

Merlinus Ambrosius. Merlin the Magician. Counsel to the Pendragon. The most cryptic and fascinating character to emerge from the mists of Medieval folklore. Was he a sorcerer or a sage? What sort of knowledge did he possess? Alfred Lord Tennyson gives us a sympathetic glimpse of the aged Merlin exhorting a disciple in “Merlin and the Gleam.”

O young Mariner,
You from the Haven
Under the seacliff,
You that are watching
The gray Magician
With eyes of wonder,
I am Merlin,
And I am dying,
I am Merlin
Who follow the Gleam.

A mysterious allusion from a moribund magician. A “gray” magician? Apparently he did not practice black arts. Does his status as a gray magician have something to do with following this “Gleam”? “The Gleam”. . . “the Gleam.” How *does* one follow a “Gleam” anyway?

Mighty the Wizard
Who found me at sunrise
Sleeping, and woke me
And learn'd me Magic!
Great the Master,
And sweet the Magic,
When over the valley,
In early summers,
Over the mountain,
On human faces,
And all around me,
Moving to melody,
Floated the Gleam.

Let us, for a moment, take seriously this notion: this Gleam.

If we view Merlin as an evil sorcerer, perhaps the Gleam he followed would represent some mystical, ill-gotten, dark power. If, on the other hand, we view Merlin as Tennyson suggests, as a gray magician (one whose powers are not necessarily derived from the pit of hell) The Gleam becomes an allegorical flicker of truth; a guide whose twinkle the lover of wisdom will associate with truth.

Down from the mountain
And over the level,

And streaming and shining on
 Silent river,
 Silvery willow,
 Pasture and plowland,
 Innocent maidens
 Garrulous children,
 Homestead and harvest,
 Reaper and gleaner,
 And rough-ruddy faces
 Of lowly labor,
 Slided the Gleam--

Sometimes the pursuit of truth can lead one into areas difficult to understand. This very theme does, in fact, surface in a dialogue between Percivale the knight and Ambrosias the monk in Tennyson's "The Holy Grail."

In our great hall there stood a vacant chair,
 Fashion'd by Merlin ere he past away,
 And carven with strange figures; and in and out
 The figures, like a serpent, ran a scroll
 Of letters in a tongue no man could read.
 And Merlin call'd it "the Seige Perrilous,"
 Perrilous for good and ill; "for there," he said,
 "No man could sit but he should lose himself."

"A tongue no man could read?" That the pursuit of truth would lead one into matters difficult to understand is one thing, but, is it likely that true knowledge would be veiled in a language which no human can decipher? Such a likelihood runs counter to our modern sensibilities. Surely truth is accessible to all who seek it. C.S.

Nearly 100 years after Tennyson, Merlinus Ambrosias *and* his "Great Tongue," (as he called it,) is revived as the great pivotal character in C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*. In the intriguing conclusion to that trilogy, Lewis resurrects Merlin and has him join in battle with one Ransom, a man chosen to save modernity from self-destruction. In preparation for his task, Ransom learned the Great tongue, "which was," he said, "the language spoken before the Fall and beyond the Moon and the meanings were not given to the syllables by chance, or skill, or long tradition, but truly inherent in them as the shape of the great Sun is inherent in the little waterdrop. This was Language herself."

So, having discovered their common tradition (that they were the only two humans in Earth's history who knew the Great Tongue,) Merlin and Ransom united forces; but their union was not grounded in naive trust. Merlin decided to give Ransom his full allegiance only after Ransom successfully completed a threefold riddle, which required knowledge few possess.

“Well answered,” said the Stranger. “In my college it was thought that only two men in the world knew this. But as for the third question, no man knew the answer but myself. Who shall be Pendragon in the time when Saturn descends from his sphere? In what world did he learn war?”

“In the sphere of Venus I learned war,” said Ransom. “In this age Lurga shall descend. I am the Pendragon.”

When he had said this, he took a step backwards, for the big man had begun to move and there was a new look in his eyes. Any who had seen them as they stood thus face to face would have thought it would have come to fighting at any moment. But the Stranger had not moved with hostile purpose. Slowly, ponderously, yet not awkwardly, as though a mountain sank like a wave, he sank on one knee; and still his face was almost on a level with [Ransom’s.]”

Then, with a melody
 Stronger and statelier,
 Led me at length
 To the city and palace
 Of Arthur the King;
 Touch'd at the golden
 Cross of the churches,
 Flash'd on the tournament,
 Flicker'd and bicker'd
 From helmet to helmet,
 And last on the forehead
 Of Arthur the Blameless
 Rested the Gleam.

To follow The Gleam, then, is sheer adventure. The love of Truth is an adventure which transcends space and time. You never know where the spark of truth will show up; we must be diligent to follow The Gleam and tarry wherever, and *with* whomever upon, it rests.

Not of the sunlight,
 Not of the moonlight,
 Not of the starlight!
 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.