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## Death and meaning: the case of Tristan

### Abstract

The earliest versions of the legend of Tristan have reached us in fragmentary state only; the reader therefore has to reconstruct the story and become actively involved in its interpretation. This interpretation must follow the steps taken by medieval hermeneutics which was the context in which the poets wrote and constituted the horizon of expectation and reception. A story was considered to be an *integumentum*, a construct in which a deeper meaning was embedded and which the reader had to reconstruct by following the verbal concatenations inside the text. In the case of Thomas's text the verbal concatenations show that the love between Tristan and Isolde was an effort to identify totally between the lovers which is denied to them in so far as they do not die together. The reader is then left to draw his own conclusions. It seems that both Thomas and Gottfried von Strasburg want to point out the danger which lies in an exclusive passion, in a fascination which locks human consciousness up in desire and self-reflection.

### 1. The legend of Tristan

It seems self-evident that death should be the moment at which one's life becomes a completed destiny, and revealing its meaning, so much so that the finitude and mortality of human existence may be regarded as preconditions for meaning to have any meaning at all.<sup>1</sup> A work of fiction, by the very fact of its temporal and verbal limitations and of the liberty with which it is able to arrange the events that shape human destiny, can constitute the realm in which the meaning of death is revealed. Perhaps all stories speak about love and death, the two existential situations in which humanity is confronted with the limits of its own being. Fictions and legends, even from the remote past, preserve this meaningfulness, even when they reach us only in a fragmentary state.

A case in point is the legend of Tristan. None of the earliest versions has come down to us in its entirety, so that our knowledge about this legendary character, called Tristan, is destined to remain fragmentary for ever. But this partial ignorance has not prevented a host of poets and historians from being interested in him. On the contrary, Tristan has excited the admiration of so many writers that his personality has become full of contradictions, his life has been crammed with so many incidents; he has been made a man

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<sup>1</sup> An outline of this problem of meaning, in so far as it is linked to the finitude of human existence and indications towards a dialectical solution which encompasses the existentialistic point of view in its opposition to idealism and transcends them in a transcendental language-pragmatism can be found in Apel (1978). To avoid the *abstract fallacy*, it takes into account the transcendental subject in which meaning is located, but this meaning becomes intersubjective and independent of time in language.

of so many talents that a critical reappraisal seems necessary. The sometimes contradictory evidence which we find in all fragments and adaptations has prompted medieval scholars to try and reconstruct the original version of the story, a reconstruction which, according to the solidly established principles of the historical school, should be the best and the most truthful, the real one.<sup>2</sup> But needless to say, this activity is inevitably locked into a vicious circle: we reconstruct the original from fragments but their authenticity in turn can only be judged in relationship to the original which they are supposed to help to reconstruct. Despite this insoluble nature of the problem posed by lost texts or works, the reconstruction business thrived during the first half of this century: the amount of work, research, debate applied to it, and the volume of publications produced, has made us lose sight of the simple fact that we are dealing here only with hypotheses and speculation.

And now that the dust has settled, there is only one certainty: whoever tries to reconstruct the original *Tristan* in fact creates his own version of the story. Hence it is clear that the very notion of literary work is severely challenged by this state of affairs. It is also clear that the reader in these circumstances will have to be actively involved so that his reading becomes part of the shaping of the work. As far as the *Tristan*-material is concerned, the modern reader occupies a position not unlike that of the four medieval poets who took *Tristan* to heart. These four, namely Beroul and Thomas, who wrote in French, and the two Germans, Eilhart von Oberg and Gottfried von Strasburg, had to do their own research, as we would call it now, before they could start to compose their poems. The material they had to deal with was of Celtic origin, a material which was essentially foreign to their own convictions and practices, but fascinating in its strangeness, subversive also, and compelling. They had to come to terms with it, to understand it, to interpret it; they had to try and appropriate it, as modern hermeneuticists would say, to make it their own.<sup>3</sup> A consideration of what these texts say about their relationship to their subject material could provide us with a useful entry into the vision of these poets. But before doing this, I shall give the reason for my choice of Thomas. It is quite simple: of all the fragments which have come down to us in their original form, only Thomas's text contains an account of the death of the two main characters. There at least we have something solid on which to base our discussion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a survey on the enormous amount of literature see Shirt (1980) and Schoeperle-Loomis (1970).

