

Ronald S. Librach

Myth and Romance In *Idylls of the King*

"But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting"

— "East Coker"

Tennyson's tale in *Idylls of the King* most certainly depicts the dissolution of Arthur's ideal order, and so readings which take their lead from the direction of the poem's narrative tend to see in this ultimate dissolution a fundamentally pessimistic philosophy on the part of the poet.¹ But running throughout this same narrative, woven into the poetic and dramatic fabric of the entire poem, are Tennyson's notion of the poet as an evocator of mythical archetypes and his use of certain elements of romantic convention, and by means of these, he is able to alter profoundly the direction of his philosophical theme.

Idylls of the King culminates, in fact, upon an explicit note of "hope". For Tennyson, hope issues from man's realization that he is a creature with free will, capable of both imagining ideal states of being and of striving to attain them. It is the state of mind by which the poet is inspired to re-create in his work the archetypal symbols of an ideally "meaningful" reality, or by which man himself is inspired to look towards an ideal moment in the future that will give meaning to the apparent isolation of his own consciousness or the apparent disorder of his age.² Hope, for example, rests even with Guinevere, who passes, after having served three years as an abbess, "To where beyond these voices there is peace" (G.691-92).³ "I think there was hope," she says of Arthur's final words to her,

'Except he mock'd me when he spake of hope;
His hope he call'd it; but he never mocks. . . .
And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven
My wickedness to him, and left me hope

That in mine own heart I can live down sin
 And be his mate hereafter in the heavens
 Before high God!' (G.625-27; 629-33)

The ideal, then, on which hope focuses has a specifically religious dimension, and so the idea of hope merges effectively with that of "faith", which is directed towards God and the realm of heaven. Faith becomes for Tennyson a principle of vitality not only for man, but in nature as well; it is the principle by which man recognizes his relationship with the divine, and it represents for Tennyson a subjective type of knowing, beyond the strictures of merely rational knowledge. This is the sense, for example, in which faith is treated among the major themes of *In Memoriam*:

We have but faith: we cannot know,
 For knowledge is of things we see;
 And yet we trust it comes of thee,
 A beam in darkness: let it grow (Prologue, 21-24).

According to the report of his son, Tennyson would argue the case for faith on the grounds that "If you allow a God, and God allows this strong instinct and universal yearning for another life, surely that is in a measure a presumption of its truth. We cannot give up the mighty hopes that make us men" (*Memoir*, I, p.321).

Among the principal themes of *Idylls of the King* is the idea that man, while he must live out his real life in the realm of nature, remains capable of conceiving, in both hope and faith, of an ideal life in heaven, and that the relationship of nature to heaven is an essential attribute of nature itself. This capacity on the part of man defines not only the extent to which man's life and the world in which he finds himself are profoundly limited, but also constitutes his freedom and his potential for transcending his life on earth. The "pessimistic" interpretation of *Idylls* focuses, in other words, on the same limitations of human existence, and on the contention that Tennyson is concerned with such limitations I do not argue. But if we consider both the philosophy and the aesthetic tradition of *Idylls*, not as "tragic", but as what I shall characterize here as "romantic" and "mythic", we can describe more accurately the implications of such themes as hope and faith, and arrive at an interpretation of the poem which recognizes in its view of man's predicament a decisive affirmation, rather than a somber tragedy.

As I use the term here, the *romance* aesthetic involves the effort to isolate an ideal moment in a continuing process of time, and, as such, is

characterized by a certain set of aesthetic conventions. These conventions reflect a search for what Northrop Frye has described as "some kind of imaginative golden age in time and space",⁴ and this ideal state is by definition something *not real*, or *to be realized*, only in some hypothetical time future. At the same time, however, the poet is capable of imagining and re-creating this ideal state of being according to his understanding of it in terms of available archetypes, whether those archetypes be symbolic, historical, or (as in *In Memoriam*) biographical.

