March 1972

Robinson's Camelot: Renunciation as Drama

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.9, March 1972, p.468-481

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Oviously beguiled by the stories of King Arthur and his court, E. A. Robinson composed *Merlin* (1917) and *Lancelot* (1920). To have any success, however, with the Arthurian material, he had radically to change its emphasis so as to make it congenial to his sensibilities and skills. The old legends, in Malory as in his French and English sources, were mainly stories: their dominant concern was narrative. But Robinson is not a poet of action and he never really tells a story. His mind is a reflective one; he is best at several removes from an event, trying to understand all that it may signify in the lives of his protagonists.

Most critics say that the Arthurian material appealed to Robinson because it is about the end of a world, the fall of a kingdom. Robinson wrote the poems when he was stricken by the fact of World War I, and a good deal of evidence suggests that he shared Henry James’s feelings about it:

> The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.  

It was for them a “goodbye to all that” and the realization as well that “all that” had contained the seeds of its own defeat. The Arthurian material provided Robinson with an analogy, and he could use it to explore in his own particular way the personal faults and treacheries that brought the end.

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1 *Tristram* (1925), surprisingly a popular success that won for the poet the last of his three Pulitzer prizes, is decidedly inferior to the other two. In his recent fine book on Robinson, Louis Cox calls it “the only meretricious performance in his career.” *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry* (New York, 1969), 123.

But the Arthurian stories help Robinson in at least two other important ways. In the first place, they provided him literally with a story—a sequence of events, a number of characters, and a set of relationships. His poems depend on this story in the most basic ways, since they attempt to realize the variety of emotional intensities and ethical conflicts the story can provide. Unlike T. H. White in his charming book, *The Once and Future King*, Robinson is not interested in telling the story again. He assumes the facts and takes for granted our general knowledge of them. His role is to interpret. In his other long poems, his typical obliqueness and allusiveness can become a vice because we have no way of knowing the story to which he refers. Here his story is a part of the Western literary heritage.

The second contribution, if less visible, is at least as important. The Arthurian stories are not mainly about the end of a world; they are primarily about that world itself and the adventures of the people who rule it. They are about people who had virtually all life could offer. Robinson could not share such experiences as they had in the days of their glory, but he knew that they were likely, because they were human, to share some of his. They too had to lose, to suffer, to say goodbye. That is the part of their story he would tell, but the other part, the power and glamor and excitement, is intrinsic to the characters and the material. He gives a fuller, more convincing description of experience in the Arthurian poems than in any other of the long poems because more of life is there. The Arthurian material necessarily brings with it the fulness and vigor of life, and Robinson simply appropriates it. The pathos of loss is greatly increased because we believe in the richness of joy that preceded it.

Robinson begins to appropriate from *Le Morte d'Arthur* at a point where the material is most accessible to his own talent and sensibility. He begins near the end of the story, where it is perfectly clear that no one can do anything to prevent the disaster—where in fact everything that everybody does, whether meant for good or for ill, contributes in some way to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom. This part of the story underscores how pathetically inadequate conscious individual intention or action is to stem the forceful movement of history, and since action no longer serves, speculation must take its place.

He divides his poems into sections, some of which are simply
juxtaposed to each other, while others are linked by a brief narrative passage. The bulk of each section describes people in intense, though usually restrained conversations that reveal their anguish in trying to understand what is happening to them. Lines and passages in the author’s voice most often describe how one of the characters feels or how another reacts. This approach therefore emphasizes personal relationships and the drama of the subjective life. Similarly, it allows a pattern to emerge: one of personal need that is expressed and that goes unsatisfied. It articulates the conflict between reason and emotion and works toward their reconciliation, toward an acceptance that is also a renunciation.

