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THE *MAKARIS* OF CAMELOT

by

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The legends of King Arthur and his court at Camelot have fascinated both writers and ordinary readers for hundreds of years. William Caxton, who edited and published Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur claims to have done so at the request of "many noble and divers gentlemen of this realm of England":

> The said noble gentlemen instantly required me to imprint the history of the said noble king and conqueror, King Arthur, and of his knights, with the history of the Sangreal, and of the death and ending of the said Arthur; affirming that I ought rather to imprint his acts and noble feats, than of Godfrey of Bouillon, or any of the other eight [Worthies], considering that he was a man born within this realm, and king and emperor of the same.[1]

For more than five hundred years the legends have captured the imaginations of Englishmen and their American descendents. The importance of the "matter of Britain" to many generations of literate men is reflected in a recent description of Malory's work: "[Le Morte D'Arthur] is no specialist's book; it is Milton's book, Tennyson's book, Morris's book, a sacred and central possession of all who speak the English tongue."[2] The study that follows will deal with three of the most substantial works in English that share as common material the Arthurian legends: Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, Alfred Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the

King, and Edwin Arlington Robinson's Lancelot and Merlin.

The three are ambitious works by men commonly considered major writers--men separated from one another both by time and by place. There has been a great deal of valuable criticism devoted to Malory and Tennyson, though not to Robinson, but very little of that criticism has involved a sustained analysis based on a comparison of the ways they handle similar material. We cannot assume that each of the three authors is representative of his times, but we are surely safe in believing that they are not merely isolated or unique individuals. There are several good historical reasons for them to be as different as they are from each other. There is a period of roughly four hundred years between Malory's work and Tennyson's, and about fifty between Tennyson's and Robinson's. As Arthur B. Ferguson has written, Malory was dealing with themes that could have timely significance:

> There has always been reason to suppose . . . that it was in part at least a feeling that the England of the civil wars had deviated sadly from the great pattern of chivalry that prompted him to embark, in his later years and in circumstances of enforced leisure, on the stories of King Arthur's court. Certainly nothing in the literary heritage of the fifteenth century could better have served such a purpose than this "matter of Britain" which for generations had provided the inspiration and even to some extent the pattern, for the patriotic brand of chivalry characteristic of England . . . Nor could Malory have failed to see in the fratricidal struggle that destroyed the Round Table and in the failure of the aging Arthur to dominate his kingdom a provocative parallel to the Wars of the Roses and to the disintegration of the English monarchy he must have thought was taking place around him even as he wrote.[3]

The threat of social upheaval caused by the French Revolution, the profound economic and social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, the increasing dissatisfaction of women with their traditionally sanctioned roles, the undermining of the Christian Church by scientific discoveries and historical Biblical criticism--all this is obliquely revealed in Tennyson's poems. And the fact that Robinson was an American, and from New England at that, is of considerable importance to an understanding of the unique ways he handles the legend. The influence of an attenuated Puritanism and the overpowering effect of the tragic first world war profoundly inform Robinson's poems. We know little about Malory, but Tennyson and Robinson were justifiably major literary figures in their lifetimes. Without claiming that each speaks for his age, we shall find that many of the differences among their works have revealing historical implications.

The three literary works considered here employ different genres: Malory writes in prose, while Tennyson and Robinson write essentially narrative poems. This study will not be primarily concerned to evaluate the aesthetic qualities of _Le Morte D'Arthur_, partly because the question of its unity and coherence has been disputed at great length by highly qualified medieval scholars who do not invite speculation from the relatively uninitiated; the territory has already been extensively explored.[4] I am concerned to discover those aspects of the _Morte_ that justify its

claim to be a major work and at the same time to understand why it attracted Tennyson and Robinson. When we examine the poets in the light of their source, we shall see primarily how different their work is from his and by means of comparison shall realize more vividly certain qualities in the poems that might otherwise go insufficiently recognized.

In fact, the works dealt with here were chosen partly for the reason that they are necessarily so different from one another. Furthermore, neither of the two later authors, while attempting to write truly significant poems, is content with a merely academic reconstruction of his medieval source. Most of what gives Malory's book such solidity and so strong a claim to being considered a major work is not really available to Tennyson and Robinson; Le Morte reflects a comparatively early stage of social organization and an unquestioning access to religious certainties. Consequently, the additions that Tennyson and Robinson make to Malory will probably represent their most serious claims to creating important literature. Such additions will, furthermore, suggest their own historical circumstances at least as much as their own sensibilities.

Unlike the critic of prose fiction, who can more legitimately concentrate on the themes and attitudes a work expresses, the critic of poetry must be concerned with the quality of the poetry itself. He must ultimately determine how adequate are the subject

matter, conception, and structure to inspire the poet's particular talents and special genius. The poems under consideration here are works by great poets but are themselves generally criticized or neglected in favor of their authors' lyrics or shorter poems. The narrative poem is in fact a genre comparatively and undeservedly slighted by modern criticism, and so this study proceeds in something of a critical vacuum as regards the nature and possibilities of the long poem. We shall have to determine how the long poem differs from the lyric and what the implications of those differences are for the _Idylls of the King_ and _Merlin_ and _Lancelot_.

Serious moral claims have been made, both by the authors and by the critics, for all of these works.[5] Each requires us to understand and evaluate the relationship between the ethical attitudes expressed in it and the way in which these ethical attitudes are revealed and valued. Each presumes in some sense to deal with a real world at the same time that it recommends certain ideals worthy of emulation. In the _Morte_, for example, there are two different kinds of idealistic standards--one of which is expressed in the chivalric vows and obligations of Arthur's court, while the other is represented by the pursuit of the Holy Grail. It will be necessary, then, to understand in each work the relationship between idealism and realism, aspiration and achievement, the writer's sense of moral purpose in relation to his sense of possibility.

To understand this relationship, we shall particularly have to examine the authors' attitudes to character creation or revelation, to the possibility of showing recognizable human beings trying to cope with recognizable and difficult situations that challenge their moral natures. To study the structure and direction of each work in terms of the values explicitly praised in it is at least partially to perceive the changing nature of ethical norms in changing historical circumstances.

In dealing with Tennyson and Robinson we shall consider the nature of the poet's relationship to traditional material as well as to traditional ethical understanding. While discovering what material and themes the poets take from their predecessor, we shall examine in considerable detail the ways they try to make it distinctively their own. Ultimately we must determine whether it matters that the poet be true to his source, or to whatever part of it he chooses to take, or whether, on the contrary, his license is virtually unlimited. The question of the real availability of traditional subjects and themes to nineteenth and twentieth century poets and writers is one that has stimulated and preoccupied many of them. A study of the attempt by two important poets of those centuries to make meaningful use of "the matter of Britain" should contribute to understanding of the difficulties inherent in such an attempt.

FOOTNOTES: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

[1]William Caxton, "Preface," Le Morte D'Arthur (London, 1961), p. 1.

[2]"The Morte Darthur," anon. rev., TLS (June 7, 1947), p. 1. The author of this review is C.S. Lewis. It was reprinted in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature (Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 103-111.

[3]Arthur B. Ferguson, The Indian Summer of English Chivalry (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 43-44.

[4]See footnotes 7, 8, and 12 in Chapter I.

[5]See footnotes 8, 9, 19, and 24 in Chapter I; footnotes 8, 14, 23, 37 in Chapter II; footnotes 10, 13, 15, 16, 26 in Chapter III.

CHAPTER I

SIR THOMAS MALORY'S *LE MORTE D'ARTHUR*

> "Much more I am sorrier for my good
> knights' loss than for the loss of my
> fair queen; for queens I might have
> enow, but such a fellowship of
> good knights shall never be together
> in no company." (II, 353)

1.

Introduction

Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur was first published in 1485 by William Caxton, who claims in the book's preface to have been urged on by "many noble and diverse gentlemen of this realm of England"[1]; they were interested in a version in English of the life and history of Arthur, England's most famous legendary king and one of the nine worthies. Caxton edited the manuscript as well. He divided it into twenty-one books; reduced the length of various battle scenes, and replaced dialect or archaic words with ones more familiar to his audience.[2] He first advances the idea that the work is preeminently moral: "all is written for our doctrine, and for to beware that we fall not to vice nor sin" and says he published it "to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days, by which they came to honour; and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke . . . . For herein

may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin." (I, 3)

No one has been able to establish conclusively Malory's identity. The favored candidate until recently has been Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, of whom there are fairly substantial records. These indicate that he was both a knight and a prisoner, and so the author of Le Morte D'Arthur describes himself. In 1896 G.L. Kittredge first argued that this knight from Newbold Revel was the real author of the Morte,[3] but critics have been disturbed by the extraordinary discrepancy between the presumed author's criminal record and the high ideals so frequently praised in the work itself.[4] In 1966 William Matthews published a brilliant scholarly work, The Ill-Framed Knight,[5] that advocates the candidacy of Thomas Malory of Studley and Hutton in Yorkshire. This man, about whom little is known, is not morally objectionable and his Northern origins would explain various aspects of Le Morte D'Arthur. But because he was not a knight and was not definitely a prisoner, the uncertainty and argument will presumably continue.[6]

The interpretations of Malory's work itself, especially after the discovery of the Winchester manuscript in 1934, have also been controversial. Malory's most recent editor, Eugene Vinaver, claims that Malory tried to eliminate the polyphonic interweaving of stories characteristic of his sources and attempted instead to write several

distinct, separable narratives.[7] Another school of critics,[8] led by R.M. Lumiansky, argues that on the contrary the work is profoundly shaped and united by recurrent emphases on and a convincing development of the causes for the Round Table's collapse; they read Le Morte D'Arthur as though it were a moral tragedy.

> People are seen for what they are in terms of what they do, and their actions are allowed to stand silently symbolic of the causes which are constantly at work bringing about the ruin of a world that seems so fair.[9]

To call a literary work a moral tragedy, one must be able to say that the denouement is characteristically effected by the deliberate actions of one or more central figures; that the author emphasizes individual responsibility far more than any other possible causal factor in the collapse of the particular order that work describes. For those who read Le Morte D'Arthur in this way, the great stress tends to fall upon its famous adulteries as embodiments of the willful corruption that destroys the Arthurian world.

I am interested in Malory primarily because he is the source for the Arthurian poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Edwin Arlington Robinson. The study and interpretation of Malory's own sources is an extremely arduous task, carried on by specialists who dispute learnedly in scholarly journals about the significance of Malory's alterations or deviations. I presume only to approach Malory as a "common reader" to try to understand the book that fascinated Tennyson and Robinson so deeply.

Still, because so many writers and critics have seen Malory's work in merely moral terms, it should be useful to try to determine how adequate is the moral tragedy approach to a description of the work as a whole. Unlike the recent exponents of the moral tragedy theory, I shall not deal with his sources at all, not only because we cannot be positive about what they were,[10] but because to stress Malory's "alterations" seems to me an individualistic heresy. C.S. Lewis most appropriately compares the work to a cathedral, the composite product of many different workmen and artisans. He writes: "Whatever Malory's intentions--if he had any intentions--may have been, it is agreed on all hands that he has changed the tale very little."[11] The individual, Sir Thomas Malory--about whom we know virtually nothing--is much less interesting than the voluminous work which bears his name. I am then concerned quite simply with the work as we have it--the "Malory" whose rich material was used to such different ends by poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Consequently I shall deal here only with the Caxton text, the only one available to Tennyson and Robinson, and I shall use "Malory" as a synecdoche for the English version of the Arthurian legend "reduced" from the French by Sir Thomas Malory and printed by Caxton. I shall argue that the concept that Malory's work is moral tragedy seriously misrepresents his artistic method and most of the contents of _Le Morte D'Arthur_. I shall attempt to describe

the Arthurian world as Malory presents it and to isolate and understand what are, if not major themes, at least recognizable and important preoccupations of the author.

2.

The "Moral Tragedy" Approach

The thesis that Malory conceived _Le Morte D'Arthur_ as a moral tragedy raises major questions of critical tact and approach. It is a serious thesis and an attractive one, and it is capable of providing both interesting and valuable insights into the book. However, it seems to me an argument imposed upon, rather than drawn from _Le Morte D'Arthur_ and a serious distortion of the work. This is not to say that there are not certain moral attitudes to be found in the work, nor that it lacks profoundly tragic implications. But literature which can legitimately be called moral tragedy should display a pervasive and consistent concern with issues of moral choice, and consequently a lucid rendering of cause and effect. On the assumption that a man's acts determine his fate, such a work will be primarily concerned with character, and the author will inevitably show a clear commitment to judging his characters, even if the final judgment is expressed equivocally. I do not believe that a disinterested study of Malory's work can find in it adequate evidence of such preoccupations or support for such claims.

The critical approach that examines Le Morte D'Arthur in terms of moral tragedy violates what I assume to be the critic's initial obligation to a work of art: the obligation to describe it in such a way as to account for as many of its elements as possible and the relationships of those elements to one another. This approach further raises what has become a major question in relatively contemporary criticism, one which has led to a plethora of fine distinctions, often quite untenable and usually classified as irony, personae and the like: the question of determining the attitude of an author to his material, and in particular the judgment he makes of his characters. These two concerns are closely related, and a critical evaluation that deals inadequately with one will almost certainly misrepresent the other. If the general context and tone of a work of literature are overlooked, any judgment of its moral aspects may not only be exaggerated--it may be seriously distorted. The exclusively moral judgments in a literary work may be less harsh than the commentators would allow. And often one feels prompted to protest the notion that a piece of literature that does not lend itself to heavily moralistic interpretation is therefore less serious and considerable than works more easily categorized.

Since a treatment in terms of moral tragedy takes little, if any, account of the dominant feature of Le Morte D'Arthur, it should not be frivolous to stress what to more disinterested

readers seems so obvious: that Malory's primary aesthetic interest is narrative. A large proportion of the book, simply and straightforwardly, deals with action. Caxton was a fine editor of _Le Morte D'Arthur_ and, one would therefore assume, a sensitive reader. A glance at his titles for the small sections into which he divided the book strongly suggests that he found its essence in the events it relates. Even the chapter (Book I, Section XIII) entitled "Of a dream of the King with the hundred knights" includes, in less than a half page, a description of scouts spying on the enemy, a countryside ravaged, towns and castles destroyed by a hurricane and then swept away by a flood, and a surprise attack beginning an important battle.

In addition, the book contains an immense variety of material, with marked disparities in tone among the various sections.[12] There are, for example, important differences in interest and focus between the sections on Arthur's early wars to establish his power and dominance and those sections on Launcelot and Guenever. The former deal almost exclusively in political machinations and descriptions of battles, the latter in the vicissitudes of a private relationship. But in those latter sections the love-affair is more assumed than described, and the bulk of the material depicts public events upon which that relationship has some bearing, such as the scenes in which Launcelot defeats various accusers in order to save the Queen. In other words, despite their many

obvious differences, these sections share a predominantly narrative approach and give the impression that the author's attention is devoted to telling the story at hand, at whatever cost to philosophical consistency or unity of tone.

Furthermore, the moral tragedy approach necessarily overlooks the fact that <u>Le Morte D'Arthur</u> contains a number of thoroughly contradictory attitudes. One basic and quite irreconcilable contradiction within the Launcelot-Guenever story can indicate the perils involved for a critic who overlooks a writer's basic technique and preoccupation. I should like to be able to say of the various adulteries in the book that we can take them on their own terms, with the evaluation the book either gives or implies. But such a claim would unfortunately suggest a consistency in attitude that Malory does not display. In a traditional apostrophe to May, an exultation over natural recurrence, beauty, and love, Malory cites Guenever, and claims "while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end" (II: 315). Much later he shows Guenever at Almesbury, where she is visited by Launcelot. On this occasion she makes an often-quoted self-recriminating statement:

> Through this man and me hath all this war been wrought, and the death of the most noblest knights of the world; for through our love that we have loved together is my most noble lord slain.
> (II, 394)

Guenever's salvation is subsequently ascribed to repentance of her sinful ways and strict adherence to the ascetic life from then until her death. She is shown to have "a good end" because she renounces her love, and not, as in the earlier passage, because she is a true lover all her life.

