June 1963

Tocqueville as a Source for Robinson's "Man Against the Sky"

Fred Somkin

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.6, June 1963, p.245-247

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 administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelley@colby.edu.
where as a rule I don’t go.”) He preferred to think that the value of history lies in its expositions of man’s weakness and folly, that man is capable of using the sad lessons of the past as rungs toward a glorious summit.

He derived patent satisfaction from thrusting outward beyond mortal range. He would have enjoyed knowing how close he came to foretelling atomic warfare, the imminent moon shot, the fragility of the United Nations, and the ominous population explosion in the so-called underdeveloped countries. He may right now, in fact, be chuckling softly somewhere over the sagacity of his last line in “John Brown”: “I shall have more to say when I am dead.”

15 To Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux, February 2, 1921: “The whole western world is going to be blown to pieces, asphyxiated and starved, and then, for a few centuries we poor artists are going to have a hard time.” *Selected Letters*, 124.

---

**TOCQUEVILLE AS A SOURCE FOR ROBINSON’S “MAN AGAINST THE SKY”**

*By Fred Somkin*

In the spectacular setting of “The Man Against the Sky” Edwin Arlington Robinson created what is probably his most unforgettable image:

Between me and the sunset, like a dome
Against the glory of a world on fire,
Now burned a sudden hill,
Bleak, round, and high, by flame-lit height made higher,
With nothing on it for the flame to kill
Save one who moved and was alone up there
To loom before the chaos and the glare
As if he were the last god going home
Unto his last desire.

Published by Digital Commons @ Colby, 1963
Dark, marvelous, and unscrutable he moved on
Till down the fiery distance he was gone. . .

It was natural for the French scholar, Charles Cestre, to associate both Robinson's theme and his imagery with Dante. In his An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1930), Cestre wrote, "Without instituting a comparison, which the author in his modesty would not admit, we do not hesitate to affirm that there is a Dantesque majesty and grandeur in the poem, with an originality of vision and a modernity of thought that remove any suspicion of unconscious imitation" (60). Robinson's own published comments on the poem dealt only with the problem of its meaning and volunteered nothing as to the origin of the setting. (See Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1938), 302; and Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940), 92-93).

So far as the setting may owe anything to a literary source Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America has a strong relevance which has gone unnoticed. In a chapter entitled "Of Some Sources of Poetry Among Democratic Nations" the traveler in Jacksonian America considered the problem of what poetic subject-matter might be available in a land without tradition or class structure. The poets of Democracy had left to them one great theme, Tocqueville argued:

I need not traverse earth and sky to discover a wondrous subject woven of contrasts, of infinite greatness and littleness, of intense gloom and amazing brightness, capable at once of exciting pity, admiration, terror, contempt. I have only to look at myself. Man springs out of nothing, crosses time, and disappears forever in the bosom of God; he is seen but for a moment, wandering on the verge of two abysses, and there he is lost. (Democracy in America, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols., New York, 1945; II, 76.)

Out of context this passage could be taken for an epitome of "The Man Against the Sky." The parallelism of image and language between Tocqueville and Robinson would seem to be more than coincidental although there is no direct evidence that Robinson ever read Tocqueville. But that an American poet should so approximate his vision Tocqueville would not have found surprising. In a sentence prophetic of such dis-
similar voices as those of Whitman and Robinson Tocqueville concluded:

The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchedness, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry among these [democratic] nations. *(Democracy in America, ibid.)*

---

**AVON’S HARVEST RE-EXAMINED**

*By Ronald Moran*

I

*Avon’s Harvest*, a blank verse narrative of Edwin Arlington Robinson, has been interpreted as a “bona fide” ghost story, as a chronicle of hate-inspired vengeance, and as the record of the deterioration of a man’s mind. Whatever the poet’s intention, the poem presents the mind of a man tortured by the remembrance of a hasty act executed in a youthful passion. The dynamics of *Avon’s Harvest* rest upon Avon’s profound sense of guilt, on his inability to reconcile diverse elements within himself, and on the suspense generated by the ambiguous nature of the ghost.

The narrator, an old friend of Avon who remains unnamed throughout the poem, states early in the poem that Avon was once a “gay friend” but that now he is possessed by fear, the cause of which is not known by the narrator. Avon is pictured as a successful lawyer who in his youth was regarded as neither a hero nor a base individual by his classmates at boarding school:

*I was a boy at school, sixteen years old,*
*And on my way, in all appearances,*
*To mark an even-tempered average*