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Paradise Lost Again: Poetics of the Tale & Nostalgia of Eternity in Tennyson's Idylls of the King (1891)

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Paradise Lost Again:

Poetics of the Tale & Nostalgia of Eternity

in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1891)

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Introduction

"I remember once, in talking to Mr. Burne-Jones about modern science, him saying to me, 'the more materialistic science will become, the more angels I shall paint: their wings are my protest of the immortality of the soul.'"

Oscar Wilde, lecture "The English Renaissance of Art,"
New York, 9 January 1882.[1]

In *Introduction à la psychanalyse*, Sigmund Freud identifies three "narcissistic wounds" in the history of mankind: the first is constituted by the Copernican Revolution and the last – not without a certain narcissistic flavour – by the invention of psychoanalysis. Yet, in the present case, the second wound inflicted to mankind is the most relevant and Freud describes it as follows:

> Le second démenti fut infligé à l'humanité par la recherche biologique, lorsqu'elle a réduit à rien les prétentions de l'homme à une place privilégiée dans l'ordre de la création, en établissant sa descendance du règne animal et en montrant l'indestructibilité de sa nature animale. Cette dernière révolution s'est accomplie de nos jours, à la suite des travaux de Ch. Darwin, de Wallace et de leurs prédécesseurs, travaux qui ont provoqué la résistance la plus acharnée des contemporains.[2]

Here, Freud displays the importance of the traumatism represented by the Darwinian theory which caused the Victorians to wonder with Disraeli "Is man an ape or an angel?"[3] Indeed, with *On the Origin of Species* published in 1859, science once more disturbed the vision that man had of himself and of his place in a world designed by a benevolent God. Of course, it calls into question the validity of Creation as it is told in *Genesis*, which establishes a great divide between man as image of God and the rest of Creation. Thus, *Genesis*, 1, 25-28 reads:

> [25] And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that *it was* good.

[1] Oscar Wilde quoted in Fiona McCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London, Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 333.
[2] Sigmund Freud, *Introduction à la psychanalyse* [1916], translated by Samuel Jankélévitch (Paris, Payot, « Petite Bibliothèque, » 1975), pp. 266-267.
[3] Benjamin Disraeli, speech at Oxford, 25 November 1864, in *The Times* 26 November 1864, quoted in Elizabeth Knwoles, *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Fifth Edition (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 269.

> [26] And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
>
> [27] So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.
>
> [28] And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

In 1859, man ceases to be *imago Dei* and becomes the descendant of the ape. This realisation constitutes the apex of what Max Weber will call the "disenchantment of the world,"[4] that is a process of rationalization brought about by science that leads to secularization and disbelief in supernatural entities. Natural sciences weaken faith because when faced with empirical evidence, the believer has to perform the "sacrifice of the intellect" in order to keep believing, since "the tension between science's field of value and that of religious salvation is insuperable." This tension was at the heart of the Victorian relation to the world, as is well illustrated by an anecdote told by Tennyson: "When I was a lad, a mere lad, you know, I was given a book called *Conversations on Physical Science*, by a good author. The book was simple enough, but somehow, I don't know why, I felt differently after reading it. The oxygen and carbon and all the rest of it unsettled me a little, and made me feel less able to believe, made my faith heavier, duller; I don't know why."[5] Now, this weakening of faith induces a loss of bearings and more importantly a loss of meaning, as analysed by Max Weber:

> Partout où la connaissance empirique rationnelle a réalisé de façon systématique le désenchantement du monde et sa transformation en un mécanisme causal, la tension par rapport aux prétentions du postulat éthique selon lequel le monde serait un cosmos ordonné par Dieu, donc orienté d'une manière éthiquement significative, quelle qu'elle soit, est finalement apparue. Car la considération empirique et, en sa forme achevée, mathématiquement orientée du monde développe principiellement le rejet de tout mode de considération qui recherche en général un « sens » au devenir terrestre.[6]

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[4] Max Weber, *La science, profession et vocation*, (trans. Isabelle Kalinowski) *suivi de « Leçons wébériennes sur la science et la propagande »* by Isabelle Kalinowski (Marseilles, Agone, 2005), p. 55, translation ours.

[5] Lord Alfred Tennyson, quoted in Martin, Robert Bernard, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, London, Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 36.

[6] Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*, quoted by Catherine Colliot-Thélène in *Le désenchantement de l'Etat de Hegel à Max Weber* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1992), p. 136, note 21.

Thus, in the second half of the 19th Century, the Christian conception of life and the world, as well as Western metaphysics at large shake on their foundations under the assault of scientific rationalization.

Yet, since Max Weber, many sociologists have argued that disenchantment calls for re-enchantment and have studied what practices have been developed by societies and individuals to try to fill the gap left by religion. Art, that creates works in which each element is meaningful, is often evoked as the best replacement for religion, such as in Gordon Graham's study *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion.*[7] Indeed, the strongest response to this metaphysical earthquake in Victorian England did not come from religious authorities but can be seen in the revival of fairy-tale writing. Indeed, it is noteworthy that after having been disregarded as superstitious by the rational 18th Century, the fairy-tale genre was brought back to its former glory when the tales of the Brothers Grimm were translated into English in 1823. Subsequently, several seminal authors started writing tales: of course, Dickens is here to be mentioned, with for instance "A Christmas Carol," but also John Ruskin who wrote "The King of the Golden River," published in 1851, as well as Thackeray who published "The Rose and the Ring" in 1854, or Christina Rossetti with *Speaking Likenesses* in 1874, without evoking Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Wilde himself published two collections of fairy tales written after the birth of his sons: *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891). This trend of fairy-tale writing can be construed as an attempt at re-enchantment since it brings authors and their readers back to childhood, the period in life when the world seems most magical. Besides, since Blake and the Romantics, childhood had also taken on the symbolic value of state of innocence and mirror-image of the infant Christ, as exemplified by William Blake in "A Cradle Song": "Sweet babe in thy face, / Holy image I can trace. / Sweet babe once like thee. / Thy maker lay and wept for me" (ll. 21-24).[8] Going back to childhood would then be returning to a state of greater closeness to the divine. Furthermore, fairy tales are a means of re-enchantment in as much as they are set in a time outside time, that occurs between "Once upon a time" and "ever after". This temporality is utterly at odds with the notion of progress which is at the heart of disenchantment according to Max Weber who writes:

[7] Gordon Graham, *The Re-Enchantment of the World: Art versus Religion* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).
[8] William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [1789)], (London, Tate Publishing, 2011), p. 16.

> L'homme civilisé, […] pris dans l'enrichissement continuel de la civilisation en idées, en savoirs, en problèmes, peut se « fatiguer de la vie » mais non en être « rassasié ». De tout ce que la vie de l'esprit ne cesse d'offrir de nouveau, il ne saisit en effet que la plus infime partie, qui n'est jamais que provisoire et non définitive : voilà pourquoi la mort est pour lui un événement dépourvu de sens. Et parce que la mort est dépourvue de sens, la vie civilisée en tant que telle l'est tout autant : c'est justement parce que son caractère de « progrès » est absurde qu'elle condamne la mort à être absurde. (*La science, profession et vocation*, p. 30)

The fairy tale is a form in which animals can talk, magic exists, everything has a meaning, evil is punished and good deeds are rewarded; turning the cover of a collections of fairy tales is pushing the door to an enchanted world.

Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate who came to be held as the spokesman for the Victorian age, is quite representative of this tension between disenchantment and attempts at re-enchantment. This is to be seen in his very ambivalent attitude towards science: he was really curious about scientific discoveries, as shown by the minute depiction of the Science fair in the "Prologue" of *The Princess*,[9] yet he proved very critical of scientific materialism as he expresses in section CXX of *In Memoriam A.H.H.*:

> I trust I have not wasted breath:
> I think we are not wholly brain,
> Magnetic mockeries; not in vain,
> Like Paul with beasts, I fought with Death;
>
> Not only cunning casts in clay:
> Let Science prove we are, and then
> What matters Science unto men,
> At least to me? I would not stay.

[9] "There moved the multitude, a thousand heads: / The patient leaders of their Institute / Taught them with facts. One reared a font of stone / And drew, from butts of water on the slope, / The fountain of the moment, playing, now / A twisted snake, and now a rain of pearls, / Or steep-up spout whereon the gilded ball / Danced like a wisp: and somewhat lower down / A man with knobs and wires and vials fired / A cannon: Echo answered in her sleep / From hollow fields: and here were telescopes / For azure views; and there a group of girls / In circle waited, whom the electric shock / Dislink'd with shrieks and laughter: round the lake / A little clock-work steamer paddling plied / And shook the lilies: perched about the knolls / A dozen angry models jetted steam: / A petty railway ran: a fire-balloon / Rose gem-like up before the dusky groves / And dropt a fairy parachute and past: / And there through twenty posts of telegraph / They flashed a saucy message to and fro / Between the mimic stations; so that sport / Went hand in hand with Science; […]", Lord Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess* (1847), "Prologue," ll. 57-80, in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, edited by Christopher Ricks (London, New York, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014) (hereafter referred to as "Ricks edition"), pp. 224-225.

Let him, the wiser man who springs
Hereafter, up from childhood shape
His action like the greater ape,
But I was born to other things.[10]

Given this state of mind, it appears relevant to study to what extent a poetics of the tale can have found its way into the *Idylls of the King*. Elaborated over more than forty years – from the first publication of the "Morte d'Arthur" (later to be included in the last idyll, "The Passing of Arthur") in 1842 until that of the complete series in the final order with the last modifications in 1891 – and intended by its author to be his masterpiece, the *Idylls* are a long poem divided in twelves idylls on the Arthurian legend, drawing mainly from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and the collection of Welsh tales called the *Mabinogion* (12^{th}-13^{th} centuries) for its content. Its generic classification has puzzled several generations of critics, as recalled by Clyde de L. Ryals at the beginning of his study on the *Idylls*: "The *Idylls of the King* have been described in many ways – as episodes, tableaux, an epic, a medley, a drama, romances, a novel, heroic poems, and romantic narratives."[11] Ryals then dedicates an entire chapter to showing why it is adequate that they were called "idylls." However, it seems that no one hitherto has thought of comparing it with tales. Yet, this comparison could be fruitful by shedding light on some aspects of the poem. First, it can replace it in this context of disenchantment of the world – and so, paradoxically, taking up the most antique form of narrative would prove the modernity of the text. This interpretation of the *Idylls of the King* as tales meant to strengthen faith in a godly-ruled world is sustained by the last lines of the work, the dedication "To the Queen" which prays her to "accept this old imperfect tale" (l. 36) and ends upon the poet's declaration of faith:

[…] take withal
Thy poet's blessing, and his trust that Heaven
Will blow the tempest in the distance back
From thine and ours: for some are scared, who mark,
Or wisely or unwisely, signs of storm,
Waverings of every vane with every wind,
And wordy trucklings to the transient hour,
And fierce or careless looseners of the faith,

[10] Lord Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), Section CXX, in Ricks edition, p. 466. The Ricks edition contains a note about ll. 9-12 indicating that Tennyson specified that they were "spoken ironically against mere materialism, not against evolution."
[11] Clyde de L. Ryals, *From the Great Deep: Essays on* Idylls of the King, (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1967), p. 3.

> […] the goal of this great world
> Lies beyond sight: yet – if our slowly-grown
> And crowned Republic's crowning common-sense,
> That saved her many times, not fail – their fears
> Are morning shadows huger than the shapes
> That cast them, not those gloomier which forego
> The darkness of that battle in the West,
> Where all of high and holy dies away.[12]

In these lines, Tennyson reasserts his faith in a theological, meaningful world, even though its goal "Lies beyond sight," thus rejecting the materialistic conception of history as a causal succession of pointless events.

Besides, associating the *Idylls* with a poetics of the fairy tale brings to the foreground the feeling of nostalgia for a long-gone golden age that any narrative starting with "Once upon a time" supposes and from which the *Idylls* stem. Indeed, alike the eponymous speaker of "The Ancient Sage," Tennyson was possessed by "The Passion of the Past" which led his friend James Spedding to describe him as "a man always discontented with the Present till it has become the Past, and then he yearns toward it, and worships it, and not only worships it, but is discontented because it is past" (quoted in Martin, p. 203). Of course, such an attitude is reflected in his works and R.B. Martin in his biography of Tennyson remarks that "in such poems as the *Idylls of the King* he displays closer kinship to his uncle than he knew, in his belief in the possibility of giving new life to a heroic past by making it a shell to encase the nineteenth century. […] and the poignancy of their longing was not made less by the brute fact that the particular segment of history for which they were nostalgic had never existed" (p. 212). As a matter of fact, it is notable that Tennyson's life-long project deals with the Arthurian legend, which is set in an uncertain mythical past of Britain, quite close to "Once upon a time." This appeal for a time before Time suggests a longing for the time of the origins, that of the Garden of Eden. Actually, through the poetics of the tale, what can be sensed is the nostalgia of a time out of time, of something which occurs between "Once upon a time" and "Happily ever after" – of an eternity. The nostalgia expressed in *Idylls of the King* is that of a time and a life that would go on forever, of a divine status that was lost when Adam and Eve ate the Forbidden Fruit and became mortal. This idea is supported by the fact that Tennyson started writing the "Morte d'Arthur" in 1833, after Arthur Hallam's untimely

[12] Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, "To the Queen" ll. 45-66, Ricks edition, p. 975.

death,[13] alongside the first sections of *In Memoriam A.H.H.*. Tellingly, both poems are concerned with the wish for the immortality of an Arthur, King Arthur thus becoming the other face of Arthur Hallam. This community of sentiment shows through the occurrence in both poems of a dream of Arthur's return from the dead. One can thus think of some verses from Section CIII of *In Memoriam*:

> And I myself, who sat apart
> And watch'd them, wax'd in every limb;
> I felt the thews of Anakim,
> The pulses of a Titan's heart;
>
> As one would sing the death of war,
> And one would chant the history
> Of that great race, which is to be,
> And one the shaping of a star;
>
> Until the forward-creeping tides
> Began to foam, and we to draw
> From deep to deep, to where we saw
> A great ship lift her shining sides.
>
> The man we loved was there on deck,
> But thrice as large as man he bent
> To greet us. Up the side I went,
> And fell in silence on his neck;[14]

These lines can easily be compared with others from "The Epic", in which the "Morte d'Arthur" is embedded:

[13] Arthur Hallam was Tennyson's closest friend in his youth. He met him at Cambridge in 1829 and Robert Martin write movingly about it that "it is difficult to write of the meeting of Tennyson and Hallam because of the inadequacy of our language to deal with deep friendship. There should be a phrase analogous to 'falling in love' to describe the celerity of emotion that brings two persons together almost at first meeting; 'falling in friendship' is what happened to Tennyson and Hallam" (p. 72). Hallam went to stay with the Tennysons several times and finally got engaged to Tennyson's sister, Emily. Sadly, he was in bad health and he died during his trip to Italy in 1833. His early death (he was only 22) constituted a real trauma for an entire generation of Cambridge students among which he was considered as both a brilliant and a kind young man. Thus, John Kemble wrote to his sister "This is a loss which will most assuredly be felt by this age, for if ever man was born for great things he was. Never was a more powerful intellect joined to a purer and holier heart; and the whole illuminated with the richest imagination, with the most sparkling yet the kindest wit." (quoted in the Ricks edition, p. 332). Even though brief, his friendship with Hallam was seminal to Tennyson's poetry since he was the one who urged him to write down his poems and publish them. His death was very harsh on Tennyson and brought him to write one of the greatest elegiac poems in the English language: *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

[14] *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Section CIII, ll. 29-44, Ricks edition, pp. 450-451.

> And so to bed, where yet in sleep I seem'd
> To sail with Arthur under looming shores,
> Point after point; till on to dawn, when dreams
> Begin to feel the truth and stir of day,
> To me, methought, who waited with the crowd,
> There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore
> King Arthur, like a modern gentleman
> Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,
> "Arthur is come again: he cannot die."
> Then those that stood upon the hills behind
> Repeated—"Come again, and thrice as fair;"
> And, further inland, voices echoed—"Come
> With all good things, and war shall be no more."[15]

Both passages celebrate the dreamt resurrection of Arthur staged as a return from sea, which evokes – through phrases like "thrice as large as men", "'Arthur is come again: he cannot die'" or "war shall be no more" – the return of Christ on Doomsday.

Hence, the *Idylls of the King* are fostered by a refusal of death and the wish to regain eternity: the characters of the *Idylls* attempt to regain eternity and immortality under three shapes: eternal life after death, eternal return or cyclicity and absolute eternity (abolition of death and decay). The core of the Arthurian project is to redeem the world of men in order to make it worthy of eternity, to *turn history into a fairy tale*. Accordingly, King Arthur and Tennyson share the same concern: how to shape a world according to their ideals and render this actualisation of their ideals worthy of lasting forever? How to unite harmoniously man's spiritual and physical dimensions? This implies other questions: can the world be redeemed? Can the king be as successful as the poet in this quest? What can man hope? Can he reclaim his divine nature and how?

In order to answer these questions, the first part of this study will be devoted to the creation of a fairy-tale-like kingdom. It will consider how the coming of Arthur creates a renewal which leads men to differentiate themselves from beasts and to claim their divine nature. It will ponder on the chivalric values which are imposed and the harmony and complementarity between male and female that is put to the foreground. All these elements contribute to Arthur's attempt at regaining eternity for mankind. Eventually, this part will dwell on the aesthetic and structural criteria that make the *Idylls* close to fairy tales.

[15] "Morte d'Arthur", "The Epic", ll. 288-300, Ricks edition, p. 164.

Then, a second part will expand on the failure of the Arthurian project and the fall of Camelot. It will reveal the degradation of the fairy tale as a stylistic model that runs parallel to the degradation of the idyllic kingdom and the ensuing drift towards tragedy. It will also bring to the foreground the parallel that can be established with the Fall through the question of free will and female responsibility in the *Idylls of the King*. Since "To the Queen" presents the poem as "shadowing Sense at war with Soul" (l. 37), we will analyse the responsibility of Guinevere's sensuality in the destruction of Arthur's kingdom but also wonder about the role played by Arthur's idealism in this downfall. Besides, the ambiguous value of cyclic time in the work will be evaluated in order to determine what hope is left after Arthur's death.

Finally, faced with the failure of Arthur to regain eternity for his people through social and political transformations, art will be viewed as the only means to reach eternity. This development will deal with the manifestations of art and the artistic figures at work in the *Idylls*, as well as with the relation of the poem with its photographic illustrations by Julia Margaret Cameron. In this regard, the choice of photography and its relation to time will be emphasised. Eventually, the relation of poetry to eternity will be focused on, accompanied by a reflexion on the role of rewriting in the survival of literary works, and a meditation on the pictorial quality of Tennyson's writing as a way to slow down time.

I – The Coming of Arthur: Creation of a Fairy-Tale-Like Kingdom

A – The Coming of a Messiah

1 – Arthur's Coming and Supernatural Legitimacy

The first of the idylls concerns itself with the birth of Arthur and the beginning of his realm. Most of it revolves around the question of his legitimacy as Uther's heir. Indeed, the barons of the realm protest thus: "Who is he / that he should rule us? who hath proven him / King Uther's son? for lo! we look at him, / And find nor face nor bearing, limbs nor voice, / Are like to those of Uther whom we knew. This is the son of Gorloïs, not the King; / This is the son of Anton, not the King'" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 67-73, p. 681). The question is brought to the foreground when Arthur asks Leodogran for Guinevere's hand since Leodogran will only give his daughter "to a king, / And a king's son" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 142-143, p. 683). Therefore, he decides to investigate Arthur's origins. In order to do so, he first interrogates his knights and Bedivere expresses his own opinion on the matter, that is that Arthur is Uther's son and that, on the night of Uther's death, "By reason of the bitterness and grief / That vext his mother, all before his time / Was Arthur born" (ll. 209-211, p. 684). His version of the story does not really assert the legitimacy of Arthur's crowning: the manner in which he depicts it recalls rather a coup-d'état than the expression of public consent:

> This year, when Merlin (for his hour had come)
> Brought Arthur forth, and set him in the hall,
> Proclaiming, "Here is Uther's heir, your king,"
> A hundred voices cried, "Away with him!
> No king of ours! a son of Gorloïs he,
> Or else the child of Anton, and no king,
> Or else baseborn." Yet Merlin through his craft,
> And while the people clamoured for a king,
> Had Arthur crowned; but after, the great lords
> Banded, and so brake out in open war.[16]

[16] "The Coming of Arthur," ll. 227-236, p. 685.

As a matter of fact, even though the crowd applauds him, the phrasing suggests that it might only be the result of one of Merlin's magic tricks. Thus his story does not provide true legitimacy to Arthur's kinghood.

Then enters Bellicent, daughter of Ygerne and Gorloïs. She tells Leodogran a version of Arthur's birth that she holds from Bleys, Merlin's master, as he told it to her on his deathbed. What is compelling about her account is that she does not strengthen the belief in the filiation between Uther and Arthur but on the contrary she weakens it by remarking: "'What know I? / For dark my mother was in eyes and hair, / And dark in hair and eyes am I; and dark / Was Gorloïs, yea and dark was Uther too, / Wellnigh to blackness; / But this King is fair / Beyond the race of Britons and of men" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 325-330, pp. 687-688). The last line invalidates the idea of a direct lineage between Arthur and the previous king but more importantly, it underlines Arthur's exceptionality. Actually, Bellicent makes Arthur's legitimacy rest on a filiation not with kings but with the supernatural world and the divine. It is striking in her depiction of the ceremony of his crowning which features an accumulation of magical figures:

> And ere it left their faces, through the cross
> And those around it and the Crucified,
> Down from the casement over Arthur, smote
> Flame-colour, vert and azure, in three rays,
> One falling upon each of three fair queens,
> Who stood in silence near his throne, the friends
> Of Arthur, gazing on him, tall, with bright
> Sweet faces, who will help him at his need.
>
> 'And there I saw mage Merlin, whose vast wit
> And hundred winters are but as the hands
> Of loyal vassals toiling for their liege.
>
> 'And near him stood the Lady of the Lake,
> Who knows a subtler magic than his own –
> Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.[17]

The accumulative process is to be felt stylistically in the succession of the figures evoked, introduced by the repetition of "And" and through the use of ternary rhythms[18] ("Flame-

[17] "The Coming of Arthur," ll. 271-284, p. 686.

[18] The shift from the enumeration of the three queens to that of the three characteristics of the Lady of the Lake evoke a very Christian fusion of trinity into unity. Accordingly, a note on line 282 in the

colour, vert and azure" and "Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful"), but the accumulation is also conveyed semantically through the adjective "vast" and the numerator "hundred." This legitimacy drawn from the divine and the supernatural is corroborated by Leodogran's dream in which first Arthur's authority is contested on earth and then "the solid earth bec[omes] / As nothing, but the king st[ands] out in heaven, / Crowned." ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 441-443, p. 691). All of this results in providing the new king with strong support from that spiritual world that Clyde de L. Ryals designates as "the deep."[19]

Indeed, Arthur's origins are intricately linked with the sea, often designated by Tennyson as "the deep" or "the great deep." Thus, Bellicent describes his birth as follows:

> [Bleys and Merlin]
> Descending through a dismal night – a night
> In which the bounds of heaven and earth were lost –
> Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps
> It seemed in heaven, a ship, the shape thereof
> A dragon winged, and all from stem to stern
> Bright with a shining people on the decks,
> And gone as soon as seen. And then the two
> Dropt to the cove, and watched the great sea fall,
> Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
> Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
> And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
> Roaring, and all the wave was in flame:
> And down the wave and in the flame was borne
> A naked babe, and rode to Merlin's feet,
> Who stoopt and caught the babe, and cried "The King!
> Here is an heir for Uther!" And the fringe

Ricks edition (p. 686) specifies Tennyson's comment: "The Lady of the Lake in the old legends is the Church." Moreover, it should be noted that many critics have meditated over the recurrence and the symbolic values of the number three in the *Idylls*. For instance, Gerhard Joseph writes in *Tennysonian Love*: "That [beneficent] God asserts himself through the mystery of number. […] The *Idylls of the King* is filled with threes. […] Why do three queens follow Arthur through life and accompany him to Avilion? To such questions we can supply the numerologist's answer that three is the primary odd number, the emblem of multiplicity in unity, or the mythologist's answer that […] the queens are a type of the triplicated great mother, a cosmic female presence that broods over the life of Camelot in several forms, both natural and supernatural" (Gerhard Joseph, *Tennysonian Love: The Strange Diagonal* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1969),
p. 149).

[19] Clyde de L. Ryals, *From the Great Deep: Essays on* Idylls of the King, (Athens, Ohio University Press, 1967).

Of that great breaker, sweeping up the strand,
Lashed at the wizard as he spake the word,
And all at once all round him rose in fire,
So that the child and he were clothed in fire.[20]

The crucial symbolic importance of the sea in Arthur's birth is emphasised by the manner in which the rhythm of the lines mirrors the ebb and flow of the waves. As a matter of fact, it is evoked through the alternation of perfect iambic pentameters and shorter lines[21] as well as by some enjambments like "[…] And then the two / Dropt to the cove […]" which keep the reader expectant for the clause to finish as for a wave to fall. Moreover, the abundance of spondees in lines 377-378[22] slows down the pace of the reading and mimics the slow and majestic rhythm of the sea. This emphasis laid on the sea in relation with Arthur is made all the more significant as, when Bellicent asks Merlin about the veracity of this tale, he only answers in riddles ending with "From the great deep to the great deep he goes" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 410, p. 690). Tellingly, this line is repeated by various characters throughout the *Idylls* (Guinevere in "The Last Tournament," l. 134, p. 924 and Bedivere in "The Passing of Arthur," l. 445, p. 972) and thus it becomes emblematic. Clyde de L. Ryals in his study of the *Idylls of the King* makes the link with other occurrences of "the deep" in Tennysonian poetry. He evokes one poem which is particularly relevant: "De Profundis," written soon after the birth of the poet's first son, which reads:

Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep,
From that great deep, before our world begins,
Whereon the Spirit of God moves as he will –
Out of the deep, my child, out of the deep,
From that true world within the world we see,
Whereof our world is but the bounding shore -[23]

---

[20] "The Coming of Arthur," ll. 370-389, p. 689.

[21] Such as lines 380-381:
u / | u / |u / |u / |u / |
"And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
/ u u |/ u | / u| u / |
Roaring, and all the wave was in flame"

[22] To be scanned as follows:
/ u| u / |u / | u / | / / |
"Dropt to the cove, and watched the great sea fall,
/ / |u / | / / |u / | u / |
Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,"

[23] "De profundis," 'The Two Greetings,' II 1, ll. 26-31, in *The Poems of Tennyson in three volumes* edited by Christopher Ricks (Harlow, Longman, 1987), volume III, p. 68-69.

Thus, “the deep” represents a sort of ideal world (in the Platonic sense of the term) where the origin and end of human life would lie. Therefore, Ryals can assert that “The point that Tennyson wishes to make, and which he is unwilling for us to overlook, is that Arthur comes to earth from the spiritual deep and that his coming serves to mediate between time and eternity” (p. 58-59). The question of temporality will be explored further on, but it can already be said that this status of emissary from “the deep” gives Arthur messianic dimension.

2 – Apocalyptic Coming and Christ-like Figure

As a matter of fact, Arthur is closely associated with the figure of Christ: this parallel is made clear from “The Coming of Arthur” when the knights of the Round Table sing after his crowning “The king will follow Christ, and we the King” (l. 499, p. 692). The syntactical similarity between the two clauses suggests the similarity of Christ and the King. The same process is used in “Gareth and Lynette” when Gareth replies to his mother (who was suggesting that he could hunt rather than becoming one of Arthur’s knights): “Follow the deer? follow the Christ, follow the King, / Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King” (ll. 116-17, p. 697). Here, the association is made even stronger since there is no change of grammatical subject, so that “the Christ” and “the King” seem almost equated. Similarly, Lancelot describes how those two names are cried together by the Round Table before battle: “I myself beheld the King / Charge at the head of all his Table Round, / And all his legions crying Christ and him” (“Lancelot and Elaine,” ll. 302-304, p. 843). Besides, Arthur himself presents Christ as a model: thus, when he sits in his hall and listens to his subjects’ requests, he compares his justice with that of Christ: “Go likewise; lay him low and slay him not, / But bring him here, that I may judge the right, / According to the justice of the King: / Then, be he guilty, by that deathless King / Who lived and died for men, the man shall die.” (“Gareth and Lynette,” ll. 372-375, p. 704). Designating Christ as “that deathless King” reinforces the similarity between the son of God and Arthur. Hence, the King stands out as a real Christ-like figure. As Clyde de L. Ryals writes, “he is an *ideal* man, a Christlike human who comes to human form with the authority of God” (p. 88).

Indeed, Tennyson valued highly Christ as a character: he said to his son Hallam “They will not easily beat the character of Christ, that union of man and woman, strength and

sweetness."[24] He saw Christ as embodying the ideal of the androgyne, the complete man. This idea was mainly developed in early theological writings, in the Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It can be found for example in the works of John Scotus Erigena, an Irish theologian and philosopher of the 9th century. Mircea Eliade summarises his thoughts about the subject:

> Pour Scot Érigène, la division sexuelle fut une conséquence du péché, mais elle prendra fin par la réunification de l'homme, qui sera suivie par la réunion eschatologique du cercle terrestre avec le Paradis. Le Christ a anticipé cette réintégration finale. Scot Érigène cite Maxime le Confesseur[25], selon lequel le Christ avait unifié les sexes dans sa propre nature, car, en ressuscitant, il n'était « ni mâle, ni femelle, bien qu'il fût né et mort mâle. »[26]

Nonetheless, this idea recurs in the 19th century: interestingly, when dealing with the subject, Eliade takes up the example of the novel *Séraphita* (1834) by Balzac, and what he writes about the eponymous character could easily be applied to Tennyson's Arthur:

> […] l'androgyne de Balzac n'appartient que très peu à la terre. Sa vie spirituelle est entièrement dirigée vers le ciel. Séraphitus-Séraphita vit uniquement pour se purifier – et pour aimer. Bien que Balzac ne le dise pas expressément, on comprend que Séraphitus-Séraphita ne peut quitter la terre avant d'avoir connu l'amour. Il s'agit peut-être de la dernière et la plus précieuse perfection : aimer *réellement* et conjointement deux êtres de sexes opposés. Amour séraphique évidemment, mais ce n'est pas pour autant un amour abstrait, général. L'androgyne de Balzac aime deux êtres bien individualisés ; il reste, donc, dans le concret, dans la vie. Il n'est pas, ici, sur terre, un ange ; il est un homme parfait, c'est-à-dire un « être total ». (*Méphistophélès et l'androgyne*, p. 122)

Similarly, Tennyson's Arthur is not supposed to be an angel but "Ideal manhood closed in real man" as asserted in "To the Queen" (l. 38). Moreover, to strengthen the parallel with what Eliade says of *Séraphita*, in "The Coming of Arthur," the King swears twice a "deathless love": to "his warrior whom he loved / And honoured most" (ll. 124-125), i.e. Lancelot,[27] and to Guinevere.[28] To be more specific about why Arthur can be seen as androgynous, it should be said that his androgyny is to be found rather on the moral and symbolical levels. Indeed, as Vivien says mockingly yet significantly, he is "Arthur the blameless, pure as any maid"

[24] Quoted in the Ricks edition, p. 902.
[25] A Christian theologian of the 7th century, sanctified.
[26] Mircea Eliade, *Méphistophélès et l'androgyne* (Paris, Gallimard, 1962), p. 128.
[27] "[…] Whereat the two, / For each had warded either in the fight, / Sware on the field of death a deathless love" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 129-131, p. 682).
[28] "[…] while the two / Sware at the shrine of Christ a deathless love" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 464-465, p. 691).

("Balin and Balan," l. 472, p. 800). As a matter of fact, he refrains from vice and particularly from lust, thus showing the moral purity of a Victorian maid, as pointed out by Elliot L. Gilbert in his article "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse" who remarks that "Tennyson even goes so far as to alter his sources in order to make this point, rejecting Malory's designation of Mordred as Arthur's illegitimate son and instead having the king refer to the usurper as 'my sister's son – no kin of mine.'"[29] In the same vein, he is characterised by pity, which is rather held as a feminine quality. His pity is best exemplified in "Guinevere," he where describes himself as "I, whose vast pity almost makes me die" (l. 530, p. 955). This line also confirms his association with Christ who died out of pity for men. Furthermore, Gilbert analyses that Arthur is symbolically associated with the feminine principle, mainly through the pattern of the circle (deemed as feminine whereas the line would be masculine):

> As the country of King Pellam is the land of the spear, so Arthur's Camelot is the court of the Grail. At least, it is from Camelot that the knights of the Round Table, tutored in Arthur's values, set out on their quest for the sacred cup, familiar symbol both of nature and of the female, a womblike emblem of fecundity […]. Such female energy is, in traditional mythography, ahistorical, a fact to which the Grail also testifies. The vessel's circular form, like that of the Round Table itself and like the "flickering fairy circles" and "wreaths of airy dancers" associated with the coming of Arthur, mimics the timeless cycles of nature […]. (p. 870)

The Holy Grail is a crucial symbol because not only does it symbolise the quest for the feminine principle and the wholeness of the human being but its coming to the world suggests that the time might have come for the world to be redeemed: Percival relates the hopes of his sister's confessor as follows: "And when King Arthur made / His Table Round, and all men's heart became / Clean for a season, surely he had thought / That now the Holy Grail would come again; / […] Ah, Christ, that it would come, / And heal the world of all their wickedness!" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 89-94, pp. 878-879). Thus, Arthur is associated with Christ as an androgynous figure representing the perfect man and whose coming brings the hope of the salvation of mankind.

Finally, Arthur's Christ-like dimension is sustained by the fact that his coming appears as an apocalyptic event, in the sense that, as Christ's second coming is supposed to do in the Bible, it puts an end to history. Accordingly, Elliot L. Gilbert writes:

[29] Elliot L. Gilbert, "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse", *PMLA*, Vol. 98, No. 5 (October, 1983), p. 871.

