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TENNYSON AND ROBINSON: LEGALISTIC MORALISM vs. SITUATION ETHICS

By LAURENCE PERRINE

I

TENNYSON’S *Idylls of the King*, at the time of their publication, were widely regarded as the poet’s crowning masterpiece. Since then their reputation has plunged, and, even during Tennyson’s time, a few readers expressed dissatisfaction. George Meredith wrote to a friend:

The lines are satin lengths, the figures Sèvres china. . . . To think! — it’s in these days that the foremost poet of the country goes on fluting of creatures that have not a breath of vital humanity in them, and does us out his regular five-feet with the old trick of the vowel endings — The Euphuist’s tongue, the Exquisite’s leg, the Curate’s moral sentiments, the British matron and her daughter’s purity of tone: — so he talks, so he walks, so he snuffles, so he appears divine. . . . Why, this stuff is not the Muse, it’s Musery. The man has got hold of the Muses’ clothesline and hung it with jewelry.¹

Though perhaps with excessive severity, Meredith has accurately expressed the causes for later discontent with the *Idylls*, as well as recognition of their enduring merit. The central defects of the *Idylls* are characters lacking in “vital humanity,” and moral sympathies too narrow for a first-rate poetic vision. Their lasting achievement lies in isolated passages, brief and extended, of unsurpassed lyric beauty.

Edwin Arlington Robinson did not join in the denigration of Tennyson which became so fashionable following his death. James L. Tryon recollects that Tennyson was one of Robinson’s favorite poets at Harvard.² Rollo Walter Brown reports that once, at Peterborough, when Tennyson, according to fashion, was being disparaged, Robinson said quietly, “He wrote some poetry.”³ Robinson probably found a great deal of poetry in the *Idylls*, for it is there. But probably, also, Robinson felt deeply the same dissatisfactions with the *Idylls* that Meredith felt

¹ *Letters of George Meredith* (New York, 1913), I, 197.
² *Harvard Days with Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Waterville, Maine, 1940), 11.
³ *Next Door to a Poet* (New York, 1937), 37.
with them. The most important respects in which Robinson's Arthurian trilogy differs from the *Idylls*, and rises superior to them, is in Robinson's provision of believable, complex characters, rather than allegorical abstractions and paper cut-outs, and in his bringing to bear on these characters a moral judgment decidedly more subtle, more complex, and more modern. It is this latter difference which I wish to explore in this paper.

Whatever defects the *Idylls* have, they cannot be convicted of lack of ambition. More than any previous user of Arthurian material, Tennyson tried to give the legend large-scale, consistent, and continuous allegorical and moral treatment. Believing that the poet's function is to express truth, or "to have a new vision of God," Tennyson attempted in the *Idylls* to embody his highest vision of spiritual truth for his nation and his age. Unlike some later poets — e.g., Swinburne and Masefield — he did not undertake to recreate the medieval spirit or express medieval ideals. Instead, he wished to give the old stories new meanings, to invest the legend with a moral significance more modern, more worthy, and more universal in its application. In his epilogue he entreated the Queen to accept his tale, "new-old," and his Arthur, "ideal manhood closed in real man," rather than the Arthur of Malory's book, one

Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time  
That hover'd between war and wantonness.  

Robinson, sitting down to write his own Arthurian poems, was fully aware that he was directly challenging Tennyson. He too was attempting a large-scale work which would invest old legend with modern moral significance. Like Tennyson he was concerned with the relationship between private and political morality; like Tennyson he saw in the fall of Camelot the passing of one social order and the beginning of a new. Robinson's morality, however, is in almost direct contradiction to Tennyson's. Where Tennyson's is a rigid moral conventionalism, in which judgments are made by a legalistic application of rules, Robinson's is a complex morality, in which judgments are based on a consideration of all aspects of a unique situation. As

5 The Works of Tennyson, edited by Hallam, Lord Tennyson (New York, 1939), 466. All subsequent page references (W) are to this edition.
opposed to the morality of rules, Robinson’s is what has since become known as Situation Ethics. The difference is most apparent in the two poets’ treatment of sexual relationships.

II

The *Idylls of the King* exalt the institution of marriage, and their central lessons are the importance of sexual purity before marriage and the awful consequences of infidelity afterwards. In Tennyson the marriage vows are sacred and paramount. They are to be broken under no circumstances whatever.

