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Text and Subtext in “Merlin and the Gleam”

LINDA K. HUGHES

WITH THE PUBLICATION of Robert B. Martin’s biography of Tennyson (1980) and the first volume of Tennyson’s letters (1981), the personal substrata of Tennyson’s multilayered poems are likely to receive renewed attention. In fact, Tennyson’s poems have long intrigued readers with the psychological patterns, both public and private, embedded in them. But simply because Tennyson took such care to conceal the latter, the glint of private traces in the matrices of his texts often elicit the hottest pursuit. For example, noting the “intense privacy in Tennyson’s poetic practice,” Christopher Ricks has recently argued that “some of [the] strongest and deepest poetic reminiscences” in *In Memoriam* “are of words which only a tiny circle within the large circle of its original readers could ever have recognised and participated in.” *In Memoriam*, in other words, encloses within its public, accessible text a private subtext, “an intimate world of private allusion.”¹

In “Merlin and the Gleam,” published in 1889, Tennyson himself uncharacteristically identified a personal element in the text. The poem *qua* poem is a dramatic monologue in which the aged and dying Merlin speaks to a young mariner of the events in his life and his impending death. But according to Hallam Tennyson’s notes in the Eversley Edition, “For those who cared to know about his literary history he wrote *Merlin and the Gleam*”; “He thought that *Merlin and the Gleam* would probably be enough of biography for those friends who urged him to write about himself.”² Tennyson’s own notes to the poem in the same edition even gloss the personal symbolism of his text: “I have read that Nimuë means the ‘Gleam,’ which signifies in my poem the higher poetic imagination. Verse iv. is the early imagination; Verse v. alludes to the Pastorals” (IV, 594). If the poem is

¹“Tennyson Inheriting the Earth,” in *Studies in Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (Totowa, N.J., 1981), pp. 68–69).

²*The Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Lord Tennyson, (New York, 1908), IV, 594, 598.

personal, however, it seems to be so only in the most generalized way. Tennyson has written not “The Life—the Inner Life—of Merlin” but “The Chronicles of Merlin”; his Merlin merely relates the outer events of his life. And the chronology of the poem as it corresponds to Tennyson’s life is so obscured, so masked, that it has perplexed any reader who knows something of Tennyson’s history—including Tennyson’s own son.³

Rather than disclosing the private meaning of the poem, Tennyson’s notes on “Merlin and the Gleam” actually disguise it, diverting attention away from the true subtext and discouraging readers from taking the form of the poem seriously. For if we approach the poem as a dramatic monologue, seeing Merlin as a dramatic speaker whose peculiar linguistic patterns reveal his psyche’s inner pressures and motives, we also come upon truly personal and private meaning embedded in the text. This linguistic pattern is shored up by two other subtexts. One takes the form of private allusion such as Ricks observes in relation to *In Memoriam*. The other is a characteristic Tennysonian device: “Merlin and the Gleam” has a paired or pendant poem, “Romney’s Remorse.” Reading the two together, so that each becomes a subtext for the other, is an additional means of recovering Tennyson’s personal investment in “Merlin and the Gleam.”

Several of Tennyson’s late dramatic monologues, including “The Ancient Sage,” “Locksley Hall Sixty Years After,” and “Demeter and Persephone,” feature an old and venerable speaker addressing a young auditor and instructing that auditor in higher forms of knowledge. In “Merlin and the Gleam” as well the dramatic monologue is a containing form for a rite of initiation. The poem begins with Merlin addressing his auditor,

O young Mariner,

 You that are watching
 The gray Magician
 With eyes of wonder (ll. 1–6)

whom he proceeds to induct into the mystery of the presence and significance of “The Gleam.”⁴ The stark, simple rhymes and line lengths of the poem have all the solemnity befitting an initiation rite, and as is common to inductors, Merlin maintains an opacity regarding his personal self, identifying himself only with his ceremonial role:

³See Christopher Ricks’s headnote to the poem in *The Poems of Tennyson* (London, 1969), pp. 1412–13. All citations of Tennyson’s poetry are from this edition.

⁴A. Dwight Culler, too, notes that Merlin speaks because “what he wants is someone to carry on.” Culler also suggests that in choosing a mariner as auditor, “Tennyson deliberately wanted to recall his own Ulysses and . . . what he wants is not a young Telemachus to realize the Ideal but a young Ulysses to pursue it” (*The Poetry of Tennyson* [Yale Univ. Press, 1977], p. 253).