<sup>3</sup> Interpretation comes into play as soon as one is confronted with the strange and unfamiliar: interpretation is not some kind of decoding but a coming to terms with what is not immediately understandable, formulating what is not clear. Asking these questions is already a means of appropriating what is alien or remote. In this respect the thinking of philosophers such as Gadamer (1972) and Ricoeur (1986) is fundamental. I do not see any solution of continuity between medieval hermeneutics - as I try to apply it in this paper - and modern transcendental hermeneutics. In any case, we do not have a complete text or work on *Tristan* at our disposal. It is impossible to try and apply a semiotic or narratological approach which is based on the closure of the text which is to be analysed. This is the conclusion of Barthelemy (1972), who put our fragments to that semiotic test. Interpretation in the hermeneutical sense of the word asks for a movement by which the reader assumes, takes to heart the work he reads, and in that sense reading is an act of re-creation. As we will show, this is how the medieval poets conceived their art when writing the story of *Tristan*.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from Thomas's text are from Wind's edition (1960). All translations are mine, except for one passage in Gottfried's *Tristan* in the Penguin Classics (1960).

## 2. Problems of intertextuality

In order to get into the material, we will take the path Thomas prepared for us. He too is involved in problems of the authenticity of episodes and before tackling the episode in which Tristan fights Estult l'Orgilius - who uses a poisonous sword to inflict on Tristan the incurable wound of which he will die - Thomas states that the original story has been too richly and too loosely expanded by superfluous or illogical incidents and ramifications, and that it is necessary to cut it down to its essentials. In doing so he has to sort out his oral and written sources, because he was involved himself in what we now call *intertextuality*:

Fr. D. v. 841      Entre ceus qui solent cunter  
                         e del cunte Tristran parler  
                         il encuntent diversement  
                         oï en ai plusur gent  
                         asez sai que chescun en dit  
                         e co que il unt mis en escrit  
                         mes sulun co que j'ai oï  
                         nel dient pas sulun Breri  
                         ki solt les gestes e les cuntes  
                         de tuz les reis de tuz les cuntes  
                         ki orent esté en Bretaigne

Amongst those who can tell tales  
and can speak about duke Tristan  
they talk differently about him  
I have heard several people  
and I know well what everybody says  
and what they have written  
but according to what I have heard  
they do not speak as Breri  
who knew the poems and tales  
of all kings and dukes  
who have been in Britony

This text by Breri has never been found, nor has the poet been identified. It would be wrong, however, to dismiss Thomas's statement as a mere rhetorical device. In the same passage Thomas does not support the view that Breri is the only one in step and therefore the most authentic: for Thomas, the authenticity of his own version is based on its coherence. He refuses to be drawn into controversy and proposes his own poem instead. The problem of diversity crops up again and is explicitly stated by his German successor, Gottfried von Strasburg, and in much the same words. If these two passages are compared it will be understood that it is not appropriate, certainly not for the medieval poet, to tackle the problem with historical methods. What they are after is not the pure and original, authentic version of a story, but the meaning of that story, its essence and the spirit in which it should be told and interpreted. In his prologue Gottfried von Strasburg acknowledges his indebtedness to his French predecessor Thomas:

v. 131      Ich weiz wol ir ist vil gewesen  
                 die von Tristande hânt gelesen  
                 und ist ir doch niht vil gewesen  
                 die von im rehte haben gelesen

I know there have been many  
who have read about Tristan  
but there are not so many  
who have done so in the right manner

Gottfried obviously plays here on the polysemy of the verb *lesen* which means 'read' or 'recite to an audience' or 'interpret'; personally I should not think it too far-fetched, given the context and the etymology of the verb *lesen*, that it also means to 'gather' in the sense Heidegger uses the word in his reading of philosophical and poetical texts; to harvest and to collect and then to sift the material.<sup>5</sup> But this is not a mere matter of the quantity of information. Both Breri and Thomas have read and heard extensively and comprehensively, but that is not the reason for their superiority, and it does not exempt Gottfried from reading it all over again for himself, adding the French and Latin texts to their British counterparts. Their superiority lies in the spirit of the reading and in the coherence of the resulting poem which - and this is of paramount importance - is a personal interpretation:

v. 167      waz aber min lesen dô waere  
              daz lege ich miner willekür  
              allen edlen herzen vür

This interpretation corresponds to the intentions of the poet. "Willekür" here means a free decision taken with regard to the poet's choice and intention. And this intention is formulated in the line, "daz si dá mite unmuezic wesen" (v.171) - to distract the noble hearts of lovers from their own love pain because leisure of the mind only exacerbates desire. But let it be stressed again: the truth of the story does not reside in its origin but in its gist as worked out in accordance with the instructions of the poet.

