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The Plays of Edwin Arlington Robinson

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The unfortunate fact is that Edwin Arlington Robinson was driven to the writing of plays more by his need for money and hope for a quick Broadway success than by any deep urgency to find dramatic expression for his view of life. Years without a poem sold and publication underwritten by friends when his poems did appear in print convinced Robinson that poetry would pay not even for the sauce, let alone the dinner. His sister-in-law and his three young nieces needed his assistance, and the income from his sinecure at the Custom House in New York evidently could not cover his own expenses during the first decade of the century. He saw potentially high profits from the stage as a solution to his financial problems, and he turned as intensely as he could to playwriting.

His two published plays, *Van Zorn* (1914) and *The Porcupine* (1915), were aimed at the commercial theatre, though Robinson rationalized their theatrical and, indeed, their dramatic inadequacies by suggesting that their target was rather the reform of the crass inanities of the contemporary theatre. To be sure, there is some reason for seeing Robinson along with his friends William Vaughn Moody, Percy MacKaye, and Ridgely Torrence as liberators of the stage, but Robinson's theatrical taste would put into question his competence for helping to accomplish that. His earlier interest in the stage was conventional. His friend and biographer, Hermann Hagedorn, says Robinson enjoyed even dull plays and saw in the theatre an escape from life like alcohol.¹ This comment would seem to be justified on the basis of the poet's announced approval of the artificial problem plays of the currently popular James A. Herne and Henry Arthur Jones. A more startling disclosure of his taste in drama appeared in a comparison he drew for Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux, who had written admiringly about a production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. Although he had forgotten most of the operetta except the policeman's chorus, he liked the musical "better in some ways

than the last act of *Prometheus Unbound*, which somehow,”
he wrote, “doesn’t quite come off.”\(^2\) What might imply a wider
and deeper approach to drama on his part was an early attempt
to write an English version of *Antigone* based on a literal trans-
lation, but his interest in that play flagged.\(^3\)

Despite his apparently conventional theatrical views, his
clearly desperate need for money and a public for his writings
during the early 1900s might have inspired him to compose a
masterpiece for the stage; what stood massively in the way of
that possibility was his feeling that every line of prose he wrote
obstructed his yearning to write poetry. If art does grow out
of frustration, it would have needed frustration in another mode
to fertilize his dramatic imagination.

His own view of why he turned to playwriting obscured what
seems to be the reality and emphasized a different motive. In
1913, shortly after he had completed yet another draft of *Van
Zorn* and just after receiving an unencouraging letter about
*The Porcupine* from Winthrop Ames, the director-producer,
Robinson wrote: “I see now that my past three years of flound-
ering in prose have been due to nothing more serious than the
fact that I had temporarily written myself out.”\(^4\) The fact that
six years elapsed between the publication of *The Town Down
the River* in 1910 and *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916 might
bear out this conclusion. Later, when once again the current
was running full and swift, he would be publishing a volume
every two years at most.

From 1905 until a production of one of his two published
plays in 1917 Robinson was intermittently involved in play-
writing, but his dramatic effort was concentrated in the years
between 1906 and 1913. He had “high hopes” of a comedy
he was planning in 1905,\(^5\) but unless Robinson was referring
to one of the plays later published, that particular comedy did
not go beyond the planning. Nor have manuscripts turned up
for the “play after play” that, according to his biographer, failed
“to find . . . a production.”\(^6\) Whether he actually did finish

\(^{2}\) [Ridgely Torrence, editor], *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson*
(New York, 1940), [to Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux, 26 June 1913], 86.
\(^{3}\) Lucy Dickinson Fryxell, *Edwin Arlington Robinson as Dramatist and Dra-
\(^{4}\) *Letters* [to John Hays Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 70.
\(^{5}\) Hagedorn, 209.
\(^{6}\) Ibid., 273.
more than two plays is open to question. He may possibly have written a one-act drama entitled _Terra Firma_ for Henry Miller, the actor-producer, in 1906 or 1907, but others were no more real than flickers of intention, as he admitted: "I thought some time ago that I had other plays in sight, but I can see now that they are not only far off, but gradually dissolving into nothing."  

