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Edwin Arlington Robinson's use of the Arthurian narratives

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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S
USE OF THE ARTHURIAN NARRATIVES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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PREFACE

Edwin Arlington Robinson's place in American letters is firmly estab-
lished. He is, with Whitman and Poe, one of the three leading poets America
has yet produced. A careful study of his Arthurian narratives has convinced
the writer that these narratives carry a high message and a high vision, and
that this message and this vision can best be grasped through an understand-
ing of his use of symbols. Although several of Robinson's interpreters,
Charles Cestre, Mark Van Doren, and Lloyd Morris, have in general statements,
assumed that the narratives disclose their true meaning through symbols, no
effort has been made, so far as this writer has been able to ascertain, to
interpret these narratives through symbolization. This study offers an
interpretation of Robinson's ideas and beliefs through the symbolization of
the characters in the Arthurian myths; with the reading of the symbols, it
is the writer's belief, one sees clearly Robinson's hopes and meaning for a
better humanity and a more secure society. The writer hopes that this study,
then, is a real contribution toward a further understanding and apprecia-
tion of the poet.

In Professor Woodbridge's An Essay on Nature and in Miss Vida D.
Scudder's The Life of the Spirit in the Modern English Poets, the writer
found illuminating discussions which helped to clarify her ideas. Mr.
Charles Beecher Hogan's "Edwin Arlington Robinson: New Bibliographical
Notes," which he made available for this study, was especially helpful in
locating more recent material on Robinson, and his letter concerning the
worth of this study has been a constant source of encouragement.
But it was Dr. William Stanley Braithwaite, intimate friend of Robinson and advisor in this study, who led the writer to feel the spirit of the poems. His careful supervision and his valuable additions to her ideas made this study possible.

Acknowledgments must also be made of the help rendered by Mr. Wallace Van Jackson, Librarian of the Atlanta University Library, and the members of his staff, in placing at the writer's disposal the resources of the Atlanta University Library.
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CHAPTER I

THE PREPARATORY YEARS—1896-1916

In no period, certainly, since the revival of English poetry a hundred and fifty years ago, had criticism been so unanimous in granting supremacy to a poet as it was in the nineteen twenties in the case of Edwin Arlington Robinson. This accolade was the result of measured and mature opinion, for Robinson was considerably past the meridian of his career when the recognition came. Robinson lacked a public audience for fully two thirds of his career; and when it came, with the publication of his Collected Poems in 1921, it was exactly twenty-five years after the publication of his first book. Then it was, and during the remaining fifteen years of his life, that critical authorities proclaimed with a boldness and conviction only attending the final recognition given a few, a parsimonious few, other figures in American literary history.

Assured as criticism was of his greatness, it was at first altogether too faulty in its perception of the elements in his work that made for that greatness. However, as time passed, criticism became more certain and spoke boldly. "His work is distinguished for its artistry, particularly for its use of the rhythms of the spoken language and the employment of an indirect mode of expression; it is even more distinguished for its weighty themes, dealing with human tragedy, human destiny, and the nature, of man," declared one of his later interpreters, Professor J. H. Nelson.¹ Upon this

general endowment of his mind and imagination, and technical mastery, he is said by Mark Van Doren to be "the best of living American poets."¹

"Many critics feel," declare the collaborating authors of the work on The American Mind, that "in Mr. Robinson American poetry has its profoundest voice, its deepest vision, its most enduring utterance."² The definitive judgment of Ben Ray Redman is given in the statement that "I can think of him only as the greatest poet whom this country has yet produced";³ and in the opinion of Mr. J. C. Squire, the English critic, Robinson is "one of the best writers ever born in America."⁴

The total volume of Robinson's poetry runs to considerably over a thousand pages of printed text, and projecting from it, like a landmark, impressive and distinguished, stand the Arthurian Narratives which best embody his ideas and philosophy of the complex destinies of human will and passion, of prophecy and vision, of character and symbols. No complete understanding of Robinson's mind and art is to be had, as he dreamed and speculated on man and the society which man created, without an understanding of these narratives, as a unified pattern of purpose, as ideas factual and symbolic of Robinson's philosophic doctrines, of his imaginative synthesis of the world and its society, first in chaos and, later, brought

to some visional order through the imaginative process of his ideals and aspirations for human growth and regeneration.

The illumination of the eternal verities -- with which legend is replete -- so as to make, through a visional evaluation their values meaningful to his age, requires of the artist a complete control of his medium, an assurance that he can so establish his designs through this medium that their significance will not be obscured because of some deficiency in his art. A poet who acquires this confidence in his early years is fortunate indeed; and it was the promise of Robinson's genius to possess an equipped and ordered workshop from the beginning. How this equipment and its mastery were achieved can best be understood if we turn our attention to the early years of his preparation.

When, in 1915, Robinson wrote in a letter to Amy Lowell, "I used to rock myself in a chair many sizes too large for me and wonder why I should ever have been born," he had long since found the answer; for in 1889, at twenty, he "had realized finally" that he was "doomed, or elected, or sentenced for life, to the writing of poetry." As a boy growing up in Gardiner, Maine, he had been fascinated by words, and in those days he had thought nothing of fishing for two weeks to catch a stanza, or even a line, that he would not throw back into a squirming sea of language where there was every word but the one he wanted ....

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Many of those slippery victims went into the preparation and final accomplishment of innumerable short poems and sonnets that had certainly many faults and at least one merit...there was a sort of merit in their not being quite like anything else—or anything that...\( \text{he} \) remembered.\(^1\)

In Dr. A. T. Shumann, the village doctor turned poet, Robinson found an invaluable friend with a remarkable knowledge of poetic technique and an enthusiasm for metrical perfection. To this enthusiasm, and to the doctor's faith in, and encouragement of, his youthful aspirations, Robinson acknowledged an inestimable debt. It was Cicero's first oration against Catiline, a high school Latin class assignment, which served as his first experiment in English blank verse. He made a metrical translation of this oration in "impeccable pentameters" followed by similar translations of Virgil's "Eclogues." As a result of these efforts Robinson states, "I had the profound and perilous satisfaction of knowing a great deal more about the articulation and anatomy of English blank verse than I had known before."\(^2\) Of the value of the normal blank verse line for the expression in English of a wide range of poetic feeling no argument is needed. Its worth has been proved by five centuries of English poets; and Robinson accepted it as a legacy, not to be used subserviently, but to merge it with his own invention and thus complete his full poetic stature. The tutelage of Dr. Shumann in metrical technique and his own passionate absorption in mastering blank verse resulted for the young poet in a perfection of craftsmanship seldom achieved by one not having reached maturity with many years of

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1 Ibid., p. 163.
2 Ibid., p. 165.
painstaking practice behind him. It is this sure grasp of his craft that
gives his work that quality of precision, that faultlessness of technique
made so much of by his critics.

To be certain of his medium is essential to a poet, but mastery
of technique is not the end of poetry. There have been innumerable state-
ments made concerning this end, but Professor Garrod's declaration that
"The end of poetry is, truly enough, to present life; but to present it in
such a manner as to eliminate what is unessential, unrelated, inorganic;
to present it as a whole of which all the parts are seen to be cooperative,\"¹
will serve us very well. For Robinson, as his poetic talent developed, did
just that; he reported life connected, ordered, stripped of unessentials.

The material development of the late nineteenth century, brought
about by the advance of industrialism and science, produced both prosperity
and desolation. Material wealth, not spiritual wealth, or intellectual
riches, was the measure of success; and exploitation of self, and of others
by those with power, went hand in hand with the national growth. Keenly
aware of the contradictive elements in this materialistic culture which
was stripping the New England village of its strong young men and women,
Robinson watched the spirit go out of the old and less rebellious, as they
submitted to the loneliness of a world that was dying. He watched with
anguish the slow disintegration of his father and the cruel distortion

of all that had once been so promising in his brother Dean. And he was painfully sensitive to the speculative eyes of the village upon him, or so he imagined, waiting for him to prove himself. He had had two years at Harvard College, where, under Professor Lewis Gates, he had steeped himself in nineteenth century prose writings as well as poetry. Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Swinburne, Byron, and especially George Crabbe impressed him. He saw the tragedy in Thomas Hood and "became an enthusiast over the poetry of Paul Verlaine,"¹ the symbolist. "I am a better man with better ideals than I was before I went,"² he wrote Arthur Gledhill after his college days were over. But those two years served also to deepen his conviction that if he was ever to amount to anything, it would have to be through writing.

In 1896, he decided to print a private collection from the poems he had done so far, since he "couldn't persuade any publisher to take the stuff." When the book was ready, he wrote to his friend Arthur Gledhill, to whom he was sending a copy, saying,

You won't find much in the way of natural description. There is very little tinkling water, and there is not a red-bellied robin in the whole collection. When it comes to "nightingales and roses" I am not "in it" nor have I the smallest desire to be. I sing in my own particular manner, of heaven & hell and now and then of natural things supposing they exist of a more prosy connotation than those generally admitted into the domain of metre. In short I write whatever I think is appropriate to the subject and let tradition go to the deuce.³

² Selected Letters, p. 10.
This small volume of poems, which he called "The Torrent and the Night Before," he sent to literary people in America and England who he thought might understand what he was trying to say. Though slight and, in several instances, unperceptive, the response gave him a hope of being understood eventually and helped him face the "years of obscurity and material uncertainty" which he knew lay before him. Edward Eggleston hailed him with admiration; Dr. Titus Munson Coan sent him an enthusiastic note inviting Robinson to come to see him. Harry Thurston Peck of The Bookman wrote a review praising his passionate spirit but thought that Robinson viewed the world as a "prisonhouse," a view Robinson promptly refuted in the now famous statement that "the world is not a 'prison-house' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."¹

There was no peace for Robinson in Gardiner. His family ties had been severed by death and illness, and there were too few other bonds to mitigate his loneliness and give him a feeling of fellowship with the life of the village. In 1897, he moved to New York, which, except for an interval at Cambridge, became his permanent home. Richer associations were awaiting him there with men like William Vaughn Moody, Ridgely Torrence, Daniel Gregory Mason, Fullerton Waldo, and Louis Ledoux—men who believed in him and who could offer him the intellectual companionship he needed. Not long after he came to New York, he met Alfred H. Louis, a failure by

¹ Quoted by Herman Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 112.
the world's standards, but to Robinson an impressive figure, a wise and exuberant philosopher who substantiated Robinson's growing conviction of the "folly of measuring one's success too much in the scale of external evidence .... "The test of a man," he wrote Mason, "is his willingness to measure himself by what he has tried to do—which is truly what he has done."¹

In 1898 and 1899, he was writing "Captain Craig" and reading Donne, Kipling, and Spencer. Donne, Robinson informed John Hays Gardiner, was "hardly to be considered as apart from his period" and therefore not a great poet, "who must be, if he is to be anything, an interpreter of life."² William James's presumptuous claim to a discovery of a "metaphysical creed" based on the Spencerian system annoyed him; for he believed Spencer's doctrine "that there can be no such thing as a moral science but as drawn from the tangible progress of events, and measured from the point of view of a postulated ideal,"³ was inclusive of everything James had to say. As for the style of the two men, he thought Spencer's "sincere," and, he wrote, "it intends to be dignified, while James's is forever prostituting itself to contemporary slang and slipshod affectations, by which he hopes, I suppose, to strike the popular chord and conceal its arrogance."⁴

¹ Selected Letters, pp. 34-35.
² Ibid., p. 15.
³ Ibid., p. 16.
⁴ Ibid., p. 17.
Living in New York without means, and dedicated to a task that
offered no promise of immediate financial returns, and which might never
offer such, was a problem Robinson faced with a quiet, determined courage.
"The present day disregard of everything save dynamics and dollars does not
worry me in the least," he declared in a letter to John Hays Gardiner. "If
I happen to be ground to pieces in the hopper, I still have faith in the
pieces."1 This confidence enabled him to forego his writing for some months
to take a job, over the protests of his friends, as time-checker in the
subway. A year later, 1905, he received a position through the interest
of President Theodore Roosevelt, in the custom house as a special agent.
His volume, "The Town Down the River," was the product of the four years he
spent here, and, when it was published in 1910, he found for the first time,
in William Stanley Braithwaite of the Boston Transcript, a reviewer who
could understand him. His review "packed into a column of close thinking
the wisest analysis which had yet been made of the qualities by which
Robinson was 'distinguished from all contemporary American poets.'"2

Persuaded, against what he thought was his better judgment, to try
a summer at the McDowell Colony in Peterborough, he found there an atmos-
phere harmoniously related to his natural temper of mind and mood. Two
ventures into drama with the plays, "The Porcupine" and "Van Zorn," made
him realize that he could not hit the "popular chord," and that there was

1 Ibid., p. 54.
2 Herman Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 260.
"no immediately popular impulse" in him. They caused the truth to come home to him, for the last time, that poetry, not prose, was his "natural form of expression." Summer after summer he gave himself to his poetry, until, in 1916, he had completed another book, *The Man Against the Sky*.