Some critics have objected to Guenever's conduct toward Launcelot in her last scene with him as rather insensitive and unworthy, and one may of course make such judgments as one chooses. The more pertinent fact, however, is that Malory simply narrates the scene. He does not comment upon it or judge the performances of those who appear in it. Whatever the reader's reaction, one cannot say that it is indisputably at one with the author's. The absence of a categorical and comprehensive shaping of the material, as I suggested earlier, does not preclude the presence of moral conviction. A number of passages, such as the one in which Gawaine is enjoined always to grant mercy, have an almost aphoristic intent. There are many more passages, however, in which no moral judgment is evident, passages which convince us that Malory is simply telling us about the world as he sees it and saying, in effect, "this is the way things are."[13]

If the overwhelming stress in Le Morte D'Arthur lay on some philosophical or ethical analysis of events, then certain passages on Arthur would be crucial to an interpretation of the book as moral tragedy. Since Arthur is the central, if not the most interesting

figure in the book, the responsibility for the destruction of the Round Table, by Aristotelian standards, should ultimately rest upon his weaknesses and misjudgments. Arthur, like the other characters, has a good many of the failings that moralists attribute to him, failings which can perhaps be described generally as willfulness. To stress these weaknesses, however, as the dominating force in Le Morte D'Arthur is simply to misrepresent the very shape and content of the book. For one thing, Malory is not notably concerned with character analysis or development; he seldom makes an effort to develop a character fully. This lack of interest is particularly evident in the way characters such as Sir Kay and King Mark suddenly assume a new set of traits for which the reader is prepared inadequately or not at all.[14]

It is illuminating to examine several passages that show how Malory handles the most significant examples of Arthur's willfulness. Chapter XIX of the Caxton text begins with the following lines:

> Then after the departure of King Ban and of King Bors, King Arthur rode unto Carlion. And thither came to him, King Lot's wife, of Orkney, in manner of a message, but she was sent thither to espy the court of King Arthur; and she came richly bisene, with her four sons Gawaine, Gaheris, Agravine [sic], and Gareth, with many other knights, and ladies. For she was a passing fair lady, therefore, the king cast great love unto her, and desired to lie by her; so they were agreed, and he begat upon her Mordred, and she was his sister, on his mother's side, Igraine. So there she rested her a month, and at the last departed. Then the king dreamed a marvellous dream whereof he was sore adread. But all this time King Arthur knew not that King Lot's wife was his sister. Thus was the dream of Arthur . . .
>
> (I, 34-35)

Malory goes on to describe the dream, which has nothing to do with what immediately precedes it. He then describes an encounter with King Pellinore, who follows the Questing Beast and takes Arthur's horse. The final description is of a meeting with Merlin, disguised first as a youth and then as an old man. The section which includes these events is roughly five times the length of the passage just cited. We then come to another passage pertinent to what might be called the ethical aspect of Malory's characterization of Arthur:

> but ye have done a thing late that God is displeased with you, for ye have lain by your sister, and on her ye have gotten a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm. What are ye, said Arthur, that tell me these tidings? I am Merlin, and I was he in the child's likeness. Ah, said King Arthur, ye are a marvellous man, but I marvel much of thy words that I must die in battle. Marvel not, said Merlin, for it is God's will your body to be punished for your foul deeds; but I may well be sorry, said Merlin, for I shall die a shameful death to be put in the earth quick, and ye shall die a worshipful death. And as they talked this, came one with the king's horse, and so the king mounted on his horse, and Merlin on another, and so rode unto Carlion.
> (I, 37)

Certainly the elements of a grand tragic drama are here, and it might be valuable to speculate on what writers like Sophocles or Milton would have done with the material. However, the shape of these passages does not support the inference that Malory's primary interest lay in the ethics involved. Let us examine the passages with some care.

Apart from the proportions themselves--the sheer weight of innocuous description as compared with what might be considered

material for ethical interpretation--it is evident that there is no particular emphasis in these sections. Much diverse material is included, with no clear stress on any one clause or sentence that marks it as more important than any other. In the first passage quoted, we can even suspect that Malory adds as an afterthought Arthur's ignorance of his kinship to Morgause, surely important to a moral judgment of his action. But as Malory tells it, two rather perfunctory sentences intervene between the reference to their intercourse and that to Arthur's ignorance of their kinship. We should not accuse him of lacking interest in the fact of incest, but we can hardly maintain that he is preoccupied with its significance.

In the second passage there is a remarkable contrast, one frequently present in Malory, between calmness of tone and portentousness of content. Malory matter-of-factly refers to incest, the wrath of God, the destruction of a kingdom, and the mysterious living death of the world's most powerful mage. The sequence of sentences is similarly revealing. After Merlin's horrendous pronouncement, Arthur is first concerned to know the identity of the speaker. After satisfying himself on this point he wonders that Merlin had said he should die in battle (it should be noted that Merlin did not mention a battle) and seems unconcerned to know who the sister was. Finally, the aura of their respective deaths is baldly stated, with no reference to any reasonable ethical hierarchy that would explain or justify either Arthur's worshipful death or Merlin's shameful one. The full import of the technique itself is simply that this is the way

things are.

In Book III, Chapter I, we find the other early mention of a major element in Arthur's responsibility for the ultimate destruction of the Round Table. When Merlin asks Arthur whom he loves and wants for a wife, Arthur answers:

> I love Guenever the king's daughter, Leodegrance of the land of Cameliard, the which holdeth in his house the Table Round that ye told he had of my father Uther. And this damosel is the most valiant and fairest lady that I know living, or yet that ever I could find. Sir, said Merlin, as of her beauty and fairness she is one of the fairest on live, but, an ye loved her not so well as ye do, I should find you a damosel of beauty and of goodness that should like you and please you, an your heart were not set; but there as a man's heart is set, he will be loth to return. That is truth, said King Arthur. But Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenever was not wholesome for him to take to his wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again; and so he turned his tale to the adventures of Sangreal. Then Merlin desired of the king for to have men with him that should enquire of Guenever, and so the king granted him, and Merlin went forth . . .
>
> (I, 71)

The passage is predominantly descriptive, and the narrative pace makes any meaningful reflection virtually impossible. The power of fatefulness to which Merlin alludes is reinforced by the inclusive technique. There is no speculation on why Arthur chooses to pursue Guenever, despite Merlin's warning, and there is no other place in the book where Malory refers to this example of Arthur's willfulness as having a crucial effect on his fate and the fate of the Round Table.

Finally, we must consider whether Le Morte D'Arthur displays the relatively clear chain of cause and effect, of act and responsibility,

which any literary work dominated by moral considerations must have. I suspect that Malory had either a more vague or a more complex sense of causal relationships than can be indicated by such a claim. This is evident in the variety of reasons he gives at different points in the book for the downfall of the Round Table. First we have Merlin's early prophecies, previously quoted, concerning Arthur's incest with Morgause and Guenever's unsuitability to be his queen. Much later, both King Pelles and King Arthur state quite directly that the Grail Quest will break up the Round Table. No reasons are offered, although the information is given as though it were fact rather than speculation; Malory evidently considers it irrelevant to ask how they have access to such knowledge.

At the end of Caxton's Book XIX, Malory returns to something approaching an assessment of individual responsibility when, in his own voice, he says, "here I go unto the morte of King Arthur; and that caused Sir Agravaine" (II, 338). A few lines later, he somewhat expands this accusation:

> So in this season, as in the month of May, it befell a great anger and unhap that stinted not till the flower of chivalry of all the world was destroyed and slain; and all was long upon two unhappy knights, the which were named Agravaine and Sir Mordred, that were brethren unto Sir Gawaine. For this Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred had ever a privy hate unto the queen Dame Guenever and to Sir Launcelot.
> (II, 339)

In the midst of the hostility, Sir Lucan holds Gawaine responsible for what will come: "Alas . . . my lord Arthur would love Launcelot, but

Sir Gawaine will not suffer him." (II, 372) And just before his death Gawaine accuses himself:

> all is through mine own hastiness and wilfulness . . . and of all this am I causer, for Sir Launcelot and his blood, through their prowess, held all your cankered enemies in subjection and daunger . . . . But alas, I would not accord with him.
>
> (II, 382)

After the disastrous war between Arthur and Mordred, Guenever and Launcelot have their chance at self-recrimination. In Launcelot's presence, Guenever makes the statement to the ladies of Almesbury, previously quoted, and after her death Launcelot, mourning by her tomb and Arthur's says

> For when I remember me how by my default, mine orgulity and my pride, that they were both laid full low, that were peerless that ever was living of Christian people, wit you well, said Sir Launcelot, this remembered, of their kindness and mine unkindness, sank so to mine heart, that I might not sustain myself.
>
> (II, 398)

Obviously, by any standard of possibility, none of these indictments is entirely correct. Malory does nothing to make it unquestionably clear to us which charge he favors, although the only accusation expressed, as it were, in the author's voice, relates to Agravaine and Mordred. We can even read these charges, especially the latter ones, as suggesting the excessive human pride that insists that the individual has a decisive effect on events, even be it a disastrous effect. If it is perhaps possible to assess the subtle degrees of blame due to each character, the relevant fact nonetheless is that Malory does not

make this assessment. At the same time, it is equally clear that there is some truth in the charges; each figure bears some responsibility for the catastrophe. However, a critic trying to determine the relative degrees of guilt would overlook one of the most compelling implications of the last part of the book: that after a certain point there is nothing anyone can do to stop the inexorable course of events, or, to use a favorite medieval image, to halt the downward turn of the wheel of fortune. Such an approach would stress rational causation and human responsibility beyond what Malory leads us to believe is possible, for the inextricable tangle of human qualities and motivations, both good and bad, has by now been fully established. In the last sections prior to Arthur's death, we see that every action or decision, whether reasonable or unreasonable, well-intentioned or ill-intentioned, contributes in some way to the general disaster. It seems to me that Malory suggests the pathetic inadequacy of conscious individual intention or action to stem the forceful movement of history or to control the vicious and anarchic impulses within itself: to use a poetic term, he creates an image of glamorous self-destruction, of the Round Table preying upon itself and courting its own death.

To claim that Le Morte D'Arthur is a moral tragedy, a critic would thus have to assume that the author's major interest lay in what the reader must ferret out and piece together over long sections of unrelated material; that it is possible and appropriate to assess precisely the varying degrees of guilt and responsibility due each character;

that had certain figures made different decisions at significant points, the tragedy would not have happened; and that in the absence of unequivocal editorial judgment, the reader nonetheless has access to his unexpressed preferences. Such a claim cannot be justified by a careful examination of the book and is irrelevant to describing the bulk of its contents. Malory is far less convinced about the coherence and crucial relevance of individual action than the author of a moral tragedy would be; he is very much concerned with other aspects of his material that such an emphasis tends to obscure.

3.

Malory's Basic Themes and Assumptions

How, then, can we describe Malory's work so as to take into account more important aspects of it than the moral tragedy approach can comprehend?[15] It seems to me fruitless to try to find aesthetic unity in a work so various and even contradictory--a work that includes different styles and is most uneven in execution. It will be more interesting and profitable to study the book with an eye to the sense of human life that informs it; to ask what is the unalterable condition of the human experience assumed and dealt with in Le Morte D'Arthur. For it is the very absence of a comprehensive and coherent shaping of the material which suggests that the work will reveal more than it will say explicitly; that it is, in the most serious way, about things that Malory does not necessarily talk about directly or evaluate. While he is telling a story

and concerned primarily to do so, there are certain assumptions about man and his life in society that profoundly shape his material.

I should like to isolate what seem to me six major aspects of the world of Le Morte D'Arthur and show how Malory's treatment gives them thematic significance. The first, an emphatic fatalism, tends to underline the other five characteristics which together demonstrate the extreme tenuousness of the whole society portrayed. Second is a violence so extreme and often bizarre as to shock even a modern reader.[16] The third aspect, the seriousness and scope of which have been inadequately represented by the critics, is political factionalism and the constant threat of social dissolution. The fourth and fifth characteristics are closely related: the difficulty in going beyond the old law of retribution in kind and the contingent problem of finding a satisfactory method of determining guilt and sufficient reparation for it. Finally, while recognizing the tenuousness of the social order, we must admit the vast and entirely legitimate importance in the Arthurian world of surface and form, and the accepted discrepancy between social facade and moral reality.

I have noted Malory's technique of narrating the story as though it were actual history and elaborating the details of most of the situations. In the Arthurian world from which he draws his material he discovers what we might see as the counterpart to this artistic habit of inclusiveness; he shows in it a substantial element of fatefulness. In other words, he tells the story as though the events were real and

had already happened, refusing to emphasize one event or situation as more important than another. By proceeding in this way, he implies that the course of history could not have been altered. The suggested fatalism does not demand that we regard his characters as meaningless ciphers; this fatalism is not pervasive, and its presence in Malory implies more the inevitability of human frailty and decay than the victimization of man by an all-powerful force outside of the human will.

Merlin, with his faculty of superhuman vision and his prophecies, is the major and most interesting early manifestation of this quality in the Arthurian world. He is not completely omniscient; he knows, for example, that in the first battles Arthur wages to establish his power one of two great kings must die, and he manages to ensure that the loser be Lot rather than Arthur. But the impact of his mysterious presence, the dreams which foretell future events, and various comments, either from Malory or from other characters, indicating certain knowledge of things to come all constitute, not a philosophical fatalism, but a literary evocation of inevitability. In Le Morte D'Arthur, there is a constant sense of life's many pressures. The major characters seem bigger than life, but nonetheless we are made aware that they can gain only partial and temporary control over the forces that threaten them. Not only do Merlin's prophecies come true, neither the reader nor Malory ever doubts that they will.

The prophecies themselves, or the characters' reactions to them, frequently are an ironic commentary on the actual limitations of

human ability, for they indicate the way a character's actions result in ends that are the opposite of his desires or intentions. Balin and Launcelot will kill the men they love most in the world. Arthur will beget, in ignorance of an incestuous relationship, a son who will destroy him. He will marry for love a woman who is fated to love another. The passage in which Merlin warns Arthur of Morgan's treachery and of his own departure emphasizes the limitations of human possibility:

> So on a time he told King Arthur that he should not dure long, but for all his crafts he should be put in the earth quick, and so he told the king many things that should befall, but always he warned the king to keep well his sword and the scabbard, for he told him how the sword and the scabbard should be stolen by a woman from him that he most trusted. Also he told King Arthur that he should miss him--Yet had ye lever than all your lands to have me again. Ah, said the king, since ye know of your adventures, purvey for it, and put away by your crafts that misadventure. Nay, said Merlin, it will not be; so he departed from the king.
> (I, 90)

All Merlin's knowledge cannot save him from certain doom, and he knows, while warning Arthur of treachery, that the warning will be futile.

This fatalism underlines those elements in the Arthurian world that threaten its stability and peace, and the most obvious of the threats is physical. Coexistent with the glamor and brilliance in Malory's pages is a recurrent violence and even barbarism. Malory characterizes the era: "In those days the son spared not the father no more than a stranger"(II, 199) There are of course the wars, but they are neither unique to the Arthurian world nor the most interesting aspect of it. It should be noted in passing, however, that the numbers against

Arthur are always staggering: in the first section alone, there are at one time eleven kings against him and at another, five; after defeating these, he must face the Emperor Lucius and his subordinates from all of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. While the success of Arthur's knights against such odds (apart from the fact that overwhelming opposition to the hero is a normal convention of the medieval romance) tends to lend them heroic or archetypal stature, at the same time the number of Arthur's enemies suggests the extraordinary power of the forces of dissolution.

The modern reader is particularly struck, however, with certain kinds of violence which occur so frequently that they indicate a considerable threat to Arthur's world. In describing this violence, Malory often omits any indication of its cause, as though it were so ordinary as to render explanation superfluous. One of the recurrent evils is "the custom of the castle." We are first introduced to it in the section on Balin, when blood is demanded of a damsel with whom he rides: "their lady was sick, and had lain many years, and she might not be whole but if she had a dish silver full of blood of a clean maid and a king's daughter." (I, 62) This demand is comparatively mild when we consider the custom with which Tristram is forced to deal:

> for the custom of the castle was such, who that rode by that castle and brought any lady, he must needs fight with the lord, that hight Breunor. And if it were so that Breunor won the fight, then should the knight stranger and his lady be put to death, what that ever they were; and if it were so that the strange knight won the field of Sir Breunor, then should he die and his lady both. This custom was used many winters, for it was called the Castle

Pluere, that is to say the Weeping Castle.
(I, 273)

Malory reveals little emotion or outrage in describing how Tristram handles the situation. Tristram, before striking off the head of Breunor's wife, says "meseemeth it were pity that my lady should lose her head" (I, 274); and Breunor "dread his lady's head should be off . . . [but] thy lady is fairer than mine, and that me sore repenteth" (I, 274-275).

Despite historians' claims about the exaltation of women in chivalric society, a cursory reading of Malory's tales discourages nostalgia.[17] Not only are they widowed or otherwise bereft with predictable frequency--they are not themselves immune to extremes of violence. Gawaine's temporary punishment for beheading a lady is "that he should bear the dead lady with him in this manner; the head of her was hanged about his neck, and the whole body of her lay before him on his horse's mane" (I, 80). Gaheris beheads his own mother, whom he has surprised in bed with Sir Lamorak. Another knight who beheads his wife, despite Launcelot's attempted intervention, is required to bear her head about his neck to the Holy Land. The fact that the latter punishment is levied by Guenever and her ladies suggests not only their acquaintance with bizarre violence but a degree of participation in it. Guenever herself is threatened with burning at least three times, and when only four of the ladies of Mark's court "drank clene" from the horn of chastity he condemns the other ninety-five to be burned. The fact that none of these burnings actually takes place in

the narrative does not mitigate this sense of constant peril.

Sudden attack by an unknown enemy knight is another typical form of violence. An illustration of this threat is the frequent reappearance of the knight called Breuse Sance Pite, whom the knights of the Round Table are never able to capture and hold. He is the embodiment of the wicked potentialities of knighthood, and his elusiveness makes him almost a symbol in Le Morte D'Arthur of the threatening evil forces which Arthur's knights must continually fight and can never quite subdue. Along with Breuse and his less spectacular or consistent counterparts in vice are the monsters and giants who periodically menace and destroy. Lucius, for example, gets the help of "fifty giants which had been engendered of fiends" (I, 133).

Certainly one of the most ominous figures in all of legendry is Arthur's half-sister Morgan, who has extraordinary powers of enchantment and invariably uses them for vicious ends. Her evil is sometimes gratuitous, but more often motivated by jealousy or hatred. Arthur owes his defeat partially to his blind trust in her, for it is she who steals Excalibur and its scabbard and leaves him vulnerable to personal attack. Her role in the book is more significant than that of Breuse: she suggests the divisiveness inherent in the closest bonds, the cankering hatred that may spring from intimacy.