What may have prompted him to devote so much of his time to drama was the brilliant theatrical success of Moody's _The Great Divide_ in 1906 and the accomplishment of MacKaye, whose _Jeanne d'Arc_ that same year is said to have saved the season for Sothern and Marlowe. These two, with Torrence and Robinson, used to talk among themselves about regenerating the hackneyed commercial theatre. Together they would demolish the Broadway Philistines. Hopeful and elated by this public response—to Moody's play especially—Robinson in early 1907 started serious work on _Van Zorn_, originally titled _Ferguson's Ivory Tower_. While one draft of _Van Zorn_ was making the rounds of producers' offices, he began _The Porcupine_.

Robinson persisted with rueful obstinacy for the next several years in wrestling with the uncongenial dramatic mode. In December of 1911 he wrote to MacKaye's daughter: "Tell your father that E.A. has gone crazy again and is writing another bad play." And the following summer from the MacDowell Colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire, he wrote Hagedorn that he was ready to work on a new comedy and hoped to have "the scaffolding all up" before returning to New York. This was his year of resolution and ambition. As time went on he came to see his playwriting merely as a way of filling the void of exhausted poetic inspiration, but in 1912 and into the spring of 1913, deeply discouraged about his prospects for making money in the theatre, he could yet not bring himself to refuse the hurdle of the theatrical challenge. He would have to leap that hurdle, he felt, before he could reach

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7 Fryxell, 10-11.
8 Letters [to Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 79.
10 Fryxell, 10.
11 Hagedorn, 240-243.
13 Letters [to Hagedorn, 18 September 1912], 74.
14 Letters [to Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 79.
again the free field of poetry.\textsuperscript{15}

He pressed and badgered friends, producers, and publishers to win a public for the tentatively completed plays. For years he nagged at the plays themselves, once even called \textit{Van Zorn} an "impossible play,"\textsuperscript{16} and eventually made both plays into novels that could not find publishers. He left Scribner’s for Macmillan, with the publication of his plays as the price for the rights to his poems. After all the struggle, the years of revision, the pathetic search for approbation as he circulated the manuscripts, one of the plays, \textit{Van Zorn}, was at last produced—by a stock company at the Y.M.C.A. in Brooklyn.

Five years after he had begun \textit{Van Zorn} he was still revising it, and in letters to friends he had constantly to reassure himself that he could write a play. He was reducing the first act to "less formidable proportions"\textsuperscript{17} and depending on his friend John Blair to circulate the play among the theatrical managers.\textsuperscript{18} His reaction to the criticism of his friends shifted as his own uncertainty about the plays developed over the years into sad awareness of the truth. In one letter he talks about John Blair’s "enthusiasm" for \textit{Van Zorn};\textsuperscript{19} less than a month later he is complaining that "Blair tells me that my play will act, but he doesn’t like the people in it very much. I don’t think he is more than half-right in his interpretation of them, but I am hardly in a position to say much."\textsuperscript{20} He continued to tinker with \textit{Van Zorn}, and six months later he had still not had a final copy typed.\textsuperscript{21} As the certainty of failure grew, Robinson became more and more defensive.

\textit{The Porcupine} was no more successful than \textit{Van Zorn} in finding production or publication quickly. When it was first written in 1907, Robinson read it to Moody, who found it a "stunning play." Moody went on in a letter to his wife to say, "It is really a very strong play, and handles with a wonderful deftness and lightness of touch. I am going tomorrow to beard Charles Frohman in his den, with it in my hand and try and hypnotize him into taking it."\textsuperscript{22} Moody kept his promise and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Hagedorn, 277.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 256.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Letters [to Louis V. Ledoux, 1 October 1912], 76.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid. [to Hagedorn, 18 September 1912], 74.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid. [to Ledoux, 1 October 1912], 76.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid. [to Lewis M. Isaacs, 7 March 1913], 78.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Moody, [13 October 1907], 342-343.
\end{itemize}
in Frohman’s office “swore the daylight black and blue crack­ing up The Porcupine.” Two days later Frohman had re­turned the play with the notation oddly worded but unmis­takable in meaning: “not available for stage.” Winthrop Ames, too, had a look at The Porcupine, and Robinson re­ported his reaction this way: “He professes to like [The Por­cupine] immensely himself but thinks it would pass over the heads of an audience and leave them wondering what it was all about. He may be right; I don’t pretend to know.” But he did know. When he sent Ames’s letter to another friend two days later his comment became: “I think he is right.” His conclusions accorded with what he had written a few weeks before to Kermit Roosevelt: “When I have satisfied myself and all my friends that I cannot write a play, I shall probably have the good sense to go back to poetry.”