> The coming of Arthur at the beginning of the Idylls is plainly an apocalyptic event, recognized as such by the whole society. The advent of a king who proposes to reign without the authorization of patrilineal descent is an extraordinary and threatening phenomenon. 'Who is he / That he should rule us?' the great lords and barons of the realm demand. 'Who hath proven him King Uther's son?' (p. 867)

Moreover, John D. Rosenberg in *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's* Idylls of the King remarks upon Tennyson's early interest for the Apocalypse as a theme as manifested by the poem "Armageddon" written in his youth.[30] Interestingly, some lines from "The Coming of Arthur" are reminiscent of passages from this poem. Indeed, when Arthur goes to battle, the poetic voice insists upon the acuity of his sight: "[…] the world / Was all so clear about him, that he saw / The smallest rock far on the faintest hill" (ll. 96-98, p. 682). This is evocative of the second part of "Armageddon" when an angel opens the eyes of the poetic persona: "[…] I saw / The smallest grain that dappled the dark earth."[31] Similarly, Tennyson himself indicates that his characterisation of the Lady of the Lake owes some features to the *Apocalypse of John*: a note in the Ricks edition indicates that "Tennyson compares *Revelation* xiv 2: 'I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters'" with "But there was heard among the holy hymns / A voice as of the waters […]" ("The Coming of Arthur", ll. 289-290, p. 686). In addition, Arthur's coming can be construed as the apocalyptic return of Christ also because his birth happens on "the night of the new year" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 208, p. 684). Now, the New Year is endowed with great symbolic significance. Mircea Eliade writes in *Le Sacré et le profane*:

> Puisque le Nouvel An est une réactualisation de la cosmogonie, il implique la reprise du Temps à son commencement, c'est-à-dire la restauration du Temps primordial, du temps « pur », celui qui existait au moment de la Création. Pour cette raison, à l'occasion du Nouvel An, on procède à des « purifications » et à l'expulsions des péchés, des démons ou simplement d'un bouc émissaire.[32]

"The Coming of Arthur" provides a good illustration of this quotation since Arthur's war against the heathens matches the idea of purification of the realm whereas the combination of water and fire that surrounds his miraculous birth recalls cosmogonic myths featuring the creation of the world as the union of opposite forces (often the sky and the earth like in the Greek mythology with Ouranos and Gaia). In Christian terms, the defeat of the heathens could

[30] John D. Rosenberg, *The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's* Idylls of the King (Cambridge, Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 14-19.

[31] "Armageddon," II, ll. 29-30, in *The Poems of Tennyson in three volumes*, volume I, p. 81.

[32] Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le profane* (Paris, Gallimard, 1965), p. 71.

also represent the punishment of the impious souls on Doomsday and fire and water could stand for the release of the elements by the angels. Now, it should be recalled that this destruction of the earth in *Revelation* is followed by the creation of a new earth and new Jerusalem in which God comes to live with men (*Revelation*, 21, 1-4). The coming of this new Jerusalem is adumbrated by the proclamation of the end of time by the seventh angel:

> [5] And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hands to heaven,
>
> [6] And sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer:
>
> [7] But in the days on the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he has declared to his servants the prophets.[33]

These end of time and coming of God are precisely what Arthur strives to achieve, as we shall see in the following section.

B – The Arthurian Endeavour to Regain Eternity

1 – The War of the Soul of Man against Time

In "Gareth and Lynette," Gareth contemplates a carved allegory representing "The war of Time against the soul of man" (l. 1168, p. 729):

> In letters like to those the vexillary
> Hath left crag-carven o'er the streaming Gelt –
> 'PHOSPHORUS,' then 'MERIDIES' – 'HESPERUS' –
> 'NOX' – 'MORS,' beneath five figures, armed men,
> Slab after slab, their faces forward all,
> And running down the Soul, a Shape that fled
> With broken wings, torn raiment and loose hair,
> For help and shelter to the hermit's cave.[34]

Actually, this allegory portrays the plight of man after the Fall. Indeed, in *Genesis*, God says to Adam "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: [17] But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (*Genesis*, 2, 16-17). This disobedience is thus clearly associated with death.

[33] *Revelation*, 10, 5-7, King James Version.
[34] "Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1172-1179, p. 729.

Similarly, God ejects Adam and Eve from the Garden in order to prevent them from eating from the tree of life: "[22] And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: [23] Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden […]." Accordingly, aging and death constitute the ultimate punishment of man, turned into "a Shape that fle[es] / With broken wings, torn raiment and loose hair."

That is the condition that Arthur wants to redeem, and "Gareth and Lynette" participates in this endeavour of the human soul to wage war on Time. Indeed, in order to deliver Lyonors, Lynette's sister, Gareth has to defeat the Brotherhood of Night and Day. The four brothers have a double allegorical meaning: they stand simultaneously for the passing of time that brings relentlessly man to his death and for "the three ages of life" and "the temptations of these ages."[35] This second allegorical pattern has been admirably commented on by James R. Kincaid in *Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns.* Gareth first encounters Morning-Star and defeats him easily; Kincaid analyses that "the first, Morning-Star, carries a single crimson banner, suggestive of the passion of youthful ardour and lack of control. The fight is quickly over, Gareth having long ago conquered the impatience and frustration he showed at the opening of the idyll."[36] Kincaid interprets the second knight, Noon-Sun, as an embodiment of "the empirical reason that threatens to blind one to the real truth" (p. 170), given that it is associated with the sun as opposed to the moon, linked with imagination for the Romantics. This blinding is made physical since the poem reads "[…] flashed the fierce shield, / All sun; and Gareth's eyes had flying blots / Before them when he turned from watching him" (ll. 1004-1006, p. 724). But Noon-Sun's horse slips in the ford and so the knight his defeated: Kincaid concludes that "The illusion of materialism is no match for spiritual fact" (p. 170). Gareth's third opponent, Evening-Star, defined by Tennyson as "allegory of habit" (note to the Ricks edition, l. 1067, p. 726), proves to be the tougher. He is "wrapt in hardened skins / That fit him like his own" (ll. 1067-1068, p. 726) and his strength really is that of old habits, as made clear by the effect of the dual on Gareth:

> Till Gareth panted hard, and his great heart,
> Foredooming all his trouble was in vain,
> Laboured within him, for he seemed as one
> That all in later, sadder age begins

[35] Tennyson, quoted by Ricks, note on "Gareth and Lynette," l. 883, p. 720.
[36] James R. Kincaid, *Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1975), p. 170.

To war against ill uses of a life,
But these from all his life arise, and cry,
'Thou hast made us lords, and canst not put us down'[37]

Eventually, Gareth manages to throw him in the river. The only knight left to overthrow is the dreadful Night, more often called Death: "High on a nightblack horse, in nightblack arms, / White with breast-bone, and barren ribs of Death, / And crowned with fleshless laughter […] / […] advanced / The monster" (ll. 1346-1350, p. 734). Yet, Gareth overthrows him easily and splits his helm: "and out from this / Issued the bright face of a blooming boy / Fresh as a flower new-born, and crying, 'Knight / Slay me not: my three brethren bad me do it'" (ll. 1372-1375, p. 735). Of course, this young man can represent the natural cycle of life and death, of new life springing from death nonetheless, ultimately, the moral of the idyll seems to be that death should not be feared (since all in the end "made merry over Death, / As being after all their foolish fears / And horrors only proven a blooming boy" (ll. 1388-1390, p. 735)) and even that it can be easily defeated. This resolution of the plot echoes the description of the gate of Camelot at the beginning of the idyll, where Gareth notices "New things and old co-twisted, as if Time / Were nothing" (ll. 222-223, p. 699). On this gate, it is the very gist of the Arthurian project that is sculptured.

Furthermore, this war against Time permeates the manner in which temporality is dealt with in the *Idylls*. Indeed, the poem is remarkable for its *circular structure* following the cycle of seasons: the Ricks edition quotes Tennyson explaining that "The Coming of Arthur is on the night of the New Year; when he is wedded 'the world is white with May'; on a summer night the vision of the Holy Grail appears; and 'The Last Tournament' is in 'the yellowing autumn tide.' Guinevere flees through the mists of autumn, and Arthur's death takes place at midnight in mid-winter" (p. 678). James R. Kincaid brings forth the idea that instead of emphasising the power of time, the year cycle denies it by making it spatial. He explains that "even the overlaid seasonal progress in the *Idylls* suggests not so much objective, physical time as the spatial representations of time in medieval tapestry or triptychs. This emphasis on space seems to imply the absence of time, which in turn implies the conquest of time" (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, pp. 151-152). This abolition of time, which turns history into a myth, is the aim of both Arthur's and Tennyson's quest. As James Kissane writes, "the timelessness of myth was one of its greatest attractions to the Victorians. It was the realm of myths and legends that came closest to constituting an idealized past that could solace

[37] "Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1098-1104, p. 727.

Tennyson's imagination as a kind of eternal presence."[38] Yet, the question remains: how to vanquish time and retrieve eternity?

2 – Reclaiming the Divine Nature of Man

In order to regain eternity for mankind, Arthur has to prove that in the Great Chain of Being,[39] that man is closer to angels than to apes. The *Idylls* are suffused with this pattern of making "men from beasts" ("The Last Tournament," l. 358, p. 930). In other words, Tennyson makes the difference between human and humane. This is evidenced by Arthur's words to his maimed churl: "'My churl, for whom Christ died, what evil beast / Hath drawn his claws athwart thy face? Or fiend? / Man was it who marred heaven's image in thee thus?'" ("The Last Tournament," ll. 62-64, p. 922). These lines epitomise two crucial ideas: the first is that some men do not deserve the name of man (the final question taken separately is a real question: can such a man be held a man, or should he rather be considered an "evil beast"?); the second is that man is *imago dei*, he was made in God's image and therefore attains a certain degree of perfection which would make him worthy of salvation and eternity. Consequently, Arthur must make men more humane in order to save them. Indeed, the beginning of "The Coming of Arthur" lays emphasis on the bestiality reigning in the kingdom before his arrival:

> And thus the land of Cameliard was waste,
> Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein,
> And none or few to scare and chase the beast;
> So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear
> Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,
> And wallowed in the gardens of the King.
> And ever and anon the wolf would steal
> The children and devour, but now and then,
> Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat
> To human sucklings; and the children, housed
> In her foul den, there at their meat would grow,

[38] James Kissane, "Tennyson: The Passion of the Past and the Curse of Time." in *Tennyson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Elizabeth A. Francis (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice- Hall, 1980), p. 109, quoted in "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse," note 13 p. 877.

[39] This concept from the Antiquity had a great influence on the vision of man's place in the universe during the Renaissance. It assumed that there was a hierarchy and a continuity between all creatures from minerals to angels, through plants, animals and men.

And mock their foster mother on four feet,
Till, straightened, they grew up to wolf-like men,
Worse than the wolves. […][40]

This vivid portraiture of beast-like men can recall both the myth of Romulus and Remus – thus alluding to the alleged barbarity of pagan societies – and a Hobbesian state of nature:[41] it is meant as a starting point for the moral evolution of mankind. This evolution is portrayed on the wall of the hall of the Round Table:

And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall:
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,
And in the second men are slaying beasts,
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,
And over all one statue in the mould
Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,
And peaked wings pointed to the Northern Star.[42]

Actually, this gradation matches the progression of the poem since when "The Coming of Arthur" starts, "beasts are slaying men," then Arthur comes and starts a civilising process, the rapidity and efficiency of which are encompassed in the compression of its narration to a few lines: "Then he drave/ The heathen; after slew the beast, and felled / The forest, letting in the sun, and made / Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight / And so returned" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 58-62). Next, "Gareth and Lynette" and the two idylls about Geraint ("The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid") present the readers with "warriors, perfect men." Indeed, these two idylls are rife with fights: Gareth defeats four knights during duals, overthrows Kay (Arthur's seneschal), and is overthrown by Lancelot; as far as Geraint is concerned, he defeats "the sparrow-hawk" during tournament and slays the numerous bandits that attack him and Enid in "Geraint and Enid." After them comes Lancelot, Arthur's dearest and best knight, who would stand halfway between the third and the fourth levels. As a matter of fact, he is a warrior, "the first in Tournament" ("Gareth and Lynette," l. 485 p. 707) as he demonstrates in "Lancelot and Elaine," but he seems to be "growing wings" as

[40] "The Coming of Arthur," ll. 20-33, pp. 679-680.
[41] Hobbes in his *Leviathan* describes the state of nature as a state of continual war: this idea of ceaseless fighting between men is hinted at in the second stanza of "The Coming of Arthur": "For many a petty king ere Arthur came / Ruled in this isle, and ever waging war / Each upon other, wasted all the land" (ll. 5-7, p. 679).
[42] "The Holy Grail," ll. 232-240, p. 883.

well since he sees the Holy Grail, though clothed, and we learn that he "die[s] a holy man" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 1418, p. 874). Meaningfully, his character is most fully developed in "Lancelot and Elaine" and "The Holy Grail," the seventh and the eighth idylls. This moral ascension comes to its apotheosis in "The Holy Grail" with Percival and Bors who see the holy cup in all its glory, and with the passing of Galahad to the spiritual city with it.

Arthur's action to obtain this spiritual elevation for his people comports three facets: one is *political*, the second is *moral*, the third is *religious*, even though they all intertwine somehow. Politically speaking, his reign is characterised by the instauration of unity and order. In point of fact, his building of a united kingdom is brought to the foreground at the beginning of the first idyll: "For first Aurelius lived and fought and died, / And after him King Uther fought and died, / But either failed to make the kingdom one. / And after these King Arthur for a space, / And through the puissance of his Table Round, / Drew all their petty princedoms under him. / Their king and head, and made a realm, and reigned" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 13-19, p. 679). This emphasis on unity is strengthened by its repetition at the end of the idyll where it is amplified by the unity of the Round Table: "And Arthur and his knighthood for a space / Were all one will, and through that strength the King / Drew in the petty princedoms under him, / Fought, and in twelve great battles overcame / The heathen hordes, and made a realm and reigned" (ll. 514-518, p. 693). Unity is also part and parcel of the religious aspect of his policy since he wants to impose the unity of faith. Actually, through the emphasis on unity and his role of Christian king, he can evoke a Charlemagne who became the head of a great Christian empire, replacing the Roman empire as defender of the Church. This parallel is sustained by Arthur declaring to the Romans: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new / And we that fight for our fair father Christ, / Seeing that ye be grown too weak and old / To drive the heathen from your Roman wall, / No tribe will we pay" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 508-512, p. 693). Accordingly, it is his role of Christian warrior against the heathens that grants his kingdom its rank among the political powers of the world. Moreover, the battles against the pagans display Arthur as invested with the wrath of God: Lancelot depicts the scene as follows:

> '[…] And I saw him, after, stand
> High on a heap of slain, from spur to plume
> Red as the rising sun with heathen blood,
> And seeing me, with a great voice he cried,
> "They are broken, they are broken!" for the King,
> However mild he seems at home, nor cares

> For triumph in our mimic wars, the jousts –
> […]
> Yet in this heathen war the fire of God
> Fills him: I never saw his like: there lives
> No greater leader.'[43]

Therefore, his wars against the pagans (Vikings mostly) prop up his status of emissary from the divine. But the religious facet of his action also takes a more intimate aspect when he urges Bedivere to pray for him: "For what are men better than sheep or goats / That nourish a blind life within the brain, / If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer / Both for themselves and those who call them friend?" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 418-421, p. 971). Thus religious faith and prayer appear as the only justifications for man's felt superiority over the animals. Hence, praying both gives meaning to a man's life and restores him to his human dignity.

Eventually, Arthur has to improve his knights morally, so that they can reclaim the divine nature of mankind. Consequently, he makes them swear vows which constitute a sort of moral code they ought to live by:

> I made them lay their hands in mine and swear
> To reverence the King, as if he were
> Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
> To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
> To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
> To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
> To honour his own word as if his God's,
> To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,[44]

Among all of these precepts, one in particular becomes Arthur's motto: "Man's word is God in man" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 132, p. 682; "Balin and Balan," l. 9, p. 788). As James R. Kincaid remarks, "The purpose of this complete trust in words is not the enforcement of mere restrictive honesty but the creation of a bond between word and deed, between past (promise) and future (action), between God and man, that is at the heart of a genuine society" (p. 153). This emphasis laid on keeping the word given aims at restoring the god-like value of human speech by making it alike God's speech, i.e. *performative*: out of the word, action and creation should occur. Besides, as the King acts as his knights' conscience, he brings them into the light of God and away from the darkness of evil, almost literally speaking: "[…] Then

[43] "Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 305-316, p. 843.
[44] "Guinevere," ll. 464-471, p. 954.

the King in low deep tones, / And simple words of great authority, / Bound them by so strait vows to his own self, / That when they rose, knighted from kneeling, some / Were pale as at the passing of a ghost, / Some flushed, and others dazed, as one who wakes / Half-blinded at the coming of a light" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 259-265, p. 686). Like God, he makes them in his image, as noticed by Bellicent, who observes: "I beheld / From eye to eye through all their Order flash / A momentary likeness of the King" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 268-270, p. 686). He stands as the appropriate model since Tennyson notes about Arthur that "God has not made since Adam was, the man more perfect than Arthur" (quoted in the head note in the Ricks edition, p. 678). Yet he cannot stand alone, for in the Bible, God takes care of creating a help for Adam, and that help is Eve.[45] Consequently, Arthur as well is to have his Eve, as will now be documented.

3- "L'Ange gardien, la Muse et la Madone"[46]

As a matter of fact, in "The Princess," Tennyson develops both the ideal of androgyny which is supposed to make man complete, and of the true complementarity of the couple (that is with man and woman on an equal footing) as the only way towards the re-creation of an Eden on Earth. Accordingly, the Prince exclaims:

> And so these twain, upon the skirts of Time,
> Sit side by side, full-summed in all their powers,
> Dispensing harvest, sowing the To-be,
> Self-reverent each and reverencing each,
> Distinct in individualities,
> But like each other even as those who love.
> Then comes the statelier Eden back to men:
> Then reign the world's great bridals, chaste and calm:
> Then springs the crowning race of humankind.[47]

[45] *Genesis*, 2, 18-22: "[18] And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. [19] And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. [20] And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. [21] And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; [22]And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man." Arthur in "Guinevere" declares that he married her, thinking "lo mine helpmate, one to feel / My purpose and rejoicing in my joy" (ll. 482-483, p. 954).

[46] Charles Baudelaire, « Que diras-tu ce soir, pauvre âme solitaire », l. 14 in *Les Fleurs du Mal* [1857] (Paris, *Librairie Générale Française*, « Le Livre de Poche », 1999), p. 90.

[47] "The Princess," VII, ll. 271-279, pp. 324-325.

These lines emphasise several elements: mutual respect and admiration between husband and wife, the chastity of such a union and the moral accomplishment that it would constitute. All of these are echoed by different couples in the *Idylls*. First, the idea that the complementarity of the spouses is a prerequisite to the salvation of mankind is deeply felt by Arthur. Indeed, after seeing Guinevere for the first time, he understands that his attempt is doomed if he works alone:

> 'What happiness to reign a lonely king,
> Vext – O ye stars that shudder over me,
> O earth that soundest hollow under me,
> Vext with waste dreams? for saving I be joined
> To her that is fairest under heaven,
> I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
> And cannot will my will, nor work my work
> Wholly, nor make myself in my own realm
> Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
> Then might we live together as one life,
> And reigning with one will in everything
> Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
> And power on this dead world to make it live.'[48]

This passage is one of the most frequently quoted in the *Idylls of the King*, for it is highly significant as to the symbolical value of the work. Indeed, Hallam Tennyson said about "The Coming of Arthur" that "in this Idyll, the poet lays bare the main lines of his story and of his parable."[49] Indeed, Tennyson admitted that there was a "parabolic drift"[50] in the poem, which can be understood as that of the interplay between "Sense" and "Soul" (these terms are Tennyson's in "To the Queen"). In this parable, Guinevere embodies "Sense," and Arthur is cast as "Soul." In point of fact, Guinevere is characterised by her sensuality from the very beginning: the third line of "The Coming of Arthur" defines her as "fairest of all flesh on earth." Obviously, the parallel with Helen of Troy – whose love was offered to Paris by Aphrodite as the love of the fairest woman on earth – is particularly relevant to the second part of the work (to idylls such as "Guinevere" in particular), but at this point of our analysis,

[48] "The Coming of Arthur," ll. 81-93, p. 681. This passage recalls Adam's request to God for a human companion in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "So amply, and with hands so liberal / Thou hast provided all things: but with me / I see not who partakes. In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" in John Milton, *Paradise Lost* [1667], (Penguin Classics, London, 2003), Book VIII, ll. 362-366, p. 176.
[49] Quoted in the Ricks edition p. 678.
[50] Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, II (London, Macmillan, 1897), p. 127.

what is to be considered is the insistence on Guinevere's association with beauty, sensuality, and the earth. This insistence is even borne by the rhythm: indeed, line 85 is more trochaic then iambic,[51] and so this falling rhythm expresses Guinevere's link with the earth. On the contrary, Arthur stands for the aspiration upwards. This contrast is heightened by the antithesis between the images of "the stars" and "the earth" which Arthur both addresses. The fact that the stars "shudder" and that the earth "sound[s] hollow" reveals the need for complementarity of these two extremes. As Gerhard Joseph writes in *Tennysonian Love*, "What is ultimately interesting about the marriage of Arthur and Guinevere is […] rather the paradox that underlies their psychomachy: soul's need of sense for incarnation is as urgent as sense's dependence upon soul for release from carnal limitation." The frail ideal light of the stars is in need of incarnation while the earth depends on spirituality to be more than an empty shell. The convocation of these images also gives their union a cosmological dimension, echoing for instance the Greek myth of the union of Gaia (the Earth) and Ouranos (the Sky). Actually, Stephen Ahern in his article "Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson's *Idylls*" remarks that Guinevere "as incarnation of the feminine principle represents for [Arthur] the fertile powers of the earth."[52] He grounds his analysis on a later passage of "The Coming of Arthur":

> This figuration of Guinevere as the feminine principle of nature is explicit in the description of the joy Arthur's knights experience at his wedding, when "The Sun of May descended on their King, [and] / They gazed on all earth's beauty in their Queen" (11. 461-62). In this binary opposition, Arthur is identified with the sun – a symbol of imagination and will – while Guinevere embodies the fecund grandeur of nature. (p. 94)

Symptomatically, their union is supposed to give them "power on this dead world to make it live": in other words, through the combination of Arthur's idealism and Guinevere's fertility, their marriage should give eternal life back to mankind.

All the more so as they are meant to be an example for all their knights and ladies. Indeed, Arthur includes among the vows to which his knights are sworn:

> To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
> And worship her by years of noble deeds,
> Until they won her; for indeed I knew

[51] This line can be scanned as follows:
(u)│/ u │u u │/ u │u u│/ u
To her that is the fairest under heaven
It is a hypercatalectic line, there is an extra-unstressed syllable at the beginning.
[52] Stephen Ahern, "Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson's *Idylls*" in *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Winter, 2004), p. 94.

Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.[53]

Here, he manifests his belief in the ability of women to induce purity in men. As Elliot L. Gilbert writes, "These lines perfectly express the Evangelical Protestant belief […] that 'Christianity had elevated women above the weakness of animal nature for the sake of purity for men'" ("The Female King," p. 871). Similarly, in "The Princess," the Prince argues that, when growing more women-like, men should gain "in sweetness and in moral height" (VII, l. 265, p. 324). Enid, with her total devotion to her husband, is undoubtedly the best embodiment of this paradigm. In fact, Gerhard Joseph defines her adequately as "a paragon of redemptive womanhood" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 125). She is the epitome of marital virtue and a sacrificial figure in as much as she treasures her husband's name and happiness over her own, declaring: "Far better were I laid in the dark earth, / Not hearing any more his noble voice, / Not to be folded more in these dear arms, / And darken'd from the high light in his eyes, /Than that my lord thro' me should suffer shame" ("The Marriage of Geraint," ll. 97-101, p. 739). What is interesting here is that although Enid subscribes to and promotes the Arthurian ideals, this passage of the idyll is permeated by sensuality and eroticism as she watches the unveiled body of her sleeping husband: actually, her interior monologue is triggered off by her contemplation:

[…] the strong warrior in his dreams;
Who, moving, cast the coverlet aside,
And bared the knotted column of his throat,
The massive square of his heroic breast,
And arms on which the standing muscle sloped,
As slopes a wild brook o'er a little stone,
Running too vehemently to break upon it.
And Enid woke and sat beside the couch,
Admiring him, and thought within herself,
Was ever man so grandly made as he?[54]

[53] "Guinevere," ll. 472-480 p. 954
[54] "Geraint and Enid," ll. 72-81, pp. 738-739.

Thus, their couple, combining spirituality and sensuality, is the perfect example of what Arthur wants to achieve. "Geraint and Enid" is particularly noteworthy for it displays them dealing with a crisis: Geraint suspects his wife's unfaithfulness while she laments at seeing him ceasing to act as a lord to his land and a knight to his king. Geraint decides to reconquer Enid by a display of virility and finally gives up his unfounded suspicions when he acknowledges her devotion. Her presence and attitude make him a better man, as underlined at the close of the idyll:

> And there he kept the justice of the King
> So vigorously yet mildly, that all hearts
> Applauded, and the spiteful whisper died:
> And being ever foremost in the chase,
> And victor at the tilt and tournament,
> They called him the great Prince and man of men.
> But Enid, whom her ladies loved to call
> Enid the Fair, a grateful people named
> Enid the Good; and in their halls arose
> The cry of children, Enids and Geraints
> Of times to be […][55]

Significantly, they have children only once they have re-established the equilibrium of their couple, but this offspring ensures them a sort of eternity through cyclicity, since they will be "Enids and Geraints / Of times to be." Eventually, they become the spiritual children of the King and Queen by fulfilling the ideals they stand for. This moral filiation is propped up by the fact that Enid dreams of the Court and in her dream, Arthur and Guinevere have children ("The Marriage of Geraint," ll. 654-669, p. 756). Hence, women impose themselves as adjuvants of the Arthurian project.

Yet, the stress laid on feminine purity is even pushed further. As Gerhard Joseph writes, in some parts of Tennyson's poetry, "the function of woman, God's closest analogue on earth according to Hallam, is to inspire man toward the spiritual city" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 182). Two characters mainly convey this vision of woman in the *Idylls*: Lancelot and Galahad. Gerhard Joseph presents an interesting point of view on Lancelot's love for Guinevere by writing that "Lancelot in his desire for unearthly perfection has specifically renounced the 'maiden passion for a maid' like Elaine […]; he prefers the 'wifeworship' of courtly love precisely because he believes a noble wife to be more untouchable than a

[55] "Geraint and Enid," ll. 955-965, p. 787.

maiden" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 176). Indeed, his devotion to the Queen is presented at some points of the work as the apex of the chastity and courtesy[56] that Arthur expects from his knights. This view is voiced for example by a "minstrel" at the beginning of "Merlin and Vivien": "A minstrel of Caerleon by strong storm / Blown into shelter at Tintagil, sa[id] / That out of naked knightlike purity / Sir Lancelot worshipped no unmarried girl / But the great Queen herself, fought in her name, / Sware by her – vows like theirs, that high in heaven / Love most, but neither marry nor are given / In marriage, angels of our Lord's report" (ll. 9-16, p. 808). This comparison with angels is evocative of a verse of the Bible stating that "in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (*Matthew*, 22, 30). Consequently, his devotion to Guinevere would participate in Arthur's endeavour in as much as it would prefigure the blissful state of the resurrected Christians. Actually, he becomes an alternative model for the knights of the Round Table, for he is imitated 'by some few – ay, truly – youths that hold / It more beseems the perfect virgin knight / To worship woman as true wife beyond / All hopes of gaining, than a maiden girl. / They place their pride in Lancelot and the Queen. So passionate for an utter purity / Beyond the limit of their bond, are these, / For Arthur bound them not to singleness" (ll. 21-28, p. 808). This model of woman leading men towards angelic purity is also incarnated by the nun, Percival's sister. She has a vision of the Holy Grail and then she urges the knights of the Round Table to "fast and pray / That so perchance the vision may be seen / […] and all the world be healed" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 126-128, p. 879). Her role as agent of the divine is most acted out in her relationship with Galahad. When she sees him for the first time, she binds round him a belt made of her hair:

> Saying "My knight, my love, my knight of heaven,
> O thou, my love, whose love is one with mine,
> I, maiden, round thee, maiden, bind my belt.
> Go fourth, for thou, shalt see what I have seen,
> And break thro' all, till one will crown thee king,
> Far in the spiritual city:" and as she spake
> She sent the deathless passion in her eyes

[56] The influence of the medieval tradition of courtly love is here to be felt. Indeed, C.S. Lewis in his *Allegory of Love: A Study of the Medieval Tradition* writes that its main characteristics are "Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love. […] This solemn amatory ritual is felt to be part and parcel of the courtly life. It is possible only to those who are, in the old sense of the word, polite. […] only the courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous" (*Allegory of Love: A Study of the Medieval Tradition* [1936] (London, Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 2). All these elements apply to Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship which is publicly acknowledged – to some extent – and emphasises the quality of Arthur's chief knight.

Through him, and made him hers, and laid her mind
On him, and he believed in her belief.[57]

She stands as the intermediary between him and the Grail, she gives him her faith. She is the vector of his spiritual accomplishment. In his essay *Divining Desire: Tennyson and the Poetics of Transcendence*, James W. Hood gives pride of place to the connection between "spiritual and erotic devotion."[58] This passage undoubtedly fits in his considerations and so he comments: "Galahad's quest for spiritual illumination, therefore, originates in being bound to a woman by virtue of their shared sexual state, their virginity. They speak the words that lovers speak and share the intimate connection of a 'deathless passion.' Spiritualised in this fashion, their erotic devotion becomes a sort of divined desire, that state of complete fulfillment that other lovers in the *Idylls* […] by no means achieve" (p. 166). The idealisation of their love grants it eternity, thus mirroring Arthur's attempt at the constitution of an ideal society grounded on moral perfection. Ultimately, the ethereal nature that the King imposes onto his kingdom evokes the unmitigated moral simplicity of fairy tales, these folktales in which kindness and purity are always rewarded by eternal happiness.

C – Poetics of the Tale in the Idylls

1 – Fairy Tales and Morality

The seminal importance of morality in Arthur's endeavour to earn eternity for mankind leads to the building of what one could call a "fairy-tale-like kingdom." Significantly, Guinevere calls him "a moral child" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 145, p. 839), because he tries to fashion his realm on the same moral principles that characterise the fairy tales we read to children. Indeed, in spite of their being filled with psychological or even physical violence, fairy tales are deemed appropriate for children in as much as they are supposed to teach them to cherish good and condemn evil. This idea is made plain by Dickens in his article "Fraud in the Fairies" which reads: "It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force – many such good things have been first

[57] "The Holy Grail," ll. 157-165, pp. 880-881.
[58] James W. Hood, *Divining Desire: Tennyson and the Poetics of Transcendence*, (Aldershot, Burlington, Ashgate, 2000), p. 8.

nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid."[59] Tellingly, the first virtue mentioned by Dickens is "gentleness," which is quite close to courtesy (one of its definition according to the *Oxford Dictionary* is "A courteous or chivalrous quality attributed to noble birth"[60]). Now, courtesy is one of the main characteristics of Arthur's court: it is best epitomised by Lancelot, who is presented as the very embodiment of courtesy through lines such as "'Lancelot-like,' she said / 'Courteous in this, Sir Lancelot, as in all'" ("Gareth and Lynette," l. 1271, p. 732). His courteous behaviour is also dramatised through Balin's eyes towards the beginning of "Balin and Balan":

> [Balin] now would strictlier set himself
> To learn what Arthur meant by courtesy,
> Manhood, and knighthood; wherefore hover'd round
> Lancelot, but when he mark'd his high sweet smile
> In passing, and a transitory word
> Make knight or churl or child or damsel seem
> From being smiled at happier in themselves –
> Sighed[61]

Moreover, his gentleness is enacted in his attitude towards Gareth as well, whom he teaches "All the devisings of their chivalry / When one might meet a mightier than himself" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1314-1315, p. 733). He puts Gareth's pride and fame before his own by giving him advice to win the fight rather than going in his stead. As far as he is concerned, Gareth appears as the exemplar embodiment of the moral values displayed in fairy tales. In point of fact, mercy is emphasised in his attitude towards the knights he defeats, for to the first one he says:

> Thy life is thine at her command. Arise
> And quickly pass to Arthur's hall, and say
> His kitchen-knave hath sent thee. See thou crave
> His pardon for thy breaking of his laws.
> Myself, when I return, will plead for thee.[62]

This passage encompasses at the same time Gareth's courtesy (for he respects Lynette's wishes), Lynette's mercy since she asks him to spare the knight, and Gareth's own mercy given that he offers to plead for the fallen knight. Thus, mercy appears as a virtue coming

[59] Charles Dickens, "Fraud in the Fairies," *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, No. 184, Vol. VIII, pp. 97-100.
[60] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/gentleness, 04/04/2015, 21:33.
[61] "Balin and Balan," ll. 154-161, p. 792.
[62] "Gareth and Lynette," ll. 959-964, p. 723.

from the King and radiating throughout his hall. Eventually, Gareth exemplifies also the forbearance Dickens writes about by bearing with equal courtesy and good humour all of Lynette's contemptuous remarks and her calling him "kitchen-knave."

As a matter of fact, Gareth and Balin are prototypical fairy-tale characters in as much as they are youths going through an initiation into adulthood, with Arthur and Lancelot as initiators. Both take Lancelot as model, Gareth even fighting in his guise and Balin imitating his worship of the Queen. Yet, the two young men stand in sharp contrast. Indeed, Gareth embodies the perfect, obedient child, and comes to represent all that Arthur expects from his knights, as made plain from his exchange with the King:

> 'Make thee my knight? my knights are sworn to vows
> Of utter hardihood, utter gentleness,
> And, loving, utter faithfulness in love,
> And uttermost obedience to the King.'
>
> Then Gareth, lightly springing from his knees
> 'My King, for hardihood I can promise thee.
> For uttermost obedience make demand
> Of whom ye gave me to, the Seneschal,
> No mellow master of the meats and drinks!
> And as for love, God wot, I love not yet,
> But love I shall, God willing.'[63]

Indeed, Gareth stands for this young and merry character that brings happiness to all those surrounding him. He is characterised by his enthusiasm, as evidenced by his "*lightly springing* from his knees." On the contrary, Balin is rather the type of the mischievous child who must learn from his mistakes. At the beginning of the idyll, he comes back after having been exiled for three years by Arthur after having wounded a thrall by hitting him while wearing his armour. Arthur welcomes him by saying: "Rise, my true knight. As children learn, be thou / Wiser for falling! walk with me and move / To music with thine order and the King" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 72-74, p. 790). But, once Balan, his brother, is gone into quest, he feels awkward, much the "ugly duckling" in a way, and he watches at Lancelot with the same envy and the same feeling of his own clumsiness at the sight of such gracious elevation as the ugly duckling watches the flight of swans:

> Sighed, as a boy lame-born beneath a height,
> That glooms his valley, sighs to see the peak

[63] "Gareth and Lynette," ll. 541-551, p. 709.

