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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

Among the major mediocrities
Who serve and earn with no especial noise
Or vast reward. I saw myself, even then,
A light for no high shining; and I feared
No boy or man — having, in truth, no cause.
I was enough a leader to be free,
And not enough a hero to be jealous.

One day a new boy comes to the school, and Avon — who refers to the stranger through snake imagery such as “reptile blood” and “ophidian mind” — begins to hate him for no apparent reason other than the boy *seems* to be the incarnation of evil. Ironically, the boy becomes attracted to Avon and makes of him a constant companion:

He fixed
His heart and eyes on me, insufferably, —
And in a sort of Nemesis-like way
Invincibly. . . .
He lavished his whole altered arrogance
On me.

Avon feels that the boy has injected a poison into him by beguiling his sympathy. Although the boy’s clothes are always in order and his general appearance is favorable, Avon cannot think of him as clean even if “he had washed himself to death / Proving it.”

Throughout his tale Avon digresses into reflections concerning man’s values as guides to the “good life.” He denies the existence of love, is wary of tolerance, and claims that good will is only worthwhile if expurgated of all subjective reservations. Avon’s negative approach is based on his own failure to possess in youth the qualities he condemns. He regards hate, fear, and remorse as elements which hamper good judgment. Rather than fragmenting the poem, Avon’s ramblings create a unity through the panoramic view of his past and present mental condition.

The boy, who also remains nameless throughout the poem, tells a lie which dishonors one of Avon’s friends at school. Words follow and Avon strikes the boy viciously, the force bearing six months of accumulated hate. Avon realizes that the boy feels the blow rather than the pain; he is visibly stunned by Avon’s assault. Since the boy whose honor Avon

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defended is a hero in the eyes of his classmates, Avon is acclaimed for his action. The boy he struck leaves school the next day. In the scene immediately preceding the boy's departure, he asks Avon with vengeance brimming in his eyes:

“Well, then,
 . . . have you thought yet of anything
 Worth saying? If so there's time. If you are silent,
 I shall know where you are until you die.”

Although Avon feels remorse for his inability to speak, he knows that anything he might say would be conceived in hate and would precipitate another quarrel. The narration occurs twenty years after this incident.

When Avon and his adversary reach manhood, Avon sees the latter in Rome. Although they do not exchange words, Avon sees the same look of vengeance in his eyes that was there before his departure from school. They pass each other again outside a music hall in London. After these two encounters, Avon is unable to dispel the man's image. He remarks to the narrator: “My doom it was to see him, / Be where I might.”

Approximately ten years following the incident at school — the chronology is not explicit — the man's name is listed among the dead in the *Titanic* disaster. Until this time Avon had received a card on each birthday (after the boy left school) upon which were inscribed the words, “I shall know where you are until you die.” No more cards arrive after the obituary listing.

Avon tells the narrator that in the preceding October he accompanied a friend named Asher, a lover of the outdoors, to his camp in the Maine woods. Two weeks later, Asher goes alone to a village some miles away to procure provisions, the trip necessitating an overnight stay. As the sun sets across the lake adjacent to the camp, Avon senses the presence of indefinable “others” on the opposite side of the lake. The “others” soon merge into one: the boy he had struck at school. Avon describes this experience — which culminates with his enemy poised above him, uplifted arm bearing a “moon-flash of metal,” while he lies immovable in his bed, bathed in perspiration — as a living hell. The eyes of his adversary gleam with violence as Avon passes into a stupor.

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After Avon relates the particulars of this horrible interlude, the narrator spends a sleepless night trying to convince himself that Avon's apparition was only a dream. However, he is unable to discount the story, remembering the terror in Avon's eyes. Moreover, he has known Avon long enough not to doubt his veracity. Avon dies that night and the narrator is summoned by the dead man's wife.

The doctor declares that Avon's death was caused by a nightmare and an aneurism. This diagnosis is largely for the benefit of Avon's wife, for the doctor only partly believes it. He confides to the narrator that "He died, you know, because he was afraid — / And he had been afraid for a long time."

Avon's door was locked from the inside, yet in the closing lines of the poem the doctor conjectures that some unknown presence had frightened him to death:

"The door was locked inside — they broke it in
To find him. . .
There are no signs of any visitors,
Or need of them. If I were not a child
Of science, I should say it was the devil.
I don't believe it was another woman
And surely it was not another man."

