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## *"Time Is a Casket": Love and Temporality in Robinson's Tristram*

by S. L. CLARK and JULIAN N. WASSERMAN

MODERN redactors of the medieval Tristan legend generally comment in some adverse way upon the society in which the unhappy lovers find themselves. The lovers' exaltation may be contrasted to the jealousy and pettiness of Cornish society in Thomas Hardy's *Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*, or the sad fate of Tristan and Isolde will serve as yet another depressing portent in Tennyson's version of Arthur's fall. The tension between the lovers and the society with which they are at odds finds unusual expression, however, in Edwin Arlington Robinson's *Tristram*,<sup>1</sup> for this poem separates the lovers from the rest of society not because of society's blind ignorance of what *Tristan-love*<sup>2</sup> entails, but rather because of the fundamentally different approaches to time held by the lovers and society. In other words, all members of society in Robinson's poem are well aware of the consuming nature of Tristram's and Isolde's passion; even Andred, reptile that he is,<sup>3</sup> recognizes that Isolde has given herself over completely to Tristram (p. 63), and Mark, too, comes to acknowledge his wife's and nephew's love at the end of the poem when he allows Tristram to return to the Queen at Tintagel (p. 178). However, Mark's progress to this point is couched in terms of his having overcome past attitudes; he states how he feels "now," repeating the term several times as he brings his view of Tristram's and Isolde's love from "once" to "a month ago" to "now," and then goes on to assume that the love will continue into the future ("All I ask / Is that I shall not see him" [p. 178]). For Mark, and for the other members of society in this poem, love is time-bound. One can look back upon its occurrence or posit its recurrence, but one can never escape its essential temporality. For Tristram and Isolde, however, love occurs in time but goes beyond time.

The manner in which Robinson effects the distinction between those who see love in time and those who see love in time but not of it can best

1. We cite from the following edition: Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Tristram* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

2. We use the term "*Tristan-love*" after W. T. H. Jackson, *Anatomy of Love: The Tristan of Gottfried von Straßburg* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), p. 268. We should also note that we will refer to Robinson's characters by the names he gives them (Tristram and Isolde), but will refer to traditional characters in the medieval legend by conventional forms (Tristan and Isolde), in order to distinguish them from Robinson's characters.

3. *Tristram*, pp. 63, 195, where Andred is explicitly called a reptile.

be approached through the characterization of the woman who loves Tristram but does not experience the love Tristram shares with Isolt of Ireland. Isolt of the White Hands is obsessed with time past and time future and walks an uneasy line in the meagre present she shares with Tristram; her existence is alternately a backward-looking, a remembrance of Tristram's past actions (pp. 9, 13), and a forward-looking, ever to the north (pp. 92, 98, 99, 114, 122, 201, 209), to the sea that will bring Tristram back or will keep him from her. Even in the two years in which she has Tristram with her in Brittany, there is recurrent reference to the power of time past and the uncertainty of time future. Isolt thus soberly states upon Tristram's departure for Camelot, commenting on his love for Isolt of Ireland:

So long ago,  
Tristram, that you have lived for nothing else  
Than for a long ago that follows you  
To sleep, and has a life as long as yours. (p. 118)

At the end of the poem, Isolt's father attempts to teach his daughter's eyes "to see / Before them, not behind" (p. 205), but she has prepared only for a future with Tristram. Although she knows and knew when she first met Tristram that his heart was with Isolt of Ireland, she is willing to accept partial, rather than total, devotion from him. Only upon Tristram's death can she reluctantly admit that she will "be Queen / Of Here or There, may be—sometime" (p. 205). Robinson thus presents her as a woman who clings to a man as to a keepsake, and whose far-seeing abilities (p. 92) may well stem from the fact that she feels that her future with Tristram is contained within her past with him; she is continually remembering and waiting, so that even during her two year marriage to Tristram<sup>4</sup> she is said to be waiting (p. 95) for the time when Tristram's past with Isolt of Ireland will claim him. Isolt of the White Hands knows that Tristram's past will shape his future, because she knows the power which Isolt of Ireland has over him, but she cannot share their love and can only look toward days and nights lined up in a row (pp. 201, 203). Isolt of the White Hands' moments with Tristram are never timeless, as are those which he spends with Isolt of Ireland; since Isolt of the White Hands is caught up in time, she can only wait in it but cannot go beyond it.

