

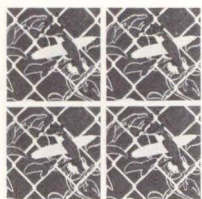


TRISTRAM'S BOOK

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The story of Tristram is one of the oldest and most frequently retold tales that has come down to us from Western European literature. One can take it from this survival that the story has some powerful and fundamental truth — lies seldom outlive their immediate purpose, and nonsense decays even more quickly.

In retelling the tale, I've ransacked it — just as all my predecessors did — to draw from it whatever it can speak to in my own time. If any violence is involved it is not against the tradition of poetry, but rather against the novelty so pursued by my generation of artists. History as a progressive, light-creating force may be an illusion, but that doesn't disqualify the past as an educational utility. It should, in fact, renew it. The tradition of poetry can nourish us in the experiential loneliness of these times, in which the search for novelty has stripped language of much of its invisible resonance and threatens to remove everything but style from the contents of our art.

The story of Tristram (and that of Isolde — although her story remains to be properly told after ten centuries) is one of the tension between sexual passion and public duty. This is Malory's real subject, and one which is central to English literature in general. Tristram and Isolde are victimized both by their passion for one another and by the public duties that thwart and contradict that passionate love. Those duties are to an unjust social order and culture, but the society and culture are nevertheless more profound than either their imaginations, or their abilities to change circumstances. The two lovers endure the tension for at least thirty years without loss of love and without being able to change the complex set of social, cultural and political imperatives that separate them again and again.

The main historical source I have used for this book is Thomas Malory, who devotes nearly half of *Le Morte D'Arthur* to Tristram. The other important variants I've used, particularly in revising my text, are Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (c. 1210), which gave me alchemical and courtly structures, and Jean Cocteau's remarkable movie, *The Eternal Return*, which instructed me to the contemporary possibilities of the tale. The opera by Richard Wagner has not been a factor.

Another important source of my text derives from eight anonymous Middle English lyrics sent to me years ago by the English poet Alan Horewood. Alan found the poems in the Archives of the British Museum and sent photocopies to me along with a note asking what

was I going to do about them. Approximately four years ago, I decided to try to turn them into contemporary language. Very soon after I began working with them, I found myself beginning to embroider on them. Before long, I began to write poems of my own that contained lines from the originals and offered commentary on them. The original poet was no master, and so the violation of the text was not criminal. Eventually I discovered that I had about seventy-five poems and the original eight lyrics had all but disappeared. The text here is shorter than seventy-five poems because many of them collapsed during revision and were discarded. Despite the absence of the originals, there are times when those first lyrics *are* speaking, and, of course, at other points it's clear that I'm talking. Malory's voice can also be discerned, and, occasionally, the sonorities of Gottfried are audible. Finally, what interests me most about the text is the possibility of yet another voice — the voice of Tristram himself. There is a voice in these poems that isn't mine, and it doesn't belong to any of my literary sources.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Gordon Lockhead and Jack Spicer in developing this text, and the generous aid given to me at several stages by Karl Siegler, who not only taught me a great deal about this kind of translation, but also listened carefully to my blunders and offered editorial assistance. Similar thanks go to Lois Redman for her editorial intelligence on several major occasions. It is my hope, as it has been my ambition for several years now, that the voices in this book will rekindle for readers an old and truthful story, and by its light, allow us to see where we've been, what we are, and where we are headed.

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Tristram was born in a small kingdom somewhere in southwestern England or northern France — some have it one way, others another, depending on their own cultural and geographic loyalties. It doesn't matter much, really, nor does the time of his birth, which was a summer afternoon around the time of King Arthur.

Tristram was born of a singularly vigorous and handsome young king and the beautiful younger sister of a middle-aged bachelor king of Cornwall named Mark. The story has it that Tristram's parents fell in love and eloped with Tristram already in his mother's womb. A few days before Tristram's birth, his father was killed in battle and his grief-stricken mother died in childbirth. Before she died, she held her newborn son and, looking out across a poppied meadow, named him Tristram.