To see how little Robinson is interested in telling the story again, we can look at the first lines of section 6 in *Lancelot*:

> The dark of Modred’s hour not yet availing,
> Gawaine it was who gave the King no peace;
> Gawaine it was who goaded him and drove him
> To Joyous Gard, where now for long his army,
> Disheartened with unprofitable slaughter,
> Fought for their weary King and wearily
> Died fighting. Only Gawaine’s hate it was
> That held the King’s knights and his warrior slaves
> Close-hived in exile, dreaming of old scenes
> Where Sorrow, and her demon sister Fear,
> Now shared the dusty food of loneliness,
> From Orkney to Cornwall. There was no peace,
> Nor could there be, so Gawaine told the King,
> And so the King in anguish told himself,
> Until there was an end of one of them—
> Of Gawaine or the King, or Lancelot,
> Who might have had an end, as either knew,
> Long since of Arthur and of Gawaine with him.³

The section goes on to present Bors’s plea—and subsequently Guinevere’s—that Lancelot end the war by killing Gawaine and Arthur. The lines quoted above are no more than one-seventeenth of the whole section, though nothing else in it comes so close to telling the story that is happening. But it is important to realize how much action has been either simply assumed or alluded to only elliptically. In the period of time between what Robinson deals with in sections 5 and 6, Lancelot and Guinevere, with many of Lancelot’s men, have escaped to Joyous Gard; Gawaine and Arthur have levied an army, left Modred

³ *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1954), 401. Page references to this edition are hereafter included in the text.
in charge of the kingdom, and pursued them to France; they have laid waste the land and besieged the castle; the war has continued for long enough to be at a stalemate and for all of them to know that Lancelot at will could end it by killing the two leaders; and, as we learn near the end of the section, the Pope has been asked to intervene and end an "endless" war. Again, Robinson assumes that we know all this.

Even the lines quoted above are highly evaluative; they are not a straightforward account of an event. Robinson immediately emphasizes the responsibility for action, not the action itself ("Gawaine it was ..."); he characterizes the brutal and ruthless quality of Gawaine's determination by using such verbs as "goaded" and "drove." He evokes an emotional situation, a sense of impasse and futility, and briefly though very powerfully indicts the war. He describes the lot of Arthur's men—exiled, manipulated, forced to fight a battle not their own—and records the further costs: the men dream of homes and a past that have been changed, perhaps irreparably, by fear and desolation. The lines that follow the melancholy statement, "There was no peace," subtly reveal Robinson's great psychological understanding and build up to Lancelot's ethical dilemma. Arthur "in anguish told himself" that one of them had to die—an expression that reveals his tormented awareness that he is deluding himself, that he is following Gawaine's commands rather than his own better judgment. And Robinson reveals their complicated burden of awareness by saying that all three know Lancelot has the power at will to end the war by killing the other two.

Robinson, then, minimizes the narrative elements of the story in order to explore the way his protagonists experience it, the way it feels to them. As the titles imply, both Merlin and Lancelot are about the consciousness of a highly sophisticated man. They are equally about his relationships with others, especially with a woman. In both poems the woman comes close to symbolizing life itself: in Lancelot Guinevere is his "inventory of the world/That he must lose." Each poem begins when the man has begun to realize that the end of their glamorous lives is near, and each ends when both of them have been able to accept this fact. The sections of each poem exploit the relationships and responses of these people and others close to them. It is thus a reflective, speculative form, and it reveals the
cast of Robinson's mind. But it is also one that allows for great emotional resonance. Because the man recognizes before the woman does that their great love must end, that they must give up Camelot and Broceliande, he must suffer the anguish of convincing a frightened woman and be strong enough to help her as well as himself to renounce all the world has meant for them. In these poems, then, the counsels of reason and the demands of emotion are powerfully at odds, and the drama of the poems lies in their reconciliation. There is no longer a straight narrative line because what happens is no longer the point. Everyone must try to understand why it happened and how they and others feel about it.

In writing of Henry James, Yvor Winters describes his particular goal as a writer in terms that fit these poems of Robinson's. Winters has been discussing the elements that restrict Isabel Archer's total freedom in the conduct of her life. These include the facts that she is human; that she has a certain temperamental bent of which she is insufficiently aware; and that she has had particular experiences “which result in certain forms of knowledge and certain forms of ignorance, and which may consequently lead her to judge a situation on the basis of imperfect knowledge.”