II

Avon's Harvest was first published in 1921 by the Macmillan Company, and was praised for its dramatic presentation of the inner conflicts of a tormented man. Carl Van Doren commented that most of the readers, even some of the reviewers, feel that Avon is confronted by the ghost of his adversary. He nevertheless admits that the poem leaves room for doubt on this point. He contends that Robinson's previous writings were not concerned with the supernatural. "He has found his ghosts in this sufficient world." The primary conflict, he continues, lies not in the relationship of Avon and his "spook" but between the primitive passions and reasoning man within Avon himself. Since he is a "creature of incurably mixed elements, he alternately rages and reflects, curses and endures, and so comes to a tragic end."¹

¹ Carl Van Doren, "In a Style of Steel," *Nation*, CXII (April 20, 1921), 596.

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The anonymous reviewer for the *Dial* emphasized the corrosive hatred that "survives even the death of one of the participants, and finally causes the death of the other." Apparently, this reviewer is satisfied that Avon's adversary does not return as a ghost.²

Conrad Aiken was content to slough the poem off as a Robinson caprice. He equates *Avon's Harvest* with Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw"; neither is to be taken seriously. Aiken, though, does acknowledge the existence of a ghost:

It is a ghost story, and a fairly good one. That Mr. Robinson should deal with an out-and-out ghost is not surprising, for ghosts have figured in his work from the very onset — ghosts, that is, as the symbols of human fears or lives, ghosts as the plausible and tangible personifications of those varieties of self-tyranny — which nowadays, we call psychotic.³

If Avon be thought of as suffering from a "pronounced persecutorial mania," Aiken argues that not enough information is given before the narration commences which would lead the reader to doubt Avon's sanity.

In the *New York Times*, Marguerite Wilkinson suggested that perhaps Avon is "too sensitive and too secretive to be quite safe in any world of man's poor making." To Miss Wilkinson, Avon is representative of the early twentieth century which has "forgotten how to use its fists and yet has not learned to use its soul." She echoes Carl Van Doren's sentiment that Avon is a composite of primitive passions and reasoning man. His downfall lies in his inability to reconcile diverse elements within himself.

Miss Wilkinson is not convinced that Avon's suffering is induced by supernatural agency. She claims instead that the workings of natural law led to his misery. This, she continues, "strengthens the force of the moral for many modern readers. The story is the more powerful, moreover, because Avon has sown the seed of evil only in his own heart and mind. . . . He planted hatred deep in his own flesh and spirit and let it grow there."⁴

² "Avon's Harvest," *Dial*, LXXI (August 1921), 243.

³ Conrad Aiken, "The Poetry of Mr. E. A. Robinson," *Freeman*, IV (April 21, 1921), 44.

⁴ Marguerite Wilkinson, "A Poet Tells a Story: 'Avon's Harvest,'" *New York Times*, Sec. III (June 26, 1921), 27.

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Mark Van Doren saw *Avon's Harvest* as a "particularly intense study of the corrupting effects of single-minded hate and fear when no other emotions are allowed room in a closed soul."⁵ Louise Dauner maintained that in the entirety of his works and particularly in *Avon's Harvest* Robinson is arguing for man to perceive life as it is, to see it as a unified whole, a point which she fails to explain fully.⁶

Yvor Winters decided that the poem deals with a "pathological relationship which may or may not be tinged with homosexuality." He condemns the poem for being a horror story which "never gets beyond the intention to awaken horror for its own sake." Winters argues further that *Avon's Harvest* as a study in remorse and as a study in fear is inconceivable, "for the consequences are out of all proportion to the initial act." He feels that the poem as a study in these areas can be valid only if Avon "is abnormal at the outset and progressively becomes insane."⁷ There is no internal evidence that Avon is abnormal at the outset. Rather, he is pictured as a normal youth whose sensitivity, kindled by reminders as the years pass, will not let him forget that he has committed a hate-inspired act. Avon's striking his youthful companion seems on the surface to be trivial, yet the image could easily remain marked on the mind of the boy he struck, for this boy demonstrates abnormal behavior in his clinging to Avon and in his unjustified remarks about the other youth at the school. The boy's leaving school may be compared with A. E. Housman's failing the final examinations at Oxford; it may have become a stigma, ceaselessly reminding him of injustice or perhaps of failure. At any rate the boy does not forget the event.

