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88 Colby Library Quarterly

E. A. ROBINSON AND "THE GOLDEN HOROSCOPE OF IMPERFECTION"

By CELIA MORRIS

With faith neither in salvation nor the prospect of eternity, E. A. Robinson nonetheless shared the Puritan assumption that the essence of a man lay in his struggle with his demons, and that nothing else really mattered.¹ And somewhere—probably in the dreadful history of his immediate family and through his own conviction that he was ill-suited to accomplish any of the things his culture valued—he developed a compassion so profound that no other American poet approaches it. The combination is powerful. In his best long poems, *Merlin* and *Lancelot*, he unites unflinching judgment and compassion to create characters so solid and so deeply civilized that their peers must be found in the novel rather than in poetry.

He presents his characters in relation to each other and in terms of the consequences their choices have forced upon them. And in doing so he does, for the most part, what no other poet has with the figures from Arthurian legend: he imagines them for grown-up people.² He conceives that human worth and dignity lie not—as Tennyson would have it in the *Idylls of the King*—in youth, purity and innocence but rather in grappling with guilt and loss. Integrity means fully accepting one's "golden horoscope of imperfection" by recognizing,

1 Irving Howe describes Robinson's relationship to Puritanism as follows: by Robinson's time Puritanism "was no longer a coherent religious force. It had become at best a collective memory of moral rigor, an ingrained and hardened way of life surviving beyond its original moment of strength. Yet to writers like Hawthorne and Robinson, the New England tradition left a rich inheritance: the assumption that human existence, caught in a constant inner struggle between good and evil, is inherently dramatic; and the habit of intensive scrutiny, at once proud and dust-humble, into human motives, such as the old Puritans had used for discovering whether they were among the elect" ("Tribute to an American Poet," *Harper's*, CCXI [June 1970], 104).

2 Other critics implicitly disagree. Louise Bogan writes that Robinson "did not realize . . . that the lust, barbarity and agony inherent in these tales could not be tamed to Tilbury Town's measure. Their flavor and power, under such treatment, thins out to the back-chat of gaffers around the stove of a country store" ("Tilbury Town and Beyond," *Poetry*, XXXVII [January 1931], 219-220).

Louis Coxé believes that "to demythologize his basic plot and fabric was a fatal flaw . . . We cannot accept these poems as natural emanations from the past, the profound, the evocative, nor can we see any more relevance to the lives of people living in the earlier decades of this century than the general notion of worlds breaking up and the death of God and so forth" (*Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry* [New York, 1969], 137).

Colby Library Quarterly 89

among other things, the way deep needs can make one hurt others and cripple oneself.

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* provides Robinson with his characters and his story, but its technique and its emphases are quite different from his. When we read Malory, we read about a functioning society at a recognizable stage of social and political development. We recognize the tenuous beginnings of institutions that are necessary to social stability, and we identify the serious threats to those institutions. Arthur is a highly pragmatic, if fallible ruler, and we see him almost exclusively as the king. There is an occasional hint—no more—that a man with feelings wears the robes of state, but Malory isn't interested in describing, much less exploring his characters' inner lives. His is basically a narrative about a public world, a world of event and action.

We shall return to Arthur, but first I'd like to see what these two writers do with Lancelot, whose story, arguably, is even richer than Arthur's. He is less constrained by public responsibilities; he ranges more widely, becomes obsessed by the Grail, and he loves Arthur's Queen. We see Malory's Launcelot primarily taking part in the tournaments, jousts and knightly encounters that are the facts of life in that very lively world. He is Arthur's most accomplished and therefore most esteemed knight, and the bulk of his appearances in the *Morte* describe his feats of prowess. Only in the last third of Malory's narrative do we find material that Robinson uses in his version of the story.

Launcelot goes on the Grail Quest and has a partial experience of Holiness—partial because of his love for an earthly creature: "had not Sir Launcelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knights passed him in the quest of the Sangreal."³ When he returns from the Quest, he tries to see less of Queen Guenever, remembering the perfection toward which he had striven and believing that they must "eschew the slander and noise" that Agravaine and Mordred are fostering in the court. Guenever believes simply that he is weary of her,

3 Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (London, 1961), II, 271. All subsequent references to this edition are parenthesized by volume and page number within the text of the discussion.

90 Colby Library Quarterly

though he feels more concern for her safety and honor than for his own. Further, he knows that if they are caught, he and his followers must rescue her: innocent people will be killed, and the tenuous political entity that is the Round Table will be destroyed.

He fails, though, to give her up; and when they are caught, Launcelot kills many of those who have tried to betray them. He then rescues Guenever from the fire to which Arthur rashly condemns her and in doing so kills, among others, Gawaine's brothers, Gareth and Gaheris. Victimized the King and everybody else because of his rage at the man who killed his brothers, Gawaine pushes Arthur to deadly battle in France with Launcelot. The Pope intercedes. Launcelot delivers Guenever back to Arthur and is banished to his own lands, to which Arthur and Gawaine again pursue him.