But the ego was bruised, and defenses were raised: “It isn’t that I can’t write a play, so far as the technique goes—in fact, I believe it is admitted that I can—but I cannot hit the pop­ular chord, and for the simple reason that there is no popular impulse in me.” It is likely that the parenthetical clause here cherished the memory of a comment of Moody’s five years earlier after both Moody and MacKaye had followed their original theatrical successes with failures. “You have got the technique better than any of us,” Moody wrote then, “and it is only a question of time when you will strike it and strike it hard.” For Robinson Van Zorn was still a “writhing demon,” and The Porcupine had “a real odor of the stage.” But he said. “I may be wrong—probably I am.” He would not chance further failure by trying to write more plays, but he would not admit equivocally the end of his hope by filing Van Zorn and The Porcupine away. He continued to dream of a production even after both plays had been published.

The publication of Van Zorn in September 1914 and The Porcupine just a year later liberated him for the poetry he always felt was at the center of his life. The years he had spent

23 Ibid. [18 October 1907], 344.
24 Ibid. [excerpt from letter to Percy MacKaye], 423n.
25 Letters [to Isaacs, 7 March 1913], 78.
26 Ibid. [to Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 79.
27 Ibid. [to Kermit Roosevelt, 23 February 1913], 77.
28 Ibid. [to Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 79.
29 Hagedorn, 246.
30 Ibid., 277.
on the plays and on the novels he tried to derive from them he saw as "literary gallivanting." What he could bring himself to say when he considered the two plays finished was that the years spent on them were years of waste: "I feel that I have given the thing a fair trial and that it would be unfair to . . . waste any more of my life doing something for which I have come to see that I am not fitted."

He admired the cover of the advance copy of Van Zorn in early August 1914, but he was concentrating on his new book of poems. And in answer to an admiring letter from Kermit Roosevelt about the play, he could not refrain from referring with some of his earlier touchiness to the less than wholehearted approval that had greeted the book elsewhere. The play, he told Roosevelt, "seems to be giving trouble to several otherwise worthy people. 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." But the heat of his defense had diminished.

Not all of Robinson's correspondents felt so kindly toward Van Zorn as did Roosevelt. His long-time typist, Esther Willard Bates, thought that in an ideal production it might be "possible that certain qualities might come to life and light that would explain the author's dogged faith in his own playwriting." After publication of the play she wrote Robinson that she had "failed to understand Van Zorn," and her confession brought this swift reply:

"I'm sorry, too, that you, like so many others, have missed what I was driving at in the play. It was written for the stage—too much so, in fact—and I fear the stage will (or would) be absolutely necessary to make the thing intelligible. Van Zorn is supposed to believe that he has 'found his destiny' in Villa Vannevar, but finds in Act II that he has been working unconsciously for Lucas, who is equally ignorant of what is going on. Villa knows by this time that Van Z. is in love with her, and this fact, together with the realization that she is going to get Lucas after all, and through the unconscious sacrifice of a man who would probably have got her himself, if Lucas hadn't been in the way, shakes her up considerably. I suppose the trouble is that I tried to do

31 Letters [to Isaacs, 7 March 1913], 78.
32 Ibid. [to Gardiner, 9 March 1913], 79-80.
33 Ibid. [to Roosevelt, 28 June 1915], 87.
34 Esther Willard Bates, Edwin Arlington Robinson and His Manuscripts (Waterville, Maine 1944), 8.
too much. The play is for the most part the working of character upon character, the plot being left, more or less, to reveal itself by inference. If the thing has vitality enough to be ‘cussed and discussed’ sufficiently, people will come eventually to understand and accept it. Otherwise it will probably die an easy death, if not a sudden one. I made a misleading mistake, to, in calling it a comedy. So far as Van Z is concerned, it is a tragedy; and it is supposed to open or partly open all sorts of trap doors and windows that will give people glimpses into their own cellars and dooryards, and incidentally a fairly good view of the sun, moon and stars.

