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Robinson's Tristram
and the American Reviewers

by RICHARD CROWDER

Published on Tuesday, May 10, 1927, E. A. Robinson's *Tristram* sold wildly well for a volume of blank verse. The Literary Guild distributed 12,000 copies. By the end of July sales had reached 27,000; at Christmas the book had gone to 17 printings, and it continued to sell well even during the bottom years of the Great Depression. Macmillan had never before been able to market more than 3000 of any one of Robinson's books.

Some of the most interesting minds of the 1920s passed judgment on the work: we have record of 86 American reviews. In addition, there were four reviews in England and one two-part review in France, by Charles Cestre. This paper is based on 39 American reviews from Savannah to Seattle, Chicago to Dallas, Boston and New York to San Francisco.

Three readers had jumped the gun by two to six weeks. Five others published their opinions on the Saturday and Sunday before publication date, and Edmund Wilson made comment in *The New Republic* dated the day after. Babette Deutsch, in Saturday's *New York Sun*, said she thought the instant acclaim was "slightly odd" after all the years of Robinson's poetic accomplishment, quietly attained and received. This was not to say, however, that *Tristram* was not marked as much as ever by "quiet grace, thoughtful intricacy, and breathing passion."

Percy Hutchinson, in the good gray *Sunday Times*, was somewhat ponderous, digging far back in literary tradition for parallels, contrasts, and sources. At the opposite pole was Leon Whipple a few weeks later in the *Survey*, who urged his readers to climb into their hammocks and lose themselves in this new work by Edward [!] Robinson. They would find, for example, "princesses with fair white hands" (I count only one such lady) and "the same wonderment and pain that leaps onto the front page of the newspapers sometimes in this very year." Such simple-minded extravagance was fortunately rare among the other reviewers.

As the weeks passed, several readers noted the omission of certain familiar or beloved details: scenes from childhood, in the forest, of terror. At the same time, they could not blame the poet for selecting what he wanted. And there were changes: the meetings of the two lovers...
had undergone simplification; greater importance was given to their death. The ignoring of the love potion brought the situation up to date: the outcome was now logical and inevitable, the consequence of a natural psychological development of the passions, the characters being subject to "the unalterable fatalities of existence." Tristram’s feudal duty to Mark was changed: he had simply been slow in making up his mind, had not objected to Isolt’s marriage to Mark, and had accepted exile when confronted with Mark’s jealousy and power.

Reference to other authors was common. The most frequently cited recent versions of the legend were those by Wagner and by Swinburne, Arnold, and Tennyson. Wagner, it was pointed out, had made the legend the most popular of all the Arthurian tales. Using the version of Gottfried von Strassburg, the composer had developed his plot with the aid of gorgeous music that enveloped the story in consummate glamour and the languor of great passion. He had also set a precedent for Robinson’s shift of focus. Conrad Aiken saw Robinson’s poem—in a burst of synaesthesia—as halfway between the melodrama of Wagner and the tapestry of William Morris.

In writing of the Victorians, the reviewers ranged in opinion from Robinson’s undeniable superiority over any of them to his inferiority in poetry, nobility, perfection of art, successful elaboration, and rich imagery. Whereas some expressed annoyance with Swinburne’s couplets and aggressive alliteration, John Hyde Preston in the Virginia Quarterly admired Swinburne’s account as the greatest of modern times, creating a "white heat of passion" that Robinson could not hope to match: only Keats could have written a love story so convincing. Others agreed: Robinson lacked the "romantic glamour" and the "sonorous verbal harmonies" of Swinburne, whose characters excelled Robinson’s in vivid delineation of personal traits. At least one reviewer felt, however, that, though Swinburne’s was a noble poem, it could not equal Robinson’s as a story.

As for the other Victorians, one reviewer found Arnold’s narrative less satisfying and convincing, whereas another found it more affective and believable. Arnold was ready, said one, to struggle with metaphysical problems whereas Robinson evidently could not formulate a position (what still other critics praised as Robinson’s willingness to admit with Mark that he did “not know”). Robinson was furthermore cited to be as weak as Tennyson in confronting changing morality, but was said to avoid the Victorian’s propensity for allegory and moralizing. Critics also mentioned Arthur Symons and Thomas Hardy, generally, however, as inferior to Robinson in recounting this tragedy.

Of the earliest tellers of the tale critics alluded to Chrétien de Troyes, the “thirteenth-century Thomas,” Béroul, le Domnei des Amanz, and Luces de Gast. It was noted that Robinson did not go beyond Malory in linking Tristram to the Round Table. If Gottfried’s version was the best
of all, the reason was that it was told for entertainment purposes only (as would please his medieval audience) quite in contrast to the subjective speculations of Robinson’s characters.