Sun-flushed, or touch at night the northern star;
For one out of his village lately climbed
And brought report of azure lands and fair,
Far seen to left and right: and he himself
Hath hardly scaled with help a hundred feet
Up from the base: so Balin marvelling oft
How far beyond him Lancelot seemed to move,
Groaned, and at times would mutter, 'These be gifts,
Born with the blood, not learnable, divine,
Beyond *my* reach. […]'[64]

Despite his feeling of inadequacy, Balin really tries to match Arthur's expectations and so asks permission to wear Guinevere's crown on his shield in order to "forget / [his] heats and violence" and "live afresh" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 185-186", p. 793). The King and Queen accept and he feels in peace for a time. Nonetheless, his efforts finally fail and the poem becomes an illustration of what happens when a knight disrespects one of the moral principles expressed in his vows. In Balin's case, it is slander.[65] Indeed, the vows sworn to Arthur do specify "To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it" ("Guinevere," l. 469, p. 954). Consequently, Gareth displays the right behaviour: "But if their talk were foul / Then would he whistle rapid as any lark, / Or carol some old roundelay, and so loud / That first they mocked, but after, reverenced him" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 494-497, p. 708). On the contrary, Balin is driven mad first by witnessing a rather innocent exchange between Lancelot and Guinevere which ends with the Queen blushing. He flees the court and arrives at Pellam's castle, where his son Garlon insults the Queen and Lancelot. Balin loses his temper and kills him, then runs to the forest. There, he meets Vivien who lies to him, saying that once she saw: "The flower of all their vestal knighthood, knelt / In amorous homage – knelt – what else? – O ay / Knelt and drew down from out his night-black hair / And mumbled that white hand whose ringed caress / Had wandered from her own King's golden head" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 501-505, p. 801). Balin believes her, which makes him lose his mind, and eventually he unwittingly fights to

[64] "Balin and Balan," ll. 161-172, p. 792.

[65] As a matter of fact, the poem is pervaded with symbols of slander. As pointed out by Clyde de L. Ryals, the first emblem on Balin's shield (described as a "rough beast […] / Langued gules, and toothed with grinning savagery" ll. 192-193, p. 793) can stand for "the fiend slander with its lying red tongues" (*From the Great Deep*, p. 183), whereas the characterisation of the fiend that haunts the woods evokes the same theme: he "Was once a man, who, driven by evil tongues / From all his fellows, lived alone, and came / To learn black magic, and to hate his kind / With such a hate that when he died his soul / Became a fiend, which, as the man in life / Was wounded by blind tongues he saw not whence, / Strikes from behind" (ll. 122-128, p. 791).

death with his brother Balan who takes him for the fiend he was supposed to kill. Of course, the reader knows that Garlon and Vivien are right and that Lancelot and Guinevere have an adulterous relationship, but at this point of the work, there is no evidence of it and there is no knowing if their love affair has already started or not (and actually it is never proven that they actually consummate their love). Balin is to a certain extent responsible for his pathetic fate in as much as he should not have listened to slanderers.[66] Therefore, this idyll can be likened to the pattern of some fairy tales in which the hero is punished for having transgressed an interdiction.

Finally, part of the didactic and moral value of the *Idylls* comes from its Manichean conception of characters. Tellingly, the title of one of its first editions was *Enid and Nimuë: The True and the False*,[67] thus highlighting the contrast between the good, faithful wife and the sulphurous and malevolent "harlot" as Merlin calls her, saying that "harlots paint their talk as well as face / With colours of the heart that are not theirs" ("Merlin and Vivien," ll. 819-820, p. 830). In the same vein, Mark stands as a tyrannical king, the exact opposite of Arthur, who, against Arthur's strife for moral purity, tries to impose "Mark's way."[68] Arthur defines him as "a man of plots, / Craft, poisonous counsels, wayside ambushings" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 423-424, p. 705). Against Arthur's values of courage, courtesy and honesty, he holds lie, craft and brutality. Truly, Vivien and Mark, as well as Modred, are the villains in the "new-old tale"[69] of the *Idylls of the King*; it is all the more striking as there is no given reason for their evil deeds. As Clyde de L. Ryals remarks: "what is the motivation for their malevolence? Tennyson does not provide the answer. He seems to see evil as a presence which always lurks in the background, working its harm without cause, always ready to strike when it finds an opening" (*From the Great Deep*, p. 181). Like in fairy tales, the wicked ones are wicked by reason of the tautology that they are the wicked ones. If this Manichean characterisation corresponds to Arthur's fairy-tale-like conception of the world, it also points

[66] Actually, Balin foreshadows another character driven mad by the knowledge of the adultery, that is Pelleas. Yet, Pelleas is more justified to believe in it because he learns it from Percival ("Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 514-522), who is a figure of purity, and not from Vivien, who represents evil and slander.
[67] Trial edition published in 1857. It only included "Enid" (which was later reworked and split between "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid") and "Nimuë" (which was to become "Merlin and Vivien").
[68] These are his final words before murdering Tristram and Isolt from behind in "The Last Tournament" (l. 748, p. 941). Clyde de L. Ryals uses this phrase to characterise his insidious action in Camelot, implemented through Vivien as well.
[69] "To the Queen," l. 37, p. 974.

to Tennyson's design: to what extent can it be said that the poet choses the model of the tale and for what reasons?

2 – The Fairy-Tale as Aesthetical Model

The first element through which the *Idylls* can recall fairy tales is their *dramatis personae*. Indeed, as an Arthurian text, they bring the reader into a medieval universe full of characters often encountered in fairy tales: it is rife with kings and queens and peopled by multiple knights performing heroic and knightly tasks: fighting in tournaments (see "Lancelot and Elaine" and "The Last Tournament"), questing for magical objects ("The Holy Grail") and rescuing damsels in distress. The latter are also numerous: Lyonors in "Gareth and Lynette," Enid in "The Marriage of Geraint" and even Guinevere in "The Coming of Arthur." Actually, she is presented as the prototypical fairy-tale princess for she is said to be "fairest of all flesh on earth" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 3, p. 679). Beside the fact that they are characterised by their great beauty, these feminine figures evoke fairy-tale characters in as much as they arouse love at first sight. Thus, Geraint on hearing Enid's voice for the first time knows that she is the only woman he will ever love, saying out loud: "Here, by God's grace, is the one voice for me" ("The Marriage of Geraint," l. 344, p. 746). To put it briefly, the characters of the *Idylls* follow the same narrative patterns as traditional fairy-tale protagonists.

Indeed, Propp in his *Morphologie du conte* established a list of the functions of characters in tales and brought to the foreground the prototypical organisation of the plot in most popular tales. Now, a structural analysis based on Propp's observations can be performed on each idyll. One of the most striking examples is that of "Gareth and Lynette": the poem begins with Gareth's departure to Arthur's kingdom, which corresponds to Propp's first step ("I. UN DES MEMBRES DE LA FAMILLE S'ÉLOIGNE DE LA MAISON"[70]). His mother accepts to let him go only if he swears not to tell who he is and to work as a kitchen knave for a whole year – "II. LE HÉROS SE FAIT SIGNIFIER UNE INTERDICTION" (p. 37) or "XXIII. LE HÉROS ARRIVE INCOGNITO CHEZ LUI OU DANS UNE AUTRE CONTRÉE […] 2. Il arrive *chez le roi d'un pays étranger*, se fait embaucher aux cuisines comme cuisinier ou se fait engager comme palefrenier" (p. 74). Then, Lynette comes to Arthur's hall to ask for help for her sister

[70] Vladimir Propp, *Morphologie du conte* in Vladimir Iakovlevitch Propp, Eleazar Moiseevitch Meletinski, Marguerite Derrida (translator), Tzvetan Todorov (translator), Claude Khan (translator), [1970] *Morphologie du conte suivi de Les transformations des contes merveilleux et de L'étude structurale et typologique du conte* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 'Point Essais', 1973) p. 36.

Lyonors – "IX. LA NOUVELLE DU MÉFAIT OU DU MANQUE EST DIVULGUÉE, ON S'ADRESSE AU HÉROS PAR UNE DEMANDE OU UN ORDRE, ON L'ENVOIE OU ON LE LAISSE PARTIR" (p. 47). Since Lancelot is absent, Gareth asks Arthur to choose him to free Lyonors from her oppressors – "X. LE HÉROS-QUÊTEUR ACCEPTE OU DÉCIDE D'AGIR" (p. 50). Gareth is then led by Lynette to her sister's castle – "XV. LE HÉROS EST TRANSPORTÉ, CONDUIT OU AMENÉ PRÈS DU LIEU OÙ SE TROUVE L'OBJET DE SA QUÊTE" (p. 63). There, he successively fights against and defeats the four knights who besiege Lyonors – "XVI. LE HÉROS ET SON AGRESSEUR S'AFFRONTENT DANS UN COMBAT" (p.64) and "XVIII. L'AGRESSEUR EST VAINCU" (p. 65). The victory against Death is singular because Gareth wears Lancelot's shield in order to upset his adversary with Lancelot's fame as a warrior. This could match Propp's twenty-ninth step: "XXIX. LE HÉROS REÇOIT UNE NOUVELLE APPARENCE" (p.77). Eventually, the idyll closes on the idea of Gareth's marrying either of the two sisters: "And he that told the tale in older times / Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors, / But he, that told it later, says Lynette" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1392-1394, p. 735) thus fulfilling the last piece of Propp's pattern: "XXXI. LE HÉROS SE MARIE ET MONTE SUR LE TRÔNE […] 2. Parfois le héros se marie, mais comme sa femme n'est pas princesse, il ne devient pas roi" (pp.78-79). Propp specifies that it is very rare to find all of the steps he enumerates in one and only tale, what is systematic is the order of their succession. Therefore it is perfectly normal that "Gareth and Lynette" does not contain all of Propp's functions. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that those which are missing here are distributed over various other idylls. For instance, functions XII to XIV ("XII. LE HÉROS SUBIT UNE ÉPREUVE, UN QUESTIONNAIRE, UNE ATTAQUE, ETC., QUI LE PRÉPARENT À LA RÉCEPTION D'UN OBJET OU D'UN AUXILIAIRE MAGIQUE" p. 51, "XIII. LE HÉROS RÉAGIT AUX ACTIONS DU FUTUR DONATEUR" p. 54 and "XIV. L'OBJET MAGIQUE EST MIS À LA DISPOSITION DU HÉROS" p. 55) do not appear in "Gareth and Lynette" but constitute the gist of "The Holy Grail" in which the knights seek the Holy Grail and are tested to know whether they are worthy of finding it or not. Similarly, steps IV to VII ("IV. L'AGRESSEUR ESSAYE D'OBTENIR DES RENSEIGNEMENTS" p. 39, "V. L'AGRESSEUR REÇOIT DES INFORMATIONS SUR SA VICTIME" p. 39, "L'AGRESSEUR TENTE DE TROMPER LA VICTIME POUR S'EMPARER D'ELLE OU DE SES BIENS" p. 40 and "VII. LA VICTIME SE LAISSE TROMPER ET AIDE AINSI SON ENNEMI MALGRÉ ELLE" p. 41) constitute the basic outline of "Merlin and Vivien" since Vivien coaxes Merlin into telling her the spell to lock him out of this world. Thus, Tennyson exploits different models of fairy tales.

Besides, the *Idylls of the King* are reminiscent of the universe of fairy tales for what they owe to magic. Indeed, as already analysed, Arthur is surrounded and protected by various

supernatural figures. In the same vein, the novice in "Guinevere" relates how her father saw magical creatures appear on the night of Arthur's coming:

> After the sunset, down the coast, he heard
> Strange music, and he paused, and turning – there,
> All down the lonely coast of Lyonnesse,
> Each with a beacon-star upon his head,
> And with a wild sea-light about his feet,
> He saw them – headland after headland flame
> Far on into the rich heart of the west:
> And in the light the white mermaiden swam,
> And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea,
> And sent a deep see-voice through all the land,
> To which the little elves of chasm and cleft
> Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.[71]

These elves and mermaids are typical folkloric figures, often found in popular fairy tales. Magic is also present in the *Idylls* through the presence of legendary objects such as Excalibur or the Grail. In fact, the Grail is described as "The cup, the cup itself, from which our Lord / Drank at the last supper with his own" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 46-47, p. 877) and it is endowed with wonderful powers since Percival tells how, when Joseph of Arimathea brought it to Britain, "if a man / Could touch or see it, he was healed at once, / By faith, of all his ills" (ll. 54-56, p. 878). Its magical potentialities liken it to magical objects in folkloric tales, such as the "Cauldron of Plenty" with which Elliot L. Gilbert associates it ("The Female King," p. 870). Similarly, Excalibur is granted a magical quality since it was made by the Lady of the Lake: it "rose from out the bosom of the lake" and it is adorned with "elfin Urim" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 296-298, p. 687). It is said that its blade is "so bright / That men are blinded by it" (ll. 299-300, p. 687). Its folkloric dimension is further sustained by the inscriptions on the blade: "on one side / Graven in the oldest tongue of all this world, / 'Take me,' but turn the blade and ye shall see, / And written in the speech ye speak yourself, / 'Cast me away!'" (ll. 300-304, p. 287). Yet, the great magical artefact of the *Idylls* is the city of Camelot itself, for Merlin describes its construction as follows: "a Fairy King / And Fairy Queens have built the city, son; / They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft / Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand, / And built it to the music of their harps" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 254-258, pp. 700-701). It must be said that all these elements belong to the

[71] "Guinevere," ll. 236-247, p. 948.

category of the "marvelous" in Todorov's words for those supernatural or magical elements go unquestioned and are not rationalised, they are accepted as being part of the norms of the intradiegetic world, as opposed to the fantastic, that comports elements seeming to be irrational at first sight but which are given a rational explanation in the end, still according to Todorov's theory of the fantastic.[72]

Furthermore, the very style used by Tennyson in the *Idylls* is reminiscent of fairy tales. The most striking common feature is the acceleration of the rhythm at the end of the narrative: Genette calls that narratological device a "summary" ("*récit sommaire* ou, par abréviation, *sommaire*"[73]), and defines it as a passage in which the duration of the narrative is inferior to the duration of the story. In other words, the narration summarises quickly what happens over a quite long period of time. Indeed, several idylls end with a rather short stanza telling rapidly the rest of the life of the protagonist until his death, as for instance in "Geraint and Enid" (ll. 944-969, pp. 786-787) or, more markedly, in "Guinevere" of which these are the final lines:

> […] [the nuns] took her to themselves; and she
> Still hoping, fearing 'is it too late?'
> Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess died.
> Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life,
> And for the power of ministration in her,
> And likewise for the high rank she had borne,
> Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess lived
> For three brief years, and there, an Abbess, past
> To where beyond these voices there is peace.[74]

This final acceleration is highly evocative of the traditional "And they lived happily ever after" ending most fairy tales. Besides, the *Idylls* recall the style of tales in that they are strongly marked by orality. As a matter of fact, there are several references to a story teller under the designation of "he that tells the tale" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1392, p. 75 and "Geraint and Enid," l. 161, p. 103). This figure of the teller is seminal to the origin of fairy tales. It is noteworthy that "The Passing of Arthur" is presented as "That story which the bold Sir Bedivere, / First made and latest left of all the knights, / Told, when the man was no more than a voice / In the white winter of his age, to those / With whom he dwelt, new faces, other

[72] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [1970] (Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1977).
[73] Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1972), p. 129.
[74] "Guinevere," ll. 684-692, p. 959.

minds." (ll. 1-5, p. 960). It emphasises the transformation of history into tale, and its oral transmission. This oral quality is, obviously, strengthened by the versified form since, in the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, myths were versified so that the music of the language would help memorise the text. Tennyson's text hints at these practices through the repetition of certain phrases, such as the reference to Arthur as "the blameless King"[75] or to Elaine as "the lily maid."[76] This repetition of formulas is especially striking in "Gareth and Lynette" in which each fight against one of the first three knights is presented as a variation on the same pattern. The repetition throughout the idyll of "Lead and I follow,"[77] while showing Gareth's determination, gives to the text a systematic aspect recalling that of a tale. Ultimately, the continuity with the oral tradition of bards and story tellers is to be seen in the presence of numerous songs throughout the *Idylls* (the only idylls which do not include a song are "Geraint and Enid", "The Holy Grail" and "The Passing of Arthur"), and Merlin's riddle[78] in "The Coming of Arthur," which is "an echo of the triads of the Welsh bards" (Tennyson quoted in the notes to the Ricks edition, p. 689). All these elements concur to give to the *Idylls* a tale-like flavour, which has passed quite unnoticed in the critical world, even though the fairy tale seems to be one of the models for what James R. Kincaid means by comedy in his study *Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns*.

There are several reasons to justify this poetics of the tale in the *Idylls*. First, it seems that Tennyson held this form as one of the best way of conveying one's ideas and of persuading others. As a matter of fact, when faced with his mother's refusal that he should leave to become one of Arthur's knights, Gareth tells her two "tales" in order to convince her. This device can recall the moral of Jean de la Fontaine's "Le Pouvoir des fables": "A ce reproche l'assemblée / Par l'apologue réveillée, /Se donne entière à l'Orateur : / Un trait de fable en eut l'honneur. / Nous sommes tous d'Athène en ce point ; et moi-même, / Au moment que je fais cette moralité, / Si Peau d'âne m'était conté, / J'y prendrais un plaisir extrême, / Le

[75] See "Geraint and Enid": l. 811 (p. 783), l. 931 (p. 786), l. 969 (p. 787); "Merlin and Vivien": l. 162 (p. 812), l. 777 (p. 829).
[76] See "Lancelot and Elaine": l. 2 (p. 834), l. 28 (p. 835), l. 241 (p. 841), l. 316 (p. 843), ll. 383-384 (p. 845), l. 733 (p. 855)
[77] See "Gareth and Lynette", l. 728 and l. 740 (p. 715); l. 869 (p. 720); l. 964 (p. 723); l. 1027 (p. 725); l. 1127 (p. 728).
[78] "Rain, rain and sun! a rainbow in the sky! /A young man will be wiser by and by; /An old man wits wander ere he die. / Rain, rain and sun! a rainbow on the lea! / And truth this is to me, and that to thee; /And truth or clothed or naked let it be. / Rain, sun, and rain! and the free blossom blows: Sun, rain, and sun! and where is he who knows? From the great deep to the great deep he goes'" (ll. 402-410, pp. 689-690).

monde est vieux, dit-on : je le crois, cependant / Il le faut amuser encor comme un enfant." Hence, this could be Tennyson's way to urge his reader to "keep down the base" in him and to cultivate his humanity. It would be quite adequate in so far as the imaginative faculty which is at play in the writing of fairy tales – particularly when they include magical creatures – participates in claiming the godlike nature of mankind. J.R.R. Tolkien props up this symbolic value of fairy-tale writing in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*: "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[79] In addition, this aesthetical choice reflects Tennyson's "passion of the past." Naturally, as already evoked in the introduction, the timelessness, the "atemporality" (if we may) of the tale makes it the perfect candidate for the war against time led by both Arthur and Tennyson: it is the genre of eternity by excellence, because neither its beginning nor its end are temporally situated, and because numerous tales have acquired the status of myths, seeming to originate from the beginnings of civilisation and to die only with mankind itself. But there is more: undeniably, the tale is the most archaic form of literature, therefore using its themes and devices turns the *Idylls* into a text from the original Golden Age. This stylistic voyage into the past of literature is heightened by Tennyson's frequented use of alliteration, thus recalling medieval alliterative poetry. It is striking that there are few alliterations covering a whole line, but many enhance the cohesion and individualisation of one action or one element of the scene: it is quite plain, for instance, in the following extract from "The Marriage of Geraint," when Geraint follows the "sparrow-hawk" and his paramour to their city: Geraint rides "By ups and downs, through many a **g**rassy **g**lade / And valley, with fixed eye following the three. / At last they issued from the **w**orl**d** of **w**oo**d**, / And climbed upon a fair and even ridge, / And showed themselves against the **sk**y, and **s**an**k**." ("The Marriage of Geraint," ll. 236-240, p. 743). Eventually, from a certain point of view, the fairy tale and poetry are the purest forms of literature as art in that they are the further estranged from reality. That is the position of Wilde in "The Decay of Lying" in which he regrets that telling the truth, in society as in art, be the new trend: he gives an account of the terrible consequences of such a reversal by describing the American culture as he sees it: "The crude commercialism of America, its materialising spirit, its indifference to the poetical side of things, and its lack of imagination and of high unattainable ideals, are entirely due to that country having adopted for its national hero a man, who, according to his

[79] John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories: Expended edition* [1947], edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Allen Anderson (London, Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), p. 66.

own confession, was incapable of telling a lie […].”[80] On the contrary, Wilde praises poets and tellers of fairy tales because they are “universally recognised as being absolutely unreliable” (“Decay of Lying,” p. 32): by joining the two, Tennyson ensures the survival of imagination and idealism.

Thus, Tennyson in his writing longs to go back to the origins of literature and poetry, as Arthur strives to go back to the original, prelapsarian state of mankind. Yet, can this state be reached? Can men be redeemed? Is it possible for a Christ-like figure to come and shape men like clay? Can a society live on ideals, and history turn into a fairy tale? As the year-cycle of the *Idylls* goes on, the poems ripen with disenchantment, the marriage of “Sense” and “Soul” becomes a “war” (“To the Queen,” l. 37), and the fairy tale metamorphoses into a tragedy.

[80] Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, volume 10, *Intentions* [1891] (New York, AMS Press, 1972), p. 33.

II – Failure of the Arthurian Endeavour: The Fall Re-Enacted

It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when the ideal world created by Arthur starts declining: suspicion is introduced in "The Marriage of Geraint," slander causes Balin and Balan's death, Vivien beguiles Merlin, thus taking away one of Arthur's most precious allies, in "Merlin and Vivien"; then "Lancelot and Elaine" reveals to the reader the veracity of Guinevere and Lancelot's adultery, and "The Holy Grail" marks the widening of the Round Table's dislocation through its actual dispersion and dismemberment. No matter when it begins, the last idylls portray the fulfilment of this process of decay, with Guinevere's flight from court, the war between Lancelot and Arthur, Modred's betrayal and his final battle against the King. This last event constitutes the nadir of Arthur's reign since it results in the death of the last of his knights but Bedivere, and in his being mortally wounded. The sense of impending doom that pervades the second part of the volume is reinforced by an aesthetic shift towards tragedy. As John D. Rosenberg remarks, the *Idylls of the King* provide "the subtlest anatomy of the failure of ideality in our literature" (*The Fall of Camelot*, p. 11), and the last idylls indeed implement "the loathsome opposite / Of all [Arthur's] heart had destined" ("Guinevere," ll. 488-489, p. 954). Therefore we shall, in our turn, probe into the mechanisms of this decay.

A – The Tragic Drift of the Idylls

1 – Fairy Tales Parodied

James R. Kincaid in *Tennyson's Major Poems: The Comic and Ironic Patterns* insists that Tennyson makes great use of irony and parody of traditional literary genres, more particularly in the *Idylls*. He claims that "its narrative structure parodies romance; its tone parodies comedy" (p. 152). As has already been mentioned, what Kincaid means by comedy is quite close to the spirit of fairy tales, and indeed, the idylls of the second half of the work evidence a decline of the fairy tale as a model, which runs parallel to the fading grasp of Arthur's ideal on the society of Camelot. In point of fact, the quest for the Holy Grail is the last one in the *Idylls*, and it proves disappointing for most knights, while Galahad, the only one to complete it, never returns. After that, the reader is faced with Pelleas's blind quest for a woman to love, which is no more than a degradation of the ideal of courtly love, conceived as

deep love for an inaccessible and admirable woman. This declension of chivalric values and actions is also to be seen in "The Last Tournament," ironically named "The Tournament of Dead Innocence" (l. 136, p. 924), given that it is deprived of its glory by the absence of the King as a judge and that of Lancelot as a competitor, and stripped of its courtesy by Tristram's discourteous attitude. In reality, once Arthur is gone to fight against the Red Knight in the North, Lancelot proves unable to uphold the chivalric values of his king since he fails to regulate the tournament: "He saw the laws that ruled the tournament / Broken, but spake not; once, a knight cast down / Before his throne of arbitration cursed / The dead babe and the follies of the king;" (ll. 160-163, p. 925). These lines epitomise both the debasement of the morality imposed by Arthur – through these examples of disrespect for the dead and the authority of the king – and Lancelot's resignation, or at least his awareness that he, himself, is at fault and so has no legitimacy to correct that of others. Thus, the model of the tale fades away as the boundaries between good and evil characters become more and more blurred.

Moreover, the contrast between the first idylls and the last is heightened so that the latter stand out as degraded versions of the former. One of the most telling parallels is the one that can be drawn between "Gareth and Lynette" and "Pelleas and Ettare." Indeed, both idylls stage the relationship between a young knight and a disdainful damsel, but the second seems almost a parody of the first. Though disdainful, Lynette appears lively and witty through her use of the metaphor of the kitchen smell to designate her contempt for Gareth and his alleged social status as a kitchen knave – "'Methought, / Knave, when I watch'd thee striking on the bridge / The savour of thy kitchen came upon me / A little faintlier: but the wind hath changed: / I scent it twenty-fold'" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 966-970, p. 723). The declination of this image brings dynamism to the text while it shows how she progressively recognises that her scorn is unjustified. She finally acknowledges graciously her mistake, even before knowing that Gareth actually is as noble as her:

> 'Sir, - and good faith, I fain had added – Knight,
> But I heard thee call thyself a knave, -
> Shamed am I that I so rebuked, reviled,
> Missaid thee; noble I am; and thought the King
> Scorn'd me and mine; and now thy pardon, friend,
> For thou hast ever answer'd courteously,
> And wholly bold thou art, and meek withal
> As any of Arthur's best, but being knave,

Hast mazed my wit: I marvel what thou art.'[81]

Because she is able to evolve and admit her mistake, she is a rich and positive character. On the contrary, Ettare strikes the reader as the negative stock character of the coquette. As a matter of fact, she merely uses Pelleas for her own fame and glory, as made plain by lines 108 to 114:

She mutter'd, 'I have lighted on a fool,
Raw, yet so stale!' But since her mind was bent
On hearing, after trumpet blown, her name
And title, 'Queen of Beauty,' in the lists
Cried – and beholding him so strong, she thought
That peradventure he will fight for me,
And win the circlet: therefore flatter'd him[82]

In the end, instead of recognising Pelleas's valour, she betrays him with Gawain and regrets Pelleas only once she has lost him forever. Her inferiority to Lynette, both morally and as a character, is emphasised by the fact that her mockery is by far inferior to Lynette's in terms of poetic quality, since she thinks of nothing more original than to call him "Sir Baby" ("Pelleas and Ettare," l. 183, p. 908). In addition, if Ettare can be construed as a degradation of Lynette, as far as he is concerned, Pelleas can stand as a degraded version of Gareth as well. Indeed, while Gareth is determined and embodies forbearance by his tenacity in performing his quest, Pelleas only proves naïve and blind, refusing to acknowledge Ettare's refusal, despite her rather telling closing the gates of her castle before him. His interpretation of this gesture of rejection is astonishing:

'These be the ways of ladies,' Pelleas thought
'To those who love them, trials of our faith.
Yet, let her prove me the uttermost,
For loyal to the uttermost am I.'
So made his moan; and darkness falling, sought
A priory not far off, there lodged but rose
With morning every day, and moist or dry,
[…]
Sat by the walls, and no one open'd to him.[83]

This exaggerated persistence turns his courtesy into oppression, as pointed out by Ettare's exclamation: "He haunts me – I cannot breathe – besieges me" ("Pelleas and Ettare," l. 220,

[81] "Gareth and Lynette," ll. 1133-1141, p. 728.
[82] "Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 108-114, p. 906.
[83] "Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 202-210, p. 908.

p. 909). His misunderstanding of the chivalric values consequently makes him stand as a counterpoint to Lancelot as well. Indeed, his misadventure with Ettare stems from the fact that he has understood that courtly love was among the values of the Round Table but has only a vague idea of what it is, as made plain in the beginning of the idyll:

> And since he loved all maidens, but no maid
> In special, half-awake he whisper'd, 'Where?
> O where? I love thee, tho' I know thee not.
> For fair thou art and pure as Guinevere,
> And I will make thee with my spear and sword
> As famous – O my Queen, my Guinevere,
> For I will be thine Arthur when we meet.[84]

This passage is crucial, firstly because it shows that his love for Ettare will not be true love but only love for love's sake: he does not love her passionately for herself but loves in her only the occasion to have someone to love. Then, its irony is the key to the whole idyll for indeed when they meet, Ettare is "his Guinevere" and he is "her Arthur" in as much as she betrays him with Gawain, just as Guinevere betrays Arthur with Lancelot. Actually, contrarily to what he declares in the very beginning of the idyll – saying "Make me thy knight, because I know, Sir King, / All that belongs to knighthood, and I love" ("Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 7-8, p. 903), Pelleas does not really comprehend the values of Arthur's knighthood and proves unable to put into practice either courtly love or forbearance.

Actually, Pelleas's main defect is his naivety. He approaches the world with the eye of a trustful child, and really acts as if he lived in a fairy-tale world in which beauty would be equated with goodness. It is made obvious by his first judgement of Ettare: "The beauty of her flesh abashed the boy, / As though it were the beauty of her soul: / For as the base man, judging of the good, / Put his own baseness in him by default / And nature,[85] so did Pelleas lend / All the young beauty of his soul to hers" ("Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 74-79, p. 905). His innocent outlook on the world can seem ridiculous, but James R. Kincaid is right to point out that his appreciation of Ettare "is a mistake, but it should not be. Pelleas is simply making the wrong assumptions about the nature of the world. Geraint made no mistake in trusting his imaginative picture of Enid, we recall. Now, however, the body and the soul are split"

[84] "Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 39-45, p. 904.
[85] This is precisely what Vivien does in "Balin and Balan" when she attributes Balin's despair to jealousy, saying that "This fellow hath wrought some foulness with his Queen: / Else never had he borne her crown, nor raved / And thus foamed over at a rival name" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 556-558, p. 802).

(*Tennyson's Major Poems*, p. 200). Hence, Pelleas acts as a pointer to the failure of Arthur to shape his kingdom as an authentic fairy tale. He has his female counterpart in the novice keeping company to the Queen in "Guinevere." In this idyll, Guinevere flees the court after her relationship with Lancelot has been brought to light by Modred and she finds shelter anonymously in a nunnery. There, she is assailed by the babbling of a young novice who judges the decay of Arthur's kingdom with the harsh and unqualified morality epitomised in the following lines:

> And when at last [Arthur] came to Camelot,
> A wreath of airy dancers hand-in-hand
> Swung round the lighted lantern of the hall;
> And in the hall itself was such a feast
> As never man had dreamed; for every knight
> Had whatsoever meat he longed for served
> By hands unseen; and even as he said
> Down in the cellars merry bloated things
> Shouldered the spigot, straddling on the butts
> While the wine ran: so glad where spirits and men
> Before the coming of the sinful Queen.[86]

She lives in a clear-cut world, where people are either good or evil, with no in-between. The story of the decline of Camelot is, in her mouth, the tale of "the good King and his wicked Queen" ("Guinevere," l. 207, p. 947), for the very phrase "wicked queen" is evocative of fairy tales such as *Snow-White*. Undoubtedly, her "innocent talk" (l. 212, p. 947) stresses the gap between the ideal world at which Arthur aimed and the actual outcome of his attempt: the repetition of "ere the coming of the Queen" (ll. 221 and 231, p. 948) echoes that of "ere/till Arthur came" in "The Coming of Arthur" (ll. 5 and 12, p. 679), thus emphasising the contrast between the hope brought by the King and the decay and despair conveyed by Guinevere. Furthermore, the over-simplification that she imposes on the situation is perceived by the reader as irritating and lacking the beauty of complexity. Ultimately, she also embodies a degradation of Arthur's ideal: like Pelleas, she misunderstood it and so perverted it. In her case, this devolution is only annoying, but it turns out to be destructive in Pelleas. As a matter of fact, his naïve vision and incomplete integration of the Arthurian values make him unfit for the confrontation with the real world, and especially with its share of evil. He cannot stand the betrayal of Gawain and Ettare, while the perjury of Guinevere and the other knights to their

[86] "Guinevere," ll. 258-268, pp. 948-949.

vows makes him discredit his. Like Balin, he is rendered mad by the revelation of evil where he expected to find goodness. What is most traumatising to him is deceit, since his simplicity had left him unprepared for the complexity of the real world. Therefore, he goes North, takes the name of the Red Knight, and founds his own Round Table on these principles:

> "Tell thou the King and all his liars, that I
> Have founded my Table Round in the North,
> And whatsoever his own knights have sworn
> My knights have sworn the counter to it – and say
> My tower is full of harlots, like his court,
> But mine are worthier, seeing they profess
> To be none other than themselves – and say
> My knights are all adulterers like his own,
> But mine are truer since they profess
> To be none other; […]"[87]

His moral immaturity wrecks him and makes him become the total opposite of what he was, because he acknowledges only extremes. It is telling that neither the novice nor Pelleas are characters we really empathise with. Their black-and-white worldview alienates them and makes them stand as foils to the great tragic figures of the work. In the heart on the reader as well as in the text, tragedy wins over this exaggerated form of fairy tale.