Here was a book to which criticism could not give an indifferent appraisal; yet, though more discriminating, it was not at ease. Followers of both the traditional and the new poetry saluted him. The *New York Times* admitted his distinction; and Amy Lowell, in the *New Republic*, wrote that the book was "dynamic with experience and knowledge of life" but that the volume was sad and pervaded by a profound melancholy. ¹ "Nothing could have been further from my mind when I wrote 'The Man' than any emissary of gloom or of despair," Robinson answered her. "In the closing pages I meant merely, through what I supposed to be an obviously ironic medium, to carry materialism to its logical end and to indicate its futility as an explanation or a justification of existence." ²

For twenty years he had been exposing the disproportion that men were making between matter and mind. He had, in poem after poem, uncovered the easy complacency, the blindness to the worth of inner experience, the flatulent, hypocritical pretensions, the lust for wealth, the inadequacy of the material to shape a sound social structure; in short, he had been disclosing the insufficiencies of the "half-gods." The average man's refusal

¹ Reprinted in Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1912), pp. 51, 63.

² *Selected Letters*, p. 93.
to be undeceived dismayed him; and when the war struck in Europe and he saw the unconcerned shortsightedness of a nation that would, he knew, be caught in world disaster, he began to seek for a way to reveal the true nature of the catastrophe, and to reinterpret the purpose and ideas and aspirations of his philosophic speculations.

Lloyd Morris has observed that

The very wealth of connotation and association which ... legends have accreted through centuries of active collaboration not only of poets and artists, but of the popular mind as well, make them unusually complete records of spiritual experience, and hence every age finds it possible to cultivate a portion which seems especially relevant to its own problems and thus achieve a fresh interpretation. But if the fertility of legend in ideal associations and race ideas makes it a peculiarly subtle instrument of artistic expression, the paucity of its contacts with the criteria of external reality adds to its imaginative force. For the artist who finds in legend an appropriate language is made free of a world which he may rebuild as he desires; we judge him not by his picture of reality but by the power and significance of his ideals.1

This will perhaps explain why Robinson, in his search for a vehicle to carry the freight of his ideas, retreated to the Arthurian Narratives.

It was a retreat in that the narratives, in removing the restraint imposed on his imagination by the factual contemporary world, gave complete freedom for the recasting of his philosophic doctrines. Robinson was at home in this mythical community, at peace with, and thus strengthened in, his resolves and his material through which he was to transmit his interpretation of humanity and its society. Through these narratives—"Merlin," "Lancelot," and "Tristram"—he was to reveal his conception of an ordered

universe in which the interplay of the forces of the human mind and spirit gives evidence of purpose in that order. He was to restate his belief in the triumph of failure in terms of "cosmic disaster" and to reaffirm his faith in the potentiality of the human spirit to attain, through a regenerative process, a fuller realization of its aspirations. Because Robinson achieved through the legends his most comprehensive expression of his intellectual ideals and purposes, and because a clear perception of his philosophy rests upon a complete understanding of the narratives, a detailed study of them is important.

The publication of the narratives had, according to Robinson, "a refrigerating effect upon the critics." An avalanche of hostile criticism poured in upon him. William Lyon Phelps wrote:

Mr. Robinson's latest volume, "Merlin," may safely be neglected by students of his work. It adds nothing to his reputation, and seems uncharacteristic. I can find little in it except diluted Tennyson, and it won't do to dilute Tennyson. One might as well try to polish him. It is of course possible that Mr. Robinson wished to try something in a romantic vein; but it is not his vein.

In The New Republic, Stark Young commented:

No little contemporary allusion and allegory is implied in the publishers' note and somewhat indicated in the poem itself; it would seem perhaps the best pretext for retelling the story. Any distinctive success for the poem would depend perhaps on such import. But the transfer is not easily made from this world of absolutisms and Fate and the seer to our own condition. For such implication to count, the poem needs an overhauling, a pulling together and underscoring; it needs also a sharpening of meaning for Fate, "what is to be," Time, "the torch of woman," and Galahad's Grail which together "are yet to light the world," and so on.


2 Stark Young, "Merlin," The New Republic, XII (September, 1917), 251.
Representing the "new poetry" was Amy Lowell with this diatribe:

The most recent poem which Mr. Robinson has written, "Merlin," was published by the Macmillan Company in March, 1917. This is, as its name implies, a re-telling of the Arthurian legend, and one cannot help a slight feeling of disappointment that this re-telling is neither so new nor so different as one might have expected. For some reason the author seems here to have abandoned his peculiar and personal style. Instead of a vivid modern reading of an old theme, instead of the brilliant psychological analysis applied to history and legend which made "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" so memorable, we find in this book only a rather feeble and emasculated picture, tricked out with charming lyrical figures, it is true, but lifeless and unconvincing. Merlin is no great wizard, swept into Vivian's toils by a fascination which no man, not even he, can resist; he is a vain, weak old man, playing a pastoral.

She goes on in this vein for almost a dozen pages, calling it "a long meandering tale," "a beautiful picture-book, a portfolio of old rare prints" that "have nothing to do with us, nor we with them," and closes by observing that "a work of art should round its pattern somehow. 'Merlin' fails to satisfy because the ends ravel away without any such rounding."

In a review of "Tristram," after expressing his opinion that the poem was too long, "perhaps twice as long as it needed to be," Conrad Aiken continued his criticism by writing,

To realize the comparative failure of Mr. Robinson with his "Tristram," is to realize also his chief weakness as a narrative poet; and in particular, his weakness as an adapter of Malory. For he is curiously unable to deal with a hero as a "man of action." Everyone of them is a king of helpless Hamlet and shorn of all masculine force ... (his) elaborate obscurity, with its accompanying absence of tactile qualities in the language and ruggedness of the blank verse, too frequently makes these pages hard and unrewarding reading.

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1 Amy Lowell, op. cit., pp. 64-65.
2 Ibid., pp. 65-75.
Professor Odell Shopard regretfully berated Robinson for his use of the legends, suggesting that he had betrayed his admirers by abandoning his sharp world of reality for the misty and illusive myths of the past, in which his ideas and firm connotations were incapable of taking form and meaning.¹

These censures of the narratives by their early critics showed, as Hagedorn puts it, that "Robinson and his critics were thinking on different levels, they on the intellectual, he on the ethical and spiritual."² The harshness of their attacks has been tempered by later and more perceptive criticism, which, considering that many nineteenth century writers, and several of the twentieth century, had used the legends effectively, found that Robinson more than held his own in this field. The extent to which Robinson transcends the other treatments of the Arthurian myths is evident in the comparisons presented in the following comments on the narratives produced by Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne, Morris, and Richard Hovey.

It is the not unambitious purpose of this study to offer proof in its interpretation of Robinson's use of the Arthurian legends, that the poet's two-fold greatness was in his being both a great artist and a great thinker.


² Herman Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 321.
CHAPTER II
A NOTE ON THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

For centuries, the legends of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table have stimulated and excited the creative imagination of artists of many nations, but, since the appearance in the fifteenth century of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, few English artists have felt the need to search into the archives of English history for their origin. *Morte d'Arthur* was a work of "moral edification," directed primarily to the fifteenth century nobles with the intent of impressing upon them the worth of the chivalric code at a time when the ideals of chivalry were passing. Deeply concerned by the corruption of the class to which he belonged, Malory sought to promote, through the principles of knighthood, the concept that nobleness of birth should be allied to nobleness of conduct. The effect of Malory's version on recent English writers has been presented by Mr. William Henry Schofield in this manner:

The *Morte d'Arthur* is the fountain-head of Arthurian fiction, so far as most Englishmen of to-day are aware. Malory, more than anyone else, deserves the credit of making modern Englishmen feel that Arthur and his comrades were national heroes...Save the *Morte d'Arthur*, there was no English book on the same theme widely read until Tennyson produced his *Idylls of the King*; and had it not been for Malory, Tennyson would never have thought of composing these. To English poets, in fact, the *Morte d'Arthur* has ever seemed a palace of manifold dreams. From it one after another of them has emerged greatly enamoured of old romance, eager to perpetuate the aspirations that it reveals and evokes.1

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Tennyson drew upon Malory's version of the legends for the *Idylls of the King*, the great poem of his dreams. He intended to relate his material to the moral needs of nineteenth century society and, at the same time, through allegorical treatment, to depict the struggle of the soul with the senses. How well he succeeded in carrying out his purpose is still a controversial matter; however, though the magnificence of his art and the greatness of his ideas are admitted, many authorities agree that his work is uneven, due in part, perhaps, to the order of their composition, and in part to the loss in power when he tried to adjust them to the conventions of Victorian society. This inequality is clearly in evidence in his portrait of Merlin, who yields to Vivien even though he abhors the foulness of her character and is aware of her desire to destroy his power. It is difficult also to conceive Vivien as a real woman, since Tennyson allows her not one redeeming feature in all her depravity. Few critics have forgiven Tennyson for degrading the passion in "Tristram and Isolt," one of the world's greatest love stories, in order to make an attack against adultery; and most think his Guinevere too ordinary to have been the chief cause of

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1"His poem is not plainly an allegory, nor is it plainly a story. Sometimes the men and women are real, sometimes they are mere shadows. Sometimes the events are human and romantic, sometimes they are metaphysical, theological ideas in a romantic dress. We glide from reality to vision and from vision to reality. The two things are not amalgamated." Stoppard A. Brooke, *Tennyson, His Art and Relation to Modern Life* (New York, [1894]), p. 263. See also *Ibid.*, pp. 235-391; Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature* (New York, [n. d.]), 111, 336-363; Henry Van Dyke, *Studies in Tennyson* (New York, 1920), pp. 121-165; LaFecadio Hern, *Appreciation of Poetry* (New York, 1918), pp. 30-7; R. P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahn, *Social Backgrounds of English Literature* (Boston, [1923]), pp. 207-244.
the fall of Camelot. Her lack of womanly strength in the final scene with Arthur at Amesbury has been the subject of several attacks, as has Arthur's pompous declaration of his forgiveness of her sin. In fact, it is the conception of Arthur which has called forth the most emphatic denunciation of his portraiture, since the picture of Arthur as the "blameless king" confuses the conception of Arthur as a man. Much of the grandeur of the subject is lost in a compromise which violates the fundamental laws of human nature to gratify the shallow rules of social custom.

