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Merlin: *E. A. Robinson's Debt to Emerson*

by OWEN W. GILMAN, JR.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY upon the appearance of Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Merlin* in 1917, readers and critics began to assess the influence exerted on Robinson by earlier versions of the Arthurian legend. The title of Robinson's work was an open invitation to such speculations; his poem was clearly meant to be read within a specific tradition. But where precisely in that tradition had Robinson found his inspiration? And more precisely, what texts in the myths of Arthur had he appropriated as he struggled to establish his own perspective on the world of Camelot?

The most obvious textual influences were considered right away. Malory was an inevitable contender, for *Le Morte D'Arthur* seemed logically to stand foursquare behind all subsequent English-language treatments of Arthurian material; Malory's text was primary and it was well known. His stories had fed the imaginations of readers for centuries, and anyone with Robinson's literary background would have had a sure grasp on Malory's narrative.

The same sort of facile reasoning made Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* a likely candidate for influencing Robinson. This time the "source" would enjoy the advantage of proximity. Tennyson was the dominant English-language poet during Robinson's formative years, and *Idylls of the King* had proved the power of an old story made anew. Furthermore, Tennyson's account of the Merlin character was focused on Merlin's relationship with Vivien, and since this is precisely what Robinson chose to feature, the possibility that Tennyson shaped Robinson's purpose was difficult to ignore.

However, even as these investigations of influence became somewhat more rigorous and scholarly in the 1930s,¹ statements about the relationship between Robinson's *Merlin* and previous developments of Merlin's meaning in the legend of Arthur still hovered close to the level of commonplace generalization. The situation was complicated, of course, by the fact that Robinson's story is far tidier—though yet at the same time more obscure—than Malory's, and Robinson seems clearly to be contradicting Tennyson's moral concerns at every turn. Having gleaned this

1. See E. Edith Pipkin, "The Arthur of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *English Journal*, XIX (March 1930), 183-95; rpt. in *Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Me.: Colby College Press, 1969), pp. 6-16.

evidence from examination of the better known versions of Merlin in the Arthurian tradition, critics of Robinson were inclined to concentrate on the matter of negative influence; that is, they would show how Robinson carefully departed from the work of his predecessors in order to make an original contribution.

This tendency might have gone on indefinitely if it had not been for the fine scholarship of Laurence Perrine. Just a little over ten years ago, Perrine took a fresh look at the possible sources for Robinson's *Merlin*.² Realizing that Malory and Tennyson and some others did not appear to be very close to the essence of Robinson's narrative, Perrine looked beyond the obvious. He discovered that in 1916 Robinson had consulted S. Humphreys Gurteen's *The Arthurian Epic*, a text which summarized a Norman version of Merlin's place in the Camelot story. This particular account directly contradicted Tennyson's harsh portrait of Vivien and her relationship with Merlin, and it bore a striking resemblance to Robinson's characterization of the two lovers. Perrine handled the character and thematic parallels skillfully; Robinson's debt to the Gurteen text is clear.

Nevertheless, I suggest that one other earlier text was also working in Robinson's imagination as he crafted his *Merlin*. Perhaps the final piece in the puzzle regarding sources for Robinson's first Arthurian poem rests with Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Merlin I" and "Merlin II." Although the forms are vastly different—Emerson's work coming in short lyric meditations and Robinson's involving a long dramatic narrative—the possibility of an Emersonian influence cannot be considered surprising. In *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet*,³ Edwin Fussell demonstrated convincingly the early appeal which Emerson's work had for Robinson. More recently, Louis Coxe has cogently argued for an Emersonian influence on some of Robinson's poetry.⁴ In addition to being drawn to Emerson's highmindedness, Robinson found a kindred spirit working in the toughness of Emerson's poetry and his prose style. Yet the case for Emerson's influence on Robinson's *Merlin* goes beyond vague kinship in philosophy and method. The evidence of Robinson's debt to Emerson is both textual and thematic.