By reason of Avon's allusions to chance meetings in Rome and London and from his comment that the man was listed as a fated passenger on the *Titanic*, it may be accepted that the protagonist's enemy was a man of some wealth. Through a somewhat confused chronological account of Avon's life from his years at boarding school to the time of the narration, Avon implies that the chance meetings and the *Titanic* listing occurred

⁵ Mark Van Doren, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1927), 59.

⁶ Louise Dauner, "Avon and Cavender: Two Children of the Night," *American Literature*, XIV (March 1942), 61.

⁷ Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Conn., 1946), 100, 102.

when both (assuming that Avon's adversary is the same age as Avon) were either in their late twenties or early thirties. That an individual could amass enough wealth to travel through Europe and to be a passenger, presumably first-class, on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* while still in his early years, seems improbable. Since he was evidently of some wealth and social standing, his shameful departure from school purports more than appears on the surface. This, coupled with his unnatural, obsessive personality, renders the boy's vengeance justifiable, at least in his own eyes. Consequently, Avon's fears of retribution and of his inability to express remorse do not seem inconceivable, as Winters would have it.

Mark Van Doren reported these reflections on the confusion caused by the supposed ghost in the original version of the poem:

Readers and reviewers at the time the poem was published conjectured variously that Avon had seen a ghost, had created to feed his fear an image of one long gone, had died because in some abstract way he was afraid. Mr. Robinson insisted to a younger poet who was interviewing him that Avon's enemy had of course not died on the *Titanic*. "You know," he was quoted as saying, "ghosts don't leave knives. All the reviewers so far have made that mistake. It is simply a more excruciating form of mental torture which he contrived when he let Avon think he was a ghost."⁸

In a discussion with Carl Van Doren before his *Collected Poems* appeared (in October 1921, seven months after *Avon's Harvest*), and apparently just after the first version was published — somewhat shocked at the interpretations that the critics read into the poem — Robinson said: "I supposed, by the way, that the knife would be enough to show that the other fellow was not drowned, but chose merely to let Avon think so. Maybe I had better add a few lines to the collected edition to make this entirely clear."⁹

David Brown examined both printings of *Avon's Harvest* which appeared in 1921 and noted that in *Collected Poems* Robinson eliminated the controversial dagger which supposedly was the clue to the nature of Avon's misery. In the first version, the dagger is initially alluded to as resting on Avon's dictionary

⁸ Mark Van Doren, 59.

⁹ Carl Van Doren, *Three Worlds* (New York, 1936), 161.

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in the library of his home, then referred to six additional times. When Avon lies motionless in his bed at Asher's cabin, his adversary or the ghost of his adversary raises his arm and Avon sees a "moon-flash of metal." According to Robinson, this refers to the dagger. Brown contends that Robinson at first intended to elucidate the point that the man had not drowned in the *Titanic* disaster; however, as this thought took form Robinson changed his mind. Brown suggests that because the "first readers had perceived the strength of the poem to lie in its presentation of the harvest of hallucination and death reaped by Avon from his experience of fear and hate," Robinson eliminated the dagger in the second version to preserve this reading. The "moon-flash of metal" which, incidentally, appears in both versions, is only an hallucination to Avon, concludes Brown. He considers the poem a "study in the psychology of Avon and his harvest of fear and death from actions and thoughts sown in hate."¹⁰

That Robinson excluded the dagger from the revised edition is strong evidence that he wished his readers to believe the man had actually drowned. But it seems rather far-fetched to assume that Robinson did this to preserve the hallucinatory quality of the poem. If he did wish to retain this quality, it is also necessary to assume that he wanted Avon's character to take on an entirely different aspect than was originally intended. In his remarks about the first version, Robinson admits that Avon is tortured by a living man; Avon neither has hallucinations as the result of an abnormal psychology nor does he see a ghost. Therefore, if Avon were to suffer from hallucinations in the revised version, he would not be the same man as the Avon of the first version. Since there is no internal evidence to justify the charge that Avon is abnormal, and since it is unlikely that Robinson would completely alter Avon's character, it is valid to deduce that, in the revised version, he wished his readers to acknowledge the existence of the man's ghost. Thus, the revised version of *Avon's Harvest* must be read as a ghost story, not as the account of a man who sees hallucinations which are occasioned by a collapse in his mental faculties.

¹⁰ David Brown, "A Note on 'Avon's Harvest,'" *American Literature*, IX (November 1937), 346, 348, 347.