I am Merlin,
And I am dying,
I am Merlin
Who follow The Gleam. (ll. 7-10)

But we get a double initiation. In order to initiate his auditor, Merlin recounts his own initiation, his gradual internalization of the Gleam. In the first five stages of his life the Gleam was external to him, and Merlin was able to undertake only a passive role. The point is clear from the language of stanzas II-VI. In none of these stanzas does the word "I" appear; stanzas IV and V contain no personal pronoun at all, and the others use only "me," where Merlin is the recipient, not the agent, of action:

Mighty the Wizard
Who found me at sunrise
Sleeping, and woke me
And learned me Magic!
(st. II, ll. 11-14)

A barbarous people,
Blind to the magic,
And deaf to the melody,
Snarled at and cursed me.
(st. III, ll. 25-28)

Then, with a melody
Stronger and statelier, [the Gleam]
Led me at length
To the city and palace
Of Arthur the king.
(st. VI, ll. 62-66)

This linguistic pattern is clearly deliberate. In the trial edition of the poem, Merlin's reaction to the "barbarous people / Blind to the Magic" appeared as follows:

A demon vext me,
The light retreated,
The landskip darkened,
The melody deadened,
I heard a whisper
"Follow The Gleam." (ll. 29-34)⁵

But Tennyson revised the passage to remove Merlin's agency and transfer it to the Master: "The Master whispered / 'Follow The Gleam'" (ll. 33-34). Merlin's "Master" has the power of action, then, but above all it is the Gleam which is active, as it floats, flies, slides, and rests—on Arthur.

That, of course, is the turning point. As soon as contact with Arthur is made, the Gleam is internalized, Merlin becomes an active agent, and the first "I" appears in his account of his personal history:

Clouds and darkness
Closed upon Camelot;

⁵See Ricks's notes to the poem in *The Poems of Tennyson*, p. 1414.

Arthur had vanished
 I knew not whither,
 The king who loved me,
 And cannot die. (ll. 75–80)

It is curious that this first “I” is simultaneous with the vanishing of Arthur, as if Arthur’s disappearance were part of Merlin’s assuming active poetic agency. This consorts well with the recurrent critical view that Arthur Hallam’s death was, ironically, the greatest boon to Tennyson’s developing poetic powers, though the fusion of Arthur’s vanishing and Merlin’s assumption of linguistic, hence poetic, agency can be seen as part of the extreme compression of the poem. What matters most, at all events, is that henceforward in the poem Merlin *is* that active agent, until, in the final stanza, he hands over his agency to the young mariner:

Old and weary,
 But eager to follow,
 I saw, whenever
 In passing it glanced

 The mortal hillock,
 Would break into blossom;
 And so to the land’s
 Last limit I came. (ll. 100–110)

O young Mariner,
 Down to the haven,
 Call your companions,
 Launch your vessel,
 And crowd your canvas,
 And, ere it vanishes
 Over the margin,
 After it, follow it,
 Follow The Gleam. (ll. 124–131)

The last subject of the verb is not “I” but the implied “you,” as the young mariner, it is implied, assumes Merlin’s legacy just as he had earlier assumed Arthur’s and the Master’s legacies. There is a sad poignancy in the structure of the poem; Merlin no sooner absorbs the Gleam than he approaches death. But there is also grace and dignity in the personal homage to Arthur Hallam conveyed in the correspondence Tennyson draws between the appearance of Arthur and Merlin’s realization of the Gleam, homage embedded in a linguistic pattern so unobtrusive it functions as a subtext.

The personal reverberations of the poem grow clearer, too, if we see what “The Gleam” signifies in one of Tennyson’s sources, John Veitch’s “Merlin,” published only four months before Tennyson wrote “Merlin and the Gleam.”⁶ In certain respects Veitch’s Merlin has little to do with

⁶See Ricks’s headnote to the poem. Veitch’s poem has been identified as a source by M. W. MacCallum (*Tennyson’s Idylls and Arthurian Story from the XVth Century* [Glasgow, 1894]) and John Killham, “Tennyson and the Sinful Queen—A Corrected Impression,” *N&Q*, N.S. 5 (1958), 509. No direct evidence exists that Tennyson read Veitch. But as MacCallum remarks, “It is interesting to note, and is an indication of the interest of the subject, that in the same year

Tennyson's. As Veitch explains in his introductory note to the poem, his subject is Merlin Caledonius, distinct from the Myrdin Emrys whom Veitch links with Uther Pendragon and Arthur.⁷ Veitch's Merlin, moreover, paces a glen as the poem opens, despairing over the defeat of his people, the Cymri, and over the futility of his desire to have entire control over nature and man; at the end he is captured by herdsman who want revenge for the tempests and plagues Merlin sent against them, and who drown him in the river Tweed.