Tennyson was right in regarding this as a modern meaning for the legend. The stories of Lancelot and of Tristram had their origins in works which exalted love or sexual passion at the expense of marriage. The early forms of the Tristram story were quite frankly a glorification of lawless love. Tristram and Isolt, under the spell of a magic love potion, systematically and continuously deceived King Mark — Isolt’s husband and Tristram’s uncle — in violation of both feudal and marital obligation. The characterization of Mark, in these early versions, as a noble and compassionate human being, made the offense of the lovers more awful. Yet the lovers were so treated as to compel the sympathies of the reader: the influence of the magic potion excused all. The blossoming briar which sprang from Tristram’s tomb and took root again in Isolt’s, uniting them in death as they had been united in life, symbolized the greatness of their passion and expressed the poet’s approval. The story of Lancelot and Guinevere had its beginning, in the work of Chrétien de Troyes, as an embodiment of the ideals of courtly love. Here the love between the knight and his queen was justified by the very fact that it was not sanctioned by marriage. Since a lady was compelled to love her husband by legal contract, according to the ideals of courtly love, there could be no merit in such love. Love, to be meritorious, must be voluntarily conferred. Since medieval aristocratic marriages were contracted for economic and political reasons rather than for reasons of sentiment, true love, it was argued, could find expression only outside of the marriage relationship.

Tennyson, who, like Robinson, could give no credence to magic love philtres, and who lived in a time when marriages of
convenience, though still contracted, were losing favor, understandably could not accept the morality either of lawless passion or of courtly love. No more could Robinson. Tennyson, however, went to an opposite extreme. If the medieval treatments of the story exalted love at the expense of marriage, Tennyson unconsciously exalted marriage at the expense of love. To say this is to say that Tennyson's central criterion for judging a sexual relationship between man and woman was legalistic. The first question he asked was not “Are these two people genuinely in love?” but “Are they married?” — not “Is this relationship mutually self-fulfilling?” but “Is it legally sanctioned?” We may see this criterion expressed or implied in Tennyson's treatment of the conceiving of Arthur, of the unrequited love of Elaine for Lancelot, and of the story's central relationship between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. Its application powerfully shapes his treatment also of the story of Tristram and Isolt.

In Tennyson's allegorical scheme King Arthur represents the Soul. It was necessary, therefore, that he be given a mystical birth, and Tennyson accordingly provides an entirely original account, reported by Bellicent as told to her by Bleys, of how the infant Arthur was washed ashore on the fiery crest of a ninth wave from a ship crowded with angels which had seemingly descended from heaven (W, 308-309). This account serves his allegorical intention superbly, and it is recounted in a passage of superb poetry. Like Robinson, however, Tennyson, writing for modern readers, preferred not to rest his work on the naively supernatural. The \textit{Idylls}, he protested, contained no fact or incident “which cannot be explained as without mystery or allegory whatever.”\footnote{Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son (New York, 1897), II, 126-127.} He provided for unsupernatural-minded readers, therefore, an alternative account of Arthur's origin in which Arthur, as in Malory, is the son of Uther and Ygerne. He makes one significant change in Malory's account, however. In Malory King Uther, desiring Ygerne, wife of the Duke of Cornwall, had waged war against the Duke, slain him during night fighting, and that same night, in the Duke's likeness, had entered the Duke's castle and lain with Ygerne, who was unaware of her husband's death. That night Arthur was conceived; only some time later did Uther marry her. In Tennyson
the marriage precedes conception. Uther, Bedivere tells us, cast upon Ygerne "eyes of love":

"But she, a stainless wife to Gorlois,
So loathed the bright dishonor of his love,
That Gorlois and King Uther went to war:
And overthrown was Gorlois and slain.
Then Uther in his wrath and heat besieged
Ygerne within Tintagil, where her men,
Seeing the mighty swarm about their walls,
Left her and fled, and Uther enter'd in,
And there was none to call to but himself.
So, compass'd by the power of the King,
Enforced she was to wed him in her tears,
And with a shameful swiftness" (W, 306).

Quite understandably Tennyson wishes to have his hero conceived in wedlock. His offense is not that he changed the story to accomplish this purpose, but that he did not change it enough. In his mind the marriage, though it is little better than a legal rape, somehow gives the affair legitimacy. It is important for him that his ideal hero, allegorically the Soul, be the offspring of a marriage relationship, but not that he be the product of reciprocated love.

