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called "a kind of compassionate humor" in the face of "irremediable tragedy,"16 makes Eben Flood far more attractive than that other old man in T. S. Eliot's equally brilliant poem, "Gerontion." It is worth noting, for purposes of comparison that both these senior citizens entered American literature in the year 1920.

16 Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn., 1946), 36.

THE SOURCES OF ROBINSON'S ARTHURIAN POEMS AND HIS OPINIONS OF OTHER TREATMENTS

By Laurence Perrine

The sources of Robinson's Arthurian poems have been discussed in two recently published essays. The notes that follow are an attempt to complete the record. They do not duplicate the previous discussions, but neither do they omit any previously mentioned sources. They furnish a compact summary of Robinson's indebtedness or possible indebtedness to other works. They also give Robinson's recorded opinions of other treatments of the legend.

Malory

Robinson's principal source for all three Arthurian poems is Malory's Morte Darthur. Letters in the Robinson collection at Houghton Library, Harvard, showed that Robinson borrowed the two-volume Temple edition of Malory from his friend Louis V. Ledoux in April 1916 and did not return it until July 1924. Robinson did much of his reading in Ledoux's library at Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, and often borrowed books from Ledoux. According to the Hagedorn biography, Robinson first became acquainted with Malory as a youth in his father's library in Gardiner, Maine. Robinson's Harvard

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classmate, James L. Tryon, reports that Robinson was at Harvard interested in Arthurian legends.\(^2\) Undoubtedly Malory was an early and lifelong enthusiasm of Robinson’s.

**The Vulgate Merlin**

Besides Malory, Robinson used one other main source. His version of the love story of Merlin and Vivian is not Malory’s but that of the French prose romance known as the Vulgate Merlin. He found this story admirably summarized in S. Humphrey Gurteen’s book *The Arthurian Epic* (New York, 1895), 179-197. Unpublished letters in the Harvard collection show that Ledoux mailed this book to Robinson in Boston, at Robinson’s request, in April or May 1916. Robinson’s use of it is fully discussed in the second of the two essays previously referred to.

**Tennyson**

Robinson’s treatment of Arthurian legend is a challenge to Tennyson’s, because both work on a big scale, attempt to invest the legend with modern moral significance, and see in the fall of Camelot the passing of one social order and the beginning of a new. It is not impossible that if Tennyson had not written the *Idylls of the King*, Robinson would never have turned to Arthurian legend. James L. Tryon recollects that Tennyson was one of Robinson’s favorite poets at Harvard.\(^3\) In letters to his Harvard friend George Latham, Robinson praised the “art” of the *Idylls* and referred to “Guinevere” as the “greatest of all the Idylls.”\(^4\) Rollo Walter Brown relates that once at Peterborough when Tennyson, according to fashion, was being disparaged, Robinson said quietly, “He wrote some poetry.”\(^5\) It is probable that Robinson found a great deal of poetry in Tennyson’s *Idylls* but much else to be profoundly dissatisfied with. In spirit, characterization, and moral outlook, Robinson’s treatment is directly opposed to Tennyson’s.\(^6\) His conceptions of

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\(^2\) *Harvard Days with Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Waterville, Me., 1940), 11.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Unpublished letters in the Harvard collection, cited by Davis in *Centennial Essays*, 93.

\(^5\) *Next Door to a Poet* (New York, 1937), 37.

\(^6\) For a partial exploration of these differences, see my article “Tennyson and Robinson: Legalistic Moralism vs. Situation Ethics,” *Colby Library Quarterly*, VIII (December 1969), 416-433.
King Arthur, of Vivian, and of Tristram and Isolt could hardly be more unlike. The difference between the two men is indicated by the difference between Tennyson's contemporaneous reference in "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" to authors who "Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism," and Robinson's sonnet in praise of Zola.

