September 1971

"Wreck and Yesterday": The Meaning of Failure in Lancelot

N. E. Dunn

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.7, September 1971, p.349-356

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
"WRECK AND YESTERDAY": THE MEANING OF FAILURE IN LANCELOT

By N. E. Dunn

In his long dramatic narrative, Lancelot (New York, 1920), Edwin Arlington Robinson recounted in modern idiom the legendary story of the fall of Camelot. By dramatizing the causes of failure in the medieval ideal society of Arthur's Round Table, the poet intended to reveal some of the reasons for failure in the modern ideal: twentieth-century American democracy. By implication, he thus dramatized the operation of principles which he considered necessary to the survival of a democratic society.

As a narrative, the story concerns Lancelot's illicit love for Arthur's Queen, Guinevere, with its consequent betrayal of the King. Robinson's social criticism is incorporated in the three levels of meaning operative in the situation. On one level Lancelot is a set of psychological studies; on another level it has sociological implications; on a third level it deals with what can be called metaphysical concepts. And while private spiritual salvation is a part of Robinson's vision in Lancelot, it is not, as Christopher Brookhouse suggests, the total vision. Ultimately, Robinson's analysis of psychological and spiritual problems pertains to the problem of determining the nature of a practicable social structure.

Lancelot himself is one of the most striking psychological studies in the poem. An idealist acutely aware of the necessity for fealty, he is a victim of his own twice-divided loyalties. His allegiance is torn not only between illicit loyalty to the Queen and chivalric loyalty to the King, but also between the celestial Light, of which he has had a glimpse during his quest for the

Grail, and the fleshly white and gold of Guinevere. Additional stress accumulates in the course of the action. In the warfare over Guinevere, whom he has abducted from the fire to which Arthur condemned her, Lancelot is forced to kill his former comrades-in-arms. His disinclination to kill Arthur, who knighted him, or Gawaine, who was his friend but whose brothers he has killed, causes the war to drag on longer than it might otherwise have. The lawlessness of his love also contributes to the psychological pressure under which Lancelot suffers, trapping him in a dilemma in which he must choose between what are, to him, transient and permanent values: the pleasures of the flesh and his duty to seek the Light. The fact that he indulges the flesh before he fulfills the duty, along with the subsequent complications that arise in his relations with his King and his peers, indicates one of the functions of psychological analysis in the poem in that it reveals one of the causes of failure of Camelot, the failure of the individual to meet his commitments.

But Lancelot's is not, by any means, the only such failure. If the knight renders inadequate service to the King, the King, in turn, is inadequate as a leader. In Arthur, as E. Edith Pipkin has pointed out, the king is subordinated to the man; he is introspective, emotionally disturbed, unnerved by fear and suspicion, and aware of "the love that never was" between himself and Guinevere. Above all, Arthur is himself a guilty person: Modred, the instrument of Arthur's final destruction, is Arthur's illegitimate son by an incestuous relationship. Nor is Lancelot the only one of the Knights of the Round Table who fails both King and friend. Gawaine bitterly regrets his failure to help Lancelot when the time was opportune: "It was I who laughed at Lancelot / When he said what lay heaviest on his heart." In his enlightening study of the personality of Gawaine, Jacob Adler observes that although Gawaine's behavior is human and inevitable, it is also wrong. The fatal flaw in his character leads Gawaine, wishing revenge for the death of his brothers at the hands of Lancelot, to persuade the King to make war on Lancelot at Joyous Gard. His action is not right, yet it grows out of his profound brotherly devotion and his strong convictions about
friendship—the very ideals upon which the Arthurian world of chivalry is founded. And woman fails in Camelot as readily as man. Guinevere fails Arthur as both wife and Queen; furthermore, her recognition of her failure in her responsibility to Lancelot is revealed by her renunciation of her love for him when, from the convent to which she has retreated, she sends him off upon his final quest for the Light.

Robinson's psychological treatment of his characters has first a dramatic impact on the reader’s sensibilities, but beyond that it contributes to the thematic concern of the poem: the citizens of Camelot are psychologically unable to meet the demands of the ideal society.

Much of the sociological meaning in the poem is dealt with in terms of “the world,” which is here, of course, the Arthurian world, a kingdom ultimately destroyed by war. But civil war is ultimately a manifestation of something larger than itself, and that is a failure of some sort within the social structure. The primary cause of tragedy on this social level, as the poem reveals it, is again the failure to meet responsibility. Gawaine’s regret for his own failure to fulfill his responsibility to Lancelot has already been cited. He regretted equally his failure to King Arthur:

"Say to the King
That I saw nothing vaster than my shadow,
Until it was too late for me to see;
Say that I loved him well, but served him ill."