In one sense it is more a poem than a play. In another sense, the good Lord only knows what it is, or what it is worth. In the light of my experience with other things of mine, I can only say that I don’t believe that I could feel quite as I do about it, if there wasn’t something in it. But the only sensible thing for me to do now is to forget it and work at other things—which will, in all probability, be about as intelligible as Van Z.  

The play is neither so complex as Robinson suggests nor so opaque as Mrs. Bates leads one to believe. The four leading figures are Weldon Farnham, a fashionably successful portrait painter; his fiancée, Villa Vannevar, a brittle sophisticate with depths of feeling and perception beneath the shining surface; Villa’s former fiancé, the unstable genius, George Lucas; and Van Zorn, a mysterious millionaire and catalyst in the crucible of “Destiny.” The central symbol of the play is a portrait of Villa just completed by Farnham which rests on its easel facing away from the audience during the first and third acts in Farnham’s studio. In the second act—in Villa’s sitting room—another portrait, a picture of her alcoholic uncle, is the dialogue spring that prompts exploration of the past relationship between Villa and Lucas. The repetition of the device does not function to accentuate a dramatic rhythm; nor are the two portraits conjoined on the symbolic level. They are there baldly for the convenience of the playwright, who, as poet, responds to the purely visual and not to the tensions within the visual out of which drama might be created. The point becomes clear if we stand the portraits in Van Zorn alongside those in, say, Pirandello’s Henry IV. In the Italian play the portraits are at the heart of the metaphysical problem of real and unreal time, which is one of the central concerns of the drama. Not the

35 Ibid., 8-9. (I have silently followed certain inconsequential corrections from the annotated copy of Howard G. Schultt, owner of the manuscript.)
portraits but the tensions in the situation indicated by the portraits is the focus, and if we did not hear a word spoken, we should have been aware of a dramatic action.

It might be argued that the invisible portrait of Villa sets up suspense simply because we wonder what is on the face of the canvas turned away from us. But drama does not occur out of suspense alone. A central theme of Van Zorn is the horror of the meretricious, and verbally the painting is a central instance of that theme. But obviously, since we never see it, the painting cannot dramatize the theme. The practical problem that faced Robinson here is the virtual impossibility of conveying to an audience largely unattuned to the often subtle differences between good and bad painting the idea that Farnham was an artist of genius who was wasting himself in creating works aimed merely at satisfying the popular taste. The audience, seeing the painting, would of course have responded in the way of popular taste, and would have found appealing in it what Van Zorn found bad.

In Farnham's Greenwich Village studio at the opening of the play the artist and his friend Otto Mink, a novelist and man-about-town, talk of the painting, of destiny, and of the other characters in the play who are expected. Lucas, a weary and cadaverous alcoholic (a self portrait?) arrives, is astonished but controlled at hearing the news that Farnham and Villa are engaged, joins the other two in a drink, and then listens to Otto's mild reproof: "Why don't you try to find out where you are, and stop pickling your brains with rum?"36 The others arrive—Villa, her aunt Mrs. Lovett, and then Van Zorn. Van Zorn's silent reaction to Villa, their teasing banter, and his declaration to Farnham that his destiny has brought him to Villa at that moment establish one of the currents in the plot that centers on the lady. Farnham's half-hearted love for his fiancee flows into that stream too, and so, at last, does the old love between Villa and Lucas. The second focus is upon Van Zorn, who perceives the potential in the wasted genius of Lucas, the wasted integrity in the success of Farnham, and the wasted love in Villa's engagement to the artist.

Lucas comes to call on Villa later that day, sends up a blank calling card, talks evasively about going on a journey—"going

west," as he puts it—and is just about to leave when Van Zorn appears and insists on talking privately with him. In this conversation Van Zorn makes it clear that he understands the direction of Lucas' journey. Lucas, feeling in Van Zorn's interest a compelling reason to reconsider his suicidal intention, accepts a check from the millionaire to help his rehabilitation and hands over to Van Zorn the vial of poison he had carried with him. The second major dialogue in the act is between Villa and Van Zorn, who extracts from her the admission that her relationship with Farnham can lead only to the dark and that she is still in love with Lucas. What becomes apparent is Van Zorn's love for Villa and the strength in his denial of his own desire as he smooths the way for a reconciliation between Villa and Lucas.