The war ends a second and final time when Mordred usurps Arthur's throne and tries to possess Guenever, who barricades herself in the Tower. Gawaine dies in France, after writing an apology to Launcelot and pleading that he fight once again for Arthur. But Launcelot arrives too late in England, where Arthur and Mordred have killed each other. He goes to Almesbury to see Guenever and tries to persuade her to leave the convent and return with him to France. She, however, remains firm in her new religious devotion, and consequently he leaves to dedicate the rest of his life to cloistered penance and prayer.

Robinson assumes that we know all this. He takes the part of Malory's "facts" that interests him and, in the spirit of something like Malory's tolerance, interprets them by exploring the moral experience they suggest. Robinson's Lancelot is not the supremely accomplished swordsman and horseman he is in Malory, but there is a coherence, vigor and richness in his emotional life that serve as counterweights to our disbelief in him as an active man. In Robinson's poems the activity of the Arthurian world has become an inner reality. The measure of a man's humanity has become the integrity of his conscious awareness.

Lancelot dramatizes a man's attempt to give up everything he has known and loved, and everything at which he has proved his worth. The poem begins after the Quest, when

Colby Library Quarterly 91

Lancelot has experienced something higher than the earthly satisfactions he has known so well. On the one hand, he aspires to a greater purity and selflessness; he wants to devote himself to a spiritual world to which Robinson can only point. On the other hand, there is an ugly reality that urges him away: he recognizes people who long to destroy him and the Queen and who wait patiently for the chance to do so. Yet he loves Guinevere still—sympathy is too weak a word; and he knows that she misinterprets his decision, that no argument can allay her fears and distrust, and that his leaving will perhaps destroy her. The poem's extraordinary emotional tension—its anguish—results from Robinson's acute and powerful recreation of this dilemma.

Robinson's Guinevere, unlike either Malory's or Tennyson's, is also highly self-conscious; she is bitterly aware that she was forced into a situation she knew was wrong for her. She fought for her integrity when she tried to persuade Leodegran, her father, not to marry her to Arthur. Aware that she has wronged her husband, she believes he wronged her first by buying her from Leodegran "with a name/Too large for my king-father to relinquish."⁴ She is the only Guinevere who lives consciously with the horror of having been rescued at the last moment from a gruesome death. She is, similarly, the only one who has a sufficient sense of her identity to fight against being used as a pawn in a political game and to argue against being sent back to Camelot.

Robinson, then, imagines that these two mutually shape and determine each other's worlds. Apparently considering such an interdependence necessary and, on the whole, good, his Merlin in another context claims, "The man who goes alone too far goes mad—/ In one way or another" (p. 254, ll. 5-6). Lancelot and Guinevere are not simply two people juxtaposed: the relationship between them has provided their fullest, richest human experience, despite the fact that it violates their closest social obligations. What has been real and life-giving to them has also hurt someone else and thereby in a measure crippled them in turn.

Because great good for them has hurt another and come

⁴ *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1954), p. 424, ll. 4-5.

92 Colby Library Quarterly

from what traditional morality considers evil, they have no clear principles to guide them but instead must proceed by understanding the burden of the past and the necessary limits of individuality. Lancelot knows, for example, that Guinevere cannot escape to France because she is the "Queen of the Christian world" and cannot have anonymity even if she wants it. He knows further that she could not long survive, isolated and abstracted from what nourished and defined her. And he believes they cannot return to a world that has come to an end: the fruit in the old garden "would all be fallen/ And have the taste of earth" (p. 426, ll. 2-3). To continue would be to degrade the beauty of what has gone before. But to give each other up is tantamount to giving up life itself.

Two sections effectively demonstrate Lancelot's struggle when he has to choose in the absence of clear moral guides. Section VI presents his dilemma when Joyous Gard is under siege. He must stand firm against the two people closest to him, his kinsman and the woman he loves, as they challenge him to kill Gawaine and Arthur in order to end the war. Bors argues the futility of the multitudes who will die so long as their vendetta lasts. Lancelot's "blistered soul" will be more salved by the death of two than by the slaughter that seems the only alternative. Revolted by the fiery death she barely escaped, Guinevere dares Lancelot to honor Arthur, who ordered her killed, more than he honors her, who has been his life. Theirs are neither specious nor easy arguments; no mere logic can answer them, and no answer is unquestionably right. At the very least they increase Lancelot's burden of responsibility.