2 – The *Idylls of the King* as a Tragedy

Indeed, the style of the *Idylls* increasingly deviates from that of tales to that of tragic monologues. As the volume draws to its end, the poems give more and more pride of place to long speeches: the voice of the characters tends to supersede that of the story teller, thus evoking drama. "The Holy Grail" constitutes one of the most prominent instances of that phenomenon, for it is almost entirely narrated by Percivale, whose speech is prompted by the interventions of his brother monk Ambrosius who acts as a confidant. This emphasis laid on characters' speech is symptomatically strengthened at the end of some idylls, which are closed by somehow grandiloquent and theatrical sentences. Thus, "Pelleas and Ettare" concludes with "Then a long silence came upon the hall, / And Modred thought, 'The time is hard at hand'" (ll. 596-597, p. 920). This final thought could easily stand as an aside at the end of the last-but-one act of a tragedy. Its tragic value is all the more blatant as it echoes the

[87] "The Last Tournament", ll. 77-86, p. 923.

beginning of the *Apocalypse of John*: "[3] Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (*Revelation*, 1, 3). Similarly, the final lines of "The Last Tournament" read "'I am thy fool, / And I shall never make thee smile again'" (ll. 755-756, p. 941), announcing very dramatically that the days of happiness are over and the doom of Camelot is on them. Besides, it is relevant to give the last word to Dagonet, Arthur's Shakespearian fool. As a matter of fact, much alike the fool in *The Tragedy of King Lear*,[88] he uses paradoxes and jest to convey wisdom, as when he says about Arthur: "'Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools! / Conceits himself as God that he can make / Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk / From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs, / And men from beasts – Long live the king of fools!" ("The Last Tournament," ll. 354-358, p. 930). Actually, there are many elements reminiscent of Shakespearian tragedy in the *Idylls of the King*. Another is the apparition of Gawain's ghost to Arthur between the final battle against Modred in "The Passing of Arthur":

> There, ere that last weird battle in the west,
> There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain killed
> In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown
> Along a wandering wind, and past his ear
> Went shrilling, 'Hollow, hollow all delight!
> Hail, King! tomorrow thou shalt pass away.
> Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.
> And I am blown along a wandering wind,
> And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight.'[89]

This visitation can recall *King Richard III*, Act 5, scene 3 when the ghosts of all of Richard's victims come to curse him and bless Richmond before the final battle. Besides, it also imparts the *Idylls* with a sense of Fate, since Gawain predicts Arthur's passing. Likewise, before the scandal of her adultery breaks out, Guinevere has a recurrent dream: "[…] she seemed to stand / On some vast plain before a setting sun, / And from the sun there swiftly made at her / A ghastly something, and its shadow flew / Before it, till it touched her, and she turned – / When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet, / And blackening, swallowed all the land, and in it / Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke" ("Guinevere," ll. 75-82, p. 944). It

[88] Dagonet's witticisms can be compared for instance with these lines from *King Lear*: "I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are: they'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o'thing than a fool, and yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides and left nothing i'th'middle." (*The Tragedy of King Lear*, I, 4, 143-148, edited by Jay L. Halio (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 128).

[89] "The Passing of Arthur", ll. 29-37, p. 961.

constitutes the symbolical transcription of the civil war that the discovery of her betrayal then triggers off. This impression that the future is determined in advance is also at work in "The Holy Grail," which, in almost parodic subversion of the structure of tales, starts with the summary of the end of Percivale's life: "From noiseful arms, and acts of prowess done / In tournament or tilt, Sir Percivale, /Whom Arthur and his knighthood call'd The Pure, / Had passed into the silent life of prayer, / Praise, fast, and alms; and leaving for the cowl / The helmet in an abbey far away / From Camelot, there, and not long after, died" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 1-7, p. 876). Since his death is announced from the very beginning, there is no escaping it. This sense of doom suffuses the *Idylls* with the tragic temporality according to which it is always too late, as made clear by the song of the nun in "Guinevere." Indeed, it voices the distress of the foolish maids in the parable of the ten virgins:[90]

> 'Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!
> Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
> Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.
>
> 'No light had we: for that we do repent;
> And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
> Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.
>
> 'No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!
> O let us in, that we may find the light!
> Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.
>
> 'Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
> O let us in, though late, to kiss his feet!
> No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now.'[91]

[90] *Matthew*, 25, 1-13: "[1] Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. [2] And five of them were wise, and five *were* foolish. [3] They that *were* foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: [4] but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. [5] While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. [6] And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. [7] Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. [8] And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. [9] But the wise answered, saying, *Not so;* lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. [10] And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. [11] Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. [12] But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. [13] Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh."

[91] "Guinevere," ll. 166-177, pp. 946-947.

This song is most appropriate since it conveys Guinevere's despair and repentance in an indirect way and foreshadows her final acknowledgement of Arthur as a "sweet bridegroom." It also sheds light on the fact that her rejection of Arthur as her husband could cost her salvation, since this parable is meant to preach patience and moral behaviour in waiting for Christ's return.

Furthermore, the sense of tragedy is sustained by the role played by passion, and erotic passion in particular, in the ruination of Camelot. In point of fact, notwithstanding Arthur's praise of the "maiden passion for a maid," love often proves fatal in the *Idylls of the King*, as indicated by the violence with which Arthur falls in love with Guinevere: "[…] Arthur, looking downward as he past, / Felt the light of her eyes into his life / Smite on the sudden" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 55-57, p. 680). In the same vein, Elaine's love for Lancelot is both immediate and lethal, as unmistakably stated in the following lines: "she lifted up her eyes / And loved him, with that love which was her doom" ("Lancelot and Elaine", ll. 258-259, p. 842). Accordingly, she then dies of unrequited love. Besides, the second part of the volume stages several incarnations of a traditional tragic figure: the wrathful betrayed woman. This model, embodied by Seneca's Medea and Euripides's Hermione for instance, is hinted at by the characters of Isolt and Guinevere. Indeed, Isolt is utterly dominated by her passions, torn between her hatred for Mark and her love for Tristram, "plucked one way by hate and one by love" ("The Last Tournament", l. 537, p. 935). The intertwining between her two passions is plainly acknowledged when she declares to Tristram: "My God, the measure of my hate for Mark / Is as the measure of my love for thee" (ll. 535-536, p. 935). Likewise, the violence of Guinevere's love is displayed by the intensity of her jealousy in "Lancelot and Elaine": when she hears that Lancelot wore the colours of a young maid in tournament, she flies into a passion: "she choked, / And sharply turned to her chamber, and there flung herself / Down on the great King's couch, and writhed upon it, / And clenched her fingers till they bit the palm, / And shrieked out 'Traitor' to the unhearing wall, / Then flashed into wild tears, and rose again, / And moved about her palace, proud and pale" (ll. 603-610, p. 852). The contrast between this violent passion and the chaste love wished for by Arthur is emphasised by the insistence on the wildness and the physical dimension of her emotions: here, she flashes into "wild tears," later, when the knights drink to Lancelot and Elaine, she reacts with the same fierceness: "the Queen, who sat / With lips severely placid, felt the knot / Climb in her throat, and with feet unseen / Crushed the wild passion out against the floor / Beneath the banquet, where the meats became / As wormwood, and she hated all who pledged" ("Lancelot

and Elaine," ll. 734-739, p. 855). But it is in Lancelot that the contradiction between the two visions of love presented in the *Idylls* finds full expression.

As Gerhard Joseph writes most appropriately, "If the *Idylls* does portray a war between sense and soul, the ravages of that war are most fully described in the character of Lancelot" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 173). Accordingly, Tennyson insists on these "ravages" in "Lancelot and Elaine": "The great and guilty love he bare the Queen, / In battle with the love he bare his lord, / Had marred his face, and marked it ere his time" (ll. 244-246, p. 841). In this conflict, his allegiance is difficult to define. Indeed, the classical interpretation is that of Gerhard Joseph according to which "Tennyson implies that Guinevere has been the prime mover in a carnal passion to which Lancelot has reluctantly acquiesced. Trapped within the adoration of his queen Lancelot tries mightily but unsuccessfully to resist the garden rose of sense she offers in place of the spiritual lily he expects" (p. 174). This conclusion and its imagery come from a passage in "Balin and Balan" in which Lancelot and Guinevere meet in the garden of Camelot: the Queen enters through "a walk of roses" (l. 237, p. 794) and the knight, instead of coming to her, paces away along "a walk of lilies" (l. 238). Guinevere reproaches him with his lack of courtesy and he apologies, explaining that the lilies reminded him of a dream he had:

> 'Yea – for a dream. Last night methought I saw
> That maiden Saint who stands with lily in hand
> In yonder shrine. All round her prest the dark,
> And all the light upon her silver face
> Flowed from the spiritual lily that she held.
> Lo! these her emblems drew mine eyes – away:
> For see, how perfect-pure! As light a flush
> As hardly tints the blossom of the quince
> Would mar their charm of stainless maidenhood.'[92]

To which explanation, Guinevere replies: "'Sweeter to me […] this garden rose / Deep-hued and many folded! sweeter still / The wild-wood hyacinth and the bloom of May" (ll. 264-266, p. 795). This passage is often read as contrasting Guinevere's asserted sensuality with Lancelot's wish for an angelic love (as developed in the first part of our analysis). Nonetheless, Stephen Ahern, in his article "Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson's *Idylls*," offers a thought-provoking counter-reading of this moment. He argues that "[Lancelot's] response to this dream image of a madonna figure

[92] "Balin and Balan", ll. 255-263, pp. 794-795.

shows the conflict he experiences between the idealized purity his society expects him to desire in a woman and his passion for the less acceptable sensual honesty of a woman like Guinevere. The dramatic pause in his declaration that the image 'drew mine eyes-away' emphasizes the initial attraction and ultimate repulsion that this figure exerts on him" (p. 100). Since Lancelot is compelled by Guinevere's highly eroticised praise of the roses (his eyes "dwelt / Deep-tranced on hers, and could not fall" ll. 272-273, p. 795), Stephen Ahern concludes that "He loves her for her sensual honesty and not for her embodiment of some chivalric ideal" (p. 101). Whether he first loved her for the ideal she represents or for the real woman she is is difficult to determine, for both facets of his vision of Guinevere seem to be intertwined, as betrayed by the image of the flowers he uses in "The Holy Grail": "in me lived a sin / So strange, of such a kind, that all of pure, / Noble and knightly in me twined and clung / Round that one sin, until the wholesome flower / And poisonous grew together, each as each, / Not to be plucked asunder" (ll. 769-774, p. 898). It does not seem relevant to choose a side here, what matters is the impossible contradiction that tears him apart. It finds its finest expression in the following lines: "His honour rooted in dishonour stood, / And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true" ("Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 871-872, p. 859). They are remarkable because their very crafting reveals Lancelot's unbearable plight. The paronomasias suggest the relativity of values and the impossibility to make a choice while they strengthen the paradox expressed by the oxymora "faith unfaithful" and "falsely true." This excruciating dilemma grants him the makings of a great tragic hero, and therefore there is no wonder that he is offered a deliberative monologue in the end of "Lancelot and Elaine" in the purest tradition of tragedies:

> Alas for Arthur's greatest knight, a man
> Not after Arthur's heart! I needs must break
> These bonds that so defame me: not without
> She wills it: would I, if she willed it? nay,
> Who knows? but if I would not, then may God,
> I pray him, send a sudden Angel down
> To seize me by the hair and bear me far
> And fling me deep in that forgotten mere,
> Among the tumbled fragments of the hills.'[93]

His tragic dimension is propped up by the fact that his encounter with Elaine, the "lily maid," "shaped, it seems / By God for [him] alone" ("Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 1355-1356, p. 873)

[93] "Lancelot and Elaine", ll. 1408-1416, p. 874.

happens too late, as explicitly stated through the lines "And peradventure had he seen her first / She might have made this and that other world / Another world for the sick man; but now / The shackles of an old love straitened him" (ll. 867-870, p. 858). Henceforth, his adulterous relationship with the Queen prevents him from seeing the Grail and becomes one of the causes of the Camelot's downfall, a case which is now to be further investigated.

B – "Sense at war with Soul"

1 – Myth of the Fall from Eden and Female Responsibility

In "Guinevere," the unfaithful Queen is violently indicted by Arthur for the wreck of his kingdom. He recalls the glorious beginnings of his reign and then contrast them with the ruinous effects of her adultery: "Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot; / Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt; / Then others, following these my mightiest knights, / And drawing foul ensample from fair names, / Sinned also, till the loathsome opposite / Of all my heart had destined did obtain, / And all through thee!" (ll. 484-490, p. 954). The emphasis laid on the sinful nature of her actions cannot but bring to mind the original sin and lead the reader to draw a parallel with the story of Adam and Eve. Indeed, though Arthur can stand as the new Adam, to his people, he also stands as a Godlike figure who built a Paradise for them. In this Paradise, he sets his own Adam, i.e. Lancelot, his best knight, made in his image, the actualisation of his ideals about knighthood, and Guinevere as his Eve: his only command is that they keep their word which is like "God in man." Significantly, Guinevere remembers how she travelled with Lancelot through a paradisiac nature: "and far ahead / Of his and her retinue moving, they, / Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love / And sport and tilts and pleasure, (for the time / Was maytime, and as yet no sin was dreamed,) / Rode under groves that looked a paradise / Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth / That seemed the heavens unbreaking through the earth" ("Guinevere," ll. 381-388, p. 952). The comparison with the myth of Eden is sustained by many elements in these few lines: the most obvious one is the fertility and plenty of nature, but what is most remarkable is the state of innocence in which Lancelot and Guinevere are plunged. The rejection of their "retinue" echoes the absence of shame between Adam and Eve before they tasted the Forbidden Fruit. This prelapsarian atmosphere is enhanced by the comment that "as yet no sin was dreamed." But the Devil lurks in the background: in the *Idylls of the King*, he has two faces: Modred and Vivien. The latter is tightly associated with the figure of the Serpent: she is full of lies and deceit, and

meaningfully, the phrase wants that she "beguiles" Merlin, while in the Bible Eve says: "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat" (*Genesis*, 3, 6). Actually, the image of the serpent is forcefully conveyed in the description of her movements in "Merlin and Vivien": "And lissome Vivien, holding by his heel, / Writhed toward him, slided up his knee and sat, / Behind his ankle twined her hollow feet / Together, curved an arm about his neck, / Clung like a snake;" (ll. 236-240, p. 814). As far as Modred is concerned, he is called "the subtle beast" ("Guinevere", l. 10, p. 942), and W. David Shaw points out that "Lancelot's expulsion of the Satanic Modred, who is found spying from the garden-wall ("Guinevere," ll. 30-35), recalls Gabriel's expulsion of Satan from Eden in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*."[94] Yet, what is compelling about Vivien and Modred as a reworking of *Paradise Lost*'s Satan[95] is that their wrongdoing lies not in tempting these medieval Adam and Eve but in spreading the word of their sin. The destructive power of slander is underlined by James Eli Adams in his article "Harlots and Base Interpreters: Scandal and Slander in *Idylls of the King*": "The indulgence of scandal is thus aligned with an array of destructive passions as a standing threat to Arthur's realm. Indeed, Merlin suggests that scandal may be a greater threat than any other, inasmuch as it is not merely the indulgence of illicit passion, but represents – like Mark's creed – a programmatic repudiation of Arthur's ideal."[96] Apart from this divergence, the work deals with two seminal themes of the myth: longing for sensual knowledge and free will. In turn, they raise the question of Eve's responsibility.

It is a central issue in the *Idylls*, all the more so as the parallel with the first woman is reinforced by the fact that Guinevere stands as the embodiment of the absolute feminine principle. Vivien calls her "Woman of women" ("Merlin and Vivien," l. 77, p. 810),

[94] W. David Shaw, The Idealist's Dilemma in *Idylls of the King*, *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 1967), p. 50.

[95] The note on *Genesis* in Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett's edition of the Bible underlines that Milton's masterpiece presents a variation on the Biblical tale which has proved highly influential in the English-speaking culture: "Later generations of Christian apologists would derive from this [original, Biblical] story a much darker tale about (original) sin – a notion neither in the text nor Jewish traditions – and would identify the snake with the Devil. The dominant interpretation of the English-speaking world, that of Milton's hugely extended seventeenth-century version in *Paradise Lost*, is so coloured by such accretions that it is less a retelling of the original biblical saga than the creation of yet a third myth." In *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, edited with an introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 326.

[96] James Eli Adams, "Harlots and Base Interpreters: Scandal and Slander in *Idylls of the King*", *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 30, No. 3/4, Centennial of Alfred, Lord Tennyson: 1809-1892 (Autumn - Winter, 1992), pp. 430-431. In this article, he explores how the *Idylls* reflect the complex workings of Victorian publicity in relation with social (and mostly sexual) morality, emphasising the paradoxical and sometimes contradictory attitude of Tennyson in this matter.

appropriately so, given that almost all female figures in the work point back to her. As a matter of fact, Enid is a dear and close friend of the Queen's (that is the reason why Geraint fears she is as unfaithful as the rumour says Guinevere is), and she represents the marital virtues which Guinevere abandons. It is noteworthy that Enid is also sensitive to sensual appeal but that her sensuality has found its expression in her marriage since her erotic desire is turned towards her husband.[97] On the other hand, the Queen is also associated with Vivien in as much as they utter similar criticisms of Arthur: when Merlin asks her for "one word of loyal praise / For Arthur, blameless king and stainless man" ("Merlin and Vivien," ll. 776-777, p. 829), Vivien exclaims "'Man! is he man at all, who knows and winks / Sees what his fair bride is and does and winks? / By which the good King means to blind himself, / And blinds himself and all the Table Round / To all the foulness that they work'" (ll. 779-783, p. 829); similarly, Guinevere answers to Lancelot, wondering if she will "Henceforth be truer to [her] faultless lord" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 119, p. 838), as follows: "She broke into a little scornful laugh / 'Arthur, my lord, Arthur, the faultless King, / The passionate perfection, my good lord – / But who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven? / He never spake a word of reproach to me, / He never had a glimpse of mine untruth, / […] Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round, / And swearing men to vows impossible" (ll. 120-130, p. 838). Her lack of faith in Arthur's ideals consequently bring her closer to the fatale woman incarnated by Vivien. Actually, if, as Merlin asserts, women at most can differ "as Heaven and Hell" ("Merlin and Vivien," l. 813, p. 830), Guinevere stands somewhere in between, as indicated by her sitting "betwixt her best / Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court / The wiliest and the worst" ("Guinevere," ll. 27-29, p. 943). Besides, she also has a reflector in Ettare who at some point ponders over the reasons of her distaste for Pelleas: "'Why have I pushed him from me? this man loves, / If love there be: yet him I loved not. Why? / I deemed him fool? yea, so? or that in him / A something – was it nobler than myself? / Seemed my reproach? He is not of my kind. / He could not love me, did he know me well" ("Pelleas and Ettare," ll. 299-304, p. 911). Through the web linking all female characters back to Guinevere, this introspective passage betrays something of the royal couple as well, conveying Guinevere's own feeling of unworthiness. In addition, the Queen symbolises a referential point for all the other women in the *Idylls*, who are systematically compared with her. It is never so true as with Elaine, who of course is her direct rival: she stands in constant comparison with the Queen around the theme of the diamond to be won in tournament. Indeed, Lancelot wins it for Guinevere but he does so

[97] See the passage quoted above in which she contemplates Geraint's body while he is asleep.

while wearing Elaine's colour, therefore the diamond becomes a symbol for Lancelot and his love, the bone of contention between the two women. Thus, Elaine's brother states that the diamond is a large one, and so, that "'Such be for queens, and not for simple maids'" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 230, p. 841), but Lancelot replies "'If what is fair be but for what is fair, / And only queens are to be counted so, / Rash were my judgements then, who deem this maid / Might wear as fair a jewel as is on earth, / Not violating the bond of like to like'" (ll. 236-240, p. 841), hence affirming that Elaine is worthy of him, and is even his equal. As far as she is concerned, the lily-maid is obsessed with Guinevere, which is at the same time an ideal to reach and a double, almost a doppelganger. As a matter of fact, when she stages her death, Elaine insists forcefully on being made Guinevere's equal: "Then take the little bed on which I died / For Lancelot's love, and deck it *like the Queen's* / For richness, and me also *like the Queen* / In all I have of rich, and lay me on it. / […] I go in state to court, to meet *the Queen*" (ll. 1110-1117, p. 865, emphasis ours). She even becomes super-imposed with Guinevere when she dreams "That someone put this diamond in her hand, / And that it was too slippery to be held, / And slipt and fell into some pool or stream" (ll. 211-213, p. 840), since it is Guinevere that drops the diamonds into the river out of jealousy. Elaine stands as Guinevere's major counterpoint and yet she cannot escape the comparison. The Queen is the feminine absolute, the "woman of women," the Eve figure from which no woman can break apart, as underlined by the novice who laments: "'Yea, […] this is all woman's grief, / That *she* is woman, whose disloyal life / Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round / Which good King Arthur founded" ("Guinevere," ll. 216-219, pp. 947-948). Like Eve's, her sin is supposed to bring misery to mankind as a whole and shame to all women.

Alike the First Mother also, her fault stems from sensuality. Indeed, sensual appeal is a powerful motivation for the sin of Milton's Eve. He describes her thus contemplating the fruit:

> Fixed on the fruit she gazed, which to behold
> Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound
> Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregned
> With reason, to her seeming, and with truth;
> Meanwhile the hour of noon drew on, and waked
> An eager appetite, raised by the smell
> So savoury of that fruit, which with desire,
> Inclinable now grown to touch or taste,

Solicited her longing eye; […][98]

In this, Guinevere, the embodiment of "Sense," is utterly in keeping with her role of new Eve. As a matter of fact, she insists that her love for Lancelot sprung from his sensuality, in contrast with Arthur's ethereality: "I thought I could not breathe in that fine air / That pure severity of perfect light – / I yearned for warmth and colour which I found / In Lancelot" ("Guinevere," ll. 640-643, p. 958). The comparison between Lancelot and the Forbidden Fruit is pushed further in "Lancelot and Elaine" when the young maid's father remarks: "And sure I think this fruit is hung too high / For any mouth to gape for save a queen's" (ll. 769-770, p. 856). Therefore, Guinevere, like Eve, is tempted by the allure of sensual knowledge, which runs counter to Arthur's idealism. To this extent, she is considered as the prime guilty party in Camelot's downfall, both at the intradiegetic level (Arthur's speech in "Guinevere" makes it crystal clear) and by some critics. It is best exemplified by Elliot L. Gilbert in "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse" which reads: "In the end, Guinevere's reality triumphs over Arthur's and Lancelot's abstraction in the *Idylls of the King*, just as her irresistible sexual energy at last defeats her husband's passionlessness" (p. 872). In this article, Gilbert deals with the 19th-century fear of natural energy and female sexuality in relation with the French Revolution seen as an unleashing of these forces. His hypothesis is that Arthur creates a natural kingdom in which female energy is no longer contained and that this liberation is ultimately responsible for his failure: "In the end, Arthur's dream of a natural community is destroyed, Tennyson suggests, by the carnality to which such a dream must necessarily lead, is spoiled by an irrepressible female libidinousness that, once released by the withdrawal of patrilineal authority, can be neither contained nor directed" (p. 873). This reading, though interesting in its relating the feminine and the natural and in proposing a historical outlook on the work, seems rather reductive of the complexity of female figures in the *Idylls* and underestimates Arthur's share of the guilt in this collapse. Actually, in spite of Arthur's denunciation, there are elements showing that perhaps Tennyson's opinion on the matter of her responsibility was not as definite as that. As Gerhard Joseph writes, "Guinevere – and Lancelot with her – are given a concreteness that eludes Arthur. They share the finest dramatic moments in the *Idylls* […]. We sense, in other words, Tennyson's aesthetic sympathy for the character of Guinevere and her plight that undercuts whatever overt moral judgement he apparently makes" (*Tennysonian Love*, pp. 172-173). As a consequence, it is valuable to look at the situation from her point of view as well, to listen to what the other party has to say in this allegorical conflict. Let us proceed.

[98] *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, ll. 735-743, p. 204.

2 – Idealism in question.

In her defence, Guinevere uses the paradox according to which "He is all fault who hath no fault at all" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 132, p. 838). This affirmation invites the reader to evaluate the burden of such an absolute morality as that displayed by Arthur in practical life. As a matter of fact, W. David Shaw in "The Idealist's Dilemma in *Idylls of the King*" comments that "Though, empirically regarded, an individual like Arthur absolves Guinevere from guilt, dialectically he intensifies it. [..] By rendering the Queen's shame more acute, Arthur makes her feel more unworthy. Her feelings of guilt and alienation precede her adultery, which she commits to defy or 'justify' the guilt" (p. 51). Actually, one view on the decay of Camelot as a utopia consists in considering that Arthur expects to much of his knights and wife and that they collapse under the pressure. This theory is mainly developed by Clyde de L. Ryals who writes:

> Lancelot and Guinevere's sin is thus, I believe, not the cause but the symptom of what is wrong in Camelot. Arthur has attempted to take Guinevere completely unto himself, to refashion her according to his conceptions, to make her will his, to set her up as the feminine ideal; and he forces this view of her – that is, Guinevere as the feminine counterpart to the ideal man – on his Order. Guinevere is not, however, made of the same metal as the King. A real woman and not an abstract presence, she has all the passion and longing for life of a normal woman. (*From the Great Deep*, pp. 77-78)

Not only does Guinevere feel that she cannot match her husband's expectations, but she does not want to, because that would be denying her own identity and her own will. That is the reason why Stephen Ahern in "Listening to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry" holds her as "the most balanced and fully human figure in the *Idylls*" in her struggle against the rules of a patriarchal society. He portrays her as an individualist and a rebel:

> The problem with Guinevere is that she does not want to "reign with one will in everything" because that "one will" is Arthur's, not hers. She refuses to play angel of the house, let alone of the castle. The queen chooses instead to rebel against the constraints of her social position by affirming her right to live her life as she desires. Her freedom of choice is limited by the world in which she finds herself, but she has no qualms about asserting her agency in the one arena in which she as a woman of noble stature can exert control – the arena of love. She resists playing muse to what she considers Arthur's project of self-aggrandizement. This resistance is conspicuously expressed in her love for Lancelot. (p. 97)

Both Ryals and Ahern insist on the questions of freedom and will. Indeed, in this re-enactment of *Genesis*, man's free will is once again at the heart of his eviction from Paradise. Apart from Guinevere, the claim for freedom is mainly supported by Tristram. In fact, he contests the vows he took as being shackles and he ascribes the disintegration of the realm to the impossibility for the knights of the Round Table to keep their word in this matter:

> And so the realm was made; but then their vows –
> First mainly through that sullying of our Queen –
> Began to gall the knighthood, asking whence
> Had Arthur right to bind them to himself?
> […] a doubtful lord
> To bind them by inviolable vows,
> Which flesh and blood perforce would violate:
> For feel this arm of mine – the tide within
> Red with free chase and heather-scented air,
> Pulsing full man; can Arthur make me pure
> As any maiden child? lock up my tongue
> From uttering freely what I freely hear?
> Bind me to one? The wide world laughs at it.
> […] we are not angels here
> Nor shall be: […] [99]

The emphasis on freedom is made clear through the repetition of "free" and "freely," while the rejection of the vows imposed by Arthur as violations of volition is conveyed by their association with verbs of constriction such as "to bind" or "to lock." Tristram also unveils the destructive repercussions of such high moral expectations, remarking that "The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself – / […] being snapt – / We run more counter to the soul thereof / Than had we never sworn" (ll. 652-655, p. 938). This argument is validated by the precedents of Balin and Pelleas who, once their faith in their models had been destroyed, lost faith in their own moral capabilities and turned into the utter opposite of what they had sworn to be. Besides, accusing Arthur of violating the freedom of his subjects is all the more problematic as freedom is one of the founding principles of Arthur's reign. In point of fact, Gareth, in order to legitimate Arthur as king, exclaims: "Who should be King save he that makes us free?" ("Gareth and Lynette," l. 136, p. 697). Hence, Clyde de L. Ryals can conclude: "The ultimate meaning of Tennyson's *Idylls* lies, I believe, in the paradox of Arthur. He set out to found a society based on freedom, but to his sorrow he learned that he could not create a free

[99] "The Last Tournament," ll. 674-694, p. 939.

man. […] For the imposition of his heroic authority, his will, upon reality meant the denial to others of their own moral responsibility" (p. 90). From the conclusion that "Arthur stands, finally, in moral terms, both as the hero and the villain of the *Idylls of the King*," Ryals draws a compelling application of Nietzsche's theory of the tragedy (as developed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872) to the poem:

> In his study of Greek tragedy Nietzsche discovered that the tragic hero is always justified, because he issues forth from a realm outside the world of moral values. The hero, the mask of God, takes on individuality in order to manifest the values of his heavenly domain through moral action. But, says Nietzsche, the action always ends in crime, for the values of the hero present themselves as evil since they clash with conventional moral categories. […] The paradox is finally resolved by the destruction of the hero, which is his fate in the moral world, and his return to the realm of pure value where he is justified. (pp. 90-91)

Arthur comes "from the great deep," which could be assimilated with a Platonic world of ideas, to impose angelic purity on men. The term of "crime" seems exaggerated to characterise the King's actions but he undoubtedly exercises psychological violence onto his knights and Guinevere. This paradoxical moral judgement of Arthur as "hero and villain" is the key to Ryals's interpretation of one of the most enigmatic passages in the *Idylls of the King*: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new / And God fulfils himself in many ways, / Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 408-410, p. 971). According to Ryals's view, Arthur's death, like his coming, would proceed from a godly plan for even though he stands for all that is good in man, his mouldering action has perverse effects and so threatens to "corrupt the world."

Furthermore, there is a second facet to Tristram's stance. Indeed, his solemn affirmation that "we are not angels here / Nor shall be" can be interpreted in two different manners, depending on the value of "shall." Actually, if one takes "shall" as an expression of the future, his sentence expresses the despair and discouragement of man faced with his own moral imperfection; but if the modal is given its moral value, then these lines come to signify that the perfect man is not a man "with growing wings," as implied by Tennyson's choice of words in his depiction of the sculptures in Arthur's hall.[100] As a matter of fact, Tristram describes himself as a "worldling of the world" ("The Last Tournament," l. 691, p. 939), characterised by the materiality of his body – his arm which he offers to be touched and his

[100] See "And on the third are warriors, perfect men, / And on the fourth are men with growing wings" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 236-237, p. 883).

red blood pulsing within it – while he reproaches Arthur with his immateriality: "whence / Had Arthur right to bind them to himself? / Dropt down from heaven? washed up from out the deep? / They failed to trace him through the flesh and blood / Of our old kings" (ll. 678-682, p. 939). Like Guinevere, he accuses him of not really being a man because of his disavow of his senses. Furthermore, not only this disavow makes him unsympathetic to the fight of his knights against their sensual desires, but Arthur's idealism is plagued with sterility. In point of fact, it is highly significant that he and Guinevere do not have children. There are three allusions to a possible progeny in the work. The first is Enid's dream in which she sees royal children running to Guinevere in the gardens of Camelot. That *she* must dream of it is consistent with the fact that she emblematises marital virtue and she is the only one of Arthur's generation to give birth to children. She stands for what Guinevere should have been and therefore only she can see the Queen as a possible mother. The second hint at possible heirs is presented at the beginning of "The Last Tournament": while riding in the forest, Lancelot and Arthur hear an infant's cry and find a little girl in an eagle nest with a ruby carcanet around her neck. Lancelot climbs up the tree to fetch her and Arthur decides to give her to Guinevere to raise: "the Queen / But coldly acquiescing, in her white arms / Received, and after loved it tenderly, / And named it Nestling; so forgot herself / A moment, and her cares; till that young life / Being smitten in mid heaven by mortal cold / Past from her" (ll. 22-28, pp. 921-922). This short passage contains many meaningful elements. First, it is noteworthy that the only child Arthur ever brings to Guinevere is had through Lancelot, and this child is the only victor of her individualism since she only can make her "forget herself." Then, the girl dies "of mortal cold": obviously, this echoes Guinevere's cold reaction when the child is brought to her but it also brings to mind how Arthur's presence affects his wife who thinks him "cold, / High, self-contained, and passionless" ("Guinevere," ll. 402-403, p. 952). Hence, the death of the "maiden babe" can be construed either as the effect of Arthur's cold sterility or, since she is "smitten in mid-heaven," between the sky and the earth, as the consequence of the disharmony between the royal spouses. Finally, the last hint at royal children is an ironical one, when Arthur greets Guinevere with "Well is it that no children is born of thee. / The children born of thee are sword and fire, / Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws, / The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts / Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea" ("Guinevere," ll. 421-425, p. 953). Here again, Arthur imputes the collapse of his kingdom to his wife's sexuality, but more interestingly, the length of the enumeration bespeaks Guinevere's fertility – though it proves destructive. This evidences that Arthur's idealism and lack of sensual reality result in sterility. Now, this sterility is as problematic for

the continued existence of his realm as the moral failure caused by his wife's adultery. As a matter of fact, how can there be eternity without progeny? As we asserted earlier, Geraint and Enid are granted a certain form of immortality through their children who are "Geraints and Enids of times to be." But Arthur and Guinevere are denied this possibility. It is all the more striking as Lancelot, which is symbolically their child in as much as Sense and Soul intertwine within him, dies childless. Arthur underlines the fact in "Lancelot and Elaine" when he laments that Lancelot did not marry the lily maid: "Thou couldst have loved this maiden, shaped, it seems; / By God for thee alone […] / Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man / Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons / Born to the glory of thy name and fame, / My knight, the great Sir Lancelot of the Lake" (ll. 1355-1362, p. 873). Lancelot is the actualisation of Arthur's ideal knight, as a consequence, his dying heirless means the failure of Arthur's project. The suggestion of the sterility of ideals is made even harsher by Tennyson as in the *Idylls*, contrarily to other texts of the Arthurian tradition, Galahad is not Lancelot's son, and is associated with him only by rumours. [101] The reasons for Lancelot's celibacy have already been evoked, but he is not an isolated case. Actually, all of Arthur's purest knights are denied procreation: Galahad vanishes into the spiritual city while Percival, "leaving human wrongs to right themselves, / Cares but to pass into the silent life" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 894-895, p. 902), after having refused to take a bride in order to chase the ideal cup.

As a conclusion on the part played by Arthur's idealism in the downfall of his utopian realm, two points should be made. The first is that, however interesting it is as a counterpoint to the explicit morality of the work, Tristram's naturalistic argumentation should not be taken entirely for granted. For sure, he is right to point out how the Arthurian morality can prove barren and even destructive, but we cannot agree with the maxim according to which "we are not angels here / Nor shall be." Indeed, F.E.L. Priestley is right when he argues that "it is the essence of ethics to be not descriptive but normative; not to tell us how we behave, but how we ought to behave."[102] Human dignity stems from this struggle towards ideal morality, as indicated by Merlin's warning to Gareth: "Yet take thou heed of him, for, so thou pass / Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become / A thrall to his enchantments, for the King / Will bind thee by such vows, as is a shame / A man should not be bound by, yet the which / No man can keep" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 263-268, p. 701). It is true that the human being

[101] See "some / Called him a son of Lancelot, and some said / Begotten by enchantment – chatterers they, / […] we know not whence they come; / For when was Lancelot wanderingly lewd?" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 143-148, p. 880).
[102] F. E. L. Priestley, "Tennyson's *Idylls*", *University of Toronto Quarterly,*Vol. 19, No. 1 (Oct. 1950), p. 44.

is imperfect, limited, finite but it is his constant attempts at bettering himself that enable him to transcend his finitude, otherwise he is no different from the "cattle of the field" (l. 270). As underscored by Priestley, the key then is to find balance: "The vows present the paradox: The highest is the most human too. A morality which merely conforms to our nature is based upon less than the highest possibility of our nature; we are most human when we transcend our ordinary selves. The ideal must not, like the ascetic ideal, be so remote that it seems obviously unattainable; nor must it, like the naturalistic ideal, be so close that it seems obviously attained" (p. 44). Balance is what Arthur and Guinevere do not manage to reach. Gerhard Joseph remarks that this quest for equilibrium informs the basic human relation to the world and transcendence:

> As Arthur's radiance plays over the vitality of Guinevere and kindles the idealism of Camelot's worthies, we can sense Tennyson's characteristic movement from a temperamental delight in sensuous beauty, to an obsessive distrust of sensuous abandon, and – doubling back upon himself – to a critique of life-denying asceticism. The *via media* that Tennyson tries to find among these competing impulses is one way of defining the perfection of Camelot, that perilous balance which individuals and societies can win at rare moments from the flux of time. The lasting significance of the *Idylls of the King* is the comprehensive way in which it outlines the most basic of human tragedies, the personal and social dislocations that arise from man's passion to transcend mutability and mortality. (p. 187)

These lines undoubtedly constitute one of the best renderings of the allegorical meaning of the *Idylls of the King*, this morality play presenting "Sense at war with Soul." Before going further in the assessment of this conflict's outcomes, of the "dislocations" it causes, we shall consider what is assuredly the most controversial scene in the *Idylls*: that of the final encounter between Arthur and Guinevere.