During the dialogue between Van Zorn and Villa, Otto enters to reveal that Lucas has just refused a drink! The reformation is established! This incident sums up the failure of the play. None of the incidents in the play is so strong as Robinson imagined it was. Just as the refusal of one drink is hardly credible or large enough dramatically to signal the reformation of an alcoholic, so also is the action in the final moments of the third act weak and unconvincing.

The first action in Act III comes only after eight pages of static dialogue between Farnham and Van Zorn, dialogue on Van Zorn's part full of innuendo about Lucas' reformation and Farnham's destiny. Then, just prior to the entrance of Villa and Lucas, Van Zorn returns to Farnham the engagement ring the artist had given to Villa. Eventually Lucas accepts Villa and Farnham accepts Villa's rejection—rather more quietly than one would expect. Otto, who arrives on the scene to hear the news, approves of the rearrangement, and the stage is cleared for the final confrontation between Van Zorn and Farnham.

In the final moments of the play Robinson achieves a truly dramatic instance—an accomplishment that had eluded him before. Supporting the conclusion of the play is the revelation from Van Zorn that with Villa's decision to marry Lucas he has lost any reason for living—that without talent and without motive now he must face himself. Farnham, at Van Zorn's request, gives his friend the painting of Villa. Deliberately Van Zorn cuts the head and shoulders from the canvas, cuts the
image of Villa from the painting that now is his, and then shreds and burns it all. The episode is dramatic not because it is melodramatic (it is that, too), but because in the first place it suggests the emptiness Van Zorn feels and his personal strength in tearing from himself what might make him weak, and in the second place the action proves to Farnham the possibility of deep sacrifice, the potentiality of human strength and, with the destruction of the painting, the transience and emptiness of the meretricious, whether in art or love. In thus bringing Farnham to a crisis of awareness the play does what drama ought to do. But, if what has just been described is to occur meaningfully, it must occur within a context dramatically whole and wholly moving. Obviously, there may be drama within a single incident, but a single incident does not create a drama.

The leading motif of the play is what Robinson calls “destiny,” and probably the poet’s intention was to weave a rich and suggestive tapestry around that theme. The theme is personified in Van Zorn himself, but only partially, for Van Zorn is conceived as subject to “destiny” as well as “destiny” itself. In the play we hear the word for the first time from Otto, the author of elegant books, who is the friend and confidant of all the principals. He has just been criticizing Farnham’s easy accession to popularity. “What have I done?” Farnham asks. “You? You haven’t done anything,” Otto answers. “Destiny, or something or other has done it for you.” To which Farnham replies: “But I don’t believe much in destiny. I believe in work.” A few lines later, however, Farnham says: “I’ll take back a part of what I said, Otto. There may be a large element of destiny in my—we’ll say my very great good fortune.” The word appears with little excuse in other parts of the play. In the first act, for instance, Farnham, indicating some photographs of a bust of Poe, announces to the company at large, ironically, “He could tell you something about Destiny, if he were alive.” And again, later in the act in a reference to Lucas’ alcoholism, Farnham, looking at Van Zorn, comments: “As for poor Mr. Lucas, this man . . . will tell you that he is in the hands of Destiny—gin-rickeys and all.”

Farnham’s typically jocular attitude toward “destiny”—his
view of “destiny” as chance or luck, and his implicit faith in man’s capacity to create his own situation—is the first term in the dramatic equation that is fully stated at the conclusion of the play when Farnham, having lost Villa to Lucas, comes to the opposite awareness. The reiteration of the word in the play does not achieve the aura of mystery and the depth of intensity that Robinson must have wanted to surround the idea. Well toward the end of the last act, after the crisis of rearranged lives has occurred, Farnham and Otto and Van Zorn all use the word “destiny” as though it meant nothing more than a future event.