Banishment, enchantment, and imprisonment are other constant threats, and even the central figures are at times subjected to them. Such experiences often force them into dilemmas with which rational

ethical standards seem ill-equipped to cope. Arthur, for example, has to make the distressing choice between languishing virtuously in prison and fighting as champion for the cowardly and evil Sir Damas in order to free himself and twenty other prisoners. On another occasion Launcelot fights Sir Brian de les Isles, who is suggestively characterized as "a noble man and a great enemy unto King Arthur" (I, 308), and by defeating him frees from his prison "of Arthur's knights thirty, and forty ladies" (I, 309).

Finally, there is the threat of insanity: two of the major figures, Tristram and Launcelot, are driven mad by love. They wander, each for two years, occasionally mistaken for local idiots. Thus the extreme vulnerability of the most noble people in Arthur's world, both to external danger and to internal division and degradation, is made abundantly clear.

Intimately related to the violence of the Arthurian world are its factionalism and the ever-present threat of political chaos. The suggestion that the barons want to kill Tristram when he is born, "by cause they would have been lords of the country of Liones" (I, 240), gives us some idea of this problem. There is a fascinating theme in the book (upon which there are many not entirely consistent variations) that pertains to the relationship between loyalty to a family and loyalty to a larger group. Blood ties were, of course, of critical importance in medieval times, and they are not undervalued in _Le Morte D'Arthur_.[18] It is necessary, for instance, for Merlin to prove that

Arthur is the son of Uther before he can command a minimum degree of allegiance. Meanwhile the tribal instincts flourish: "Then stood the realm in great jeopardy long while, for every lord that was mighty of men made him strong, and many weened to have been king" (I, 10). However, to create the strong political unity which comes to be known as the Round Table, Arthur must merge these family loyalties into a more comprehensive whole. He relies largely on the idea of a community of good men who urge each other to ever greater achievements. The vulnerability of the Round Table lies partially in the fact that it must be inspired primarily by personal loyalty to him, though bound by larger ideals:[19]

> then the king stablished all his knights, and gave them that were of lands not rich, he gave them lands, and charged them never to do outrageousity nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world's goods. Unto this were all the knights sworn to the Table Round, both old and young. And every year were they sworn at the high feast of Pentecost.
>
> (I, 89-90)

The punishments promised for violation of these ideals are both practical and severe, but they nonetheless cannot ensure complete obedience to Arthur's commands. At several points Malory makes perfectly clear the inherent limitations of Arthur's power. His attempts to force King Mark to treat Tristram humanely are ludicrously ineffective; Arthur's inability to command the unqualified allegiance of his

nephew is disastrous.

The difficulty of Arthur's attempt to comprehend family loyalties in a greater whole is emphasized by the progressively ominous recurrence of the phrase "Gawaine and his brethren."[20] What at first seems merely a verbal tag comes to have serious thematic significance. Gawaine is the son of Lot and Morgause, and consequently a nephew of Arthur. Lot opposes Arthur and is slain by King Pellinore. From what we can tell of the narrative, he is not a victim of treachery but rather the loser in a game whose rules he accepts. His son Gawaine, however, does not recognize the ethics of political war as being any different from more essentially domestic strife, and he takes upon himself the responsibility of the blood feud: "But King Pellinore bare the wytte of the death of King Lot, wherefore Sir Gawaine revenged the death of his father the tenth year after he was made knight, and slew King Pellinore with his own hands" (I, 58).

The disastrous loyalty of Gawaine to the family tie, along with its consequent divisiveness to the Round Table, is not developed until the second half of Le Morte D'Arthur. At a joust that Arthur has called, Lamorak, son of King Pellinore, wins the prize by smiting down

> twenty knights, beside Sir Gawaine and his brethren . . . The king was glad, and also was all the fellowship of the Round Table, except Sir Gawaine and his brethren . . . . Then Gawaine called privily in council all his brethren, and to them said thus: Fair brethren, here may ye see, whom that we hate King Arthur loveth, and whom that we love he hateth. . . . Sir, said Sir Gawaine's brethren, let us see how ye will or may be revenged, and ye shall find us ready.
> (II, 10)

It would be tedious to trace the many references to this clique, but they bear a significance considerably beyond even the infamous murder of Sir Lamorak. After Launcelot's accidental slaying of Gareth, Gawaine's purpose is complete destruction. Only then are there references to Launcelot's kin, or at least only then do such references become so frequent that we are compelled to recognize their importance. We discover that the strength of the Round Table has come largely through the union of the families of Gawaine and Launcelot, and this insight helps to explain why Launcelot has continued to honor Gawaine regardless of his vindictiveness and other negative qualities. Contrary to Merlin's early claim, Launcelot has not loved Gawaine more than anyone else in the world, but he has been politically loyal to him to to Arthur.

It is Gawaine who is portrayed as the principal reason for the permanent alienation between Launcelot and Arthur: "the noble King Arthur would have taken his queen again, and have been accorded with Sir Launcelot, but Sir Gawaine would not suffer him by no manner of mean" (II, 358). The coalition, which aimed at a kinder, more spacious justice, cannot withstand the determined onslaught of the old law of the blood feud. Launcelot is continually forced to do the things he has said he will not do; the whole tale of the war concerns the interplay of Gawaine's persistence and Launcelot's reluctance. And the slow progress of the struggle suggests the tenacity of the Round Table ideal when it is confronted with the reality of its

self-destruction. On his deathbed Gawaine acknowledges his responsibility for the dissolution of the Round Table:

> all is through mine own hastiness and willfulness . . . had Sir Launcelot been with you as he was, this unhappy war had never begun; and of all this am I causer, for Sir Launcelot and his blood, through their prowess, held all your cankered enemies in subjection and daunger.
>
> (II, 382)

I do not wish to exaggerate, as Gawaine probably does, his entire responsibility as a fallible human being for the final disaster. But we are justified in seeing him as a type, characteristic of a certain period of social and political history: one who is unable to commit himself completely to loyalties and allegiances larger than the clan, one who cannot accept a standard of justice more comprehensive and humane than that of retribution in kind.

The problems of accepting and rendering justice and mercy in the world of Le Morte D'Arthur extend far beyond those relevant to Gawaine alone, although his refusal to accept Arthur's authority in this area proves fatal to the Round Table. There are many incidental examples of an attempt to evolve a system that will provide a more stable, coherent, and merciful means of dealing with wrongdoing. The most obvious and important embodiment of this desire is the ritualistic command by the victorious Round Table knight that his defeated opponent go in penance to Arthur's court and there pledge himself to loyalty and good conduct. There is a desperate need to break the deadly spiral of personal vindictiveness, and a willingness to accept

at face value a knight's assurances of good intentions. Arthur's need to create a stable society in which his hegemony is explicitly acknowledged is reflected in a court that characteristically gives mercy rather than justice; the most extraordinary crimes are forgiven in exchange for sworn political allegiance. The weakness of the system is clear in the case of King Mark, whose word is worthless and whose chronic unscrupulousness victimizes good men. But this ritualistic system is presented as undoubtedly the best means yet evolved for dealing with a deeply serious question of moral and social stability.

Arthur's lenience toward the outrages committed by potential political allies is rarely matched by mercy toward treason within his acknowledged realm (although in the supreme instance he regrets that he initially pursued the letter of the law). Death by burning at the stake is the punishment for treason (a crime which has a wide latitude of interpretation) and for murder. The major problem related to these essentially domestic concerns is the determination of guilt; and here we must recognize the close equation in the Arthurian world between physical achievement and moral worth, while understanding the consequences of that equation for determining guilt.

A physical trial is frequently considered the appropriate and reliable test of a man's spiritual dignity. There are swords that only eminently good men can handle, and bridges to be used only by those "without treachery or villainy." Launcelot proves himself the "best knight of the world" (II, 332) by healing Sir Urre. The political

implication is simple: the recognized and accepted test of moral right and wrong is trial by physical combat. When King Anguish is accused of murder, he gets Tristram to defend him in combat with Sir Blamore; most notably, several times Launcelot saves Guenever from burning at the stake by standing as her champion and defeating her accuser. It is significant that when Guenever is first accused of treason, the only reasoned examination of the likelihood of her guilt appears in a statement by Bors--a statement intended merely to justify his being her champion and not considered a proper way to determine her guilt or innocence.

The inadequacy of this type of trial as a sure means of determining moral right and wrong is perfectly obvious to everyone.[21] When Mark wounds Amant, Malory notes, "And yet was Amant in the righteous quarrel" (I, 392). An exchange between Launcelot and Gawaine presents the situation with great lucidity. Launcelot says that he and Guenever had been wrongly accused by Mordred and Agravaine, whom he had subsequently defeated; "they called thee right, said Sir Gawaine. My lord, Sir Gawaine, said Sir Launcelot, in their quarrel they proved themselves not in the right" (II, 364). Both Gawaine and Launcelot himself know he is being sophistical; as Arthur has said earlier:

> I will not that way with Sir Launcelot, for he trusteth so much upon his hands and his might that he doubteth no man; and therefore for my queen he shall never fight more, for she shall have the law.
> (II, 310)

However, no surer method, nor even a satisfactory alternative, is ever put forward, and Malory clearly considers it more primitive when Arthur forsakes this method and, "in this heat" (II, 349), condemns Guenever to the fire. In this context, we should observe that on the other occasions, Guenever either has been innocent, or, by the cleverly-worded terms of the accusation, must be adjudged innocent.

The inevitable testimony of such evidence is that there is a tacitly acknowledged discrepancy between the intricate forms of this world and the moral or human relationships which such forms ideally symbolize, and while the discrepancy may be lamented, a more adequate social representation has not been evolved. The forms and public roles have real and immense intrinsic value, and when a choice is necessary between public position and private fulfillment, the latter is always sacrificed. In _Le Morte D'Arthur_ neither Launcelot nor Guenever questions the rightness of her return to Arthur, once there have been assurances given for her life. Her role as Queen is more important to both of them than their love. The elaborate rituals of the Arthurian world satisfy an intense need to provide a measure of coherence and beauty that will serve as a bulwark against the disruptive forces with which these people must contend.[22] The pageantry of the court society can be seen as a necessary, albeit superficial, manifestation of stability and solidity in a world menaced by barbarism and anarchy. The jousts, the tournaments, and the more casual knightly encounters have an additional function beyond

training men in the skills of physical combat which the political situation of their world demands for survival. They have the effect of stylizing and consequently of giving grandeur and a kind of legality to what is in essence a barbaric necessity. They give a grace and dignity to the most brutal and basic kind of social judgment, that which ranks men primarily according to their physical prowess. After all, it is perfectly clear that one of the major reasons Mark's court is considered inferior to Arthur's is the cowardliness of his knights when challenged to combat.

It is also true, however, that Arthur's elaborate court society is superior because it has aimed toward the ideal conduct embodied in the Round Table oath. It has tried, but of course it has not been entirely successful. Lamorak knows that both courts share a divergence between real and assumed morality. He chooses to expose that divergence in Mark's court because "I had liefer strife and debate fell in King Mark's court rather than Arthur's court, for the honor of both courts be not alike (I, 294). More important, Malory himself in effect recognizes this disparity and the necessity for preserving the social surface. Among the many accusations of responsibility for the Round Table's destruction, the only one in Malory's voice is directed toward Agravaine and Mordred. We must recognize, as Malory does, that they were not mistaken or unjust in their charge; their culpability lay in violating a worldly, unspoken gentlemen's agreement that even Gawaine recognized as fundamentally important to the stability of their world.

In the Arthurian milieu much importance is attached to fame and honor, qualities which imply a standard of pride and dignity in terms of worldly opinion. These preoccupations bear important similarities to rituals and pageantry; they share an orientation that is essentially external. They are concerned with surfaces, with a public relationship. It is often difficult to know whether such preoccupations are compatible with ethical issues, or whether they must simply be referred for their justification and power to an overwhelming need for stability and order. The partial lack of congruence between the two can be seen early in the book, when Balin beheads the Lady of the Lake in the presence of Arthur. The King, horrified, exclaims "ye have shamed me and all my court." He is unmoved by Balin's recital of her wicked deeds and says, "What cause soever ye had . . . ye should have foreborne her in my presence" (I, 50).

However, Le Morte D'Arthur cannot be called a critique of honor as the highest goal of worldly man because this standard is so obviously responsible for most of the admirable deeds recounted in it. One must realize, after all, that a society that must preserve itself against powerful and recognized threats must be preoccupied with "honor" as partially distinct from "integrity." Irving Howe has made a valuable distinction between the two, which we can see has a different applicability in Malory's world than it does in the world of a contemporary writer like Faulkner:

> Honor points to what one is in the world, integrity to what one is in oneself. Honor involves a public

> relation to others, a standard of pride and dignity, a level of status and reputation; integrity an ease of being and security of conscience. Honor requires an act of the will, integrity is a condition that cannot be summoned. Honor depends upon an assertion of one's worth, integrity upon a readiness to face the full burden of one's existence.[23]

It is clear that the responsible ruling members of a threatened society often cannot afford the luxury of "integrity," a purely private virtue, which cannot be imitated, transferred, or even evaluated by the workable standards of ordinary society. Integrity may characterize recluses, saints, or ordinary admirable private human beings, but is less likely to inspire a public figure held up as a model. It is notable that Launcelot, who is unquestionably presented as the most admirable human being in the book, never shows remorse or even reluctance to lie in order to preserve the public facade of his and Guenever's innocence.[24] This willingness to deny publicly what they privately know to be true is equally characteristic of the lesser figures in the book, and Malory never appears to assume the right to approve or disapprove of such attitudes. The Arthurian world, then, is one in which there are many rights and many wrongs--one in which moral outrage may be a dangerous indulgence; and those who inhabit it tend to admit this worldly fact and keep living together as well as they can. Sir Segwarides recognizes this when he says to Tristram:

> I know you for Sir Tristram de Liones, the man in the world that I have most cause to hate, because ye departed the love between me and my wife; but as for that . . . I will never hate a noble knight for a light lady; and therefore, I pray you, by my friend, and I will be yours unto my power; for wit ye well ye are

> hard bestead in this valley, and we shall have enough to do either of us to succour other.
> (I, 292)

The relative importance of private moral considerations is best illustrated by Arthur's reaction to his wife's adultery. When Agravaine tells Arthur about Launcelot and Guenever, the king's reply shows little emotion: "If it be so . . . wit you well he (Launcelot) is none other (than a traitor), but I would be loath to begin such a thing but I might have proofs upon it" (II, 341). We sense that Arthur is trapped by his position so that he can no longer ignore Agravaine's charge. His role as ultimate judge and dispenser of justice makes it impossible for him to disregard an overt accusation, and the best he can do is to insist on incontrovertible proof. It seems to me that some of the most considerable evidence against the moralistic interpretation of Malory comes in an editorial aside:

> For as the French book saith, the king was full loath thereto, that any noise should be upon Sir Launcelot and his queen; for the king had a deeming, but he would not hear of it, for Sir Launcelot had done so much for him and the queen so many times, that wit ye well the king loved him passingly well.
> (II, 341)

In the later scenes it is made quite clear that Arthur is perfectly willing to take Guenever back and wishes he had not listened to Agravaine. There is a firm sense of proportion in his words after Launcelot rescues Guenever from the fire: "much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have anew, but such a fellowship of good knights

shall never be together in no company" (II, 353).

The book implicitly shows the limitations of honor, less, when it demands the sacrifice of ethical right than when it precludes forgiveness and drives a man to what he is capable of recognizing as his own destruction and the destruction of others. Immediately before his fatal encounter with his unrecognized brother, Balin laments, "I may not turn now again for shame" (I, 67). Arthur kills Accolon and is almost killed himself while supporting a cause he knows to be unjust. At one point he says he will continue the battle he promised to wage because "I had lever to die with honour than to live with shame" (I, 103). Considerations of honor work against Tristram's marrying Isoud himself: he says to King Anguish, "Sir, an I did then I were shamed for ever in this world, and false of my promise" (I, 272). Most important of all, Arthur sorrowfully recognizes that the prevailing standards of honor make it impossible for him to readmit Launcelot and his followers: "for I may never hold them together no more with my worship" (II, 353).

Thus it seems to me inappropriate, if not impossible, to read Malory's work as though the author had a particular and coherent philosophy or ethics he wanted to expound in it. Nor does the author's particular sensibility seem noticeably to dominate and modify the work. The Morte is various, lively, contradictory, vivid, and, it seems to me, quite unpretentious. One of the most impressive and serious things about it is that, though it is literally story-telling, it reveals a great deal about a solid and historically explicable

world, I have tried to underline the tangibility of this world, at least partly because we find nothing remotely like it in the Arthurian poems of Tennyson and Robinson. The sense of reality that underlies the story-telling is both sound and sober, although the reality which it reflects is not a wholly universal one but rather characteristic of a certain period of social development. The stories obviously have very wide appeal, since so many writers have been so fascinated with them. But this appeal is primarily one of sheer human interest, and whatever other dimensions we may find in later Arthurian poems or stories will probably reflect the writer's own sense of reality or vision of life. In the two major sections that follow I want to take special note of the other dimensions to be found in Tennyson's and Robinson's poems in order to determine how congenial they are to the story itself and how likely they are to inspire fine poetry.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER I

[1]Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur (London, 1961), p. i. All subsequent references to this edition are parenthesized by page and volume number within the text of the discussion.

[2]Sally Shaw, Caxton and Malory," Essays on Malory, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford, 1963), pp. 144-145.

[3]G.L. Kittredge, "Who was Sir Thomas Malory?" Harvard Studies and Notes, vol. v., 1896.

[4]Malory had been convicted of "cattle-lifting, poaching, extortion, sacrilegious robbery, attempted murder, and rape." C.S. Lewis, "The English Prose Morte," Essays on Malory, p. 9.