Lancelot states cryptically his own major failure, from which all the other derived. Speaking to Guinevere, he says,

"For in my heart I knew that I should fail
My King . . . .
I saw your face, and there were no more kings."

Guinevere is aware of the larger consequences of her own failure. In the beautiful speech beginning “I heard the woman in me asking why,” she questions why she has been saved from the fire at the expense of so many other lives.

In Robinson’s Arthurian world, failure in responsibility seems always to be a failure in love. The story centers upon a faithless wife, a treacherous friend, a guilty husband, and self-

indulgent lovers. Love betrayed leads to war, which in turn destroys a world. Robinson wrote elsewhere that "selfishness . . . is the thing that keeps humanity where it is." On the sociological level, the poet seems to be saying that man is not yet capable of maintaining an ideal society because, still the victim of feelings which he cannot always control, he cannot be trusted to meet his responsibilities toward either his peers or his superiors.

But if the society of Camelot fails because of flaws in the character of its citizens, it also fails because of flaws in its own structure. At the same time that the medieval tradition of courtly love was chivalrous, it was also adulterous. Robinson uses this element in the legend to dramatize, through the destructive consequences of the tragedy of Lancelot and Guinevere, the necessity for both a moral code and moral commitment. Also, Arthur's realm is governed by autocratic law. Condemning Guinevere, the King declares that "the law says fire," but he regrets the existence of the law which he himself has made. Finally, Lancelot and Guinevere indulge an unsanctioned love. Yet Guinevere has been forced against her will to marry Arthur, in spite of the fact that she and Lancelot were known to be in love before her marriage. Artificial mores thus contribute to the tragedy. If man is not yet ready to live in an ideal society, neither has he contrived the ideal society in which to live.

The question of the basis upon which to build an ideal society leads to the metaphysical level of meaning in Lancelot. Robinson embodies his spiritual concepts in the symbols of "the Light," "the Grail," or "the Vision."

Some sort of spiritual vision Lancelot sees as essential to life: "The Vision shattered, a man's love of living / Becomes at last a trap and a sad habit." Concerning these lines Robinson explained that "this Vision is not only the cosmic vision; it is the personal vision, the inner truth of his own nature which is the persuasion by which a man lives." Lancelot laments his own failure in the quest for truth:

"The Light came, and I did not follow it;  
Then she came, knowing not what thing she did,  
And she it was I followed."

---

The reader comes only gradually, and in the end, only partially, to understand what the Light actually is. Guinevere perceives what it is not: “The Light you saw / Was not the Light of Rome.” Sir Bors wistfully laments its enigmatic nature: “I have not your eyes to find the Light / Here in the dark—though some day I may see it.” Although the nature of the Light remains obscure, its significance for the poet is evident in the last passage of the poem, where Lancelot is riding off on his Quest:

The Voice within him said: “You are not free. You have come to the world’s end, and it is best You are not free. Where the Light falls, death falls; And in the darkness comes the Light.”

He rode on into the dark, under the stars, And there were no more faces. There was nothing. But always in the darkness he rode on, Alone; and in the darkness came the Light.

Although the ambiguity of the word *falls* leaves interpretation open to question, the two parts of the passage seem to represent promise and fulfillment. Apparently the Light will fall upon the nature that has achieved readiness to receive it, yet there must be a death before the Light can be received. Lancelot, riding on alone, has died a kind of death; in his renunciation of the widowed Guinevere he has given up a kind of life.

Certainly the metaphysical as well as the social meaning of the poem concerns love. Created passionate, Lancelot must love; created spiritual, he must follow the Light. Thus his problem is to establish a relationship with humanity which will not preclude relationship with God. Guinevere, forced to render duty to the King, fails. Her gift of herself to the knight was a voluntary act of love, but in this case the love itself had to be sacrificed so that the lover could follow the Light. A human love not sanctioned is incompatible with divine love. Not subject to coercion, love must yet find its expression without trespass. Herein lies the thematic problem of the poem. Furthermore, the “eternal triangle” in *Lancelot* is representative of more complex relations than that classic situation usually signifies. A king is a father-figure, and a knight a filial one. The woman symbolizes the very spirit of love—given, as Guinevere
says, by God. The various disrupted relationships treated in the poem, such as the love between man and woman, father and son, or friend and friend, indicate that Robinson was thinking of love in its broadest terms both on the human level and beyond it.