The Victorian Romantic, William Morris, who found in the Scandinavian sagas, Greek myths, and in the legends of the Middle Ages material for his art, uses in his "Defense of Guinevere," an episode omitted from The Idylls of the King. His Guinevere is deeply human, suffering but defiant, as she faces death by fire, vividly and passionately giving justification of her love for Lancelot. The poem denies the power of convention or tradition to become the controlling principle in human personality and sanctions the right of the individual to disregard these conventions when they deny fulfillment.¹

The glorification of love is the theme of Swinburne's "Tristram of Lyonesse." Lifting the story from the degradation to which it was subjected by Tennyson, he gives an exalted picture of a great and overwhelming passion in which the whole of nature takes part. Objections have been made to the

effect that Swinburne's over use of his brilliant, elaborate imagery confuses the story, and that incongruous incidents, such as the meditations of Tristram on the mysteries of life and the incestuous love of Arthur (perhaps a reversion from Tennyson's portrait of the "blameless king"), interrupt unnecessarily the love theme. But the overall picture of the growth and fulfillment of love and its triumph over hate, jealousy, and death, is done with great beauty and strength.¹

Though lofty in spirit and admirable in execution, Matthew Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult" lacks the impassioned force of Swinburne's poem. Restraint and self-control subdue the violence and intensity of the love element, the center of interest swinging to Iseult of Brittany for a re-establishment of the natural course of things. Arnold's conviction that "sure, sane" relations should govern the conduct of life prevents his complete entry into the intense passion of the lovers, and his emphasis on the serious but serene wife and mother, shows the manner in which he believes life ought to be lived.²

Since Tennyson, no poet had planned on so magnificent a scale to make use of the Arthurian material as had the American poet, Richard Hovey. His was to be a single poem including all the stories of the Round Table, divided into twelve closely related parts, consisting of nine dramas and

¹ For fuller discussions of Swinburne's "Tristram of Lyonesse" see S. C. Chew, Swinburne (Boston, 1929), pp. 164-184, and Lafoadio Hearn, op. cit., pp. 126-172.

² For further comments on Arnold's treatment of the Tristram story, see Oliver Elton, op. cit., pp. 250-77; Lafoadio Hearn, op. cit., pp. 298-334; Stoppard Brooke, op. cit., p. 115.
three masques, each concerned with some aspect of the central problem. Before his death in 1900, he had completed four of these parts, leaving fragments of the remaining eight to give some indication of the immensity of the task he had set for himself. These three dramas and one masque abound in striking theatrical and poetic moments, in technically perfect lyrics and choruses, and in intensely dramatic expressions. Although there is a certain amount of crudeness and immaturity in these poems, especially in "The Marriage of Guenevere," the fact that they were among his first works is suggestive of the latent power his development might have promised. As to his purpose, Hovey had planned to build the entire work around the problem resulting from the contradiction between individual freedom and social obligations. Like Morris he vindicates Guenevere and Launcelot in their love, but he extends his justification; for, so sacred does he make the union of the Queen and the Knight, that from it is produced Galahad, the holiest of the knights. Because of the difference in form, a comparison of Hovey's poem-dramas with Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is difficult, but Hovey made his characters live and show growth, and he presented a problem of significance to his age. ¹

Among writers in the twentieth century, Robinson was the first American poet to discover in the Arthurian legends a rich body of material that could be used for a study of life. Transmitting his interpretation by means of blank verse, over which he had already acquired a complete

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¹ For an estimate of Hovey's work, see Curtis Hidden Page, "Poems of Richard Hovey," *Bookman*, VII (April, 1900), 360-364.
mastery, he produced "Merlin," "Lancelot," and "Tristram." Concerning these three narratives, Professor Charles Oestre writes:

His poems, often as gracefully gentle and softly musical as Tennyson's and often as fraught with sensuous richness and lyrical splendor as Swinburne's, derive their essential quality from robust thinking, psychological penetration, and pathetic force.¹

And Professor Ben Ray Redman remarks that he is

...convinced that he (Robinson) is the only man since Malory who has succeeded in endowing this particular group of legendary characters with life; beside his figures, those of Tennyson are pale phantoms gliding over lawns of dreamland.²

Unlike Tennyson, Robinson did not shape his material so as to give support to the ethical code of his age, nor did he make the slightest attempt to uphold the narrow conventions of respectability. Instead, he engaged himself with the more deeply conceived human relationships. His concern is not that man should conform to the institutions of society, but that man should grow in the realization of his possibilities and those of his brother. His Merlin is no all powerful wizard, succumbing for the moment to an utterly evil Vivian; he is a man with unusual prescience, but liable, like other men when they see danger and ruin ahead, to the human weakness of seeking for solace where he can find it. That Lancelot and Guinevere have broken the legal bond of marriage does not disturb him so much as that Lancelot has denied his potential growth as a leader of men.

¹ Charles Oestre, An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1930), pp. 75-76.

² Ben Ray Redman, op. cit., p. 74.
and that the influence of Guinevere has not been directed toward development. Arthur as the faultless king has no place in Robinson's presentation; rather, he is a man brought to torture by his own deficiencies as well as by the deficiencies of those about him, and brought to anguish in the realization that, as he was not receptive to it, he must give way to the inexorable law of change. Underlying the whole structure of Camelot are these denials of progressive development—hence, its doom, and hence, the "squeezed world" that Dagonet deplores in "Merlin."

Working toward the essentials of living, with his thinking firmly based upon the sustaining principle of an "ordered universe," Robinson allowed his imaginative powers full play in the narratives to give an interpretation of life as a complete experience. In his concept of interdependent orderly relationships, universal in nature, Robinson follows one of the great universal truths science has uncovered; for, as Miss Vida D. Scudder in her discussion of the "Unity-Idea" writes,

There subsists between all things a relation not arbitrary but vital; for one great connecting principle runs through all the world. What this principle may be—this central truth from which all phenomena derive their significance—science cannot tell us; but it can reveal the existence of such truth, for it can show us a universal and orderly sequence. Thus the imagination is vindicated; for its instinct is shown to be identical with the deepest of known law. Thus all symbolism receives its sanction, and is at the same time put upon a theoretically rational basis, since it must be no longer invented but sought. So Robinson used his imagination to build a world through symbols, and we seek, through his symbolization, his message and his vision.

CHAPTER III
ROBINSONIAN SYMBOLS

In regard to Robinson's use of the Arthurian legends, we are about
to depart from the main currents of his interpreters and to declare assump-
tive the temper of his thoughts and motives. Great works of art are germinal
in the emotions, and the emotions generate ideas. The artist then turns back
to his emotions to objectify his ideas in the achieved poem, or picture, or
symphony, or sculpture. Somewhere throughout this process are little pockets
of subconscious pools, dim and obscure, holding, abstract and unshaped, the
artist's meaning, which is with the form of his aspiring truth. When he
becomes firmly aware of both his purpose and intention, that is, the form
his ideas take in the conscious shaping and reshaping of them through his
spirit and imagination, then he embodies them, or perhaps it would be bet-
ter to say, translates them into sentient substance of character and event.
Therefore, any given set of personages as they attract or repulse each other
in any drama of events mounting to a crisis of experience, is in reality
the artist's postulate of a world or of a society in conflict, from which
the artist's philosophy evolves a pattern of hope or aspiration. One does
not understand, then, what is the artist's purpose or meaning by too ready
acceptance of what his figures are in their obvious appearances of likability
to human beings as they parade through their relationships upon the loom of
action in the drama or the narrative. They are but symbols of those forces
which in the imagination have taken shape in the opposite types of human
beings. They have a precise meaning not as figures that are men and women,
but as symbols which men and women transfigure into ideals through events and experiences and the sharp conflict of motives which possess them. This inescapable application of the critical mind is what so often compels the artist to complain of the misunderstanding affecting his works.

Some hint has been given before of Robinson's complaint in this respect. That his Arthurian narratives were misunderstood perturbed him a good deal, and it is precisely because his critics failed to symbolize his figures of Malory's chronicle, Arthur, Merlin, Guinevere, Gawaine, and the rest, that they failed to understand his purpose in recreating the Arthurian legends in his terms of the world and society. We shall try, with some daring assumption, but with complete faith in our belief, to interpret what we have called the Robinsonian symbols as the key to an understanding of the profound significance of Robinson's vision as revealed in the mythical legends; for they were, these legends of Camelot, and the king and his knights, really pregnant with a mythology, a mythology provocative of symbolized forces, as was true of the Greek Olympus with its gods and heroes.

That Robinson had some such profound idea of the world and society in the use of these narratives is shown by his frequent reference to them in his letters. For instance, he wrote to Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux about "Merlin," saying,

The thing seems to be interesting and, on the whole, entirely moral. It all depends on the point of view. You may still call me an evangelist of ruin when you have read it, but you mustn't forget the redemption....

1 Selected Letters, p. 97.
In a letter to Mr. Louis M. Isaacs, he called attention to the misunderstanding attending the reviews of "Merlin":

...most of the so-called reviewers can make nothing of him and for that reason have dodged him. Most of those who have written anything at all have copied the publisher's notice on the jacket—and I supposed the thing was as clear as daylight.¹

To correct an erroneous impression of "Merlin," he wrote to Herman Hagedorn,

I have made him, without any legendary authority, such a lover of the world as to use Arthur and his empire as an object lesson to prove to coming generations that nothing can stand on a rotten foundation.²

And to make still clearer the interweaving of "Merlin" and "Lancelot," Robinson added,

...the poem "Merlin" was written in anticipation of L. & G. to supplement its various incompletenesses, and the two should be read together....Galahad's "light" is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of Things and their significance...The "torch of women" is to be taken literally...The most significant line in the two poems, considered from a practical point of view is, perhaps, "The world has paid enough for Camelot...."³

Not only did he alter the legendary conception of Merlin, but he used his own invention to draw the character of Guinevere, of whom he wrote,

I don't know whether I deserve a crown or a foolscap for trying to make Guinevere interesting—a fact that hasn't to my knowledge been accomplished heretofore—but she must have had a way with her or there wouldn't have been such an everlasting fuss made over her.⁴

¹ Ibid., p. 105.
² Ibid., p. 112.
³ Ibid., p. 113.
⁴ Ibid., p. 107.
And applying his own ideas to "Tristram," he disregarded the medieval magic, for, as he expressed it in a letter to Mrs. Laura Richards,

The fool potion, or philtre in the Tristram story has always been an incurable source of annoyance to me, and after fighting it away for four or five years, I have finally succumbed to telling the story of what might have happened to human beings in those circumstances, without their wits and wills having been taken away by some impossible and wholly superfluous concoction.  

"I shall get myself disliked for doing it," he wrote concerning the alterations he had made in "Tristram," but there was the hope that the pure lyrical beauty and the noble aspirations of the poem might make it welcome "after too many years of dirty water which is the fashion."  

To a student's inquiry about his treatment of the narratives he replied that in "Tristram" he was "using the merest outline of the old legend," and that, "There is no symbolic significance in it," although there is a certain amount in "Merlin" and "Lancelot," which were suggested by the world war." (He had written Herman Hagedorn twelve years before that Lancelot might be taken as a "rather distant symbol for Germany"). Asking to be excused from trying to interpret his own work, he wrote:

1 Ibid., p. 145.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 146
4 See p. 70 below, for our argument in rejecting this statement. Further evidence for our refusal to attribute undue significance to this statement may be found in the poet's admitted reluctance to state any formal interpretation of his own work. See Selected Letters, p. 160.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 112.
There is no "philosophy" in my poetry beyond an implication of an ordered universe and a sort of deterministic negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of "rational" thought.¹

Even in these scattered allusions to the narratives there is ample evidence of Robinson's deep dissatisfaction at their being misunderstood, just as there is a clear indication of the fundamental conceptions which underline and give meaning to the symbolized forces expressing his interpretation of life as he saw it.

