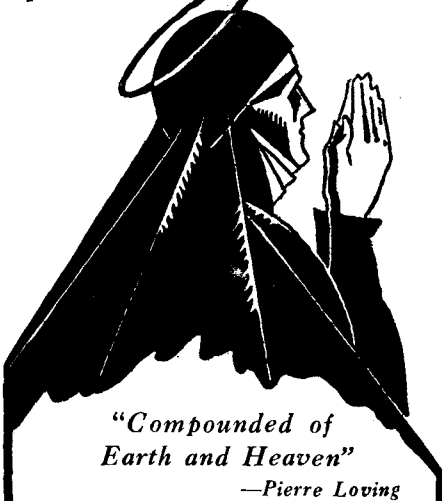


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## Round about Parnassus

By WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT

WITH the passing of years, in a continuing study of the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson, his success as an innovator becomes more and more apparent. The progress of his quiet creation has not been an entirely even progress, but when one compares it with the development of the talents of most of his contemporaries it gathers to itself an astonishing mass and variety of accomplishment. Our best modern American poets seem to have worked at their highest pitch for but a few years. Then, if death did not intervene, we continued to hear their voices in repetition, and in a less striking repetition, of their most characteristic utterance. A few with the inevitable lessening of the lyrical impulse seemed rather to go to pieces. They were no longer surprised by impetuous inspiration. They were neither self-critical enough nor assiduous enough sagaciously to build on their initial promises, developing their most native virtues, discarding the experimentation that proved uncharacteristic. Robinson, more than any of them, save perhaps Robert Frost, was able wisely to weigh his particular powers, to proceed along the individual trail he had blazed at the start.

It may be said, even then, that the Robinsonian manner has frequently become mannerism, that he has repeated himself, that—in a sense—he has "gone droning on." But usually at the moment when this feeling had accumulated to the proportions of a conviction some new creation of the poet's made its unobtrusive appearance with force and freshness sufficient to cause the gossipers to look a little silly. To be sure, his idiom has never changed. Why should it? It is entirely characteristic of the man, it is his identity. In this idiom he has continually conquered new provinces. That is the important thing.

We were speaking of his innovations. Robinson began by a remarkable transforming of the sonnet into a vehicle for the presentation of a novel *in petto*. He brought a new tone into the lyric. Since Browning, more than any other English poet, dealt in his poems with the complications of the lives of imagined characters, Browning as forerunner to Robinson was a matter immediately noted. It has almost unexceptionally suited Robinson better to invent a tale of what happened to a cast of characters that he could observe with detachment than to express himself in the first person, except as the onlooker. Browning also. But none can be student both of Browning and of Robinson and not be able to distinguish them at the first fall of an accent. There is less similarity in the speaking voice of their poetry than even between Browning and George Meredith. Robinson early presented his own manner of dramatic lyric, he has proceeded from that to psychological analysis in long poems in blank verse. Browning did the same. But there is a robustness, a romanticism, a quiddity, to Browning that Robinson entirely lacks; and—in spite of all charges of "obscurity"—there is a clarity to Robinson's language that was impossible to Browning. Browning is a giant laboring up a steep hill with spasmodic exclamations, objurgations, apparently random pithy remarks that suddenly shape into an enthralling parable or highly significant story. Robinson allows himself merely the soberest or driest "asides." They are well-weighted, they have not the lightning-flash of intuition, the sudden wildly elliptical aptitude of Browning's, but they are levelled shafts, and they tell.

In handling his moderns, aside from his historical figures, Browning was dealing, naturally, with the conventions of his day. Robinson, in dealing with his own day, deals no less with conventional life—though both poets also analyzed certain aspects of bohemian existence. Both poets examined "failures" sympathetically. Both dissect human catastrophe, and, in dissecting

invent

A tale from my own heart, more near akin  
To my own passions and habitual thoughts;  
Some variegated story, in the main  
Lofty

as Wordsworth said. But "the unsubstantial structure" does not melt, as with Wordsworth, "mist into air dissolving." Robinson gives us real people of flesh and blood in his Arthurian poems. (It is fascinating to speculate what Browning might have done with the Court of King Arthur!) Both poets, unable somehow to write drama that satisfies the demands of the actual stage, are most profoundly dramatists, even as they are both psychologists of a high order. Nor does Robinson bring the "patter" of modern

psychology to bear upon his direct or indirect analysis of character. His first concern is to present human beings in action. His chief comment is upon fatality. He proceeds, with Browning, on broad bases. Browning, whose sense of life's ironies remains profoundly alien to the sophomoric half-wittedness that will forever be snickering over "God's in his heaven" (without even an elementary knowledge of the poem in which the lyric appears), possessed to the end a faith-by-intuition which Robinson's "Man against the Sky," it is true, must gravely dismiss with logical inevitability. Yet we think, so far as we can know, that the much greater, mere physical enjoyment, that Browning found in life must largely account for this. His spirits were generally buoyantly high. He was a man of great gusto. (Which is not meant to reduce faith to being merely a matter of a good digestion,—though it is extraordinary how much physical well-being has to do with one's optimism!) Yet only this gusto saved Browning sometimes from sentimentality, a pitfall upon whose edge Robinson has never even stood, for all his sympathy with human nature.