Section VII dramatizes the lovers' different attitudes to the crucial question: do their public obligations and their guilt now require them to renounce each other? Must Guinevere go back to Camelot?⁵ With extraordinary power, Robinson shows them as they analyze their complex dilemma; he makes us fully realize the terrible weight of consciousness and of loss: the conflict between reason and necessity on the one hand, and

5 It is perhaps worth noting that in Malory there is never a question that Guinevere should return if her safety is guaranteed. Malory dwells on the pageantry and pathos of their journey: "And she and Sir Launcelot were clothed in white cloth of gold tissue; and . . . he rode with the queen from Joyous Gard to Carlisle. And so Sir Launcelot rode throughout Carlisle, and so in the castle, that all men might behold; and wit you well there was many a weeping eye" (II, 363).

Colby Library Quarterly 93

desire and human need on the other — the conflict both within Lancelot and between Lancelot and Guinevere.

More than most writers, even in fiction, Robinson makes us feel how hard are the demands of reason. He makes us understand, for example, the intolerable strain that human affection puts on judgment. Lancelot's love and pity for Guinevere exert the most powerful influence over him, despite the knowledge of wrong and danger; and only at the most devastating cost does reason triumph.

In a fine passage Robinson describes Lancelot confronting Guinevere and trying at the same time to keep foremost in his mind his considered judgment about his responsibilities to her, to Arthur's Camelot, and to his experience with "the Light":

Once more he frowned away a threatening smile,
But soon forgot the memory of all smiling
While he gazed on the glimmering face and hair
Of Guinevere — the glory of white and gold
That had been his, and were, for taking of it,
Still his, to cloud, with an insidious gleam
Of earth, another that was not of earth,
And so to make of him a thing of night —
A moth between a window and a star,
Not wholly lured by one or led by the other.
The more he gazed upon her beauty there,
The longer was he living in two kingdoms,
Not owning in his heart the king of either,
And ruling not himself. There was an end
Of hours, he told her silent face again,
In silence. On the morning when his fury
Wrenched her from that foul fire in Camelot,
Where blood paid irretrievably the toll
Of her release, the whips of Time had fallen
Upon them both. All this to Guinevere
He told in silence and he told in vain.

(p. 415, 11. 10-30)

The beauty of the woman and the extent of his love are not literally described. The "glory of white and gold" is an epithet Robinson uses more than once for Guinevere, but we *see* her much less than we *feel* her, through Lancelot. There is an almost simultaneous rendering of Lancelot's experience of her and a commentary on what that means to him — the way his love leaves his will infirm, his intentions unrealized. In Robinson's measured, controlled way he is highly dramatic; the

passage implies a physical situation — a tense meeting between two people — and it reveals the dramatic conflicts within Lancelot. Further, we know that the protagonists themselves must resolve their crisis — there can be no *deus ex machina* — and this fact makes the drama all the more highly charged.

There is an interplay between the implied physical scene and Lancelot's thoughts and memories, and Robinson manages this simply by telling us repeatedly that Lancelot is looking at Guinevere: "While he gazed . . ." (1.12), "The more he gazed . . ." (1.20), "he told her silent face . . ." (1.24), "All this to Guinevere/ He told . . ." (11.29-30). The accumulation of such simple facts effectively embodies his infirmity of will where she is concerned — his actual preoccupation with her contrasting, as it does, with what his rational self tells him all the while. Instead of giving us abstract, theoretical temptation, Robinson realizes it in a dramatic situation.

Since his poems begin close in time to the final catastrophe, it may seem perverse to claim that Robinson establishes his characters' humanity by focusing on their choices and the agony they experience in making them. By the time we see them, his characters can acquiesce in disaster or willingly accept renunciation, and they usually do both. Similarly, there is an element of fatalism that qualifies our sense that the characters have a choice to make. Lancelot, for example, states in rather fatalistic terms his "decision" to satisfy his love for Guinevere, thereby mocking his obligation to Arthur. Guinevere has claimed that she should have died, rather than inspire a war in which so many men have died for her. Lancelot, though, believes in the inexorable. Her beauty compelled his love and therefore his disloyalty to Arthur. That disloyalty led ultimately to the deaths of Gawaine's brothers — deaths that drove Gawaine insanely to push Arthur to war. And all those soldiers died because Camelot was dying, "As Merlin said it would" (p. 416, 1.27). Still, neither in *Lancelot* nor in *Merlin* do we have the mystical fatalism of the source; instead, Robinson compels us to recognize that there are some burdens that some people simply cannot sustain and some good things they cannot deny themselves. The "flowery ways" that are so magnificent and signify life itself require a breach of loyalty and

will, like all things, end.