### 3. How to read Thomas

Thomas's poem has come to us in eight fragments which consist of five manuscripts. Only two of these, both preserved at the Bodleian library in Oxford, contain the end of the poem: the so-called Douce manuscript, which constitutes the longest uninterrupted portion of the poem, except for the last 25 lines which are missing, and the so-called Sneyd manuscript, which brings us the last 56 lines, including the epilogue. All the other fragments are disconnected, relating only parts of one or other of the main episodes. So, in order to understand why Tristan dies, we have to read our text backwards, but this can only be done after taking into account the epilogue in which Thomas states his intentions.

This epilogue shows striking resemblances with the prologue of Gottfried. Comparing these two texts will not lead the reader too far astray since the intention of the two poets is dictated to them by what they consider to be the gist of the story and this deeper meaning concerns precisely the relationship between life and death. It will be attempted not to collate manuscripts but to try to read as Thomas and Gottfried did; the intention with this approach is to read and harvest in order to understand what the story meant. It is necessary to keep in mind the world in which the medieval poets wrote, how they perceived

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<sup>5</sup> Basic to the act of reading is the collecting of what is said in what is written; it is collecting or concentrating oneself on what takes hold of one through the text. Without reading we are not able to see what looks at us and to contemplate what appears to us. (Heidegger, 1983; my translation.)

the sense of their own activity and its value. It therefore becomes necessary also to give a brief outline of the main principles of medieval hermeneutics<sup>6</sup>, which were not only valid for the interpretation of the Bible and divine revelation, but were also applied to the interpretation of profane texts.

In profane literature the search for truth did not concern a historical origin or source which had to be restituted in its factuality (as is the prime concern of modern positivistic historians); it was not the writer's concern to tell a story accurately as a modern journalist would claim to do: for the medieval writer, even the first or original story, and not only any story but any event or happening, any fact, already carried a meaning. A story is already an interpretation which has to be reinterpreted by the poet according to his own "willekür", in a personal manner. The criterion of authenticity was concerned, not with positive historicity, but with the resemblance or difference between the profane truth of a story and divine revelation. Only biblical stories could be treated as real and, in our sense, historical. The medieval conception of history was typological and the truth of these stories was of allegorical nature. All the rest was fiction and whatever truth it conveyed, could only have been formulated in a parabolical or analogical manner. The two poets in discussion wrote within the confines of this vision.

In medieval hermeneutics there is a term reserved for this type of analogical truth conveyed by a story, the term *integumentum* (some, like Abelard, use the word *involucrum* with the same meaning); both terms designate the wrapping of something in clothes or some kind of cover, the story being the garment in which the idea, spiritual or philosophical in nature, has been wrapped. This term was firmly established in literary and clerical circles from the beginning of the twelfth century (let us not forget that Thomas wrote in the second half of that century and Gottfried towards its end or at the beginning of the thirteenth); it was used for the type of stories we find in ancient myths, in romances, stories which could tell the truth only through invention, through what we call fiction. It was applied to such works as Vergil's *Aeneas* and to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, to mention only the two most important and best known. These poems were scrutinised and studied as models in our sense of the word, models which analogically exemplify spiritual or philosophical realities such as metamorphosis in its relationship to the essence of love.