Malory uses the story of Elaine, the fair maid of Astolat who dies of her unreciprocated love for Lancelot, to demonstrate Lancelot's faithfulness to the Queen. Tennyson uses the episode to show what Lancelot missed in the way of a chaste and tender marriage by reason of his sinful attachment. In Malory, as Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot stand about the barge of the dead Elaine, having read Elaine's letter, Guinevere rebukes Lancelot for not having shown the maid more kindness. Lancelot defends himself by saying that Elaine would have been satisfied by nothing less than his love, which he could not give her, as love cannot be bound. Arthur concurs in this sentiment.

Ye might have shewed her, said the queen, some bounty and gentleness that might have preserved her life.

Madam, said Sir Launcelot, she would none other ways be answered but that she would be my wife, outhere else my paramour; . . . For Madam, said Sir Launcelot, I love not to be constrained to love; for love must arise of the heart, and not by no constraint.

That is truth, said the king, and many knights: love is free in himself, and never will be bounden, for where he is bounden he looseth himself.7

7 Le Morte Darthur, book 18, chapter 20.
In Tennyson it is Arthur rather than Guinevere who rebukes Lancelot, and his reproach is that Lancelot did not marry Elaine. (In keeping with the ideal of sexual purity, Elaine's request, in Tennyson, is either to be Lancelot's wife, or to be allowed to serve him and to follow him—spotlessly—throughout the world.) Lancelot replies, as in Malory, that love cannot be bound. But Arthur thinks this no objection. If a maiden is worthy to be loved, she should and can be loved. "Free love, so bound," he says, "were freest" (W, 409). Tennyson apparently sees no obstacle but Lancelot's love for Guinevere between Lancelot and marriage with Elaine. A legal contract will satisfy all requirements: the heart's feelings are obliged to follow.

The extension of the attitudes indicated in these minor episodes of the *Idylls* to its central situation is what most damages it as an enduringly satisfying human and moral document. Because Arthur is perfect and therefore worthy to be loved—even though, to Guinevere, he seems "cold, high, self-contained, and passionless" (W, 453)—and because she is married to him, Guinevere is obligated to love him. The natural, spontaneous movements of the heart are not to be regarded. Tennyson's account of the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere shows how paramount, in his mind, the legal obligation is. There is no evidence in the *Idylls* that Arthur had ever courted Guinevere, or, for that matter, even seen her, before their marriage. Their first cognizance of each other comes when Arthur brings his army to the aid of Guinevere's father.

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Guinevere

Stood by the castle walls to watch him pass;
But since he neither wore on helm or shield
The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
But rode a simple knight among his knights,
And many of these in richer arms than he,
She saw him not, or mark'd not, if she saw,
One among many, tho' his face was bare.
But Arthur, looking downward as he past,
Felt the light of her eyes into his life
Smite on the sudden (W, 304).

In Tennyson's allegorical scheme Arthur represents the soul and Guinevere the flesh, and, allegorically, this first encounter skill-
fully represents the blindness of the flesh, which has eyes but sees not, and the percipience of the soul, which is aware without the need of sense. On a literal level, however, the incident is much less satisfactory, for Arthur has not physically seen Guinevere, and Guinevere has not recognized Arthur.

Having won the battle against Leodegran’s enemies, Arthur decides that unless he be joined “to her that is the fairest under heaven,” he cannot will his will, or work his work wholly, or make himself “victor and lord” in his own realm (W, 304). He accordingly sends a delegation of three knights to ask Leodegran for Guinevere’s hand. He does not go himself. He does not write to ask for Guinevere’s consent. No one asks Guinevere’s consent. The matter is negotiated by Arthur’s knights and Leodegran, to whom the important consideration is the truth about Arthur’s birth and the legitimacy of his claim to the crown. When, having satisfied himself on this score, Leodegran returns an affirmative answer, Arthur sends Lancelot to fetch Guinevere to Camelot. Again, he does not go himself. On the way to Camelot Guinevere falls in love with Lancelot. Why should she not? Her heart is unpledged elsewhere; she has never been courted by Arthur, has never to her knowledge even seen him. And Lancelot is, by Arthur’s own declaration, “a man made to be loved” (W, 409). But when the marriage between Arthur and Guinevere fails, Tennyson puts all the blame on Guinevere and Lancelot. Guinevere’s prior love for Lancelot counts for nothing. Arthur’s failure to secure her love before marriage, or even to ask her consent, likewise counts for nothing. She has broken her marriage contract and is therefore a grievous sinner. It does not occur to Tennyson to ask whether Arthur might not have sinned, by taking in marriage a woman whose heart was pledged elsewhere.