An attempt to show the manner in which these narratives served Robinson seems to call for a definite restatement of his intentions and purposes which have been more or less implied elsewhere in this study.² That he used the old legends to free himself from the restraint imposed by the world about him has been called to the reader's attention.³ In these narratives, he intended to posit the formulations which were the results of his experience of life. Through these formulations of his philosophy—a belief in a purposeful universe, a confidence in the supremacy of spiritual effort over material accomplishment, and a faith in the regenerative power of man—he purposed to depict a civilization and its society in the throes of change, to typify through its men and women the forces which, in their interaction, determined the structure of this society, and to resolve these forces into symbolic import pointing the way to a fuller realization of what life can be.

The unfolding of the story of Camelot is really a recording of the eternal character of the struggle of man to adapt the universe to his desires.

¹ Ibid., p. 160.
² See pp. 2, 11, 20, 21, 23, 24, above.
³ See p. 11, above.
Camelot, then, may represent for us both medieval and contemporary civilization, or social culture in general at any period of its development. This can be seen when we realize that though the immediate sphere of action in the first two narratives may be limited to the time of the disintegration of a society, the author has through implication in dialogue and narrative given so clear a conception of the sequence of events that we have the complete picture of the society before us. Sufficient light is thrown upon the founding of the social order, upon important incidents such as Arthur's marriage to Guinevere and the coming of the Grail, to reproduce the main trends of the story. However, the author has not only threaded the incidents into a pattern; he has, by probing into their causes, made a comprehensive design of the action and reaction of the forces which, created by the desires and longings of the people of Arthur's court, formed the texture of the society.

Founded upon wisdom, embodied in Merlin, and upon a devotion to ideals, ingrained in the concept of the Round Table, this society, as the power of human passions began to act upon it, wove into its texture the dominant aspects of these passions. When Wisdom consorts with Folly, symbolized in Merlin and Vivian, there is the general weakening of the power and influence of knowledge. From this interplay there evolves in Merlin a kind of saddened disillusionment, ineffectual in reshaping the society he forsook. Wrought into the fabric of this world would be, then, a wisdom, not firmly established, but liable to the deceptive influence of illusion.

Under the controlling guidance of wisdom the possibilities of human growth, that is, man's perfectibility, can best be realized. But when
perfectibility forsakes wisdom for self-indulgence and pride, there is a resulting insufficiency which renders it an easy prey to many other forces. Robinson makes Arthur the symbol of just such an impotent perfectibility which, when it realizes its plight, is further reduced in power by the forces of regret and remorse until fear and desperation all but engulf it. It is exhausted still further by the blinding force of hate making its ineffectiveness complete. Fear, remorse, self-gratification, hate, regret, are forces playing upon perfectibility and transforming its potentialities into an impotency to be molded into the structure of society.

The hate which completed the dissolution of Arthur is personified in Gawaine, springing from the forces which he typifies. Indulgence, gay complacency, impatience, scornful envy, and selfishness acting upon each other can be converted into an unreasoning hate, forgetful of friendship, honor, and the accidents of circumstance. Twisted into the fiber of Camelot is the warping influence of this hate.

Thrown into high relief in this design of a world in chaos is the force which is represented by the love of Guinevere and Lancelot. It is a worldly love, though devotedly given, for it sets into action fear, envy, suspicion, disloyalty; and it paves the way for the unremitting hate which, though misdirected, contributes to the ruin of a civilization. Guinevere symbolizes the perfection of worldly love and pleasure. She is the incarnation of beauty, just as Lancelot is the flower of manhood, representing life and power. Their love resolves itself into renunciation for him, and for her self-abnegation.
Symbolical significance may be attached to the minor characters in the narratives, as they, too, affect and reflect the action of the greater figures. Certainly, Modred as the symbol of evil ambition produced by Arthur's self-indulgence arouses fear, hatred and loathing. Dagonet, to use Robinson's own term, symbolizes "abused integrity," made so by self-doubt and by the play of the forces of selfishness about him. In Bedivere's insistence that Lancelot be blamed for the coming ruin is found a shortsightedness that he may be said to represent; while in Lamorak's refusal to believe that the old order is going we find the symbol of outworn tradition.

The pattern of a society in chaos becomes clearer as its outline takes form. As designs in its fabric we find a wisdom weakened by folly, an impotent perfectibility, an unreasoning hate, a love of pleasure, a greedy ambition, an abused integrity, shortsightedness, and an outworn tradition -- all interlaced by fear, greed, selfishness, envy, and similar forces which divide and destroy rather than hold together. Clearly it is a society that is passing; its structure is "rotten" and, therefore, cannot stand. But Robinson had written, "You may call me an evangelist of ruin ...but you mustn't forget the redemption." He had not forgotten the redemption.

Strangely enough, or perhaps not strange at all when we take into account Robinson's profound knowledge of permanent human truths, it is Lancelot who points the way to redemption. Medieval legend and The Idylls of the King had given Lancelot no such role to play. After the fall of Camelot and Guinevere's retirement to the convent at Almesbury, Malory and
Tennyson have him spend his days in deep penance until his death. Not so with Robinson's Lancelot. There was renunciation, surely, and with it a deep and personal sorrow; but there was not the weary spending of days regretting a sin committed. On the contrary, there had been, even before the final act of renunciation, a conflict between the love of worldly perfection as found in Guinevere and the desire to seek the regenerative influences symbolized in the Light. There had been the hope that this society could be saved through the impelling force of the Light, but the world was too far gone to heed. Now that the forces of chaos had wrought their work of ruin and the renunciation of self had been consummated, the realization promised by the Light could be sought. Struggle and darkness would attend that seeking, and the same forces would play upon the new world. Yet it would seem that with a vision of possibilities as a guide these forces could not always make for ruin. Robinson, through his Lancelot, points toward some such visional order, where, perhaps, the potentialities of man will have an opportunity for fuller growth. Lancelot, as he passes through the conflict of his passions, seems to have developed a compassion for the whole of mankind; and his resolve to seek the Light may be taken as an attempt to better the world. In this sense, he is the symbol of a messianic power or of a deliverance from the forces of dissolution.

If we think of Lancelot as the symbol of the deliverance of man, we can then turn to the third narrative, "Tristram," for the symbolization of the means to this deliverance. Love transcendant is the theme of this narrative, and Robinson has made this passion a universal force embracing the whole of life. The assaults of time, separation, death, and of treachery
as represented in Morgan leave it unaltered. Its transforming power is shown in its lifting of King Mark from the commonplace to a wise and kind tolerance, and in the utter selflessness of Tristram and the two Isolts. Its all-enduring quality can be seen in the period of agony at Cornwall, which was a veritable Gethsemane, and in the exile at Brittany, which represents a sort of sanctuary. To understand the splendor of its fulfillment at Joyous Gard is to realize the fullness it can bring to all living.

Thus through renunciation and a desire for human growth, and through an all-embracing love, the world in chaos is brought to order.

In making this synthesis of society, Robinson realized that the medieval world as presented in legend was really an imaginary world expressing the noblest aspirations and the highest ideals of a people. Actually, beneath the institution of chivalry was the same lust for power as was engendered by twentieth century materialism. To increase their power the nobles of the Middle Ages concerned themselves chiefly with warfare; and although this warfare was romanticized in the jousts and the tourneys, it was still the devastating force it had always been and continues to be. In the twentieth century, the great German war machine was motivated by a similar thirst for power, and Robinson's statement that Lancelot might be considered as a remote symbol for Germany may be due to the fact that this knight was the most powerful and the most feared in combat.¹ Robinson was

¹ Robinson urged that this analogy not be pressed too far. See Selected Letters, p. 112. Also, we have noted how through self-abnegation a very different connotation of Lancelot's character may be read. See pp. 28-30, above.
aware of the same tendency, in the present and the remote age, to emphasize
the outward act over the inner experience and of the desolation both periods
brought to the masses.\(^1\) The forces at work in the narratives are those
that wrought their effect upon both worlds, and the author has built the
contemporary world in the one that is past by making the characters typify
the forces common to both. As the wars in the narratives brought to a close
the age of chivalry, so World War I ended a phase of life for the twentieth
century. And the futility of the wars in both ages is revealed; neither
solved anything. With the author's cultivation of that from the old which
is relevant to the present, the two worlds are made one.

These two worlds, made one through "symbolic figuration," present
problems of human experience and human destiny to which the symbols have
application. There are the problems of human relationships, of man to woman,
of man to other men, of man to himself; and there is the problem of how these
relationships can best shape human development. Robinson has shown us the
relationship between man and woman in forms from the most base to the most
noble: the treacherous sensuality of Morgan in her relationship with Tristram,
the weakening of wisdom through folly in Merlin and Vivian, the transitory
worldly love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the ennobling effects of self-
less love of Tristram and the two Isolts. These relationships are all in-
volved in human experience and made of woman the "torch bearer" or "driv-
ing force" in the shaping of human destiny.

\(^1\) We have reference here to the system of feudalism upon which
chivalry was founded. For clarification of its evils, see R. P. Boas and
Barbara M. Hahn, op. cit., pp. 27-38.
Then there are the problems of man's relationship to other men. The difficulties created by Arthur's impotent leadership are disclosed in the growing iniquity of the knights, in their careless indifference to the development of the society as a whole, and in the fostering of a covetous ambition among them. Distrust and suspicion, shortsighted endeavors, and divided loyalties create ominous foreshadowings of the future.

The question of duty is set forth in symbolic form and some indication of a possible answer to man's responsibility to himself given in Lancelot's solution to his problem; and in doing this, the author really points a way to the resolving of the problems of human destiny.

This pageantry of romance as Robinson viewed the mythical characters of the Arthurian legends is for his purpose the focusing of turbulent forces that make human life. What is important and entertaining to the average reader is the story or stories. What is profoundly important to the interpreter of these narratives is to identify these forces in the human figures as symbols. These forces are bound by a cartharsis. Knowingly, or unknowingly, Robinson's imagination was affected by the power of the elemental Greek Fates. These Fates of the Greeks were, in their beliefs, the supernatural workings of the forces upon human destiny. They did not shape merely the individual aspiration or hope, but the community as these individuals reacted to each other for the common good of the social, religious and political structure of mankind. Robinson was more vitally concerned with these forces as they manifested themselves in the characters of the stories than he was with the men and women--kings and queens and knights and crusaders--in their loves and wars, and in their personal ambitions. In this
he took a broad view of human society where time and event ran the whole
gamut of civilization, rather than narrowing his view to a fragment of
human experience bound by a medieval legend. He saw these forces as eter-
nal postulates, governing and affecting man's intentions and advancement,
working through alternating changes toward some perfection.

Did not Robinson say that Guinevere must have something in her
to have created such a "fuss"? This something was not the mere woman, but
that force or passion which was common to all womanhood. Therefore, she
was the symbol of a force that was the "torch of woman" which so upset for
good or evil the ways of mankind.

For centuries great thinkers have concerned themselves with forces
translated into symbols to attain their most satisfying interpretation of
the whole of life. We read in the Gospel according to St. John the Divine,
that "In the beginning was the Word...And the Word was made flesh." The
Word, as declared by St. John, was the force of Divinity, and the flesh,
which is man, is the symbol of that Divinity. This reference is made to
clarify our opinion that Robinson was primarily, in these narratives, con-
cerned with Forces, and that these Forces, being eternal, worked in dif-
ferent and changing degrees of efficacy. They were manifested in the world
of to-day as they were in the world of yesterday. And the worst of them
Robinson saw working with sinister effects in his world of the twentieth
century. In writing these narratives, Robinson aspired to refine their
energies for good to be applied in the practice of twentieth century society.
Thus he symbolized these energies, and we substitute the word energies for
images, of good and evil in the Arthurian figures.
Robinson did not, then, retreat into the mythical past to escape the problems of his day, as practically all his critics censuringly agreed. He saw Camelot, its court, its knights and women, as symbolized forces, and he wanted to pattern them through their deeds into regenerative ideals for modern society that had been so rudely undermined by materialism. And, indeed, taking the three narratives as a unit, we see in them the spirit and the hope of a glorified "man against the sky."