For the textual evidence, we must turn to a passage very early in Section III of Robinson's *Merlin*. Merlin is not actually present in the first two sections, but he is the chief subject in discussion between several of the knights in Arthur's realm. Robinson uses this technique to create a sense of mystery about Merlin; the poet's goal is to let us know that Merlin is not understood by those in the world of Camelot—and thus we do not "know" him either, despite our familiarity with the character in other versions of the legend. In Section III we discover King Arthur's attitude

2. Laurence Perrine, "The Sources of Robinson's *Merlin*," *American Literature*, XLIV (May 1972), 313-21.

3. Edwin S. Fussell, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1954).

4. Louis Coxe, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), pp. 23-24.

toward his chief counsel, Merlin, who is about to appear to Arthur for the first time in the poem. Arthur is as puzzled as Robinson's readers are at this point about Merlin's situation; however, the following passage indicates that Arthur (the "he" in the excerpt below) has formed a tentative impression of Merlin's status:

He might have wondered hard
And wondered much; and after wondering,
He might have summoned, with as little heart
As he had now for crowns, the fond, lost Merlin,
Whose Nemesis had made of him a slave,
A man of dalliance, and a sybarite.⁵

The last two lines of this passage are especially significant. By working through the consciousness of Arthur—in terrible despair at the apparent collapse of his world—Robinson advanced the final evaluative judgment of Merlin before his appearance to Arthur and to the readers of the poem. Furthermore, the judgment links Merlin to "Nemesis" and "a sybarite," both allusions to classical mythology.

What prompted Robinson to include these two particular allusions with regard to Merlin? Neither the "Nemesis" association nor the "sybarite" description are commonplaces in stories of the Arthurian legend. Tennyson's characterization of Merlin as a figure so oriented toward pleasure that he succumbs to the wily manipulation of Vivien seems to fit the general meaning of the Sybarites in mythology. The residents of Sybaris, a neighboring city of Crotona, were known for their sense of luxury and effeminacy; as a consequence of these general traits, Sybaris fell to Crotona in war. Yet Tennyson does not specifically link Merlin to the Sybarites. Neither do any of the other previously identified sources for Robinson's *Merlin*. The same situation holds true for the "Nemesis" reference. How, then, did Robinson arrive at this specific combination of mythological reference to explain Arthur's perception of Merlin?

I believe the answer is to be found in Emerson. About halfway through "Merlin I," Emerson offers a clear linkage of Merlin to the Sybarites, declaring about Merlin:

By Sybarites beguiled,
He shall no task decline;
Merlin's mighty line
Extremes of nature reconciled,—⁶

Emerson here uses the reference to Sybarites only to suggest that Merlin stood fast against the temptations typically represented by them. Although Robinson's stance on this mythological reference is more complex

5. Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Merlin," in *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 249. Subsequent references to *Merlin* will be from this text and will be given parenthetically.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Merlin I," in *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), pp. 121–22. Other references to this poem and text will be given parenthetically.

than Emerson's, as soon as Merlin actually enters Robinson's poem, we see that Robinson accepted Emerson's sense of the situation regarding Merlin's seduction by the Sybarites; the seduction was only *apparent*, not real. Even while Robinson appropriated a descriptive, suggestive phrase from Emerson, he employed it with an ironic twist. Merlin's behavior in Broceliande contradicts Arthur's prejudgment. In essence, Robinson's Merlin does indeed have the independence of spirit emphasized in Emerson's lines. Thus Emerson's reference to the Sybarites agrees with Robinson's usage in *Merlin*.

It is near the conclusion of "Merlin II" that Emerson introduced "Nemesis" as a prior mythological counterpart to explain Merlin's chief function as one who orders or balances events in the universe:

And Nemesis,
Who with even matches odd,
Who athwart space redresses
The partial wrong,
Fills the just period,
And finishes the song.⁷

Emerson's interpretation of Nemesis as a powerful idea/figure charged with maintaining equilibrium or balance in human life is both faithful to the traditional mythic value for Nemesis and congruent with the assertion about Merlin cited above: "Merlin's mighty line / Extremes of nature reconciled, —" I shortly intend to show that this view of Merlin was deeply appealing to Robinson.

Emerson's two Merlin poems cover only six pages of text and follow one another in the Riverside edition of Emerson's collected poems which was in Robinson's personal library. Emerson's work was readily available to Robinson for a quick review as he prepared his own version of Merlin, and the close proximity of the "Nemesis" and "sybarite" references in Robinson's poem — just as Merlin is about to join Arthur — points to the conclusion that Robinson did indeed consult Emerson's Merlin poems.