The high valuation which Tennyson put upon the sacredness of marriage accounts for his abysmal treatment of the Tristram legend, for the story of Tristram and Isolt was the story of a double adultery. Not only did Isolt break her marriage vows to Mark by her love for Tristram, but Tristram, after his marriage to Isolt of Brittany, broke his vows by his love for Isolt. For Tennyson not only were marriage vows somehow supposed to create or obligate true love, but no profound and lasting sexual and emotional attachment could exist outside the legally recog-
nized bounds. He therefore treats the story in a way unique among all treatments of the story—a way which essentially perverts its very nature. In all previous treatments, with or without the magic potion, the story of Tristram and Isolt is the story of an overwhelming love between a man and a woman, which sweeps aside all obstacles to its fulfillment. In Tennyson’s hands the story is no longer a story of passion, but a story of light love and dalliance. Tristram, no longer the great lover of previous legend, is an advocate of free love whose principles are expressed in the song he sings for Dagonet:

"New life, new love, to suit the newer day:
New loves are sweet as those that went before:
Free love—free field—we love but while we may" (W, 439).

His principal offense, for Tennyson, consists in his infidelity to Isolt of Brittany, "whom he wedded easily and left easily" (W, 441). As Dagonet tells him:

"When thou playest that air with Queen Isolt,
Thou makest broken music with thy bride,
Her daintier namesake down in Brittany" (W, 439).

For medieval poets whatever infidelity was involved proceeded in the opposite direction. Tristram, by his marriage, was momentarily forgetful of his love for Isolt of Ireland, but then he showed its strength by refusing to consummate the marriage. The unconsummated marriage thus becomes another testimony to his deathless passion for Isolt of Ireland. But in Tennyson Tristram doesn’t really love even Isolt of Ireland. Nothing can bind him to one woman, he tells her. He will not vow to love her when she is old—except as an acknowledged lie—for "The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself" (W, 445). He even taunts her with the purely physical basis of his attraction: "May God be with thee when thou art old and past desire" (W, 445). As for Isolt, her love for Tristram is really the reflex of her hate for Mark. When she heard Tristram’s footsteps on the stair, she tells him,

"I felt my hatred for my Mark
Quicken within me, and knew that thou wert nigh" (W, 443).
And later she says:

"O were I not my Mark's, by whom all men
Are noble, I should hate thee more than love" (W, 444).

Tennyson's idyll on Tristram and Isolt, "The Last Tournament," is meant to illustrate the corruption of the Round Table caused by the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere. It serves this purpose admirably, but it is too bad that Tennyson had to attach the names of Tristram and Isolt to his unloving lovers. He did so because of his inability to conceive of any genuine passion between man and woman not sanctioned by the marriage contract.

III

Robinson's Arthurian poems present three stories of unmarried love counterpointed against three marriages. In terms of the moral judgments implied on these relationships, they may be fairly ranked in the following order, from approved to disapproved: (1) Tristram — Isolt of Ireland, (2) Tristram — Isolt of Brittany, (3) Lancelot — Guinevere, (4) Merlin — Vivian, (5) Arthur — Guinevere, (6) Mark — Isolt. Though one might argue with detail in this ranking, it is obvious that Robinson is not applying the legalistic criteria of Tennyson, and there can be little doubt that the marriages of Mark and Arthur belong at the bottom. Robinson's Tristram, on Mark's wedding night, can think only of Isolt of Ireland,

so soon to be the bartered prey
Of an unholy sacrifice, by rites
Of Rome made holy.

Though these bitterly ironical thoughts are Tristram's, they have the full force of Robinson's ethical judgment behind them. No legal ceremony, for Robinson, could ever make "holy" a match not based on reciprocated feeling. King Arthur's kingdom falls, as Merlin tells Vivian, because it was built "on two pits of living sin" (CP, 289). The sins are Arthur's own, and one of them is his marriage to Guinevere, whom he made Queen although he

8 Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1937), 608. All subsequent page references (OP) are to this edition.
knew that her "unworn allegiance" to Lancelot would some day bring the end "of love and honor and of everything" (CP, 289). The marriage is made despite the warnings of Merlin and over the protestations of Guinevere, who later says of it that Arthur "bought" her with "a name too large" for her "king-father" to relinquish, despite her prayers to be spared (CP, 424). Marriage, for Robinson, is not the sacred institution that it is in Tennyson; unless based on reciprocal love it may be a sin.