Elements of this sort are what we call the given facts of the plot: they are the ineliminable facts of character and of initial situation. We have a certain group of particularized individuals in juxtaposition; the particularity is destiny, the juxtaposition chance. But the understanding and the will may rise in some measure superior to destiny and to chance, and when they do so, we have human victory; or they may make the effort and fail, in which case we have tragedy; or the failure having occurred, there may be a comprehension of the failure and a willed adjustment to it, in which case we have the combination of tragedy and victory. It is this combination, the representation of which Henry James especially strives to achieve. 4

Unlike Tennyson's, Robinson's Arthurian character are entirely human, and they have the same faults and weaknesses they have in Malory. By the time Robinson begins with them, they have acted out most of their destinies and must face the tragedy their natures have in part brought upon them. They must comprehend their failure, and they must and do adjust to it.

In the Arthurian poems, Robinson explores certain beliefs he has about the nature of human experience: that a person is

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seldom adequate to another's need for him; that loyalties tend tragically to conflict; that reason and emotion most typically work at odds with one another; that happiness and fulfilment—if one is lucky enough to know anything of them—are usually bought at a very high price, the price often being the betrayal of another's trust; that we can know others only in part and only for a time and that what we know of them is inevitably a function of our own needs and biases; that all of us fail and all of us suffer and all of us deserve sympathy. Now such conclusions are certainly bleak and discouraging, and fortunately there are many other things that can be said about human experience. But we cannot prove Robinson to be wrong; we can only show that he is limited, and that really goes without saying. The important point is to realize how true he is in these Arthurian poems to his own vision of things and how richly the material provides for him.

Each poem assumes that there is a relationship between the love affairs and the fall of the kingdom. They assume a basic conflict between the profound experience of love and responsibility to a public world, between private fulfilment and duty. _Lancelot_ has a single action and traces it from what we might call the beginning of the end almost to the end. The connection between the love affair and the fall of Camelot is roughly as clear as these terribly complicated situations can be. The love affair is one among several causes of the final catastrophe; the destruction of the society ensures the end of the love affair. Robinson observes the personal relationship and the society moving together to the end.

In _Merlin_, however, the connection between the two is not so clear. In Robinson, as in Malory, Merlin does as much for Arthur as he is capable of doing. He leaves for Broceliande after he has established Arthur in power and told him all he needs to know—at least all that Merlin himself can discover. Therefore, when he goes to Vivian he does not abdicate his worldly responsibilities because he has already fulfilled them. Before he leaves, he says to Arthur,

*Wherever I have warned you, see as far As I have seen; for I have shown the worst There is to see. Require no more of me, For I can be no more than what I was* (p. 260)
But Robinson certainly shows Vivian’s Merlin as “A man of dalliance, and a sybarite” (p. 249) and posits a world in which Merlin cannot have, at one and the same time, both private fulfilment and political power and responsibility. Perhaps he is simply inconsistent, expecting us to understand tacitly that no man has ever done as much as he is capable of doing and that Merlin therefore does wilfully cripple himself by leaving Camelot. The conflict between Camelot and Broceliande, between the intrinsically good things, is basic to the very structure of the poem.

Merlin has seven sections of irregular length. To examine each section is to discover the way it articulates Robinson’s sense of the nature of human experience, to explore the ironies at the heart of Robinson’s vision, and to see how highly dramatic an austere New England poet can be. Sections 1, 2, 3, and 7 are about the ruin of Camelot; 4, 5, and 6 deal with the love affair. The only part that describes a period of happiness is preceded by three long sections that anticipate disaster. That is, everything is seen in the perspective of loss; the joy is, as it were, enclosed by sorrow.

Section 1 works through a dialogue between Gawaine and Dagonet about the meaning of “Merlin’s rumor-laden resurrection.” Their fearful speculations anticipate the end of the flawed peace that has been Arthur’s kingdom. There is a considerable—and to an extent unfathomable tension between the two men. In these poems, as so often in James’s late novels, there are hovering significances, implications, intimations, and each man, in his own way and in some measure despite the other, is trying to come to terms with them. The subject, in its deepest sense, can be understood as the problem of knowledge. How do we know, and what does knowing signify? Gawaine recalls that Merlin warned him once “you may one day hold the world/Between your fingers, knowing not what it is/That you are holding” (p. 236). He does not take the warning seriously, partly because he does not understand it, and partly because he is Gawaine. A portion of the impending tragedy they worry so much about is his to avert, but he has neither sufficient insight nor sufficient self-control to avert it. He “knows” on one level, but that knowledge is powerless to command his behavior. Robinson’s subject here is, further, that the problem of knowledge is complicated by the hazards
and ambiguities of a personal relationship. Dagonet, to Gawaine's discomfort, seems to know the more, but both his mood and his statements are enigmatic. Despite mutual affection and respect, neither can wholly trust the other. The function of their dialogue is to introduce Merlin as a diminished but still powerful man. Robinson's method is thus essentially oblique: we are told that Merlin must be extraordinary because two obviously intelligent men, and according to them all of Camelot, are preoccupied with him.