By *myth*, I refer to the means by which man variously expresses his understanding of that part of reality which is external to him. While romance is basically concerned with the self, myth is concerned with what exists outside the self. Romance and myth can be said to merge when the romantic concept of the archetypal ideal becomes associated with the mythical concept of that which is absolute (or in religious myth, divine) in external reality. The artistic method which T.S. Eliot has labeled "the mythical method"⁵ becomes, then, the effort to give meaning or order to an apparent meaninglessness in external reality by re-creating in art (and thus affirming the reality of) the subjectively conceived ideal.

In *Idylls of the King*, Arthur embodies an ideal which is divine or spiritual in ordination, and he gives order to a civilization in which "the beast was ever more and more,/And man was less and less" (CA.11-12). Arthur finds man, in other words, in a condition symbolic of the conflict between the two aspects of his own nature: his humanity and his bestiality. This conflict threatens to destroy man and his civilization: "Arise, and help us thou!" Leodogran implores of Arthur, "For here between the man and the beast we die" (CA.44-45). Arthur, whose function is essentially spiritual and who represents on earth the divinity of God and Christ, thus serves man as a medium for recognizing this divinity: "The King will follow Christ, and we the King," proclaim the knights of the Table Round, "In whom high God hath breathed a secret thing" (CA.499-500). In other words, if man is to escape the "beast" and realize himself as man, he must be made conscious of the divine and his own relationship to it.

And yet, in order to assume his own role as redeemer, Arthur must himself assume a special incarnation, without which, he realizes, "I seem as nothing in the mighty world" (CA.86). The idea which

Tennyson intends Arthur to symbolize, then, is a seemingly paradoxical one: he must represent divinity if he is to inspire in man a realization of his own relationship to the divine, and yet he must affirm his own humanity if he is to be able to bring this consciousness of the divine to man. In the union of Arthur and Guinevere, not only is mortal man made conscious of the divine, but the divine itself is invested with the means by which to function in the world of man. According to Tennyson, if man's relationship to the divine be impressed upon him in the form of hope or faith, then he can act according to his own free will in an effort to escape the real and attain the ideal. The irresolvable interdependence of the real and the ideal is thus the paradox by which "Man's word is God in man" (CA.132) or "Man's world is God in man" (BB.8). As we shall see, Tennyson explores this paradox throughout *Idylls of the King*, and the specific relationship which he draws between the real and the ideal ultimately allows the poem to transcend its seemingly tragic evolution.

Each of Tennyson's *Idylls* deals with the relationship of man to his ideals, and thereby man's embodiment of the essential paradox. Among the various manifestations of the ideal in *Idylls of the King*, that of love is the most pervasive. In the later *Idylls*, especially from "Balin and Balan" through "The Last Tournament", Tennyson deals principally with those limitations which arise from man's estrangement from the ideal, and which, as we have said, result in the various pessimistic readings of the poem. But in the early tales, "Gareth and Lynette", "The Marriage of Geraint", and "Geraint and Enid", Tennyson's theme is more clearly that of love, and it is in these *Idylls* that he most clearly delineates the extent to which man can and must recognize his relationship to the ideal; it is here that Tennyson shows the ideal — in the form of love — to be giving meaning to the individual consciousness of man.

The theme of "Gareth and Lynette", for example, is quite specifically the discovery of viable values through the exercise of the human will in the performance of knightly deeds. Gareth determines to make himself a knight by performing the *deeds* of knighthood, proclaiming "Let be my name until I make my name!/My deeds will speak" (GL.562-63). When Lynette asks what reward he intends to seek for his deed, Gareth replies: "None! for the deed's sake have I done the deed" (GL.811). And to her taunts he replies: "Say thou thy say, and I

will do my deed" (GL.879). Lynette ultimately confesses that it was because she had believed Gareth to be a knave and not yet a knight that he had won her love:

'I gloried in my knave,
Who being still rebuked would answer still
Courteous as any knight — but now, if knight,
The marvel dies, and leaves me fool'd and trick'd,
And only wondering wherefore play'd upon' (GL.1217-21).