To be sure, Isolt of the White Hands is not alone in her vigil; Isolt of Ireland waits as well. Described as being "alone with time" (p. 123), she notes: "I have been alone with time so long / That time and I are strangers" (p. 134). Like Isolt of the White Hands, Isolt of Ireland is preoccupied with the past and with the future. In the former instance,

4. This marriage is described, significantly, in the middle of the work; Isolt of Brittany's past with Tristram is detailed in the work's opening passages, and it is with her musings on time past in time future that the poem ends.

she rages against the time lost to her and Tristram, time when they could have loved but did not (p. 50). In the latter case she expresses awareness that the future holds death and that there is indeed little time left on earth. She tells Tristram at Joyous Gard:

I am not going to be old.  
There is a little watchman in my heart  
Who is always telling me what time it is. (p. 159)

However, unlike Isolt of the White Hands, her experiencing of temporality entails an extra dimension, that of the transcendence of time. *Tristan*-love in this poem, in fact, is detailed largely with respect to the lovers' unique stance toward time. They are in it but not of it. Thus, while they chafe under lengthy separations, they partake in a sense of rapturous timelessness at Joyous Gard and, moreover, quite frequently view this transcendence of time as one sustaining feature of their relationship. Robinson will contrast the lovers' attitude to that of a man such as Gawaine, who can never experience a devotion such as that of Tristan and Isolde. Gawaine sees time as a period to be filled up, for he sees love in terms of appetite. Since he marks his time in terms of love affairs, he cannot fathom Tristram's devotion to Isolt of Ireland. He muses:

Why must a man, where there are loaves and fishes,  
See only as far as one crumb on his table?  
Why must he make one morsel of a lifetime? (p. 171)

For Gawaine, time is a vessel to be filled with adventures, compliments, and love affairs, and then to be drained to the dregs. This attitude, which will deviate so sharply from that of the lovers, is further mirrored in Gouvernail's somewhat dour assessment of the march of time:

Time is a casket  
Wherein our days are covered certainties  
That we lift out of it, one after one (p. 82)

Gouvernail's statement is particularly suggestive, however, for the idea of precious things being contained in a protective enclosure and brought out one by one is countered by both the regularity of the removal and the double meaning of the casket. Tristram and Isolt, as "the time-sifted few that leave the world" (p. 83), will share a love that both results in death, in the casket, and goes beyond death.

Gouvernail's contention that time is the enclosure which holds the days of one's life firmly places existence *in* time, so that one's life is viewed with respect to time. Tristram, however, repeatedly asserts that life, rather, is the enclosure, and that, moreover, it is not filled by mere time. His is an opinion initially not shared by Isolt of Ireland, and the process by which she comes to share his contention that "Time is not

life” (p. 144) proves significant.<sup>5</sup> At first Isolt is caught up in the woman’s trap of waiting<sup>6</sup> and likens years to shells of life, “empty shells / When they hold only days, and days, and days” (p. 145). Gouvernail’s casket, then, has become an empty enclosure of days. However, the episode at Joyous Gard transforms Isolt into a woman who comes to approach time and life differently than she had previously. When she is reunited with Tristram at Tintagel, she returns to the idea which Tristram articulated at Joyous Gard, an idea which she has pondered in the intervening time:

You said once that whatever it is that fills  
Life up, and fills it full, it is not time.  
You told my story when you said that to me,  
But what of yours? Was it enough, Tristram?  
Was it enough to fly so far away  
From time that for a season time forgot us? (p. 186)