Isolde was the daughter of the King and Queen of Ireland. Her mother, also named Isolde, was a powerful healer who taught her daughter that uncommon skill. The younger Isolde was called Isolde the Fair, and she was known near and far as an intelligent and extraordinarily beautiful woman.

The world of Tristram and Isolde was the Arthurian world, which is to say, a world of political and religious intrigue, small and vulnerable national kingdoms, and heavily structured systems of loyalty and commitment that were meant to provide human beings with the means to live within the maelstrom of war and venal ambition around them. Tristram entered that world when, after an education that made him a master of music, hawking and hunting, he came as a young man to live in Cornwall with his uncle. He was handsome, tall and muscular, and skilled in battle beyond his years.

A short time after Tristram arrived, a huge knight, the brother of Queen Isolde of Ireland, landed in Cornwall to extract from King Mark a tribute of money and young women. As was the custom of the day, the tribute would have to be paid unless this knight, called the Morholt, could be defeated in single combat. No one in Cornwall would fight with him — least of all King Mark. Young Tristram then offered himself as Cornwall's champion, demanding that his uncle allow him to fight for the honour of his adopted king and land. Mark accepted the offer.

A long and vicious battle ensued. It ended in victory for Tristram, who drove his sword through the Morholt's visor into his skull, where a shard from the sword broke off and remained. Tristram did not

escape injury either; the Morholt wounded him in the groin with an envenomed sword.

Lacking the expected tribute, the Irish ship departed the harbour at Tintagel, bearing the corpse of the Morholt with the shard still lodged in his skull. Tristram quickly sickened with his poisoned wound. No cure could be found for him, and a soothsayer made it known that a cure could be obtained only in the land in which the venom was brewed. So Tristram was transported to Ireland, put ashore and abandoned by men rightfully fearful for their Cornish lives. He waited there for what was to befall him, playing on his harp sad songs, songs to ease his passage into death's dark kingdom. But death did not hear him. Isolde the Fair heard him, and she marvelled at the lonely music, its sadness and its beauty.

Isolde the Fair took him in and healed his wound. He, in return, played for her pleasure and soon they were friends, walking together across the flowering heath day after day until his strength returned. It was in Ireland that Tristram first killed a dragon, one that had long tormented the land, and with that brave deed he paid the debt of his healing.

At length he thought of returning to Cornwall, and began to prepare for the voyage. Isolde came to his chamber as he was laying out what he needed for the passage. She saw his sword, which he had carelessly left exposed, and noticed the notched blade. She recalled the shards taken from the skull of her uncle, the Morholt, fitted them with Tristram's sword, and felt all her affection for the young man turn to rage and hate. She grasped the sword and would have slain him but was prevented by Tristram. Tristram was allowed to escape Ireland with his life, but only because the King thought it ill to murder a guest, no matter what the provocation. He then sailed back to Tintagel, carrying with him the enmity of Isolde the Fair and the knowledge that a return would mean certain death.

So Tristram returned to the castle of King Mark and to the rejoicing of Cornwall's people. Once there, Tristram sang the praises of Isolde the Fair to one and all, and especially to King Mark. Mark, for his part, quickly grew envious of this young man who had saved his kingdom and was more beloved by the people than himself. He therefore devised a cruel plan to rid himself of Tristram.

King Mark demanded, since this Isolde was so fair, and since he, Mark, was both queenless and without an heir, that Tristram return to Ireland to obtain the hand of Isolde the Fair in marriage for him. This was an apparently impossible task and certainly a hateful one in

the safest of circumstances, for Tristram's praise of the young woman who healed him grew out of desire and not merely gratitude. Yet Tristram had no alternative, because it was his nature and the nature of the times for him to do the bidding of his chosen King. He left in sadness and with little hope.

By a fortunate turn of winds, his ship became lost, and Tristram found himself in the realm of King Arthur, where, by chance, also was the King of Ireland, who had been summoned there by accusations of treason and commanded to do battle for his honour against Sir Blamor de Ganis, cousin of Sir Launcelot. The Irish King feared for his life until Tristram championed his cause and defeated Blamor, receiving as his prize an irretractible boon. The boon Tristram asked, after some hesitation, was the hand of Isolde in marriage — not for himself, but for King Mark.

