



December 1969

Edwin Arlington Robinson and the Theatre of Destiny

Michael C. Hinden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.8, December 1969, p.463-471

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly 463

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON AND THE
THEATRE OF DESTINY

By MICHAEL C. HINDEN

WHEN a major poet's attempt to transform himself into a writer for the stage ends only in frustration and reversals, the reasons for his failure often become a matter of some interest. E. A. Robinson's case is particularly poignant, for after having devoted six years to the effort, he could not easily bring himself to admit defeat, and thereby increased his pain by clinging to illusions. Certainly he knew that precedents for public disinterest in a popular poet's plays were abundant in recent English literary history; still, long after the initial rejections of *Van Zorn* and *The Porcupine* and after years of unsuccessful rewriting (which included transposition of one of the plays into a long novel that was later burned), the poet desperately maintained the hope that somehow his two plays might prove exceptions.¹ Eventually, of course, he bowed to the inevitable ("When I die," he wrote, "they ought to put D.D.—Defeated Dramatist—on my tombstone"),² but Robinson never entirely lost faith in his two plays, especially *Van Zorn*. To Kermit Roosevelt he confided: "It remains to be seen whether it is simply a failure, or whether it is so different from most plays in subject matter and construction that some time will be required for its assimilation."³ As yet this hope has not been justified. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is that Robinson's "unassimilated" play bears striking resemblance to the work of a more widely accepted American poet-turned-playwright, T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, and in order to better assess the merits of Robinson's play, and to account, too, for its ultimate failure, it might be useful to compare these two works in some detail.⁴

Preceding publication of *The Cocktail Party* by better than three decades, *Van Zorn* anticipates the Eliot play in key as-

1 For a detailed exposition see Irving D. Suss, "The Plays of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VIII (September 1969), 347-363.

2 Esther Willard Bates, *Edwin Arlington Robinson and His Manuscripts* (Waterville, Maine, 1944), 9.

3 Ridgely Torrence, editor, *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 87.

4 I am indebted to Professor Hyatt H. Waggoner of Brown University for the original suggestion that there might be similarities between Robinson's play and Eliot's.

464 Colby Library Quarterly

pects of plot, structure, character, setting, mood, tone, and theme. Both are drawing-room comedies: the plots of each unravel within the confines of a living room, a studio, or an office, where the only principle of action is discussion; both are structured on the well-tried principle of complicating a simple situation for the worse and then resolving it for the better, and both assume a theory of aesthetic distance according to which characters are introduced who approach life with some degree of detachment and sophistication, but whose discomfitures are so managed that they interest and amuse us without engaging our profoundest sympathies. Even the plots are similar. The complicating and unraveling devices of both *Van Zorn* and *The Cocktail Party* depend upon the machinations of some benevolent "mystery" character, an outsider, a visionary, a sort of comic Tiresias who has some special knowledge of the other characters and their destinies and who is influential in bringing those characters to their appointed rendezvous with Fate. Both Eliot's Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly and Robinson's Van Zorn are in the world but seem to be not of it; they commune with secret (perhaps symbolic) forces of the universe and derive their being from a plane of existence different from that of the characters whom they manipulate. Reilly helps to hold a marriage together; Van Zorn proceeds to prevent one from taking place. Yet in the process both confer a new dimension of selfhood upon the parties involved, bringing each to acknowledge some meaningful revelation concerning the nature of his destiny and personal identity. Reilly and Van Zorn's functions are analogous, then, for the emphasis on Destiny and self-revelation is indeed the central issue of both plays. *The Cocktail Party* and *Van Zorn* are drawing-room comedies on the surface only; on a more profound level both plays are metaphysical comedies in the sense that they purport to be dramatizations of principles of reality.

The Cocktail Party is sufficiently familiar to most readers so as not to warrant detailed summary, but it may be of value here to recall several aspects of the better known play which have direct bearing on the central issues raised earlier by Robinson's *Van Zorn*. Part of the interest in the Eliot play centers on its two interlocking themes of Destiny and selfhood. Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, Peter Quilpe and Celia Copplestone, at

varying levels of awareness, embark on quests of self-identity and discovery. Each character must become the artificer of his own identity and destiny, but to a significant extent the choice he will make already has been determined for him. Destiny in Eliot's play may be described as the fulfillment of personality. Characters have the power to determine their own course, yet once a choice is made, the course seems to determine the actions of the characters. Since he is somehow prescient, Harcourt-Reilly is able to foretell the pattern in which the characters' lives seem destined to unfold. Yet the pattern Reilly envisages assumes that the characters themselves make the necessary choices that determine it. It is his role, therefore, to interpret to the others the nature of their destinies and to encourage each to "work out [his] salvation with diligence." Thus the play develops a rather fascinating paradox, expertly dramatized by Eliot so that it never appears in terms of a merely abstract concept or mechanistic idea—the paradox implicit in the fusion of the doctrines of free will and necessity.