With regard to the story of Tristan it can already be stated now, without presuming too much about the outcome of the intended reading of the story, that it was linked as a kind of variant to another story related in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovidius, the story of Orpheus, in so far as it enacts a mysterious bond between love, life and death - a model which can also be found in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe. In the context of this vision of analogical truth as enacted in fiction, it is imperative to take the two poets seriously when they state their intentions. This is not a case of intentional fallacy rearing its ugly head, but an indication of the spirit in which these poets intended to write and of the framework in

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<sup>6</sup> The fundamental work is the one by Brinkmann (1980). It would be totally wrong to conceive of medieval hermeneutics as an unchangeable set of rules to be followed during the act of reading: each reading had to end with a personal assumption of the text, be it in an analogical (mystical) sense or in the sense of an *application* of the work to one's own existential situation. In that sense medieval hermeneutics was by no means dogmatic. Fusion with another living being is linked to metamorphosis in so far as the self is transformed into the other. Metamorphosis manifests the unity of the living universe.

which they wanted to be understood, a statement about how they wanted to be read in all the meanings of the word. Practically speaking, our reading has to be attentive first to all verbal and literal connections and repetitions in the text (which should not be dismissed as clumsiness or remnants of its supposed previous oral state). These connections lead to the core of the subject matter and from there give insight into its parabolical or analogical meaning. This meaning in turn will have to be confronted with the avowed intentions of the author. Having laid the theoretical foundation of the reading, the text itself can be examined.

#### 4. Inside the text

The first text which has to be taken into account, according to the intended practice of reading backward, is the epilogue of Thomas's text. It is quoted in its English translation by Hatto, published in the Penguin classics (Gottfried von Strasburg, 1888:353):

Here Thomas ends his book (*sun escrit*). Now he takes leave of all lovers, the sad and the amorous, the jealous and the desirous, the gay and the distraught, and all who will hear these lines. If I have not pleased all with my tale, I have told it to the best of my power and have narrated the whole truth, as I promised in the beginning. Here I have recounted the story in rhyme, and have done this to hold up an example, and to make this story more beautiful, so that it may please lovers, and that, here and there, they may find things to take to heart (*u se puissent recorder*). May they derive great comfort (from it), in the face of fickleness (change) and injury (*tor*), in the face of hardship (*a paine*) and grief (*dulur*), in the face of all the wiles of love (*engins d'amur*).

Hatto's translation is at fault at one point: Thomas's text states "u se puissent recorder", which Hatto translates: "they may find things to take to heart", but the literal translation is better here: "where they can recognise themselves, where they can take heart". It will have been noticed that Thomas's intention is much the same as that of Gottfried: to present a story in which lovers can recognize themselves and which helps them to occupy their minds, to abate their anguish, and to ease their hearts of cares. The lover can while away the time and give his spirit solace and release, while away the hour while plying a love-tale with his heart and lips, a kind of homeotherapy it would seem. But what can be so consoling to a sad lover in the story of tragic love; what can be so consoling in being confronted with one's own image? This matter can be pursued in Gottfried's prologue, where the German poet defines the world in which this intention should be operative. I quote the text in its original for its poetic strength:

v. 58      eine andre weld die meine ich  
               diu sament in einem herzen treit  
               ir sueze sūr ir liebez leit  
               ir herzeliep ir senede not  
               ir liebes leben ir leiden tot  
               ir lieben tot ir leidez leben

This passage constitutes a fascinating exchange or metamorphosis of sound and meaning, incarnating in the flesh of the word the identity of contraries. Translated it gives something like this:

I have another world in mind, which together in one heart, bears its bitter sweet, its dear sorrow, its heart joy, its love's pain, its dear life, its sorrowful death, its dear death, its sorrowful life

Gottfried shuts himself up in that world; he pretends to stick to it, no matter what comes of it, "verderben oder genesen", damnation or salvation. This synthesis of opposites suggests what desire (*senede*) really is, what happens in the world of the true lover, and what that world is made of: a desire for real unity, fusion and identity with the other, fusion between man and woman. Can we really talk of homeotherapy here, if the consolation consists in the locking up of the reader in his own world, consists in showing him his own image in a mirror? This act of coupling words artistically strung together, this doubling of a state of mind in order to provide sweet sorrow to the victims, is it not an invitation to a kind of self-pity? Is it not what Tristan did when he could not stay with Isolde anymore and locked himself up in a cave where he had erected a statue representing his beloved, and passed the time speaking to this statue and meditating about his own predicament? This story is a mirror, the fascination of fascination with oneself. What dark mystery is hidden behind this *integumentum*? When studying Thomas's text itself, the following aspect comes to the fore: the consolation offered by the poet concerns, in first instance, the end of the story, which can be read backwards. And this end, as is known, is constituted by the double death of the two lovers. The end of the story is death, the death of Isolde upon the corpse of her lover, as she embraces his body, kisses it and dies *dejuste lui* - which prompts the following comment from Thomas:

Fr. Sneyd 816      Tristrans murut pur sue amur  
                          Ysolt qu'a tens n'y pout venir  
                          Tristrans murut pur sue amur  
                          e la bele Ysolt par tendrur

As will have been noticed the repetition "Tristan died because of her love" occurs. These lines in fact are a verbatim repetition of what Isolde says immediately before dying, words which in turn are the echo of Tristan's last words

Fr. Douce 1762      pur vostre amur m'estuet murir  
                          mais de ma mort avrez dular  
                          co m'est amic grant confort  
                          que pité avrez de ma mort

for your love I have to die  
 but you will have much pain because of my death  
 and that is a great consolation to me  
 that you will have pity for my death

From here on a web of verbal repetitions can be followed - repetitions which will lead to the core of the matter. First of all there is Isolde's soliloquy while she is on her way to save her lover. At its first approach of Bretagne, where it is eagerly awaited, the ship is caught up in a mighty storm which threatens to wreck it and drown its occupants. Isolde laments her dismal fate: she is totally at sea and if she dies at sea, Tristan, who is on land, will never be reunited with her except if his corpse is swallowed by the same whale which will have engulfed her own body. But the important element here is the fact that the lovers cannot die without one another, and they cannot live without each other:

Fr. Douce 1633      vus n'avez, amis, confort  
                          quant jo muer, contre vostre mort

you will, my friend, have no recourse  
when I die, against your death

When one will hear about the death of the other, he will also die

Fr. Douce. 1638 jo sai bien que vus en murrez  
de tel maners est nostre amur  
ne puis senz vos sentir dolur  
vus ne povez senz moi murir  
ne jo senz vus ne puis perir

I know very well that you will die  
so is our love  
I cannot feel pain without you  
you cannot die without me  
and I cannot die without you

The fusion of two destinies cannot be more clearly stated, more forcefully affirmed. When I said that Isolde is at sea, I did so to draw attention to the fact that the two lovers drink the love potion during their sea voyage to Cornwall. When Tristan asks his friend Kaherdin to go and fetch Isolde, in order to make sure that she will come, he instructs his friend to remind her of the indissoluble bond which exists between them; and this bond was foisted upon them while they were at sea between Ireland and Cornwall.

Fr. Douce. v. 1214 Dites li qu'ore li suvenge  
des emveisures des deduiz  
qu'eümes jadis jors e nuiz  
des granz peines des tristurs  
e des joies e des dusurs  
de nostre amur fine e veraie  
quant ele jadis guari ma plaie  
Del beivre qu'ensemble beümes  
en la mer quant surpris fumes  
El beivre fud la nostre mort  
Nus n'en avrum ja mais confort  
a tel ure duné nus fu  
a nostre mort l'avum beü

tell her to remember  
the pleasures and delights  
we had day and night  
the great pains and sorrows  
the joys and bliss  
of our true and fine love  
when she cured me from my wound  
from the drink we had both  
while at sea when we were taken by surprise  
the drinking was our death  
we will never have respite  
it was given to us to such effect  
that we drank to our death

The unification of the lovers in death has its origins in the drinking of that love potion. This is what Brangevain, Isolde's lady in waiting, says when she discovers they have drunk the fatal drink. These words from Gottfried's poem have to be quoted since that passage has not been preserved in the fragments of Thomas's poem:



v. 11703-10           ouwe Tristan unde Isot  
                              diz tranc ist iuwer beider tot

                              alas Tristan and Isolde  
                              this drink is death for both of you

The connection between drinking (*el beivre*) and death is so strong that Isolde can use the verb *drink* with the same meaning as *die*, as she does right at the end of Thomas's poem

Fr. Sneyd,<sup>804</sup>       e venue sui a la mort  
                              de meisme le beivre avrai confort  
  
                              and I have come to death  
                              I will have consolation from the same drink

