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What Ever Happened to Tristram?

by NANCY CAROL JOYNER

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S most popular poem was *Tristram*. In 1927 it gained for him his third Pulitzer Prize, an estimated \$15,000 in royalties, his name for once on the best seller lists, and the sort of public acclaim that has never been awarded him since.¹ The phenomenon of its selling over 57,000 copies in the first year is due partially to its being a Literary Guild selection, a gamble by Carl Van Doren that succeeded. Although few reviewers were willing to agree with Van Doren that it was "the greatest poem yet written . . . by an American," they nevertheless paid more attention to it than to any other single volume by Robinson.²

Tristram also became the touchstone for the seven subsequent volumes published by Robinson. *Cavender's House*, *The Glory of the Nightingales*, *Matthias at the Door*, *Nicodemus*, *Talifer*, *Amaranth*, and *King Jasper* frequently were judged against the acknowledged masterpiece. *Cavender's House*, which immediately followed *Tristram*, suffered most by comparison. Although it received elaborate attention and was generally highly regarded, the consensus was that it lacked the color and vitality of the earlier work. Carty Ranck, one of Robinson's staunchest supporters, found *Matthias at the Door* to be "quite the best poem written since *Tristram*."³ Later he found *Amaranth* to be "the finest achievement since *Tristram*."⁴ *Nicodemus* was variously praised for using the same method as *Tristram* and denigrated as "far below the level of *Tristram*."⁵ Although there were dissenting opinions about all the later poems, the general view was that *Tristram* was the supreme poem of America's most significant poet.

In Carl Van Doren's laudatory review of *Tristram*, he predicted that the poem would be read fifty years from the time of its publication. Now that fifty years have passed, it is clear that this prognosis has not proven true, for today there are relatively few readers of *Tristram*. The longest of the long poems, its forty-four hundred lines make it over

1. Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (London: Methuen & Co. [1948]), pp. 227-28.

2. "The Roving Critic," *The Century Magazine*, CXIV (1927), 255-56.

3. "Four People Caught in the Meshes of Fate," *Boston Evening Transcript*, October 3, 1931, Book Section, p. 8.

4. "An American Poet in Nightmare Land," *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 26, 1934, Section III, p. 2.

5. Johnstone Beech, "Nicodemus," *The Churchman*, CXLVI (1932), 5; and Fanny Butcher, "E. A. Robinson Presents New Book of Poems," *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1932, p. 8.

twice as long as most of the others and comprise one-tenth of Robinson's total output.⁶ This extraordinary length has discouraged readers, and the lack of readers has partially accounted for the general low regard for the poem today and the concomitant scarcity of criticism. Less critical attention has been paid to *Tristram* than to "Richard Cory," one of the celebrated early poems of the Tilbury Town group upon which Robinson's reputation now rests.⁷ Although *Tristram* was considered Robinson's best poem during his lifetime, his stature as a poet today exists in spite of, rather than because of it, or of any of the thirteen book length poems.

After Robinson's death his reputation rapidly declined, and while high regard for some of the short poems has been recovered, *Tristram* has not fared so well. A 1966 dissertation devoted exclusively to the Arthurian trilogy, for instance, concludes that the three poems were unsuccessful because "the material is inappropriate to Robinson's abilities."⁸ Nevertheless, there has been considerable scholarship on *Tristram*, either because it is too important to Robinson's biography to ignore or because a study of the Arthurian trilogy makes such a convenient package. The purpose of this essay is briefly to survey that scholarship, which falls into three categories: source studies, comparisons between *Tristram* and the other modern treatments of the legend and the other two Arthurian poems by Robinson, and, running a poor third, analysis of the poem itself, emphasizing either the structure or the characterization.

In 1927 Lucius Beebe published a thirty page treatise on all three Arthurian poems in which he attempted to trace sources, compare the poem with other modern poets' treatment, and provide textual analysis for them all.⁹ Other studies have been more thorough and more sophisticated. Charles Cestre's introduction to Robinson seems somewhat inflated now, but in 1930 it was a model of scholarly restraint.¹⁰ It points out some of the sources of the Arthurian trilogy and emphasizes Robinson's admirable divergence from the early German, French, and English versions. Most notable of the changes is Robinson's omitting the love potion common to the earlier versions, but there are other changes, such as Robinson's having Andred kill Tristram and making Mark a sympathetic figure. More recently, Charles T. Davis, in "Robinson's Road to Camelot," and Laurence Perrine's "The Sources of Robinson's

6. For tabulation of length and kind of Robinson's poems, see Floyd Stovall, "Edwin Arlington Robinson in Perspective," in *Essays on American Literature in Honor of Jay B. Hubbell*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1968), 258.

7. Nancy Carol Joyner, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), p. viii.

8. Patricia O'Donnell Ewers, "Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram: E. A. Robinson's Poems of Man's Dilemma," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Loyola University, p. 196.

9. *Edwin Arlington Robinson and the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dunster House Bookshop, 1927), 30 pp.

10. *An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 230 pp.

Arthurian Poems," examine the sources in detail.¹¹ Davis observes that Malory, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Wagner are the most important sources, while Perrine documents thirteen influences on the trilogy. These studies emphasize Robinson's thorough knowledge of earlier versions and his own individualistic treatment of them.