But Veitch's Merlin, like Tennyson's, is bard and prophet, and the poem, again like Tennyson's, is cast in quasi-dramatic form. Most important, "The Gleam" functions in significant and similar ways in both works. Veitch's "Gleam" is both a spirit in the noumenal sense and the actual ghost, or spirit, of Merlin's early love, called Hwimleian on earth before she died and became a gleam that appears "as a glint on the hill" (p. 26). Merlin speaks of her as

the Gleam amid the trees,
Whereon the spring had spread the apple-bloom,
Low by the river's side,—my Hwimleian,
Earth's paragon of movement and of grace,
The jewel of this heart.

.....
Ah me! the blossoms were untimely frayed,
Ne'er golden autumn theirs. (p. 26)

Though dead to the earth, Hwimleian in the form of the Gleam can still sing to and be heard by Merlin, so that he exclaims, "She has conquered death, and calls from th' unseen / To me, dim groper after truth and power, / Yet missing bliss!" (p. 28). She reappears as Merlin dies, and he calls out to the Gleam:

thou, thou
Alone art faithful unto passing death
Of this poor feeble framework of the soul
That fears the dread unknown and yearns for love,
E'en in that future baffling all our ken.
I am for ever consecrate to thee! (p. 34)

And when Merlin dies, only the voice of the Gleam is heard, which cries out, "Now we are one—one in our strength and love" (p. 35), joined forever "As life on life evolves, infinite life, / Th' unwearied process of th' eternal years" (p. 36).

One can merely hypothesize what Tennyson's response to the poem may have been. But the words of Veitch's dying Merlin and of the Gleam are

in which [the Veitch poem] appeared, the author of the *Idylls*, turning from the versions he had hitherto employed, resorted to this variant for his final poem in connection with British legend" (p. 287).

⁷*Merlin and Other Poems* (Edinburgh and London, 1889), pp. 4–5.

so close to the sentiments of *In Memoriam*⁸ that it is easy to imagine Tennyson's linking Arthur (and his death) to Merlin's internalizing the Gleam because the Gleam signified for Tennyson not only the imagination but also, as in Veitch's work, a love that transcends time and death and links kindred souls through all eternity. When, therefore, we examine the linguistic patterns of Merlin considered as a dramatic speaker, and uncover the subtext of Veitch's "Merlin," we also encounter the deeply personal expression that underlies a poem that at first seems personal only in a remarkably impersonal way.

"Merlin and the Gleam" has a final subtext, one that illuminates less Tennyson's personal relation to Hallam than his insistence that art must be connected with love and a high spiritual ideal. "Romney's Remorse," another dramatic monologue, was apparently sparked, not by the painter George Romney, but by Edward FitzGerald, whose letters were published in July, 1889. There Tennyson would have read FitzGerald's response to the painter who left his wife because Joshua Reynolds asserted that marriage was incompatible with the ideals of Art, but who, dying, crawled back to the same wife and was nursed by her until his death. As FitzGerald said, "This quiet act of hers is worth all Romney's pictures! even as a matter of Art, I am sure."⁹ Given Tennyson's hatred of "Art for Art's sake (instead of Art for Art—and—Man's sake)"—this last the title of one of Tennyson's unpublished epigrams—it is easy to understand his taking Romney for a subject. Perhaps the very fact that these revelations about Romney's private life had been made public, as well as Tennyson's finding these revelations in FitzGerald's own posthumously published letters, also attracted Tennyson to the subject; for the most readily discernible personal lines in the monologue are those devoted to the "lies" that follow the death of any prominent artist, guilty or not guilty:

⁸Early in Veitch's poem, in fact, like the poet of *In Memoriam* (Section XLVII), Merlin fears that the dead lose all memory of earthly things and are reabsorbed into a general soul:

And is it so that all are surely gone

 to Nirvana's shade,
 The formless state where nought is marked or known,
 No sense, no thought, pain, pleasure, or desire;

 Where comes not e'en a passing dream to stir
 The unconscious brain, or glint of memory
 Across the darkened past; but all is one—

 Close folded in unconscious unity?

What, then, this life of ours but pain and wreck! (pp. 16–17)

⁹Ricks, p. 1418; Tennyson affixed the relevant passage from the letters as a headnote to the poem.