[5]William Matthews, The Ill-Framed Knight (Berkeley, 1966). Matthews argues most persuasively against the Kittredge thesis:

> When the hypothesis that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel was the author of Le Morte D'Arthur is subjected to skeptical examination, almost nothing is left to support it. The man's career seems morally discordant with the book. It is extremely unlikely that he could have written the book in Newgate. The few conjectured allusions to Warwickshire people prove to be no allusions at all. The language gives no evidence of Warwickshire origin, and in fact points elsewhere. It seems likely that the Warwickshire Malory was not in prison at the time the book was written in prison. And even if he were in prison, he was much too old to have written it.
>
> (p. 73)

Matthews discovers that the linguistic evidence of the book points to a northerner, a probability made more likely by the fact that one of the sources, the Morte Arthure, is an alliterative poem in northern dialect not easily comprehensible to a non-northern Englishman. After greatly detailed research, he is able to report:

> despite the Dictionary of National Biography's flat statement to the contrary, despite the reported failures of Sommer, Kittredge, and all their followers, there was a Yorkshire man named Thomas Malory at the time that Le Morte D'Arthur was written. The fact is made certain by family witness, genealogies made almost contemporaneously, and accounts and records made while the person was alive.
>
> (p. 126)

[6]Eugene Vinaver, ed. The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, 3 3 vols. (Clarendon Press, 1967), footnote no. 2, xxi, I.

[7]Eugene Vinaver, "On Art and Nature," Essays on Malory, p. 38ff.; The Works of Sir Thomas Malory, ed. Vinaver.

[8]Their works include the following: R.M. Lumiansky, ed., Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte D'Arthur (Baltimore, 1964); R.M. Lumiansky, "The Question of Unity in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, TSE, V (1955), pp. 29-39; Lumiansky, "The Relationship of Lancelot and Guenever in Malory's 'Tale of Lancelot,'" MLN, LXVIII (1953), pp. 86-91; R.H. Wilson, "How Many Books Did Malory Write?" University of Texas Studies in English, XXX (1951), p. 1-23; Wilson, "Malory and the Perlesvaus," MP, XXX (1932), pp. 13-22; Mary E. Dichmann, "Characterization in Malory's 'Tale of Arthur and

Lucius'" PMLA, LXV (1950), pp. 877-95; Barbara Bartholomew, "The Thematic Function of Malory's Gawain," CE, XXIV (1963), pp. 262-7; J.A.W. Bennett, ed., Essays on Malory, passim; C. Moorman, "internal Chronology in Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur," JEGP, LX (1961), pp. 240-249; C. Moorman, "Malory's Tragic Knights," Medieval Studies, XXVII (1965), pp. 117-127; C. Moorman, "Malory's Treatment of the Sankgreall," PMLA, LXXI (1956), pp. 496-509; C. Moorman, The Book of King Arthur: The Unity of Malory's Morte D'Arthur (University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

[9] Charles Moorman, "The Tale of the Sankgreall," Malory's Originality, p. 147.

[10] Roger Sherman Loomis, "Sir Thomas Malory," The Development of Arthurian Romance (London, 1963), p. 170; Vinaver's notes, Works, pp. 1265-81, 1360-64, 1398-1404, 1417-24, 1432-43, 1521-30, 1572-82, 1600-12; also in commentary, pp. 1281 ff.; Lumiansky, p. 2 ff.; Lewis, p. 19.

[11] Lewis, p. 24.

[12] "In spite of his efforts to achieve coherence and consistency, he failed--and could not help failing--to attain a complete organic unity. Besides the discrepancies and contradictions already cited, there is a wide variety of tone. What a gap in style, ideology, and

feeling between the tale of Arthur's war with the Emperor Lucius and the tale of the Sangreal. The one borrows its pompous style from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, glorifies conquest and cruelty, and makes a fine art of boasting and insult; the other is written in an austere, plain style, reprobates manslaughter, and breathes the spirit of its Cistercian model." Loomis, p. 173.

[13]"Judgment in Malory is neither so rigorous nor so easy as a moral system would imply. Malory's morals are, in a sense that is not meant to be pejorative, quite loose." Stephen Miko, "Malory and the Chivalric Order," Medium Aevum, XXXV (1966), pp. 211-212. Miko's article appeared after this chapter was completed, and his approach and perceptions are fundamentally similar to my own; we differ on a few points, but to point them out would be tantamount to quibbling.

[14]"When Sir Kay first appears on the scene he is the deceitful lad who falsely claims the kingship of England, but presently he is Arthur's trusted seneschal, performing great feats of arms in a tourney, only to turn up in Book VII as a churlish mocker, easily unhorsed by young Sir Gareth." Loomis, p. 171. In Book IV, Chapter III, Sir Kay is shown to be a gallant knight: "No force, said Sir Kay, I will undertake for two of them, and then may ye three undertake for the other three . . . but always Queen Guenever praised Sir Kay for his deeds, and said, What lady that ye love, and she love you not again she were greatly to blame; and among ladies, said

the queen, I shall bear your noble fame, for ye spake a great word, and fulfilled it worshipfully." (I, 93-94) Much further on, as Loomis notes, Kay is easily thrown by the fledgling knight, Sir Gareth, and when Launcelot disguises himself in Sir Kay's armor, various other Round Table knights feel that he will be easy to overcome: "When he was passed the three knights saiden him that it was the proud Kay: He weeneth no knight so good as he, and the contrary is ofttime proved." (I, 170) His behavior to Gareth is abominable by any standards, much less those of chivalry: "And sythen he hath no name, I shall give him a name that shall be Beaumains, that is Fair-hands, and into the kitchen I shall bring him, and there he shall have fat brose every day, that he shall be as fat by the twelve-months' end as a pork hog. Right so the two men departed and beleft him to Sir Kay, that scorned him and mocked him." (I, 182) In the early parts of Malory's work, King Mark is a good king and entirely solicitous of his nephew's welfare: "Then was King Mark and all his barons passing heavy, for they deemed none other but that Sir Tristram should not recover. Then the king let send after all manner of leeches and surgeons, both unto men and women, and there was none that would behote him the life . . . . When King Mark understood that, he let purvey for Sir Tristram a fair vessel, well victualed, and therein was put Sir Tristram." (I, 249) The reason that King Mark is given for beginning to hate Tristram is convincing enough: "at last there befell a jealousy and an unkindness

betwixt King Mark and Sir Tristram, for they loved both one lady. And she was an earl's wife that hight Sir Segwarides. And this lady loved Sir Tristram passingly well. And he loved her again, for she was a passing fair lady, and that espied Sir Tristram well. Then King Mark understood that and was jealous, for King Mark loved her passingly well." (I, 257) But the sneakiness and unfairness of his behaviour to Tristram is quite out of keeping with anything we previously have been told about him: "King Mark armed him, and made him ready, and took two knights of his council with him, and so he rode afore for to abide by the way, for to wait upon Sir Tristram. And as Sir Tristram came riding upon his way with his spear in his hand, King Mark came hurtling upon him with his two knights suddenly." (I, 257) He subsequently forces Tristram to do a thing totally against his honor as a knight (I, 285), and he becomes an entirely evil man: "I will that ye wit my coming hither is to this intent, for to destroy Sir Tristram by wiles or by treason; and it shall be hard if ever he escape our hands. Alas, said Sir Bersules, what mean you? for ye be set in such a way ye are disposed shamefully; for Sir Tristram is the knight of most worship that we know living, and therefore I warn you plainly I will never consent to do him to the death; and therefore I will yield my service, and forsake you. When King Mark heard him say so, suddenly he drew his sword and said: Ah, traitor; and smote Sir Bersules on the head, that the sword went to his teeth." (I, 381)

[15]"Malory was a translator who abbreviated and adapted and sometimes added small details--occasionally even short stories. He is not to be judged solely by his changes, however; he must be judged by his work as a whole. He is as responsible for what he chose to translate as for what he chose to add. He is not to be stripped of what is holy and gentle simply because he found it in French. Nor is he to be judged by any small gathering of scattered phrases that may or may not reflect a materialistic outlook. Far outshining the grey cloud of all such small, unemphasized details is his reiterated nostalgia for decencies no longer observed, and his idealism in two lovely tales that are related in none of his known sources: the tale of Gareth, which is nothing but gentle, and the tale of Sir Urry, which seems nothing but holy." Matthews, p. 49.

[16]See J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (London, 1955), pp. 9-30. Although Huizinga's book is about the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and the Netherlands, his analyses, if not taken absolutely literally, are revealing about Malory's own era.

[17]"Indeed, medieval literature shows little true pity for woman, little compassion for her weakness and the dangers and pains which love has in store for her. Pity took on a stereotyped and factitious form, in the sentimental fiction of the knight delivering the virgin . . . . Civilization always needs to wrap up the idea of love in veils of fancy, to exalt and refine it, and thereby to forget

cruel reality. The solemn or graceful game of the faithful knight or the amorous shepherd, the fine imagery of courtly allegories, however brutally life belie them, never lost their charm nor all their moral value. The human mind needs these forms, and they always remain essentially the same." Huizinga, pp. 128-129.

[18]"When vow clashes with vow, blood provides the method of counting sides. Malory continually reminds us that vows grow out of these more fundamental bonds . . . . The better one's blood, moreover, the better one's chances to achieve the greatest worship. This is taken quite literally, as a principle of heredity. Lancelot and Galahad are descended from Jesus Christ, and they are consequently the highest examples of the earthly and the saintly knight." Miko, p. 212.

[19]"The main function of chivalry, after all, is to hold down chaos, to defend it through knighthood and noble blood. The Round Table is, as the queen of the Waste Lands had pointed out long ago, a symbol of perfection, and by that perfection is meant unity and order in the face of their opposites." Miko, p. 226.

[20]But again, see Miko, p. 222 ff.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 219 ff.

[22]"It is important to realize the function of festivals in the society of that time. They still preserved something of the meaning they have in primitive societies, that of the supreme expression of their culture, the highest mode of a collective enjoyment and an assertion of solidarity . . . at a time when the higher pleasures were neither numerous nor accessible to all, people felt the need of such collective rejoicings as festivals. The more crushing the misery of daily life, the stronger the stimulants that will be needed to produce that intoxication with beauty and delight without which life would be unbearable. The fifteenth century, profoundly pessimistic, a prey to continual depression, could not forgo the emphatic affirmation of the beauty of life afforded by these splendid and solemn collective rejoicings. Books were expensive, the country was unsafe, art was rare; the individual lacked the means of distraction. All literary, musical, and artistic enjoyment was more or less closely connected with festivals . . . . The festival requires style." Huizinga, p. 252.

[23]Irving Howe, William Faulkner (New York, 1962), p. 148

[24]"Whether [Lancelot] recognizes 'right other wrong' is not the final point, for he is against chaos and mystery more than he is against evil in a religious or moral sense." Miko, p. 216.

CHAPTER II

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON'S *IDYLLS OF THE KING*

"No more of hatred than in Heaven itself,
No more of jealousy than in Paradise."
("Balin and Balan," 148-9)

1.

Introduction

Unlike Sir Thomas Malory, whose identity remains obscure, Alfred Lord Tennyson was the most popular poet of his age, and a great deal has been written about his work and about his life. When Sir Harold Nicolson in 1922 published his stimulating book on the poet, he said in the introduction how difficult it was to acknowledge properly all his source material: "The British Museum catalogue records some two hundred and fifty books bearing directly upon Tennyson himself or upon his writings, and there is scarcely a work on the literature or life of the Victorian age in which he is not mentioned."[1] Nicolson's book itself inspired a new burst of critical energy in many who felt his approach inappropriate and his conclusions perverse.[2] As a result, the secondary material on Tennyson is vast and can be daunting to anyone attempting to read his poetry with an unjaundiced eye.

Malory was a great favorite of Tennyson's, just as the medieval period affected in a marked way the imagination of the

nineteenth century. Art, architecture, and many forms of literature were deeply influenced by an interest in and nostalgia for what seemed a comparatively untroubled, uncorrupted, graceful, and vivid period in English history. Tennyson's son Hallam refers to his father's beloved and well-thumbed copy of Le Morte D'Arthur,[3] and the Idylls of the King occupied him for more than half a century.

The story of Tennyson's life is quite well-known,[4] but probably two events in it are most relevant to his major work, the Idylls of the King. The first is the extraordinary friendship that developed at Cambridge between him and Arthur Henry Hallam, who has been called "the phoenix of the century, the idol of contemporary Cambridge."[5] When Hallam died in 1833, Tennyson received a profound shock, and the most impressive of all the Idylls is the "Passing of Arthur," most of it written in a mood of bereavement and doubt at the time of Hallam's death.

The second event in Tennyson's life that seems particularly significant to the Idylls is his selection as Poet Laureate in 1850. The responsibilities of his position encouraged his proclivity, perhaps first nourished by the Apostles in Cambridge, for a concern with social issues and the nature of contemporary life. He subsequently tried to write, in the Idylls, a poetry of the ideal, a poetry that would instruct and elevate a society for which he had an increasing distaste. Thus he used the Arthurian material first to reveal a highly personal emotion and later to provide a medium for

more abstract considerations. The following pages will be particularly concerned to show how this ambivalent use of the Arthurian material affects the quality of the Idylls of the King.

Tennyson has been extravagantly praised and brutally attacked, but there can be no question that he is a very great poet. T.S. Eliot gives a poet's tribute to his predecessor:

> Tennyson is a great poet, for reasons that are perfectly clear. He has three qualities which are seldom found together except in the greatest poets: abundance, variety, and complete competence. We therefore cannot appreciate his work unless we read a good deal of it. We may not admire his aims: but whatever he sets out to do, he succeeds in doing, with a mastery which gives us the sense of confidence that is one of the major pleasures of poetry. His variety of metrical accomplishments is astonishing. Without making the mistake of trying to write Latin verse in English, he knew everything about Latin versification that an English poet could use; and he said of himself that he thought he knew the quantity of the sounds of every English word except perhaps *scissors*. He had the finest ear of any English poet since Milton . . . . Tennyson extended very widely the range of active metrical forms in English.[6]

George Saintsbury praises him for "the character and variety of his accomplishment," for the pervasive and sustained impact of his genius on the literature of his period, and on his almost perfect versification.[7] And Douglas Bush, comparing him to Virgil, describes the quality and character of his best work:

> As a man and an Englishman he was much more of a Roman; as a craftsman also he was Roman, and, like most of the Roman poets, Hellenistic . . . . He also is a landscape-lover, a lord of language, he is, at moments, majestic in his sadness at the doubtful doom

> of human kind, and for him hope gleams like a golden branch amid the shadows . . . he was very much like Virgil. They both were and remained, even in the sunshine of court favor, shy provincial lads, and they never lost the truest kind of patriotic feeling, attachment to the _dulcia arva_ . . . . They both revered an heroic national past and believed in the state, in order, in the old ways of piety, duty, and discipline. Both were uncommonly sensitive to the life and color of field and sky and sea, and recorded all the phenomena of nature in exquisitely finished pictures; and in nature and human life they saw the workings of Universal Mind. Both Virgil and Tennyson had absorbed a rich literary culture, and were the most scholarly and ornate stylists of their age . . . . Their best work is essentially elegiac, the product of a temperamental melancholy, a brooding, wistful sense of the past, an unappeasable _desiderium_ which is deepened by troubled questionings about the present and the future. Tennyson has less than Virgil of universal piety, but he has a not altogether dissimilar note, a cry of profound sadness and bewilderment.[8]

That Tennyson triumphs in a dazzling variety of forms can be seen from observing a mere handful of his poems: the lush, evocative "Mariana"; the ballad "The Lady of Shalott"; his splendid and stately monologues on classical themes, "Ulysses" and "Tithonus"; the famous _In Memoriam_; the exquisite lyrics in _The Princess_ and _Maud_; the "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," surely one of the most majestic English odes; the rollicking dialect poem, "Northern Farmer; New Style"; the urbane, epistolary "To E. Fitzgerald"; his vigorous translation of the "Battle of Brunanburg"; the haunting "Frater Ave Atque Vale." These poems are not necessarily either his best or his most ambitious poems; but their variety can suggest for us the extraordinary range of the poet.

The _Idylls of the King_ were Tennyson's most ambitious work, and, as I mentioned earlier, they occupied him for almost half a century. Before proceeding to note the various critical estimations of them and to give what is essentially a twentieth century analysis of a nineteenth century phenomenon, I should like to quote Tennyson himself, and occasionally his son, describing what he was about in the _Idylls_.

Like many subsequent writers, Tennyson finally grew restive over the rigidity and heaviness of numerous analyses, and he became increasingly reluctant to commit himself to a definite and elaborate interpretation. His son Hallam quotes him as saying "They have taken my hobby, and ridden it too hard, and have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical or perhaps a parabolic drift in the poem." (II, 127) Some of his statements sound curiously like those of a later generation. When asked by a friend if those readers were right who understood the three Queens accompanying King Arthur on his last voyage to be Faith, Hope, and Charity, he answered:

> They are right, and they are not right. They mean that and they do not. They are three of the noblest of women. They are also those three Graces, but they are much more. I hate to be tied down to say, "_This_ means _that_," because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation.
> (II, 127)

However, the poet felt his general intentions were clear enough, as one can see from the most relevant statements in Hallam's memoir:

Of course Camelot for instance, a city of shadowy palaces, is everywhere symbolic of the gradual growth of human beliefs and institutions, and of the spiritual development of man. Yet there is no single fact or incident in the 'Idylls,' however seemingly mystical, which cannot be explained as without any mystery or allegory whatever.

(II, 127)

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 of a whole cycle of generations.