Nevertheless, Robinson owes several debts to Tennyson's treatment. Most important of these is the conception of Lancelot's having been sent as Arthur's ambassador to fetch Guinevere from Camelot, and their falling in love on the way back. This felicitous invention of Tennyson's has been widely adopted by later writers and is one of Tennyson's permanent contributions to the development of Arthurian legend.

Another of Tennyson's permanent contributions is his localizing of Arthur's capital at Camelot, which in previous legend had been merely one of several equally important capitals — Caerleon-upon-Usk, Carlisle, Carduel, London, etc. If Robinson can refer to Camelot as if it were synonymous with Arthur's kingdom, the credit is mostly due to Tennyson.

The conception that Lancelot and Guinevere were meeting for the last time when Modred surprised them originates with Tennyson and considerably sharpens the tragedy. In Malory there is no hint that the meeting is to be the last one. In Tennyson, however, it is Guinevere who initiates the idea of Lancelot's leaving, and her purpose is merely to avert the growing danger of scandal. In Robinson it is Lancelot who initiates the idea, and his motive is to allow him to follow his higher ideal.

In a letter to Mrs. Laura E. Richards in the Harvard collection, written in 1926, Robinson writes, "I don't like Isuelt [sic] — never did — and am glad to follow Tennyson to the extent of using Isolt." Robinson also follows Tennyson rather than Malory in his spelling of Lancelot, Guinevere, Leodegran, and Modred.

Robinson follows Tennyson likewise in the color of Isolt's hair — to the extent of verbal reminiscence. In medieval versions Isolt's hair had been gold, as manifested in the episode of the swallows and the golden hair. Swinburne says, "A more golden sunrise was her hair." A few modern poets, however,

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beginning with Arnold and including Tennyson and Hardy, have made Isolt dark. Tennyson is alone in calling her hair "black-blue," and made a deep impression on Robinson's memory by the magic of his verse. Tennyson writes of Isolt's "black-blue Irish hair and Irish eyes"; Robinson writes of Isolt's "Irish pride and blue-black Irish hair." Robinson makes repeated reference to Isolt's blue-black hair, and also makes considerable poetic capital out of repetition of the word Irish in describing Isolt.

Gawaine's lightness as a lover has its basis in Malory, but is underscored by Tennyson, and may thus have slightly influenced Robinson's characterization. Particularly the incident in Tennyson where Gawaine, as Arthur's messenger to Lancelot, unsuccessfully makes love to Elaine of Astolat, may have suggested the incident in Robinson where Gawaine, as Arthur's messenger to Tristram, unsuccessfully makes love to Isolt of Brittany. Malory's Gawaine shows no disposition to flirt with Elaine and never meets Isolt of Brittany.

Tennyson's Dagonet may have supplied one or two hints to Robinson. In the medieval romances Dagonet was a natural fool. The English prose Merlin specifically says, "a fooll he was of nature, and the moste coward pece of flessh that was in the worlde." Malory merely says that he was "the best fellow and the merriest in the world" and that "King Arthur loved him passing well, and made him knight with his own hands." Most modern versions make Dagonet a mock-fool, obviously modeled on the prototype furnished by Shakespeare's fools. (Shakespeare incidentally makes a reference to Dagonet in 2 Henry IV, act III, scene 2, line 299, where Justice Shallow tells Falstaff, "When I lay at Clement's Inn — I was then Sir Dagonet in Arthur's show." Dagonet is the only Arthurian character mentioned by Shakespeare except Arthur and Merlin.) Robinson might have got his conception of Dagonet either from Tennyson or likelier from Richard Hovey, but it is hardly necessary to go to either of these for explanation. Tennyson may well have suggested, however, the incident in Robinson's Merlin

8 The Works of Tennyson, ed. Hallam, Lord Tennyson (New York, 1932), 441.
11 Le Morte Darthur, Bk X, ch. 12.
where Arthur requests Dagonet to sing him an old song —

Dagonet's quick eye
Caught sorrow in the King's;
And he knew more
In a fool's way, than even the King himself
Of what was hovering over Camelot.