Still, if there were no thematic parallels between Emerson's vision of Merlin and Robinson's handling of him, we would be wise to resist over-emphasizing a linkage between these poets, for we could never discount the possibility of independent discovery of the two particular mythological references. However, Robinson's Merlin functions essentially as does Emerson's; each poet's vision of Merlin is centered on Merlin's mediating capacity, his role as one who "reconciles" or brings together conflicting elements in the world. In Robinson's case, Merlin ultimately joins love to the reality of human weakness and mortality, love being a necessary experience for preparing one to understand this reality. Having loved, Merlin is reconciled to his fate of life within the boundaries of time. By

7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Merlin II," in *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), p. 124. Other references to this poem and text will be given parenthetically.

the end of the poem, Merlin has come to know and to accept his own destiny, and this knowledge brings a mystical transcendence of pain and turmoil. Robinson's *Merlin* shows in practice what Emerson had established as a theoretical foundation for Merlin's role and meaning.

Furthermore, Emerson's stress on the significance of Merlin as a *poet*—the quintessential artist figure for Emerson—is matched by Robinson's development of Merlin as a storyteller, one who discovers the meaning of existence through the act of telling stories. Each of these two interpreters of Merlin is drawn to the same conclusion: it is through the work of poetry (and for Robinson this includes storytelling) that human life rides over the rough terrain of experience, endures, and achieves a lasting sense of order, coherence, and meaning. Disintegration and fragmentation are only apparent; the poet's work stands beyond the temporal realm, magically outside the limitations of any human life. Robinson and Emerson thus seem to share essentially the same aesthetic theory.

Emerson asserts a powerful role for the poet in "Merlin I." Merlin becomes the archetype for poetic activity, and Emerson declares:

The kingly bard
Must smite the chords rudely and hard,
As with hammer or with mace;
That they may render back
Artful thunder, which conveys
Secrets of the solar track,
Sparks of the supersolar blaze. ("Merlin I," *Poems*, 120)

Although Emerson doesn't explain how, the poet's efforts lead to the deepest secrets of life. A little later, Emerson further clarifies the goal of the poet:

Great is the art,
Great be the manners, of the bard.
.....
'Pass in, pass in,' the angels say,
'In to the upper doors,
Nor count compartments of the floors,
But mount to paradise
By the stairway of surprise.' ("Merlin I," *Poems*, 122)

The element of surprise is paramount, and it is the natural province of the poet. In a totally unpredictable pattern, poetry can arrive at an understanding of mysterious things beyond any other human way of knowing. At the conclusion of the poem, Emerson again emphasizes the power and mystery which may be unlocked only through poetry:

There are open hours
When the God's will sallies free
And the dull idiot might see
The flowing fortunes of a thousand years;—
Sudden, at unawares,

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Self-moved, fly-to the doors,
 Nor sword of angel could reveal
 What they conceal. ("Merlin I," *Poems*, 122)

The poet has the capacity for catching the most startling profundities of the universe—and this happens "sudden, at unawares."

In *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America*, R. A. Yoder argues that the Merlin poems represent a shift in Emerson's perception of the poet. Yoder asserts that early in his career, Emerson subscribed to the Orphic nature of the poet—that the poet was a visionary, a seer, one who had by nature a command of supernatural reality. The poet "knew" instinctively, immediately, and completely. As Emerson matured, Yoder claims, this view of the poet was lost; the key change took place at the time of the Merlin poems:

Merlin's history is Emerson's also, for it traces the decline of visionary powers and the substitution of natural and rhetorical magic, like the structures of surprise and polarity, for the insight of the seer. This craft served Emerson well, for there are major artistic triumphs among his later works. But the silencing of Merlin remains a symbol for the loss of Orpheus, not only to Emerson, but to later poets like E. A. Robinson or Richard Wilbur who have taken up this theme.⁸

Yoder's argument seems accurate in part. Emerson's view of the poet's nature and function did undergo some change, but I disagree with Yoder in his characterization of this change as a "loss." I see the change as a substitution of equals—two different means to the same end. Whether the poet arrives at meaning because of *a priori* insight or because of a "surprise" discovery, the importance of the meaning remains unchanged. There is sufficient power in happening upon an insight, "sudden, at unawares," and I think Emerson was mightily impressed with this process—as is demonstrated by his Merlin poems.