(II, 127)

To sum up: if Epic unity is looked for in the "Idylls," we find it not in the wrath of an Achilles, nor in the wanderings of an Ulysses, but in the unending war of humanity in all ages,--the world-wide war of Sense and Soul, typified in individuals, with the subtle interaction of character upon character, the central dominant figure being the pure, generous, tender, brave, human-hearted Arthur,--so that the links (with here and there symbolic accessories) which bind the "Idylls" into an artistic whole, are perhaps somewhat intricate.

(II, 130)

My father would explain that the great resolve (to ennoble and spiritualize mankind) is kept so long as all work in obedience to the highest and holiest law within them: in those days when all the court is one Utopia:

> The King will follow Christ, and we the King,
> In whom High God has breathed a secret thing.

Thus in "Gareth"[3] the "joy of life in steepness overcome, And victories of ascent," lives in the eternal youth of goodness. But in the later "Idylls" the allowed sin not only poisons the spring of life in the sinner, but spreads its poison through the whole community. In some natures, even among those who would "rather die than doubt," it breeds suspicion and want of trust in God and man. Some loyal souls are wrought to madness against the world. Others, and some among the highest intellects, become the slaves of the evil which is at first half-disdained. Tender natures sink

3. The epitome which follows is a summary of the chief points on which my father would dwell.

> under the blight, that which is of the highest in them working their death. And in some, as faith declines, religion turns from practical goodness and holiness to superstition:
>
> This madness has come on us for our sin.
>
> These seek relief in selfish spiritual excitement, not remembering that man's duty is to forget self in the service of others, and to let visions come and go, and that so only will they see "The Holy Thing." In the Idyll of "Pelleas and Ettare" selfishness has turned to open crime; it is "the breaking of the storm"; nevertheless Pelleas still honours his sacred vow to the King and spares the wrong-doers. Whereas in "The Last Tournament" the wrong-doer "suffers his doom," and "is cloven thro' the brain." We have here the deadly proof of the kinship of all willful sin in murder following adultery in closest relation of cause and consequence--the prelude of the final act of the tragedy which culminates in the temporary triumph of evil, the confusion of moral order, closing in the great "Battle of the West."
>
> Throughout the poem runs my father's belief in one strong argument of hope, the marvellously transmuting power of repentance in all men, however great their sin. (II, 130)

The 1859 version of the Idylls of the King sold ten thousand copies in the first week of publication, a figure that would delight a serious writer even today, and it is interesting to recall the comments it elicited from his various friends. The Duke of Argyll reported gleefully to Tennyson that Macaulay, who was generally unsympathetic to Tennyson's work, had been delighted with "Guinevere" and "did not find one single fault." (I, 447) Coventry Patmore, in the Edinburgh Review, said that the Idylls contained the least Latin of any English poetry: "no language has surpassed in epic dignity

the English of these poems."[9] In the Quarterly Review, Gladstone expressed his reverence for the conception of Arthur and added, "But even he only reaches to his climax in these two really wonderful speeches [at the end of "Guinevere"]." (II, 130) Benjamin Jowett, the epitome of the earnest Victorian scholar and don, wrote to Tennyson that he particularly admired "Vivien," "which seems to me a work of wonderful power and skill. It is most elegant and fanciful. I am not surprised at your Delilah reducing the wise man, she is quite equal to it. The allegory in the distance greatly strengthens, also elevates, the meaning of the poem." (II, 449) In 1893 he wrote again: "Tennyson has made the Arthur legend a great revelation of human experience, and of the thoughts of many hearts." (II, 134) And Hallam reported that George Eliot cried when his father read to her and George Lewes the "Guinevere." (II, 109) The Idylls, then, were taken seriously by serious scholars and writers, and they received impressive encomia.

It is not, however, impossible to discover contemporary accounts that anticipate the predominantly adverse judgment that later critics have made of the work. A writer in the London Quarterly Review in 1870 roundly condemned the turn Tennyson's work took with the publication of the Idylls; while praising the incidental beauties of the verse and the fine ideas included in them, he criticized them for vagueness of characterization and heterogeneity of conception.[10] And although they were such a popular success, the Idylls

have increasingly received the brunt of criticism directed against Tennyson. A.C. Bradley describes this not unprecedented irony:

> It was the four Idylls of the King published in 1859 that opened to him the heart of the public and began that immense popularity which, happily, he never saw diminished. On the other hand, FitzGerald was disappointed with every volume that appeared after 1842, and held that Tennyson never fulfilled the promise of early days; those very Idylls of 1859 were a rock of offence to admirers like Swinburne and Meredith; and, to the reaction, the whole collection of the Idylls, his most ambitious work, is probably the most obnoxious.[11]

Many of the explanations for the failure of the Idylls as a whole have rested on the fact that Tennyson composed them at intervals over such a long period of time. The "Morte D'Arthur" was first published in the 1842 volume. In 1859 Tennyson published "The True and the False. Four Idylls of the King." In 1869 he published "The Holy Grail" volume, including "The Coming of Arthur," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," and "The Passing of Arthur." The last idyll written was "Balin and Balan," which was in the "Tiresias" volume of 1885. Morton Luce, Stopford Brooke, and Paul Baum have written at great length about how this intermittent composition reflects uncertainty of purpose and ambiguity of intent.[12] Valerie Pitt sympathetically locates one of the difficulties:

> The "Morte d'Arthur" (later "The Passing of Arthur"), the earliest written of the Idylls, was written at the time of Hallam's death. Since what was in question was a personal mood, the fantasy involved is not . . . very much out of place. But in the later Idylls, Tennyson is trying to turn a fantasy into a myth: he wanted desperately to make the legend of Arthur the type and

> symbol of public life in the nineteenth century. Such an attempt was bound to fail: Tennyson's associations with Arthur were precisely personal and not public, and Arthur himself was too remote to carry real meaning to the Victorians. The project drooped under its own artificialty.[13]

Still other attacks have concentrated on the confused nature of the allegory, the imposed meanings. Miss Pitt speaks of the "failure due to the incompatibility of his purpose and the medium in which he is trying to express it."[14] Furthermore, the allegorical overtones compromise the vividness and reality of the characters Tennyson presents. He offers them, for the most part, as real people, and his son's Memoir suggests that he thought of them in that way:

> Lancelot the "noblest brother and the truest man," Tristram the bold and careless hunter, Galahad the pure, unearthly knight, Bors the blunt and honest, Bedivere the warm-hearted, all have been to me from boyhood living personalities, natural human characters, each with some dominant trait; and the allegorical (if alone accepted) would be to me the death-warrant of many an old friend.
>
> (II, 128)

Yvor Winters is typically uncompromising when he describes the unfortunate result of confusing an allegorical or type figure with a recognizable human being: "the allegory is seldom quite clear in his mind,or in ours, and the poems live as narratives about people, and the people when not dull are too often incredible."[15] Paul Baum concentrates more precisely on Tennyson's ambiguous use of type figures:

> An allegorical figure which cannot be readily recognized is a menace. If the reader is allowed to feel that Vivien stands for something else, but has no way of

> making sure _what_ else, he has grounds for complaint; for if he makes a wrong guess he is lost in dubiety. This was Henry Van Dyke's case; he assumed that Arthur was the Conscience and Guinevere the Flesh, and asked "What business has the Conscience to fall in love with the Flesh?" He assumed that Merlin represented Intellect, and asked "What attraction has Vivien for the Intellect without any passions?" Troublesome questions, because they betray the uncertainty which Tennyson's method both permitted and encouraged. Like a fainthearted allegorist, he would not bother to be consistent; desiring the advantages, he was unwilling to pay the fair price.[16]

Few critics have looked at the _Idylls_ in the light of Malory's work. They assume, with considerable justice, that Tennyson's poems are too radically different from the old romances to make comparison worthwhile. As C.S. Lewis slyly suggests, Malory may have had no "intentions" at all in "reducing" the Arthurian tales from the French; on the other hand, Tennyson's intentions are abundantly and sometimes painfully evident. Any serious reader of Malory, however fond, must admit that his work is often repetitious and occasionally contradictory; that parts of it are too long for modern taste; that it can be elliptical, obscure, inaccessible. More important, I earlier cited several themes in Malory that are virtually untranslatable: aspects characteristic of an era and a level of social organization remote and unreal to the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. One is of course hesitant to say that something cannot be done when perhaps the right person with the right perspective has just not yet appeared to do it. However, a potential nineteenth century redactor

of the Arthurian material might understandably be baffled at the prospect of making comprehensible the bizarre and extreme violence we find in Malory; the blood feud and the political primitivism of even the most admirable society; the visionary, magical, and mystical aspects of the tales; the absence of adequate laws and firm institutions to insure reasonable social stability; the particular and extraordinary admiration accorded physical prowess. It is not, on the face of it, necessary for a writer dealing with the Arthurian material to include aspects of it such as those just mentioned. Still, such elements and themes are what give Malory's work much of its solidity and greatness; any subsequent version, at least one which presumes to be a major work, must have something rich and powerful to put in their place.

In his 1859 review of the Idylls Coventry Patmore discussed the difficulties of the Arthurian material:

> The disproportion and incoherence of the materials among themselves were fatal to their fitness for a single epic; and the critical traditions which, until lately, connected epic character with epic magnitude, have prevented our poets from treating separately what are, in fact, separate, although mutually related, subjects. There were also other difficulties in the way of the modern rendering of the legends of the Round Table. There is scarcely one of them which does not turn upon some outrageous violation of modern manners and morals, and which does not contain innumerable improbabilities and impossibilities in its necessary sequence of events.[18]

In the epilogue "To the Queen" Tennyson shows himself fully aware of aspects of Malory that are essentially remote from his own age:

> accept this old imperfect tale,
> New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,
> Ideal manhood closed in real man,
> Rather than that gray king whose name, a ghost,
> Streams like a cloud, man-shaped, from mountain peak,
> And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him
> Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one
> Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time
> That hover'd between war and wantonness,
> And crownings and dethronements.
> (36-45)[19]

Thus there will be radical differences between the Idylls of the King and Le Morte D'Arthur, even though some of the material is the same.

To my knowledge, no one has carefully studied the two together, and consequently we have been deprived of a potentially valuable perspective on the Idylls of the King. Since Tennyson's work is, by general consent, a failure, it should be important to discover every possible reason for that failure.[20] We have a great poet who considered this sequence of poems his major life's work; we have a great body of narrative which has fascinated both writers and the general public in almost every age. By making extensive comparisons between Tennyson and Malory, thereby discovering Tennyson's ambivalent attitude to his source, we shall find changes so radical and pervasive that they illuminate several of the other weaknesses of the Idylls of the King. It will be revealing not only to see how much he changed his characters but to find what preoccupations or compulsions dictated the changes he made. Such compulsions can be shown to have overwhelming significance in relation to the general scheme of the Idylls and the moral fable it tells. By comparing

"The Holy Grail" to the Quest in Malory, we shall see how little of traditional Christianity was available to Tennyson; and this relative poverty of dogma, ritual, and accepted belief will throw considerable light on his difficulty in the *Idylls* in demonstrating a humane, powerful, and defensible ethic. Finally, a study of the most successful idyll, "The Passing of Arthur," will show us what kind of material and what kind of situation liberate Tennyson's peculiar genius; we shall be able to see how comparatively alien the rest of the *Idylls* are to his great strenths as a poet.

2.

Character-types

a. Characterization in narrative poems and in the *Idylls of the King*

A major problem in discussing the *Idylls of the King* arises from the dearth of critical commentary on the problems, especially, of characterization in narrative poems. Mordern criticism of poetry has dealt almost exclusively with the lyric, even to the point of treating a long poem as if it were no more than a series or a cluster of lyrics. This preoccupation with the lyric as the epitome of poetry has tended to create a situation in which our literary expectations are polarized: we expect characterization and an interest

in moral issues in the novel, while we assume that for intensity and imagery we go to the lyric poem. Graham Hough has made these distinctions with precision:

> The preferred exercising-ground of the moral critics has commonly been the novel. And with good reason. Any literary experience can be an expression of the moral life, and can connect itself with the moral life of the reader; but the large-scale fiction, presenting character in action, inevitably has a more massive moral impact than most other literary forms. A lyric poem, for example, represents a modd, a single phase in the panorama of existence. Most often neither we nor the author are committed to it except in a temporary and provisional fashion. . . . But the novel, which presents a whole and rounded character, follows his development over an extended stretch of time, from one phase of life to another, shows him in the act of making choices and then shows the consequences of the choices--this detains our attention in a very different way . . . . The novel does not present a single moment of insight, it presents a web of circumstances very like that in which we find ourselves actually entangled. We can make moral judgments about its characters and their situations very much as we can make moral judgments about our own lives.[21]

Yet the long narrative poem--or, more precisely, the _Idylls of the King_ and E.A. Robinson's Arthurian poems--are closer to what Hough refers to as "the large-scale fiction" than they are to lyric poems. They do not deal with a single mood or phase or moment of existence; they do present a web of circumstance, and they do most definitely appeal to the moral judgment of the reader. Their presentation of character thus creates the problem for the critic of dealing with characterization in a non-novelistic context. The problem is much less acute in the case of Robinson's poems because, as we

shall see, his method of presenting and developing his characters comes much closer to satisfying the expectations aroused by our novelists; his narrative poems have been called novels in verse. But Tennyson's poems are another matter altogether.

While confronting this problem, we would be mistaken if we were to treat character in a long poem exactly as we would character in a novel. No poem can or should have the detailed representation we expect from the novel. It cannot have the degree of social verisimilitude appropriate to prose fiction; it cannot have what D.H. Lawrence referred to as the "furniture" of the novel. Therefore the characters will not be shown in such intimate relationship to their surroundings, nor will the texture of their lives and experiences be represented in anything like their fullest circumstantiality. Nonetheless, it would be at least as serious a mistake to exclude questions of characterization from the study of narrative poems. If we attempt to maintain that such questions are not appropriate to the study of poetry, we are saying in essence that poetry is nothing but the lyric. But such an identification is patently too exclusive. The poems we are considering here deal with character in action, and the poets invite, indeed demand our engagement on the moral level. They make an effort to create, in some sense, people to whom they give particular names and who act in recognizable ways. These poems are, far more than a lyric poem can be, detailed imitations, representations of human life. And therefore we

are invited to expect characterization that has both internal coherence and a convincing relationship and reference to the external world. That is, if particular moral qualities are attributed to certain characters, the actions in which they take part must be able to provide reasonable justification for the qualities ascribed to them; we must be convinced, our moral sense must be engaged and gratified by the propriety of the characters' actions in terms of the moral claims that the author makes for them.

The critical problem of dealing with Tennyson's characterization is exascerbated, if not created, by the fact that he himself seems uncertain, or at least ambivalent, about what his characters are. We earlier observed his refusal to be specific about some of them ("They mean that and they do not."). Too often he implicitly attempts the impossible combination of pageant figures, allegorical figures, and figures that refer more directly to a real world. His characters are, in effect, neither one nor the other. A pageant figure is one which appeals to us primarily because of its splendid appearance, one that would seem appropriately inspired by that glorification of the color and vividness of medieval life that the nineteenth century indulged as a refuge against the drabness and often horror of Victorian England. Such a figure would afford a dazzling, elaborate surface, which could give ample opportunity for the exercise of Tennyson's extraordinary decorative skill. Pageant figures might appropriately be involved in actions that have no great significance

or moral burden; they might be the actors of an amiable, undemanding, unpretentious tale. Many of Tennyson's figures could be satisfactorily characterized in this way--but for the fact that he demanded so much of them in moral terms.

On the other hand, allegory is a form essentially concerned with questions of morality, and it was no longer a living form in Tennyson's day. The allegorical element in the Idylls of the King that has confused and annoyed so many readers is unfortunate because it is confused in itself and is, by Tennyson's own admission, only partially applicable. Dealing as it does with moral absolutes, allegory in the post-Spenserian sense is a form unsusceptible to modification, ambiguity, or adulteration. Surface is important only insofar as it expresses or reveals depth; it has little independent value or existence and is never allowed to acquire an autonomous value of its own. The characters are fixed qualities, and they do not change; their actions fully reveal the quality they embody, and nothing more is expected either of them or of their actions than that they reveal this quality. If Tennyson's work is meant to be allegory, it suffers from a lack of certainty. Virtually all the commentary that we noted earlier testifies to the fact that the Idylls of the King are, if partly allegorical, at least significantly other than allegory. To the extent that the characters in the Idylls are other than allegorical--or other than pageant figures--they require, or at least invite expectations that they will have a vital moral life, that

they will have an internal moral history. Yet precisely this, for the most part, they do not have.

A major characteristic of the _Idylls of the King_ is the reduction of character to type. Malory was not very much concerned with character development, nor was he prone to dwell upon his characters' feelings and thoughts. We learn about the characters in Malory primarily through their actions and their relations with each other. They are not essentially developing characters, but neither are they flat and one-dimensional. Each major figure has several distinctive character traits. The fact that they are vivid, various, believable people is surely the reason they have fascinated so many for so long.

There are no characters in the _Idylls_ who are highly individualized, as a comparison with any of Tennyson's better dramatic monologues would indicate. The characters exist largely to exemplify a dominant trait, and Tennyson believed that their actions, like those of allegorical figures, would perfectly express their essential selves. Without wanting to be held mechanically to such identifications, Tennyson would have Enid represent the perfect young wife; Vivien, the temptress; Tristram, the cynical advocate of _carpe diem_; Gawaine, the worldly dissolute, and so on.