In turn the names of the two lovers are repeated by Gottfried to suggest their union when he says

v. 129-130           ein man, ein wip; ein wip, ein man  
                              Tristan Isot Isot Tristan  
  
                              one man one woman one woman one man

This is the focal point in the web of verbal relations within the two poems: they are *integumenta* of a certain type of love, the love understood as fusion between man and woman, a symbiosis where each partner ceases to be himself and becomes the other. That is why this type of love is linked to metamorphosis.<sup>7</sup> But in Thomas's poem this fusion is stated, the words pronounced by the two main characters are merely and summarily repeated by the poet as a kind of magic formula. In all the passages quoted so far, the reader will have noticed one common element which will have to be taken into account in the interpretation: all the passages contain antitheses opposing realities and feelings and are yoked together by the force of poetic diction. Poetic form tries to transcend the opposites, but this transcending concerns only what is said about the drinking and the unification in death, the transcending is only in words. These words in turn are situated in a story and in order to ascertain how they are supposed to be realised in deed or fact - in other words, it has to be seen how the poet arranges the death of his heroes, how their deaths occur or, (in terms of our own interpretation) how this idea of love as total fusion is enacted in the story. Do they really die together? Only then can it be understood what sort of comfort the poem can offer to the reader, who also has a noble heart possessed by desire.

## 5. Tristan's death

When Tristan is forced to leave the court of Marc and to live apart from his beloved, he first tries to console himself in the hall of statues; he manages to return three times to Isolde and to be reunited with her but only for brief periods. He decides to marry the second Isolde (for her name and beauty) without consummating the marriage. At one

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stage he is called upon by a thwarted lover, Tristan le Nain, to come and claim his wife back from a hideous giant, Estult l'Orgilius, who fights with a poisoned sword and wounds Tristan before succumbing in the duel. No medicine can help, but only Isolde, who helped before, when she and Tristan drank that other poison, the love potion which was aimed at somebody else. Tristan sends for her across the sea and gives himself forty days to hang on to his life. If Isolde agrees to come, his friend Kaherdin should hoist the white sail; if she is not prepared to come, a black sail will appear. The second Isolde, his common-law wife, has overheard the plan and when the ship approaches with the first Isolde on board, she tells Tristan that the sail is black. Tristan is overcome by grief; he cannot keep up his own life any longer, turns around to the wall, mutters the name Isolde three times and, at the fourth, he dies.

If the idea behind Tristan's death is to be grasped it is important to realise that he situates his own life and even his own immortality in Isolde. Whenever Tristan is fatally wounded his salvation has to come from Isolde, his salvation is situated in the presence of the beloved woman; his damnation is in her absence. As long as Tristan and Isolde are together they are invincible, they are immortal, they are even beyond bad and good, "Jenseits Gut und Böse", indifferent to moral or spiritual values. They are in a world of their own, a world similar to the one which is conjured up by poetic magic. So why do Tristan and Isolde die? The latter is prevented from arriving on time, first by a storm, and then by a sudden lull; only at its third attempt is the ship able to land, and so the period of forty days is exceeded. It is clear that this number forty has symbolic meaning: forty is the number of days for awaiting, preparation, trial or punishment. It marks the critical period at the end of a cycle which should lead to another level of action or life. Why does this period of preparation fail? During these forty days Tristan is obsessed with one idea only, the coming of Isolde:

Fr. D. 1561      vers nule ren n'ad il desir  
                       fors sulement de le sun venir  
                       en co est trestut sun pensé  
                       sun desir e sa volenté

He has no desire for anything  
 except only for her coming  
 and that is his whole thought  
 his desire and his will

Instead of preparing himself for another life, Tristan shuts himself up in one single idea, an obsession which finds its expression in the fourfold repetition of her name at the moment of death. The same idea is conveyed by his turning away from the world towards the wall.<sup>8</sup>

This is all the more significant if it is compared with the way other heroes die, with the way also in which people die and understand their own death as a social occasion, as an act performed for the benefit of those who have to stay on in this world.<sup>9</sup> This type of death

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<sup>8</sup> The meaning of each number is dependent on the context in which it occurs; there are no simple tables of conversion for the different numbers and each one has to be 'applied' to the context in which it becomes meaningful (Beaujouan, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> A moving description of the public agony and death of a medieval knight can be found in Duby (1984). We know that the death of important people was a public affair: the dying man took leave of all after having settled his affairs and he was never alone while dying. In this respect Tristan's turning around to the wall becomes all the more significant.