In mentioning earlier poems of Robinson himself, most reviewers agreed that *Tristram* excelled *Merlin* and *Lancelot*, being, among other virtues, more easily readable. It was warmer, more economical of energy, and less marred by “subjective flourishing and divagation” (though it was subjective enough). Donald Davidson, philosophically distant from the New Englander in his Southern agrarianism, found the new poem as “baffling” as the earlier long narratives and much the same in texture and method.

The catalogue of other writers mentioned showed at least the breadth of reading of these critics, even if, now and then, the relationship with Robinson was not always clear. Reference was made to Homer and Aeschylus, Scott, Carlyle, Browning, Ibsen, Hawthorne, Henry James, Anatole France, Pope, Saintsbury, Renan, Sandburg, Walter de la Mare, John Erskine. In Millay’s *The King’s Henchman* Edmund Wilson felt that the lovers in the second act were allowed to show their emotion (in what he called “musical equivalent”) rather than just talk about it. Harriet Monroe suggested similarly that, while Shakespeare’s Anthony and Cleopatra did not talk with everyday realism, nevertheless, in contrast with Tristram and Isolt, they did communicate genuine passion. Elsewhere, Henry Adams was indicated as a New Englander with a subtler, more penetrating intellect than Robinson’s, with the capacity for broader, tougher investigation of motives and effects. One writer said Robinson was closer to Proust than to Malory, another that he was the opposite of Pound in technique and attitude, still another that he had wisely stayed near “the noble old tradition of the masters” as could not be said of Eliot and the Sitwells. On the whole, allusion to so many other writers was suggestive to the thoughtful reader in placing the new poem in the canon of Western literature.

The characters most frequently mentioned in the reviews were Tristram, the two Isolts, Morgan, and Mark. Of Tristram himself little good could be said. For the few reviewers who singled him out, he was in fact the least successful actor in the drama. Epithets as damning as “namby-pamby” and “milksop” came to mind. No longer a man of action, he had lost his capacities as warrior, lover, and even ingenious liar. He was consumed with “morbid self-doubt,” a disturbed modern man, analytical, loquacious, without true passion, slow in decisions, said to be conscience-stricken, but remaining unconvincing. In fact, one critic called him a libertine, ridden by “innate lust” (a questionable judgment). Davidson condemned him as a “moral scalawag” and a “weak philanderer.”

Reviewers likewise saw Isolt of Cornwall as modern, lacking medieval spirituality. For some this translated into no real substance as a charac-
ter. On the other hand, a more sympathetic reader sensed in her a realiza-
tion of the power of fate and the imminence of futility and evaluated
her analyses and speculations as fittingly “unfathomable, unreasonable,
insecure, eternal.”

Though Preston surprisingly called Morgan a subtle character, he did
not elaborate. Another reader pointed out that she had no problem in
seducing Tristram. Two readers, however, thought her being in the
poem at all was pointless, in Deutsch’s phrase, “implausible trivial
melodrama.” Deutsch even said she was so evil that she was actually
comical.

The reviewers were especially interested in the change in Mark at the
end, where hostility and sadness were transformed into wisdom. Two
critics reminded their readers that Gottfried’s thirteenth-century version
had shown Mark altered in the conclusion. Reasonableness, tact, power,
beauty, wisdom, nobility—these were qualities found in Mark’s last “I
do not know” speech. One irresponsible reader called Mark “melodramatically treacherous.” Mark Van Doren was nearer the truth when
he saw in this final meditation an illustration of Robinson’s idea of a
wise man: “a sad man who can only say that thus was so.” By this time
any melodrama had disappeared; Mark was after all an ordinary
mortal, neither flawless nor hateful, a “civilized modern man” (as Carl
Van Doren called him) who was submitting to the fact that his legal
rights were indefensible before destiny.

The poet’s drawing Isolt of Brittany out of the background attracted
the attention of several critics. Even Monroe, in general uncomfortable
with the poem, praised this Isolt as the best of the characters, Robin-
son’s most penetrating portrait. Other writers, too, said she was sharply
etched—wise, tragic, and noble. Hutchinson pictured her as the aban-
doned wife, puzzled by what love had done to her. For him her closing
“plaint” was both pitiable and ingeniously delicate. Vida Scudder, in
the Atlantic, was glad that Robinson had chosen to omit Isolt’s decep-
tion of Tristram in the matter of the black and white sails. The con-
sensus was that Robinson had been at his best in picturing this Isolt.