The general theme which Robinson evolves from these psychological, social and metaphysical levels of meaning is virtually summarized in terms of the abstractions of Time and Fate. In Lancelot, Fate has two sources: some Power which operates beyond man’s control, and man’s own character. The Power is represented by Lancelot’s Light. Lancelot pursues the Light because his nature craves some spiritual fulfillment, but he must ride alone because he has yielded to temptation. The operation of these forces of necessity and free will can be discerned in the destiny of the other characters as well. Robinson’s comment was that “man is, more surely than he likes to admit, the storehouse of his own destiny.”

Time bears one fruit, and that is change. The change time brings to Arthur’s kingdom is destruction, and Arthur foresees both the fall of his realm and the immediate reasons for it. Gawaine’s thirst for revenge for the death of his brothers or Modred’s anger over the circumstances of his birth will make of his Round Table “a thing of wreck and yesterday.” Whether or not the fall of the old order is for the better is open to question; Bedivere can only prophesy “another Camelot and another king.” Bors, however, sees the possibility of progress, though he does not apprehend its precise nature:

“The Light you saw
Was not for this poor crumbling realm of Arthur,
Nor more for Rome; but for another state
That shall be neither Rome nor Camelot,
Nor one that we may name.”

The most significant hope lies in the promise made to Lancelot by the Voice: “A world has died / For you, that a world may live.”

Lancelot himself is acutely sensitive to the transience of what is and the attendant necessity to adapt to what is to be: “God, what a rain of ashes falls on him / Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!” The fusion of Time and Fate—which is to

6 Ibid., 230.
say, the statement of the relationship between change and character—occurs in a pivotal speech of Lancelot's:

"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?

Who is this King, this Arthur . . .
Who has no eye for what he will not see,
And will see nothing but what's passing here
In Camelot, which is passing?"

In his treatment of Time and Fate Robinson has reiterated the implications inherent in the dramatic action of the poem. Self-indulgence, refusal to accept or even to face a changing world, "cankered honor"—these are the prime causes of failure in Camelot. Although the changes brought by Time are largely the result of the operation of the forces of Fate, that Fate involves not only the eternal will, as represented by the Light, but also human will. It is this last factor which Robinson seems to emphasize in the dramatization of the poem. Through the failures of his characters, he demonstrates that, as a psychological entity, the individual has foibles which, for the sake of his own happiness and fulfillment, he must discipline. Gawaine becomes his own man again only when he can announce that he has no more venom in him. But the individual must also cultivate his higher nature because, as a social being, and for the welfare of the social body, he has moral commitments which he must honor. Lancelot's remorse for his betrayal of the King is sufficient evidence. At the same time the individual needs to live within a social structure that will permit his fulfillment as a human being. Guinevere's forced marriage and its aftermath reveal the consequences otherwise. And finally, as a being with a soul, the individual has spiritual needs and spiritual responsibilities, both of which he must meet. Lancelot must seek the Light not only to satisfy his spiritual hunger but also because it is his duty to live by the Light.

Robinson's concept of the social structure within which such three-fold development can occur, as revealed by the sequence of events in the poem, is perhaps not quite so tentatively suggested as Charles T. Davis has found it to be, nor does it rest
altogether on such abstractions as God’s love and art.\textsuperscript{7} It would almost certainly be, as Laurence Perrine observes, a structure without kings.\textsuperscript{8} In the poem both the absolute monarch and the realm he ruled die; a world ruled by autocratic law is inadequate. And although authority would be less concentrated and the power and freedom of the individual increased, as Floyd Stovall suggested,\textsuperscript{9} Robinson’s ideal structure would almost certainly involve a hierarchy of some sort. The lamentations among his people concern their failures not only in relation to their peers, as in the case of Lancelot and Gawaine, but also to their superiors, as when Lancelot and Gawaine deplore their betrayal of their king. The necessity, by implication, is for a self-disciplined and enlightened leader, responsive to and responsible to his people and supported by a self-disciplined, enlightened, and loyal constituency. This is, of course, an almost trite description of the democratic ideals enunciated at the inception of the United States of America, the “other state” which Bors foresaw and could not name but which he knew would be neither Rome nor Camelot. Neither Church nor chivalry had provided either the leadership or the structure within which man, with his dual nature, could develop his true potentiality. Robinson obviously hoped that democracy could eventually provide such conditions.

That it has not yet done so is evident from the similarity of circumstance in the poem and in the present day. Like Camelot, the nation is involved in war and civil strife. As a realist, Robinson knew that even at their best the ideals of man are flawed in their implementation and “we are not all safe / Until we are all dead.”\textsuperscript{8} In the story of the wreck of yesterday, however, he has shown us the necessities of today.

\textsuperscript{8} “Contemporary Reference of Robinson’s Arthurian Poems,” Twentieth Century Literature, VIII (July 1962), 72.