The basic situation in Robinson's *Van Zorn*, like that of *The Cocktail Party*, is relatively uncomplex. Act I, set in the New York studio of the artist Weldon Farnham, introduces a set of quasi-sophisticated characters whose spiritually vacant lives belie their external indications of talent and creativity. Farnham, callous and complacent, has recently announced his engagement to the beautiful but bored Miss Villa Vannevar, much to the despair of her former lover, George Lucas, a writer. Now enter the mysterious Van Zorn, the instrument of "Destiny," who perceives immediately that the fate of each of these three depends upon his prevention of the scheduled marriage. In Act II, the function of which is analogous to the second act of *The Cocktail Party*, Van Zorn attempts to redirect the intentions of the three principal characters. He succeeds in dissuading Lucas from committing suicide and eventually convinces Miss Vannevar that it is her destiny to marry George, not Farnham. In Act III it remains for Farnham to concede the point and to discover a revelation concerning the nature of his own identity—or destiny. Like Celia in *The Cocktail Party*, Farnham's role in life is not to marry but to dedicate himself to something greater than personal contentment. In Eliot's play

466 Colby Library Quarterly

Celia moves toward sainthood; in Robinson's play Farnham consecrates his life to art.

The central interest here, of course, devolves upon the character of Van Zorn and the nature of his ability to engineer revelations that occur in others. On his entrance he is described in paradoxical terms as a very serious person, "inclined to a certain intangible melancholy," yet afraid of being taken too seriously. "There is something almost unreal in his easy persistence along lines that few men would even think of pursuing . . . There remains a fringe of mystery around him to the end."⁵ Van Zorn is independently wealthy, a world traveler; indeed, there are scattered references throughout the play linking him to the legend of the Flying Dutchman. Van Zorn announces to the company gathered that he has undertaken to become a doctor—of medicine, divinity, and philosophy, and that he considers himself his own patient. For four years he has been "seeking for guidance," and it now appears that he is on the verge of fulfilling his role in the universe. "I must have a place in the scheme of existence, and I have had a presentiment that I am soon to find it" (I, p. 32). Like Reilly, Van Zorn's role in the scheme of existence is that of goading others into re-examining themselves and re-interpreting their identities. He plays the Socratic gadfly with Farnham and Lucas, continually asking each whether he truly knows himself. By the end of Act I Van Zorn has taken the reins and has proposed to meet with Villa Vannevar to arrange "the future happiness of all."

A major problem, it must be admitted, already conspicuous in the play, is Robinson's unfamiliarity with stage dialogue. Like Eliot he is faced with the difficulty of wedding a pattern of metaphysical meaning to the conventions of drawing-room comedy, but he seems unable at times to bring about that special fusion of revelation and conversation which Eliot executes so expertly. Perhaps the verse form of *The Cocktail Party* is more congenial to a commingling of the two levels; albeit, one has the impression that Eliot in verse writes dialogue that sounds more natural than Robinson's in prose. In Robinson's play the casual "small talk" seems almost inadequate to the burdens of meaning intermittently thrust upon it. Only occasionally do the

5 Robinson, *Van Zorn* (New York, 1914), Act I, 27.

revelations develop out of the natural flow of preceding conversation. Indeed, a related problem arises in Robinson's handling of voice. Obviously a playwright's key device of characterization is the creation of individual idiom, but the characters in *Van Zorn* for the most part sound alike; many of their speeches might be interchangeable. All speak with tones of mock-serious irony, forced grace, light cynicism—all except Van Zorn, who on occasion comes dangerously close to sounding like a pamphlet from the Theosophical Society. Yet Van Zorn is also capable of wit, and it is he who keeps the play alive and interesting.