When Arthur warns him that the knights of the Table Round are sworn to vows of "utter hardihood", "uttermost obedience to the King", and "utter faithfulness in love" (GL.541-44), Gareth can vow only to that which he knows from experience that he can fulfill — but not to love, which is for him nothing as yet but an abstract ideal:

'My King, for hardihood I can promise thee.
For uttermost obedience make demand
Of whom ye gave me to, the seneschal. . . .
And as for love, God wot, I love not yet,
But love I shall, God willing' (GL.546-48; 550-51).

The divine and unattained ideal of love depends, in other words, upon the grace of God. But the values which Gareth himself creates and of which he proves himself worthy — his knighthood and the freedom of Lyonors — result from the striving of the human will towards the real attainment of ideals (and not from a passive subservience to some abstract concept of them), and culminate in the symbolic worldly love of Lynette.

In the tale of Geraint and Enid, this same condition is very nearly destroyed by the perversity of Geraint's attitude towards it. In the beginning, Geraint renounces the ideal of love as an inspiration in the world of the real; and then finally he tries to attach his freedom of will to the very same ideal, believing that he can put the reality of Enid's love to the test without having to earn it by the exercise of his will in the world of the real. In both cases, his will is debilitated and rendered ineffective in the world of the real.

When Geraint arrives at a belief in the Queen's infidelity, despite the fact that there is as yet no "proof", he abandons Arthur's court, is "forgetful" of the deeds which Arthur's knights have sworn to perform, and embraces instead the sublimated "ideal" of his own wife's fidelity. In doubting the Queen, Geraint has in effect deprived himself of the

genuine ideal which, as Arthur's consort, she represents. He has posited for himself a false ideal, an abstract belief in the mere idea of fidelity, and has demanded objective "proof" in which to take moral refuge for his refusal to act. He has forsaken the responsibility for winning Enid's fidelity by means of the knightly deeds which he performs.

"By taking true for false, or false for true" (GE.4), Geraint has embraced an illusory ideal, and so he has deprived himself of the power of his own will. His only "deed" is to embark with Enid upon a "fatal quest/Of honor, where no honor can be gain'd" (GE.702-03). In always demanding proof, in always doubting, Geraint has in effect demanded an "ideal" which would be subject to his own mortal's knowledge, and which does not belong, therefore, to the realm of the ideal. Despite what he overhears in the castle of the Earl Doorm, for example, Geraint persists in doubting:

[Geraint] said to his own heart, 'She weeps for me';
And yet lay still, and feign'd himself as dead,
That he might prove her to the uttermost (GE.586-88).

Ultimately, Geraint must abjure the doubt which his illusion has fostered. He must recognize once again that the ideal of fidelity has to be accepted as an article of faith, and so he must vow to Enid: "I do believe yourself against yourself,/And will henceforward rather die than doubt" (GE.743-44). Only then is the power of his will, and thus his sense of responsibility to the King, restored:

...nor did he doubt her more,
But rested in her fealty till he crown'd
A happy life with fair death, and fell
Against the heathen of the Northern Sea
In battle, fighting for the blameless King (GE.965-69).

Significantly, Enid serves as the focus of good in the tale, and because it is in her that Geraint's faith must ultimately be placed, she serves to transform what appears to be a progressively darkening drama into a poetic portrayal of the capacity of the human will to discover its own relationship to the ideal in the world of the real: and in this sense, the tale of Geraint and Enid reflects the dramatic and poetic interaction of *Idylls* as a whole.

Only an ideal which lies beyond the scope of human knowledge is capable of actuating the human will, and for Tennyson the human "personality" consists of a consciousness of ideals and an ability to

strive towards their attainment by an exercise of the will in the world of the real. Through Arthur, his subjects are capable of embracing the spiritual as ideal, and, to that extent, of effectively approximating not only the personality of the King, but the divine principle which, in turn, he embodies. According to his son, Tennyson "insisted that, although 'man is like a thing of night' in 'the boundless plan,' our highest view of God must be more or less anthropomorphic: and that 'Personality,' as far as our intelligence goes, is the widest definition and includes 'Mind,' 'Self-Consciousness,' 'Will,' 'Love' and other attributes of the Real, the Supreme, 'the high and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity Whose name is Holy' " (*Memoir*, I, pp.311-12).⁶