3 – "Guinevere": Ultimate Confrontation and Controversy

What should first be said about this scene of farewell between the royal spouses is that it is entirely original. Though the *Idylls* are largely based on Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Tennyson draws only from his imagination to write this sequence: as a matter of fact, in Malory's version of the story, Guinevere retreats to the nunnery only after Arthur's

death and it is with Lancelot that she meets for the last time there.[103] Tennyson's choice to present rather her last interview with Arthur is consistent with the "parabolic drift" he gave to the Arthurian myth: it is the last confrontation between sensuality and idealism. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the reception of this scene is the subject of great controversy and has been so since its publication. Indeed, Stephen Ahern gives this account of contemporary reactions to the idyll:

> Response by contemporaries to Arthur's speech was generally positive, although the self-righteous tone of the king's sermon prompted one reviewer to comment that he sounds like a "crowned curate." As well, the fact that R. H. Hutton in 1888 feels compelled to defend Tennyson's Arthur against the "taunt" that he is an "impeccable prig" suggests that such an appraisal was common and defensible enough to merit an extended rebuttal (quoted in *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John D. Jump [New York: Routledge, 1967, 386). ("Listening to Guinevere," p. 104)

Modern critics indict it even more harshly. Thus, James Kincaid writes:

> "Guinevere" apparently had quite a spectacular effect on many Victorians. It seems astonishing, for instance, that the idyll "made George Eliot weep" when Tennyson read it. These days, the idyll is more likely to seem an unaccountable lapse on Tennyson's part. Less open about our emotions and also less struck by the novelty of domestic realism, we are prone to blame the whole episode on sexual prudery. (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, pp. 206-207)

Undeniably, part of this criticism is true, and we must agree with Gerhard Joseph when he remarks that "the most sympathetic reader must concede a priggishness that has been the scorn of those who see in Tennyson's Arthurian pageant little more than a representatively obnoxious document of Victorian male chauvinism" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 171). It is indeed difficult – if not impossible – to justify aesthetically such a part of Arthur's tirade as the following one:

> I hold that man the worst of public foes
> Who either for his own or children's sake,
> To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
> Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house:
> For being through his cowardice allowed
> Her station, taken everywhere for pure,
> She like a new disease, unknown to men,
> Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,

[103] This divergence from Malory's text is explained in the introduction to "Guinevere" in the Ricks edition (p. 942).

Makes wicked lightning of her eyes, and saps
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.
Worst of the worst were that man he that reigns![104]

Faced with such a piece of patriarchal morality and paranoia, we are prone to exclaim with Kincaid that "it recalls Tennyson in his worst reactionary moods" (p. 207), pointing to his "morbid worry about sex" as Robert B. Martin puts it in *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (p. 493). Yet, Kincaid admits that one should not stop at that: "Adultery, in fact, is hardly the issue. On the narrative level the great sin in disloyalty; more generally, Guinevere's defection suggests the failure of physical actuality to give life to spiritual truth. Despite his few lapses into self-indulgent and self-pitying ire, Arthur's real charges against her are social, not personal. She has ruined not him but law and civilisation" (p. 209). This is accurate, but only because Arthur does not make the difference between the public and the private spheres, he is the king before being a man. This lack of differentiation in Arthur between his roles as king and as husband explains why critics cannot come to an agreement about the status he assumes in this interview. In point of fact, Kincaid estimates that "Arthur […] now seems less the mythic king than the outraged husband, speaking with a too personal bitterness and desire to hurt" (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, p. 207), while on the contrary, Clyde de L. Ryals legitimates the so-called priggishness of his tone as follows: "Critics have objected that Arthur here speaks like a prig, and so indeed he does. For Arthur is the redeemer, the hero from the realm of pure value who is more messiah than man; he is exactly what Tennyson said he is: an ideal man – and the ideal man simply does not talk like the usual cuckolded spouse. Arthur is, in fact, less the wronged husband than the wronged ideal ruler" (*From the Great Deep*, p. 87). Now, Guinevere actually *is* a good queen: this is exemplified in many instances, she is worthy of her position and holds it gracefully as made plain by such lines as "she / Sweetly and statelily, and with all grace / Of womanhood and queenhood" ("The Marriage of Geraint," ll. 174-176, p. 741); and notwithstanding the contemptuous remarks she sometimes makes, she cares about Arthur's project, as evidenced by her equal disapproval of the Grail quest. As a matter of fact, she is as affected as Arthur by the departure of the knights: "the King himself could hardly speak / For grief, and all in middle street the Queen, / Who rode by Lancelot, wailed and shrieked aloud, / 'This madness has come on us for our sins'" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 354-357, p. 887). Hence, she acts as a good queen but not as a good wife. In this, she can be justified by the fact that Arthur seems to consider her more as his queen than as his spouse.

[104] "Guinevere," ll. 509-520, p. 955.

In “Lancelot and Elaine,” she decries his indifference: “He never spake a word of reproach to me, / He never had a glimpse of mine untruth, / He cares not for me” (ll. 124-126, p. 838). Stephen Ahern points out that her accusations are not contradicted anywhere else in the text, and that her husband’s neglect is propped up by the fact that there are “few scenes in the *Idylls* shared by Arthur and his queen, a notable omission considering how central their relationship is to the rise and fall of Camelot. […] By contrast, Guinevere and Lancelot share a number of scenes that illustrate the fervent passion they feel for each other” (“Listening to Guinevere,” p. 100). Indeed, one is often under the impression that, as Ryals writes, “Guinevere has all along been but a means and not an end to Arthur” (*From the Great Deep*, p. 87). As a consequence, we cannot agree with Arthur’s accusations and Guinevere’s final repentance when taking the exchange from a social point of view. Yet, what Kincaid writes without dwelling on it – “Guinevere’s defection suggests the failure of physical actuality to give life to spiritual truth” – seems to us far more relevant, for indeed, allegorically speaking, the scene is highly valuable.

The nodal interest of this scene lies in the question of Arthur’s humanity. As a matter of fact, Rosenberg accurately underscores that “an inevitable duality in Arthur’s character runs throughout the *Idylls*” (*The Fall of Camelot*, p. 127). This duality is the one contained in Tennyson’s description of his King Arthur as “Ideal manhood closed in real man” (“To the Queen,” l. 38, p. 974). “Guinevere” is crucial in as much as it best displays the intertwining of these two facets of the character, as Rosenberg sheds light on:

> Tennyson’s aesthetic dilemma in properly distancing Arthur is a direct consequence of patterning him upon the paradoxical nature of Christ, the stern Judge and forgiving Son. In the first part of his speech to Guinevere the King figures as Christ in Judgement, in the second part, as Christ in Mercy; in both parts the voice of Arthur the man can be heard along-side that of the Christ-figure, first in injured rage, then in compassion. (p. 128)

The second part of his speech is the more meaningful for it is rife with allusions to Christ. Indeed, Arthur defines himself as “I, whose vast pity almost makes me die” (l. 530, p. 955), in clear echo with Christ’s sacrifice out of pity for men. Then, he grants his wife forgiveness with the words: “Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God / Forgives” (ll. 541-542, p. 955). The parallel with the Saviour is reinforced by the imminence of his death which he announces soon after his entrance, saying “Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies / Have erred not, that I march to meet my doom” (ll. 446-447, p. 953). Similarly, the association is heightened by the dramatisation of the exchange: when she hears her husband coming, Guinevere falls to the ground in repentant attitude: “prone from off her seat she fell, / And grovelled with her face

against the floor: / There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy hair / She made her face a darkness from the King: / And in the darkness heard his armed feet / pause by her" (ll. 411-416, p. 952). This setting cannot but recall the episode in *Luke* when Mary Magdalene washes Jesus's feet: "[37] And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, [38] And stood behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment" (*Luke*, 7, 37-38). Therefore, Arthur's godlike nature is particularly enhanced in this sequence, yet significantly, it is also when his human facet is the most developed. Actually, the King here betrays a sensuality of which he had heretofore seemed deprived. In this last interview, he finally expresses his love and longing for Guinevere, exclaiming in most human disarray: "But how to take leave of all I loved? / O golden hair, with which I used to play / Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form, / And beauty such as never woman wore, / Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee - / I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine, / But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the King's" (ll. 543-549, pp. 955-959). Furthermore, he movingly confesses his love, in spite of his anger and feeling of betrayal:

> How sad it were for Arthur, should he live,
> To sit once more within his lonely hall,
> […]
> And in thy bower of Camelot or of Usk
> Thy shadow still would glide from room to room,
> And I should evermore be vext with thee
> In hanging robe or vacant ornament,
> Or ghostly footfall echoing on the stair.
> For think not, though thou wouldst not love thy lord,
> Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.[105]

This comes as a revelation to Guinevere who had always suffered of feeling unloved, and the discovery of the humanity of Arthur is, we believe, what prompts her "conversion" as John D. Rosenberg puts it (p. 127). She shares her epiphany with the reader by exclaiming, once Arthur has left the room:

> […] now I see thee for what thou art,
> Thou art the highest and most human too,
> Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none
> Will tell the King I love him though so late?

[105] "Guinevere," ll. 493-506, pp. 954-955.

[…]
It was my duty to have loved the highest:
It surely was my profit had I known:
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.
We needs must love the highest when we see it,[106]

Here, she speaks in the name of all mankind, claiming that human dignity lies in the struggle towards moral and spiritual elevation. Nevertheless, we would argue that, notwithstanding her regrets, her conversion could not have happened earlier, because the love she now feels is not the love of a wife for her husband, but that of the forgiven sinner, very much like of Mary Magdalene for Christ. [107] She has learnt that spiritual love is nobler than carnal love, she "divines her desire" to paraphrase James W. Hood, and their new union is marked by the same fusion of eroticism and holiness as that of Galahad and the nun: "She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck, / And in the darkness o'er her fallen head, / Perceived the waving of his hands that blest" (ll. 578-580, p. 956). As a consequence, she turns towards after-life, hoping to "be his mate hereafter in the heavens / Before high God" (ll. 632-633, p. 958). Yet, as pointed out by Rosenberg, Guinevere was Arthur's tie to the material world, therefore their parting and her turning to the spiritual world are "the necessary prelude to his disincarnation, just as his marriage served as his incarnation" (p. 132). This "disincarnation" is diegetically materialised by his disappearing in the mist: "And even then he turned; and more and more / The moony vapour rolling round the King, / Who seemed the phantom of a Giant in it, / Enwound him fold by fold, and made him gray / And grayer, till himself became a mist / Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom" (ll. 596-601, p. 957). But it is also an element of continuity with "The Passing of Arthur" and the last battle in the West which overshadows the blaze of Arthur's light, as we will now scrutinise.

C – "The Passing of Arthur": Fleetingness of Human Life and Cyclicity

1 – "Vanitas Vanitatum et Omnia Vanitas"[108]

[106] "Guinevere," ll. 643-655, p. 958.
[107] *Luke*, 7, 47: "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."
[108] *Ecclesiastes*, 1, 1.

As a matter of fact, as many critics have pointed out, Arthur is associated with solar imagery throughout the *Idylls of the King*: Tennyson insists on his fairness and spreads over the text a network of images such as "The Sun of May descended on their King" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 461, p. 691), "Arthur, my lord, […] / But who can gaze at the Sun in heaven?" ("Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 121-123, p. 838) and "His hair, a sun that rayed from off a brow" ("The Last Tournament," l. 661, p. 938). Nonetheless, in the last idyll, when he has been severed from Guinevere, his means of incarnation without which he cannot "will [his] will, nor work [his] work" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 87, p. 681), he cannot bring light to the world anymore. As a consequence, mist pervades the scene, bringing chaos along with it: "A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea: / Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew / Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold / With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell / Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought" ("The Passing of Arthur", ll. 95-99, p. 963). This passage is crucial for it brings to the foreground several major ideas. First, as Tennyson comments, "This grim battle in the mist contrasts with Arthur's glorious battle in the 'Coming of Arthur,' fought on a bright day when 'he saw the smallest rock far on the faintest hill'" (quoted in the Ricks edition p. 964). Beside this powerful contrasting effect, the mist adumbrates the slaughter that follows as its description strongly evokes imminent death through the explicit characterisation as "deathwhite" and the association with cold. Indeed, mist here can be construed as a symbol for mortality falling on men for their sins, the unescapable certainty that they will die. Hence, the failure of Arthur to regain eternity for mankind is complete: he has not been able to "make live" this "dead world" ("The Coming of Arthur," l. 93, p. 681) and he is no more than "King among the dead" as he himself declares ("The Passing of Arthur," l. 146, p. 964). That being so, this mist has yet another role to play in as much as it prepares Arthur's withdrawing from the world by materialising his losing touch with material reality. In fact, he exclaims: "O Bedivere, for on my heart hath fallen / Confusion, till I know not what I am, / Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King. Behold, I seem but King among the dead" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 143-146, p. 964). These lines are evocative of others from "The Holy Grail," which Tennyson commented on by saying that "Arthur suggests that all the material universe may be but vision" (Ricks edition, note l. 908). In this passage, Arthur explains that "the King" cannot indulge in visions such as that of the Grail as long as he has not done his work, but then, they stream over him "Until the earth he walks on seems not earth / The light that strikes his eyeball is not light, / The air that smites his forehead is not air / But vision – yea, his very hand and foot - / In moments when he feels he cannot die, / And knows himself no vision to himself, / Nor the High God a vision, nor that

One / Who rose again" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 908-915, p. 902). Now, the interplay between both extracts is thought-provoking for, due to Arthur's ambivalent nature as man and supernatural agent, it can be viewed in two opposite ways. Indeed, the fact that Arthur doubts "who [he is] / Whence [he is] and whether [he] be King" can mean either that, in coherence with his speech in "The Holy Grail," he doubts that he is a man from this world, socially anchored by his royal function or, on the contrary, that he questions his spiritual origin and feels reduced to the vanity of human condition.

Indeed, in this last idyll, Arthur is confronted with his failure and the futility of any human enterprise as he realises that all his work has come to nothing: "For I, being simple, thought to work His will, / And have but stricken with the sword in vain; / And all whereon I leaned in wife and friend / Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm / Reels back into the beast and is no more" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 22-26, p. 960). The fatality according to which human action shall be vain is betrayed by the metrical perfection of line 23, "I waged His wars, and now I pass and die," [109] which conveys the idea that notwithstanding his commitment to the bettering of men, his death is inscribed in the order of things. Human beings are doomed with transiency: the final battle field itself illustrates the vanity of human civilisations since it is set in Lyonesse, "A land of old upheaven from the abyss / By fire to sink into the abyss again; / Where fragments of forgotten people dwelt, / And the long mountains ended in a coast / Of ever-shifting sand, and far away / The phantom circle of a moaning sea" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 82-87, p. 963). These return to the abyss and fall into oblivion are what threatens Arthur's realm, as materialised by the physical fall of Arthur and all his knights, as first he is wounded by Modred ("Arthur at one blow, / Striking the last stroke with Excalibur, / Slew him, and all but slain himself, he fell" ll. 167-169, p. 965) and his knights all (Bedivere excluded) perish by his side: "So all day long the noise of battle rolled / Among the mountains by the winter sea; / Until King Arthur's Table, man by man, / Had fallen in Lyonesse about their lord" (ll. 170-173, p. 965). With him, his whole civilisation collapses as indicated by the image "So like a shattered column lay the King" (l. 389, p. 970). Eventually, there is no hope for eternity anymore and everything cries the fleetingness of human existence. Yet, the end of the *Idylls of the King* is an ambiguous one, due to the ambivalent value of its cyclical pattern which we shall now consider.

[109] It is a perfect iambic pentameter to be scanned as follows:
u / | u / | u / | u / | u /
"I waged His wars, and now I pass and die."

2 – The Ambiguous Cyclicity of the *Idylls of the King*

Indeed, cyclicity structures the volume at several levels with different implications. It is best evidenced through the repetition of "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" in both the opening and the closing idylls. Indeed, in "The Coming of Arthur", it applies to the Arthurian order superseding the Roman one:

> There at the banquet those great Lords from Rome,
> The slowly-fading mistress of the world,
> Strode in, and claim'd their tribute as of yore.
> But Arthur spake, 'Behold, for these have sworn
> To wage my wars, and worship me their King;
> The old order changeth, yielding place to new;
> And we that fight for our fair father Christ,
> Seeing that ye be grown too weak and old
> To drive the heathen from your Roman wall,
> No tribute will we pay.'"[110]

This passage underlines the transiency of human life and civilisation through the personification of Rome as an ageing beauty, as can be construed from the phrase "slowly-fading mistress of the world" in which the term mistress can be seen either as the feminine of master, leader or in the amorous sense of the word, thus making Rome very much alike the young beauties in *vanitas* paintings realising that their charms will fade away almost as quickly as those of the rose they keep near their looking-glass. Yet, since the Roman decay gives way to the birth of Arthur's Paradise-like kingdom, change here appears as the vital renewal of spring: it sounds all the more ironical then in "The Passing of Arthur," when Arthur, before leaving this world, declares to Bedivere: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, /And God fulfils himself in many ways, /Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" (ll. 408-410, p. 971). As a matter of fact, the reader is hardly convinced that this change is for the best, as sustained by Rosenberg who points out that "If the first use of the line seems to promise perpetual renewal, its repetition implies the reverse. For Arthur's 'new order' at the opening has become the 'old order' at the end, and the order that replaces Arthur is even more barbarous than the one he displaced" (*The Fall of Camelot*, p. 37). Rosenberg also remarks that this cyclical time is the *natural* time, the time of *In Memoriam*'s Nature,

[110] "The Coming of Arthur", ll. 503-512, pp. 692-693.

"red in tooth and claw" (Section LVI, l. 15, p. 399), which mindlessly slaughters her children. It is at odds with the eternity Arthur strives to establish, all the more so as it represents the temporality of fatality. This natural, cyclical time emphasises the meaninglessness of human action and the impossibility to redeem the world. Accordingly, the *Idylls of the King*, as a repetition of the Fall, convey the idea that man will never be able to rise again from his fallen state. This view is upheld by W. David Shaw who writes in "The Idealist's Dilemma" that "The events of the Arthurian myth that Tennyson has chosen to dramatize are not just 'historical' or 'legendary,' but aspects of a civilizing venture which must continue till the end of time. Human order can never be final, for it forever circles back on itself, always guilty and always in need of redemption" (p. 52). This dark analysis is propped up by Tennyson's famous quote about the *Idylls* according to which "The whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation but a whole cycle of generations" (quoted in *The Fall of Camelot*, pp. 39-40, from Hallam Tennyson's *Memoirs*, II, p. 127). The idea that man's life is caught in a deterministic cycle is not specific to Tennyson and actually pervades the work of other Victorian authors such as Thomas Hardy. Thus, in her analysis of *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*, Linda M. Shires speaks of "cycles of retribution" as Tess's violation by Alec can be construed as a retribution for the violence of her ancestors. Similarly, Linda M. Shires ponders over the division of the novel into "Phases": "To be sure, the word can refer to periods of development in a linear pattern, as in Thomas Carlyle's use of it with regard to history. But 'phases' can also refer to phases of the moon and thus to lunar/solar/tidal time. Tess's story is divided into sections that imply larger time schemes embodying her tale, but the word is multivalent and remains so."[111] Hence, the cyclicity that informs the *Idylls of the King* can be seen as the dark force of fatality working against Arthur.

Yet, there can be a more optimistic outlook on this, as this perpetual change is associated by Arthur with the will of God when he states "And God fulfils himself in many ways." He claims his and Tennyson's faith that the advent of evil is part of a divine plan, that there is a "goal" to this world, even if it lies "beyond sight" ("To the Queen," ll. 59-60, p. 975). This idea of a godly-meant cycle is best accounted for by F.E.L. Priestley who argues that the fact that the arm of the Lady of the Lake rises out of the water to catch Excalibur as

[111] Linda M. Shires, "The Radical Aesthetic of *Tess of the d'Ubervilles*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, edited by Dale Kramer, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 150.

Bedivere casts it away, in perfect reflection of "In those old days" when "one summer noon, an arm / Rose up from out the bosom of the lake, / Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, / Holding the sword" ("The Passing of Arthur", ll. 197-200), strengthens Arthur in the belief that he is part of a cycle "whose meaning may not be clear to Arthur, but is clear to those who armed him" ("Tennyson's *Idylls*," p. 46). For Priestley, the passing of Arthur should not be moaned because it only means that the ideals he stands for will be reborn under a different shape. He writes: "The ultimate truth is the paradox of the permanence of the ideal which underlies the transitory shifting phenomena. […] The Ideal which Arthur symbolizes has found embodiment in many forms, in many ages, in many places; it has fought its battles and has, in each form, yielded place to new. It passes, but it never dies" (p. 46). This interpretation is sustained by the very last line of the poem which reads "And the new sun rose bringing the new year" ("The Passing of Arthur," l. 469, p. 973). Traditionally, the rising sun is a symbol for hope, all the more so as it contrasts here with the gloomy mist obscuring the last battle. Nevertheless, this optimistic vision is undermined by assertions of the exceptionality of Arthur's reign throughout the text, such as "And never woman yet, since man's first fall, / Did kindlier unto man" ("Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 854-855, p. 858) or "Such times have been not since the light that led / The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 400-401, p. 971). Moreover, Bedivere's complaint that "the true old days are dead, / When every morning brought a noble chance, / And every chance brought out a noble knight. / […] / And the days darken round [him], and the years / Among new men, strange faces, other minds" (ll. 397-406, p. 971), as it was written by Tennyson centuries after the time supposed to be that of Arthur, betrays the feeling that Arthur's passing is a terrible loss for the world, from which it has not yet recovered. It is noteworthy that this is precisely the impression that overcame Arthur Hallam's friends after his death. Thus, Gladstone writes: "When much times has elapsed, when most bereavements will be forgotten, he will still be remembered, and his place, I fear, will be felt to be still vacant, singularly as his mind was calculated by its native tendencies to work powerfully and for good, in an age full of import to the nature and destinies of man." [112] Yet, there is more hope for King Arthur than for Arthur Hallam as Bellicent reports Merlin's prediction that "Though men may wound him […] he will not die, / But pass, again to come" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 420-421, p. 690). The potentiality of his return is emphasised by Tennyson's changing the title of the poem from "Morte d'Arthur" as it was entitled in its first version (1842) to "The Passing of Arthur".

[112] William Gladstone, *Memoirs*, I, p. 108, quoted in the introductory note to *In Memoriam*, Ricks Edition, p. 333.

In fact, it is only when related with Arthur's return that cyclicity becomes fully positive. Now, his resurrection is strongly suggested to the imagination through his connexion with water. Indeed, he comes to the world out of a wave and he leaves it on a barge disappearing in the distance. This watery cycle is heightened by the repetition of "From the great deep to the great deep he goes" when Bedivere watches him go away ("The Passing of Arthur," l. 445, p. 972). It is noteworthy as water is endowed with very specific symbolic values. Indeed, it is considered as a feminine element, associated with maternal identity and thus able to give life. Accordingly, Bachelard in *L'Eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière* quotes Jung's analyses of a Northern funerary rite which consists in putting the dead in a tree on a river: "Le désir de l'homme, dit ailleurs Jung, « c'est que les eaux de la mort deviennent les eaux de la vie, que la mort et sa froide étreinte soient le giron maternel, tout comme la mer, bien qu'engloutissant le soleil, le ré-enfante dans ses profondeurs […] Jamais la Vie n'a pu croire à la Mort ! »"[113] This idea of returning the dead to the maternal bosom to be reborn is reinforced by the fact that Arthur's head lies on the lap of one of the three queens that accompany both his crowning and his passing: "Then murmured Arthur, 'Place me in the barge.' / So to the barge they came. There those three Queens / Put forth their hands, and took the King, and wept. / But she, that rose the tallest of them all / And fairest, laid his head upon her lap, / And loosed the shattered casque, and chafed his hands, / And called him by his name […]" (ll. 372-378, p. 970). All of her gestures, and the fact that she calls him by his name designate her as a maternal figure, so that she becomes somehow an allegory of Mother Earth taking him back to her to heal him. In the same vein, Mircea Eliade in his study of religious rites underlines the paradoxical nature of water which is related both with life and death, or rather with life and death seen in a continuum:

> L'émersion répète le geste cosmogonique de la manifestation formelle ; l'immersion équivaut à une dissolution des formes. C'est pour cela que le symbolisme des Eaux implique aussi bien la mort que la renaissance. […] l'immersion dans les Eaux équivaut non à une extinction définitive mais à une réintégration passagère dans l'indistinct, suivie d'une nouvelle création, d'une nouvelle vie ou d'un « homme nouveau » […]. Au point de vue de la structure, le « déluge » est comparable au « baptême », et la libation funéraire aux lustrations des nouveaux-nés […]. (*Le Sacré et le profane*, pp. 112-113).

Thus, it is utterly consistent with the idea of his passing to the island of Avilion to be healed that Arthur departs on water. Besides, Bachelard lays emphasis on the way in which water can

[113] C. G. Jung, *Métamorphoses et symboles de la libido*, translated by L. Devos (Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, 1931), p. 225, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* : *essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, (Paris, José Corti, 1942), p. 99.

prompt the imagination and keep the dead more alive for us: "Si vraiment un mort, pour l'inconscient, c'est un absent, seul le navigateur de la mort est un mort dont on peut rêver indéfiniment. Il semble que son souvenir ait toujours un avenir … Bien différent sera le mort qui habite la nécropole. Pour celui-ci, le tombeau est encore une demeure, une demeure que les vivants viennent pieusement visiter. Un tel mort n'est pas totalement absent" (*L'Eau et les rêves*, p. 102). The idea of Arthur's return is accordingly made more potent in the *Idylls of the King* than in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* since Malory's king is said to be brought to his tomb by the three queens, even though legend has it that the tomb wears the epitaph: "*Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam Rexque futurus*" (here lies Arthur, king once and in the times to come). [114] Hence, Arthur's passing appears as only a necessary step before his return.

Nonetheless, the Arthurian endeavour to grant prelapsarian eternity to men ends in failure and "the temporary triumph of evil, the confusion of moral order" as commented by Tennyson (quoted in the Ricks edition, p. 959), either because the world is unredeemable, or out of Arthur's inability to create a proper union between sensuality and idealism. The reader, along with Bedivere, watches him disappear in the distance with the hope of his return, and cannot but give in to nostalgia, metaphysical nostalgia for the eternity that could have been, but also nostalgia for the world they are about to leave by closing the book. Therefore, the question stands: if Arthur proves unable to make his political actualisation of the Ideal eternal, what can be said of Tennyson's artistic attempt at the same aim? Can art succeed where life fails? And if so, how and why?

[114] Thomas Malory, *The Morte d'Arthur* [1485], "The Day of Destiny", in *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, edited by Eugène Vinaver, volume III (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 1242.

III – Art and Eternity.

It makes particular sense to consider the relation between art and eternity in a study of the *Idylls of the King* as the work presents the harmony of Sense and Soul as the necessary condition to immortality. Now, this *via media* between materialism and ethereality is precisely what philosophically defines the work of art. This conception is best developed by Hegel who considers the work of art as spiritualised matter:

> L'œuvre artistique tient ainsi le milieu entre le sensible immédiat et la pensée pure. Ce n'est *pas encore* de la pensée pure, mais en dépit de son caractère sensible, ce *n'est plus* une réalité purement matérielle, comme sont les pierres, les plantes et la vie organique. Le sensible dans l'œuvre artistique participe de l'idée, mais à la différence des idées de la pensée pure, cet élément idéal doit en même temps se manifester extérieurement comme une chose. […] Ainsi, dans l'art, le sensible est *spiritualisé*, puisque l'*esprit* y apparaît sous une forme sensible.[115]

This union of sensuality and idealism in the work of art urges the reader to reconsider the intra-diegetic achievements of the *Idylls* as artistic creations. It is noteworthy that they give a good airing to painting and music which according to Hegel are, along with poetry, the most spiritualised forms of art, or as he phrases it "the arts which are destined to represent the soul in its inner or *subjective* concentration" (*Esthétique*, p. 94, translation ours). Yet, we shall not follow entirely the Hegelian approach to the question of art for two reasons: the first is that he conceives of the evolution of art as a teleological process which engenders a hierarchy between artistic forms and ends with the disappearance of art for the sake of aesthetics. It is, obviously, a position that we cannot endorse. The second reason is that his meditation on art (and music in particular) as expression of spirit relies on the idea that the subject cannot exist out of time: "Le moi est dans le temps et le temps est l'être du sujet" (p. 107). This is undoubtedly true as far as the philosophical study of the subject as consciousness goes, but it is at odds with the Tennysonian refusal of the passing of time. As we have seen, this poet was characterised by an inherent nostalgia that made him always prefer the past over the present. Consequently, our study of artistic forms in the *Idylls of the King* should follow these two main axes of reflection: how do these forms of art enact the union of Sense and Soul and to what extent do they transcend the passing of time?

[115] Georg Wilhem Friedrich Hegel, *Esthétique*, selected edition edited by Claude Khodoss (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1953), pp. 19-20.

A – Artistic Achievements in the Idylls of the King

1 – Music, broken or silent

Music plays a great part in the *Idylls* as in other works by Tennyson. Its metaphor already runs through *In Memoriam*, in the "Prologue" of which those lines feature: "Let knowledge grow from more to more, / But more of reverence in us dwell; / That mind and soul, according well, / May make one music as before" (ll. 25-28, p. 343). Hence, it stands as Tennyson's favourite image for harmony, and it is loaded with prelapsarian connotations as indicated by the nostalgic "as before." Nonetheless, in the *Idylls*, music is more ambivalent as the work opposes two kinds of musical art: Tristram's "broken music" ("The Last Tournament," l. 264, p. 928) and Arthur's "silent music" ("The Last Tournament," l. 349, p. 930). This distinction made by Dagonet, Arthur's Shakespearian fool, constitutes a convenient starting point for an account of the musical images in the *Idylls of the King*.

To begin with "broken" music, what Dagonet reproaches Tristram's song is not its lack of euphony, for when the knight asserts "I made it in the woods, / And heard it ring as true as tested gold" (ll. 283-284, p. 928), the fool answers by a parable ending with "the cup was gold, the draught was mud" (l. 298, p. 929). In fact, under a finely chiselled melody, Tristram conveys libertine philosophy:

> '"Free love – free field – we love but while we may:
> The woods are hushed, their music is no more:
> The leaf is dead, the yearning past away:
> New leaf, new life – the days of frost are o'er:
> New life, new love, to suit the newer day:
> New loves are sweet as those that went before:
> Free love – free field – we love but while we may." [116]

The use of alternate rhymes as well as the numerous repetitions enhance the musicality of the lyrics but cannot conceal the feebleness of the ideas they voice. As Walter Nash puts it quite harshly, "For what it says, the poem is a fairly poor specimen of the *carpe diem* genre: 'stay up-to-date with a new lover every year.'"[117] His praise of ephemeral love as opposed to Arthur's command "To love one maiden only, cleave to her, / And worship her by years of

[116] "The Last Tournament," ll. 275-281, p. 928.
[117] Walter Nash, "The Poetics of Idyll", (Unpub. Diss. Nottingham, 1972), p. 140, quoted by J.M. Gray in *Thro' the Vision of the Night* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1980), p. 106.

noble deed" ("Guinevere," ll. 472-473, p. 954) makes his music broken. He is compared to Orpheus, this "Paynim harper" ("The Last Tournament," l. 322, p. 929) around who "swine, goats, asses, rams and geese / Trooped" (ll. 321-322), a comparison that lays emphasis on the fact that what Tristram preaches is an animal, naturalistic way of life at odds with Arthur's moral elevation. When he points out that "thy Paynim bard / Had such a mastery of his mystery / That he could harp his wife out of hell" (ll. 326-328, p. 929), Dagonet wittily answers "And whither harp'st thou thine? down! and thyself / Down! and two more: a helpful harper thou, / That harpest downward!" (ll. 330-332, pp. 929-930). Music should lead to the elevation of man, to the harmony of "mind and soul," not bring him back to the temptation of living according to his impulses. James W. Hood reports Catherine Barnes Stevenson's interesting theory according to which Tennyson could have chosen to make Tristram a "fleshy poet" in order to denounce the "blatant and perilous sensuality of Swinburne's 'poems and plays.'"[118] Furthermore, we would argue that although his song seems harmoniously crafted, its "broken" character is materialised in the very fabric of the text through the dashes which can visually recall that "little rift within the lute" that, in Vivien's song, "by and by will make the music mute" ("Merlin and Vivien," ll. 391-392, p. 818). Symptomatically, Vivien's speech is similarly fragmented by the abundance of dashes when she lies and slanders about Lancelot and Guinevere: "Hither, boy – and mark me well. / Dost thou remember at Carleon once – / A year ago – nay, then I love thee not – / Ay, thou rememberest well – one summer dawn – / By the great tower – Carleon upon Usk – / Nay, truly we were hidden […]" (ll. 495-500, p. 801). In this fashion, her persiflage ostensibly becomes a "broken music" that seeks to disrupt the harmony of the Arthurian order. Unfortunately, Tristram and Vivien's music may be "broken," but it rings louder, and finally even pervades the narration. Indeed, Clyde de L. Ryals comments on the increasing narratological complexity of the poems as follows: "What we find, especially in 'The Holy Grail' and 'The Last Tournament,' is the decay of the King's Order indicated by the 'broken music' of the narrative flow" (p. 93). Thus, the moral battle between Tristram's naturalistic philosophy and Arthur's idealistic one is also a musical contest.