Modern writers with which he is compared include Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne, and Hardy, who, Carl Weber tells us, was working on *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* during Robinson's visit to him in 1923.¹² But Robinson is most often compared to Tennyson. In 1930 Emily Pipkin noted that the most popular view of the Arthurian characters was the Tennysonian one, in spite of the major changes Robinson had made.¹³ In her dissertation, *The MAKARIS of Camelot*, Celia Morris argues that Robinson's treatment is more subjective than Tennyson's.¹⁴ In a recent article Perrine sees the difference between the two a matter of legalism versus situation ethics.¹⁵

Comparisons of *Tristram* to the other two Arthurian poems by Robinson are numerous. Although Cestre claimed that "the *Tristram* . . . deserves for its stately structure, its dramatic force and its finish of expression to be considered as the principal and commanding part of the trilogy on the Arthurian legend," most subsequent critics have disagreed.¹⁶ Yvor Winters, never one to equivocate, maintained that none of the Arthurian poems could equal the shorter poems in aesthetic quality and that *Tristram* was the least satisfactory of the three.¹⁷ Nathan Comfort Starr, in his book *King Arthur Today*, also finds *Tristram* less well written than the other two.¹⁸ Chard Powers Smith, who gets the title of his Robinson biography, *Where the Light Falls*, from *Lancelot*, insists that that poem is the most significant one in the entire canon.¹⁹ Louis O. Coxe, in *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry*, argues for *Merlin* as the most interesting of the three. "The scenes between Merlin and Vivian have wit, high color, and a sense of actuality," he says, but misses those qualities in *Tristram*, a poem which fails because the passion of the lovers "must be shown and Robinson does not show it."²⁰

One difference between *Tristram* and the other two Arthurian poems is that *Merlin* and *Lancelot* can and have been read as symbolic com-

11. *Colby Library Quarterly*, X (1974), 336-46; and *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1969), pp. 88-105.

12. "The Sound of Cornish Waves Cold Upon Cornish Rocks," *The Colby Mercury*, VI (1938), 215-16.

13. "The Arthur of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *The English Journal*, XIX (1930), 183-95.

14. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, City University of New York, 360 pp.

15. "Tennyson and Robinson: Legalistic Moralism vs. Situation Ethics," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VIII (1969), 416-33.

16. "Le Tristan d'Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Revue Anglo-Americaine*, V (1927), 110.

17. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions Books, 1946), p. 61.

18. (Gainesville: Univ. of Florida Press, 1954), pp. 21-39.

19. (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 235.

20. (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 136.

mentary on the Great War, as *Tristram* cannot. Robinson himself will not allow such an interpretation, as he has explained in a letter: "In writing *Tristram* I was merely telling a story, using the merest outline of the old legend. Perhaps I should say adopting rather than using. There isn't much for you to write about it except in the way of general criticism. There is no symbolic significance in it, although there is a certain amount in *Merlin* and *Lancelot*, which were suggested by the world war."²¹ In spite of Robinson's saying there is not much to write about, critics such as Frederick I. Carpenter and John Hurt Fisher have placed it in the Robinson canon relative to his Emersonian transcendentalism on the one hand and as a representative of the chivalric dilemma on the other.²²

Textual analyses have tended to emphasize the structure of the poem. Cestre was the first to call attention to the balanced, classical form. Other examinations include that of Wallace Anderson, who points out that the poem "contains two interlocking stories, each with its own Isolt and each with its dominant image that takes on symbolic force as the poem progresses."²³

Other studies focus on Robinson's characterizations. Louise Dauner includes the Isolts in her article on the female character types, "The Pernicious Rib."²⁴ A. M. Sampley has observed that *Tristram* and Captain Craig are Robinson's two most individualistic heroes, who do not act on the basis of what society expects.²⁵ Jacob Adler has found Robinson's portrait of Gawaine in all three poems to be exceptional.²⁶ Hoyt C. Franchere, in the introduction to Robinson in the Twayne series, observes that the two principal characters in *Tristram* "reach the heights of Robinson's finest creations, but that the lesser characters are also admirably drawn, especially Mark and Morgan le Fay."²⁷

The most recent dissertation touching the subject, written by Louise Mulligan in 1975, examines *Tristram* from an autobiographical point of view.²⁸ Although Chard Power Smith's book in 1965 takes the thesis that all the poems with a triangular love element as a principal structural device reflect the great tragedy in Robinson's life, his losing Emma Shepherd to his brother Herman, no one has heretofore examined *Tristram* from the biographical perspective with care.

21. *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 160.

22. "Tristram the Transcendent," *The New England Quarterly*, XI (1938), 501-23; and "Edwin Arlington Robinson and the Arthurian Tradition," in *Studies in Language and Literature in Honour of Margaret Schlauch*, eds. Mieczyslaw Brahmer, et. al. (Warsaw: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1966), pp. 117-31.

23. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 141.

24. "The Pernicious Rib: E. A. Robinson's Concept of Feminine Character," *American Literature*, XV (1943), 139-58.

25. "The Power or the Glory: The Dilemma of E. A. Robinson," *Colby Library Quarterly*, IX (1971), 357-66.

26. "Robinson's 'Gawaine,'" *English Studies*, XXXIX (1958), 1-20.

27. *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 129.

28. "Mythology and Autobiography in E. A. Robinson's *Tristram*," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Massachusetts, 1975, 231 pp.

Many other areas of investigation are open to scholars who are interested in this poem. Relatively little attention has been given the language, for instance. The image patterns that develop involving the birds and the sea have been noted, but they have not been studied thoroughly. Virtually no examination of the strong pattern involving beasts has been undertaken. It is obvious with even a cursory look at the poem that it teems with metaphorical beasts—wolves, cats, tigers, goats, and lizards are only a few of the beasts used to delineate a character or an action. Other areas of study that have been neglected are the narrative point of view and the attitude toward religion expressed in the poem.

Robinson once replied to William Rose Benét's query about his best work, "You might say . . . that *Merlin*, *Lancelot* and *Tristram*, taken together as a sort of unit—appear to me as likely to last as anything I have written."²⁹ *Tristram*, with all the Robinson canon, has lasted, but it clearly deserves more attention than it has received.

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29. Quoted in *Uncollected Poems and Prose of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1975), p. 150.