Spiritual ideals are for Tennyson ultimately beyond the ability of man to know or attain, just as love is beyond Geraint's efforts to "know" it by doubting and seeking proof of Enid's love. But that does not mean that such ideals have no efficacy in the realm of specifically human endeavor. The vows to which Arthur would bind his knights are such, the old Seer (Merlin) warns Gareth, "as is a shame/A man should not be bound by, yet the which/No man can keep" (GL.266-68). And it is because he realizes that his own human fallibility will prevent him from ever doing ultimate justice to Arthur's vows that Tristram abjures his knighthood and its ideals. For Tristram, Arthur becomes but "a doubtful lord" who would bind men "by inviolable vows,/Which flesh and blood perforce would violate" (LT.682-84). Tristram seeks refuge for his fallibility in such sublimations as "worldling of the world am I" and "we are not angels here/Nor shall be" (LT.691; 993-94). And Guinevere justifies her infidelity similarly, faulting Arthur with "swearing men to vows impossible" and seeking her moral refuge in the rationalization that "He is all fault who hath no fault at all" (LE.130, 132).

On the other hand, however, Arthur has in fact succeeded in inspiring his mortal subjects to purge the land of the "heathen host", and he has managed, furthermore, to create viable human values. Even Tristram acknowledges that this much has been attained:

'The vows!

O, ay — the wholesome madness of an hour —
They served their use, their time; for every knight
Believed himself a greater than himself,
And every follower eyed him as a God;

Till he, being lifted up beyond himself,
 Did mightier deeds than otherwise he had done,
 And so the realm was made' (LT.669-76).

The presence of Arthur has not enabled men actually to attain the ideal values themselves, but it has inspired them to strive towards their attainment, and men have in the process created values in the world of the real. For Tennyson, consciousness of the ideal — even though the ideal is ultimately beyond the possibility of human attainment — is necessary if the specifically human, moral will of man is to be effective. The exercise of each individual will, rather than the attainment of a single ideal as a means of unifying the moral consciousness of all men, is thus both the condition of moral value and the constitution of personality in *Idylls of the King*.

This concept of personality is treated most explicitly in "The Holy Grail", in which Tennyson's theme is the spiritual dimension of human nature. Man is seen in this poem as a creature who becomes conscious of the spiritual by means of his own self-consciousness, and a creature whose ability to act in the world of the real thus depends precisely upon this consciousness of the self. Once Sir Percivale has vowed to seek the Holy Grail, he comes to regard the effort to exemplify the virtues of Arthur's earthly order as a wasteful expenditure of "the spiritual strength/Within us, better offer'd up to heaven" (HG.35-36). No longer is he even conscious of his own existence among men on earth: "All men," he later explains to the monk Ambrosius, "to one so bound by such a vow,/And women were as phantoms" (HG.564-65). Reality itself, he reports, "Fell into dust" (HG.389; 400; 419). He rejects even that passion which has come to symbolize in *Idylls* the most noble of human aspirations — the love of "that one only, who had ever/Made my heart leap" (HG.578-79). In the company of Galahad, Percivale pursues instead his quest for the Grail, and he is ultimately rendered incapable of love: "Then after I was join'd with Galahad,/ [I] Cared not for her nor anything upon earth" (HG.610-11). And when he finally returns from his quest, Percivale determines to repair to a monastery, "And, leaving human wrongs to right themselves,/Cares but to pass into the silent life" (HG.894-95).

The knights who vow to seek the Holy Grail desire to substantiate their own mortal existence in terms of the divine. They are conscious, in other words, of a relationship which binds them to the divine, and

they want to *prove* that this relationship exists objectively, independent of any merely human consciousness of it and linking the world of the real, in which they are imperfect and condemned to death, with the realm of the divine, in which their mortality would be transcended. Of all the knights who seek the vision of the Holy Grail, only Galahad, of course, succeeds. But while Galahad does in fact vindicate his belief that "If I lose myself, I save myself" (HG.178), his success is not an affirmation of self: it suggests, rather, that extinction of self which the Grail quest actually represents.