As far as he is concerned, Arthur is not properly speaking a musician, but rather a conductor as suggested by Dagonet who speaks of a star called "The harp of Arthur" ("The Last Tournament," l. 333, p. 930) saying "It makes a silent music up in heaven, / And I, and

[118] Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "Swinburne and Tennyson's Tristram", *Victorian Poetry*, No. 19 (Summer 1981), p. 189, quoted by James W. Hood in *Divining Desire*, p. 168.

Arthur and the angels hear" (ll. 349-350, p. 930). This heavenly music is the one he conducts his Round Table to play. As a matter of fact, the constraints he imposes on his knights through the vows act like beats on the partition of their lives to set them at unison. This is made plain by his welcoming words to Balin: "walk with me, and move / To music with thine Order and the King" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 73-74, p. 790). Beautiful music can only be made through order, and it is no coincidence that Tennyson refers to the Round Table as an "Order."[119] Arthur is an artist in as much as he imposes order on nature, except that he exerts his art on the human soul. He takes men as raw matter and sculpts them into works of art, impresses his ideals onto them. However, Tennyson associates him not with sculpture but with music, which is not surprising as music is the most immaterial of arts, thus matching adequately Arthur's ethereality. Actually, music is the medium of the "deep," the ideal world of purity and eternal bliss, as can be construed from the apparition of the Grail being announced by unearthly music, so that "O never harp nor horn, / Nor aught we blow with breath, or touch with hand, / Was like that music as it came" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 113-115, p. 879). The mystical connotation of music could then explain why Camelot is built "to music." Indeed, Merlin relates the construction of the city as follows: "For truly as thou sayest, a Fairy King / And Fairy Queens have built the city, son; / They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft / Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand, / And built it to the music of their harps. / […] / For an ye heard a music, like enow / They are building still, seeing the city is built / To music, therefore never built at all, / And therefore built for ever" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 254-274, pp. 700-701). This image is very rich and has given rise to many interpretations. For instance, Clyde de L. Ryals views Camelot as the materialisation of harmony between Arthur and his knights, "the embodiment of Arthur's will, a city always in the process of creation" (*From the Great Deep*, p. 75). In reality, Ryals's position is extreme, for he sees Arthur as a tyrant imposing his will and his personality onto his knights with the consequence that "being not themselves but pale facsimiles of the King, his knights must depend more and more on someone or something for emotional satisfaction" (p. 77). Yet the idea that Camelot is held together by the unity of the Round Table is convincing, all the more so as Ryals underlines that the "dissonance" engendered by the Grail quest is symbolically rendered by the fact that Arthur's statue loses a wing ("The Holy Grail," ll. 729-730, p. 896, alluded to in *From the Great Deep*, p. 84). From a different point of view, John D. Rosenberg recalls the

[119] See "The Passing of Arthur," l. 269 (p. 686), l. 473 (p. 691); "Gareth and Lynette," l. 610 (p. 711); "The Marriage of Geraint," l. 3 (p. 736); "Balin and Balan," l. 88 (p. 790), l. 208 (p. 793), l. 542 (p. 802); "Merlin and Vivien," l. 56 (p. 809), "Lancelot and Elaine," l. 1321 (p. 872), etc.

mythological precedent of the metaphor, since the city of Troy is said to have been built to the music of Apollo's lyre, and gives a Biblical reading of Camelot's paradox: "since in St. Paul's phrase we can have 'no continuing city' on earth (*Hebrews*, 13, 14), Camelot is 'never built,' although the ideal that animates it predates its founding and will survive its fall, and hence the city is 'built forever'" (*The Fall of Camelot*, p. 49). This interpretation has the merit of emphasising Camelot's artistic nature at the crossroads between physical and spiritual realities. However, it seems to us that the choice of the musical metaphor is very telling: in his attempt to suffuse matter with ideal in order to turn the world into an ever-lasting work of art, Arthur elects the wrong medium. As a matter of fact, as has been said, music is the art with the thinnest material basis, and most importantly, it is the *art of time* par excellence. Music has factual existence only as long as it is played, and cannot exist outside time. Significantly, *vanitas* paintings often feature musical instruments for this precise reason: it represents the fleetingness of time, its fluid passing. For Bergson, music is what gives us the more accurate idea of what time really is. A king waging a war on Time should not rely on a temporal art to reach eternity. Therefore, Camelot, as a symphony, was doomed to pass and end. However, we would argue that music is the metaphor for Arthur's *political* action, but his reign also has a truly *artistic* dimension, which is best identified by James W. Hood, who writes:

> [Arthur], like his own creator, rears an edifice constructed upon the principles of meter that is both nothing – "never built", unreal, false, a lie in Plato's sight – and 'for ever,' transcendent, evanescent, eternal. The very slipperiness of (particularly poetic) signification – its "parabolic drift" or its "shot-silk" quality producing "many glancing colours" (*Memoir*, II, p. 127) – paradoxically makes it mean nothing and many things at the same time. Arthur builds a metaphoric representation of an ideal which, therefore, is simultaneously meaningless and rich in signification. (*Divining Desire*, p. 167)

Camelot is a work of art in that it is never finished, done with, considering that it always gives rise to new interpretations, and because of this infinity of possible meanings, it is built "for ever" since it becomes a monument, something to be saved throughout generations. The very hermeneutic works we have just surveyed participate in its building. Camelot, as a symbol, cannot collapse. The power of symbolic representation to transcend the contingency of life is also what another character comes to learn, as we shall now dwell on.

2 – Elaine, the Multi-Faceted Artist.

Actually, Elaine stands out as the major artistic figure in the volume. As pointed out by James R. Kincaid, "The union of red and white in her favour indicates very pointedly her willingness to join body with spirit" (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, p. 189). Moreover, she is endowed with great imaginative power: she crafts an embroidered case for Lancelot's shield with "All the devices blazoned on the shield / In her own tinct, and add[s], of her wit, / A border fantasy of branch and flower" ("Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 9-11, p. 834). She is able to produce an original and personal creation, as emphasised by the insistence on "*her own* tinct" and "*her* wit," and she is associated with the imaginative world since she "live[s] in fantasy" (l. 27, p. 835). Interestingly, she is also an intradiegetic figure of the reader as "Leaving her household and good father, [she] climb[s] / That eastern tower, and entering bar[s] her door, / Strip[s] off the case, and read[s] the naked shield, / Now guesse[s] a hidden meaning in his arms, / Now ma[kes] a pretty history to herself" (ll. 14-18). Indeed, this can recall the attitude of the reader seeking privacy to plunge into the story and "live in fantasy" for a few hours, while her hermeneutic endeavour is obviously a pointer to critical reading. Likewise, her empathy with Lancelot's pain later on in the idyll, when he is hurt in tournament and the text reads "Through her own side she felt the sharp lance go" (l. 620, p. 852), could refer to the identification process between the reader and the characters. This could be part of her formation as artist. Actually, the poem could be construed as a *Künstlerroman* in as much as she becomes more and more creatively active throughout the idyll. Indeed, after she has first seen Lancelot, her imagination is likened to the skill of a painter: "As when a painter, poring of a face, / Divinely through all hindrance finds the man / Behind it, and so paints him that his face, / The shape and colour of a mind and life, / Lives for his children, ever at its best / And fullest; so the face before her lived, / Dark-splendid, speaking in the silence, full / Of noble things" (ll. 330-337, p. 844). Once again, her artistic potential is enhanced but this portrait of Lancelot that lives in her mind never reaches a canvas. After that, she embroiders the case and starts interpreting the shield, and then inventing stories from the marks it bears. The next step in her artistic maturation is the creation of her "little song" (l. 997, p. 862), praised by the poetic voice that comments: "sweetly could she make and sing" (l. 999, p. 862). Finally, she reaches full artistic amplitude with her masterpiece, that is the staging of her own death. James W. Hood recalls that "Catherine Barnes Stevenson, emphasizing Elaine's artistic creativity, can argue that in creating the death barge she moves away from the privatistic, enclosed world of the artistic 'fancy' of her embroidery into the more public realm of artistic

'imagination', thus allowing the barge to accrue a greater symbolic meaning available to the world at large." [120] The last step of her apprenticeship as an artist is this passage from the private to the public sphere, the birth of the intention that directs her work at others, which she displays when she explains her designs to her father and she predicts how the members of the Court will react at her arrival: "There will I enter in among them all / And no man there will dare to mock at me; / But there the fine Gawain will wonder at me, / And there the great Lancelot muse at me / […] / And there the King will know me and my love, / And there the Queen herself will pity me," (ll. 1045-1052, p. 863). Because she manages to move her audience, she becomes a real artist.

Her masterpiece then is the scene of her death as she has staged it. Actually, she composes a real *tableau vivant* – or rather a *tableau mort* as wittily phrased by Catherine Barnes Stevenson ("How It Struck", p. 14), a theatrical form very fashionable in the parties of the Victorian upper-class. The care brought to the organisation of the scene and to the colours creates a vivid picture in the mind of the reader: "Then rose the dumb old servitor, and the dead, / Oared by the dumb, went upward with the flood – / In her right hand the lily, in her left / The letter – all her bright hair streaming down – / And all the coverlid was cloth of gold / Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white / All but her face, and that clear-featured face / Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead, / But fast asleep, and lay as though she smiled" (ll. 1146-1154, p. 866). We find here typical elements of the Pre-Raphaelite style (in particular the long, streaming hair and the flower) which have prompted Catherine Barnes Stevenson to make a compelling hypothesis: that Tennyson would have designed this scene after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's illustration of his "Lady of Shalott," a wooden engraving realised for the Moxon illustrated edition of Tennyson's *Poems*, published in 1857 (**Figure 1**). Chronologically, it is possible, as Stevenson recalls that "Lancelot and Elaine" was written between 1858 and 1859. Then, she justifies her theory by remarking that Rossetti added elements to the Lady's arrival at Camelot, such as "an unidentified second male, peering over the body with Lancelot," and that he "created a religious aura by giving the corpse a beatific expression and a triangle of candles surrounding its head" ("How It Struck," p. 14). Now, she underlines that when Elaine foresees her arrival at Camelot, she pictures in particular two men, Lancelot and Gawain on which she lingers, saying "But there the fine Gawain will wonder at me, / And there the great Lancelot muse at me; / Gawain, who bad a thousand

[120] Catherine Barnes Stevenson, "How It Struck a Contemporary: Tennyson's 'Lancelot and Elaine' and Pre-Raphaelite Art," *The Victorian Newsletter*, No. 60 (Fall 1981), pp. 8-14, quoted in *Divining Desire*, p. 179.

Figure 1

farewells to me, / Lancelot who coldly went, nor bad me one" (ll. 1046-1050, p. 863). Similarly, Stevenson suggests that Elaine's corpse could have drawn her peaceful demeanour from Rossetti's lady, and that her being buried "worshipfully" on Arthur's order (l. 1318, p. 871) could be the legacy of "Rossetti's beatification of the Lady of Shalott" ("How It Struck," p. 14). Hence, Elaine asserts herself as a Pre-Raphaelite artist, all the more so as she adds a letter to her tableau: "In so doing," Catherine Barnes Stevenson observes, "she becomes the ideal Pre-Raphaelite: poet and painter in one; moreover, she puts into action Ruskin's injunction that in order to encourage 'noble' painting, people must themselves 'be'

pictures[121]" ("How It Struck," p. 14). She realises the perfect union of Sense and Soul by using her body to symbolise her ideal of love and by creating a complete work of art made of both image and words, sensual beauty and signification.

Nonetheless, the fact that she reaches this achievement through her death cannot be overlooked. In fact, she is driven by an unconcealed fascination for her own death as evidenced by such lines as the following ones: "Her father's latest word hummed in her ear, / 'Being so very wilful you must go,' / And changed itself and echoed in her heart, / 'Being so very wilful you must die'" (ll. 775-778, p. 856). She is actually an excellent illustration of what Freud was to theorise as the "death drive" and the "life drive" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922). According to Freud's theory, organic matter and the human psyche as well are steered by two fundamental and contrasting instincts: the life-instinct, or Eros, which is associated with the sexual instincts in leading to the continuation and renewal of life; and on the other hand, the death-instinct which is the longing of the organic to return to the inorganic. These two competing drives are set at play in Elaine's "Song of Love and Death":

> 'Sweet is true love though given in vain, in vain;
> And sweet is death who puts an end to pain:
> I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.
>
> 'Love, art thou sweet? then bitter death must be:
> Love, thou art bitter; sweet is death to me.
> O Love, if death be sweeter, let me die.
>
> 'Sweet love, that seems not made to fade away,
> Sweet death, that seems to make us loveless clay,
> I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.
>
> 'I fain would follow love, if that could be;
> I needs must follow death, who calls for me;
> Call and I follow, I follow! let me die.'[122]

In this song, Elaine opposes almost nominally the two instincts identified by Freud, Love and Death, Eros and Thanatos. The song is made very moving by its simplicity: J. M. Gray remarks that "There is not a single word of more than two syllables. No line has more than one two-syllabled word in it until the last, which expresses urgency, a desired haste" (*Thro'*

[121] John Ruskin, "Pre-Raphaelitism," *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* (London, Smith Elder, 1854) in *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by James Sambrook (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 101.
[122] "Lancelot and Elaine," ll. 1000-1011, p. 862.

the Vision of the Night, p. 104). This lack of complexity in the choice of words conveys her innocence in a style reminiscent of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Furthermore, it also betrays her over-idealistic outlook on life. Lancelot is right to assert that "This is not love: but love's first flash in youth" (l. 944, p. 861), but he forgets that this "first flash" is correlated by the faith of youth in absolute values. Accordingly, Elaine only believes in absolutes: her love is "true love," and therefore she has only two possibilities: "Him of death" (l. 897, p. 859). Since Lancelot does not return her love, she feels she has no choice. Therefore she stands as a sort of Don Quixote figure whose idealism and loose relation to reality (given that she lives "in fantasy") prove destructive. But, as pointed out by Arthur L. Simpson, her ideals do not come clearly from a literary background (even though she has a striking precedent in Shakespeare's Ophelia to which her maiden death on the river connects her), but rather from the myths inherent to both the Victorian and Tennyson's Arthurian societies: "The personally and socially destructive effects of Elaine's believing and acting out stereotypical and mythic views of maidens and women appear clearly in, first, three central dialogues (with her father, with Gawain, and with Lancelot) that anticipate Elaine's final departure to Camelot and, second, in the preparations for and in the departure itself."[123] By "mythic views," he refers to such concepts as Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," making of the wife and mother a figure of angelic purity and morality, as well as to conceptions "of love of woman as a purifying passion, and of women as fragile creatures, prone to swooning, blushing, and delicate health" ("Elaine the Unfair," p. 348). Besides, as an artist, she also embodies the perverse facet of imagination which Fred Kaplan sees at work in "Merlin and Vivien": "The imagination," he writes, "has its perverseness, its desire to embrace death, timelessness, and peace. Its potential for evil and destructiveness, its delight in peculiar perversities, can overcome its positive strengths. Out of hand, the imagination can be a breeding ground of morbid fancies, of sexual phantasms, of deep and self-destructive melancholy, of psychological nightmares."[124] Indeed, her longing for peace and timelessness is expressed when she ends the scenario of her journey to Camelot by "And after my long voyage I shall rest!" (l. 1054, p. 864). Hence, she can be construed as the embodiment of the self-destructive artist.

[123] Arthur L. Simpson, Jr., "Elaine the Unfair, Elaine the Unlovable: The Socially Destructive Artist/Woman in *Idylls of the King*," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (Feb., 1992), p. 349.
[124] Fred Kaplan, "Woven Paces and Waving Hands: Tennyson's Merlin as Fallen Artist," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1969), p. 298.

Yet, she is somehow redeemed by the success of her artistic endeavour: through her death and its staging, she obtains recognition of her love and purity and becomes intrinsically associated with Lancelot, as Arthur commands: "'Let her tomb / Be costly, and her image thereupon, / And let the shield of Lancelot at her feet / Be carven, and her lily in her hand. / And let the story of her dolorous voyage / For all true hearts be blazoned on her tomb / In letters gold and azure!'" (ll. 1328-1334, p. 872). She becomes the symbol of the absolute love she believes in and thus justifies her dedication to it. James W. Hood brings to the foreground that she succeeds through her death:

> "In one sense, her final artistic endeavor achieves grand, transcendent status as her desire becomes eternalized in the image and words which bring tears to the onlookers at Camelot. Her audience is left 'half-thinking that her lips… moved again' (LE, 1278-9); thus she lives beyond limitation in her text and tableau, cheating death through a representation that transcends both it and unrequited love" (*Divining Desire*, pp. 180-181).

She has turned herself into a work of art and thus avoided both her love "fading away" and her decaying into "loveless clay." Through her complete dedication to her art, she escapes time and material reality, enacting in her turn Galahad's paradox according to which: "If I lose myself, I save myself" ("The Holy Grail," l. 179, p. 881). Eventually, by inscribing the image of her arrival for ever in the memory of Camelot's inhabitants, what she achieves can be likened to the art of photography, which, meaningfully, is the form of illustration that Tennyson chose to illustrates his *Idylls*. We shall now expand on the adequacy of this choice in relation with the main themes of the work.

B – Idylls of the King *and Photography:* Ut Poesis Pictura

Indeed, it is Tennyson himself who asked his neighbour and dear friend, Julia Margaret Cameron, to illustrate his Arthurian masterpiece. Although Robert B. Martin suggests that it was "an act of deliberate kindness since he hated illustrations of his poems, even when he supervised them"[125] (*The Unquiet Heart*, p. 508), Marylu Hill asserts that the care he took in helping Julia Margaret Cameron to select her models (he insisted that "For

[125] William Holman Hunt relates how Tennyson reproached him with the way he had interpreted some details from the poem in his illustration of "The Lady of Shalott," concluding that "an illustrator ought never to add anything to what he finds in the text" (William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, volume II (London, Macmillan, 1905), p. 125, quoted in "How It Struck," p. 14).

Lancelot, you must have a man with a face seamed and scarred by human passions" as quoted in *The Unquiet Heart*, p. 508) indicates his faith in the project, all the more so as, "by all accounts, Tennyson was not a particularly kind man when it came to preserving and promoting his poetry."[126] Moreover, from a purely aesthetical point of view, there exist congruencies between Tennyson's poetic style and Cameron's photographic touch. As a matter of fact, Robert B. Martin stresses the influence of Tennyson's bad sight on his poetry:

> It is obvious in his poetry that what he knew best was the minute examination of form, such as the flowers or leaves that he peered at by throwing himself on the ground and thrusting his face into them. Against that must be set the evocation of enormous misty distances, of the blank loneliness of sea and sky that fascinated him and that so often furnished him with the similes for dimly perceived abstractions, for the capitalized words like Immutability or Immensity or Unknowable. (*The Unquiet Heart*, p. 93)

Gerhard Joseph holds this "bifocal perceptual oscilation" as Tennyson's "adaptation of what the German aesthetician Rudolph Zeitler has called the 'telescopic structure of nineteenth-century poetry and painting, whereby both arts emphasize the duality between the nearby and the romantically distant in space and time."[127] Now, this contrast between clear focus on minute details and blurred effect have come to characterise Cameron's work as well. Hence, her art offers interesting correspondences with that of Tennyson, yet we think that beyond that, photography in itself matches Tennysonian poetry better than any other art through one of its intrinsic qualities: its very singular relation to time.

1 – Photography, Time and Death

In the 18th Century, Lessing in his *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766) established the traditional classification of arts as resting on the division between spatial arts (architecture, sculpture and painting) and temporal arts (poetry and music). This conception was very influential still in the 19th Century and, as pointed out by Hubert Damisch,[128] can be felt in the Hegelian system which classifies arts from architecture (the more spatial one) to music and poetry. Yet, Hubert Damish demonstrates that this classical vision of arts is shattered when photography appears:

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[126] Marylu Hill, "'Shadowing Sense at war with Soul': Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographic Illustrations of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*', *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), p. 446.
[127] Gerhard Joseph, "Poetic and Photographic Frames: Tennyson and Julia Margaret Cameron," *TRB*, No. 5 (1988), p. 47.
[128] Hubert Damsich, *La Dénivelée: A l'épreuve de la photographie* (Paris, Seuil, 2001), p. 92.

> La découverte de la photographie a bouleversé la classification traditionnelle des arts. Car la photographie, dès l'origine, aura été liée au temps autant qu'à l'espace. Elle l'était à l'espace comme à l'élément dans lequel opère la projection qui autorisait la réduction de l'objet, ou du modèle, au deux dimensions d'une 'vue'. Mais elle l'était aussi bien au temps qui était celui de la pose, comme à la condition nécessaire à l'impression de l'image sur la plaque sensible ou la pellicule. (*La Dénivelée*, p. 96)

Accordingly, from the beginning, photography stands out for its temporal dimension. Roland Barthes in *La Chambre claire* notices that originally, the wooden cameras were made following the same techniques as clockworks, so that for a fertile imagination, they were truly "seeing clocks"[129] (translation ours). There is no surprise that photography should have attracted Tennyson: a photograph freezes a small portion of time and fixes it in an eternal present, shields it from the passing of time. Yet, the subject who wants to reach immortality *via* his photographic portrait has to pay the price for it. As remarked upon by Barthes, it is an experience very much akin to death: "Imaginairement, la Photographie […] représente ce moment très subtil où, à vrai dire, je ne suis ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir objet : je vis alors une micro-expérience de la mort (de la parenthèse) : je deviens vraiment en spectre" (*Chambre claire*, p. 30). Like Elaine, the "photographee" has to accept to be turned into an object (a work of art in the best case) in order to escape time. As critics have pointed out, there is another situation in the *Idylls* which can hint at photography: the beguiling of Merlin. Indeed, Tennyson sketches the effects of the charm which Vivien casts on him as follows: "The man so wrought on ever seemed to lie / Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower, / From which there was no escape for evermore" ("Merlin and Vivien," ll. 206-208, pp. 813-814). The "four walls of a hollow tower" are not without recalling the frame of a photograph, thus Marylu Hill and Carol Armstrong can argue that "the entrancement of Merlin is symbolic of the photographic process itself, where the subject is fixed in a frame where s/he will stand, bewitched and static, for ever - what Armstrong calls 'the trancelike stillness of the gaze and the mute frozenness of the photograph'[130]" ("Shadowing Sense," p. 454). Both Elaine's and Merlin's fates end in (a form of) death but it is paradoxically in death that they live forever.

[129] "et je me rappelle qu'à l'origine, le matériel photographique relevait des techniques de l'ébénisterie et de la mécanique de précision : les appareils, au fond, étaient des horloges à voir." Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire* (Paris, Seuil, 1980), p. 33.

[130] Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843-1875* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998), p. 391.

This paradox is at the heart of photography, as evidenced more particularly by its link with amateur theatricals and *tableaux vivants* in Cameron's work. In point of fact, Barthes recalls the primitive function of drama:

> On connaît le rapport originel du théâtre et du culte des Morts : les premiers acteurs se détachaient de la communauté en jouant le rôle des Morts : se grimer, c'était se désigner comme un corps à la fois vivant et mort […]. Or c'est ce même rapport que je trouve dans la Photo ; si vivante qu'on s'efforce de la concevoir […], la Photo est comme un théâtre primitif, comme un Tableau Vivant, la figuration de la face immobile et fardée sous laquelle nous voyons les morts. (*Chambre claire*, pp. 55-56)

Actually, as underlined by Marylu Hill, the parallel between the people represented in a photograph and corpses is not at all far-fetched or imaginary, in particular in the Victorian Era, when photography was invented or discovered. She reminds us that "one of the earliest popular uses of photography, particularly in the age of the daguerreotype, was to capture for the last time (and often the first time as well) the features of beloved children, parents, spouses, as they lay waiting for burial" ("Shadowing Sense," p. 448). Yet, Barthes is also right to point out that "Photography has something to do with resurrection" (*Chambre claire*, p. 129, translation ours), since a photograph can bring back to life a loved deceased one, like in his example, the photograph of his mother as a child, that moves him because he sees a living and smiling girl who in reality is already dead. This temporal paradox is what makes photography both comforting and distressing, the *nostalgic* art par excellence.

Indeed, by freezing time, photography only enhances it: Jean-Christophe Bailly identifies rightly the illusion to which we are prone while considering in what way photography interacts with time. He writes: "elle inscrit le temps à la façon d'une horloge arrêtée pour toujours – non, comme on le croirait trop facilement, en laissant entendre que le temps ne passe plus, mais au contraire en condensant dans la tête d'épingle de l'instant éternisé toute la violence irréductible du passage des heures."[131] When we witness that for the subject of the photograph, time has stopped, by comparison we only feel more acutely that for us it goes on streaming away. Barthes underlines the painful perversity of the photographic illusion:

> l'immobilité de la photo est comme le résultat d'une confusion perverse entre deux concepts : le Réel et le Vivant : en attestant que l'objet a été réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu'il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au

[131] Jean-Christophe Bailly, *L'Instant et son ombre* (Paris, Seuil, 2008), p. 55.

> Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle : mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé (*« ça a été »*), elle suggère qu'il est déjà mort. (*Chambre claire*, pp. 123-124)

The very grammatical time used reveals us that what we witness *was*, but is *no more*. Every photograph is like a raven whispering "Nevermore" in our ear, to paraphrase Edgar Allan Poe's emblematic poem.[132] A photograph eternalises a golden age but, by in doing so, it heightens the contrast with the present and intensifies our awareness of its imperfection. For a poet of such a nostalgic temper as Tennyson's, always in "mourning for an irrecoverable past" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 191), this medium could only appear as sympathetic. Besides, Régis Durand in *Le Temps de l'image* speaks of "photographic melancholy" ("mélancholie photographique," translation ours) in as much as one asks simultaneously of a photograph to confirm that what it represents existed once, thus emphasising its absence, and to soothe our grief at its being past.[133] That is the reason why he speaks of photographs as "fetishes," because they aim at "stitching over the gap and denying the unbearable absence" (*Temps de l'image*, p. 57, translation ours). Thus, by offering a body to Tennyson's Arthurian figures, Julia Margaret Cameron provides an object to Tennyson regrets and longing since she gives the illusion of reality to a time and characters that never existed. As remarked by Marylu Hill, her photographs are "as real and seemingly trustworthy as the photographs with which I [grew] up, even while [they] paradoxically depict a verifiable present recreating an unknowable and unverifiable past" ("Shadowing Sense," p. 445). Precisely because they represent a *mythical* past, Cameron's illustrations add one layer of complexity to the temporal nature of photography by transforming its essence from Barthes's "*it-was*" ("*ça-a-été*," translation ours) into what François Soulages calls the "*it-was-played*"[134] ("*ça a été joué*," translation ours). We shall now consider them more specifically.

2 – Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographic Illustrations

By November 1874, as the result of a three-month work, Cameron had realised twelve photographs she considered worthy of illustrating Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Yet, she was

[132] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven," in *The Complete Tale and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London, Penguin, 1982), pp. 943-946. Actually, Poe was very enthusiastic about the invention of the daguerreotype, even if it was mainly for scientific reasons. He publicly expressed his astonishment in an article published in *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* on 5th January 1840.

[133] Régis Durand, *Le Temps de l'image: essai sur les conditions d'une histoire des formes photographiques* (Paris, La Différence, 1995), p. 59.

[134] François Soulages, *Esthétique de la photographie: la perte et le reste* (Paris, Nathan, 1998), chapter 2 "De l'objet du portrait à l'objet de la photographie en général : 'ça a été joué'", pp. 53-68.

disappointed in the use that was done of them – she complained in a letter to her friend Sir Edward Ryan that her "beautiful large photographs [were] reduced to cabinet's size for his people's edition and the first Illustration [was] transferred to Wood-cut." [135] Consequently, she decided to publish them separately. A first volume was issued in late December 1974 – early January 1875 and was entitled *Illustrations to Tennyson's* Idylls of the King. Then, she published a second volume under the same title in May 1875. Nonetheless, this second edition comported more illustrations of other poems by Tennyson (such as *The Princess* or *Maud*) than subjects taken from the *Idylls* (she only included three photographs from this series, the new *Elaine*, *The Corpse of Elaine in the Palace of King Arthur* and *King Arthur Wounded Lying in the Barge*).[136] The strong will and the independence evidenced by her decision to publish on her own are manifest in her photographs, which, as underscored by Debra N. Mancoof, are no "slavish translation of word into image" ("Legend 'From Life,'" p. 94). Her illustrations are compelling because they simultaneously inscribe themselves in contradiction and in continuity with Tennyson's text. As a matter of fact, the interplay between the poems and the illustrations comes to reproduce the conflictual union between Sense and Soul at work within the text.

Undoubtedly, in this artistic marriage, Cameron's work assumes the role of Sense and the female point of view. Obviously, the very medium of photography implies that she grounds her characters in the real, material world, but beyond that, some of her artistic choices betray her desire to bring the *Idylls of the King* to a human scale. That is the main point of Debra N. Mancoff in her essay entitled "Legend 'From Life'" (from the words with which Julia Margaret Cameron was used to signing her negatives) because she claims that "in her *Illustrations* Cameron recognised the life in the legend and, in so doing, she forged legend from life" (p. 104). Indeed, she points out that, even though by 1874, almost all the idylls had been published,[137] out of the fifteen illustrating photographs, ten draw their subject matter

[135] Julia Margaret Cameron, letter to Sir Edward Ryan, on 29th November 1874, quoted by Debra N. Mancoff in "Legend 'From Life': Cameron's Illustrations to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*," in Sylvia Wolf, *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* (New Haven, London, The Art Institute of Chicago, Yale University Press, 1998), p. 87.

[136] All these details about the publication history of the illustrations come from Debra N. Mancoff's essay.

[137] The first edition of 1859 only contained "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere," but *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* published in 1869 contained "The Coming of Arthur," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettare" as well as "The Passing of Arthur." "The Last Tournament" was issued in 1871, and "Gareth and Lynette" in 1872. "To the Queen," which constitutes a commentary on the poem's main issues, appeared in 1873. The only unpublished idyll at the time of Cameron's enterprise was "Balin and Balan" (1885).

from the first four idylls published in 1859: "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine" and "Guinevere." Here, the progressive publication of the *Idylls of the King* is relevant because it implies that contemporary readers did not have from the start the same outlook on the work as modern readers. As a matter of fact, Debra N. Mancoff contrasts those four initial texts with the following ones, remarking that "the first indication of the completed poem's metaphysical themes and symbolic patterns was evident in the publication of Tennyson's *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* in 1869" ("Legend 'From Life,'" note 18, p. 105). On the contrary, she quotes from contemporary reviewers who praised the realist, domestic quality of the first poems, such as a critique in the *Saturday Review* of 16th July 1859 which reads: "His fabulous knights and ladies are not only true men and women, but sharing in the highest interests of genuine human life."[138] Accordingly, by choosing to illustrate primarily those four idylls, Cameron emphasised the real over the ideal.

Moreover, she seems to empathise with the female figures of the work, whom she gives pride of place to. It is particularly striking in her treatment of Enid, as noticed by Debra N. Mancoff. In fact, previous illustrations of the story of Geraint and Enid (such as Gustave Doré's engraving for the 1868 illustrated edition of the *Idylls of the King*) only featured Enid with Geraint, with the result that "Enid's existence gain[ed] significance only through his presence" ("Legend 'From Life,'" p. 96). In reverse, Cameron presents Enid by herself and conveys her emotions through dramatization, as best exemplified in *Enid* (**Figure 2**), which portrays her when she opens her cabinet to find her "meanest dress" at her husband's order. Debra N. Mancoff shows how the image expresses the feelings implicitly at play in the poem: "In his poem, Tennyson tells the reader that her thoughts stray to the moment when Geraint first saw her in her impoverished home in that modest gown, but Cameron adds nuance to the moment, using Enid's weary gestures and

[138] *Saturday Review*, 16th July 1859, p. 76, quoted in "Legend 'From Life,'" p. 92.

withdrawn, downward glance to expose the pang of lost happiness in her recollection" ("Legend 'From Life,'" p. 96). In addition, the exquisite delicacy (suggested by the position of her hands) with which she opens the door of the cabinet, and the fact that she keeps it only slightly ajar bring to the picture a sense of intimacy, as the camera captures her uncovering her treasured belongings ("she kept them folded *reverently*" Tennyson says, "The Marriage of Geraint," l. 137, p. 740, emphasis ours), humble symbols of not less treasured memories.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Similarly, Cameron's sympathy for Tennyson's women is to be felt in her

Figure 4

renderings of Guinevere. Indeed, it is telling that she did not choose to represent her with Arthur,[139] thus upholding Gerhard Joseph's assertion that "She lives dramatically when we see her acting out the consequences of her adultery, rarely when she is in the moral presence of Arthur" (*Tennysonian Love*, p. 173). De facto, the moments when she deals with those consequences are precisely those selected by Cameron. Out of the three photographs she picked for the idyll "Guinevere," two are particularly significant: *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere* (**Figure 3**) and *The "little Novice" and Queen Guinevere in "the Holy House of Almesbury"* (**Figure 4**). Both images picture highly dramatic moments in the idyll: the first stages the last farewell of the lovers, depicted by Tennyson as follows: "Passion-pale they met / And greeted. Hands in hands, and eye to eye, / Low on the border of her couch they sat / Stammering and staring. It was their last hour / A madness of farewells" ("Guinevere," ll. 98-102, p. 945). The close focus creates an intimate atmosphere, reinforced by the blurring of the background which conveys the idea that for the lovers, the outside world disappears for a

[139] Though there is an anecdote (reported by Robert B. Martin in *Unquiet Heart*, p. 508) proving that she tried to shoot the final scene between Arthur and his queen, she did not decide to include the result in her *Illustrations*.

time. This very impression is loaded with tragic irony because the intimacy of their farewells is then shattered by Modred who brings their adultery to the light at the very moment when they were ending it. The composition of the picture sketches the paradox of every separation: they are together but already apart. Their physical closeness is already contradicted by their looking in opposite direction, while the diagonal line formed by Guinevere's body, enhanced by the light shade of her gown that catches the eye, suggests that she is already sliding away from Lancelot. Eventually, the photograph is remarkable in as much as it displays Guinevere as a woman in intimacy, seeking strength and comfort against the chest of her beloved. In that, this picture stands in sharp contrast with the second in which, under the inquisitive gaze of the novice, she stands with all the dignity of a queen, or at least a lady, thus hinting at the social constraints imposed upon her. Moreover, it is noteworthy that her garments shift in colour from white to black. There are several possible interpretations to this aesthetic choice: her white dress in the first picture could point either to Lancelot's angelic vision of her, to the innocence of her first love for him or to the fact that their separation is the first step on her way towards redemption;[140] by contrast, her wearing a black dress in the abbey can hint at the new strictness she intends to endorse or at her condition of fallen woman, now that the scandal of her adultery has broken out. It also indicates that she belongs, as underlined by Debra N. Mancoff, to the world of experience as opposed to the innocence of the novice (in white) who, secluded in the nunnery, knows nothing of the real world, a point that Guinevere actually makes in the poem, exclaiming "'O closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls, / What knowest thou of the world, and all its lights / And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?" ("Guinevere," ll. 340-342, p. 951). Hence, Julia Margaret Cameron's photographic illustrations sustain the human scale of

[140] Debra N. Mancoff interprets Cameron's choice of these two photographs as the evidence of "her deep response to Guinevere's conflicted emotions, and her progress, not to sin but toward redemption" ("Legend 'From Life,'" p. 103).

the *Idylls of the King* by staging mainly women which represent in the poem this sensual reality without which ideality has no grasp on the world.