"O King," he said, "I cannot sing tonight.
If you command me I shall try to sing,
But I shall fail; for there are no songs now
In my throat, or even in these poor strings
That I can hardly follow with my fingers.
Forgive me—kill me—but I cannot sing."

Dagonet fell down then on both his knees
And shook there while he clutched the King's cold hand
And wept for what he knew.12

In Tennyson when Arthur returns to Camelot on the night of Lancelot and Guinevere's exposure, we are told

About his feet
A voice clung sobbing till he question'd it,
'What art thou?' and the voice about his feet
Sent up an answer, sobbing, 'I am thy fool,
And I shall never make thee smile again.'13

There is also an obvious similarity, though not necessarily reminiscent, between Tristram's "I am but a fool to reason with a fool"14 in Tennyson; and Gawaine's

"If I be too familiar with a fool,
I'm on the way to be another fool."15

Curiously, there is in Lancelot what may be a conscious allusion to, or an unconscious reminiscence of, Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." Near the beginning of section III Lancelot, meditating on Guinevere's invitation to visit her that night, says to himself:

"Time, tide, and twilight—and the dark;
And then, for me, the Light."16

12 Collected Poems, 256.
13 Works, 447.
14 Ibid., 439.
15 Collected Poems, 238.
16 Ibid., 588.
William Morris

Ledoux recalls that Robinson used to have him or his wife read to him occasionally Morris’s “The Defence of Guenevere” and “King Arthur’s Tomb.” Ledoux states that Robinson seemed to like these quite as much as he detested the Hovey versions. 17  

Quite possibly Morris’s first poem partly suggested to Robinson his treatment of Arthur’s marriage with Guinevere. Morris’s Guinevere declares that she

“was bought
By Arthur’s great name and his little love.” 18

Robinson’s Guinevere says of Arthur,

“He bought me with a name
Too large for my king-father to relinquish.” 19

In Robinson, however, it is Arthur who keeps repeating, “The love that never was!” 20  

Malory tells us that Arthur first had sight of Guinevere in Cameliard, “and ever after he loved her.” 21

Joseph Bédier

Joseph Bédier’s Le Roman de Tristan et Iseult is a composite version of the medieval Tristram romance synthesized from fragmentary versions of early writers like Thomas of Brittany, Eilhart von Oberg, Béroul, and Gottfried von Strassburg. It tells a story which is considerably earlier than Malory’s, and quite different, and one which has no Arthurian connections. In a letter to Miss Dorothy Bonawit, author of an unpublished Master’s thesis on Tristan at Columbia University in 1932, Robinson writes: “I used the barest skeleton of the old stories, drawing mostly from Malory and partly from the French story as it has recently been retold in a new version in French prose.” Miss Bonawit states, undoubtedly with justice, that the French book referred to is obviously Bédier’s, especially since Robinson says the book is “easily available.” (The Bédier book was first published in 1900 and has appeared in a number of edi-

17 In a letter to the present writer, November 27, 1941.
19 Collected Poems, 424.
20 Ibid., 256, 391, 392.
21 Le Morte Darthur, Bk. I, ch. 18.
tions since that time. One edition appeared in 1922, three years before Robinson began writing his poem. An abridged English translation by Hilaire Belloc appeared in 1915; a complete translation, by Hilaire Belloc and Paul Rosenfield, in 1945. There was a copy of Bédier’s book, in French, in Ledoux’s library.\(^{22}\) Comparison of Bédier’s version with Robinson’s, however, shows that Robinson made almost no concrete use of Bédier, though Bédier would certainly have given him a better idea of the story’s possibilities as a great love story than could Malory. A few minor details that Bédier may have suggested are: (a) Mark’s repentance and belated recognition of the truth about Tristram and Isolde’s love, (b) the suggestion that Griffon (Earl Grip in Malory, Count Riol in Bédier) is after Isolde of Brittany, (c) the suggestion of burning alive as Tristram’s punishment should he return to Cornwall, (d) the suggestion of Mark’s friendship for Tristram as a youth.