To the dramatist born, the most violent crises must always appeal as material. It is unnecessary to cite examples from Browning. Robinson found for himself that one of his main strengths lay in the presentation and analysis of such crises. Among his dramatic lyrics we have only to remind you of "London Bridge." The recent "Cavender's House" was concerned with the afterthoughts and mental mirages of a man who had murdered his wife. The present long poem, "The Glory of the Nightingales" (Macmillan: \$1.25) is the story of a planned revenge which, by circumstance, is taken out of the hands of the avenger. The colloquy between Nightingale and Malory in Nightingale's house by the sea succeeds to an intensely dramatic juxtaposition. The essentials of the "plot," without Robinson's handling, might easily take the pattern of melodrama. And yet the excitement of the poem, and its suspense, consist in the gradual revealing of the souls of the two antagonists and of their complete relationship to each other, not (naturally) in any mere physical act of violence. And in "The Glory of the Nightingales" we perceive how thoroughly, if quietly, Robinson has taken possession of the new territory indicated by his early sonnets which he advanced upon as a modern novelist as well as poet. The thought of Henry James crosses our mind. Robinson possesses that subtlety, and the discipline derived from the use of poetic forms prevents him from the involvement and interminable qualification of James.

We wish to glance a moment at the technique. The first lines of the poem begin swingingly, lyrically, not with the grave stepping-off of ordinary blank verse:

With a long way before him there to  
Sharon,  
And a longer way from Sharon to the sea,

which soon falls into a soberer pace. But on the next page, as if dictated by the intensity of Malory's intention, the beat changes, achieving a remarkable feat of metric emphasis:

No surer part  
Was yet assigned to man for a performance  
Than one that was for Malory, who must  
act,  
Or leave the stage a failure.

For the present  
All his wealth was in a purpose and a  
weapon.  
All his purpose a removal of one being  
Whose inception and existence was an error,

The Roman type is ours. Throughout the poem, unobtrusively, the rhythm of the blank verse slips into other variations that prevent monotony to the ear. This craftsmanship may only be noted here, without illustration. But the hand of the poet has lost no whit of its cunning.

If "The Glory of the Nightingales" is not one of Robinson's greatest achievements, it is nevertheless one more example of his continued exercise of his own peculiar ability to analyze the human spirit under all manner of special strains and stresses. We should almost, indeed, pronounce him, over and above being a poet, the most profound psychological novelist of our day. We are prevented from doing so by the undeniable fact that, in general, his characters do "talk Robinson" and not as they actually might speak in real life. This is necessary for

the weave of his fabric, for the unification of effect in a medium that imposes its own obligations, even as the stage imposes others. And yet, even in the face of this qualification, how the illusion seizes one!

Hortense Flexner's "This Stubborn Root" (Macmillan \$1.25) is a volume upon which the author should be complimented for her craftsmanship. If she is never dazzling she is always interesting and she has the power of compact expression. We remember being much struck by her initial poem, "Alien," when it appeared in *The New Republic*. Her impressionism is vivid and her thought individual. She can be spontaneous, artfully, both in strict forms and in free. We have space to quote but this:

### QUERY

Is it not possible that our millions of years  
Are as a bad morning,  
In the workshop of God?  
That day on which the materials failed  
Him?  
And all of our agony  
But His hand drawn painfully across His  
brow,  
Our blood and sweat of aons,  
His question,  
"But perhaps this is the wrong approach?"

BRONZE WOMAN. By GEORGE BRANDON SAUL. Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc. \$2.

These are musical poems, though they do not much impress save for occasional rather echoing stanzas. The best of these seem to us—from two different poems—

Where the nether waters of hell roll starless  
I saw one stand;  
There was pride in his eyes, at his lips  
a trumpet,  
A rose in his hand

and also

Vaguely through the rains he heard the  
wild horns calling,  
The wild horns of her beauty, and  
and now he knows no rest  
Because he rose and followed, and drank  
below the sunrise  
The dew that was the morning on  
her rose-white breast.

SONG OF THE NEW HERCULES. By LEIGH HANES. BOSTON: The Four Seas Company. \$2.

