he lacks contemporaneousness would leave him cold in the face of the obvious fact that the spirit of an age is only a fiction built up heavily on the surface of that particular portion of history under which lie the actual remains. So, especially, are the tombs and epitaphs of poets.

In all his volumes Mr Robinson has chiselled with a deft and gracious hand; if there be no "fair vast head," as yet, along his galleries, there are, nevertheless, fascinating faces, and companionable ones. As with fine work he has come slowly into fame, one suspects his tenure of it will be at least correspondingly long, such being the caprices of events. Cynically though Mr Robinson might reflect, in view of the havoc literary legends play with the memory of men—legends that make a Puritan of Milton and an Irishman of Swift—fame is of small moment.

STEWART MITCHELL