The discussions in this chapter of the symbols, their meanings and their application to the problems of human experience and destiny, are based upon a study of the narratives in the light of the author's speculations on the significance of life in reality and in promise. It is with his ideas and philosophical principle clearly before us that we attempt in the following chapters to interpret objectively the three narratives as a purposeful reading of life, in its limitations, and in its possibilities.
Robinson, in his "Merlin," has chosen from the Arthurian legends those episodes dealing with the relation between Merlin and Vivian and those disclosing the darkness overhanging Camelot. When the story opens, the counselor has just been recalled from Broceliande by a frantic Arthur, who hopes with Merlin's help to avert the ruin which threatens the kingdom. But Merlin can only repeat the counsel he has already given—that Arthur concentrate his forces against Modred rather than against Lancelot, who offers no real threat to Camelot. As the seer leaves Camelot to return to Vivian, we are taken back to Broceliande ten years before, when, under the spell of Vivian, Merlin has put aside his responsibilities to the kingdom he had built. Then the scene shifts to his present return as we find him unable to re-enter the old relationship with Vivian. They part, and Merlin comes once more to Camelot to find Arthur, under the influence of Gawaine, preparing to wage war against Lancelot. Knowing that his counsel will go unheeded, Merlin decides not to see Arthur again, and with Dagonet he departs, leaving Camelot to await its doom.

The narrative opens with a question that sets the atmosphere of the story and strikes the note for the gloomy foreshadowings hovering over Camelot. Dagonet, the King's fool, with a kind of mocking gravity, asks:

Gawaine, Gawaine, what look ye for to see,  
So far beyond the faint edge of the world?  
D'ye look to see the lady Vivian,  
Pursued by ominous vile demons  
That have another king more fierce than ours?  
Or think ye that did ye look far enough
Or hard enough into the feathery west
Ye'll have a glimmer of the Grail itself?
And if ye look for neither Grail nor lady,
What look ye for to see, Gawaine, Gawaine? 1

Both men are thinking of the return of Merlin from Broceliande, and both
have an uneasy sense of misgivings about the future of Camelot. Even
Gawaine, usually concerned only with what affects him personally, has felt

...a foreign sort of creeping up
And down him as of moist things in the dark,— 2

and Dagonet voices his misgivings by saying,

If you see what's around us every day,
You need no other showing to go mad. 3

Neither believes that Merlin can dispel the clouds gathering over Camelot.
Dagonet sadly muses:

...I look not to Merlin
For peace, when out of his peculiar tomb
He comes again to Camelot. 4

for

...when you stake your wisdom for a woman,
Compute this woman to be worth a grave,
As Merlin did, and say no more about it. 5

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1 Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Merlin," Collected Poems (New York,
1927), III, 1. This collection consists of five unnumbered volumes, which,
for convenience in this study, the writer, by observing the earliest copy-
right dates of the poems, has designated as Volumes I-V. All subsequent
passages in this study from "Merlin," "Lancelot," and "Tristram" are taken
from Volume III and will be indicated by page number only.

2 P. 4

3 Ibid.

4 P. 6.

5 P. 9.
Echoing these premonitions of disaster, Sir Bedivere utters this warning:

We're late now for much praying, Lamorak,
When you and I can feel upon our faces
A wind that has been blowing over ruins
That we have said were castles and high towers—

And we shall have, where late there was a kingdom
A dusty wreck of what was once a glory—

These passages indicate the general uneasiness felt in Camelot, and prepare us for the deepening gloom as the narrative unfolds. Turning again to Sir Bedivere, we find him reasoning that...

...Lancelot
Has wrought a potent wrong upon the King,
And all who serve and recognize the King,
And all who follow him and all who love him.

But Lamorak, who has no illusions concerning Arthur's leadership, retorts vehemently,

As for the King, I say the King, no doubt,
Is angry, sorry, and all sorts of things,
For Lancelot, and for his easy Queen,
Whom he took knowing she'd thrown sparks already
On that same piece of tinder, Lancelot,
Who fetched her with him from Lepdogran
Because the King--God save poor human reason!—Would prove to Merlin who knew everything
Worth knowing in those days, that he was wrong,
I'll drink now and be quiet....

Then as he worriedly reflects on the fact that the world he loves is threatened, he exclaims,

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1 P. 14.
2 Pp. 14-15
3 P. 16.
...but, by God,
I'll have to tell you, Brother Bedivere,
Once more, to make you listen properly,
That crowns and orders, and high palaces,
And all the manifold ingredients
Of this good solid kingdom, where we sit
And spit now at each other with our eyes,
Will not go rolling down to hell just yet
Because a pretty woman is a fool.

And he gives his opinion as to the cause of the impending doom,

...For me,
I see no other than a stinking mess—
With Modred stirring it, and Agraviane
Spattering Camelot with as much of it
As he can throw. The Devil got somehow
Into God's workshop once upon a time,
And out of the red clay that he found there
He made a shape like Modred, and another
As like as eyes are to this Agravaine.
'I never made 'em,' said the good Lord God,
'But let 'em go, and see what comes of 'em.'
And that's what we're to do.

We have now a sense of what has happened: the love between Guinevere and Lancelot, the threatening evil of Modred, and the troubling shadows they have cast over the kingdom. We have been informed that Arthur did not follow Merlin's counsel in regard to Lancelot and Guinevere; and he further disregarded this counsel as Lamorak tells us that

The King, if one may say it, set the pace,
And we've two strapping bastards here to prove it.
Young Borre, he's well enough; but as for Modred,
I squirm as often as I look at him.
And there again did Merlin warn the King.

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1 Ibid.
3 P. 13.
So we note before turning to the king himself the growing impotence of his power to inspire his knights.

In the interview with Merlin, we can see how the forces of remorse and regret, of fear and desperation, have torn away all Arthur's kingly arrogance, leaving him a tortured consciousness of what might have been—

The King, who sat with folded arms, now bowed
His head and felt, unfought and all aflame
Like immanent hell-fire, the wretchedness
That only those who are to lead may feel—
And only they when they are maimed and worn
Too sore to covet without shuddering
The fixed impending eminence where death itself were victory, could they but lead
Unbitten by the serpents they had fed.—

He lashes himself in despair,

...for I am still
A king—who thought himself a little less
Than God; a king who built him palaces
On sand and mud, and hears them crumbling now,
And sees them tottering, as he knew they must.

And Merlin, eager to be off again to Broceliande, gives Arthur a last warning:

But your most violent years are on their way
to days, and to a sounding of loud hours
That are to strike for war. Let not the time
Between this hour and then be lost in fears,
Or told in obscurations and vain faith
In what has been your long security;
For should your force be slower than your hate,
And your regret be sharper than your sight,
And your remorse fall heavier than your sword,—
Then say farewell to Camalot, and the crown,
But say not you have lost, or failed in aught

1 P. 24.

Your golden horoscope of imperfection
Has held in starry words that I have read.¹

When Merlin leaves him to go back to Vivian, Arthur's wretchedness is complete—

No spoken doom
That ever chilled the last night of a felon
Prepared a dragging anguish more profound
And absolute than Arthur, in these hours,
Made out of darkness and of Merlin's words;
No tide that ever crashed on Lyonesse
Drove echoes inland that were lonelier
For widowed ears among the fisher-folk,
Than for the King were memories to-night
Of old illusions that were dead for ever.²

So far we have shown, as far as possible in Robinson's own words, the gloom stealing upon Camelot, and have pictured the broken king as he realizes his inadequacy to stave off the approaching doom. The passages quoted should reveal, among other things, that there was generally a realization that the old way of life was passing; that Camelot had been subjected to the forces of self-indulgence and arrogance in Arthur, to malicious envy in Modred, and to suspicion and divided loyalties among the other knights caused by the fateful passion of Guinevere and Lancelot; and that Merlin in some way had lost his power to bring order through his wisdom. Some indication there has been, too, that Merlin has staked his wisdom "for a woman." This takes us, with Merlin, to Broceliande and Vivian, to watch the play of folly upon wisdom.

¹ Pp. 26-27
² P. 35.
The narrative covers two visits to Broceliande, the first made
ten years before the story opens. Robinson, in splendid descriptive pas-
sages, reveals the beauty and grace of Vivian, and in the dialogues he gives
flashes here and there of her character. For instance, the fact that she
intends to change Merlin is disclosed as she refers, with artful insinuation,
to his beard,

I'm sure rather to hate you if you keep it,
And when I hate a man I poison him.¹

and further on, she says playfully, but with the truth edging in,

For I'm a savage, and I love no man
As I have seen him yet....
... . . . . . . . . . . . . .
I'm cruel and I'm cold, and I like snakes;²

Her servant Blaise also throws light on her character when he suggests
changes in Merlin's clothing:

The lady Vivian would be vexed, I fear,
To meet you vested in these learned weeds
Of gravity and death; for she abhors
Mortality in all its hues and emblems—
Black wear, long argument, and all the cold,
And solemn things that appertain to graves.³

The changes are made and a youthful Merlin dines with a gloriously beautiful
Vivian sheathed in crimson. Lost in the enchantment of the hour, he "raised
a golden cup" and

He drank, not knowing what, nor caring much
For kings....
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

¹ P. 45.
² P. 46.
³ P. 51.
For what were kings to such as he, who made them
And saw them totter—for the world to see,
And heed, if the world would?....

So folly plays on wisdom; and when Merlin is called to the aid of a tottering Camelot, Vivian watches him go, and

...in his lonely gaze
Of helpless love and sad authority
She found the gleam of his imprisoned power
That Fate withheld; and pitying herself,
She pitied the fond Merlin she had changed,

Returning to Broceliande from his fruitless visit to Arthur, Merlin finds that "his injured intellect" will give him no peace. He wanders restlessly in the gardens, and his thoughts, as well as his talk, inevitably center around Camelot and its impending doom. Sensing the change in him, Vivian grows coldly ironical as she listens to his recitals of Arthur's sin with a neighboring queen and his marrying Guinevere knowing she loved Lancelot. To cover her sharp apprehensions, she yawns as Merlin ends his tale:

And with a kingdom builded on two pits
Of living sin,—so founded by the will
Of one wise counsellor who loved the king,
And loved the world and therefore made him king
To be a mirror for it,—the king reigned well
For certain years, awaiting a sure doom;
For certain years he waved across the world
A royal banner with a Dragon on it;
And men of every land fell worshipping
The Dragon as it were the living God,
And not the living sin.

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1 Pp. 63-64.
2 P. 73.
3 P. 77.
4 P. 83.
Both Merlin and Vivian realize that Time and Change have caught up with them, and she sounds the note of finality to their relationship when she says vindictively,

Pray take your kings and sins away somewhere
And bury them, and bury the Queen in also.
I know this king; he lives in Camelot,
And I shall never like him. There are specks
Almost all over him. Long live the king,
But not the king who lives in Camelot,
With Modred, Lancelot, and Guinevere—
And all four speckled like a merry nest
Of addled eggs together.¹

In the desolation caused by his disillusionment, Merlin remembers the light of the Grail, which

Has many rays to throw, for many men
To follow; and the wise are not all pure,
Nor are the pure all wise who follow it.
There are more rays than men.²

The lamentable waste of his powers to guide men strikes him sorely as he realizes that

...there is a delving that is to be done—
If not for God, for man.³

Exorcised from the allurements of folly, but saddened by his weakened wisdom, he goes back to Camelot and to the rock outside the city where he used to sit and meditate on the ways of man. But before he comes, Gawaine, Sir Bedivere, and Dagonet, on that same rock, have their say about the fate of Camelot. Gawaine, all his gay insouciance departed, is bent upon destroying Lancelot, who, in saving Guinevere from the flaming stake, has killed

¹ P. 89.
² Pp. 91-92.
³ P. 92.
accidentally Gawaine's two younger brothers. Inflamed by jealousy, Arthur has put himself completely into Gawaine's hands. Sir Bedivere pleads with Gawaine--

Is not the kingdom any more to you
Than one brief enemy?