The implications beyond this are found in the characterization of Van Zorn. The elements in the play that present Van Zorn as the figure of fate, vague and deliberately mysterious though they are, yet compel the attention. For example, the others in the play talk of Van Zorn’s immense wealth and the tantalizing source of it; they talk of his unexpected appearances and unannounced departures; they talk of the strong and strange impression he makes. In his presence and at the prompting of little more than a conventional question (Van Zorn [Indulgence]: “I will ask if you care enough to begin the game all over again, and let the past sink.”). Lucas hands over the poison that was intended for his suicide. What undercuts the dramatic aim here is Van Zorn’s presenting Lucas with money in exchange for the poison. The large effect of presence and force dwindles to a Lord Bountiful gesture.

Van Zorn begs comparison with Gorki’s The Lower Depths and sentimentalized plays on the same theme of the mysterious stranger who changes lives such as The Passing of the Third Floor Back and The Servant in the House. Its allegiance is to the last two as they celebrated the softer verities—truth and true love, honesty and honest self-appraisal. A better comparison would be with Robinson’s poem “Flammonde.” In its narrative detail the poem about a man of mystery who comes to Tilbury Town and moves the people there to new kindness and new understanding is not more convincing to the contemporary sensibility than Van Zorn. But the imagery imbedded in a series of rhetorical questions in the penultimate section of the poem succeeds in creating the sense of strange power that bur-

41 Ibid., 91-92.
geons when human beings touch the deepest currents within each other. *Van Zorn* aims at this effect but does not achieve it.

Robinson's second play, *The Porcupine*, is most clearly seen perhaps as three geometrical configurations with the characters at the angles. Viewed in this way, the play reveals its fundamental flaw: the configurations are tangential merely, and despite the fact that certain of the characters appear in more than one of the configurations, the groupings are not interlocked. The four-angled figure farthest from the center of focus is composed of the family doctor, Ben; the woman he wants to marry, Alma, who has chosen to remain a spinster because the man she is in love with married another; Stuart, the man Alma loves, who has wasted ten years of his life in marriage to a brash and possibly unfaithful coquette; and Stuart's wife Louise. The complication among these four is easily unraveled by Alma's brother Larry whose insight and wealth permit him to provide Stuart's wife with what she wants most: money and the exciting life of a metropolis. Dr. Ben remains peripheral, never in dramatic confrontation with the others. Louise yields without demur to Larry's proposition that she disappear into the city with his financial support. Stuart is glad his wife has chosen to leave, and the true love between him and Alma promises to flourish as the play ends.

Closer to the center of the play is a triangle involving Louise, Larry's half-brother Rollo who is infatuated with her, and Rollo's wife Rachel, the porcupine of the play. Larry's arrangement to get Louise off the scene concludes the incipient scandal between her and Rollo. Within this configuration there is a minor conflict between Rollo and Louise as he pursues his infatuation and she turns away any serious advances, though she continues to toy with him.

The important drama in *The Porcupine* lies in the figure involving Rollo, Rachel and Larry. Rachel was and is in love with Larry. Years before, pregnant with his child when he disappeared, she married in desperation his half-brother Rollo, who was deeply in love with her. Robinson creates in the relationship between Rollo and Rachel the sense of sexual and emotional frustration that governs Rollo's life; what Rachel has refused him over the years he yearns to find elsewhere. Rachel's cold and prickly rejection of her husband accounts for the
title of the play. The portrayal of Rachel’s sense of guilt is one of Robinson’s successful efforts in playwriting. He is less successful in motivating Rachel’s revelation to Larry that the child who lies ill in an adjoining room is his; and he is less successful still in making believable Rachel’s suicide by poison—the concluding action of the play. More than Van Zorn the later play suffers from melodramatic effects: Rachel steals the poison from the doctor’s medicine bag and hides the vial in a bookcase. After she swallows the poison, she stands, arms outstretched, whispering her lover’s name before the door of the sickroom where Larry is entertaining the sick child with joyous violin music.