William L. Brashear⁷ has argued that "Tennyson generally conceived of God as but an extension of self-consciousness" (P.44), and that Tennyson's own beliefs, furthermore, paralleled those of the knights who seek the Grail. Tennyson certainly does not condemn Galahad's assumption into "the spiritual city" (HG.526), for its "humility" is compared by the "holy hermit" to the Incarnation of God as man in Christ (HG.445-57). But this idea of the salvation of self through the extinction of self is not, I think, the prescription which Tennyson presents as the theme of *Idylls*.

To understand Tennyson's concept of God, it is indeed necessary to understand his notion of the nature of self-consciousness. But while he acknowledges an essential relationship between the ideality of God and the reality of self-consciousness, Tennyson must also preserve the ultimate unattainability of God by man. God is on the one hand the object of all forms of faith, and the intelligence of God serves to give meaning to the limited knowledge of man. It is the effort of man to attain to this divine intelligence — to realize such abstract ideals as justice, truth, purity, honor, nobility, all of which are known to God — which gives meaning to the life of man on earth. All that man creates, despite the fact that it shares his finitude and fallibility, results from his efforts to attain the infinite and perfect values possessed by God. For man on earth, therefore, God is real. On the other hand, as an ultimate reality (that is, as the ideal), God exists beyond man's limited ability to know. Human consciousness can thus never perfect itself, and so man's sense of absolutes is contingent upon the fact that they are possessed by the perfect knowledge of God (who, as we shall see, is present to man in nature). And yet, at the same time, while man remains free to act towards the realization of such absolutes, God, in this sense, is not real for man on earth, because there is always the essential disparity

between what God knows and what man can know. Theoretically, then, the attainment of divine knowledge by human consciousness would constitute in Tennyson's terms an "absorption" of the self into that which, for the self, is not real: which is to say, it would constitute an extinction of self. The assumption of Galahad represents this theoretical phenomenon, but such is clearly not the ideal which Tennyson himself offers in *Idylls of the King*. "If the absorption into the divine in the after-life be the creed of some," Tennyson implores, "let them at all events allow us many existences of individuality before this absorption" (*Memoir*, I, p.319). For on the practical level of human and social endeavor, the quest of Galahad and Percivale for the Holy Grail represents the abandonment of a man's responsibilities to the King and to his fellow men. And on the philosophical level, it represents the abdication of moral responsibility, the denial of contingency and freedom, and finally, a rejection of the true place of man in the world.

Tennyson's theme in this respect is the one which Arthur affirms in a famous passage at the end of "The Holy Grail", and which Percivale does not fully comprehend:

'. . .the King must guard
That which he rules, and is but as the hind
To whom a space of ground is given to plow,
Who may not wander from the allotted field
Before his work is done, but, being done,
Let visions of the night or of the day
Come as they will; and many a time they come,
Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,
This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,
This 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 the One
Who rose again' (HG.901-15).

A man must realize, in other words, that his self-consciousness is, in fact, his consciousness of that which is real — that is, of that which is no mere "vision". And he must also realize that this consciousness of reality is, in turn, his consciousness of the realm of heaven, in which his mortality is to be transcended. This is for Tennyson the essential relationship between the real and the ideal: in affirming his own reality — in affirming his place in a world in which he is condemned to death — man is vouchsafed his only glimpse of the infinite.

Arthur rejects the irresponsibility of the knights who believe that life derives its meaning from a perfect and immediate relationship with the ideal, and affirms instead the relationship of man to the natural processes which operate in the world of reality, of which man is himself a part. Transcendence is in effect made contingent upon immanence. For just as consciousness progresses and creates because it is inspired by ideals, nature — that is, reality itself — progresses and creates in terms of an impulse provided by the immanent and presiding intelligence of the divine. Man's relationship to the divine must, in other words, come through the agency of nature.

