

TEL ARBRE, TEL FRUIT: The Tristan as τραγωδία

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In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell makes a profound and provocative statement:

Everywhere, no matter what the sphere of interest (whether religious, political, or personal), the really creative acts are represented as those deriving from *some sort of dying to the world*; and what happens in the internal of the hero's nonentity, so that *he comes back as one reborn*, ... (Campbell 35–36; italics mine)

Although it is disputable whether every hero would fit into this category, Campbell's *aperçu* seems to resonate the essence of the tragic hero. Is it for nothing that in tracing the origin of tragedy one alludes to the seasonal and cyclic death and rebirth of Dionysus:

... dont le corps, déchiré et bouilli par les Titans à l'instigation d'Héra, fut reconstruit et revivifié par sa grand-mère Rhéa – ou, selon une variante que recueille Diodore, par sa mère Déméter (Capellán 32, n. 60).

Going back to an even more primeval level, Robert Graves makes reference to the perennial birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year and his losing battle with the God of the Waning Year, all for the love of the capricious and all powerful White Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out (Graves 24). Male human sacrifice was an integral part of her worship (Graves 99). It would seem that at the very core of tragedy one finds the fatal twins of death and resurrection. We suggest that any definition of tragedy that does not take this *sine qua non* into account is missing the mark. And that includes Aristotle's definition¹ which, like others after him, tends to describe the outer trappings of tragedy, although the purgation of pity and fear implies a type of metaphorical death out of which the spectator arises anew.² The concerns, albeit legitimate, with *peripetia*, *anagnorisis*, and *hamartia* really do not go to the heart of the matter, it seems to us.

¹ "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear, effecting the proper of these emotions" (Butcher 23). Not unnaturally, Aristotle is describing tragedy as it existed at that historical moment.

² Krishna Gopal Srivastava understands this purgation as an aesthetic catharsis (Srivastava 182).

Such a superficial approach has led G. K. Bhat to say that cannot speak of a tragedy /Bhat 6) since he could not perceive any underlying pattern. Also missing the mark is the balanced attraction and repulsion of Richard H Palmer (p.11), as well as the involvement and detachment of the audience according to T. J. Scheff (p. 177).³ When Adnan K. Abdulla hypothesizes that the two essentials of tragedy are (1.) emotional arousal, leading to (2.) intellectual understanding (Abdulla 118), it would appear that he is approaching the quiddity of tragedy.⁴ As found in Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan sums it up in this refrain:

Isot ma drue, Isot mamie
en vus ma mort, en vus ma vie!

We suggest that it is precisely this antithetical union of life and death that defines the essence of tragedy, whatever superficial external forms may cover the tragic root.

One is therefore not surprised when Roberto Ruiz Capellán sees a similarity between Tristan and Dionysus:

... Tristan, qui paraît, surtout depuis l'ingestion du philtre, partager avec Dionysos un nombre considérable de traits, ... (Capellán 12).

Both Tristan and Dionysus come from another land (Capellán 16). As the Greek god is closely associated with the renewal of Nature, Capellán notes that the pine presides at the first scene of Béroul and Marie de France makes this connection even more explicit in her *Chievrefoil* (Capellán 22). Dionysus is delivered from the fire that destroyed his mother; Tristan escapes from being burned alive after he is caught *in delicto flagrante*, so to speak (Capellán 29). With justification, Capellán sees a parallel between the wine of Bacchus and the vin herbé of Tristan:

Le vin et l'enthousiasme bachique, d'une part, le philtre et l'amour, de l'autre, créent ce rêve, aspire à combler les désirs et l'espérance que refuse de donner la vie éveillée (Capellán 61).

Capellán sees Tristan's recovery after being wounded by the Morholt as a second birth, similar to the Dionysian rebirth (Capellán 32). The cyclic conception he finds in both the disappearance/reappearance of Dionysus (Capellán 94) and the beroulian summer solstice betokening renewal (Capellán 113) recalls our own study "Circle as Structure: the *Tristan* of Thomas," in which it is pointed out that the primeval life-death-rebirth cycle has been replaced in the *Tristan* by a similar "life-near – death-'rebirth'" cycle (P. M. Thomas 43).

It is precisely this tragic element that sets the *Tristan* apart from the other medieval romances:

³ These critics do have important things to say about tragedy, but they do not seem to get to the essence of what tragedy is.