The pattern, then, of the _Idylls_ would be that of a moral fable--one which substitutes adultery for disobedience to the will of God as the initial corrupting sin--and its burden would be articulated through the actions of these character-types. The quality of

the type figures, and the way in which Tennyson reveals that quality--will then be crucially related to the power of the moral understanding in the Idylls. The "parabolic drift" will necessarily emphasize certain qualities which Tennyson wants us to believe are supremely important. It is, then, through these figures and the uses to which Tennyson puts them that the moral understanding of the poems if revealed. They are figures closer to either allegorical or pageant figures than they are to rounded characters, but Tennyson not only puts them into a "large-scale fiction," he puts them into situations that must be described in relatively realistic terms.

Apart from their medieval trappings, these situations are essentially familiar, indeed, mundane ones. In the Idylls we observe figures who are not concerned with battling dragons, making their way to the Holy City, or travelling through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. They are presented primarily in terms of their obligations to those with whom they live, in terms of personal relations, especially marital relations.[22] It is an essentially domestic scene. The central sin itself is not a theoretical, or rather a theological one, but a very real violation of domestic, and more than domestic ties. Tennyson does not present adultery simply as the symbol for the degeneration of the Round Table; he treats it essentially realistically, climaxing his presentation with a scene between injured husband and grovelling wife. Such a presentation brings the characters very close to the world we all know and invites us to bring our own

sense of reality, developed and determined by precisely such material, to bear on his treatment of it. To this extent, then, the characters and the situations are not allegorical, are not native to pageant, and to this extent do we expect them to have a recognizable, if not rich, inner life. But this Tennyson's commitment to type figures does not allow. He comes close to the real and at the same time draws back from it. The difficulty with type figures, at least as Tennyson uses them, is that they do not change, and consequently cannot grow and develop; and their manners reflect their morals, leaving no ambiguities, complexities, or depths.

As Hough says, the large-scale fiction shows characters in the act of making choices and then shows the consequences of the choices and the way those consequences necessarily alter the life of the character. Because the type figure cannot change, he cannot make significant choices; his choice is already determined by the nature of the quality he represents. In a work deeply concerned with morality, yet significantly remote from the strong, coherent system that informs true allegory, the absence of the possibility of choice is, as we shall see, both revealing and devastating. The characters cannot try to be better morally because they cannot be other than they are. Their moral natures are imposed upon them from without, and consequently a tapestry replaces a morality. Characters are sternly held responsible for that which, evidently, they could not help and cannot change; the poet does not allow himself to penetrate the surface and engage on the level of consciousness

and moral struggle.

Furthermore, an excessive importance is invested in mere manners. Since the behavior of Tennyson's type figure is not the exact equivalent of the behavior of an allegorical one, that behavior primarily expresses a code of manners and social politeness. We shall eventually see how inadequate to a convincing representation of moral life is the equation between social manners and moral reality, but what essentially takes place is that honor is made to stand for integrity. The status and public dignity of a figure is made to stand for the nature of his conscience and inner life. There is no discrepancy, as we find in Malory, between public facade and inner reality; nor is there the overwhelming concentration that we discover in Robinson on the nature and quality of individual consciousness. There is no apparent and compelling reason in Tennyson, as there is in Malory, for the extraordinary importance of a code of manners, and at the same time there is no recognition that such a code has a limited usefulness.

Tennyson concentrates on the domestic as the essential part of the real world that he will admit into his Arthurian court, while he omits most of the other aspects of real life as we know it and as it was reflected in his source. His ambivalence to the Morte is revealed by the fact that he attempts to make an entire kingdom depend upon essentially domestic concerns. He rejects more of Malory than he accepts, and he uses what he does take in a way that

often does violence to the tenor of the original. He engages our moral sense by talking of his characters in moral terms, but we are not gratified by the propriety of the characters' actions in terms of the moral claims the author makes for them. Significant action has largely been denied them because Tennyson has deprived himself of so much of the ordinary stuff of life by means of which character is developed and tested. Because of his preoccupation on the realistic level with domestic concerns, he demands too much of certain admirable but limited moral qualities; he implicitly attempts to make such virtues as goodness, innocence, and inexperience count for more in the world at large--even the large world of the imagination--than they are capable of sustaining. Consequently there is a moral substitution steadily at work, one that offers the domestic virtues for those of greater compass and significance. When we examine Arthur and Merlin in particular, we shall see that Tennyson can label a figure wise or good or powerful, but because most of the real world has been omitted from his poems, he will frequently have difficulty showing these characteristics at work and thereby convincing us of the appropriateness of the labels. It is not merely that his world is not so solid as Malory's; no one should expect such a thing from him. But he refuses to satisfy the realistic expectations he himself has raised; he fails to create, because of his various ambivalences, a strong fictional world that we might know--one with a coherent, persuasive, imaginative reality. The problem

in the Idylls of the King is finally one of the confusion of genres. Tennyson tries to appropriate the virtues of several different kinds of literature, but their incompatibility with one another leaves him with the virtues of neither.

b. Important character-types

When we examine some of the important and significantly placed figures in the Idylls, we discover a predictable diminution of scope and concern, as well as a considerable loss in flexibility. The often whimsical, quixotic characters from the Morte have become illustrations of an overwhelming moral action. The way in which Tennyson uses types requires him to exclude ordinary human complexity and to assume that each figure can mirror a certain unitary and coherent collection of attributes. His good women are beautiful, loyal, delicate, warm-hearted, and true; his bad ones are disloyal, deceitful, shrewish, and crude. There are no fundamental ambiguities, either human or moral. His "bad" women are beautiful, but if they had not been, he would have had difficulty in persuading us they are desirable. Since the female ability to entice and corrupt is central to the Idylls, he has to admit this superficial inconsistency into his plan. Let us then see how these female types are deployed in the Idylls and what are the implications of their use.

The "Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid" represent one-sixth of the titles in the Idylls, and together their lines total 1,818--longer than any other story in the work. The space devoted to them is interesting particularly because the tale is the only one Tennyson found outside Malory; it came from Lady Charlotte Guest's translation of the Mabinogion, and Tennyson makes no essential changes in it. We can assume therefore that it was especially striking to the poet and expressed themes important to him. This tale is crucial here because it is Tennyson's only example in the Idylls of a relatively successful marriage, and it is because of the failure of a marriage, that of Arthur and Guinevere, that the Round Table civilization is destroyed. Tennyson's commitment to type figures requires us to read the Geraint-Enid story as his definition of what marriage should be. The seriousness of his professed intentions as well as the "parabolic drift" of the work as a whole put a terrible burden of significance on this tale, which has justly been called Tennyson's patient Griselda story.[23] The successful marriage, then, is depicted as depending upon the behavior of the wife, irrespective of the husband's worthiness and conduct.

Enid is, of course, Tennyson's type of the good woman. His use of the type figure assumes the identity of behavior, intentions, and inner reality. Here he asserts the essential characteristics of the "good" woman to be beauty, meekness, obedience, and utter devotion.[24] Enid is what we would call a man's projection of his own

wishes and needs, an utter fantasy, yet even for a woman the possibility of such a type figure has quite powerful attractions. Tennyson's particular version probably seems insipid to most readers now, but we should not allow what is essentially a change in fashion to obscure the very real merits of a type held up for emulation. It offers a beautiful and available model to follow, a pattern in which there are no surprises or mysteries, and it is accessible to the will. It is a pattern that affords the gratification of seeming to be selfless, thereby inspiring the awe and admiration of family and friends; and by the very thoroughness and rigidity of its prescriptions it may mitigate, if not fend off the ravages of metaphysical doubts and psychological torments.

Although there can be only a limited usefulness in comparing figures in different forms of literature, it is nonetheless revealing to compare Enid to Aggie in James's <u>The Awkward Age</u>. Such a comparison can demonstrate how little Tennyson could suggest a possible discrepancy between appearance and reality, and consequently how thin his characters can seem. Aggie also epitomizes a certain traditional style; she is demure, delicate, impeccably mannered, and submissive:

> That young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary fingertips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the

> word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs. Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl . . . . Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasized virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction.[25]

James, though he was attracted to this kind of figure, was finally suspicious of its viability. His Mr. Longdon makes the reluctant discovery that the attractive style may hide, if not encourage, ignorance; and one of the book's most telling revelations is that it may also coexist with vulgarity and even corruption of the heart. Tennyson's decision to work with types and have behavior mirror some definite inner quality makes it impossible for him to admit any ambiguity, any hint of a discrepancy between appearance and reality. The unhappy effects of this choice are two-fold: the "good" women in the Idylls are figures of fantasy and inherently unbelievable; and perhaps more important, they are alike and utterly predictable. The lengthy stories that tell of Enid and Elaine remain primarily tales. They provide Tennyson with ample opportunity for elaboration and decoration, and some of this is very well done. But they offer no unexpected revelations of character, no subtle insights into motivation or strength of purpose. And the figures are not sufficiently substantial to sustain the weight of illustrating goodness in a world doomed because it includes too little of it. Their goodness is not transcendent but rather, domestic.

The following is a fair example of the way this works in the poetry:

> So Enid took his charger to the stall,
> And after went her way across the bridge,
> And reach'd the town, and while the prince and earl
> Yet spoke together, came again with one
> A youth that, following with a costrel, bore
> The means of goodly welcome, flesh and wine.
> And Enid brought sweet cakes to make them cheer
> And, in her veil enfolded, manchet bread.
> And then, because their hall must also serve
> For kitchen, boil'd the flesh, and spread the board,
> And stood behind, and waited on the three.
> And, seeing her so sweet and serviceable,
> Geraint had longing in him evermore
> To stoop and kiss the tender little thumb
> That crost the trencher as she laid it down.
> But after all had eaten, then Geraint,
> For now the wine made summer in his veins,
> Let his eye rove in following, or rest
> On Enid, at her lowly handmaid-work,
> Now here, now there, about the dusky hall.
> (382-401)

Tennyson implicitly attempts to make sweetness, docility, and pathos stand for greatness; inexperience and innocence for power. To use a figure that would doubtless have horrified Tennyson, it is like investing Amelia Sedley with the stature of Tess. There is little point in elaborately exposing the weakness of Tennyson's sweet young things, but it should be legitimate to take special note of their youth. The "good" represented in the women of the Idylls is not a mature standard, much less a realistic one. His good women show no self-consciousness; no particular need, desire, or ability to understand and evaluate the circumstances in which they find themselves; no needs that demand fulfillment apart from

satisfying a man. The sexual fear that reveals itself in the Idylls doubtless helped make it impossible for Tennyson to create a strong, adult woman, and his commitment to types ruled out the possibility of individual complexity and growth through experience. It can be maintained that the most commanding female figures in nineteenth century fiction acquire much of their stature through some kind of sexual experience. Tess and Hester Prynne would have been too offensive to Tennyson. But he made it impossible within the Idylls to realize a figure like Dorothea Brooke, Isabel Archer, Maggie Verver, or to mention a pair more similar to his own ideal, Milly Theale in The Wings of the Dove, or Pompilia in The Ring and the Book.

Perhaps these very examples, remote as they are from anything in the Idylls of the King, can suggest to us that the type figure, uncomplicated, instinctive, and well-defined, is no longer seriously vital in the nineteenth century. It is no longer possible to believe in the unity of virtues and the soundness of abstractions. To be convincing, they have to be tested in the crucible of hard reality, a test which Tennyson refuses to make.

The trials to which Geraint submits Enid are not convincingly real and serious. No adult reader could worry that her spirit might be broken by them; there is never any serious possibility of failure, disgrace, or disillusionment. It is essential to Enid's definition that she will remain loyal and loving; her suffering

finally is not truly serious because she is incapable of doubt and disobedience. When Dorothea Brooke, on the other hand, resolves to sustain the husband she so mistakenly has married, we know that her suffering has changed her, her understanding of herself, and her attitude to the world that surrounds her. It is not blind obedience, but pity, compassion, humility, and a strong sense of duty that direct her behavior. Enid endures and survives as the same innocent creature she was at the beginning; she does not change, primarily because as a type she cannot change. Dorothea undergoes a metamorphosis into a splendid woman.

No one in the Idylls gains stature through suffering. They either remain untouched by it, like Enid, or they are ruined by it. We are supposed to be able to see Arthur ennobled by his suffering, but he is never convincingly human until the last idyll. Guinevere professes repentance and we are told she briefly lives an exemplary life as a nun; Lancelot will "die a holy man." ("Lancelot and Elaine," 1418) But these transformations occur, as it were, off stage; they apparently did not appeal to Tennyson as essential material in his moral fable. These are serious evasions on Tennyson's part, and they suggest the polarities and rigidities that dominate the Idylls. Because everyone, except Lancelot and perhaps Guinevere, is essentially a type, there can be no choice and consequently no growth; because Tennyson was committed to "good" and "bad" he cannot convincingly present the solid, realistic middle

ground between them that is characteristically human; because "good" is youth and innocence, the "parabolic" drift is necessarily toward disaster.

The "good" women in the Idylls, then, are essentially the same, and their goodness depends upon their relation to a man. Among the remaining female cast of the Idylls, the "bad" women are also essentially the same and are defined as "bad" because of their behavior toward a man or men. Ettare, Vivien, and Isolt have at best a kind of crude vigor; their beauty is merely a bait, a corpse-light that inspires men to lust and betrayal. They have virtually no characteristics, other than hate, cleverness, and the willingness to corrupt. The curious fact, in this collection of poems that demonstrate a horror of sexual promiscuity, is that these bad women do not even seem lustful.

Each is different from her counterpart in Malory. Vivien replaces Nimue, who, at least in relation to Merlin in the Morte, had no particular character. Coincidentally, she reappears in Malory's pages after Pelleas learns of Gawaine's betrayal. She uses her magical powers to punish Ettard by making her belatedly fall desperately in love with Pelleas, whose feelings she transforms in the reverse direction. The denouement is recorded in the following manner:

> And now such grace God hath sent me (Pelleas), that I hate her as much as ever I loved her, thanked be our Lord Jesus! Thank me, said the damosel of the lake. Anon Sir Pelleas armed him, and took his

> horse, and commanded his men to bring after his pavillions and his stuff where the damosel of the lake would assign. So the Lady Ettard died for sorrow, and the damosel of the lake rejoiced Sir Pelleas, and loved together during their life days.
> (I, 123)

Tennyson's Vivien has neither this rather nice sense of humor nor a modicum of sympathy for anyone except presumably Mark, who is the stereotype of the villain he eventually became about half way through the Morte. Tennyson's presentation of her depends on the repertoire of conventional poses, and we shall subsequently see how inadequate they are to reveal extraordinary wickedness.

Ettare in the Idylls is modeled on a very minor figure in the Morte, one who appears quite early in its pages. She does not lead Pelleas on in order to get the circlet at the tournament; but when he pursues her with unrequited devotion, she urges her knights to treat him shamefully "to cause him to leave this country, and to leave his loving." (I, 119) Her sin is pride:

> but she was so proud that she had scorn of him, and said that she would never love him though he would die for her. Wherefore all ladies and gentlewomen had ascorn of her that she was so proud.
> (I, 118)

She is neither sullen, spiteful, nor crude.

The tone of the figure in the Idylls is very much like that of Vivien, and her motivation is a similar self-aggrandizement:

> in her heart
> 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.
(107-114)

In Malory, the decorum and ritual of the court clearly gave it some order and beauty; it afforded an elegant and graceful public manifestation of stability and strength. This decorum, however, was not equated with moral quality. It was finally violated by Agravaine and Mordred, who, because of their own hatred, refused to recognize the inevitable discrepancy between social form and moral reality. The following exchange between Ettare and Guinevere would have been completely out of place in the Morte:

and, seeing Pelleas droop,
Said Guinevere, 'We marvel at thee much,
O damsel, wearing this unsunny face
To him who won thee glory!' And she said,
'Had yet not held your Lancelot in your bower,
My Queen, he had not won.'
(171-6)

Tennyson is attempting to make impudence and disrespect stand for viciousness; the spitefulness of an unpleasant young woman is to illustrate the moral decay of the court society. Manners in the Morte do not stand for morals, though they tend to be less churlish than Ettare's retort to Guinevere.

A final passage from his characterization of Ettare may show how Tennyson tries to suggest a degree of complexity:

While thus he spake, she gazed upon the man
Of princely bearing, tho' in bonds, and thought:
'Why have I push'd him from me? this man loves,

> If love there be; yet him I love not. Why?
> I deem'd him fool? yea, so? or that in him
> A something--was it nobler than myself?--
> Seem'd my reproach? He is not of my kind.
> He could not love me, did he know me well.
> Nay, let him go--and quickly.
> (297-305)

The rhythm is abrupt and choppy, the diction ordinary. Nonetheless, there is a certain vigor not always characteristic of Tennyson's admirable figures. Tennyson does manage to show a measure of self-doubt, although the moment passes quickly. Self-examination is not often in evidence in the _Idylls_, and on the rare occasions that we find it, it bears no relation to any subsequent action. In effect, one can do nothing about one's character except to live with it, even when believing it to be offensive.

The only major figure whom Tennyson took from the pages of Malory and made into a "bad" woman was Isolt. The Tristram section in the _Morte_ is extremely long, comprising three books out of twenty-one, or 285 pages out of 803. The material is various, colorful, and generally high-spirited. The love story is almost as appealing as that of Launcelot and Guenever, although it is a simpler tale and a more youthful one. A crucial element in it is the lovers' mistake in drinking a potion Isolt's mother had intended for Isolt and Mark on their wedding night. The love is therefore fated, although they had already begun to love each other when Tristram came to Ireland to be healed of a wound given him while fighting for the truage of Cornwall. Before he sends Tristram to

bring Isolt from Ireland, Mark has become villainous and malicious. No one in the Morte is sympathetic to Mark's cuckoldry, and virtually everyone aids the lovers in their attempts to escape his tyranny. It would be tedious to develop in full the various components in the story, particularly since Tennyson changes them almost beyond recognition. Let us simply say that in Malory they are entirely sympathetic figures; Tristram, along with Launcelot, is considered the flower of knighthood. The lovers endure a great deal of suffering for each other; and the story is imbued with tenderness and pathos.