Act II opens with a scene between George Lucas and Villa Vannevar. George, like Edward or Peter Quilpe in *The Cocktail Party*, feels that his identity has been violated through the loss of love. In a symbolic and intentionally self-indulgent gesture, he announces his arrival by sending up a blank calling card. George tells Villa that he is leaving forever, going West "to follow the direction of the sun." (George's nickname in the play is "Phoebus Apollo," an attempt to link his character to a pattern of sun symbolism which recurs as a rather tenuous motif throughout the play.) By "going West" George means he is contemplating suicide, but it remains for Van Zorn, who now arrives, to discover his real intention and to claim him for the role which Destiny has decreed. Having succeeded brilliantly, Van Zorn next tries to convince Villa Vannevar to change her plans. Using the same line pursued by Harcourt-Reilly in questioning Edward, he asks her: "Is it your unalterable will to deprive these three people, including yourself, of the happiness that might as well be theirs?" Villa, who is not quite as malleable as George, returns: "Why do you speak of my 'will' and your 'destiny?' Mayn't I have a destiny as well as you?" (II, p. 108). This of course is precisely the revelation which Van Zorn has engineered for her. By the end of the act Villa, like Celia, is left to choose her destiny for herself, and George (like Edward and Lavinia) has had his course determined for him by Van Zorn. Yet we never fully learn how these conversions were inspired, and as a result, we are left to resolve for ourselves the motivations of the characters. At the end of the act Van Zorn rather mechanically fits together the pieces of an ivory paper-opener which George had broken early in the scene. We have

468 Colby Library Quarterly

the impression that his "fitting together" of the characters has been accomplished with no less difficulty. Unlike Reilly in *The Cocktail Party*, Van Zorn seems more a wizard than a dialectician.

Act III brings us back to Farnham's studio where Villa and George enter to announce that they intend to marry and that they have discovered their true identities. Farnham, understandably surprised, demands an explanation. He receives the answer that all is the result of "Fate." "Say determined—ordained—premeditated—desperate—anything but impetuous," exclaims Villa (III, p. 139). The point is that it all *does* seem premeditated, ordained, and that Van Zorn has but to drop a phrase at the proper moment, stare magnetically with his clear blue eyes—and all will fall into place. We never see how Destiny actually *works* in the Robinson play, whereas Eliot has faithfully documented its principles. Van Zorn sums up the issue in a single phrase: "But why debate the inevitable?" (III, p. 144). Yet the very essence of drama is debate, and in successful drama the outcome of the plot depends significantly on the outcome of the debate. Here the debate sometimes is fickle, mechanical, incidental; rarely is it vital. Very much aware of the necessity of good debate in drama, Eliot obviates Robinson's dilemma by forcing the burdens of self-determination directly onto the shoulders of his characters. Destiny in the Eliot play is an issue which *must* be debated; the characters must choose their destinies, or if they are not capable of choosing, they must at least be brought to the point of comprehending what their destinies imply.

It remains before the final curtain in *Van Zorn* to bring Farnham to a realization that the new arrangement is all for the best. In the last act, too, Van Zorn's "mysterious quality" seems to take on new dimensions. Two references clearly indicate that he, like Celia in *The Cocktail Party*, is identified with elements of Christian symbolism. With studied cleverness he remarks on one occasion that he is "about [his] father's business"; a second comment recalls the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In reference to Lucas, Van Zorn remarks: "I have never killed anybody to my knowledge. I may once have had something to do with bringing a man back to life again" (III, p. 127). In any case, Van Zorn is a redemptive figure, clearly the agent

Colby Library Quarterly 469

of a redeeming "Destiny." In Robinson's play, however, Destiny always remains a mysterious "given." Eliot attempts to dramatize the mystery; in this lies the central distinction between the two works. Still, *Van Zorn* deserves to be recognized as the precursor of a dramatic form which Eliot, a generation later, was able to infuse with subtlety and depth.

Robinson's second play, *The Porcupine*, in many respects is better than his first. The play deals with four pairs of star-crossed lovers, but its structure is more tightly knit, less easily unraveled than *Van Zorn*. Each of the characters is functional, for now the destiny of one depends upon the destiny of all. The difference here is that the "manipulating" character, Larry, is not an outsider who has prescient knowledge, but a member of the family who, in the end, is proved to be more blind than any of the others. To extend the Eliot analogy, this play might be taken as Robinson's *Family Reunion*.

The Porcupine begins when Larry Scammon, a carefree, wealthy vagabond, returns home after a ten-year absence to find that the sweetheart he had deserted then has since borne him a child. Rachel, the sweetheart, now is married to Larry's half-brother, Rollo Brewster, who believes the child to be his own. Rachel still loves Larry, but he seems too preoccupied to notice her. In the interim Rollo has become entangled with another woman, herself party to an unhappy marriage. Van Zorn-like, Larry sets out to rearrange the mismatched couples, but insensitive to Rachel's innermost needs, he blunders grievously: at the final curtain Rachel reaches for a vial of poison.