for the benefit of the other reached its climax in the Christian concept of death in place of the other. Tristan and Isolde live in a world of their own, made up of mutual fascination, made up of the illusion of total fusion, the illusion that the other could be one's double and that this union might make one immortal. But that is the paradox: such union is only possible in and through death. The idea of this union proceeds from its own impossibility. This is the mirror both Thomas and Gottfried present to the ardent lover. And so we return to our starting point, the epilogue of Thomas's poem. It contains statements about the poem itself, about its intention and its aim, about its composition; it contains no statement at all about the subject-matter of the story itself, no comment about the death of the heroes which is really the end of the story. One might have expected a burial, or even a comment from another character, whether friend or foe. But nothing of the sort occurs in this text. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions, to draw the moral of the story for himself.

## 6. Conclusion

At several points I have already indicated the direction of my reading of the story. In conclusion, I would like to point out another striking feature of Thomas's text. One is struck by the recurrent antitheses within the bounds of one line or between the constraints of one rhyme; this rhetorical device combines with a circular construction of sentences to be found in the portions of direct speech. When Tristan and Isolde speak to themselves while meditating their own state of mind, they are literally going around in circles. One passage, already quoted, may serve as an example. It is Tristan who speaks:

Fr Dovec v. 1223 El beivre fud la nostre mort  
 nus n'en avrum ja mais confort  
 a tel ure duné nus fut  
 a nostre mort l'avum beü

the drinking was our death  
 we will never have comfort from it  
 it was given to us at such moment  
 we have drunk it to our death

The first and last line of the passage constitute reverse images (*beivre/mort, mort/avum beü*). Such a way of speaking is indicative of a situation where people are locked up in fascination with each other, fascination with the other as a form of one's own non-being. This doubling as presented in poetic form reveals a fascination with death, linked to a kind of eroticism where each partner seeks in the bodily presence of the other, some sort of self-affirmation and in the other the image of his own delight and pleasure. That is the way Tristan and Isolde spend their time together. One can then ask the question: why do they part after their first voyage during which they drank the love potion, and why do they part after their stay in the forest where they lived on love and thin air? Contrary to so many commentators who have seen this as proof that the Christian medieval poets did not understand the original Celtic story, I would hold that the poets had understood too well the impossibility inherent in such an exclusive passion. Ways out of the situation would have to be true mysticism, where love incites the person to transcend the limits of his own

conscience,<sup>10</sup> or artistic creativity, as Plato would have it,<sup>11</sup> or moral advancement, as is the case in the poems of the troubadours,<sup>12</sup> or fertility, where the fascination with the other becomes a reality in the flesh of a newborn living creature. Otherwise that love is bound to be a dream - or a literary work held up as a mirror to all who suffer from that same and strange desire which lives on by its own negation.

Both Thomas and Gottfried von Strasburg, as we have seen, point to the danger of a fascination which locks the human consciousness in its own desire and reflection. Tristan and Isolde occupy a position which can be likened to that of sender and receiver in the famous scheme of communication, the one being the mirror image of the other, both interchangeable in a reversible relationship that unfolds along the lines of an impersonal code. But what we have in the form of fragments about Tristan and Isolde, forces us into an irreversible relationship with their story: as readers or receivers we ourselves shape the message and our relationship with the legend becomes dialogical. We are not decoding, but making sense and we have to commit ourselves personally in our reading.

By doing so, we are part of the dialogue which finds humanity.

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<sup>10</sup>There is a definite link between eroticism and mysticism as shown by Denis de Rougemont (1938) amongst others. But this type of love is clearly not to be found in the case of Tristan and Isolde. Rougemont's interpretation has prompted some heated debate; see Loomis and Cazenave (1969).

<sup>11</sup>Here it might suffice to mention the *Banquet* and the *Phaidros*.

<sup>12</sup>In and through his love the lover undergoes a moral promotion (often misunderstood as social climbing) in that he has to be worthy of the beloved and so must put into practice all his talents, and realise all the virtues hidden in his inner being.