There was no total agreement as to the theme of the poem. Some
critics said it was a good love story and should be left at that. One
columnist talked to Robinson himself and learned that simply an interest
in the tale had led the poet to write the work, that he had intended no
deep significance and did not acknowledge any specific influence. Carl
Van Doren found no “ethical implications,” but was interested in the
poet’s particular way of wondering about the choices of the two lovers
and the pathetic outcome for Isolt of Brittany.

Other reviewers, however, found a modern statement of moral values
(though still romantic) and even typical “flashes of moral vision” (this
was Wilson), but they chose not to elucidate. Beyond love, the discov-
ered theme was evanescence and the inevitability of fate despite love’s
exaltation. Hutchinson saw the Anglo-Saxon Weird (Fate) side by side with Christian doctrine. As he explained it, Fate compelled Tristram toward Isolt of Brittany as well as toward Isolt of Cornwall and led him (thinking, ironically, said Hutchinson, of Isolt of Cornwall all the while) to sing the song which won the heart of Isolt of Brittany, whom he married out of chivalry. Not blaming Fate, other interpreters saw life itself as the villain, not accusing but extolling that very life. Elsewhere, the narrative was considered an examination of the pity of it all, the experience of sensitive natures unable to master circumstances and their own passion.

For most readers the poem was intense and vigorous. The Dial reviewer and a few others looked in vain for compression and fire, but the majority were carried along by swift movement; sustained mood; genuine, sweeping, steady passion; inevitability and resonance. Especially did the power and suspense of the closing cantos appeal to Deutsch. Speculatively, one reader asked whether such energy and psychological reality might not have shocked the Victorians, out of whom Robinson had emerged. Warning was issued not to be drawn by the sweep of the poem from its "many intrinsically lovely things," by which were meant, I suppose, elements of style and imagery. Preston, the dog in the manger, admitted only two or three scenes (unspecified) as being as intense as earlier poems. Mostly, however, the readers agreed with Carl Van Doren that on the whole the narrative was "lofty and . . . concentrated beyond the reach of prose."

Robinson once said, "Poetry is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said" (Andrew Smithberger and Camille McCole, On Poetry, [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1931], p. 174). Indeed for many of Tristram's professional readers Robinson's "brooding intuition" could not "quite be put into words." One reader felt a negative view present through inference rather than overt statement. There was a tone of resignation, of agnosticism (i.e., not knowing), an indefinable feeling of "the deep mystery of being." Throughout the narrative, in addition, were nuances of the philosophy of love of the "high essence of poetry."

Words used to describe the tone further were "magic," "wistfulness," "timelessness." The names and places in this poem were "already rich with poetic association," "romantically glamorous." There was a sweetly lyrical quality, especially in the love scenes, a beauty both spiritual and sensuous. Critics were touched by the poignancy: Montgomery Cooper, in the Commercial Appeal (Memphis), was glad he was alone as he finished his reading, for in the growing darkness he sat in meditation, his mind replete with beautiful words and images.

Another distinguishable characteristic was the passion that could "transport the reader." Certain passages were pronounced "marvelous and magnificent," expressed with a "new vitality." Tristram had plenty
of Robinsonian traits, it was said, but was nevertheless "a beautiful, unique entity."

There was also discernable a dignity coupled with sincerity, serving, as one critic reported, to augment the reader's sympathies and worldly knowledge. Where one reader was struck by the decorous austerity, another said he would abandon the usual epithet "austere" in this case. The impression of sincerity stemmed, one thinks, from the concluding cantos, which Howard Mumford Jones considered as "peaceful" as the last cadences of great music.

Critics saw Robinsonian irony in the role of time, which wins out over all lovers, even at timeless Joyous Gard, where at least, said some, time was unimportant as a threat to life. The existential problem of modern man, his "hopeless psychological dilemma," stirred considerable interest. Preston departed from the thesis of irony, saying that, unless Robinson was being satirical, he himself could not accept Tristram's improbabilities, though he did concede that maybe his judgments were too harsh. Another critic pointed out specifically the irony in the portrait of Mark: that a seeming villain is not necessarily "demonic," but "degenerate." Several readers, however, felt that the poet's irony often checked the potential romantic beauty. At least one reviewer said that Robinson's irony prevented his telling a love story effectively: it was beyond his capacity to create real passion and ecstasy. For Wilson Tristram at its worst read like a movie scenario with conventional stage properties; at its best it was like a nineteenth-century novel of adultery: "long, well-bred conversations" and "false starts at passionate expression."