By conventional standards the three love affairs which provide the principal subjects for Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram respectively would be condemned with increasing severity, for the first involves no violation of marriage, the second involves the violation of one marriage, and the third involves the violation of two. In fact, Robinson judges them in the reverse order, that of Merlin and Vivian being the least excusable, that of Tristram and Isolt being the most. To see why this is so, we must examine the three poems separately.

*Merlin* is the story of a reciprocal love between two persons of intelligence, charm, and compatible temperament. The relationship, which lasts for ten years, is unmarred by sexual infidelity on either side. For Merlin there is no other woman but Vivian; for Vivian there will never be another Merlin. Where, then, is the sin? The fact that they are not married has nothing to do with it. The question of marriage, in fact, is never raised, and moral judgment is passed on quite other grounds.

For Merlin the affair with Vivian is a sin primarily because it is a flight from responsibility. With great gifts of vision, Merlin lacks courage. He cannot bear to live alone with what he foresees of the future. Bearing the potentiality for spiritual greatness within him, he throws the gold of his "immortal treasure back to God that gave it" and goes "down smiling to the smaller life" (CP, 251). He is "buried alive" (CP, 260) in Broceliande because his sojourn there is a withdrawal from life, from the world, from the obligations he owes to a kingdom he helped to found. "The Queen, the King, the Kingdom, and the World" becomes less to him "than one small woman in Broceliande" (CP, 258). Though Merlin commits no adultery by his love for Vivian, he is in a real sense unfaithful to King Arthur.

If for Merlin their love affair is an escape, for Vivian it is compensation for her involuntary exile from the world of larger
affairs. With an intelligence only little less than Merlin’s, Vivian is barred by her sex from an active part “in a world that men are making” (CP, 311). Where women are excluded from political and practical affairs, they tend to lavish all their talent and interest on winning and holding men. Deprived of finding their triumphs and glory in the world, they tend to find them instead in triumphing over the creatures that do find their glory there. For Vivian it is only Merlin, “the master of the world” (CP, 259), whose love and service can be “her school, her triumph, and her history” (CP, 263). Her love for Merlin is motivated, in part, by a need to feed her vanity.

The love of Merlin and Vivian, moreover, is primarily a love of the senses, enhanced by wit and mutual admiration. Though for both it serves a real need, it is not something that overmasters them; rather it is a game which they voluntarily choose to play, and which they play with a calculated artfulness. In the traditional story of Merlin’s enchantment and burial in Broceliande, the succumbing of the wizard to a woman, there was an obvious symbol of the surrender of the intellect to the senses. Robinson emphasizes this, as Tennyson had also done, but with much more sweetness and subtlety. He makes Merlin’s defection understandable by showing the full attractiveness of the temptation. The meaning of Broceliande is made clear in Dagonet’s narration to Gawain:

“Then Merlin sailed
Away to Vivian in Broceliande,
Where now she crowns him and herself with flowers
And feeds him fruits and wines and many foods
Of many savors, and sweet ortolans.
Wise books of every lore of every land
Are there to fill his days, if he require them,
And there are players of all instruments—
Flutes, hautboys, drums, and viois; and she sings
To Merlin, till he trembles in her arms
And there forgets that any town alive
Had ever such a name as Camelot” (CP, 239-240).

There is nothing gross about Merlin’s surrender, nothing gross in his dalliance with Vivian. All is sweet and sensible, and the relationship, for a while at least, is almost idyllic. Nevertheless, the philosophy underlying their life together is a refined hedon-
ism. Merlin surrenders his intellect to his senses; Vivian uses her intellect in the service of her senses — and of her vanity.

In Broceliande Merlin and Vivian not only shut out the world, they also attempt to shut out time. Living for the present, Vivian has a horror of growing old. She shudders at everything that suggests old age or death. Merlin’s shaving of his beard on his arrival in Broceliande symbolizes not only the sacrifice of his powers of intellect but also his attempt to regain and retain youth. Broceliande, though it contains infinite variety, is devised as a defense against change. Vivian hopes that she and Merlin may live there in a timeless present, perpetually young. But, of course, the attempt to shut out time is futile and therefore foolish; it is also sinful, because it cuts off the opportunity for growth. Unlike that indomitable climber, Captain Craig, Merlin refuses the effort to grow. The barring out of time from Broceliande, however, though it seems successful for a while, is ultimately an illusion. Merlin had really entered time when he left the eternity of thought for Broceliande. Finally he must confess what he has tried to conceal from himself: “In Broceliande Time overtook me as I knew he must” (CP, 310). Almost his final words to Vivian are “I am old” (CP, 297).