Tennyson's Tristram typifies the cynical young man whose _carpe diem_ philosophy is meant to indicate the degeneration of the Round Table. We are comparatively attracted to such a figure, probably because he strikes a note of refreshing realism which contrasts to the wilful ignorance of those characters Tennyson meant to be attractive. After winning the prize in the Last Tournament, or the Tournament of the Dead Innocence, he complains to a sullen Lancelot:

> Let be thy fair Queen's fantasy. Strength of heart
> And might of limb, but mainly use and skill,
> Are winners in this pastime of our King.
> My hand--belike the lance hath dript upon it--
> No blood of mine, I trow; but O chief knight,
> Right arm of Arthur in the battle-field,
> Great brother, thou nor I have made the world;
> Be happy in thy fair Queen as I in mine.
> (197-204)

Tennyson would have disapproved our inclination to agree that "use and skill" count heavily in physical contests, because such an

attitude would represent a decline from idealism to realism. Malory's Arthur, because he well knows that physical prowess is not an accurate gauge of moral rectitude, refuses to allow Launcelot to continue being the Queen's champion. He later regrets this decision, because it abandons a comparatively workable judicial procedure for factionalism and political chaos. His regret tells us which of his two realistic conclusions he considers more important. The earlier decision is based on a true assessment of the facts but ignores a more important, equally real truth: that a better means of assessing guilt had not yet been evolved. In The Idylls of the King, Tristram's inability to believe that physical and moral strength are identical indicates for Tennyson a degeneration from the earlier nobility and high-thinking of the court. The procedure is again the reverse of that in the Morte, where we go from the less to the more comprehensive realism. It is the inability to believe that Tennyson shows to be initially offensive, although he clearly cannot offer any evidence to defend the content of that belief. This disdain for fact and evidence is another example of how Tennyson's refusal to content himself with the problems of the real world leaves him with indefensible equations and empty abstractions. The inability to believe that which is not really believable is presented as degenerate, and the inevitability of catastrophe is certain.

As in the idyll "Pelleas and Ettare," Tennyson insists on making bad manners stand for decadent morals. The Tristram of

the Idylls violates the apparent code of the tournament by saying that his Queen of Beauty is not present. His prototype is only once guilty of bad manners, and he is obliged to act ungraciously by the command of King Mark. In the Idylls Tristram's rudeness comes not from discordant and irreconcilable obligations but from the erosion of moral fiber. He is offensive not because he has to choose between two difficult ways of behaving but because such offensiveness expresses him accurately.

In the following terms Tristram justifies his adultery to Dagonet, the king's fool:

> Fool, I came late, the heathen wars were o'er,
> The life had flown, we sware but by the shell.
> (269-70)

In effect, the activity and certain usefulness of "the heathen wars" were admirable; one's obligations were clear-cut and unarguable. But nothing has in truth followed them that equally commands one's loyalty and dedication. Nothing can be done about it, and one is necessarily left with merely one's own sensual instincts to satisfy. And so Tristram takes advantage of the possibility. He is self-satisfied and unconcerned about the needs or feelings of others. On meeting a woman in the forest who weeps for the loss of her "man," he says, "Yet weep not thou, lest, if thy mate return,/ He find they favor changed and love thee not." (498-9) This kind of flippancy and crudeness, utterly remote from the source, resembles that of Vivien and Ettare. It is a good example of the way

Tennyson makes unpleasant manners stand for viciousness and decadence.

The extraordinary thing about Tennyson's presentation of Tristram and Isolt together is the dearth of love shown. Isolt has met Tristram not with love for him, so much as hate for Mark:

> Not Mark--not Mark, my soul!
> The footstep flutter'd me at first--not he!
> Catlike thro' his own castle steals my Mark,
> But warrior-wise thou stridest thro' his halls
> Who hates thee, as I him--even to the death.
> My soul, I felt my hatred for my Mark
> Quicken within me, and knew that thou were nigh.
> (512-18)

Isolt almost literally continues to rave in strident hatred of Mark and self-justification for her affair with Tristram. These passages represent a radical change in emphasis: in the Morte Isolt simply loved Tristram. The notion that she despised Mark would not violate one's sense of possibility, or even probability, but to Malory that was evidently beside the point. He dealt with love rather than hate, but Tennyson has to believe that since the love is adulterous it is ugly and springs from ugliness. He reduces one of the two most famous women in romance to a bitchy shrew.

Tennyson makes a crucial change from the source in discarding the love potion and blaming the adultery of Tristram and Isolt on the corrupting influence of Lancelot and Guinevere. The love is not fated, but rather is the offspring of corruption. Tennyson's version, then, assumes that choice is possible, but in fact the lines describe an easy acquiescence in a direction set by others.

Despite the distastefulness of their bickering and our realization that the famous lovers have been demeaned to a mere fragment of their original stature, they are not wholly unsympathetic. Isolt's conscious and deliberate refusal to face the truth is more attractive and human as we shall see than Merlin's unconscious, yet stubborn ignorance. Self-knowledge and the ability to fight for what one needs are more convincing and attractive than cultivated naivete, passivity, and vaporous innocence, though Tennyson would disapprove our preference for realistic evaluation and presentation. Isolt's plea that Tristram flatter her has set the stage for Tristram's repudiation of his vows, which he condescendingly calls "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 elsewise he had done,
> And so the realm was made.
> (670-76)

The speech is a compendium of worldly wisdom, sceptical of the desirability of rigid ideals or the virtues of repression:

> Whence, then? 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.
> And wordling of the world am I, and know
> The ptarmigan that whitens ere his hour

> Woos his own end; we are not angels here,
> Nor shall be.
> (682-94)

The fact that we believe this and find it much less obnoxious than Tennyson hoped it would be reflects his unfortunate decision to hold up a standard that is inherently unattainable, to remove his fable too far from real concerns. His implicit understanding that the standard is unattainable allows him to give greater vividness and energy to characters whom he theoretically disapproved.

A further passage in the _Idylls_ can most clearly reveal how Tennyson depends on manners to reveal a moral condition as well as how minor is the role of choice in his poems.

The difference between Lancelot in the _Morte_ and in the _Idylls_ after the Grail Quest is the difference between a man who plays an active and decisive role and a man who has given up. Tennyson's portrait of Lancelot here reveals further the diminution of scope and possibility so characteristic of the _Idylls_.

Lancelot at the Last Tournament is the epitome of immobility as he takes Arthur's place to "arbitrate the field." He "Moved to the lists, and there, with slow sad steps/ Ascending, fill'd his double-dragon'd chair." (143-4) He demonstrates neither the desire nor the ability to act or rule decisively:

> The sudden trumpet sounded as in a dream
> To ears but half-awaked, then one low roll
> Of autumn thunder, and the jousts began;
> And ever the wind blew, and yellowing leaf,
> And gloom and gleam, and shower and shorn plume
> Went down it. Sighing weariedly, as one

> Who sits and gazes on a faded fire,
> When all the goodlier guests are past away,
> Sat their great umpire looking o'er the lists.
> He saw the laws that ruled the tournament
> Broken, but spake not.
> (151-61)

He looks unmoving on various abominations and seems only inspired by the entrance of Tristram

> Whom Lancelot knew, had held sometime with pain
> His own against him, and now yearn'd to shake
> The burthen off his heart in one full shock
> With Tristram even to death. His strong hands gript
> And dinted the gilt dragons right and left,
> Until he groan'd for wrath--
> (178-83)

The burden of Tennyson's presentation is that sin has a corrupting effect and saps the will. It is interesting to contrast this scene with the ones in Malory in which Launcelot was caught in a dilemma that made him for a time unwilling to act decisively. When Arthur, ruthlessly pushed by Gawaine, warred on Launcelot before Joyous Garde, Launcelot refused to end the war by killing either of the two. He reverenced Arthur and held himself deeply committed to the King who had knighted him. He knew he had wronged Gawaine in unwittingly killing two of his brothers and deliberately killing another. Consequently the war dragged on, and many innocent people were killed. His dilemma was forced by real and conflicting obligations as well as a recognition of his own culpability, and his refusal to act to end the war was in many ways a fine and noble refusal.

In the Idylls Lancelot is a man unable to bring himself to command the proper behavior because of a morbid sense of his own degradation and that of the court. It is more like emotional passivity: intensely subjective and deeply moody. Tennyson's Lancelot apparently can neither imagine nor command an alternative such as the penance that Malory's Launcelot offered for his unwitting murder of Gareth and Gaheris:

> But thus much I shall offer me, said Sir Launcelot, if it may please the king's good grace, and you, my lord Sir Gawaine, I shall first begin at Sandwich, and there I shall go in my shirt, bare foot; and at every ten miles' end I will found and garmake an house of religion, of what order that ye will assign me, with an whole convent, to sing and read, day and night, in especial for Sir Gareth's sake and Sir Gaheris. And this shall I perform from Sandwich unto Carlisle; and every house shall have sufficient livelihood. And this shall I perform while I have any livelihood in Christendom; and there nys none of all these religious places, but they shall be performed, furnished and garnished in all things as an holy place ought to be, I promise you faithfully. And this, Sir Gawaine, methinketh were more fairer, holier, and more better to their souls, than ye, my most noble king, and you, Sir Gawaine, to war upon me, for thereby shall ye get none avail.
>
> (II, 366-7)

Such penance is no longer available to Tennyson's Lancelot, for whom the alternative to passivity is something very like a death-wish: he yearns to "shake/ The burthen off his heart in one full shock/ With Tristram even to death."

Tennyson's difficulties suggest that he was the victim of an historical phenomenon; he had an oppressive sense of ideals, as

well as a conviction of the guilt that proceeded from an inability to live fully according to them--both operating in the absence of a specific structure of belief. He is left with the inevitability of failure, which he tries to mitigate with what the work itself demonstrates to be a merely verbal belief in redemption.[26] Tennyson knows he is establishing a standard that was incapable of achievement. It is perhaps not insignificant that his most specific and lengthy catalogue of virtues comes after they have been proved impossible. After all, he has taken England's most famous story of adultery as the material for an allegory that holds adultery to be the initial corrupting sin.[27] The fact that this world is doomed from the beginning is part of its truth for Tennyson. But the practical implications of his choice are much more devastating than he could have understood. In the _Idylls_ Tennyson refuses to be content with the effort of human beings to approach perfection; he does not want to see the ideal as something toward which one hopefully struggles but which is necessarily incapable of human attainment. If he cannot have perfection, he has to insist on disaster.

The inevitable destruction of the Round Table is ensured by the excessive demands Tennyson makes of youthful goodness and idealism. We earlier observed the moral substitutions at work in the case of Enid, in whom he tries to make domestic virtue of transcendent importance. Something very similar is true of Gareth and Pelleas.

In "Gareth and Lynette," the hero is to represent young knighthood in all its early strength and beauty and, by implication, the Round Table at its most admirable. Tennyson describes his submission to kitchen vassalage as follows:

> and Gareth bow'd himself
> With all obedience to the King, and wrought
> All kind of service with a noble ease
> That graced the lowliest act in doing it.
> And when the thralls had talk among themselves,
> And one would praise the love that linkt the King
> And Lancelot--how the King had saved his life
> In battle twice, and Lancelot once the King's--
> For Lancelot was the first in tournament,
> Bur Arthur mightiest on the battle-field--
> Gareth was glad. Or if some other told
> How once the wandering forester at dawn,
> Far over the blue tarns and hazy seas,
> On Caer-Eryri's highest found the King,
> A naked babe, of whom the Prophet spake,
> 'He passes to the Isle Avilion,
> He passes and is heal'd and cannot die'--
> Gareth was glad. 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 mock'd, but, after, reverenced him.
> (477-97)

Gareth's behavior in undertaking Lynette's quest similarly reflects a single-mindedness, a natural dignity, and a refusal to be daunted or changed by the behavior of others. He is in effect good from the beginning and incorruptible; he has nothing essential to learn but has merely to keep intact the qualities he already possesses. The tale is gay and light-hearted. The reader never doubts that Gareth, like Enid, will triumph in remaining his sterling self.

Tennyson's excessive expectations of the type are demonstrated in his handling of the Pelleas and Ettare story, in which his preoccupation with sexual fidelity leads him further to weaken the overall structure of the Idylls. Although this story comes early in the Morte and is quite minor, Tennyson crucially places it after the Holy Grail section and makes it stand for the way sexual license corrupts the innocent and ideal. Pelleas is, like Gareth, young and good. The situation which he has to confront is more adult and unpleasant than anything in the second idyll, yet Tennyson apparently feels that the same kind of response is appropriate and equally commendable. He is to refuse to be daunted by the words or actions of others and merely continue as the same noble-minded young knight. His persistence in submitting to the indignities Ettare heaps upon him is made to stand for the admirable strength and exercise of virtue:

> 'These be the ways of ladies,' Pelleas thought,
> 'To those who love them, trials of our faith.
> Yea, let her prove me to the uttermost,
> For loyal to the uttermost am I.'
> (202-5)

Yet this persistence becomes unpleasant because it is unintelligent, even stupid. And herein lies the inherent weakness of Tennyson's conception. The Round Table will inevitably fail if the only conduct or view of life that can be sanctioned is so vulnerable to the harsher tones of reality. Tennyson tries to make a virtual child's initial despair at first learning of infidelity and deceit stand for

that which can destroy a kingdom. The shattering of the unworldly illusions of a boy is made to substitute for the hard, irrevocable realities of life, and the writing, not surprisingly, becomes hysterically melodramatic:

> I am wrath and shame and hate and evil fame,
> And like a poisonous wind I pass to blast
> And blaze the crime of Lancelot and the Queen.
> (556-8)

c. Arthur

Much of the criticism of the Idylls has dealt, quite justly, with the problems created by Tennyson's conception of Arthur.[28] In the epilogue "To the Queen" the poet suggests that his Arthur represents Soul and is "Ideal manhood closed in real man." He is apparently oblivious to the fact that he is indulging in a contradiction in terms, insisting upon the embodiment of that which is essentially non-physical. The definition of "soul" depends upon its distinction from body; it is the spiritual part of man in contrast to the purely physical. In Tennyson's conception Guinevere represents Sense, which ultimately destroys the good works of the pure and disinterested Soul. As Hallam Tennyson says, whatever epic unity exists in the Idylls shall be found "in the unending war of humanity in all ages,--the world-wide war of Sense and Soul." The flesh is in Tennyson's own terms essentially corrupting, yet he refused to realize that if he gave a body as well as the Soul to Arthur he had

necessarily compromised his creation. His Arthur, then, is not merely ideal, he is--ultimately--impossible and Tennyson thereby postulates as a necessary goal a standard that is inherently unattainable. The necessity of living up to an impossible standard tends to produce a desperate passivity, as we discover at the most significant moments in the Idylls.

Tennyson, however, incorporates yet another contradiction into his picture of the king, and perhaps his uncertainty in handling the Arthur figure reflects his real disbelief in the possibility of attaining perfection. This uncertainty, in any case, suggests basic limitations in his method; there is a considerable loss of flexibility when a figure must represent only one basic quality, or one definite and coherent set of qualities. It is consequently not surprising that there are incongruities and contradictions. Such difficulties do not necessarily arise with a figure confined to the limits of one tale. Gareth, for example, does not have to carry a more complex philosophical burden than his youthful shoulders are able to bear. However, a figure who must take part in several different situations will have difficulty expressing coherent yet unique and significant actions. Tennyson apparently found his conception of Arthur as Soul insufficient to his role as King. In the Grail section Arthur is presented as the practical-minded, utilitarian ruler who has no right to indulge himself in spiritual excursions:

And some among you held that if the King
Had seen the sight he would have sworn the vow.
Not easily, seeing that the King must guard
That which he rules, and is but as the hind
To whom a space of land is given to plow,
Who may not wander from the allotted field
Before his work be 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 that One
Who rose again.

(899-915)

We discover here an implicit and unrecognized dichotomy between the life of the mind or spirit and the life of the active man. Arthur, who we are told "embodies" soul, disclaims any central relationship between spiritual experience and the direction of his life. Spiritual experience has become vague, mystic, suspect; it is intriguing, yet unreliable. Arthur, then, doubts the value of the very quality he presumably represents, on the literal grounds that it is "unworkable." The burden of his pronouncement is that the only valid occupation for serious men involves dedicating their major energies to practical labors. There is an intensely suggestive juxtaposition here between the loss of a certain spiritual direction and the dedication to practical achievements. We can even suspect that we are tapping one of the forces behind that extraordinary Victorian compulsion toward work. Those formidable accomplishments

they made in virtually every field of public concern might be attributed to a reluctance to face the loss of a firm belief in a directing spiritual purpose. Without in any way belittling the value of such achievements, it is still incongruous that Tennyson has his representative of Soul urge his men to cultivate the public garden.