Section 2 employs the same devices and serves the same functions, presenting Lamorak, Bedivere, and Kay talking together of Merlin and of the state of Arthur's kingdom. The relationship between the three is strained and uncertain; the fact that Robinson simply presents them in this way suggests that for him the inadequacy of people to one another approaches being a permanent human fact. The constant threat of violence that we find in Malory has been transmuted into a constant awareness of vulnerability to others. Robinson also continually acknowledges what power emotions have in human experience. A very simple example may briefly suggest how much account he takes of feelings:

Sir Lamorak, the man of oak and iron,
Had with him now, as a care-laden guest,
Sir Bedivere, a man whom Arthur loved,
As he had loved no man save Lancelot. (p. 241)

He characterizes Bedivere in terms of his capacity to sympathize as well as his capacity to inspire love. And Robinson, with an irony that is both structural and native to his thought, proceeds to challenge the happy efficacy of love. Arthur has best loved Lancelot, but, as we all know, Lancelot has betrayed him. This kind of qualification works structurally in that a statement of sorts is often made, and a various number of subsequent lines are devoted either to qualifying or challenging it. In the section as a whole this penchant for alternation and qualification works itself out in the three men's differing loyalties and judgments: Lamorak condemns Arthur; Bedivere, Lancelot; while Sir Kay sympathizes with Guinevere. Each is trying to explain and understand what has happened, and because of inevitable bias and a limited perspective, each is partial.
Section 3 first shows us Arthur and Merlin, then Arthur and Dagonet. It includes ethical evaluations that are both more stern and more comprehensive than anything that preceded them, but to make those moral judgments—to be explicitly rational—is only a part of the complex purpose of the section. The personal relationships Robinson shows have their own dynamics, since Robinson knows a man can still love and need someone he judges harshly. There is a pattern common to the section and to both relationships: Arthur asks his friends for help, and their response unavoidably falls short of the need. Neither Merlin nor Dagonet is or can be adequate to give the help for which Arthur asks. Each person is then left alone, trying to accept an inevitable human failure. This pattern of need—expressed and unfulfilled—is dominant in both poems.

Further, in the passages describing Arthur and Merlin we discover a powerful dialectic between reason and emotion. Although they apparently understand what they have done and what that means, neither has found tranquillity or full acceptance. Each man is deeply affectionate toward the other, and each is uncompromisingly hard on the other. And the ground for their mutual criticism is that each has surrendered to his emotions, and that the surrender has been demeaning or corrupting. Arthur says that this is a world

where you yourself—God save us!—
Have gone down smiling to the smaller life
That you and your incongruous laughter called
Your living grave. God save us all, Merlin,
When you, the seer, the founder, and the prophet,
May throw the gold of your immortal treasure
Back to the God that gave it, and then laugh
Because a woman has you in her arms. (p. 251)

Robinson appears to hold Merlin superior to Arthur largely because he seems better able to understand and accept fallibility—his own as well as that of others. Of the prospect of the Grail experience he says

I shall see no Grail,
Nor would I have it otherwise. I saw
Too much, and that was never good for man.
The man who goes alone too far goes mad—
In one way or another. God knew best,
And he knows what is coming yet for me.
I do not ask. Like you, I have enough. (p. 254)
The remainder of the section shows Arthur in great pain; though he has claimed that he has had “enough,” he has not yet been able to accept necessity. The remainder of the poem shows that even Merlin has more to learn and more to suffer. Painful experience, apparently, is completed only by death. Sections 4 through 6 deal with the love affair between Merlin and Vivian. They contain a few passages that beautifully describe a powerful and present love. This represents the only real attempt in Robinson’s poems, apart from *Tristram*, to render love while it is in full flower, and it is worth noting again that Robinson first describes the situation that is the beginning of the end of the love affair. Section 4 begins with apprehension on Vivian’s part and a statement of Merlin’s that is decidedly ominous:

“He said he would come back, and so he will.
He will because he must, and he is Merlin,
The master of the world—or so he was:
And he is coming back again to me
Because he must and I am Vivian.
It’s all as easy as two added numbers:
Some day I’ll hear him ringing at the gate,
As he rang on that morning in the spring,
Ten years ago; and I shall have him then
Forever. He shall never go away
Though kings come walking on their hands and knees
To take him on their backs.” When Merlin came,
She told him that, and laughed; and he said strangely:
“Be glad or sorry, but no kings are coming.
Not Arthur, surely; for now Arthur knows
That I am less than Fate.” (p. 259)

We can think of this as a framework, but we can also see how it reflects Robinson’s characteristic habit of imagining the happy, positive periods of life through a perspective of loss and mortality. Perhaps this perspective allows him to release for once those powerful emotional depths we usually see more obliquely. Vivian recalls for Merlin her earlier hopes about their life together:

Said I, ‘when this great Merlin comes to me,
My task and avocation for some time
Will be to make him willing, if I can,
To teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom.’
For I have eaten to an empty shell,
After a weary feast of observation
Among the glories of a tinsel world
That had for me no glory till you came,
A life that is no life. Would you go back
To Camelot?”—Merlin shook his head again,
And the two smiled together in the sunset. (p. 267)

As in these lines, we are kept aware that Broceliande is a retreat, that it represents wilful isolation from the world of power and responsibility, and that it is in important ways unnatural (if one assumes that to live in a society and to be part of a social organism is natural). Anything so willed is vulnerable to the reality that is bound to intrude.

Section 5 begins with the consummation of their love and ends with the event that forebodes its end: Merlin’s return with Dagonet to Camelot. At its best it is a thoroughly convincing description of two people entirely together, each satisfied with defining himself in terms of the other:

With a long-kindling gaze that caught from hers
A laughing flame, and with a hand that shook
Like Arthur’s kingdom, Merlin slowly raised
A golden cup that for a golden moment
Was twinned in air with hers; and Vivian,
Who smiled at him across their gleaming rims,
From eyes that made a fuel of the night
Surrounding her, shot glory over gold
At Merlin, while their cups touched and his trembled.
(p. 267)

The descriptions can be warm, almost relaxed, occasionally approaching a gentle playfulness that Robinson seldom manages elsewhere:

She looked up at him till his way was lost
Again in the familiar wilderness
Of night that love made for him in her eyes,
And there he wandered as he said he would;
He wandered also in his prison-yard,
And, when he found her coming after him,
Beguiled her with her own admonishing
And frowned upon her with a fierce reproof
That many a time in the old world outside
Had set the mark of silence on strong men—
Whereat she laughed, not always wholly sure,
Nor always wholly glad, that he who played
So lightly was the wizard of her dreams. (p. 281)

The subject is not one that can sustain extensive treatment:
neither ecstasy nor fulfillment lend themselves readily to verbal expression. And Robinson simply indicates that the wholeness of their relationship endured for a long time—an indication immediately followed by the fatal impingement of the outside world:

And so for years, till ten of them were gone,—
Ten years, ten seasons, or ten flying ages—
Fate made Broceliande a paradise,
By none invaded, until Dagonet,
Like a discordant, awkward bird of doom,
Flew in with Arthur's message. (p. 282)

The last lines of the section ring with the somber tones so much more characteristic of Robinson and depend upon his sense of how deeply aware his lovers are of each other's feelings:

She had not even asked him not to go;
For it was then that in his lonely gaze
Of helpless love and sad authority
She found the gleam of his imprisoned power,
That Fate withheld; and, pitying herself,
She pitied the fond Merlin she had changed,
And saw the Merlin who had changed the world.