⁴ We find it curious that G. K. Bhat states that tragedy demands a different set of values than theology and metaphysics as a way of explaining the paucity of tragedy in Sanskrit drama (Bhat 106).

It is significant that no other medieval romance ends in death: instead of culminating in a feast at King Arthur's court, the Tristan story ends ... with the hero's death and union with his ideal (Lewes 2)

Joan Ferrante is not incorrect in stating:

The dominant characteristic of Thomas's hero is his predisposition to tragedy and suffering which he inherits from his parents and the desire for death ... (Ferrante 80).

It seems, however, that Tony Hunt exceeds prudence in saying that, so far as the lovers are concerned, "it is not *fin'amor* but *thanatos* which dominates this poem" (Hunt 50). Although death apparently has the last word, the lovers are nonetheless "born again" as an exemplum in the minds and hearts of all sympathetic lovers (Kunstman 184):

Pur essample issi ai fait
Pur l'estoire embelir,
que as amanz deve plaizir, ...
Aveir em poissent grant confort.
(Wind, vv. 831-33, 836)

Would it not be more precise to say that in the *Tristan* love and death are equally dominating forces. Why else would Gottfried von Strassburg call Isolde Tristan's "levender têt" (v. 18472)? The tale of Tristan and Isolde would appear to illustrate that dictum from the *Canticum Canticorum*: "fortis est ut mors dilectio"⁵ (8.6). In discussing Tristan's combat with the Morholt, Michel Cazenave touches on a crucial point:

Aussi je me demande soudain, et dans la profondeur même de la légende, si l'ensemble de l'épreuve ne représente pas pour Tristan quelque initiation spirituelle où les puissances de mort et de vie ... sont les grands protagonistes du drame (Cazenave 36).

Almost as in a Greek tragedy, Life and Death are in a deadlock struggle fought on the playing field of Humanity. Oe should we say Love and Death? Would not Tristan and Isolde agree with Bernart de Ventadorn when he says

Qu'eu no posc viure ses amar
que d'amor sui engenoitz⁶
I cannot live without love,
for I was engendered by love.⁷

⁵ In this context the instinctual "amor" would be more appropriate than the intellectual "dilectio," although "amor" is avoided in the Bible because of the potential meaning of uninhibited passion.

⁶ "Can lo boschatges es floritz" (Lazar, vv. 15-16).

⁷ Nichols 158.

When the fated lovers drank the philter, did they not "die" to their former life, as it were, with their place in a Christian society only to be "reborn" to a more primitive world of ineluctable passions?

Voilà Tristan et Iseut dans une joie qui les ravit de l'humanité et de ses calculs, de ses codes, de ses lois, ... (Canzenave 76)

Or as Joan Tasker Grimbert puts it:

... the dreadful split engendered by a conflict of two loyalties, each demanding priority like two warring liegelords (Grimbert 93).

The insoluble conflict of this tragic tale is apparent in these words of Daniel Poirion:

Il est difficile de ramener les idées morales évoquées par les mots du poème à une doctrine claire et cohérente (Poirion 31).

From the viewpoint of a lawless love, the wild wood of Morrois found in Thomas and Beroul is truly more appropriate than the idealized crystal cave of Gottfried. Does not Tristan "die" socially when he plays the fool in public only to be "reborn" in private when he can possess Isolde as her lover?

Dans les *Folie Tristan*, le héros fait semblant d'être fou pour tester et enfin posséder l'être aimé. Dans la *Folie Tristan* de Berne, le narrateur explique clairement que Tristan se déguise en personnage humble parce que l'amour l'exige: ... (Looper 346).

For us, who live in a post-Romantic era, much of the significance of Tristan's "humility" is lost. In the medieval age, your identity was established by your place in society much more than now. By disguising himself so humbly, Tristan really becomes a pariah. The same is true when he plays, not the aristocratic harp, but the lowly rote or vielle (Looper 347-350).

By way of contrast, let us consider the *Roman de Tristan en prose* (RTP). Here the tragic element is eminently missing. Instead of being a wanderer between two worlds, in neither of which he feels completely at home (Ruhe 157), Tristan now lives in a world where fatality is almost non-existent (Curtis 174). The essentially optimistic point of view of the RTP is in contrast to the tragic tradition of the poetic *Tristan* (Caulkins 91). Instead of two equal conflicting forces, what we find are parallel lives, lived separately, and private passions are sacrificed to the public social life (Kristenson 249). The balance has shifted. In other words, the *Roman de Tristan en prose* is truly prosaic. It lost its "frange d'ombre" (Baumgartner 24).