Yet, her pictures themselves offer the dainty balance between realism and idealism that the poem advocates for. It is nowhere more patent than in her *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat* (**Figure 5**). Indeed, this photograph is remarkable in that it clearly emphasises the ideal and ethereal quality of Elaine. The blur over her white dress makes her look like an angel, an immaterial being made of light, while her gaze wanders towards the light, lost "in fantasy." Accordingly, Elaine appears as a manifestation of the ideal, "a spiritual ideal embodied by means of the seductive blurring of already beautiful models," as Michael Bartram relevantly phrases in *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera.*[141] Nonetheless the image does not entirely relinquish the representation of material reality: Michael Bartram observes that "Cameron's imaginative photography is vague and dream-like, but with recourse also to passages of literalism. Here, the shield and its embroidered case […] vie for attention with the 'Lily-maid' herself" (*Pre-Raphaelite Camera*, p. 165). In this fashion, Cameron portrays both Elaine's dreamy character and her escapism in an art which has more materiality than her soul. Therefore, her photography stands as the perfect pictorial equivalent of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

[141] Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera, Aspects of Victorian Photography* (London, Widenfield and Nicolson, 1985), p. 166.

Figure 5

However, beyond that, we would claim that the illustrations present a relation of almost indispensable *complementarity* with Tennyson's text. As a matter of fact, through her photographs, Cameron completes Tennyson's Godlike act of creation. If Arthur is supposed to be Tennyson's Christ, he needs to live the mystery of incarnation. On a symbolic level, Cameron acts as a Mary, a Virgin Mother, through which Tennyson can make his Christ-like Arthur a real man. This idea is appealing for the vertiginous *mise en abyme* it creates: God creates men in his image and sends them his son, the ideal man; Tennyson, a man, creates characters in his image and sets among them Arthur, an ideal man and his spiritual son; Arthur tries to shape men in his image and fails to foster an ideal son. Besides, this is a reminder of the metaphysical gist of artistic creation: metaphorically, all creation is an image of the Creation. It should then be stated that Cameron as well assumes a Godlike function in her process of creation. François Soulages stresses how photographic composition reproduces the divine ordering of the world. He writes: "Dans tous les cas, [photographier] c'est toujours constituer un théâtre dont on est pour un temps le Dieu ordonnateur : on donne des ordres, on rappelle à l'ordre, on introduit de l'ordre dans ce réel que l'on veut prendre en photographie" (*Esthétique de la photographie*, p. 57). Her portrait of Arthur is proof enough that she is no secondary god to Tennyson's creation. Indeed, she offers her own vision of Arthur. Although

Tennyson insists on his being fair-haired, Cameron offers a dark-haired king. Moreover, his armour and his de-

Figure 6

meanour make him a symbol of virility, an impression strengthened by his being drawing Excalibur. Her Arthur cannot be said to lack concreteness, and yet her photograph also renders his aspiration towards the ideal. The gleam in his eyes as he looks away evokes his being "Rapt in this fancy of his Table Round" ("Lancelot and Elaine," l. 129, p. 838). Thus, both the *Idylls of the King* and their illustrations are remarkable for the union of realism and idealism they display, and this effect is even heightened by their association which represents a harmonious marriage, and not a war, between photography as Sense and poetry as Soul, with the result that text and images stand in absolute complementarity. It is therefore very regrettable that they have so rarely been presented together. Nonetheless, we shall now explore in more details how the *Idylls of the King*, as a work of art, feature this combination of Sense and Soul, and how they deal with the passing of time.

C – The Idylls of the King*, The Eternal Union of Sense and Soul*

1 – Literary Tradition and Eternity

As a matter of fact, literary tradition wants that poets may be able to grant immortality to their subjects through their writings. This claim is partly based on the precedents of Dante and Petrarch who have made generations of readers dream about their respective muses, Beatrice and Laure. Therefore it is without surprise that it finds expression in Shakespeare's sonnets, as best exemplified by Sonnet 18: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade / Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; / Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st; / So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long

lives this, and this gives life to thee" (ll. 9-14).[142] This poem asserts that as long as the work lives, the woman to whom the poem is dedicated, or at least the idea of her, cannot die. The quality of the work of art ensures that neither it nor its subject will know actual death.

Hence, in spite of his political failure, Arthur succeeds in gaining an eternity of some sort: by withdrawing from the world, he turns himself into a myth, he reaches eternity by becoming the hero of the songs and tales to come. Actually, the fact that he will survive in the songs of the bards is alluded to, significantly, in the first and the last idylls. In "The Coming of Arthur," Bellicent asserts that "so great bards of him will sing / Hereafter; and dark sayings from of old / Ranging and ringing through the minds of men, / And echoed by old folk beside their fires /For comfort after their wage-work is done, / Speak of the King;" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 413-418, p. 690). This idea is reinforced by Arthur's affirmation that "And, wheresoever I am sung or told / In aftertime, this also shall be known" ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 202-203, p. 966), referring to how he received Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake. This second passage is interesting in that it stresses Arthur's active participation in the building of his own myth. Moreover, by its implication that the memory of Arthur will be saved as legend by the bards and story-tellers of times to come, it creates a metalepsis, a blurring of the limits between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic worlds, since Tennyson, as indicated by his designating himself as "he that tells the tale," is one of those contributing to Arthur's survival. This traditional immortality of the work of art is reinforced in the *Idylls of the King* by two features of Tennyson's style that perfect the union of materiality and ideality which preserves art from the passing of time: his use of rewritings, and the pictorial quality of his poetry.

[142] William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, volume B (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 1172.

2 – Rewriting: Idealism Made Fertile.

Robert B. Martin, in his biography of Tennyson, comments on his first substantial poetic achievement, *The Devil and the Lady*, a play in blank verse written when he was fourteen. Martin states that what is most remarkable in the play is "the constant, half-familiar series of echoes from *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *The Tempest*, and *Paradise Lost*, showing Tennyson in the process of making Shakespeare and Milton part of his own language, submerging their metaphors in his personal diction. It is a wonderful example of the educative process of a poet, unselfconsciously forging an original style from that of others" (p. 37). However, as has already been evidenced, he did not lose the habit of including phrases borrowed from other poets in his later poems. Indeed, J. M. Gray remarks that "A feature of Tennyson's style is that it reflects, often consciously, sometimes unconsciously, imagery and syntax of earlier poets" (*Thro' the Vision*, p. 43). A passage from the *Memoir* indicates that Tennyson was aware of this characteristic of his style but argued that it could be found among all great poets, quoting Virgil and Shakespeare as precedents. To the accusation of plagiarism for having borrowed in the phrase "the moanings of the homeless sea" "moanings" from Horace and "homeless" from Shelley, he replied "As if no one else had heard the sea moan except Horace,"[143] thus asserting the right of the poetic experience of life over literary tradition. Yet, the wealth of echoes to previous poetic masterpieces in the *Idylls* contradicts this claimed innocence and betrays a clear intention to integrate the words of the great masters into his own language. J.M. Gray provides an extended analysis of the "range of allusion" in the *Idylls of the King* and it is compelling, as the following extract demonstrates:

> Many heroic allusions are cleverly interwoven in Gareth's four combats. Their source in Malory has already been analysed in the previous chapter. Kay's challenge 'Have at thee then' (GL 739) echoes one by Bercilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: "'Haf at the thenne" quod that other.' Morning Star contemptuous dismissal, 'Such fight not I, but answer scorn with scorn' (GL 930) echoes Milton's 'To whom thus Zephon, answering scorn with scorn.' Gareth's addressing Morning Star as 'Dog' (GL 936) is typical Homeric taunting. […] In the ensuing struggle, Evening Star, 'up like fire he started (GL 1095), stems from the actions of Virgil's Proteus. Finally, when Gareth is unhorsed by Lancelot, his cry of defeat is Shakespearean: 'Out, sword; we are thrown' (GL 1205). (*Thro' the Vision*, p. 45)

[143] Reported by Hallam Tennyson in *Memoir*, II, p. 385, quoted by J.M. Gray in *Thro' the Vision of the Night*, p. 43.

Indeed, the text is rife with allusions, and therefore one has to wonder how to interpret such a striking phenomenon.

Antoine Compagnon in *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation* underscores that a quotation always creates a relation between the first text and the second and that this relation is meaningful: "Mettant en rapport deux systèmes sémiotiques inconvertibles, la citation est elle-même un rapport sémiotique qu'il convient d'analyser comme tel."[144] Of course, near quotations from the Bible and *Paradise Lost* play a role in enforcing the allegorical dimension of the work. For instance, J.M. Gray remarks how Guinevere's recollection of her journey with Lancelot is given more symbolic intensity when related with *Paradise Lost*: they are said to ride "over sheets of hyacinth" ("Guinevere," l. 387, p. 952), while "Hyacinth is associated with Eve's bower before and after the fall" (*Thro' the Vision*, p. 58). Similarly, Tennyson mentions how they "Beheld at noon in some delicious dale / The silk pavilions of King Arthur raised / For brief repast or afternoon repose" ("Guinevere," ll. 90-92, p. 952), and J.M. Gray recalls that noon is the hour of temptation in Milton's work. Nonetheless, his analysis has shown that Tennyson's influences are much more varied, and therefore he advances a thought-provoking hypothesis about this very variety of references: "the sheer range of allusion – Biblical, classical, Arthurian, medieval and Renaissance – shows not only the poet's ingenuity but his constant effort to *construct a timeless heroic atmosphere* in which to set his Arthurian court" (*Thro' the Vision*, p. 43, emphasis ours). It goes without saying that such an interpretation is highly valuable to our analysis: by quoting from different texts from various periods of time, Tennyson would attempt at situating his text out of time, thus making it eternal.

Besides, on top of these allusions, the *Idylls of the King* are based on a process of rewriting which acts on two levels: rewriting of texts by other authors (mainly Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*) but rewriting of former poems by Tennyson as well. Indeed, in the *Idylls*, Tennyson reworks themes and myths he had already exploited: he adapts his "Morte d'Arthur" into "The Passing of Arthur," turns "The Lady of Shalott" into "Lancelot and Elaine" and refashions the gist of "Sir Galahad" (1842) in "The Holy Grail." From this work on borrowing and rewriting, we would like to make two points: the first is that this process of echoing other texts revives them, by bringing another outlook on them and urges the reader to rediscover the original works, hence confirming their immortality; the second is that it proves that in poetry, *idealism is not sterile but fertile*. Accordingly, Tennyson makes apparent his

[144] Antoine Compagnon, *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (Paris, Seuil, 1979), p. 57.

belonging to a filiation of poets and his reworking of his own poems into extended versions, included in a united work prove that his own poetry can be productive as well. Actually, the best example of this fecundity of art is undoubtedly that of "The Lady of Shalott," which leads to Rossetti's illustration, in turn prompting Tennyson's staging of Elaine's death, which was then illustrated by Gustave Doré and Julia Margaret Cameron. Tennyson's poetry in general has constituted a golden mine for Pre-Raphaelite artists: one can think of John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), Edward Burne-Jones's *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1872-1877), or Arthur Hughes's *Sir Galahad* (1870). The reason for such a legacy in painting ought to be sought in Tennyson's style itself that gives pride of place to descriptions which are not without evoking the pictorial arts.

3 – "Painting in Words"

Catherine Barnes Stevenson transcribes a meaningful commentary from a contemporary reviewer of Tennyson's poems who praises them for their displaying "a faculty very desirable, if not absolutely requisite in poetry – painting in words."[145] Indeed, the *Idylls* are another example of Tennyson's gift for producing vivid pictures with words and scattering his poetry with real *tableaux*. The very title of the work claims its pictorial dimension. In point of fact, an idyll etymologically designates a small painting. It is a genre that originates in Greek poetry with authors such as Theocritus. Actually, Clyde de L. Ryals argues that Tennyson could have been inspired by Theocritus's work in his decision to substitute the idyllic to the epic mode. He quotes from John Churton Collins, a Victorian critic, who conjectures about the influence of the Greek poet on the English one: "What Theocritus may have suggested was the idea of substituting a series of idylls for a continuous narrative, of composing an epic on the same principle as painters represent history or biography, through a succession of frescoes painted on separate panels."[146] Indeed, the *Idylls of the King* are rather loosely structured: there is no other link between two idylls than the indications of seasonal progression and the repetition of lines such as "From the great deep to the great deep he goes," each poem depicting a different story, illustrating another situation. But, as underlined by James R. Kincaid, this loose structure is significant and should not be deemed as a defect

[145] William Fuldorf in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, quoted by Catherine Barnes Stevenson in "How It Struck" (p. 9) from J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London, Longsman Green and Co., 1899), I, pp. 30-33.
[146] John Churton Collins, *Illustrations of Tennyson* (London, 1891), p. 70, quoted in *From the Great Deep*, p. 37.

only.[147] He emphasises how "The narrative discontinuity in the *Idylls*, as in romance, is itself an important virtue, in that it gives a sense of being in an art gallery, glancing slowly from one 'little picture' to another. […] In romance, the passage of time is only apparent; there is always room for more adventures" (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, pp. 151-152). Accordingly, this structure participates in denying the passing of time, or at least its destructive power.

Furthermore, this pictorial dimension not only informs the structure of the work but suffuses the very style of the poem. We will here base our analysis on Liliane Louvel's distinctions as developed in her article "Nuances du pictural." She defines seven levels of "pictorial saturation": "l'effet-tableau, la vue pittoresque, l'hypotypose, les « tableaux vivants », l'arrangement esthétique, la description picturale, et enfin l'*ekphrasis*."[148] Out of these categories, the last two ones are the most present in the *Idylls*. These are the highest degrees of pictorial dimension for a text. Pictorial description is often marked by the likeness of the textual description to a traditional genre in painting, such as that of the portrait, the seascape, the bucolic or mythological scene, or the battlefield ("Nuances du pictural," p. 184). Precisely, the last item is of interest here. Indeed, "The Coming of Arthur" features a battle scene which is overtly compared with a painting: "they swerved and brake / Flying, and Arthur called to stay the brands / That hacked among the flyers, 'Ho! they yield!' / So *like a painted battle* the war stood / Silenced, the living quiet as the dead, / And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord" (ll. 118-123, p. 682, emphasis ours). Associated with the description of the bright day a little earlier in the text, this passage makes the reader visualise a large battle scene set in a clear plain on which Arthur's enemies disappear in the distance while the victorious king, radiant in glory, hails his troops to a stop. The image is completed in "Lancelot and Elaine" by Lancelot's depiction of the king "stand[ing] / High on a heap of slain, from spur to plume / Red as the rising sun with heathen blood" (ll. 305-307, p. 843), not unlike Delacroix's *Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). Moreover, Tennyson resorts to *ekphrasis*, i.e. the description of works of art. Actually, the *Idylls of the King* wink at this literary tradition – the canonical example of which is Homer's depiction of Achilleus's shield – by granting much attention to Lancelot's shield and the silken case Elaine makes for it.

[147] For instance, Robert B. Martin finds that "Tennyson had little sense of the causal qualities of human personality and hence little sense of narrative, those qualities as they are seen in action. The problem is reflected in the language of the *Idylls*, where a kind of inertness stems directly from a failure to recognize logical and verbal connection between events" (*Unquiet Heart*, p. 495). We would answer that the weak analysis of causes in the work participates in its fairy-tale-like dimension by creating a style marked by simplicity and innocence.

[148] Liliane Louvel, "Nuances du pictural," in *Poétique*, No. 126 (Paris, Seuil, Avril 2001), p. 177.

Beyond that, the work includes two actual *ekphraseis* which have already been mentioned earlier in this study: the depictions of the gate of Camelot and Arthur's hall. The description of the statue of Arthur dominating the hall in particular is minute and brings information regarding light and colours: "And over all one statue in the mould / Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown / And peaked wings pointed to the Northern Star. / And eastward fronts the statue, and the crown / And both the wings are made of gold, and flame / At sunrise" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 238-243, p. 883). The presence of these pictorial sequences is thought-provoking in that it addresses the two questions around which we have oriented this section of our meditation. Indeed, by appealing to the visual taste of the reader, these scenes impart the text with more materiality and sensuality, thus creating the necessary balance between Sense and Soul. Secondly, they have an effect on the rhythm of the narration, as pointed out by Liliane Louvel: "le *tableau vivant*, l'*arrangement esthétique*, la *description picturale* et l'*ekphrasis* ralentissent à des degrés divers le *tempo* du texte" ("Nuances du pictural," p. 184). In point of fact, they delay the progression of the narrative and thus, as Liliane Louvel phrases it, enable the author to "gain time by wasting time" ("gagner du temps en perdant du temps," p. 187, translation ours). Hence, Tennyson manages to make Arthur's glory last longer by depicting pictorially his achievements. In addition, he also slows down the narrative pace by the introduction of long similes drawing on either the visual sense or on the sense of hearing, as is most flagrant when Geraint first hears Enid's voice:

> […] and as the sweet voice of a bird,
> Heard by the lander in a lonely isle,
> Moves him to think what kind of bird it is
> That sings so delicately clear, and make
> Conjecture of the plumage and the form;
> So the sweet voice of Enid moved Geraint;
> And made him like a man abroad at morn
> When first the liquid note beloved of men
> Comes flying over many a windy wave
> To Britain, and in April suddenly
> Breaks from a coppice gemmed with green and red,
> And he suspends his converse with a friend,
> Or it may be the labour of his hands,
> To think or say, 'There is the nightingale;'
> So fared it with Geraint, who thought and said,

‘Here, by God’s grace, is the one voice for me.’[149]

The simile brings concreteness to Geraint’s emotion by evoking a very common experience, the intensity of which, though, is heightened by the suggestion of nostalgia (in its etymological sense of longing for one’s motherland) conveyed by the image of the “lander” lost on a “lonely isle.” Significantly, the musicality of these lines mirror the scenes evoked: thus, the abundance of trochaic inversions brings dynamism to the versification and hints at the surprise felt on hearing the bird sing. Similarly, the succession of nasal (mainly [m] and [n]) and approximant [principally [l] and sometimes [w]) consonants renders the “liquid note” of the bird. Trochaic inversions and alliterations actually act like clues scattered along the description and which find their resolution in “‘There is the nightingale.’”[150] Moreover, the unity between the tenor and the vehicle of the simile is reinforced by the use of repetitions, such as “the sweet voice of a bird” which is echoed by “the sweet voice of Enid,” accordingly framing the first image. Likewise, the parallel between the hearer of the nightingale and Geraint is materialised by the polyptoton “To think or say […] / […] thought and said,” the two terms of which are situated at opposite places in the line, thus suggesting a mirror-effect. In addition, Enid’s voice is even given precedence in beauty over that of the bird through the spondees characterising her voice.[151] Therefore, using both minute pictorial depictions, long similes and the musicality of his style, Tennyson imparts his *Idylls of the King* with sensual reality. Besides, it allows him to escape momentarily from the fleeting time of narration, offering the reader precious moments outside time, eternal. Eventually, these images, as well as the theatrical setting of certain scenes, strike the imagination of the readers and impress it so that they stay with them long after they have closed the book.

Thus, Tennyson achieves in his art what Arthur fails to establish in Camelot: the union of Sense and Soul in perfect harmony. His ideals are given materiality through his ability to create pictures in the mind of his readers, while he manages to prove the fecundity of the ideal by inscribing his poem in an artistic filiation. In the end, his vision of Arthur will live on as

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[149] “Geraint and Enid,” ll. 329-344, p. 746.

[150] This phrase is remarkable for the trochaic inversion at the beginning and the presence of both a nasal and an approximant consonant in the name of the bird, really constituting it as the solution to the enigma:

/ u │u / │u /

“‘There is the **n**ightinga**l**e’”

[151] To be seen in the two following lines:

/ u │ / / │u / │u / │ / u

“So the sweet voice of Enid moved Geraint;”

/ u │ / / │u u │/ / │u /

“‘Here, by God’s grace, is the one voice for me.’”

long as there will be readers to give life to *Idylls of the King*; as long as his work will be read, his Arthur will be able to "will his will" and "work his work" through his incarnation in the *body of the text*. Even though the critical reception of the *Idylls* has waxed and waned periodically over the years, we believe that they will always find a reader to see in their pages a mirror held to the questions that he, as a human being, cannot stop wondering about, those fundamental human questions identified by Kant: "1 – What can I know? 2 – What ought I to do? 3 – What may I hope? 4 – What is Man?"[152] As long as man will be a metaphysical being, in quest of himself and transcendence, the *Idylls of the King* will live on.

[152] Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Introduction to Logic and his Essay on the Mistaken Subtilty of the Four Figures* [1800], edited by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London, Longsman, Green & Co., 1885), available online https://archive.org/stream/kantsintroductio00kantuoft/kantsintroductio00kantuoft_djvu.txt 23/04/16, 12:56.

Conclusion

Thus, our conviction is that Tennyson has succeeded in his endeavour to embody his ideals in a work of art to make them eternal, nonetheless he himself thought that his enterprise had ended in failure. Indeed, Sir Charles Tennyson, his grand-son, reports the poet's state of mind after the publication of the *Idylls of the King* in their complete and definitive order, remembering that he "became more and more oppressed with doubts about the usefulness of his own work and the future of humanity."[153] Actually, he recalls him saying: "You must not be surprised at anything that comes to pass in the next fifty years. All ages are ages of transition, but this is an awful moment of transition. […] The truth is that the wave advances and recedes […] I tried in my *Idylls* to teach men the need of the ideal, but I feel sometimes as if my life had been a very useless life" (*Alfred Tennyson*, p. 491, quoted in *Fall of Camelot*, p. 37). As a matter of fact, his impression that he could not communicate his vision to mankind was already to be sensed in Arthur's failure, and in Guinevere's inability to have loved "the highest." Clyde de L. Ryals points out that "the *Idylls of the King* renders a poetic statement about a problem which belongs to the philosophy of art: the poet cannot re-create as an aesthetic entity his own vision, his own apprehension of the truth. […] The artist's expression of truth as he sees it is almost inevitably compromised by the perceptions of other men" (*From the Great Deep*, pp. 52-53). This problem of the discrepancy between the author's intentions and the reception of his work constitutes the gist of "The Holy Grail" in which Arthur's knights, while they think their quest will participate in the establishment of a heavenly city on earth, contribute to the collapse of Camelot. Their misunderstanding of Arthur's conceptions is evidenced by the exchange between Arthur and Percivale when the king returns to Camelot after the knights have sworn to find the Grail: "'Woe is me, my knights,' he cried, / 'Had I been here, ye had not sworn the vow.' / Bold was my answer, 'Had thyself been here, / My King, thou wouldst have sworn'" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 275-278, p. 884). Percivale is persuaded to have done the right thing, to have acted towards the same aim as Arthur, yet the latter foresees the waste that the quest will represent: "how often, O my knights, / Your places being vacant at my side, / This chance of noble deeds will come and go / Unchallenged, while ye follow wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire!" (ll. 316-320, p. 886). Rather than playing their part in the actualisation of the ideal city, the knights prefer to chase

[153] Sir Charles Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson* (London, Macmillan, 1950), p. 490, quoted by J.D. Rosenberg in *The Fall of Camelot*, p. 36.

the Grail, an attitude which Tennyson describes as the fact that "religion in many turns from practical goodness to the quest after the supernatural and marvellous and selfish religious excitement."[154] As a consequence, they become other representatives of the asceticism so harshly denounced in King Pellam. Indeed, Arthur's messenger relates:

> He boasts his life as purer than [Arthur's] own;
> Eats scarce enow to keep his pulse abeat;
> Hath pushed aside his faithful wife, nor lets
> Or dame or damsel enter at his gates
> Lest he should be polluted. This gray King
> Showed us a shrine wherein were wonders – yea –
> Rich arks of priceless bones of martyrdom,
> Thorns of the crown and shivers of the cross,
> And therewithal (for thus he told us) brought
> By holy Joseph hither, that same spear
> Wherewith the Roman pierced the side of Christ.[155]

The extremism of such a behaviour is conspicuous in the insistence on the faithfulness of his wife and on the morbidity of his fasting and his relics. King Pellam seems to be living in a tomb. Now, this attitude is significantly echoed in the Grail quest. In point of fact, Percivale rejects the love of a young widow which he had loved in his youth to continue the quest. He explains his choice to Ambrosius, his brother monk, saying: "but one night my vow / Burnt me within, so that I rose and fled, / But wailed and wept, and hated by own self, / And even the Holy Quest, and all but her; / Then after I was joined with Galahad / Cared not for her, nor anything upon earth" ("The Holy Grail," ll. 606-611, p. 893). This last specification echoes Pellam's stating "I have quite foregone / All matters of this world" ("Balin and Balan," ll. 113-114, p. 791). Accordingly, the Grail knights, or at least Percivale, are threatened by the same barrenness that culminates in Pellam's morbidity. Moreover, they share with the "gray King" the fascination for relics. Indeed, James W. Hood analyses that they grant to much importance to the cup as an object rather than as a symbol:

> Howard Fulweiler has argued that the knights' problem in "The Holy Grail" is not so much that they forget the practical duties of chivalry and wander off to "follow wandering fires / Lost in the quagmire" (HG 319-20), but that they view the Grail as a thing to be won, an artefact to be somehow possessed, and not as a symbol or sacrament, a via media into another order of reality. By turning the Grail into an idol, the knights

[154] Quoted in the head note to "The Holy Grail," Ricks edition, p. 875.
[155] "Balin and Balan," ll. 101-111, p. 791.

> deprive it of its sacramental power to bridge the abyss between sense and soul, between the realm of usual apprehension of everyday occurrences and that of spiritual knowledge. (*Divining Desire*, p. 185)

Like Pellam, they hope that possessing the relic, or at least finding it, will make them pure and holy, whereas the Grail is only the symbol of the purity they have to develop by themselves, hence the recurring utterance of "the Quest was not for me" (l. 740, p. 897 and l. 849, p. 901). Thus, these knights prove that they have misunderstood Arthur's vision and their quest proves as destructive as Vivien and Modred's schemes. James R. Kincaid underlines how their vow to seek the Grail leads them to disavow the balance between Sense and Soul at the heart of Arthur's ethics: "The balance he tries to maintain between the physical and the spiritual, for instance, is destroyed on one side by Tristram and the naturalists, and on the other by the well-meaning search for the Grail" (*Tennyson's Major Poems*, p. 154). From this observation, he draws a conclusion which constitutes perhaps the most disenchanted interpretation of the *Idylls of the King*: "The failure is not one of morality but a pathetic failure of understanding; the world is lost not because it is evil but because it is stupid" (p. 154). Unfortunately, it seems that Tennyson was right to doubt men's faculty to perceive the grandeur of his vision. In fact, one of the criticisms which have plagued the *Idylls* ever since their publication is that Arthur lacks consistency. For instance, Robert B. Martin argues that "in a scheme of the poem Arthur is totally acceptable as its moral centre so long as one judges him as 'ideal manhood,' but when he is looked at as 'real man,' in his relation with Lancelot and Guinevere, he seems a mere absence of vice rather than a powerful moral force" (*Unquiet Heart*, p. 495). He suggests that this may have been caused by "Tennyson's having known the model too well to give life to Arthur, that the original from which he was drawn existed so vividly in Tennyson's mind's eye that he was unaware that he had failed to transfer that vision on the page" (footnote p. 495), alluding of course to the influence of the figure of Arthur Hallam on Tennyson's poetry. Nonetheless, given the blindness of prominent characters of the work to Arthur's perfection, perhaps what one should wonder is whether this very criticism does not reveal that Tennyson was right to fear his fellow human beings had lost their admiration for the ideal, whether we are not so far gone into empiricism that we fail to see that "the highest is the most human too," whether we have not all become, so to say, Tristrams and Guineveres?

In addition, there is another interesting point in Tennyson's statement quoted above. Indeed, in 1886, he foresaw that the fifty following years would terribly upset the Western World: history proved him right. Between 1886 and 1936, Europe went through the discovery

of psychoanalysis, was then shattered by the First World War and was about to know the Second. We tend to see the First World War as a point of rupture opening an unbridgeable gap between what was before and what came after, represented in literature and arts by the breach between Victorianism and Modernism. Yet, there are no such things as absolute discontinuity in culture, and some features of Tennyson's poetry are influential in the works of Post-War artists. As a matter of fact, Arthur J. Carr – even though we disagree with his conviction that this connection is the main reason why we should reconsider Tennyson – shows how he foreshadows some characteristics of later works:

> He shows and hides, as if in embryo, a master theme of Joyce's *Ulysses* – the accentuated and moody self-consciousness and the sense of loss that mark Stephen Dedalus. He forecasts Yeats's interest in the private myth. He apprehended in advance of Aldous Huxley the uses of mysticism to castigate materialistic culture. And in *Maud*, at least, he prepared the way for the verse of Eliot's "Preludes" and "Prufrock." At some crucial points Tennyson is a modern poet[156]

Actually, Yeats's poetry in particular bears echoes of Tennysonian poetry. In point of fact, Yeats's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1929) cannot but recall Tennyson's "The Two Voices" (1842): both poems stage the dialogue between two parts of the poetic persona debating over the question of whether life is worth living (or reliving in Yeats's version) or if death would be "sweeter" to speak like Elaine; both end on the choice of life over death, Yeats concluding that "We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest" (ll. 70-72) while Tennyson's speaker disavow his gloomy thoughts: "I wondered, while I paced along; / The woods were filled so full with song, / There seemed no room for sense of wrong; // And all so variously wrought, / I marvelled how the mind was brought / To anchor by one gloomy thought; // And wherefore rather I made choice / To commune with that barren voice, / Than him that said, 'Rejoice! Rejoice!'" (ll. 454-462). The parallel between the two is even reinforced by the image of music as a sign of joy. Similarly, one of Yeats's major poem, "The Second Coming" could unsettlingly well describe the *Idylls of the King*, or at least "The Passing of Arthur":

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

[156] Arthur J. Carr, "Tennyson as a Modern Poet," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Apr. 1950), p. 361.

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?[157]

Indeed, this poem is informed by the same belief in the cyclicity of rise and fall of civilisations, the same conviction that the "triumph of evil," as phrased by Tennyson ,will only be temporary, and the same hope for the return of a saviour after "twenty centuries of stony sleep." Actually, as noticed in the introductory note of the *Norton Anthology*, in the poems written in the 1920s-1930s, Yeats finds in the symbol of the spiral (such as the "widening gyre") "a means of resolving some of the contraries that had arrested him from the beginning – paradoxes of time and eternity, change and continuity, spirit and the body, life and art" (*Northon Antology*, F, p. 2084). As we have seen, these themes are precisely those obsessing Tennyson, more particularly in the *Idylls*.

Nevertheless, if we were to argue for Tennyson's "modernity," we would rather look for it in his ambiguous staging of the truth. Indeed, both Merlin and Arthur, the two holders of wisdom in the *Idylls of the King*, contest the existence of objective truth or reality. Merlin, when Gareth asks him about Camelot, answers: "Son, I have seen the good ship sail / Keel upward, and mast downward, in the heavens, / And solid turrets topsy-turvy in air: / And here is truth; but an it please thee not, / Take thou the truth as thou hast told it me. / […] / For there

[157] William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1920-1921) quoted in *The Norton Anthology of Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, volume F (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 2099.

is nothing in it as it seems / Saving the King; though some there be that hold / The King a shadow, and the city real" ("Gareth and Lynette," ll. 249-262, pp. 700-701). Even though Tennyson specifies in a note that Merlin's offer to "Take the truth as thou hast told me" is ironical, this passage nonetheless highlights the subjective perception of truth. In the same vein, Arthur's speech in the end of "The Holy Grail" brings to the foreground his doubts (and Tennyson's) as to the existence of objective, material reality, which may be no more than a "vision." Tennyson expresses his conviction that the only truth is spiritual in the beginning of "Geraint and Enid:" "O purblind race of miserable men, / How many among us at this very hour / Do forge a life-long trouble for ourselves, / By taking true for false, or false for true; / Here, through the feeble twilight of this world / Groping, how many, until we pass and reach / That other, where we see as we are seen!" (ll. 1-7, p. 762). However, this truth is beyond knowledge, because, as stated in "The Ancient Sage," "nothing worthy proving can be proven" (l. 66), given that "Knowledge is of the things we see" (*In Memoriam*, "Prologue," l. 22, p. 343). As the complexity of the phenomenal world supersedes the clear-cut categories of the poetics of the tale, the elusive nature of truth is further betrayed by the ambiguity of the ending of the *Idylls*, which leaves Bedivere, and the reader with him, plunged in perplexity as to whether he should hope, rejoice or despair. The absence of definite signification leads Robert B. Martin to advance the compelling analysis that follows:

> As the total of the minor climaxes and resolutions mounts, so does the sense of resolution of the whole poem; the cumulative effect is nearly satisfactory, but the answers that are given are not in response to the questions that the over-all design of the poem leads one to expect. It is almost as if Tennyson was saying that the large questions are ultimately impossible to answer and that man finds a sense of meaning by ignoring them and looking to particulars for satisfaction. (*Unquiet Heart*, p. 499)

By "minor climaxes and resolutions," Martin refers to the perfection of some images and metaphors which according to him "bring the reader a momentary resolution" (p. 499), but it could also apply to the individual resolution of each idyll. Now, those three elements – the *unsettling of objective truth*, the *lack of resolution*, and the *turning to more trivial concerns* – are to some extent characteristic of *modernist* literature. As a matter of fact, critics have analysed that the modernist technique, among other reasons, springs from the unreliability of objectivity: Deborah L. Parsons in *Theorists of the Modern Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* explains that "The modern writer […] thinks the only material he can faithfully represent is the fragmentary impressions of his own subjective experience. If the essence of life was no longer to be understood in terms of an external reality, then the

traditional means or representing characters by relating them to their external surroundings could no longer be of any use."[158] Besides, Randall Stevenson asserts that "Modernist fiction more often ends in openness and uncertainty."[159] Eventually, *Mrs Dalloway* is an excellent example of the modernist preference for the small epiphanies caused by the simple pleasures of the everyday life over the resolution of metaphysical questions. The questions of life and death are not omitted, they only never find a solution and are drowned under subjective impressions, as epitomised by one of the final scenes of Virginia Woolf's novel, soon after Clarissa Dalloway has learnt about Septimus's death:

> The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put on her light! […] She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. [160]

Here, the meditation over the value of life and the reasons for suicide are interwoven with Clarissa's observations of her surroundings and superseded by her joy at being throwing a party. Here again, the important questions stay unanswered. Thus, the seeds of key features of modernist fiction can be found in Tennyson's poetry.