But the characters' speculations on events and their own role in them, along with their meditations on alternatives, are the very stuff of the poems. And Arthur, as he appears in *Merlin*, affords as clear an example as any of Robinson's peculiar blend of sympathy and judgment. What Robinson does with him, let it be said, is simpler than what he does with Merlin, Lancelot, Guinevere, or even Vivian, because he presents him at a time in his life when he no longer has major choices left to make. Nor is Arthur profoundly in love with a woman whose love for him gives his life much of the meaning it has. Primarily he must accept the consequences his earlier choices have forced upon him. And when we see how thoroughly issues of moral choice inform Robinson's presentation even of Arthur, we see in essence the way Robinson imagines character.

In the first section of *Merlin* there are numerous incidental references to the king that witness to his stature and dignity in his world. More important, Robinson creates an ominous sense of the doom hanging over Camelot and makes us know that Camelot is primarily Arthur's responsibility. He begins, as it were, by engaging our sympathy for a powerful and interesting man under enormous pressure, a man in trouble.

In the second section Robinson first records the evidence of Arthur's guilt in the words of Lamorak, "the man of oak and iron," who is worldly, rather cynical, and somewhat callous. Merlin had warned Arthur, who was too headstrong to listen and had hardly been a paragon of virtue in any case. In fathering two bastards Arthur had "set the pace" and left himself no room for self-righteousness. Bedivere, to whom Lamorak says all this, doesn't dispute the facts but judges differently: necessities of state and pity demand, he feels, that one consider Lancelot the more guilty. And he ends sympathetically by recognizing the terrible price Arthur has paid: he is now "a broken man" and "a broken king." They continue in this vein, Robinson making us aware all the while that they are partial and may be wrong, but their preoccupation with Arthur implicitly tells us that Arthur is a man who deserves our attention and probably our sympathy.

Section III presents Arthur, first with Merlin, next with Dagonet, and finally alone. It is the only section in *Merlin*

96 Colby Library Quarterly

where we actually see Arthur, and Robinson portrays him as a man who acknowledges, both intellectually and emotionally, his own guilt. He is also highly intelligent, perceptive and compassionate, and Robinson tells us this in Arthur's response to Merlin, whose face showed

for the King's remembering eyes,
A pathos of a lost authority
Long faded and unconscionably gone;
And on the King's heart lay a sudden cold.
(p. 249, 11. 28-31)

Merlin's advice to Arthur is stern advice, addressed to him as King, adjuring him to give up the hope of satisfying his personal needs and desires and instead to live only for his role as leader. This sobering revelation of the terrible demands on Arthur enhances his bid for our sympathy and complicates our impulse to judge.

In his reply to Merlin, which includes a brilliant analysis of Merlin's own choices, Arthur acknowledges the arrogance and frivolity that led him to this pass. But Robinson continues strongly to emphasize the fateful powers at work against a man's sincere attempt to be good: the ironic facts of blindness, self-mutilation, and the betrayal of trust. And this time Arthur accepts the fate Merlin says will be his and recognizes that he himself has compromised his capacity for experience: "For I have built/ On sand and mud, and I shall see no Grail" (p. 253, 11. 33-34). Robinson then shows us Arthur, suffering and alone, disappointed of company and relief even by Dagonet, whom Arthur nonetheless treats with gentle kindness. We see him last in his torment, agonized by "memories tonight/ Of old illusions that were dead forever" (p. 257, 11. 34-5).

Robinson's Arthur is, then, clearly a guilty man, and we know precisely those acts for which he is most guilty. He, "being Arthur and a king," has been lustful, adulterous, even unwittingly incestuous. He has been supremely wilful, marrying Guinevere in blatant disregard of Merlin's warning and of what he might have learned of Guinevere's own feelings. Yet he has paid profoundly, and our impulse to moral judgment is

Colby Library Quarterly 97

mitigated by Robinson's strong and compassionate awareness that to be human is to hurt others and to suffer oneself.

Robinson's poems, then, become almost meditations, both by the poet and by the characters themselves, on their responsibility for the events of the story. Robinson assumes that the attempt to live a life both full and wholly admirable will fail. But he also assumes that to be human is to continue to make that attempt and to be fully aware of the measure of failure. Vividly experiencing their humanity as a problem, the people in his poems have a few frail certainties, and those are repeatedly challenged. His poems exploit his characters' awareness that their needs and passions on the one hand and their obligations and rationality on the other basically conflict, and that there can be no satisfactory resolution. Robinson could not make a forthright confession of faith in the Commandments, could not exhort to virtue in big words, as Tennyson did, but he understood what there was to know about the Erinyes. In his compassion, in his respect for his characters, and in his knowledge of how they suffer, he resembles Thomas Hardy, of whom Katherine Anne Porter writes: "He did not need the Greeks to teach him that the Furies do arrive punctually, and that neither act, nor will, nor intention will serve to deflect a man's destiny from him, once he has taken the step which decides it."⁶

6 "On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy," *Modern Literary Criticism*, ed. Irving Howe (New York, 1961), 308.