(pp. 282-3)

Section 6 describes, not the degeneration of their love, but their recognition that forces beyond them have so fundamentally intruded that they can no longer believe it will answer and endure. The situation is Robinson's invention; he imagines a two-year period between Merlin's return from Camelot and the time he leaves Broceliande. Section 6 represents his growing awareness during this period of time that the end of his life is near and that he must leave Vivian. The relationship between the two becomes similar to the other relationships Robinson has described, but it is more poignant because he has shown it as such a different sort of thing. They suspect and hurt each other, not deliberately but in the nature of things. Inspired by a new awareness of mortality, doubts, self-doubts, and loneliness possess them. The conversations between the two reveal their fear that total candor would be disrupting; they instinctively retreat from admitting to one another what they feel to be the full truth. The pattern of the section is a movement from flawed solidarity to separation; at another level it is a movement toward an acceptance not yet achieved. A few simple lines can suggest the poignance that Robinson achieves:
He drew her slowly into his embrace
And held her there, but when he kissed her lips
They were as cold as leaves and had no answer;
For Time had given him then, to prove his words,
A frozen moment of a woman’s life. (p. 297)

The first part of section 7 describes an encounter between Gawaine and Bedivere, who are joined briefly by Dagonet. Bedivere unsuccessfully urges Gawaine not to push Arthur to war against Lancelot: Gawaine is failing Bedivere, and both are failing Arthur. These passages again reveal that the counsel of reason is repeatedly inadequate to the demands of the emotions. Human relationships, which are all they have, are perilous and incomplete. Dagonet the fool describes the dilemma of Arthur’s kingdom with the irony fundamental to Robinson:

When all are rational or rickety,
There may be no more war. But what’s here now?
Lancelot loves the Queen, and he makes war
Of love; the King, being bitten to the soul
By love and hate that work in him together,
Makes war of madness; Gawaine hates Lancelot,
And he, to be in tune, makes war of hate;
Modred hates everything, yet he can see
With one damned illegitimate small eye
His father’s crown, and with another like it
He sees the beauty of the Queen herself;
He needs the two for his ambitious pleasure,
And therefore he makes war of his ambition;
And somewhere in the middle of all this
There’s a squeezed world that elbows for attention.
(pp. 301-2)

The second part of the section, and the last part of the poem shows us Dagonet with Merlin, and they speculate together about the Camelot that lies at their feet. Again Robinson dwells upon their particular relationship and their personal attempts to come to terms with their experience. They both hurt each other—Merlin by speaking in ways Dagonet cannot understand, and Dagonet by almost taunting Merlin with Vivian. Still, they need each other’s help, fragile as it is; they accept that fact, and we see them last together:

They arose,
And, saying nothing, found a groping way
Down through the gloom together. Fiercer now,
The wind was like a flying animal
In neither *Merlin* nor in *Lancelot* is Robinson interested even in making a footnote of his protagonists' deaths. He writes of hard-won understanding brought to bear so strongly upon conduct that it results in renunciation, and the anguish of the renunciation is brilliantly captured:

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But I shall see
No more the lady Vivian. Let her love
What man she may, no other love than mine
Shall be an index of her memories.
I fear no man who may come after me,
And I see none. I see her, still in green,
Beside the fountain. I shall not go back.
We pay for going back; and all we get
Is one more needless ounce of weary wisdom
To bring away with us. (p. 311)
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It may seem disingenuous to claim that death does not conclude these poems. In *Merlin* it is imminent. For Lancelot, an undefined spiritual quest is to follow his rejecting all the known and loved, while Guinevere appears to be an essentially unre­ligious novice. She says to Lancelot,

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I shall not be alone.
And I shall tell myself that you are seeing
All that I cannot see. For the time now,
What most I see is that I had no choice.
And that you came to me. (p. 445)
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We are not convinced that there is anything in the future for them, and Robinson's heaviest emphasis falls upon their understanding of the past, rather than their hope or despair for the future. Merlin's renunciation, like Guinevere's and to some extent Lancelot's, is inspired by his determined realization of the inevitable limits of his life. Theirs will seem to many a gray triumph, but it is a triumph nevertheless. And it is essentially on this note that Robinson ends his poems.