Surprisingly, the atmosphere of *The Porcupine* (at least during the early scenes) belies the lugubrious, melodramatic outlines of its plot. Unlike *Van Zorn*, Larry contends, optimistically, that the powers of Destiny are negotiable: "Now I believe in ways out of places. The more I consider this world, and its damnable nests of misery that might be cleaned out by the exercise of a little ordinary intelligence, the more I believe in ways out of places. The ways are here, and we are here to find them. And don't, for God's sake, think the stars are in their courses against you."⁶ Ironically, he is proved wrong, for in the course

6 Robinson, *The Porcupine* (New York, 1915), Act I, 57.

of working out the love problems of the other characters, Larry (himself incapable of love) drives Rachel to suicide. Indeed, the Destiny which seems to be at work in this play is malignant rather than benign. Rachel, as she approaches the hiding place where she has secreted the poison, seems to be drawn on "as if by a mysterious and irresistible force (III, p. 152). Symbolically, Larry, through his inability to establish a personal relationship grounded in love, has corrupted that force of Destiny of which he seemed to be the instrument. Larry himself is imperfect, and it is he who is in greatest need of redemption.

Yet if Larry's thematic blindness proves disastrous to the other characters in the play, it is responsible, conversely, for creating a measure of audience interest and suspense that one finds lacking in *Van Zorn*. Larry genuinely believes himself to be the prophet of change, and his machinations continually convert the situations in the play from static to dynamic. Although change does occur in *Van Zorn*, it seems peculiarly superficial. For *Van Zorn*, who controls the action, change is not a reality but an illusion, part of the working out of a preordained pattern. In *The Porcupine*, however, Larry conceives change to be a genuine possibility, and with this view, he confers upon the other characters the responsibility of choice. Stakes are higher here than in *Van Zorn*. Our interest in the characters of *The Porcupine* results, primarily, from their innate belief that what they say and do will have a determining influence on the outcome of their fortunes. Characters now speak with distinguishable voices, and conversation becomes vital.

In this second play Robinson seems to have benefitted from earlier mistakes, learning, as Eliot learned later, that "Destiny" on the modern stage cannot descend in a machine: it must be "transhumanized" (a word used by the guardians in *The Cock-tail Party*), interwoven in the pattern created by the lives of erring human beings coping with specifically dynamic situations. Similarly, the theme of self-identity can be significant only if the characters depicted are invested with real "selves," if they are granted a capacity for choice; for whenever Destiny decides the outcome without really consulting the characters, conflict—the essence of drama—is removed.

It would be imprudent, no doubt, to proclaim that Robinson's two plays are significant landmarks in the development of

Colby Library Quarterly 471

American drama; indeed, the author himself was acutely aware of his limitations as a playwright. On the other hand, neither are these plays wholly deserving of the oblivion to which they have been relegated. If for no other reason, *Van Zorn* extends a claim upon our interest for those respects in which it so clearly anticipates T. S. Eliot's later dramaturgy. And it would not be immoderate to suggest that *The Porcupine*, a finer play, deserves not only reading but perhaps an actual production. These two works at least merit a wider measure of exposure than they have been accorded in the past.

FATE, TRAGEDY AND PESSIMISM IN ROBINSON'S
MERLIN

By LYLE DOMINA

IN DEALING with E. A. Robinson's Arthurian poems Frederic Ives Carpenter has shown them to be a trilogy which describes "progressively three distinct but related types of . . . love. In the language of Emerson," Carpenter goes on to say, "these are: Initial, Daemonic and Celestial Love."¹ He also maintains that "the three loves of Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram came to three different but obviously related ends: Merlin's ended in spiritual defeat; Lancelot's ended in suffering, which, however, promised the hope of salvation; Tristram's ended in spiritual victory." Finally, he states that "Merlin's sensuous love denied 'knowledge' and 'comprehension.'"² On the surface Carpenter seems to be as correct in his analysis of the poems as Yvor Winters, who says that "The power [of *Merlin*] is the final result . . . of the concept back of the poem, the concept of human tragedy as the consequence of a falling away from wisdom, and of the falling away as inevitable."³ Winters later states that "the theme of *Merlin* is fate."⁴ The surface of E. A. Robinson, however, is quite likely to be misleading, as the

1 "Tristram the Transcendent," *New England Quarterly*, XI (September 1938), 506.

2 *Ibid.*, 508.

3 *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Connecticut, 1946), 68.

4 *Ibid.*, 86.