The acceptance of the poem's cerebration varied. For some there was too much reasoning in sedate dialogue—a mere "intellectual exercise" both unimpressive and unconvincing. Romance, glory, and heroism had been transmogrified into a tortuous look at the "intricacies of human motives" in which the poet refused to take sides. Wilson labeled the metaphysical sportiveness unsuited to rough-hewn medieval heroes. Others wanted to know where the action was.

To less fault-finding readers, however, this cerebral element was not altogether bad. For them the "severely passionate progression of thought" was illuminative: thought and passion were fused into "organic unity." Though one critic was a little uneasy with the way Robinson's "intellectual penetration" could bring admiration without emotion, he found frequent radiant passages in terms of modern thought: there was even a connection between the poet's space-and-time imagery and the precepts of modern-day physics. On the other side were critics unable to find much serious thought or complicating psychology. No longer could Robinson be called "purely cerebral," because here he was idealizing his material. In the long run the moderate view was that Tristram was intellectual magic, albeit magic subdued by a new glamour.
Of the total design it was generally agreed that the poet was in uncontestable control. In straightforward, compact style he had given his narrative firm, clear, direct, and simple treatment. He had captured the spirit of the medieval poets—plain spoken and open. Further, he had clarified the plot by omitting heroics, wizardry, and portents. The result was a tragedy skillfully built with the poet’s ascetic, aristocratic discipline.

Two opinions emerged about the diction. Some critics admired the onomatopoeia suggesting, for example, pounding waves. Deutsch called the repetitions “the melodic insistence of a music motif,” and Carl Van Doren applauded the absence of “posturing” and “antiquities.” On the other hand there was Robinson’s habitual juxtaposition of ordinary words with latinisms that sometimes led to an ultimately simple statement, what was called “concise verbosity.” Shifting parts of speech and negatives and affirmatives resulted in loss of energy and “coldness of emotion.” Aiken called it “ironic elaboration,” which in the short poems could be controlled but here was somewhat out of hand. The majority of the readers, however, thought Robinson had escaped his occasional “tortuosities of rhetoric” and the “intricate inversions of modern poetry.” Even Preston found Robinson’s descriptions definite, his language “impeccable.”

With one or two exceptions the critics had nothing but praise for the blank verse: balanced, musical, rich and varied, stately, lyrical, gracious, vigorous, exquisite, hard and strong—they said. If one reader thought the verse not very flexible, there were others who remarked on the variation in the placing of the caesuras as a means of avoiding rigidity and as a concession to the natural movement of thought and speech. The verse, one reader discovered, turned stormy—abrupt and passionately simple—in the passages involving Isolt of Cornwall. Even Monroe was willing to point out how, toward the end, Tristram, alone, reproached himself in Robinson’s best “majestic rolling rhythm.” Most, then, agreed that the verse itself flowed with unerring judgment and unfailing dignity.

In the matter of final judgment there was widespread opinion. Preston led the unfavorable. Let richly developed old legends alone, he said; besides, Robinson had written himself out. Tristram’s high sales, said some, were due to its inherent glamour and to the distribution by the Literary Guild. Wilson would have traded it for a single one of the earlier New England “elegies.”

Other critics were more charitable, but still in doubt. They missed the original tragic quality and the pungency. Robinson, for some, was still at his highest level, but had undertaken no new exploration; depth and skill were on a plateau. One reader said that “works of the greater order” give themselves over to instant judgment, but it was impossible to decide about Tristram at once.
A good half of the 39 reviews I analyzed, however, were awash with adulation. Labels moved from the noblest long love poem in American literature to the equal of any other narrative poem in English. Carl Van Doren leaped on the bandwagon in calling it the greatest poem yet published by an American. His brother, Mark Van Doren, was more moderate: it was one of the world’s best narrative poems, but to be in a hurry to place it among the crown jewels would be to obscure the virtues of Robinson’s early poems, for one thing. Enjoy it now and let time and events award a final ranking—superlative, if the poem deserved it.

As 1927 was coming to a close, Monroe granted that it was “a tour-de-force of exceptional hardihood and somewhat astonishing success.” (She had felt free to speak her mind in the December Poetry because she knew that after seven months of successful sales she could not change anyone’s opinion.) Finally, having pronounced Tristram the most important literary work of the year, from the pen of a man she called one of “the Greats” of the world, Mrs. Emily Blair Newell advised her readers in Good Housekeeping to buy up copies, for they would make exceptionally fine Christmas presents.

West Lafayette, Indiana

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