Richard Wagner

Robinson was extremely fond of music. He knew Wagner intimately and waxed enthusiastic over Tristan und Isolde. As early as April 18, 1900, he wrote to Daniel Gregory Mason that he had been “twice this spring to hear Tristan and Isolde, which I maintain to be the only opera, as such, ever written.”\(^{23}\) In a letter to the Harvard collection to Jean Ledoux, dated February 2, 1921, Robinson recounts having heard Tristan “for the first time in about six years.” He gives an enthusiastic account of the performance and concludes, “For a few hours I fancied that our so-called civilization might not be going after all—” Robinson’s enthusiasm for Wagner was largely, of course, for the music. Mabel Daniels reports that some of Robinson’s happiest moments were spent sitting in the back of a box at the Metropolitan Opera House “listening, undisturbed, in the darkness” to Tristan or Gotterdammerung. “You don’t really need to see the stage,” Robinson once told her, “just to hear the orchestra is enough.”\(^{24}\) In a letter to Lewis M. Isaacs, dated July 29, 1925, Robinson states, “Even with Wagner’s music, the love potion makes the

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\(^{22}\) Letter from Louis V. Ledoux to the present writer, November 14, 1941.

\(^{23}\) Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940), 29.

Robinson's frequently-expressed dissatisfaction with the potion put him in opposition not only to Wagner's version, but Swinburne's, Arnold's, and Bédier's, for all of them used the magic drink. In the letter to Isaacs just quoted he wrote:

My only object in writing this poem is to get out of my system a long imprisoned curiosity to find out what sort of story might be made of T. and I. on the assumption that they were not necessarily a pair of impossible and irresponsible morons. . . . Men and women can make trouble enough for themselves in this world without being drugged into permanent imbecility. That damned dose has always spoiled one of the world's greatest stories and probably will continue to do so.

In another letter of the same year, he specifically mentions the early romancers, possibly with reference to Bédier: "I am trying . . . to tell the story of what might have happened if Tristram and Isolde had been left human beings instead of impossible primates after swallowing an impossible drink that was supposed to be a symbol of fate. Even the naive writers of the early stories got over that part of it as soon and as briefly as they could."26

Wagner's version of the story, like Bédier's, is quite unlike the Malory source which Robinson used. It is barely possible that Wagner's use of Melot as the slayer of Tristram may have made Robinson feel justified in his choice of Andred. King Mark's belated recognition of the nature of Tristram and Isolt's love might have been suggested by either Wagner, Bédier, or Swinburne. Robinson's Tristram really owes little or nothing in the way of specific detail to Wagner. What Robinson called "the key and color of the thing,"27 however, must have come largely from Wagner and Swinburne. There is certainly nothing of it in Malory.

Algernon Charles Swinburne

Tryon reports that Swinburne was one of Robinson's favorite poets at Harvard.28 In a letter from Peterborough to Ledoux in the Harvard collection, dated June 14, 1925, Robinson writes,
"I find Tristram waiting for me with a club in one hand and bottle of ink . . . in the other . . . In these cruel circumstances perhaps you will be good enough to let me have one of your copies of Swinburne's melodious poem on the same fellow, in order that I may avoid possible collisions. I can hear you saying to yourself that the collisions wouldn't be a very serious matter for Swinburne, but they might be for me, and so I'd rather they wouldn't happen." He explains in a later letter that he was referring to collisions of incident and situation, not of style. As with Wagner, Swinburne's most important service to Robinson was probably in setting "the color and key." Swinburne has a passage of eighty lines in his eighth section describing a swim by Tristram in the sea which may well be the prototype for the similar episode in part VIII of Robinson's Tristram. Actually the two passages are an excellent test of the differences between the two treatments. Swinburne's is pure pæan, and is given largely for its own sake and its provision of opportunity for Swinburne to hymn one of his favorite subjects. In Robinson the swimming passage is used only as reflection of Tristram's psychological state, and is directly related everywhere to his love for Isolt.