Robinson’s judgment on Merlin and Vivian is not harsh, but it is firm. Both are gifted and attractive people, and Robinson treats them with deep compassion. Nevertheless, they are sinners. The specks at the bottom of the incomparable liquor that Vivian serves Merlin are a symbol of their sin. They have become, in Vivian’s bitter words, “two disheartened sinners” (CP, 291). The gate that clangs behind Merlin when he leaves Broceliande is like the gate of hell. Merlin, at the end of the poem, has lost the world, as Arthur did,

“for a love
That was not peace, and therefore was not love” (CP, 401).

Lancelot’s love, like Merlin’s, is in conflict with larger obligations. Like Merlin, Lancelot has obligations to King Arthur, who is his friend and his liege lord. His love for Guinevere is a betrayal of that friendship and also endangers the state. It stands between him and the “Light” as he began to realize even before the appearance of the Grail. Because Guinevere is
Arthur’s wife his breach of faith is a more culpable betrayal than Merlin’s, for it causes Arthur personal pain as well as public peril. The love of Lancelot and Guinevere, however, differs from that of Merlin and Vivian in being an absorbing passion. It arises from the heart as well as from the senses; its emotional roots are deeper. It is not an “escape” for Lancelot, as it is for Merlin. It is something that holds him, as Dagonet perceives, “like hot claws” (CP, 306), when he desires to pursue the Light. Lancelot, unlike Merlin, is never the conscious amorist. He is rather a conscience-divided figure, “a moth between a window and a star” (CP, 415), who suffers deeply because of this inner conflict.

Whereas Lancelot is torn between passion and conscience, Guinevere is dominated by passion. Without Lancelot’s questioning idealism and spiritual hunger, and without the intellect and wit that make Vivian so fascinating, Guinevere is highly endowed emotionally, and is wholly committed to her love for Lancelot. Feeling no allegiance to her marriage, which was imposed upon her against her will, and a creature of “ice and ivory” (CP, 383) to the rest of the world, she is willing to “throw down crowns and glories” (CP, 418) and live in a cave with Lancelot, if he will let her. The intensity and single-mindedness of her love compel admiration. Single-minded as it is, however, Guinevere’s love is possessive. Before the opening of the poem it had led her into jealousy over the “two Elaines” (CP, 380), and she is unwilling later to release Lancelot to his own spiritual interests, which she does not understand. Though she once tells Lancelot she will never let herself become a curse laid on his conscience “to be borne forever” or “a weight” for him to drag on always after him (CP, 381), she has not the strength to live up to these professions, and through most of the poem she hangs on to him, when conscience urges him away. Guinevere’s love nevertheless earns higher status than Vivian’s because of its total possession of her being. It is not for her a diversion, an amusement, or a compensation for being excluded from the larger world; it is a necessity of her nature. It is significant that neither Lancelot nor Guinevere, after their affair is over, can wish that it had never been. Guinevere, reconciled at last to Lancelot’s decision and now a nun, looks back to the richness of their love with satisfaction: “I think we must have
lived in our one world,” she says, “all that earth had for us” (CP, 441).

In Merlin and Lancelot Robinson tells the stories of two immoral love affairs; in Tristram he celebrates a love which, though it involves adultery on both sides, is moral. In this respect Robinson’s poem differs from most previous treatments. Where the medieval poets had depicted a passion triumphant over all social and moral obligations — all considerations of virtue, honor, and duty, Robinson depicts a passion consonant with honor and duty and triumphant because it transcends self.