For Isolt, love has come to mean not only that which fills life and gives it meaning (“Were it not for love, / Poor life would be a ship not worth a launching.” [p. 181])<sup>7</sup> but also that which abnegates time, so that “There will be love when there are no stars” (p. 151).<sup>8</sup> Love is a going beyond as well as a going above time, and Robinson frequently expresses this concept in terms of lovers being in the world and time, but at the same time losing or being forgotten by the world and time. When Isolt comes to Tristram at Joyous Gard, it is stated:

Stronger than God  
When all was done the god of love was fate,  
Where all was love. And this was in a darkness  
Where time was always dying and never dead,  
And where God’s face was never to be seen  
To tell the few that were to lose the world  
For love how much or little they lost for it. (p. 131)

For Robinson’s lovers, time becomes “a mist / That covers the earth” (p. 189) above which the lovers rise like birds and to which they return.<sup>9</sup>

5. Tristram elsewhere (p. 156) notes: “Whatever it was that filled life high and full, / It was not time.” Wallace L. Anderson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 143, notes that Tristram’s and Isolt’s life “is measured not in terms of time but in terms of love” but neither explores the time/love/life/death nexus closely nor contrasts Tristram’s and Isolt’s perceptions of time to those of the other characters.

6. Isolt of the White Hands notes quite early in the work that

If he should not come back,  
I shall have been but one poor woman more  
Whose punishment for being born a woman  
Was to believe and wait. (p. 16)

Morgan puts it a bit more forcefully:

We are the slaves,  
Not you. Not even when most we are in power  
Are women else than slaves to men they honor. (p. 34)

7. Isolt of Ireland reinforces the idea that love gives life meaning when she states that she “had all / That one life holds of joy, and in one summer” (p. 185).

8. See also p. 149 for further support that love’s permanence goes beyond the earthly sphere.

9. One should also note that Robinson’s birds are continually seen as rising and dipping over the sea, and that the sea is associated with time (p. 150).

Isolt notes, "Our wings lifted us to let us fly / Where time forgot us" (p. 190), and when Tristram doubts during his last meeting with Isolt whether he acted rightly in loving her, she insists:

It was not time  
For you or me, when we were there together.  
It was too much like always to be time. (p. 192)

There comes, however, the return to earth and to time, from which the lovers can only escape by physical death. But here, too, Robinson emphasizes transcendence for "these two that have torn life from time" (p. 199), for the peace that comes to them after life has fled their bodies is described by once-blind Mark as "something after life, / And it was not like death" (p. 197). The lovers are dead, but not dead; they were on the earth but soared above it;<sup>10</sup> they were in time but not of it, and now they are forever beyond it.

It is, in fact, this very language of paradox that Robinson develops around the time/love/death/life nexus that speaks to the mystical nature of Tristram's and Isolt's union. For the members of society in Robinson's poem, time is a casket; it holds a limited number of days bounded by the grave. For Tristram and Isolt, whose love is repeatedly described in terms of being in time but transcending time, the casket is an insubstantial barrier to their union. In other words, death of the body comes, but it is not death of their love. Their union, in fact, becomes intelligible only through Robinson's employment of paradoxical language, which is a standard technique of mystical writers and one used by redactors of the Tristan legend from the days of Gottfried von Straßburg to the present. Just as the mystic way is one travelled by a very few men, so this "love larger than all times and all places" (p. 48) is given to Tristram and Isolt alone and is not shared by the many of society for whom "time is a casket" and for whom death comes when the box is empty of its days. For Tristram and Isolt, love is "to live for ever" (p. 160) after death has effected their release and given them the "peace / Awaiting them where they were done with time" (p. 115).

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10. As Isolt of the White Hands states:

He was not mingled and equipped to live  
Very long. It was not earth in him that burned  
Itself to death; and she that died for him  
Must have been more than earth. (p. 208)