Is the kingdom of the world,
Now rocking, to go down in sound and blood
And ashes and sick ruin, and for the sake
Of three men and a woman?

Dagonet, belying his title of Sir Fool, analyses the situation:

Lancelot loves the Queen, and he makes war
Of love; the King, being bitten to the soul
By love and hate that work in him together,
Makes war of madness; Gawaine hates Lancelot,
And he, to be in tune, makes war of hate;
Modred hates everything, yet he can see
With one damned illegitimate small eye
His father's crown, and with another like it
He sees the beauty of the Queen herself;
He needs the two for his ambitious pleasure,
And therefore he makes war of his ambition;

Then, expanding his view to mankind in general, Dagonet says,

And somewhere in the middle of all this
There's a squeezed world that elbows for attention.

and seeing no hope in this world, he cries,

I'm glad they tell me there's another world,
For this one's a disease without a doctor.

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1 Pp. 100-101.
2 P. 102.
3 P. 102.
4 P. 103.
But Bedivere, seeking to reassure him, replies,

The doctor, like ourselves, may now be learning;

We pass, but many are to follow us,
And what they build may stay; though I believe
Another age will have another Merlin,
Another Camelot, and another King.¹

Thus he expresses a faith in the future and, at the same time, a belief
that mankind must always face some struggle.

After the departure of Gawaine and Sir Bedivere, Merlin comes to the
rock where Dagonet now sits alone. As they gaze on the city below, Dagonet
laments its end, but Merlin speaks prophetically as he says,

And in the end
Are more beginnings, Dagonet, than men
Shall name or know to-day

* * * * * * * * * * * *

All this that was to be
Might show to man how vain it were to wreck
The world for self if it were all in vain.
When I began with Arthur I could see
In each bewildered man who dots the earth
A moment with his days a groping thought
Of an eternal will, strangely endowed
With merciful illusions whereby self
Becomes the will itself and each man swells
In fond accordance with his agency.²

With a brief recurrence of the full power of his prophetic vision, he
speaks of the "wrecked empire" which was

    lighted by the torch
    Of woman, who together with the light
That Galahad found, is yet to light the world.³

¹ P. 103.
³ P. 110.
Then Merlin and Dagonet leave the rock and the city behind them,

And there was darkness over Camelot.¹

The interpretation of this narrative, as we have presented it, with Robinson's symbolism in mind, should have led toward a clearer perception of the structure of the society with which we have dealt. Through the passages selected (our study limited the possible use of many others), we find how Arthur, through self-gratification and the flouting of wisdom is so reduced in effectiveness as to become the symbol for impotent perfectibility; how in the relations between Merlin and Vivian, wisdom is impaired by folly; how Gawaine, in utter selfishness and indifference to the world at large, becomes the embodiment of hate; how Modred's envy and greed feed an evil ambition; and how the whole fabric of Camelot is permeated with the forces leading to doom. There have also been implications that there is purpose in the doom and that the "torch of woman" and the "light of the Grail" would show the way. These implications are more definitely treated in the following chapter where the doom, prophesied here, is carried to its bitter conclusion, and where from the ruins of a society is drawn a faith in the vision of a better world.

¹ P. 121.
CHAPTER V
MINISTRY OF REDEMPTION: LANCELOT

The student of Robinson who reads "Lancelot," having first read "Merlin," is made admiringly conscious of the author's genius at planning, so well do the episodes of each narrative fit into those of the other to form a continuous whole. In the first five episodes of "Lancelot," an account is given of the happenings at Camelot while Merlin is away on his second visit to Broceliande; in the last four, the action is carried beyond "Merlin" to the dénouement. The conclusion of episode five, and the beginning of episode six of "Lancelot" tie in with the whole of episode seven of "Merlin." So closely knit are the two narratives, that one would do well to follow Robinson's suggestion that they be read together.¹

In the dialogue between Lancelot and Gawaine which opens the poem, Lancelot discloses his resolve to leave Camelot and follow the Light. Hoping to delay his departure, Guinevere obtains Lancelot's promise to come to her at the palace while the king is away on a hunting trip. However, the king's absence is only a ruse, and a trap is set for the lovers. When the trap is sprung, Lancelot fights his way out of the palace, and Guinevere becomes subject to the law that an adulterous queen be burned at the stake. But she is rescued from the flames by Lancelot, who, in fighting his way to her, inadvertently kills Gaheris and Gareth, Gawaine's younger brothers.

¹ Selected Letters, p. 113.
Lancelot and Guinevere flee to Joyous Gard, where Arthur, goaded by Gawaine, brings an army against Lancelot. The futile battle which follows is halted when Lancelot, steeling himself against the supplications of Guinevere, returns the queen to Camelot. But Gawaine will let Arthur have no peace, and the war is carried to France where Lancelot has retired with his kinsmen. Meanwhile, Modred, with Britain left undefended, seizes his opportunity to gain the crown and the queen by bringing an army against Camelot. Seeking to save his kingdom, Arthur leaves the dying Gawaine in France and returns to Britain with his weakened forces. In the ensuing struggle, both Arthur and Modred are killed and Camelot is laid waste. Guinevere joins the sisters at Almesbury, where Lancelot goes to find her. She makes him admit what he already knows, that they cannot go on together, and he leaves to find the Light.

Cutting away preliminary details, the author first takes us into the palace gardens where, wearied by the slanderous rumors surrounding him and Guinevere, Lancelot receives coldly the protestations of loyal friendship which Gawaine offers. Reference is made to Gawaine's brothers, the lying Agravaine and the envious Modred, who hate Lancelot. Gawaine, as he speaks of them, expresses Robinson's idea of the personal relations that should exist between men—

...Modred? Agravaine? My brothers? And what if they be brothers? What are brothers? If they be not our friends, your friends and mine?¹

¹ P. 4.
Lancelot, knowing what harm these brothers can bring to the queen and having won out of struggle his resolve to renounce his love, tells Gawaine of his decision to leave Camelot—

The way that we have gone so long together
Has underneath our feet, without our will,
Become a twofold faring....
...Mine, I believe,
Leads off to battles that are not yet fought,
And to the Light that once had blinded me.
When I came back from seeing what I saw,
I saw no place for me in Camelot.
There is no place for me in Camelot.
There is no place for me save where the Light
May lead me; and to that place I shall go.

Thus Lancelot has caught a vision of a way unlike the way of Camelot, and he is determined to follow it. Although he has not seen, and cannot see, the vision, Gawaine realizes its worth, for he urges with fervor—

And if it is your new Light leads you on
To such an admirable gait, for God's sake,
Follow it, follow it, follow it, Lancelot;
Follow it as you never followed glory.

The use of the word glory, meaning material achievement, carries out the author's emphasis on the higher value of inner experience, and even Gawaine has sensed here the superiority of Lancelot's vision over the way of life in Camelot.

When the queen comes upon the two knights in the garden, as she does shortly, and Gawaine leaves, the perfection of her beauty and the greatness of the love between her and Lancelot are caught in sudden gleams; for instance she sits

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1 Pp. 6-7.
With oak leaves flashing in a golden light
Over her face and over her golden hair.¹

Her eyes

...were soft now
And a blue light, made wet with happiness,
Distilled from pain into abandonment,
Shone out of them and held him while she smiled.²

and

Lancelot's memory wandered
Into the blue and wistful distances
That her soft eyes unveiled.³

She tells him,

Days are all alike
When I have you to look on; when you go,
There are no days but hours.⁴

Lancelot confesses the depths of his passion when he says,

I saw your face and there were no more kings.⁵

After Guinevere learns of his intention to leave and of his fear that the dark envy of Modred will endanger her, she reproaches him sadly,

I say the dark is not what you fear most.
There is a Light that you fear more today
Than all the darkness that has ever been;
Yet I doubt not that your Light will burn on
For sometime yet without your ministration.⁶

¹ P. 11.
² P. 24.
³ P. 25.
⁴ P. 14.
⁵ P. 18.
⁶ P. 22.
She leaves with his promise to meet her when Arthur has gone hunting; and Lancelot, her beauty and their love fresh in his heart, engages in a bitter struggle with all that he is leaving and all that the vision promises. The painful questioning begins—

Who is this Lancelot that has betrayed His King, and served him with a cankered honor? Who is this Lancelot that sees the Light And waits now in the shadow for the dark? 

...Why are we here? What are we doing—kings, queens, Camelots, And Lancelots?

In despair he cries, 

...God watch the world!

Then the questioning continues:

...What are kings? And how much longer are there to be kings? When are the millions who were now like worms To know that kings are worms, if they are worms? When are the women who make toys of men To know that they themselves are less than toys When Time has laid upon their skins the touch Of his all-shrivelling fingers? When are they To know that men must have an end of them When men have seen the Light and left the world That I am leaving now.

and in his passion and fear he groans—

God, what a rain of ashes falls on him Who sees the new and cannot leave the old

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1 Pp. 28-29.
2 P. 29.
3 Pp. 29-30.
4 P. 31.
Through the anguish of Lancelot, the author makes known the agonies that beset the human spirit as it struggles against the pressure of the world for a realization of its ideals.

At their meeting in the palace, Guinevere and Lancelot are trapped. As the time approaches for the queen to be burned at the stake, Gawaine curses himself for not having done something to prevent their being caught. Bedivere, seeking to calm him, addresses him gravely and sadly:

Reckonations are not remedies,
Gawaine...
...The surest-visioned of us
Are creatures of our dreams and inferences,
And though it look to us a few go far
For seeing far, the fewest and the farthest
Of all we know go not beyond themselves.¹

And, certainly, Arthur cannot go beyond the cutting, galling thoughts of the awful death awaiting the queen, as he sits in torture, almost mad with jealousy and grief. But the queen is saved from the faggots by Lancelot; and it is Gawaine's turn to go mad, with hate and grief, when he learns that in the confusion attending the rescue his brothers, Gareth and Gaheris, have been killed by Lancelot. In the first shock of grief, Gawaine cries,

There are too many currents in this ocean
Where I'm adrift, and I see no land yet.
Men tell of a great whirlpool in the north
Where ships go round until the men aboard
Go dizzy, and are dizzy when they're drowning.²

These currents and confusions which afflict Gawaine are one with the conflicts

¹ Pp. 36-37.
² P. 51.
and bewilderments of contemporary civilization, and the deceptions of modern
life are apparent in Gawaine's enraged denunciation of Lancelot—

...My folly it was,
Not yours, to take for true the unhUMAN glamour
Of his high-shining fame for that which most
Was not the man. The truth we see too late
Hides half its evil in our stupidity;
And we gape while we groan for what we learn.¹

After that dreadful morning, Arthur

...left the Queen to Lancelot—
Or would have left her, had the will been his
To leave or take....

but Gawaine will give him no peace until with an army they march against
Lancelot at Joyous Gard. Days of battle followed, and in the evenings from
Joyous Gard can be seen Arthur's soldiers,

Who in the silver distance, without sound,
Were dimly burying dead men.²

So the modern world, pressing in upon the spirit of man, dulls the hopes
and aspirations that lead to its development.

Under the urgings of Bors and Guinevere that he end the war by
killing Arthur and Gawaine, Lancelot is adamant, for he is determined to
do these two men no more harm; and when, at last, through the intervention
of Rome, he has a choice between continuing the war and giving up the queen,
he decides to let the queen go back to Camelot.