His faith in nature derived, according to his son, from Tennyson's perceptions of its cyclical order: "he felt a joy in her orderliness, patient progress and hopefulness; the same seasons ever returned, the same stars wheeled in their courses; the flowers and trees blossomed and the birds sang yearly in their appointed months; and he had a triumphant appreciation of her ever-new revelations of beauty" (*Memoir*, I, pp.312-13). What is important here is the fact that the idea of the cycle is characteristic not only of Tennyson's natural philosophy in *Idylls*, but of his use of the structure of the romantic narrative as well.

Northrop Frye notes that, in such traditional cycles of romance as those which characterize Tennyson's source material for *Idylls*, there are four distinct phases to the quest theme: the opening "conflict"; the symbolic "death"; the "disappearance" of the hero; and the reappearance/recognition of the hero.⁸ In *Idylls of the King*, "The Coming of Arthur" presents an opening "conflict", which issues in the creation of Arthur's order; and "The Passing of Arthur" presents the symbolic "death" of Arthur in his final battle or "conflict", as well as the "disappearance" of the hero in Arthur's "passing". Although *Idylls* closes with Arthur's "disappearance", central to Arthurian romance remains the promise of Arthur's "reappearance", and Tennyson is careful to adumbrate that "reappearance". Such is the promise of which Merlin has spoken:

'. . .Merlin in our time
Hath spoken also, not in jest, and sworn
Tho' men may wound him that he will not die,
But pass, again to come, and then or now
Utterly smite the heathen underfoot,
Till these and all men hail him for their king' (CA.418-23);

and also the promise of which Bedivere speaks at the moment of the "passing" itself:

'He passes to be king among the dead,
And after healing of his grievous wound
He comes again. . . ' (PA.449-51).

Tennyson's tale of Arthur's reign both begins and ends in conflict, and the disappearance of the hero in which it culminates incorporates the promise of his return. There is explicitly no reappearance or recognition of the hero, for such a consummation would in effect constitute the evolution from romance to comedy. The tale of Arthur's "coming" and "passing", therefore, suggests, just as romance does, a cyclical notion of time itself. The moment of Arthur's "passing" is at once the extinction of the old order (that which has been real) and the nascence of the new (that which, as yet, is not real).⁹ What the future promises, in other words, is the recurrence of an archetypal state of being which has existed once and then passed out of existence. For Tennyson, it is the special power of the poet to recall the archetype, just as, in *In Memoriam* (XCV), the poet is capable of experiencing the dream-trance in which he communes with Hallam, whom he has "lost" in the past.

It is the fact that time is cyclical which, according to Tennyson, makes possible the recurrence of the archetype, and Tennyson presents his notion of cyclical time through the person of Arthur. For it is in nature that the cycle is most evident, and when Arthur affirms his own place in nature, the realization of self to which he attains is not simply an affirmation of man's relationship with the divine, but an affirmation of his own human individuality as well. Arthur's affirmation is not merely abstract, because it embraces the transcendent meaning of the deeds which he has performed as an individual acting freely towards the attainment of ideal, and thus the creation of real, values. Once again, this affirmation of one's individual humanity is commensurate with the process by which the cyclical order of nature gives meaning to objective reality.

Just as the vows to which Arthur swears his knights are impossible for them to keep, the ideals towards which his order is always striving are ultimately beyond the possibility of his subjects' realization. Just as a cycle is characterized merely by recurrence rather than by transcendence, those ideals can be real only to the extent that they inspire

those men who are conscious of them. And just as the poet's archetype can be re-created only in the special province of his art, ideal values can affect the world of the real only through the individual's creation of worldly values in the course of striving towards the ideal. "I believe," says Tennyson, "that God reveals himself in each individual soul" (*Memoir*, I, p.324).¹⁰

The relationship of man to the divine, then, is for Tennyson an imperfect relationship, and it is this imperfection which dictates the dissolution of Arthur's order. But according to this same concept of imperfection, *Idylls of the King* cannot accurately be characterized as "tragedy". Henry Kozicki¹¹ argues, for example, that *Idylls* is a "tragic drama" because "its personages accept involvement with an unfathomable pattern of universal justice, which requires their dissolution as a part of its mysterious cycle" (p.16). He says of the "ritual cycle" that "the splendid rise to greatness and ruinous fall of a world is a poignant drama arousing the most profound of tragic emotions, because of the vision of an unfathomable pattern of justice" (p.20).