The title-poem of this book by a new Virginian poet appeared originally in *Harriet Monroe's Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. It is a dynamic effort. The rest of the book is composed of brief and quiet lyrics. These are clear and pleasant but hardly remarkable. Perhaps "Thumb Proof" is the most engaging. There is somewhat too much mere prettiness to them for our particular taste.

FIRST THE BLADE. California Intercollegiate Anthology of Verse. Volume III. Scripps College: Claremont, California.

Mostly brief verse not badly fashioned. The western undergraduates are technically interesting, to a certain extent.

Writing on the possibility of universal language in a recent S. P. E. tract, Elizabeth Daryush, daughter of the late Robert Bridges, says: "Every one who has had to make himself understood by a foreigner who knows very little English, will have realized how one can instinctively strip one's speech almost bare of idiom, in order to avoid misunderstanding, and how easy it is to do this when treating only of practical matters of fact. It is unlikely, also, that differences of pronunciation would cause any serious difficulty. The advocates of a universal language do, however, generally overrate the easiness of learning it. Because most of the schemes hitherto proposed are made up chiefly of Latin and other European roots, they present therefore but little difficulty to educated Europeans, to whom several of these languages are already familiar: no such facility would be experienced by non-Europeans. Again, the fond hope of some authorities, that the connection which no doubt existed between primitive speech and natural gesture could serve as a basis for a universally comprehensible modern language, is merely fanciful. (One might as well seek to frame a system of suburban by-laws on the theory of the natural rights of man!) Nevertheless, a good case can certainly be made out for the adoption of an artificial universal language. To raise a natural one to this position would involve two great disadvantages: the language in question would suffer inevitable degradation, and would moreover be too idiomatic and irregular to be well suited for the purpose."

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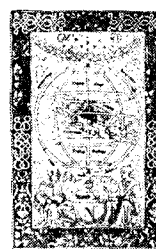
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## Foreign Literature

Pages of the Past

LA DAME DE HUNGERSTEIN. By ANDRÉ DORNY. Paris: Librairie Plon. 1930.

LA CHRONIQUE DES FRÈRES ENNE-MIS. By JÉRÔME et JEAN THARAUD. Paris: Plon. 1930.

Reviewed by AMELIA VON ENDE

CHRONICLES and genealogical records are a treasure trove to the writer who has the gift of enlivening dry facts and dates with his creative imagination and reproducing the atmosphere of a past, however remote. In French fiction the *histoire romancée* is now in great favor, and André Dorny's "La Dame de Hungerstein," a true story of the fifteenth century, is an interesting specimen of a crime novel with a postlude which is distinctly *romancée*.

The author, who in other works is specializing in Alsatian lore, bases his story upon documents and official records, but does not unquestioningly accept the statements of the old chroniclers, who were too close to the events recorded to see them in the right perspective. He admits that getting away from the academic data, properly classified and labelled, enables one between the lines suddenly to read a different story. The heroes and heroines of those annals are then no longer paragons of virtue or monsters of vice, but simply men and women who are neither—poor humans made up of good and evil. He approaches the story of Cunegonde Gielin de Gilsberg, who at the age of twenty was married by a profligate father to the octogenarian Guillaume de Hungerstein, from the standpoint of a humane psychology, and it is thus he would have the reader look upon the heroine.

The Hungersteins were a family of rude soldiers whose military feats are recorded in the chronicles of medieval Alsace; one of them served in the army of Jeanne d'Arc. Guillaume de Hungerstein is portrayed as an old fighter, fond of plentiful food and drink, with nothing to appeal to the heart of an inexperienced young girl. The Gilsbergs were an old Swiss race, "something of condottieri, brigands, and gentlemen." The mother of Cunegonde, daughter of Bernese patricians, lived in perpetual terror of her husband Rodolphe, savage hunter of game and women, and the girl's childhood was one nightmare of the mother's indescribable sufferings and her own horror of father's and brother's cruelty. These impressions left an indelible mark upon her mind. On coming to the Alsace to live, Rodolphe became involved in a crooked wheat speculation with Guillaume de Hungerstein, and, indebted to him for a loan, decided to pay it off with his daughter's person. The octogenarian was much impressed with her beauty and the marriage was agreed upon without her being consulted. Cunegonde submitted as to a lesser evil, because it seemed to promise her escape from the cruelties of father and brother.