En éliminant le conflit entre la loi morale et la passion, le prosateur éliminait en effet du même coup les crises intérieures et plaçait la lutte sur un terrain purement extérieur (Blanchard 19).

The unidimensional RTP is a universe of facts, immediately accessible to the reader (Baumgartner 24-25). It is a world where the conflict is external, i.e., combat between two knights, not the tragic psychological conflict between love and honor.

One may wonder whether the tragic aspect of the *Tristan* could not be found in more immediate medieval sources. And, here, one must be perspicacious, for, as Philippe Walter stresses:

...la tradition tristanienne pourrait se comparer à un terrain géologique aux multiples sédiments. De nombreuses strates se superposent: les plus récentes recouvrent les plus anciennes et s'infiltrent même en elles (Walter 14–15).

For this reason certain critics like A. Varvaro⁸ have denied the existence of an ur-Tristan. As a result of his study of the *Folies Tristan* of Berne and Oxford, Jean-Charles Huchet concludes that the *Tristan* has multiple origins, not just one (Huchet 148).⁹ In sifting through the tristanian "strata," one is at first not cognizant of any tragic element. The name Tristan, for example, seems to go back to Drustan, the diminutive of Drust¹⁰ (Bromwich 329). In the Welsh *Triads* (12th century) he is mentioned four times: triad 19, where he is described as an enemy-subduer,¹¹ triad 21, where he is among the battle-diademed men,¹² triad 71, where he is mentioned as one of the lovers of Britain,¹³ triad 26, where he is depicted as a

⁸ "La teoria dell'archetipo tristaniano," *Romania* 88 (1967), 13–18.

⁹ This more recent view is in contrast to those critics who, like Maurice Delbouille, would place the "roman primitif" a little after 1165 (Delbouille 433). James Carney's dating of the *Tristan* as 800 is also not looked upon favorably. Pace S. Eisner and his ill-fated book *The Tristan Legend: a study in sources* (1969).

¹⁰ The forms in -i- may have been due to the influence of Old Welsh Tristan (where -i- would have been pronounced as a), a feature a French writer would have scarcely known (Neil Thomas 3).

¹¹ Tri Galouyd Enys Prydein:

Greidyawl Galouyd mab E(n)vael Adrann,
a Gueir Gwrhytvavr
a Drystan mab Tallwch

Three Enemy-Subduers of the Island of Britain:

Greidiawl Enemy Subduer son of E(n)vael Adrann,
and Gueir of Great Valor,
and Drystan son of Tallwch. (Bromwich 33)

¹² Tri Thalelthyavc Cat Enys Prydein:

Drystan mab Tallwch,
a Hueil mab Caw,
a Chei mab Kenyr Keinuaruawc.

Ac un oed talelthyavc arnadunt wynteu ell tri:

Bedwyr mab Bedravc oed hvnnv.

Three Battle-Diademed Men of the Island of Britain:

Drystan son of Tallwch,
and Hueil son of Caw,
and Cai son of Cenyr of the Fine Beard.

And one was diademed above the three of them:

that was Bedwyr son of Bedrawe. (Bromwich 37)

¹³ Tri serchawc ynys Brydein:

(cynon) mab Kyndo (am Forwyd ferch Uryen);
a Chaswallavn mab Beli; (am Fflur feich Vugnach Gorr);
a Drystan (mab T(r)allwch am Essylt gwreig Mar(a)ch y ewythyne)

powerful swineherd seeking a rendez-vous with Essylt.¹⁴ In the *Mabinogion*¹⁵ Tristan is mentioned as one of King Arthur's counselors in the "Dream of Rhonabwy" (Lambert 203). Although various critics have seen similarities between the *Tristan*, on one hand, and certain Old Irish and Persian romances,¹⁶ on the other (Grimbert xvi), the essentially tragic nature of the *Tristan* seems conspicuous by its absence (Trindade 77). Nonetheless, the link with Arthuriana may provide us with a significant clue. In *Bran the Blessed* Helaine Newstead notes that in Arthurian literature what we find is a debased mythology, most especially as regards to Bran whose mythological nature is generally conceded (Newstead 17). It would seem that the various wounded Grail kings, e.g. the Fisher King, Perlesvaus, Bron in *Didot Perceval*, are avatars of the wounded Bran (Newstead 168). Nor is it insignificant that Chrestien's Fisher King, Anfortas, and Baudemagur's wounded host in the Vulgate *Lancelot* are wounded in the thigh (Newstead 179), for that placement has erotic overtones (Meister 78). One recalls that Tristan is wounded by a poisoned spear in the same part of the body. Bran is killed, but in a way he lives on in a prophetic head. This is not to mention that he owns a magic cauldron of regeneration (Newstead 19). The tragic root of death/resurrection we found elsewhere seems to be present in Bran's mythology which is filtered through Arthurian literature, albeit non-mythologically.