That the cyclical wheel of fortune necessitates the end of Arthur's order does not, however, constitute a "tragic" evolvment of the tale. Tragedy results when the order which is established by the heroic figure, the wheel of fortune which by his own deeds he sets in motion, come into conflict with the order of nature, and the hero and his order are thereby destroyed. Tragedy, as Frye puts it, is "the impact of heroic energy on the human condition, the wheel of fortune creaking against the greater wheel of nature."¹²

This theory is, I think, quite consistent with the concepts of myth, romance, and the cycle which I have described in *Idylls*. In her song "Of Fortune and her wheel", for example, Enid sings:

"Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel and lower the proud . . .
Thy wheel and thee we neither love nor hate. . . .
For man is man and master of his fate' (MG.364-47; 349; 355).

Man is in *Idylls* "master of his fate" and need "neither love nor hate" fortune because the "heroic energy" which he releases, the "wheel of fortune" which he sets in motion, is absolutely at one with "the greater wheel of nature". There is in *Idylls* no divine inevitability which ordains the dissolution of Arthur's heroic order. In the first place, the ideals on which Arthur establishes that order are the same ideals which constitute

the divine knowledge of God. And in the second place, it is the immanence of God which animates the processes of nature, and man, as Arthur affirms at the end of "The Holy Grail", can willingly embrace his own relationship with those same natural processes which operate in reality. Arthur can thus accept his "passing" ("Merlin sware that I should come again/To rule once more — but let what will be be" [PA.191-92]) because he has affirmed the unity of his own personality with the processes of nature. No conflict, therefore, is possible between the "wheel of fortune" and the "wheel of nature", and so *Idylls of the King*, far from presenting either the tragic failure of idealism or the tragic conflict of a mortal will against an inimical natural order, presents a triumphant affirmation of man's highest ideals and a vision of the ultimate compatibility of man and nature.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Among certain others with whom I will deal later, I refer here to such readings as those of Paull F. Baum, *Tennyson Sixty Years After* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1948), who argues that *Idylls* comes to "a pessimistic ending" (p.191); S.C. Burchell, "Tennyson's 'Allegory in the Distance,'" *PMLA*, 68 (June 1953), 418-24, who sees in *Idylls* the "symbolic revelation of man's moral infertility" and "the diagnosis of a corrupt civilization" (PP.418, 421); and Jerome H. Buckley, *Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), who traces in *Idylls* "the gradual catastrophic betrayal of its sustaining idealism" (p.193).
- 2 For Tennyson, the ideal repository of archetypes is the past, and the most important form of subjective thinking is thus memory (see note 10 below). Tennyson's friend James Spedding, for example, said of him that he was "a man always discontented with the Present until it has become the Past, and then he yearns toward it and worships it, but is discontented because it is past" (quoted in Arthur J. Carr, "Tennyson as a Modern Poet," *Univ. of Toronto Quart.*, 19 [July 1950], 361-82). Tennyson's son refers to "his almost personal dislike of the present, whatever it may be" (Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir* [London: MacMillan, 1897], I, p.154. [Hereafter, *Memoir*]). Tennyson himself described this nostalgia as "this 'Passion of the Past' I used to feel as a boy" (*Memoir*, II, p.319), and in 1839 he wrote in a letter to Emily Sellwood: "Annihilate within yourself these two dreams of Space and Time. To me often the far-off world seems nearer than the present, for in the present is always something unreal and indistinct, but the other seems a good solid planet, rolling round its green hills and paradises to the harmony of more steadfast laws. There steam up from about me mists of weakness, or sin, or despondency, and roll between me and the far planet, but it is there still" (*Memoir*, I, pp.171-72). As we shall see, according to Tennyson, it is the special power of the poet to recall the archetype from the past and realize it as an ideal value to be sought in the future. Time becomes cyclical, therefore, when past and future become one in a single moment of the poet's present, creative consciousness.
- 3 All citations from the poetry of Tennyson are from *The Poems and Plays of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Maitland Edey (New York: Modern Library, 1938). I use the following abbreviations, which will be parenthesized with lineage in the text, with reference to *Idylls of the King*: CA="The Coming of Arthur"; GL="Gareth and Lynette"; MG="The Marriage of