Matthew Arnold

Tryon reports that at Harvard Robinson liked Arnold best of all, and used most frequently to read from him aloud, usually selecting a short poem or sonnet. Ledoux, however, recalls "somewhat vaguely and through a mist of years," that Robinson disagreed with him when he once expressed a great liking for certain parts of Arnold's Tristram poem. It seems probable that Robinson was drawn to Arnold by certain qualities that are not preeminent in Arnold's Tristram and Iseult, which is not usually ranked among Arnold's best work. Arnold gives a larger role than any previous poet to Iseult of Brittany, whom he describes as "the sweetest Christian soul alive." It is unlikely, however, that Robinson's Iseult owes anything to Arnold's version. Her "beauty and simplicity" are stated by Bédier; her
innocence is suggested by the virgin-marriage in Malory. Beyond that she is an original creation.

Richard Hovey

Richard Hovey's projected cycle of nine poetic dramas — of which he completed four — is one of the most ambitious post-Tennyson treatments of the legend, and, among those by minor writers, has considerable merit. Like Tennyson and Robinson, Hovey attempts to give the legend modern significance. Ledoux recalls that Robinson disliked the Hovey treatment and made "disrespectful remarks" about it. Robinson apparently took Hovey seriously enough, however, to send to Ledoux from Peterborough in late May 1917 for Hovey's Launcelot and Guinevere. Ledoux filled the order. Robinson may possibly have taken a hint from Hovey's Dagonet, who is a completely Shakespearean fool.

John Masefield

Masefield's verse drama Tristan and Isolt was published in the same year as Robinson's Tristram — 1927 — after Robinson had completed the writing of his poem. In a letter to Ledoux from Peterborough, dated September 3, 1927, Robinson promises to send Ledoux a copy of Masefield's book and is interested to know what Ledoux will think of Masefield's "barbaric treatment" of the story. "'Barbaric' is not derogatory, but descriptive of what he is trying to do. He does it rather well, I should say." In a letter to James R. Wells, dated January 2, 1931, regarding the same work, Robinson says, "I am not sure that the author didn't make a mistake in following the French story so closely, for it is at times pretty naive. This poem has many fine phrases, though I'm afraid that Tristram's jump in the bed-chamber would bring down the house if it were acted."

James Russell Lowell

Hagedorn reports that Robinson thought James Russell Lowell a critic rather than a poet and that "The Vision of Sir Launfal"
Hermann Hagedorn

In a letter to Hermann Hagedorn, dated October 17, 1918, Robinson writes: “Merlin was undoubtedly suggested, in its form, by your Maze.” The Great Maze is a long narrative poem dealing with the return of Agamemnon from Troy and his murder by his wife’s lover Aegisthus. Hagedorn explains that Robinson visited him frequently in 1916 [1915?] while he was at work on the Maze and became intensely interested in it. One day he asked suddenly for a copy of the Morte Darthur, which Hagedorn got for him. Later he told Hagedorn that it had been “The Great Maze” which started him on the idea of Merlin. “The Great Maze” may well have shown Robinson the possibilities offered by legend for psychological portraiture and philosophical interpretation of life. It is unlikely that it did more. Its form, with its blending of narrative and dramatic techniques, use of blank verse, and division into numbered sections is similar to that of Merlin; but Robinson had already laid the groundwork for this style in such poems as “Captain Craig” and “The Book of Annandale.”

Gawain and the Green Knight

At Harvard Robinson heard Professor Kittredge lecture on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and wrote to Harry DeForest Smith that he found “something fascinating” in Kittredge’s alliterative translation of it.

38 Selected Letters, 113.
39 Letter from Hermann Hagedorn to the present writer, November 13, 1941.
40 Untriangulated Stars, ed. Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 64.