Robinson, too, was fascinated with the way understanding arrives unannounced, though perhaps expected, or even anticipated in some inchoate way. His *Merlin* reveals this phenomenon. Since Robinson was working with "old" material—the story of Merlin was well known—the challenge for the poet in this situation was to uncover new meaning in retelling the story. For this to be satisfying, there must be an element of surprise, and Robinson carefully built his poem in such a way as to provide surprise. Robinson makes Merlin an enigmatic figure, an artistic figure—a storyteller. The knights in Arthur's realm do not fathom what Merlin is up to, and readers do not know. As we read, we are mystified. Eventually, of course, Merlin arrives at a true self-understanding. He accomplishes this because he tells stories to Vivian.

These stories are told by Merlin to explain himself, for Vivian loves him, adores him, and has an erroneous impression of him. She thinks that

8. R. A. Yoder, *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 152.

he—possibly as an actual human figure, but more as a figure in her imagination—stands outside of time, and thus outside the fall of Camelot. In Section VI, Merlin tells two stories. One is a public story, and it is the central mythic narrative of the Arthurian material, the heart of the legend. It begins in a formulaic manner which indicates clearly the inherited, age-old quality of the account: “Well, once upon a time there was a king” (*Merlin*, 288). Merlin deliberates here momentarily, but feels the necessity to continue. This is a story which must go on:

He paused, and would have hesitated longer,
But something in him that was not himself
Compelled an utterance that his tongue obeyed,
As an unwilling child obeys a father
Who might be richer for obedience
If he obeyed the child: (*Merlin*, 288)

Merlin then goes on to tell the standard version of the ruin of Camelot, all about the doom that was built into the original structure of the dream.

But where does Merlin stand with regard to all of this? He is in Broceliande, safely away from Camelot and its peril, and he is deeply loved by Vivian. Perhaps these conditions can somehow save him. Such a prospect has great appeal for anyone concerned with the devastation so obvious in the world, and Vivian clings desperately to the hope that Merlin is securely beyond the collapse of Arthur's kingdom. Yet there is one more story to be told in Section VI, a private story. The story comes upon Merlin as a discovery, and it is his way of finally grasping his own destiny.

Tomorrow I shall say to Vivian
That I am old and gaunt and garrulous
And tell her one more story: I am old. (*Merlin*, 293–294)

Thus do the truest and deepest understandings of the world come to us: as stories, as the work of the imagination. And for Robinson and Emerson, as poetry. Merlin tells his story, “I am old,” to Vivian the next day, and the surprise is out. Mortals, whether kings or knights or bards, live within the crushing limits of time. Only the deep surprises, the stories and poems that discover the meanings of existence, stand apart. They endure. But with their endurance, meaning itself survives, and with that, we are also kept perpetually alive. This was Robinson's purpose in retelling an old story; it was a way to broaden the context of life, reaching outside the immediate concerns of a world-weary generation turned hopeless in confrontation with an awful war. Robinson knew early on what World War I would do to darken the dreams of his time. His own private world had known the weight of clouds and darkness much earlier. Robinson's answer was stoical, but it was an answer. He believed in poetry—poetry above everything else—and he felt that the fabrication of the imagination would outlast the turmoil of a given human life. This was Robinson's faith, and it is reasonable to think he gained some of his courage to believe

this from Emerson, for at the conclusion of "Merlin II," Emerson had marveled at the enduring magic of poetry:

Subtle rhymes, with ruin rife,
Murmur in the house of life,
Sung by the Sisters as they spin;
In perfect time and measure they
Build and unbuild our echoing clay.
As the two twilights of the day
Fold us music-drunken in. ("Merlin II," *Poems*, 124)

For Emerson, even while the poetry derived from nature may be full of doom ("with ruin rife"), there is permanence. The life of poetry perpetuates meaning; we are the "echoing clay," and we are subject to the two twilights—the wonder of dawn when we are first aware of life and the inevitable dusk when we know the limits of physical existence—but the building and unbuilding that is the work of "subtle rhymes," this survives. Emerson took heart in this permanence, and his Merlin poems provided Robinson with an aesthetic foundation for his own use of the Merlin legend.

Robinson took considerably more than two words from Emerson's effort to find meaning in Merlin; Robinson also found in Emerson a sympathetic assessment of the function of poetry. The spirit of Emerson's Merlin poems runs strongly throughout Robinson's *Merlin*, and Robinson's effort to provide a surprise in an old story told again is his way of living up to Emerson's declaration in "The Poet" that "The poets are thus liberating gods."

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