Then, in the loud world's bastard judgment-day,
One truth will damn me with the mindless mob,
Who feel no touch of my temptation, more
Than all the myriad lies, that blacken round
The corpse of every man that gains a name. (ll. 114–118)

Most commentators on Tennyson's work ignore "Romney's Remorse" entirely, and it is true that the poem falls below the level of Tennyson's best work. But the monologue gains in interest when we see that it is a companion piece to "Merlin and the Gleam," which "Romney's Remorse" immediately followed in Tennyson's manuscripts (Harvard Notebook 54) and in the published editions of his poems. Merlin, with the serenity of an old sage, initiates his auditor into a higher knowledge; Romney, having failed in the ideal of art, can only confess his failings. Thus, while in "Merlin and the Gleam" the speaker is clearly the hero of the poem, and the auditor an inductee, in "Romney's Remorse" the auditor—the wife—is the heroine of the poem, and the speaker must learn what he has hitherto missed entirely.

The difference between Merlin and Romney is that one has followed a true "Master"—the "Mighty . . . Wizard"—and that the other has followed a false one: "My curse upon the Master's apothegm, / That wife and children drag an Artist down!" (ll. 36–37). Thus for Merlin art is an ennobling ideal, but for Romney it is a harlot: "This Art, that harlot-like / Seduced me from you, leaves me harlot-like, / Who love her still" (ll. 110–112). At this point we may recall the double identity of Merlin's Nimuë as the "Gleam" or as the seductive harlot of "Merlin and Vivien." It is possible to see, then, Nimuë as the operative conceptual link between "Merlin and the Gleam" and "Romney's Remorse," creating a glorified Merlin in one poem and a fallen Merlin in the other. Indeed, Tennyson would have found in Veitch's "Merlin" both the regenerate Merlin and the fallen Merlin, separated from his gleam; and the fallen Merlin sounds remarkably like Romney:

The outer seeming, not the truth itself,
Has been my portion; husk, not fruit, was mine,—
The trick of art which awes, destroys, but builds
Not for the world: when it hath passed, remain
The waste of ashes, cowering dread, despair,
The glare of power that briefly flames in space,
Its whole reward—the dazzling snare whereby
The spirit of the world leads captive souls
Whose trust is in their strength, divorced from love,
And silent working, patient thought and faith,
That move the springs of progress and of hope—
Not waited on by fame or noisy talk
Of buzzing tongues, or clamour of the crowd. (p. 29)

Just so Romney confesses to Mary:

To you my days have been a life-long lie,
Grafted on half a truth; and though you say
"Take comfort you have won the Painter's fame,"
The best in me that sees the worst in me,

And groans to see it, finds no comfort there.
 What fame? I am not Raphaël, Titian—no
 Nor even a Sir Joshua, some will cry.
 Wrong there! The painter's fame? but mine, that grew
 Blown into glittering by the popular breath,
 May float awhile beneath the sun, may roll
 The rainbow hues of heaven about it—
 There!
 The coloured bubble bursts above the abyss
 Of Darkness, utter Lethe. (ll. 40-52)

Romney, then, is also separated from the “Gleam,” and not surprisingly repudiates it: “What Artist ever yet / Could make pure light live on the canvas? Art! / Why should I so disrelish that short word?” (ll. 9-11). Only at the end does Romney apprehend a glimmer of the Gleam, and it resides without, in the very things he slighted during his career: “Human forgiveness touches heaven, and thence— / For you forgive me, you are sure of that— / Reflected, sends a light on the forgiven” (ll. 152-154). Merlin, who has internalized the Gleam, can “die rejoicing”; Romney’s only triumph is to see that the Gleam exists, but at a distance.

As a subtext to “Merlin and the Gleam,” “Romney’s Remorse” reminds us yet again of Tennyson’s dialectic propensity, one that impelled him to depict a fallen Merlin after his celebration of a triumphant one. More to the point, the connection of “Romney’s Remorse” to Veitch’s “Merlin” and “Merlin and the Gleam” helps us understand why “Art for Art’s Sake” was such anathema to Tennyson. As *In Memoriam* and “Merlin and the Gleam” show, for Tennyson art was linked to the realm of spirit, and that spirit, in turn, was identified above all with the agency of love, love of the sort Tennyson had known for Arthur Hallam. To repudiate the spiritual dimension of art, then, would in Tennyson’s eyes be to repudiate the love which meant so much to him, and which, as he tacitly announces in “Merlin and the Gleam,” had played a major formative role in his poetry. “Merlin and the Gleam” after all is a kind of “biography” and “literary history,” one that scholarly “friends” can understand if they see that the text is clarified by subtexts which tell us a very great deal about Tennyson indeed.