(Bran) seems to have been associated with the world of the hereafter, or rather the underworld of fertility, ... (Spence 77–78).

Is it possible that the *Tristan* was influenced by this debased mythology through its Arthurian link? It would appear so. There are still other indications of a mythological origin. The name of the horse-eared King Mark goes back to "March ap Meirchiawn," i.e., "Horse son of Horses" (Rutherford 91). The triple wounding of Tristan in the "courtly" version is undoubtedly a reflection of the Triple Death¹⁷ exacted by Druidistic sacrifice (Rutherford 86).

... there is nothing inherently impossible in the idea that the ancient British religion and mysticism lingered in Wales and other distant

Three lovers of the Lovers of Britain:

Cynon son of Clydno (for Morfudd daughter of Urien);
and Caswallawn son of Beli (for Fflur daughter of Ugnach (?) the Dwarf);
and Drystan (son of Tallwch, for Essylt, the wife of his uncle March).
(Bromwich 189)

¹⁴ Tri Qwrduchychat Enys Prydein:

Drystan mab Tallwch, a gedwis moch March mab Meirchyawn hyt tra aeth y meichyat y erchi y Essylt dyuot y" w gynnadyli;

Three Powerful Swineherds of the Island of Britain:

Drystan son of Tallwch, who guarded the swine of March son of Meirchiawn, while the swineherd went to ask Essylt to come to a meeting with him. (Bromwich 45)

¹⁵ Edited in the 13th century, but its materials go back to the 9th and 10th centuries.

¹⁶ Old Irish: "The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne" and "The Wooing of Emer" (9th and 10th centuries); Persian: "wis and Râmin" (11th century).

¹⁷ Compare the triple aspect of St. Brigit who replaces the triple pagan goddess Brigit: mother goddess, goddess of prosperity, seasonal goddess (Sjoestedt 25).

parts of the island for many centuries after the departure of the Romans (Spence 66).

Even from a more general point of view, a marked predilection for groupings of three can be seen among the Celtic peoples from the time of their earliest records (Bromwich xiii). It is almost as if, in this "roman de la forêt et de la mer" (Cazenave 83), Tristan and Ysseult were struggling to return to an older, more primeval tradition. It is perhaps significant that Bran was probably a god of the sea (Newstead 17). Dionysus is said to have been born of the sea (Capellán 28). It is in a boat at sea that the fated lovers drink the potion. The same sea that brought them together prevents Ysseult from coming ashore in time to cure Tristan by its turbulence. In the *Tristan* the sea functions as both life and death (Cazenave 84). Although the lovers live within the framework of a Christian society, the forces of Celtic paganism appear to erupt volcanically, sweeping away everything in its path.

We have attempted to elucidate how at the core of tragedy one discovers the primeval antithesis of death/resurrection. Capellán's comparison between Dionysus and Tristan points out the essentially tragic nature of the medieval romance as did our study in that the triple wounding results ultimately in a "resurrection" on a higher level. Before that ultimate, however, there are smaller examples of "death" like the drinking of the philter whereby the lovers "die" to the ordinary world around them, like Tristan disguising himself as a fool, thereby "dying" to his social self. By contrast, the prosaic *Roman de Tristan en prose* lacks this tragic element. A comparison of the twelfth-century *Tristan* and the thirteenth-century *RTP* reminds us of the difference between Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, not a perfect comparison, but close enough to get across the point: the poetic spirit has been replaced by something more mundane.

Granted that the *Tristan* is tragic, the question still remained as to what was the source of its tragic nature. Although not easily discernible, it would seem that the debased mythology of Bran the Blessed, filtered through Arthurian literature, may have been the ultimate source of the tragic in this tale of fated lovers. Bran is "reborn" in a talismanic prophetic head, and Tristan and Ysseult live on as an exemplum in the hearts of lovers.

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