Geraint"; GE="Geraint and Enid"; BB="Balin and Balan"; LE="Lancelot and Elaine"; HG="The Holy Grail"; LT="The Last Tournament"; G="Guinevere"; PA="The Passing of Arthur". In *Memoriam* will be cited with reference only to section and line numbers.

- 4 *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p.186.
- 5 "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," *The Dial*, 75 (1923), 480-83.
- 6 Romance and myth receive some of their most serious modern treatment in the work of psychologist Jung. When Eliot, outlining "the mythical method", writes that "Psychology... ethnology and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago" ("*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*," p. 483), the "psychology" to which he refers is most especially that of Jung, whose notion of the "collective unconscious" describes a psychic repository of archetypal patterns or images. Perhaps even more important, however, is Jung's concept of personality, which centers, as does Tennyson's, on the undeveloped potential of the personality. See especially "The Development of Personality", *The Development of Personality*, trans. R.C.F. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1964), pp. 163-86: "Personality, as the complete realization of our whole being, is an unattainable ideal. But unattainability is no argument against the ideal, for ideals are only signposts, never the goal" (p. 172). Like Tennyson, too, Jung insists upon the individuation of consciousness as the condition for the development of personality: "the development of personality. . . means fidelity to the laws of one's own being" (p. 173).
- 7 "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism: *Idylls of the King*," *VP*, 6 (Spring 1968), 29-49.
- 8 *Anatomy of Criticism*, p.192.
- 9 Tennyson's intentions are perhaps more evident in his original version of Arthur's "passing", "Morte d'Arthur", with its "frame", "The Epic". As the company of modern listeners attends the poet Everard Hall's reading, they awake to a consciousness of the vanishing old year and the emerging new, the symbol of which is the Christmas bells. "Arthur is come again: he cannot die," says the poet, "Come again, and thrice as fair":
- At this a hundred bells began to peal,
That with the sound I woke, and heard indeed
The clear church-bells ring in the Christmas morn (ll. 347; 349; 352-54).
- This imagery culminates in Tennyson's work in the "Ring out, wild bells" section of *In Memoriam* (CVI), where the Christmas bells herald the death of the old year as a necessary precondition of the spiritual renewal inherent in the birth of the new. In *Idylls of the King*, too, the "passing" of Arthur is attended by the emergence of a new year: "And the new sun rose, bringing the new year" (PA. 469).
- 10 As Tennyson treats the theme more explicitly in *In Memoriam*, he regards certain states of subjective perception — especially memory, the dream, and the trance — as resulting from a gradual individuation of consciousness:
- But as he grows he gathers much,
And learns the use of "I" and "me,"
And finds "I am not what I see,
And other than the things I touch."
- So rounds he to a separate mind
From whence clear memory may begin,
As thro' the frame that binds him in
His isolation grows defined (XLV, 5-12).
- It is in such a state as memory that the archetype — in this case, of course, the complex of the poet's past experiences with the lost Hallam — is recalled. Similarly, then, the ideal can be present in the world of the real only through the agency of the individual, whose consciousness is by definition subjective, who is conscious of and inspired by such ideals, and who can thus act in such a way as to create real values in the world of the real. Once again, the comparison with Jung is, I think, instructive: "although the objective psyche can only be conceived as a universal and uniform datum, which means that all men share the same primary, psychic conditions, this objective psyche must nevertheless individuate itself if it is to become actualized, for there is no other way in which it could express itself except through the individual human being" ("The Development of Personality," p.179).
- 11 "Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* as Tragic Drama," *VP*, 4 (Winter 1966), 15-20.
- 12 *Fools of time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), p.17.