Unlike Lancelot, and unlike previous Tristrams, Robinson’s Tristram resists his passion as long as he has any cause for feeling loyal to Mark. In the medieval versions Tristram and Isolt had consummated their love on shipboard, after drinking the potion, as Tristram was bringing Isolt to Cornwall for her marriage. Usually there was represented a brief struggle between love and honor, in which love won out. In Robinson honor, even though it is later felt to have been blind, wins out. Robinson, in contradistinction to all previous writers, postpones the consummation of the lovers’ passion till their reunion at Joyous Gard — two years later. By the time of this reunion, Mark has forfeited any tenuous claims he might once have had on Tristram’s fealty, by banishing him, by threatening him with fire, and by forging letters in the Pope’s name to send him on an expedition against the Saracens. Besides dissolving any real or imagined obligations to Mark, the postponement of the consummation allows the love of Tristram and Isolt to be treated in the crucible of time. Unlike the sudden passion caused by the love philtre in the legend, the love of Robinson’s Tristram and Isolt is of slow growth and delayed development. It has to struggle against Isolt’s hate and Tristram’s blind honor before receiving either recognition or acknowledgment. It then undergoes the ordeal of a two years’ separation, during which it suffers

9 The early medieval versions, most of them fragmentary, are best represented in the composite rendition of the French scholar Joseph Bédier, which has been translated into English by Hilaire Belloc and Paul Rosenfeld as The Romance of Tristan and Iseult (New York, 1945).
10 For several points in this discussion I am indebted to Frederic Ives Carpenter’s “Tristram the Transcendent,” New England Quarterly XI (September 1938), 501-523, the finest analysis of Robinson’s Arthurian poems that has yet appeared in print.
no diminution. It is thus proved to be genuine and enduring emotion.

Tristram’s marriage to Isolt of Brittany, entered into at a time when he has no hope or expectation of ever seeing Isolt of Ireland again, is not motivated by any desire that involves primarily satisfaction of self. It is prompted, rather, by pity and tenderness and by recognition of Isolt’s “white need of him” (CP, 649). Nor does the marriage involve deception. Isolt is fully aware of Tristram’s past history and of the reasons for his exile from Cornwall, but her love of him is such that she is willing to have part of his heart, knowing that she cannot have it all. When Tristram leaves her to go back to England, it is not, as in previous versions, to see Isolt of Ireland, but, at Arthur’s summons, to be made a knight of the Round Table. His wife on this occasion knows more than he of what probably awaits him there, for she has been told by Gawaine of Mark’s imprisonment and has felt Gawaine’s uncertainty of Tristram’s immediate return. What she fears, however, is not the meeting of Tristram and Isolt of Ireland, which, unlike Tristram, she expects will take place, but the possibility of Tristram’s death as a consequence. “King Mark will kill him,” she tells Gawaine (CP, 660). She had told Tristram once that if he were to tire of her, and go away from her and stay some time, she would not die, for then he would come again,

“But if you died,
Then you would not come back” (CP, 653).

And she had continued, thinking undoubtedly of the other Isolt,

“If I lost you
For a long time, . . .
I should not cry for what had come between,
For I should have you here with me again.
I am not one who must have everything.
I was not fated to have everything.
One may be wise enough, not having all,
Still to be found among the fortunate” (CP, 654).

She can face the prospect of sharing Tristram’s love, but not the prospect of his death. At the end of the poem her only feeling is one of overwhelming loss; she does not suffer from a feeling
of betrayal. And King Howel, who would have been the first to resent any wrong done his daughter, says to her of Tristram’s marriage to her,

>“His willingness and my wish
>Were more to save you then, so I believed,
>Than to deceive you. You were not deceived” (CP, 725).

Tristram’s love for Isolt of Ireland, then, does not involve faithlessness to King Mark or betrayal of Isolt of Brittany. Nor does it involve evil consequences for either. On King Mark the effect is ultimately beneficent. A man of limited perceptions, he is finally brought to recognize in Tristram and Isolt’s love something deeper and greater than he can fathom, and thereby gains understanding of his own limitations. Because of their love he experiences growth in self-knowledge and compassion. As for Isolt of Brittany, she suffers from Tristram’s death, yet feels no bitterness toward the other Isolt:

>“It was not earth in him that burned
>Itself to death; and she that died for him
>Must have been more than earth” (CP, 727).

Nor does she regret her marriage. At the end of the poem the agate that Tristram once gave her is still worth more than any golden cargo that a fleet of ships might bring. Through her love and her suffering she too experiences spiritual growth. If, at the beginning of the poem, she was something more than a child with an agate, at the end of the poem she is a woman for whom

>“Wisdom is like a dawn that comes up slowly
>Out of an unknown ocean” (CP, 727).