The Porcupine is essentially Van Zorn retold. If any additional proof were needed for the theory that every dramatist or would-be dramatist has but a single play to write, this play of Robinson’s would furnish it. Like Van Zorn, Larry is a manipulator of the other characters. He comes with a portentous slogan from Ecclesiastes (“Or ever the silver cord be loosed or the golden bowl be broken”—the Preacher’s foretelling of doomsday), and envisions himself as the providential one, the “weaver of a silver cord, whereby the golden bowl may not suffer destruction.” He talks of “the Powers” as Van Zorn spoke of “destiny,” though for Larry “the Powers” are forces that exact payment for human actions. What Larry has become during his ten years’ absence is disguised under the whimsical costume he affects during the first part of the play: a pea jacket, a pair of dingy rubber boots, and a pair of old trousers. To his sister Alma and his half-brother Rollo he appears to be a profligate come home to sponge on the family, and consequently his attempts to guide lives, his insouciance, his cryptic references to himself as a force in the universe do not go down easily with the others. At midpoint of the play, he reveals himself as a wealthy builder. But neither the disguise nor the revelation are motivated. There is a saving irony in the fact that as an arranger of the lives of others with special insight, as he thinks, into the realities and necessities of life, he is surprised when he learns from Rachel of her continuing love and hears that the sick child is his own. His decision to take Rachel and the child away with him is more revealing of

43 Ibid., 20-21.
his obtuseness than of his good heart.

If Van Zorn is closely akin to the sentimental mystery of *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, *The Porcupine* has some interesting plot resemblances to Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*. In the Scandinavian play a character with a Christ complex is responsible for the death of a child and the shattering of a marriage of convenience as he insists on stripping away the illusions that had made life acceptable for the family he destroys. Like Rachel’s child, the daughter in Ibsen’s play was not fathered by the husband, and similarly the marriages in the two plays were arranged to cover the pregnancies. The death of the child in *The Wild Duck* and Rachel’s impending death are both suicides. Furthermore, the manipulators in both plays—and this is the strongest resemblance between the two works—are treated ironically by the authors as they make the point that human agents who tamper with the lives of others are blind to their own conditions and the effects of their actions. In the final analysis, despite these surface similarities, the plays are fundamentally different: Ibsen’s chief concern is man’s need for illusion; Robinson’s play scratches about the pathos of love denied.

When Robinson thought of a play, he thought of a plot, not only at first in accordance with Aristotle’s injunction, but last, too. His test for judging whether his friends understood the plays was to ask them for a résumé. “I am beginning to realize, considerably to my chagrin,” he wrote Edith Brower, “that the very people who read [Van Zorn] . . . in MS. praised it, and seemed to understand it, could not have known what it was really about. I am going to be mean enough to ask you to give me the briefest possible sketch of the plot, or rather the situation, as you understand it. If you ‘fall down’ you needn’t be at all worried, for you will be one of a rather large company.” He thought he could have cleared up the confusion in “fewer than a dozen short speeches.” During the next month several other letters to Miss Brower reiterate the point. Once he gave a woman precisely one minute to summarize the plot of *Van Zorn*; she failed. With some exasperation he then told Miss Brower to put the play away and forget it.

The sad and angry acceptance of the failure of *Van Zorn*
came in a letter at the end of the year to Miss Brower. Robinson drew a gravestone with a skull and crossbones over the parody of his hero’s name: X. Melchizedek Van Zorn. And then, below the dates 1906-1914, the years he had worked on the play, the epitaph: “And only five people knew what AILED HIM.”

It’s all over, as I thought. What you say is well enough so far as it goes, but like most readers, say eight out of ten, you seem to have missed the plot itself... Apparently you have been so much interested in Lucas’s drinking that you have not stopped to consider why VZ should take up so much room or so much time... I’m... a little mad at myself for working eight years over a thing and only to find it a puzzle for the public. I can only suppose that the plot is so simple and so obvious that you didn’t notice it, and yet a sufficient number do get it to convince me that I’m not altogether an idiot.

A little more than a year later, in January 1916, he acknowledged the failure of The Porcupine, too, and at the same time sustained his faith in both. Perhaps it would be more correct to say he was confirmed in his estimate of the low state of perception among his readers. “Both plays have fallen utterly flat,” he told Miss Brower, “and the few people who have read them—with one or two exceptions—don’t even know what they are about. I may as well confess that all this leaves me a bit bewildered, for they seem to me at least to be interesting. I still nourish a more or less idiotic faith in their coming to life some day.”