From that time to the promised marriage, events passed as they were meant to, except for one. Isolde was unhappy at the prospect of marriage to an enemy, a middle-aged uncle of the man she had sought so lately to kill. Her mother, Queen Isolde, gave to Brangwen, the lady-in-waiting to Isolde the Fair, a potion made of wildflowers. This potion had the singular property of giving whoever drank it a lifelong passion for the person first looked on afterward. The Queen instructed Brangwen to give the potion to Isolde and King Mark in their chambers after the nuptials in order to seal their marriage with delight in one another.

But as the ship carrying Tristram and Isolde neared Tintagel, they grew thirsty, and, finding nothing to drink, they searched through the luggage and found the bottle that contained the potion. It looked and tasted like wine — a very good wine — and they drank it all in the presence of the other. They conceived a passion for each other they could not deny, then or ever.

There were resultant intrigues. Mark inevitably found them out, and began actively to seek Tristram's death. Tristram was exiled, Tristram returned and was exiled again. Directly and by stealth, Mark repeatedly sought to kill him, and each time was thwarted by Tristram or by fate. After each such attempt, Tristram sought reconciliation with his King. After one of the attempts, Tristram took Isolde from Tintagel into the forest. They discovered a cavern carved by giants from an earlier time, known in legend as the Cave of Love. This cavern had vaulted walls of alabaster, floors of grass-green marble, and a bed of crystal. There they stayed, sustained by their passion and what game Tristram could hunt up — very little, since

the forest itself was nothing more than a large glade in the wasteland of King Pelles. They remained there for some months, perhaps even a year, until, weak with hunger and illness, they were discovered by King Mark. A reconciliation was effected (for, whatever else can be said of King Mark, he too loved Isolde the Fair) and Tristram and Isolde returned to Tintagel.

Several years later, the two lovers again grew desperate with their life that was at once together and apart. They quarrelled, and Isolde told Tristram that he must leave and never return. At this, Tristram went mad and, for some seven years, roamed the moors and forests of England. Little of these years is known, except that, at length, Tristram was captured by King Arthur's knights and his sanity returned to him under the care of Guinevere and others at Camelot. The two lovers were reunited there, and both were greatly honoured by that fellowship.

More years passed, some in exile, some in Cornwall. Time and time again Mark tried to break the bond of love between them by seeking Tristram's death, and time and time again Tristram fended off the attacks and sought conciliation. On more than one occasion he saved the venal Mark from the ire of Arthur's knights.

The third episode takes place in France, where Tristram travelled to help a young Duke named Cariados. This duke had a younger sister who was also named Isolde, Isolde of the White Hands. One day, some time after the Dukedom had been secured from its enemies, Tristram, now a man of around fifty, sat by the seashore with his harp, singing songs in praise of his Isolde. Cariados came upon him and, thinking the songs were meant for his sister and wanting to repay the debt he owed to his much-loved benefactor, devised to have them marry. Tristram was too worn with care to refuse and, seeing no alternative save the gravest of insults to Cariados, married the young woman. Yet, true to Isolde the Fair, he came to his senses and did not consummate the marriage, revealing to the younger woman his lifelong love of the other Isolde.

News of the marriage travelled to Isolde the Fair, and she, half-crazed with love and rage, sent word to Tristram of her rage alone, and that she would not consent to see him ever again. Tristram grew despondent and, letting down his normal guard, fell prey to one of Mark's assassins, a dwarf cousin who had long dogged Tristram's way and, who, in the dark of night, managed to wound Tristram in the groin with an envenomed spear. Tristram wasted slowly away and, on his deathbed, asked that word be sent to Isolde the Fair, for he

had known for long that in her alone was to be found a cure.

Tristram instructed the messenger to raise white sails on the returning ship if Isolde the Fair was coming to his side, black if she refused. Isolde of the White Hands heard these words and, as a white-sailed ship came into harbour bearing Isolde the Fair, Tristram, too weak to rise, asked his unloved wife what colour sails the ship bore to the winds, knowing black sails would be his funeral shroud.

"The sails are black," she said.