The love of Merlin and Vivian arose primarily from the senses. The love of Lancelot and Guinevere arose from the senses and the heart. The love of Tristram and Isolt arises from the senses, the heart, and the mind. It is based on mutual trust and comprehension. It does not violate conscience. Above all, it is not possessive. Where Vivian had tried to keep Merlin from the larger world, and was jealous of King Arthur, whom she feared “more than storms and robbers” (CP, 258); where Guinevere had been jealous of the “two Elaines” and tried to keep Lancelot from following “the Light,” Isolt tells Tristram:
There is your world outside, all fame and banners,
And it was never mine to take from you.
You must not let me take your world away
From you, after all this. Love is not that” (CP, 695).

Neither at Joyous Gard nor in Cornwall does Isolt feel any bitterness or jealousy toward Isolt of Brittany:

“You will go back
To Brittany after this, and there Isolt—
That other Isolt—” she said, “will, as time goes,
Fill up the strange and empty little place
That I may leave” (CP, 714).

Though Tristram, on the night of Isolt’s marriage, cannot with equanimity think of her in King Mark’s arms, it is as much because of the desecration of Isolt’s sensibilities by Mark as because of injury done himself. The love of Tristram and Isolt is a triumphant love because it transcends self. Because it transcends self, the love of Tristram and Isolt, for Robinson, is also one that transcends time. Merlin in Brocéliande had tried to escape from time, but because he had renounced intellectual growth, Time overtook him, as he knew it must. Before leaving Brocéliande he confesses: “Time has won” (CP, 295). The love of Lancelot and Guinevere also succumbed to time: on the morning that Lancelot rescued her from the fire, “the whips of Time had fallen upon them both” (CP, 415). But Tristram and Isolt, though they die young, triumph over Time. For them, “Time is not life” (CP, 685). Whatever it is “that fills life high and full . . . it is not time” (CP, 685). Life is to be measured, for them and for Robinson, by its quality, not by its length. Isolt, dying in Cornwall, feels that she has had “all that one life holds of joy, and in one summer” (CP, 712). She asks for no more, and she is not afraid to die.

The medieval poets, with their symbol of the blossoming briar, had suggested that the love of Tristram and Isolt was stronger even than death. Robinson makes a similar suggestion with the symbol of the ship in the harbor at Tintagil. This ship, at first motionless, moves gradually out to sea after the death of the lovers. It is an “unknown ship” (CP, 721) that finally disappears “as a friend goes” (CP, 722). In a general way, it symbolizes the passing of the souls of the lovers into the tran-
scendental whole; stated another way, it symbolizes that their love is not dead, but has passed on to another sphere.

IV

The term “Situation Ethics” indicates a belief that every concrete situation is unique, that moral decisions may be judged only in reference to the unique situation, and that the only principle by which they may be judged is that of rational loving-kindness: that is, by the probability of their having beneficent effects on all people involved, including those who make the decision. In diametrical opposition are legalistic moral systems, which hold that moral decisions may be properly made or judged by a code of unvarying rules, and that right and wrong are right and wrong in all situations and in all times and places. Though Robinson would not have been familiar with the term “Situation Ethics,” which is a recent one in philosophical discussion, it is clear that the moral judgments implied in his Arthurian trilogy belong in spirit with this concept of morality. It is equally clear, I think, that the moral judgments implied in the *Idylls of the King* are legalistic. For Tennyson Camelot falls because of the sexual transgression of Lancelot and Guinevere, and the loveless marriage of King Arthur is held to be “blameless,” though the kingdom would not have fallen had the marriage of Arthur been based on a love as deep and as reciprocal as that of Lancelot and Guinevere. In Robinson the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere is one of the “pits of living sin” which causes the kingdom to fall, though Lancelot’s failure to follow the light when it first beckons is a contributory cause. In Tennyson the love of Tristram and Isolt cannot be accepted as authentic, because it violates two marriages. In Robinson the love of Tristram and Isolt is not only justifiable but morally good, for it has beneficent effects on all concerned.

Both Tennyson and Robinson attempted to give Arthurian legend timeless significance by treating it in a spirit essentially modern. Tennyson’s failure is that he applied a moral system essentially conventional and Victorian. Robinson’s triumph is that he applied a moral judgment which, though implied in the moral teachings of Christ, is yet so modern that it had not yet been given a name.
"Uncle Ananias"

Out of all ancient men my childhood knew
I choose him and I mark him for the best.
Of all authoritative liars, too,
I crown him loveliest.