¹ P. 52.
² P. 54.
³ P. 56.
Overwhelmed by a storm of fear and grief at this decision, Guinevere pleads brokenly to be taken anywhere else but to Camelot. Lancelot, his spirit moved by the misery this war has brought to the world, reminds her that to disregard the word of Rome would bring on a more terrible conflict,

And that, for the good fortune of a world
As yet not over-fortuned, may not be.¹

Then, with the sad knowledge that their relationship is ended, he reasons with her—

Your path is now
As open as mine is dark—or would be dark,
Without the Light that once had blinded me
To death, had I seen more. I shall see more,
And I shall not be blind...

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

We cannot make one world of two, nor may we
Count one life more than one. Could we go back
To the old garden, we should not stay long;
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen,
And have the taste of earth.²

There follow more pleading and more reasoning—that Arthur has promised not to harm her, that this futile war will end, and that she will be free. Lancelot stands grim and firm, and Guinevere, a broken woman, goes back to Camelot.

But the war does not end, for Gawaine's thirst for revenge has not yet been sated. The compromise Lancelot has made ends, as most compromises do, in a continuation of the evil it had tried to halt. Following Lancelot to France, Gawaine and Arthur carry on the war until Lancelot, to save his

¹ P. 86.
² P. 93.
own life, strikes down Gawaine; and Arthur, to save his kingdom, goes home
to fight Modred.

In their last meeting, as he lies dying, Gawaine tells Lancelot,

There was a madness feeding on us all
As we fed on the world. When the world sees,
The world will have another turn at madness;
And so, as I've a glimpse, ad infinitum.¹

All his hatred gone, he reviews for Lancelot Modred's part in the catastrophe—

And there the King would sit with him for hours,
Admiring Modred's growth; and all the time
His evil it was that grew, the King not seeing
In Modred the Almighty's instrument
Of a world's overthrow.²

Then, with his thoughts turned wholly outside himself, Gawaine states,

The world has paid enough
For Camelot.³

In this manner is expressed Robinson's belief that a world built upon greed,
hat, and selfish ambition, exacts from the human spirit too high a price
in broken faiths and unfulfilled hopes. The author further indicates his
concern with a better world as Gawaine speaks wistfully of Bedivere's dream
of a world free of the evils found in Camelot:

Bedivere had a dream, once on a time:
'Another Camelot and another King,'
He says when he's awake; but when he dreams,
There are no kings.⁴

¹ P. 100.
² P. 101.
³ P. 104.
⁴ P. 106.
Acting upon Gawaine's last request, Lancelot goes to Britain to help Arthur; but Arthur, Modred, and Camelot are gone, and Lancelot rides away to see Guinevere once more before he seeks the Light.

At Almesbury, Guinevere gently and sadly chides Lancelot back to sanity when, at the sight of her in black, he would have towed her away from the convent. She speaks to him gravely,

...There is no place
For me but where I am; there is no place
For you but where it is that you are going.
...I shall see in other places
What is not here. I shall not be alone.
And I shall tell myself that you are seeing
All that I cannot see...\(^1\)

As the bell rings for him to go,

He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
Away from him like flowers into a grave.\(^2\)

Deep, overwhelming loneliness grips him as he leaves Guinevere, but he hears a voice within him say,

Where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died
For you, that a world may live....\(^3\)

With the Voice as his guide, he rides away from the world he has known, and

...the world he sought
Was all a tale for those who had been living,
And had not lived....\(^4\)

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1 Pp. 121-123.
2 P. 125.
3 P. 127.
4 P. 128.
Into the darkness, seeking this world, he rides

   Alone: and in the darkness came the Light.¹

There is need of no further evidence than these last few passages to understand Robinson's dream of the human spirit breaking the bonds of darkness to make its way upwards towards freedom and truth. Nor is it difficult, in this poem, to comprehend the author's universal application of his concept of triumph through failure. The world that died made it possible for a world to live; thus the failure of one world becomes potentially beneficial to the one that is to follow. Through his renunciation and through his dedication of himself to the search for a more progressive order, Lancelot becomes the author's symbol for the deliverance of the human spirit from a world of ruin to one of growth, from the wrecking forces of chaos to the perpetuating forces of hope which makes for that courageous attitude toward struggle so admirably rendered by Browning, as he writes of valor in facing the last and the best fight.²

This vision of Robinson's, conceived in "Merlin" and emerging from "Lancelot," broadens its scope in "Tristram," and it is to the last narrative that we turn for solutions, as we turn to "The Tempest" for the solutions of Shakespeare's conflict of the will and passions in the great tragedies. The mood in "The Tempest" is one of serenity--of the complete vision, and so in Robinson's "Tristram," its supreme lyrical beauty is in that mood of serenity which prefigures the vision he had conjured of a world and its society which was to secure man from evil and failure.

¹ P. 129.

CHAPTER VI
THE RESOLVING VISION: TRISTRAM

It is apparent from the opening lines of "Tristram" that the author intended distinctions to be drawn between it and its companion-pieces.¹ There is at once an atmosphere of thoughtful composure and an air of expectant waiting, remote from the gloom overshadowing "Merlin" and the anticipation of broken relationships at the beginning of "Lancelot." Also in "Tristram" there is an absence of the inner conflict of opposing forces which characterizes the two earlier narratives. Yet "Tristram," though complete in itself, cannot be placed apart from "Merlin" and "Lancelot"; for, not only does it have allusions to them in its plot, but, more important, it rounds out the cycle of experience begun in the other two poems.

"Tristram" begins with Isolt of Brittany, who has waited since childhood for the return of Tristram from England. King Howel, her father, chides her for believing in a promise so lightly and so long ago given, and would have her turn from her dreams to more practical matters. Meanwhile, in Cornwall, Tristram finds himself in love with Isolt of Ireland, whom he has brought to Cornwall to be the bride of his uncle, King Mark. She loves Tristram, even though she has just become the wife of Mark. Through his servant Andred, Mark discovers their love and banishes Tristram from Cornwall.

¹ Robinson had written before publishing "Tristram": "The key and color of the thing are altogether different from those of "Merlin" and "Lancelot." See Selected Letters, p. 146.
Sick and lost, Tristram is lured to the palace of Queen Morgan, who would make him one of the many victims of her charms. But Tristram cannot forget Isolt of Ireland, and a few days later, with his friend and servant Gouernail, he sails to Brittany and joins the friends of his youth. There he aids King Howel in war, after which he marries Isolt of Brittany, though he still loves the other Isolt. Tristram spends two years in Brittany helping King Howel subdue his enemies and improve his government. At the end of this period Arthur sends Gawaine to bring Tristram back to Camelot to be made a knight. Isolt of Brittany is fearful lest King Mark kill him, but Gawaine stills her fears by telling her about Mark's imprisonment for forgery.

In England, Guinevere and Lancelot arrange for Tristram and Isolt of Ireland to meet at Joyous Gard. After a summer there with Tristram, Isolt is forced by Mark, who is now free, to return to Cornwall. Months later Morgan sends Tristram a message that Isolt of Ireland is near death, and Tristram goes at once to Cornwall. A penitent Mark allows the lovers a last meeting; but while they are together, Andred, under the influence of Morgan, stabs Tristram, who falls dead in the arms of the dying Isolt. The last episode shifts to Isolt of Brittany as she sits watching the sea and dreaming of Tristram.

The opening chords of "Tristram" are struck by the quiet but intense Isolt of Brittany, who shows how completely she has given herself up to her love for Tristram as she answers her father's chidings—

"I have been told that Tristram will come back," she said; "and it was he who told me so. Also I have this agate that he gave me; and I believe his eyes."[1]

[1 P. 14.]
The more King Howel gently reproves her for dreaming, the more confident she becomes of her hope—

...You are my King,
My father, and of all men anywhere,
Save one, you are the world to me,
When I say this of him you must believe me,
As I believe his eyes. He will come come back;
And what comes then I leave to him, and God.¹

But for Tristram, at Mark's palace in Cornwall, there is no surety—only helpless rage and despair as he follows his old custom of gazing down over the parapet at the moaning sea. His thoughts have driven him from the great hall above, where is being held the festival celebrating the marriage of his love, Isolt of Ireland, to King Mark, his uncle. Deaf to Gouvernail's warnings of the dangers attending this love, and unmoved by the seductive pleadings of Morgan to forget Isolt and come back to the feast, Tristram remains where he is, the victim of his sick thoughts, until, preceded by Brangwaine, her serving woman, Isolt of Ireland comes to him:

He gazed upon a face
Where all there was of beauty and of love
That was alive for him, and not for him,
Was his while it was there....²

Despair and terror grip them, and when she looks at him,

...her tears, unwilling still to flow,
Made of her eyes two shining lakes of pain
With moonlight living in them....³

As they go over the circumstances which have separated them—his blindness,

¹ P. 16.
² P. 38.
³ Pp. 45-46.
her pride—Isolt seeks to lift him from the deep hopelessness which holds him:

...Tristram, fair things yet
Will have a shadow black as night before them,
And soon will have a shadow black as night
Behind them. And this may be a shadow,
Sometimes, that we may live to see behind us—
Wishing that we had not been all so sure
Tonight that it was always to be night.¹

Then, confident in its depth and strength, she speaks of

A love larger than all time and all places,
And stronger beyond knowledge than all numbers
Around us that can only make us dead
When they are done with us. Tristram, believe
That if I die my love will not be dead.
If in some after time your will may be
To slay it for the sake of a new face,
It will not die. Whatever you do to it,
It will not die. We cannot make it die,
We are not mighty enough to sentence love
Stronger than death to die, though we may die.²

In her eagerness to help Tristram and in her realization of the enduring quality of the love surging within her, Isolt has forgotten self. Thus the power of love has transcended self and death.

Casting aside any suggestion of self-destruction, Isolt is sure this is not the end for them. But while she is assuring him, a cry from Brangwaine warns them that Andred is listening, and Tristram, seizing Andred, hurls him against the stones of the parapet just as Mark comes upon them. The king has seen enough to know that the two are lovers, and as he banishes Tristram, Mark accuses him of betrayal of honor. Tristram, controlling himself because of Isolt, exclaims bitterly,

¹ Pp. 45-46.
² Pp. 48-49.
Where there was never any love to steal,
No love was ever stolen. Honor—oh, yes!
If all the rituals, lies, and jigs and drinking
That make a marriage of an immolation—

Later, walking away from Cornwall and cut by galling thoughts, Tristram reasons that fate must be

...but a monstrous and unholy jest
Of sin stronger than fate, sin that had made
The world for love—so that the stars in heaven
Might laugh at it, and the moon hide from it,
And the rain fall on it, and a King's guile
And lust makes one more shuddering toy of it.

In this manner, Robinson views the vicissitudes of love in a world like ours, and he adds to these a treacherous sensuality as shown in Morgan, who takes the sick Tristram to her castle and tries to deaden his exalted passion. However,

...She had made other men
Dream themselves dead for her, but not this man.