Finally, Tennyson even has a more modern approach of some themes than modernist writers. The case in point here is the parallel that can be drawn between "The Holy Grail" and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as convincingly demonstrated by Linda Ray Pratt in her article "The Holy Grail: Subversion and Revival of a Tradition in Tennyson and T. S. Eliot." Indeed, she underlines how "Tennyson's secularized value system is obscured by the Arthurian romance surrounding the grail, while Eliot's modern wasteland belies the grail's traditional values."[161] The main ideological difference between those two interpretations of the Grail legend lies in that "The ancient grail tradition supports Eliot's desire for a mystical escape beyond the secular modern world to a 'still point' of eternity, but the same mythic tradition undermines Tennyson's confidence that man has any 'heavenly city' outside the new one he

[158] Deborah L. Parsons, *Theorists of the Modern Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (Abingdon, New York (New York), Routledge, 2007), p. 69.
[159] Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 157.
[160] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* [1925], edited by Stella McNichol, with an introduction and notes by Elaine Showalter (London, Penguin, 2000), p. 204.
[161] Linda Ray Pratt, "The Holy Grail: Subversion and Revival of a Tradition in Tennyson and T. S. Eliot," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Winter, 1973), p. 307.

daily constructs in the secular world" ("Subversion and Revival," p. 308). Actually, both poets long for eternity, but they envision it differently, as remarked upon by T.S. Eliot himself who writes in *Essays Ancient and Modern* that Tennyson's "desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life; his concern is for the loss of man rather than for the gain of God."[162] This stems from the fact that Tennyson was truly modern in the fragility of his faith: eternity must be gained in this life because there might not be another. Robert B. Martin in his biography specifies that until the end of his life, "there were moments of utter desolation when eternity seemed as uncertain as it ever had; once he told Wilfried Ward that when he tried to pray in his illness, he felt as if God did not hear him" (*Unquiet Heart*, p. 580). His religious uncertainty is voiced by Arthur at the beginning of "The Passing of Arthur" who laments:

> 'I found Him in the shining of the stars,
> I marked Him in the flowering of His fields,
> But in His ways with men I find Him not.
> I waged His wars and now I pass and die.
> O me! for why is all around us here
> As if some lesser god had made the world,
> But had no force to shape it as he would,
> Till the High God behold it from beyond,
> And enter it, and make it beautiful?
> Or else as if the world was wholly fair,
> But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
> And have not power to see it as it is:
> Perchance, because we see not to the close; -
> […]
> My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death;
> Nay – God my Christ – I pass but I shall not die.'[163]

The insignificance of human life leads the king and his creator to doubt of their being the favourite creatures of a benevolent "High God." It is interesting to reflect that, contrary to modernist writers, Tennyson did not suffer such a trauma as a world war to shake so intensely his faith in the intrinsic meaning of human life, therefore the source of his doubts might lie in this feeling of nostalgia that always possessed him, the irrational conviction that it was better *before* and that human life as he knows it is not what it ought to be. Consequently, what T.S.

[162] Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1936), p. 197, quoted in "Subversion and Revival," p. 320.
[163] "The Passing of Arthur," ll. 9-28, p. 960.

Eliot said of *In Memoriam* could apply to Tennyson's poetry at large: it is "not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience."[164] In reality, what he has is not exactly faith but hope, or even further, the rational decision to "Cleave ever to the sunniest side of doubt" ("The Ancient Sage," l. 67), to bet safely in Pascal's wager. Yet it is a position quite uneasy to sustain, because it is not enough to silence doubt. In the end, it is because his poetry voices the metaphysical doubt that no modern man or woman can totally muzzle that it still moves us. His grandeur stems from his intuition that we may not be more than dust. What Arthur J. Carr states as a criticism, we would say as a praise, "he triumphs not as a master but as a victim" ("Tennyson as a Modern Poet," p. 382); his doubts are his strength – in other words, if he "loses himself" in doubt, he "saves himself" in literature.

[164] Thomas Stearns Eliot, "*In Memoriam*," *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London, Faber and Faber; New York Harcourt, 1936), p. 187, quoted by Laurence W. Mazzeno in *Alfred Tennyson: The Critical Legacy* (Rochester (New York), Camden House, 2004), p. 80.

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Figures:

- **Figure 1:** Dante Gabriel ROSSETTI, published in Alfred Tennyson, *Poems* (London, Moxon, 1857), wood engraving on paper, 9.5 x 8 cm. (3 5/16 x 3 1/16 in.), unsigned, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston J. H. and E. A. Payne Fund.
- **Figure 2:** Julia Margaret CAMERON, *Enid*, 1874, albumen silver print from glass negative, 34.2 x 26.7 cm (13 7/16 x 10 1/2 in.), David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1952, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection.
- **Figure 3:** Julia Margaret CAMERON, *The Parting of Lancelot and Guinevere*, 1874, albumen silver print from glass negative, 33.2 x 28.8 cm (13 1/16 x 11 5/16 in.), David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1952, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection.
- **Figure 4:** Julia Margaret CAMERON, *The "little Novice" and Queen Guinevere in "the Holy House of Almesbury"*, 1874, albumen print from wet collodion glass negative, 35 x 26 cm., © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- **Figure 5:** Julia Margaret CAMERON, *Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat*, 1874, albumen print from wet collodion glass negative, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
- **Figure 6:** Julia Margaret CAMERON, *King Arthur*, 1874, albumen silver print from glass negative, 35.9 x 28 cm (14 1/8 x 11 in.), David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1952, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, online collection.

Annexes

Summaries of the Idylls of the King

"The Coming of Arthur"

The idyll opens on the plight of Leodogran, king of Cameliard, surrounded by enemies (the Roman legions, his brother, King Urien, and a "heathen horde" l.35). Faced with this impossible situation, he decides to turn to the new king, Arthur, for help. Arthur defeats Leodogran's enemies and sends Ulfius, Brastias and Bedivere to ask the old king for the hand of his daughter. Leodogran hesitates because Guinevere is his only daughter therefore he would give her only to "a king, and a king's son" (ll.142-143), whereas there are doubts and rumours about Arthur's birth and royal lineage. Indeed, a rumour says that he is the son of Gorloïs, Ygerne's husband, or of Anton, a friend of Uther who raised him. Leodogran asks Bedivere and the others what they believe is the true story of Arthur's birth. Bedivere tells how king Uther fell in love with Ygerne, how she refused his love and how Uther killed Gorloïs and forced her to wed him. He died soon after that, but on the night of his death, Ygerne gave birth to a son, Arthur.

Then Bellicent, queen of Orkney and daughter of Gorloïs and Ygerne, enters. She first describes Arthur's crowning to Leodogran. Then, she gives him the account of Arthur's birth as she heard it from Bleys, Merlin's master, on his death bed. The old wizard told her how he and Merlin found Arthur on the beach, brought from "the deep" by a huge wave on the night of the New Year and Merlin declared him Uther's heir.

Puzzled over all that he heard, Leodogran decides to rest and dreams of a "phantom king" (l.435) hidden in the mist, surrounded by voices crying "No king of ours, / No son of Uther, no king of ours" (ll.438-439), but then the dream changes and the king stands radiant in heaven. Leodogran awakes and decides to give his daughter to Arthur. The idyll ends on the description of the royal wedding.

"Gareth and Lynette"

The young Gareth is withheld by his mother Bellicent who still views him as a child and refuses to let him go to Arthur's hall to become one of the knights of the Round Table. In

order to convince her, Gareth tells her two tales. Bellicent finally agrees to let him go on condition that he will first work for a whole year as a kitchen knave in Arthur's hall. Gareth accepts and leaves for Camelot – the reader discovers the city through his eyes.

Arthur makes him a kitchen-knave under the orders of seneschal Kay, who treats him rather discourteously. After a month, Bellicent changes her mind and sends word to Camelot that she frees Gareth from his promise. The young man asks Arthur to knight him secretly and not to reveal his name until he earns his fame. Arthur accepts, telling only Lancelot, and later agrees to give him a quest: indeed, Lynette comes to the hall to ask for Lancelot to fight the knights holding her sister Lyonors captive. Arthur sends Gareth with her on his request and Lynette, very offended to be granted a kitchen-knave instead of the first knight of the realm, flees, followed by Gareth.

They lose their way on the forest and Gareth rescues a lord from thieves. This lord hosts them for the night out of gratitude. On the following day, Lynette leads Gareth to the first knight, who makes people call him "Morning-Star." Gareth defeats him and sends him to the King to be judged. He then defeats the second knight, "the Sun," and, after a long and difficult fight, "the Evening." Lynette acknowledges his value and asks for his forgiveness for having so despised him. They are joined by Lancelot who had been following them on Arthur's order. Lancelot lends his shield to Gareth so that the last knight, "Death," will agree to fight against him and he trains him for the duel. Gareth defeats the last knight easily and everyone discovers that this terrifying warrior is actually no more than a very young man who was forced to play this role by his brothers. The story ends with Gareth's marriage with either Lynette or Lyonors.

"The Marriage of Geraint"

Geraint, prince of Devon, is a knight of the Round Table, very much in love with his wife Enid. As Enid is a close friend of the Queen's, when rumours start spreading about the latter's adulterous relationship with Lancelot, Geraint fears this would corrupt Enid and so they both leave Arthur's hall for Devon, where he stops performing his duties as knight and lord to spend most of his time with his wife. Enid despairs of seeing him wasting his name and fame and one night, she reproaches herself with not being a "true wife" (l.108) to Geraint because she does not tell him that his people accuse him of uxoriousness whereas she knows she ought to induce him to act as a warrior again. Unfortunately, Geraint awakes only to hear

her say “I fear I am not a true wife” (l. 108) and believes she loves another knight. He rises from their bed and makes Enid dress in her meanest dress. She finds in her closet the faded silken dress with which she first came to Camelot to marry Geraint and from this item, the narration goes backward to tell the story of how they met and married.

One day, an unknown knight insulted the Queen by refusing to tell her his name. Geraint decided to go after the knight in order to obtain his name and Guinevere promised him that when he found a maiden to marry, she would herself array her as a queen. Geraint followed the knight to a city where he was known as “the sparrow-hawk” and in which a tournament was to take place on the next day. The prince sought refuge for the night at Yniol’s castle and there met his daughter Enid with which he fell in love at first sight. Yniol told him how his nephew, the sparrow-hawk had deprived them of their wealth and title because he would not give him his daughter to marry.

On the next day, Geraint defied the sparrow-hawk at the tournament and defeated him, learning that his name was Edyrn. He sent him to ask for the Queen’s forgiveness and made him restore Yniol into his title and wealth. Going back to the castle, he asked for Enid’s hand and was granted it. Yet, the modest Enid was troubled because she feared to bring shame upon Geraint by going to Camelot dressed in her poor clothes. Fortunately, her mother had retrieved a rich garment that she had given her before the times of their misery, however Geraint asked her not to wear it; Enid obeyed sadly, and Geraint explained that he wanted thus to trial her vanity and devotion, that he was satisfied and that the queen herself would array her. They went to Camelot where Dubric married them.

The last three lines of the idyll go back to the present of the narration, the morning when Geraint commands Enid to dress in her meanest dress.

“Geraint and Enid”

Geraint and Enid leave their castle and Geraint tells his wife to walk before him into the woods and not to speak to him unless he speaks to her. Enid obeys but soon she hears three bandits ahead of them wanting to attack them and she decides to warn Geraint in spite of his interdiction. Her husband answers her wrathfully, defeats his opponents and takes their armours and ties them to their horses and gives those to Enid to be led. They resume their journey and Geraint renews his command that she should under no circumstances talk to him,

but he walks a little closer to her. Yet they approach another set of villains, Enid warns Geraint who answers her wrathfully, slays the bandits, takes their armours and horses and gives them to Enid.

Then, they arrive on the lands of Earl Limours, who had asked for Enid's hand before she met Geraint. The earl comes to visit them in their chamber and seeing that Enid sits apart, looking sad, goes to talk to her and tells her that he still loves her and that Geraint does not love her anymore since he humiliates her by making her wear an old dress. In order to get rid of him, she tells him to take her from Geraint by force on the next day. At dawn, she warns her husband and they leave, but on the road, they are attacked by Limours and his men. Geraint defeats them but is hurt in the battle and soon after he loses consciousness on the side of the road.

Enid tends to his wound and stays by his side, crying by the side of the road. The cruel Earl Doorm rides by and orders his men to bring back the knight and his lady to his castle. There, Geraint lies still unconscious and Doorm wants to force Enid to eat; when she refuses, saying that she will not until Geraint awakes, he hits her. Taking this as a sign that Geraint must be dead – or the earl would not have dared – Enid lets out a desperate cry which awakes Geraint. He rises and slays Doorm. The couple flees the castle and Geraint acknowledges his wife's faithfulness. On their way they meet Enyrd, Enid's cousin, changed into a noble knight of the Round Table who leads them to the King.

There, Arthur explains to Geraint how he values more the noble change in Enyrd than Geraint's killing of the thieves. Then, the narration tells how Arthur cleanses this region of its thieves and corrupted lords. The idyll finishes with the summary of the end of Geraint and Enid's lives, how they go back to their land where Geraint acts as a noble and fair lord, how Enid is called "Enid the Good" by the people, how they have many children and finally how Geraint dies fighting for Arthur.

"Balin and Balan"

Arthur sends a messenger to ask for King Pellam's unpaid tribute, and his man asks him if he should take care of two knights who overthrow every knight passing by a spring on the way. The King tells him to go straight to Pellam's castle but goes to the spring himself and overthrows easily the two knights. Then, he summons them to his court and they introduce

themselves: they are Balin - a former knight of the Round Table sent into a three-year exile by Arthur because he had almost killed a thrall – and his brother Balan. Balin asks the King for forgiveness and for Balan to be knighted. Arthur accepts and both join the Table Round in general merriment.

Soon afterwards, Balan is sent to kill a fiend who dwells in the woods and kills people from behind. Since his brother's presence used to soothe his violent reactions, Balin decides to take example on Lancelot for courtesy and believes that it is his worship of the Queen that makes him such a good knight. Therefore, he asks of the King and Queen permission to wear the Queen's crown on his shield and is granted it. Yet, one day, he surprises a conversation between Lancelot and the Queen that puzzles him and makes him wonder whether they be lovers.

He flees the castle through the woods and arrives at Pellam's castle where he witnesses the old king's ascetism (his pride is that he is supposed to detain the spear that pierced Christ's side). Pellam's son, Garlon mocks his devotion to the Queen by suggesting that she is having an adulterous relationship with Lancelot. Balin manages to stay calm but when Garlon insults the Queen again on the next morning, he loses his temper and slays him on the spot.

He has to flee to the forest, taking with him the holy spear. He hangs his shield to a tree, feeling unworthy of it after having killed Garlon. But he comes across Vivien who lies to him, saying that her squire saw Lancelot and Guinevere kissing and Balin believes her, so he tramples the shield and lets out a hideous cry. Balan hears it and thinks it is the demon's: the two brother, not recognising each other, fight and lethally hurt one another. Vivien leaves them to be eaten by the wolves, but before dying, they awaken and know one another. Balan tells Balin that Vivien has lied to him and so they die in peace, in each other's arms.

"Merlin and Vivien"

Mark sends Vivien to Arthur's hall to wreck the Round Table through slander. Vivien asks for Guinevere's protection, introducing herself as an orphan brutally courted by Mark. Guinevere grants it and after a failed attempt at seducing Arthur, Vivien sets to charm Merlin. She is making progress in his heart when he is taken by a great melancholy after visions of the final battle that will end Arthur's reign, and he flees to Broceliande in Brittany. Vivien

follows him there and as a reward for her cares, asks him to tell her the secret charm "The which if wrought on anyone / […] The man so wrought on ever seemed to lie / Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower / From which was no escape for ever more" (ll.204-209). Merlin refuses and the rest of the idyll consists in Vivien's various attempts at obtaining this secret.

First, she entails discussions of love and how love should be proven by total trust in the other. Merlin tells the tale of how the charm was crafted: there was once in the East a queen so beautiful that even the beasts kneeled before her. But her king was made jealous by this and demanded a wizard who could charm his wife so that he only could see her. A wise hermit was forced into casting the spell and later his book went to Merlin. Later on, Vivien tells defiling slander about knights of the Table Round and Merlin each time gives a purer version of the story; he starts getting weary of her. But a storm breaks out and Vivien, acting scared, seeks refuge against Merlin's chest, and goes on talking to him in order to persuade him to teach her the charm. By the end of the storm, he has yielded and she has used it on him.

"Lancelot and Elaine"

The idyll starts with Elaine of Astolat in her tower contemplating Lancelot's shield and crafting an embroidered casement for it. Then the narration retraces how the shield came into her hands. One day, long before he became king, Arthur found a crown with nine diamonds and once he was crowned, he decided to hold jousts every year with one of the diamonds as prize. Eight years had gone by, and Lancelot had won the last eight diamonds. The time came for the last jousts, but the Queen was sick so she could not go, therefore Lancelot decided to use the excuse of an old wound not to go either. Yet, Guinevere demanded that he would go because she feared the rumours that might arise, and gave him a pretext for the King: as his mere name discourages his opponents, he would have chosen to go to the jousts unknown. So Lancelot departed but he got lost on the way and arrived at the castle of Astolat where he let his shield to Elaine in order not to be recognised. Moreover, the maiden, who instantly fell in love with him, gave him her favour to wear at the tournament, arguing that since he had never worn a lady's colour before, this would add to his disguise. On the next day, Lancelot leaves Astolat with Lavaine, Elaine's brother.

They go to the jousts where Lancelot is hurt by his kin who do not recognise him and despite his winning the diamond, he leaves, almost dying, without taking his prize. He flees to

a nearby hermitage where he is healed. Meanwhile, Arthur orders Gawain to find the mysterious knight and to give him the diamond. Gawain obeys reluctantly and arrives at Astolat without having encountered the grieved man. There, he learns that the winner is no one else than Lancelot and discovers as well Elaine's love for him. Hence, he decides to leave her the diamond to give to Lancelot and returns to Camelot.

Elaine goes to find Lavaine who leads her to Lancelot and she nurses him all through his recovery. Lancelot becomes very fond of her and holds her as a sister. Once healed, before leaving for Camelot, he insists on granting one of her wishes, but she declares that the only thing she wishes for is to be his wife or at least to follow him everywhere he goes. Lancelot tells her that he cannot grant her these wishes and that what she feels is not love but "love's first flash in youth" (l.944) but that when she will marry someone fitter, he will endow her with a large part of his lands. Elaine refuses and swoons. Then her father asks Lancelot to act roughly with her in order to break her passion for him. Therefore, Lancelot sends for his shield and leaves without bidding her farewell.

Elaine is taken by a great melancholy, feeling that since she cannot win his love her only alternative is death. So she starts staging her death, designs a letter and asks of her father that it would be placed in her hand a little before she dies and, once dead, that she would be placed on a barge, arrayed like a queen, and thus led on the river to Camelot. Her father accepts and eleven days later, she dies.

At Camelot, Lancelot offers the nine diamonds to Guinevere but the Queen is full of jealousy because Gawain has told the court that Lancelot was in love with Elaine. In her wrath, she throws the diamonds into the river, but just then, the barge bearing Elaine's body passes by. Arthur and his knights wonder at her and Arthur reads aloud her letter claiming her love for Lancelot. He orders that she is buried richly. After the funerals, Guinevere asks for Lancelot's forgiveness who grants it, and the King asks Lancelot about his sadness and laments that he was unable to love the "lily maid of Astolat" who seemed his match. Lancelot lingers by the river and meditates over Elaine's death and his relationship with Guinevere. The idyll closes on these lines: "So groaned Sir Lancelot in remorseful pain / Not knowing he should die a holy man." (ll.1417-1418).

"The Holy Grail"

When the poem starts, Percivale has retired in an abbey and the poetic voice informs the readers that he is to die soon after having left Camelot. On the summer before his death, he tells the story of the Quest for the Holy Grail to another monk, Ambrosius. His tale constitutes the main part of the idyll.

First, he recalls how his sister became a nun and that her confessor told her of the Holy Grail, the cup in which Joseph of Arimathea is said to have collected the blood of Christ, that could heal the world of all evils. With the coming of Arthur, the old priest hoped that the Holy Grail would come again into the world, and so the nun prayed and fasted until one night a vision of the Grail came upon her in her cell. She talked about it to Percival and urged him and the knights of the Round Table to fast and pray as well. They did according to her wish and one night, when Arthur was away, the Holy Grail appeared in the hall but none could see it except Galahad. Therefore, Percivale took the vow to embark on a quest for a twelvemonth and a day until he would see the cup, and all the knights swore after him. When Arthur came back and heard the tale of what had happened, he turned melancholy, fearing most of his knights would be chasing "wandering fires" (l.319) and that the fellowship of the Round Table would be destroyed.

On the next day, the knights went, and first Percivale tells of his adventures. He passed through a waste land, burnt by a thirst that could not be quenched. Then he arrived at a field of apple trees near a brook, but everything he touched would fall into dust between his fingers. He went on and encountered a tender maid and a house, labourers, a great knight standing for Glory, and all fell to ashes. Finally, he came to a hermitage where Galahad came as well, and Galahad told how the vision of the Grail had been with him all along the way. By this account, Galahad communicated his faith to Percivale who left with him on the next day.

They rode under the storm in an ancient city and Galahad crossed numerous bridges that turned to flame behind him so that Percivale could not follow him but only watch him from afar: in the distance he saw the Holy Grail in the sky over Galahad's head, he saw him reaching the "spiritual city" (l.526) and then the city, the knight and the Grail disappeared within the storm. After that, Percivale regained Camelot and decided to become a monk.

Ambrosius wonders if he saw any other human being than the hermit and Galahad on his way. Percivale confesses that he met a woman which he had loved in his youth, who was now a rich widow and who offered to marry him. He spent some time with her, thinking that perhaps the Quest was not for him, but finally one night he was taken by the thought of his

vow and left without saying goodbye. Ambrosius then wonders about other knights, and Percivale answers that he saw Bors and narrates Bors's adventure. Bors went through a pagan land, where he was imprisoned for his Christianity but the rock covering his cell was miraculously withdrawn and he saw the holy Grail passing in the sky. Eventually he was delivered by a young maid of the village who was secretly Christian.

After this account, Ambrosius enquires about Percivale's return to Camelot. Percivale relates that they were few to come back from the Quest and almost all had sought in vain. The King asked of every of the knights the tale of their adventures and last turned to Lancelot to hear his story. The great knight confessed painfully that the Quest had shown him how his sin was intertwined in him with his nobleness and how this awareness drove him mad until he embarked on a barge which led him to the city of the Grail where he could only glance at it veiled in red samite through fire.

The idyll ends with Arthur's speech, trying to comfort Lancelot and lamenting over the weakening of the Table Round. He concluded by confiding that when his work was done, he sometimes felt that all the material world was but a vision. The final line is made of Percivale's avowal that he did not understand all that the king meant.

"Pelleas and Ettare"

Arthur recruits new knights to replace those fallen in the Holy Grail quest and among these is Pelleas, a young lord from foreign islands. On his way to Caerleon, he has fallen in love with Ettare, a lady who takes interest in him only because she thinks he could win for her the circlet of queen of beauty in the tournament to come. Pelleas wins the "Tournament of the Youth" and receives a sword and a circlet as prizes. Ettare had promised him her love if he won the circlet for her and therefore he follows her when she goes back to her castle, but she refuses to let him in. Thinking that it is a trial by which he has to prove his love, Pelleas stays before the castle's wall and overthrows the knights that Ettare sends against him. Driven mad with anger, she demands of her knights that they bind Pelleas and bring him to her. On hearing that, Pelleas defeats the knights but let them bind him. Ettare mocks him and has him thrown away from her castle, but Pelleas goes on keeping watch before her walls.

One day, Gawain comes and sees Ettare's three knights attacking Pelleas simultaneously and, considering this a felony, wants to help the young man who asks him not

to take part in the fight. Pelleas defeats the knights, let them bind him and is led in front of Ettare, who tells him to leave or she will have him killed (though the threat is not explicit). She has her knights throw him out in his bonds. Gawain unties him and swears to him that he will make Ettare love him.

Gawain exchanges his armour and horse for that of Pelleas and tells him that he will bring him the good news of Ettare's love three days later. Then, he rides to Ettare's castle and is allowed entrance when he says that he has slain Pelleas. On the evening of the third day, Pelleas waits for him and, seeing that he does not come, rides to Ettare's castle and finds the gate open and unwatched. He enters the castle and finds Gawain and Ettare lying together under a pavilion. Taken aback, Pelleas first withdraws, then comes back with the intention to kill them both for their treason, then he is reminded of his vows taken when the King knighted him and he lays the sword he won in the Tournament of the Youth across their throats. He rides away.

When they awaken, Ettare accuses Gawain of betrayal since the sword shows her that Pelleas is alive and could have murdered them. From this moment on, she feels a great love for Pelleas and despairs. Meanwhile, Pelleas rides to Camelot, where he meets Percival who reveals him the adultery of Guinevere and Lancelot. This drives him mad and leads him to disavow all the Arthurian values. He meets Lancelot and fights with him: Lancelot defeats him but is to noble to kill an unarmed enemy and so let him go knowing that he will spread the rumour of their relation. In the last lines, Guinevere, Lancelot and Modred foresee the impending doom of the realm.

"The Last Tournament"

One day, while riding in the forest, Arthur and Lancelot find a baby girl in a nest with a ruby necklace around her neck. They take her and give her to Guinevere to raise. Unfortunately, the little girl dies soon after and Guinevere wants to get rid of the jewels that remind her of the child. Hence, Arthur organises the "Tournament of Dead Innocence" with the ruby carcanet as a prize. However, a little before the tournament occurs, he encounters a maimed churl sent as a messenger by the Red Knight (Pelleas) to tell Arthur that he has established his own Round Table in the North, with knights who are all adulterers and ladies who are all professed harlots. Arthur decides that it is time for him to cleanse his kingdom

from shore to shore and he resolves to go North on the next day with his young knights. He leaves Lancelot in charge of the jousts.

During the tournament, the rules are often broken, some knights insult the memory of the dead child and eventually Tristram wins without even fighting because all the others yield. He receives the carcarnet but he proves discourteous by refusing to give it to one of the ladies in the audience. Before leaving for Lyonnesse where dwells Isolt of Britain, Mark's wife, he exchanges views about Arthur's policy with Dagonet, Arthur's fool. Meanwhile, Arthur arrives at the city of the Red Knight who insults him and wants to fight with him, but he is intoxicated and falls from his horse. Arthur's knights murder him and slaughter the people of the town, without listening to Arthur's orders.

Tristram arrives in Lyonnesse where Isolt welcomes him, before reproaching him his marriage with Isolt of Brittany and the fickleness of his love. She laments over the decay of the values of the Round Table and Tristram replies that Arthur's idealism made him forget that his knights were but men. They seal their reconciliation by a meal and when Tristram offers the necklace to Isolt, Mark creeps behind them and kills them both.

"Guinevere"

The beginning of this idyll finds Guinevere in an abbey in Almesbury. She was led there because her conscience tormented her and so she decided to part with Lancelot but Vivien heard the time and place set for their parting and warned Modred. Consequently, the lovers were surprised and their adultery was brought to light. Lancelot returned to his lands and offered to take Guinevere with him and to defend her but she refused and took refuge – anonymously – in Almesbury.

One day, seeing her so sad, a novice suggests her to compare her misery with that of the King who was betrayed by his nephew while he was waging a war on his best knight and closest friend over his unfaithful wife. She goes on blaming the Queen without knowing who she is talking to and narrates the miraculous signs surrounding Arthur's birth and the bright beginnings of the Round Table as she learnt them from her father, "before the coming of the sinful Queen" (l. 268). Guinevere gets angry with her and scares her away. She meditates over her actions and remorse but against her will she recalls the first days of her love for Lancelot

when he brought her to Arthur, and how she first met Arthur and could not love him. At this moment, enters Arthur.

Guinevere throws herself at his feet, veiling her face with her hair. He starts with informing her that he will have some of his knights guard the nunnery in order to protect her, announces that he is walking to his doom and then he embarks in a long tirade accusing her of having caused the ruin of his entire kingdom. Yet, he declares that he still loves her and forgives her, and he expresses the hope that if she purifies her soul, they might meet again in the after-life and that she will finally acknowledge him as her rightful husband. He blesses her and leaves.

She rises and runs to the window in the hope of seeing his face but all she can see is his dragon-topped helmet disappearing in the mist. Then, she makes her reply, expressing her joy at having been forgiven, she claims that she finally sees him for what he is, and feels true remorse at the thought of what they could have built together. Finally, she decides to stay in Almesbury and to become a nun in order to atone for her sin. A final summary informs the reader that she will eventually become the abbess of Almesbury and then die and go to Heaven.

"The Passing of Arthur"

This idyll describes Arthur's final battle in the West. On the day before the battle, Bedivere hears the King lamenting about the vanity of his actions and his feeling of having been abandoned by God. During the night, Arthur is visited in his sleep by Gawain's ghost announcing him that he is to die on the next day. The final battle comes, Arthur kills Modred but he is mortally wounded by the traitor. All the knights of the Round Table are killed, except Bedivere who carries Arthur to a nearby chapel, where Arthur asks him to throw away Excalibur for him. Twice, Bedivere hides the blade and lies to Arthur in order to keep it as a relic and proof of Arthur's greatness, but he finally obeys. Then, he carries Arthur down to the shore where a great black barge awaits him. Arthur delivers his final speech, telling Bedivere not to weep but to pray for him and his return from the Island of Avilion where he will be taken to heal from his wound and from which he will come back to rule when the world is ready. His boat disappears in the distance when the sun of the New Year rises.

Index of Characters' Names

Arthur: king of Britain, son of Uther.

Ambrosius: brother monk of Percivale ("The Holy Grail")

Bedivere: first knight of the Table Round. ("The Coming of Arthur", "The Passing of Arthur")

Bellicent: daughter of Gorloïs and Ygerne, Arthur's half-sister, wife of King Lot of Orkney, mother of Gawain, Mordred and Gareth. ("The Coming of Arthur", "Gareth and Lynette")

Bleys: Merlin's master in magic. ("The Coming of Arthur")

Bors: knight of the Table Round, one of Lancelot's kin, sees the Holy Grail. ("The Holy Grail")

Dagonet; Arthur's fool. ("The Last Tournament")

Elaine: also called "the lily maid of Astolat", young maid who fall his love with Lancelot and dies when her love is not returned. ("Lancelot and Elaine")

Enid: daughter of Yniol, wife of Geraint, friend of Guinevere, said to be the "loveliest / next after her" ("The Marriage of Geraint", ll.17-18), and the best of her court. ("The Marriage of Geraint", "Geraint and Enid")

Ettare: vain young lady with whom Pelleas falls in love. ("Pelleas and Ettare")

Garlon: son of Pellam, friend of Vivien. ("Balin and Balan")

Gawain: knight of the Table Round, brother of Mordred and Gareth, son of Lot and Bellicent of Orkney, cousin of King Arthur. ("The Coming of Arthur", "Lancelot and Elaine", "The Holy Grail", "Pelleas and Ettare")

Geraint: knight of the Table Round, prince of Devon, Enid's husband. ("The Marriage of Geraint", "Geraint and Enid")

Guinevere: Queen of the Britons, Arthur's wife, Lancelot's lover. ("The Coming of Arthur", "The Marriage of Geraint", "Geraint and Enid", "Balin and Balan", "Merlin and Vivien", "Lancelot and Elaine", "The Last Tournament", "Guinevere")

Isolt of Britain: also called "Queen Isolt", Mark's wife and Tristram's lover. ("The Last Tournament")

Kay: Arthur's seneschal, rather discourteous. ("Gareth and Lynette")

Lancelot: Arthur's dearest knight, the best knight of the Table Round, Guinevere's lover. ("The Coming of Arthur", "Gareth and Lynette", "Balin and Balan", "Lancelot and Elaine", "The Holy Grail", "Pelleas and Ettare", "The Last Tournament")

Leodogran: king of Cameliard, father of Guinevere. ("The Coming of Arthur")

Lynette: damsel asking help for her sister, Lyonors. ("Gareth and Lynette")

Lyonors: damsel in distress, sister of Lyonors. ("Gareth and Lynette")

Mark: king of Cornwall, uncle of Tristram, husband of Isolt of Britain (or of Ireland), enemy of Arthur. ("Gareth and Lynette", "Merlin and Vivien", "The Last Tournament")

Merlin: the wizard helping Arthur. ("The Coming of Arthur", "Gareth and Lynette", "Merlin and Vivien")

Modred: knight of the Table Round who betrays Arthur and turns against him, ultimately killing him on the field of battle and being killed by him. Brother of Gawain and Gareth, son of Lot and Bellicent of Orkney. NB in most versions of the Arthurian legend, he is the son of Arthur and Bellicent, Tennyson chose to erase this episode in order to keep Arthur a "stainless king". ("The Coming of Arthur", "Pelleas and Ettare")

Nun (The): Percivale's sister, first to see the Holy Grail. ("The Holy Grail")

Pellam: old tributary king in Arthur's realm, who turned ascetic, surrounds himself with relics and believes he descends from Joseph of Arimathea. ("Balin and Balan")

Pelleas: a knight of the second generation of the Table Round, becomes the Red Knight after having been betrayed by Gawain and Ettare. ("Pelleas and Ettare")

Percivale: knight of the Table Round, brother of the nun who sees the Holy Grail, sees the Holy Grail, narrator of "The Holy Grail". ("The Holy Grail")

Tristram: knight of the Table Round, Mark's nephew, lover of Isolt of Britain, married to Isolt of Brittany. ("The Last Tournament")