In this hope she was disappointed, because both took up their abode at the castle, and she had now to witness the drunken orgies and listen to the obscenities of three coarse men. Moreover, the brother made constant demands upon her for money which she had to procure from her husband by trickery and cajolery, and having overheard a cynical conversation between her father and her husband about the manner in which she had become Dame de Hungerstein, she conceived as bitter a hatred for the man who had bought her as for the father who had sold, and the brother who was exploiting, her. When one day Hungerstein refused a new demand for money, Werner in a rage narrowly missed killing him. The old man thereupon entered a complaint against his brother-in-law with the "grand bailli" of the province, Guillaume de Ribeauvierre. Friends, who had longed for an opportunity to interfere, appealed to the same official to appoint a guardian for the old man who had ample reason to regret his insane marriage. Thus affairs at Hungerstein, long a topic of gossip among the people, became a matter of concern to the authorities. On the day when Ribeauvierre sent his right hand, Lockmann, to examine the books and inaugurate a system of economy which made Cunegonde dependent upon him for every expenditure, Rodolphe and Werner left. But resentment against the husband who had acquired her through a bargain with her father, without asking her consent, rankled more and more in her outraged soul and led to the crime which became a *cause célèbre* in the annals of Alsace. When arrested for having induced two servants to murder Guillaume de Hungerstein, and asked for her reasons, she replied in a calm and firm tone: "To be free, and to

revenge myself for everything. . . . For I wished also to cause the death of my father and my brother."

Cunegonde's further experiences fill many pages of official records. The power of her beauty had given her the reputation of a sorceress. Men of high social standing lost their heads over her, planned her two miraculous escapes. Even the erratic son of Ribeauvierre was so infatuated with her, that his mind was unbalanced, and after exorcism and other treatments peculiar to that period had failed, died incurably insane. She was finally locked up in the dungeon of the prison of St. Ulrich, where to her fortieth year she was heard to sing by those who passed by. But while the death of every other prisoner is officially recorded, there is no mention of her demise. So it was rumored that Ribeauvierre, a few days before his death, had set her free. Her story had all the elements of lurid melodrama that appealed to the imagination of the people, and became not only a legend, but was sung by popular balladists. Such a song, hinting at the final clemency of her judge, is contained in a collection of "Bänkellieder" published in Vienna in 1832.

André Dorny added a "second part" to the story, the contents of which it would be unfair to divulge. His sympathy with his heroine is evident throughout the strange book, but somehow his pen fails to make her live. The reader hears of her beauty, but cannot visualize it. Yet the author proves his ability to create living characters in that second part, where he either gives his imagination free rein or relates actual experiences. Howbeit "La Dame de la Hungerstein" is an interesting departure from the type of crime novels popular with American readers at the present time.

Unique in conception and execution is the latest work of Jérôme and Jean Tharaud. It presents a vivid picture of the unrest in Geneva at the beginning of the sixteenth century, spiritual, because the Reformation was then knocking at the doors of the old republic, and political, because its independence was menaced by the Duke of Savoy. This forms the background of the tragedy of the enemy brothers, which Maître Lignot, owner of the Auberge de la Tour Percée, brought upon his family by a strange idiosyncrasy.

It is a psychologically interesting record of two young souls tossed back and forth upon the crest of the great tidal wave that swept over the minds of the people. It is told in the simple, naïve language of an eyewitness of events. The character of Maître Lignot, that sturdy, unswerving champion of the rights which the republic of Geneva had granted her citizens and stubborn adherent to a course he had once chosen to pursue, makes of him an equally if not the most, important figure of the story. And all through appears the tragic face of Mère Lignot, who was never to know which was her child, and the humble form of the pious chronicler—until one reaches the epilogue addressed to the "Reader," which says that the "chronicle" was a trick, and the numerous sources are quoted from which the authors drew the material for their work. The "trick" was certainly an amazing *tour de force*. For the style of the simple, garrulous old annalist is admirably preserved.

Mr. E. G. Twigg, writing of Thornton Wilder some months ago in the London *Mercury*, said: "I have heard it remarked by careless or forgetful Englishmen that Mr. Wilder's culture and sense for the English language removes him from the true American tradition. It is an absurd, but a common, fallacy. We forget too easily that an authentic American note pervades even the best American writing; or if we remember, still, with the flicker of the films before our imagination, the scream of the saxophone in our all-too-corporeal ears, and Prohibition on our minds, we are not able to disentangle it so often as we should, for it has a soft musical quality. We are confused, when we are not misled, by insistent appearances and do not always stop to consider that skyscrapers and bootleggers and loud unlettered mayors quite misrepresent the soul of America. Those vigorous writers, Mr. Dreiser and Mr. Lindsay, all question of talent set aside, are hardly as representative as the more sedate Mr. Arlington Robinson and Miss Willa Cather. In fact, Nathaniel Hawthorne's insinuating accents have had more real influence on his countrymen than the greater voices of Poe and Whitman, although these have inspired a large proportion of the writers of Europe for nearly a hundred years."