One of the exceptions was Robert Frost whose comments on Van Zorn must certainly have heartened Robinson. Frost read the play twice over and did not find it at all perplexing. He spoke glowingly of the dialogue: “It is good writing, or better than that, good speaking caught alive—every sentence of it. The speaking tones are all there on the printed page, nothing is left for the actor but to recognize and give them. And the action is in the speech where it should be, and not along beside it in antics for the body to perform.” Having said that, Frost went on to wonder whether the best sentences were not those that conveyed their own tone without the aid of italicized in-

46 Ibid. [1914], 159.
47 Ibid., 160.
48 Ibid. [17 January 1916], 166.
terpretive directions from the author. Would Robinson, flushed with the pleasure of such praise, have noticed then that practically every speech in the play did have such directions?49

Some reviewers found elements to commend in the plays when they were published, but the comments were generally restrained. None of them were so fulsome as William Lyon Phelps’s remarks memorializing Robinson at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1936. Van Zorn, Phelps said, “is not only very fine as drama and as literature, but it exhibits a side of his talents usually unknown; it had the bad luck to appear in 1914.”50 If the war in Europe smothered the publication of the play, what can be said about the performances which came at the end of February in 1917, just prior to America’s actual involvement?

Van Zorn was the first production of the newly organized Brooklyn Community Theatre Company. Without a permanent theatre of its own, the group rented the auditorium of the Brooklyn Y.M.C.A., which had previously been used only for amateur theatricals. There was some question as to whether or not the fire department would permit its use by a professional troupe, but the license was finally forthcoming. Advertisements for the play ran in the Brooklyn Eagle during the week before the performances, without the author’s name. Nothing is said about Robinson attending rehearsals, but he did appear at the opening. How much of his impression answered to his pride it is impossible to tell, of course, but the negative tone of a letter to Josephine Preston Peabody is revealing:

The thing is given under the worst imaginable conditions, but those who see it sit through it and appear to be interested, and possibly a little bewildered. At any rate I have the satisfaction of knowing that I wasn’t an ass in believing it would act. It comes out just as I saw it in my mind’s eye—only a little more so. It isn’t a bad show, but I doubt if there will ever be much of a public for it.51

The public was much more interested in the competing theatrical fare: Eva Tanguay was playing that week, and so was a popular comedy, So Long, Letty, in addition to a spate of burlesque shows, including Puss, Puss at the Casino Theatre.

51 Letters [to Josephine Peabody, 31 March 1917], 100.
Yet in the Brooklyn *Eagle* Tuesday, February 27, the day after the opening, Robinson’s play won the headline over all other reviews, including one on a revival of *Henry VIII*, starring Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. But that was playing in Manhattan. The reviewer noted that a small audience called the actors forward five times at the end, and he agreed that they deserved the kudos. The extremely brief comments on the play in this long review were perfunctory for the most part. The critic thought Van Zorn, the fatalist, “something of an ass,” as Robinson had drawn him, but he found “genuine drama in the second act when Lucas hands over the vial of poison . . . . This scene was well written and splendidly acted.”\(^5\)\(^2\) The short shift given the play by this reviewer was echoed more politely by Hermann Hagedorn twenty-two years later: “At no point did the story come to life. The characters were like exquisite engravings talking.”\(^5\)\(^3\)

*The Porcupine* has never been produced.

THE OCTAVES OF E. A. ROBINSON

*By Ronald Moran*

In April 1897 Edwin Arlington Robinson told Edith Brower that he had written forty Octaves, adding, “but I do not think they will be very well received.” And, as Richard Cary says, “He was right.”\(^1\) In light of Robinson’s splendid achievements in the short lyric and narrative forms, it is not surprising that his Octaves, neither lyrical nor narrative in manner, have been generally excluded from discussions of his poetry. Yet in one area of inquiry, the Octaves are indispensable: written when he was twenty-six and twenty-seven, they provide us with, as no other single body of his work does, statements in poetry

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\(^{52}\) Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* (27 February 1917), 10.

\(^{53}\) Hagedorn, 321.