For though she

Fondled him like a snake with two warm arms
And a warm mouth... he will have none of her, and she watches him leave

With anger in her eyes and injuries
Of his indifference envenoming
The venom in her passion and her pride,

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1 P. 66.
2 P. 70.
3 P. 77.
4 P. 78.
5 P. 79.
Still sick at heart, Tristram turns toward old friends in Brittany:

...If anywhere there were peace
For me, it might be there—or for some time
Till I'm awake and am a man again.¹

There he finds sanctuary with King Howel and with Isolt of Brittany whose intense love makes him feel "The still white fire of her necessity."²

Expecting never to see Isolt of Ireland again,

He knew that while his life was in Cornwall,
Something of this white fire and loneliness
In Brittany must be his whereon to lavish
The comfort of kind lies while he should live.³

Yielding to her need for him and seeking the spiritual comfort she offers him, he marries her and afterward

He built a royal garden for Isolt
Of the white hands to bloom in, a white rose
Fairer than all fair roses in the world
Elsewhere—save one that was not white but dark,
Dark and love-red for ever, and not here
Where the white rose was queen.⁴

The White Isolt, knowing him because she loved him, realized that his thoughts were sometimes far away:

I see almost a shadow on you sometimes,
As if there were some fearful thing behind you,
Not to be felt or seen—while you are here.⁵

¹ P. 82.
² P. 88.
³ P. 89.
⁴ P. 95.
⁵ P. 97.
Finally, when Gawaine comes to take Tristram to Camelot, Isolt cannot withhold her fear that he will not come back. Trying to calm her, Tristram, because her love for him and her serenity of spirit have brought him healing and called forth a devotion and concern for her peace of mind, tells her he will come back and all that happened was long ago. But shaken by the fear of losing him, she bares her heart—

So long ago,
Tristram, that you have lived for nothing else
Than for a long ago that follows you
To sleep, and has a life as long as yours.
Sometimes I wish that heaven had let you have her,
And given me back all that was left of you,
To teach and heal. I might be sure of that.
Or to be sure of nothing, if only sure.¹

And when he leaves,

...there was nothing left
That day, for her, in the world anywhere,
But white birds always flying, and still flying
And always the white sunlight on the sea.²

The low, even tone of the poem now lifts to the enraptured notes of love's fulfillment as Tristram, after being knighted at Camelot, goes to Joyous Gard to meet the Dark Isolt whom he had thought never to see again. She comes to him through the dark heavy curtains,

...and while she clung to him,
Each was a mirror for the other there
Till tears of vision and of understanding,
Were like a mist of wisdom in their eyes.³

Her concern, still all for Tristram, makes her say that

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¹ P. 118.
² P. 123.
³ P. 130.
Isolt is willing enough to be alone in heaven—
Or hell, if so it be—and let you live
Down here without her for a thousand years,
Were that the way of happiness for you,
Tristram...¹

Then

He felt her body throbbing
As if it held a laugh buried alive,
And suddenly felt all his eloquence
Hushed with her lips. Like a wild wine her love
Went singing through him and all over him.²

It is Isolt now who talks of darkness:

We are not children teasing little waves
To follow us along a solid shore.
I see a larger and a darker tide,
Somewhere, than one like that. But where and when
I do not wish to see.³

and, continuing, she speaks of losing him—

If I lose you, I shall not have to wait—
Not long. There will be only one thing then
Worth waiting for....

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

My life to me is not a little thing;
It is a fearful and a lovely thing;
Only my love is more.⁴

With the confidence he lacked at their last meeting at Cornwall, Tristram

stills her misgivings—

Time is not life. For many, and many more,
Living is mostly for a time not dying—
But not for me....

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

¹ P. 139.
² P. 140.
³ P. 142.
⁴ P. 144.
It is that fills life high and full, till fate
Itself may do no more, it is not time.
Years are not life.¹

Her calm, returning, she speaks from the knowledge the years at Cornwall
have taught her—

...Years are not life;
Years are the shells of life, and empty shells
When they hold only days, and days, and days.²

Then, thinking of those years and how near to death they have brought her,
she says,

...One may do worse than die.
If life that comes of love is more than death,
Love must be more than death and life together.³

And when she speaks of shadows coming, Tristram again steadies her—

...They are always coming—
Coming and going like all things but one.
Love is the only thing that in its being
Is what it seems to be. Glory and gold,
And all the rest, are weak and hollow staves
For even the poor to lean on...⁴

Thus Robinson gives to love the supreme position among human passions; and
as the lovers are raised above fear of life and death, and all of earth
itself, the author's vision sees love in its eternal and universal aspects:

There is a love that will outshine the stars.
There will be love when there are no more stars.⁵

¹ P. 144.
² P. 145.
³ P. 148.
⁴ P. 149.
⁵ P. 151.
Having attained all "That one life holds of joy and in one summer," Isolt of Ireland, when Mark has forced her back to Cornwall, finds no more to live for. And Mark, awed by her calm acceptance of death and wishing to interfere no longer in a love beyond his understanding, allows Tristram to see her. The last conversation between the lovers confirms the completion they have found in each other; and when Andred has done his work upon them with the knife, it is through Mark that the author reflects upon the meaning of such a love--

There was no more for them...
   ...and this is peace.
I should have never praise or thanks of them
If power were mine and I should waken them;
And what might once have been if I had known
Before--I do not know. So men will say
In darkness, after daylight that was darkness,
Till the world ends, and there are no more kings
And men to say it. If I were the world's maker,
I should say fate was mightier than I was,
Who made these two that are so silent now,
And for an end like this....

I do not know
Whether these two that have torn life from time,
Like a death-laden flower out of the earth,
Have failed or won. Many have paid with more
Than death for no such flower....

There is too much in this
That intimates a more than random issue;
And this is peace--whatever it is for me.
Now it is done, it may be well for them,
And well for me when I have followed them.
I do not know.  

In Brittany, the White Isolt's fears, having become actualities, are fears no longer, but evolve into a dawning wisdom "that comes up slowly out

1 P. 185.
2 Pp. 198-200.
of an unknown ocean."¹ Tristram dead will live for her in dreams, for she
tells her father,

I may not wait so long for Tristram going,
For he will never go...²

Grieved but serene, she watches the

...white birds flying,
   Flying, and always flying, and still flying³
   And the white sunlight flashing on the sea.³

"Merlin" and "Lancelot" bring the human spirit, through struggle,
to an awareness of the ideal; "Tristram" brings it through a realization
of the ideal, to peace. The interplay of the forces created by conflicting
desires has vanished now. Tristram and Isolt give themselves up to love,
and, in so doing, life opens up to them. Their love, strong in absence,
becomes glorious in possession, enrapturing and uplifting. Each exalts
the other until both are one in the realization of the universal and eternal
attributes of love. The wistful and dreamlike figure of the White Isolt
heightens the total concept of love by infusing into it a shining serenity
touched with tender sorrow, and by throwing over it the soft radiance of
her wise innocence.

So so the author, working toward the essential meaning of living, finds
love as its center; and thus, for a world having passed through struggle to

¹ P. 206
² P. 206
³ P. 208
defeat, and having been awakened by the passion to redeem, he offers, as a means of deliverance, universal love.

Means of deliverance! Universal love! In these two statements can we sum up the vision and the philosophy of Robinson. Reference was made at the end of the chapter on "Lancelot" to an analogy between Shakespeare's "The Tempest" and Robinson's "Tristram," in their relations to the struggle of human will and aspiration, as developed in Shakespeare's case to the great tragedies and in Robinson's case to the two narratives, "Merlin" and "Lancelot." It seems desirable to clarify this analogy with a particular or two in this final note to the interpretation of Robinson's spiritual triumph in "Tristram." If we take Robinson at his own word, as quoted in a letter to a friend,¹ there is no symbolical implication in "Tristram." But we shall not take Robinson at his word, for the very execution of "Tristram" nullifies that word. Rather, shall we take the beautiful and burning spirit of the narrative as an intimation of what Robinson both felt and assumed in this narrative. The very power of the poem contributes its own finality of concept of the solution it offers to Robinson's patterning of the unified purpose running through the three narratives. The power of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" is certainly not the power of "King Lear" or "Hamlet" or "Macbeth."

In his life of sustained productivity Shakespeare passed through... the period of the Tragedies, when he entered into life, sounded its

¹ See note 1, p. 25.
depths of experience, and faced its problems; and a period of reconciliation or mediation, when the tragic elements found their place in a comprehensive and beneficent order. Out of this rich and vital contact with life the poet came at last into a mood at once serene, grave, tender.\(^1\)

In "The Tempest" is a transcending power, the power of an ideal spiritualized and complete, the fulfillment of an aspiration emerging from trial and error, serene and confident with the poet's imagination, visioning the goal he has set for human endeavor. Here is found the poet's final attitude towards the ultimate questions of living, recorded in serenity of mood, and in faith in purity and goodness and love as solvents of the problems of life. It is this serenity of mood in which "The Tempest" was conceived and executed that makes it a faultless work of dramatic art.

So it was with Robinson. His belief that "Tristram" was without symbolical implication is due to the blazing enchantment of his goal of human endeavor in sight. "Tristram" is a supreme example of lyrical narrative. The joy of creating this perfection was rooted in a mood of serenity, of the contemplative perfection to be won out of the turbulent strife that attends the search for the Grail. Here is an ecstasy beyond all doubt or diversion which finds man's only, and fullest, redemption in love. The prophecy of doom threatened in "Merlin" was fired by the mis-mated love of Arthur and Guinevere; the conflicts, the wars, the antagonisms of "Lancelot"

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 314. Dover Wilson writes that in "The Tempest," Shakespeare was seeking to harmonize two worlds, the blessed and the bitter, "by means of forgiveness and reconciliation, a reconciliation which should be sealed by love...." The Essential Shakespeare (London, 1935), pp. 140-141. See also Ibid., 142-145.
were the results of the havoc caused by this same mismatched love; and
"Tristram" redeems through the perfectibilities of love in the attachment
and devotion of Tristram to the two Isolts, of Ireland and of Brittany, the
emanating substance and spirit of the one ideal. And, if this is not sym-
bolic intention, it would be difficult to name it.
CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

In concluding this study of Robinson's use of the Arthurian narratives, a backward glance will reveal that the poet's life was one, so wholly dedicated to his art, that poverty, obscurity, and adverse criticism served him as stimuli rather than as deterrents. An early mastery of the techniques of his medium gave full freedom for the expression of his ideas and beliefs. Through personal tragedy, and through a preoccupation with the destiny of the human spirit in a materialistic society, his speculations developed into definite philosophic principles, involving his concept of a purposeful universe, his belief in the worth of the inner experience over the outward act, and his faith in man's infinite possibilities for growth.

Shaken by the impact of the war, and concerned over the lack of vision of a world headed for disaster, he turned to the Arthurian legends to achieve a synthesis in which the world of actuality and the world of his vision might meet. His narratives compare favorably with Tennyson's Idylls of the King in graceful and musical expression, and with Swinburne's "Tristram of Lyonesse" in rich lyrical passages; but he excels both in the sweep of his vision. Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult" is inferior in beauty and passion to Robinson's "Tristram," while Hovey's work will bear more direct comparison with Tennyson's, since both treat differently the same problem, the rights of the individual against the obligations of society.

The Arthurian narratives comprise the most comprehensive expression of Robinson's philosophic speculations. He recognized in the constant
interplay of the forces of will and passion the determinants of human experience, and he saw the unrealized possibilities for the development of the human spirit. In the narratives, he embodies these forces in the men and women of the medieval world, and in the interaction of these embodiments is determined the symbols which illumine the structure of society. He chose from the legends those episodes which would reveal his total vision of man's progress from darkness to light.

The first narrative, "Merlin," pictures a society in chaos. All through the poem degenerating forces are at work, and the effect produced is one of gloom and darkness, foreshadowing a final decay. Arthur, Merlin, Vivian, Gawaine, typify the dominant forces in conflict, and these characters emerge from the conflict as symbols of the forces which have worked most effectively through them. They become symbols of evil in its various aspects, and as such, prophesy doom for the society.

In "Lancelot," the prophecy of doom is fulfilled, and the process of redemption is begun. The struggle in this poem is found in the conflict between the worldly love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and Lancelot's desire to become the agent of redemption. Through renunciation the passion to redeem triumphs, and Lancelot becomes the symbol of deliverance from the forces of chaos.

The means of deliverance is found in the third and last narrative, "Tristram" offers universal love as the solution to the problems of existence. Life is resolved into its essential meaning as Tristram finds full realization of love, its substance and spirit, in the two Isolts.
The vision is complete. The human spirit has made its journey from darkness through the agony of renunciation to triumph. The world in chaos is brought to order in the realization of the ideal.
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