Let us move away, however, from the internal difficulties in Tennyson's conception of Arthur and try to see how his attempt to idealize Arthur affects the texture of his verse. In "Gareth and Lynette" we have a series of pictures illustrating Arthur's role as a dispenser of justice; the sententious and pompous tone of his speeches is a clear reflection of Tennyson's decision to make him an ideal, rather than a real figure. To a woman claiming that Uther violently took a field from her late husband Arthur offers either gold or the return of the property. When she chooses the latter he says,

> 'Have thy pleasant field again,
> And thrice the gold for Uther's use thereof,
> According to the years. No boon is here,
> But justice, so thy say be proven true.
> Accursed, who from the wrongs his father did
> Would shape himself a right!'
> (336-41)

When a woman who openly proclaims herself his enemy asks a knight to avenge a wrong to her, the response is as follows:

> But Arthur: 'We sit King, to help the wrong'd
> Thro' all our realm. The woman loves her lord.
> Peace to thee, woman, with thy loves and hates!
> The kings of old had doom'd thee to the flames;
> Aurelius Emrys would have scourged thee dead,

And Uther slit thy tongue; but get thee hence--
Lest that rough humor of the kings of old
Return upon me! Thou that art her kin,
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.'
(363-75)

The stilted, even stolid movement of the verse suggests how unconvincing is the character whom it defines. There is, furthermore, an unpleasant conjunction between self-satisfaction and "an eye for an eye" morality. Why, we wonder, must he swear by Christ, traditionally the exponent of mercy, while virtuously promising retribution in kind? Such a blatant incongruity mirrors a considerable uneasiness and an uncertain grasp, and it suggests the absence of available traditional models. Malory's Arthur was more humane than this, though not entirely from the most idealistic motives. In trying to establish Arthur as an ideal figure, with only formal reference to historical actuality, Tennyson commits himself to description through postures and uneasy rhetoric. When his Arthur is finally portrayed as a human being, in "The Passing of Arthur," the quality of the poetry improves immeasurably; his speeches come to have the appropriateness of dramatic utterance and approach, if not equal, the level of such fine poems as "Ulysses" and "Tithonous."

Tennyson also wrenches the original in making Arthur physically superior: "For Lancelot was the first in tournament,/But

Arthur mightiest on the battlefield--" (485-6) In the Morte we are aware of a very particular social situation, constantly threatened by severe physical violence which makes their high esteem for physical prowess understandable. It is quite obviously crucial to survival. When Tennyson, however, perfunctorily insists in the Idylls that he who is morally superior is also physically superior, we have an example of an essentially mindless accumulation of arbitrary and not necessarily related virtues. In "Balin and Balan" Tennyson has invented an episode that contrasts predictably with the original. The brothers are sitting outside Camelot, challenging and overthrowing any knight who passes. Arthur arms himself and challenges them:

> 'but see, or proven or not,
> Whether me likewise ye can overthrow.'
> And Arthur lightly smote the brethren down,
> And lightly so return'd, and no man knew.
> (37-40)

In the original version of the Balin story Arthur has neither superlative virtue nor extraordinary strength. A woman comes to the court "girt with a sword for to find a man of such virtue to draw it out of the scabbard." (I, 46) Arthur responds with a characteristic dignity and lack of pompousness:

> I will myself assay to draw out the sword, not presuming upon myself that I am the best knight, but that I will begin to draw at your sword in giving example to all the barons that they shall assay every each one after other when I have assayed it. Then Arthur took the sword by the

> sheath and by the girdle and pulled at it eagerly, but the sword would not out. Sir, said the damosel, you need not to pull half so hard, for he that shall pull it out shall do it with little might. Ye say well, said Arthur; now assay ye all my barons, but beware ye be not defiled with shame, treachery, nor guile. Then it will not avail, said the damosel, for he must be a clean knight without villainy, and of a gentle strain of father side and mother side. Most of all the barons of the Round Table that were there at that time assayed all by row, but there might none speed; wherefore the damosel made great sorrow out of measure, and said, Alas! I weened in this Court had been the best knights without treachery or treason. By my faith, said Arthur, here are good knights as I deem, as any be in the world, but their grace is not to help you, wherefore I am displeased.
>
> (I, 47)

The sword is finally drawn by Balin, whom the King had imprisoned for half a year on the charge of slaying Arthur's cousin. We are left with the incongruity between Balin's history and the catalogue of virtues upon which the damsel had insisted. Such incongruities --and they are not infrequent in the Morte--serve to qualify Malory's formal commitment to a physical trial as the appropriate and reliable test of a man's spiritual dignity. On such a point, Malory is more realistic and sophisticated than Tennyson.

It is most interesting to discover what Tennyson willfully has rejected in the character of the king. His most important omissions, or changes, are sexual. Apart from various rather casual adulteries, Arthur in the Morte is guilty of unwitting incest with his half-sister, Morgause, and the fruit of this liason is

Mordred. Clearly this is considered one of the most serious sins recorded in those pages; Merlin's words to Arthur are severe for Malory:

> ye have done a thing late that God is displeased with you, for ye have lain by your sister, and on her ye have gotten a child that shall destroy you and all the knights of your realm . . . it is God's will your body to be punished for your foul deeds.
>
> (I, 37)

To try to escape such punishment, Arthur orders all the children born on a certain day put into a ship and driven out to sea. Mordred is one of the few children to survive, and he does eventually usurp the throne. Because of Arthur's actions King Lot, Morgause's husband, holds against Arthur:

> Then King Arthur let send for all the children born on May-day, begotten of lords and born of ladies; for Merlin told King Arthur that he that should destroy him should be born on May-day, wherefore he sent for them all, upon pain of death; and so there were found many lords' sons, and all were sent unto the king, and so was Mordred sent by King Lot's wife, and all were put in a ship to the sea . . . . So many lords and barons of this realm were displeased, for their children were so lost, and many put the wyte on Merlin more than on Arthur; so what for dread and for love, they held their peace.
>
> (I, 45)
>
> Alas, he [Lot] might not endure, the which was great pity, that so worthy a knight as he was one should be overmatched, that of late time afore had been a knight of King Arthur's, and wedded the sister of King Arthur; and for King Arthur lay by King Lot's wife, the which was Arthur's sister, and gat on her Mordred, therefore King Lot held against Arthur.
>
> (I, 58)

Lot's death inspires his son Gawaine to the blood feud that so

substantially contributes to destroying the Round Table. Consequently, Malory's Arthur is clearly responsible for particular deeds that eventually ensure his defeat. He is not, as in the Idylls, a "blameless" king destroyed by the sins of others.

Tennyson not only has rejected important incidents from the original; he has the unfortunate tendency to call attention to his revisions. Arthur says in his final speech to Guinevere:

> They summon me their King to lead mine hosts
> Far down to that great battle in the west,
> Where I must strike against the man they call
> My sister's son--no kin of mine, who leagues
> With Lords of the White Horse, heathen, and knights,
> Traitors--and strike him dead, and meet myself
> Death, or I know not what mysterious doom.
> (Gu, 567-73)

By even disclaiming Mordred as a nephew, Tennyson's Arthur unwittingly reminds us that he was originally Arthur's bastard son, and we may begin to suspect something compulsive and even unhealthy about Tennyson's substantial changes. It is no longer a simple matter of omitting what most of us would agree to be difficult material; Tennyson has tried to make his Arthur the reverse of what he traditionally was. It is not merely that he gives him additional virtues; he insists on giving him virtues completely contradictory to some of the most important facets of his legendary character. There are other relevant and perhaps more damaging revisions.

Tennyson has omitted Merlin's warning to Arthur that Guenever

would not love him:

> But Merlin warned the king covertly that Guenever was not wholesome for him to take to wife, for he warned him that Launcelot should love her, and she him again; and so he turned his tale to the adventures of the Sangreal.
> (I, 71)

The burden of this passage, as well as the much later one testifying that Arthur had "a deeming" of the adultery, is that Arthur again bears considerable complicity in the sexual irregularities of his court, and of his wife. He wanted her enough to take her despite his knowledge that she would never belong entirely to him. Nor was this eagerness just an impulsive and transitory whim. From what we can tell of the text, Arthur is publicly willing for many years to pretend he knew nothing of Guenever's love for Launcelot. No reasons are given, except that he is very grateful to Launcelot and quite fond of him. By wholly rejecting Arthur's complicated affections and compromised moral position, Tennyson has set the stage for a scene most critics now deplore on the grounds of cruelty and moral obtuseness; Harold Nicolson calls these speeches of Arthur's to Guinevere almost intolerable.[29] We are at first incredulous of the assumptions behind the speech; we cannot believe in a relationship in which all the right is on one side and all the wrong on the other.

Tennyson's allegorical intentions are of course largely responsible for the scene. We are supposed to be able to hear

Reason chastizing the corrupt Senses. However, when Tennyson gives flesh to Reason or Soul he significantly impairs his ability to render abstract qualities of virtue or vice. And when he tries to use as a vehicle for abstract considerations and conflicts England's most vivid and famous romance, he necessarily and hopelessly involves himself in human material. Rather than hearing Reason judging Sense, we hear a man condemning a woman. And to those familiar with the old tales comes the chilling realization that Tennyson's Arthur is righteously condemning Guinevere for a sin no different in kind from and actually less horrendous than, those of which he himself was traditionally guilty.

> 'Liest thou here so low, the child of one
> I honor'd, happy, dead before thy shame?
> Well is it that no child 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;
> (419-25)
> Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me
> That I the King should greatly care to live;
> For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.
> Bear with me for the last time while I show,
> Even for thy sake, the sin which thou hast sinn'd.
> (448-52)
> for indeed I knew
> 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.
> And all this throve before I wedded thee,
> Believing, "Lo, mine helpmate, one to feel
> My purpose and rejoicing in my joy!"

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,
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,
And all thro' thee.

(474-90)

For think not, tho' thou wouldst not love thy lord,
Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.
I am not made of so slight elements.
Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.
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 thro' his cowardice allow'd
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,
She like a new disease, unknown to men,
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,
Makes wicked lightnings 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!
Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,
The mockery of my people and their bane!

(505-23)

This blatant misogyny and implicit sexual fear are all the more amazing when we recall the encomia awarded these speeches; for they are the passages most praised by Gladstone, highly complimented by George Eliot and Coventry Patmore; and they were among Tennyson's favorite repertoire for recitation to his friends. There is, I think, something much more profound at issue than a mere change in literary sensibility. How is it that some of the most serious and uncompromising critics of that day and this have radically different attitudes to these crucial speeches? The

problem may be finally insoluble, but we can at least venture to describe the moral temper underlying Tennyson's writing in an attempt to approach the "Guinevere" with greater sympathy and understanding. We can ask what are the attractive and compelling assumptions informing Arthur's speeches.

Probably the most central belief implicit here is in individual responsibility. The poet imagines that an individual's actions are capable of having immense public influence and profound significance. He has a positive attitude to suffering: one is ennobled by suffering voluntarily accepted for the sake of principle and in contradiction to the promptings of the senses. There is the further gratification that one's self-ennoblement is in some sense directly connected to the public weal. There are no serious and finally debilitating moral ambiguities; it is not only necessary, it is possible to place the finger of blame with utmost precision. In this passage Tennyson assumes that will power and self-sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of one's sensual nature, are in effect the major necessities of a worthwhile and meaningful existence. And he assumes that the moral life may be learned by example and may be corrupted by example.

Tennyson's is in many ways an encouraging set of beliefs. The idea is ultimately consoling that there is a standard available to everyone which offers the satisfaction of essential needs as well as the unqualified approval of the moral nature. It would

then be merely the frivolous and selfish who wilfully limited the scope of their lives to trivial pleasures. The serious-minded could, through discipline and the determined rejection of inferior delights, devote their energies to higher concerns, thereby elevating not only themselves but also the society in which they lived. Whatever suffering might be incurred would not significantly debilitate or impoverish the individual, whose example would be all-important.

Finally, of course, our objections to the poetry cannot be based simply on our inability to assent fully to its underlying assumptions. This is hardly the place to enter into the tortuous debate on the function of belief in poetry, though it is legitimate to note certain reservations one may have to the attitudes just described. They tend to underrate the ability of suffering to damage, if not to destroy. Our post-Freudian era has an inclination, if not a right, to suspect that severe repressions may have disastrous consequences, both to an individual and to those around him. We may further suspect that apparent right and wrong in actual human circumstances do not accurately reflect either moral or psychological reality. And a way of thinking that emphasizes the transcendence of the individual over the circumstances which shape him reflects the impoverishment of communal sense so brilliantly and variously attacked bt Marx, Arnold, Ruskin, Dickens, Carlyle, and others. Essentially the <u>Weltanschauung</u> that informs Arthur's

speeches savors of wishful thinking belatedly undertaken, and one may suspect that it imposes an order and pattern on things because of a fear of looking straightforwardly into suspected chaos. Furthermore, it puts upon the relatively fragile shoulders of the individual a burden simply too great for him to bear.

A major difficulty here lies in the way Tennyson's conception relates the individual to society. Although Tennyson might not have subscribed to this assumption when stated abstractly, it is nonetheless crucial to the Idylls and a function of his decision to work with types, rather than real, complex, contradictory human beings. He postulates a chain of cause and effect that works from the individual to the larger social unit, individual vice spreading to contaminate a whole society. The insistence that there is a relationship between public and private vice is believable enough, although the particular nature of that relationship is, one would think, endlessly debatable. We can grant Tennyson and his contemporaries the right to be horrified at adultery without going so far in suspension of judgment as to agree with Tennyson's hypothesis in the Idylls that one private vice, no matter at what "heights" committed, can contaminate a whole society.

It is virtually indisputable that the corruption can spread in the reverse direction, from the public or social sphere to the private or individual. Henry James has given us a number splendid novels analyzing what happens to innocence and inexperience when they

come in contact with what people variously call sophistication, knowledge, complexity, and corruption. T.S. Eliot's well-known and much-abused observation is relevant here: Henry James "had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."[30] The crucial word of course is "violate"; the confrontation itself between innocence and experience is common to many of James's novels, but the perspectives, conclusions, perceptions, and details of that confrontation are infinitely various. And the most telling impact is that on the individual of the larger social group. By contrast, Tennyson's mind was distinctly violated by his obsessive and uncritical idea about adultery. He assumes that what happens between two or three individuals will necessarily infect the social life in which they play a minor, though exalted part.

Despite the obvious difficulties, we must attempt to read these speeches as though Arthur were Reason, preaching from assumptions such as those outlined above. When we do so, however, a curious and important fact emerges. The implicit testimony of the situation is that Reason cannot function in conjunction with Sense, that mind can operate only apart from body. The basically negative conception of Reason that has dominated the Idylls becomes more evident here. The relationship between soul and sense, rather than being an inevitable blend according to the nature of things, is a juxtaposition held together by willed contract. Such a conception permits the contract to be broken, and Tennyson takes advantage of

that possibility. In the name of the highest moral and social principles, Tennyson has allowed himself to express the most fervent sexual rejections. The twentieth century is of course in no position to quarrel with a preoccupation with sex; the difficulty here is that it is not faced squarely.

By making the marriage of two people stand for the union between soul and sense, Tennyson creates for himself an impossible dilemma. A human marriage necessarily implies that two people, each of whom suffers the often contradictory and intractable demands of his nature, try to find in each other a measure of satisfaction or release from these complications. Tennyson does not make what we could call a useful simplification but rather vulgarizes the eternal conflict between the demands of body and soul to the level of a social problem. Someone said of Thackeray's novel that the scope of "vanity fair" has been narrowed from all of human life to a particular social milieu in London. Tennyson even further reduces the scope of the fundamental conflict within each individual to the level of marital fidelity. Even if we conceive sense merely in terms of sexual desire, we have only to think of Sidney's "Leave me o Love" or Shakespeare's "Th'expence of Spirit in a waste of Shame" to realize how drastically reduced is the significance of this conflict.

Tennyson further imposes upon marriage the burden of sustaining an entire civilization. He adds to its value as a social

institution, an important element in social stability, an assumption that it is equally the channel for spiritual health:

> 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.
> (477-80)

Marriage, rather than the institution of the church or the rigid discipline of the formal religious life, is expected to inspire men to the highest.

A crucial change from Malory is evident here, and the contrast may prove instructive. Love in the Morte was also held to be distinctly elevating. Tristram and Lancelot periodically testified to its inspiring quality, and a number of incidents showed them spurred by a glimpse or thought of their lady to overcome otherwise hopelessly difficult odds. In one passage, Palomides, who has unfortunately been neglected by most modern redactors of the Arthurian material, tells Tristram of his love for Isoud:

> And now, Sir Tristram, I will that ye wit that I have loved La Beale Isoud many a day, and she hath been the causer of my worship, and else I had been the most simplest knight in the world. For by her, and by cause of her, I have won the worship that I have; for when I remembered me of La Beale Isoud I won the worship wheresomever I came for the most part; and yet had I never reward nor bounte of her the days of my life, and yet have I been her knight guerdonless.
> (II, 120-1)

Such high devotion, with its tangible effects, is inspired by erotic love, though in this case it is not even requited love. Such a passion is so overwhelming and ennobling that it almost approaches

transcendence. Yet in Malory it has nothing to do with marriage but is extrasocial. It bears no relation to social institutions and in no way functions as the cement of society. It is an individual concern with no relevance beyond the individual, except insofar as it spurs him to outstanding practical feats that others could emulate.

Tennyson must have known that the burden he is putting on marriage is insupportable, but he does not face that fact squarely. His central hypothesis is that the decay of society proceeds from the violation of marital fidelity; and the material he has chosen as vehicle abounds in tributes to extramarital love. He does not explore the moral or psychological possibilities of the material, but instead contorts it according to preconceived beliefs.

One simple way of trying to understand Tennyson's preoccupation with marriage is to recognize that we still have the terrible problems he did, though perhaps in exacerbated form. We still try to find in marriage all varieties of spiritual salvation, and to admit that the attempt is futile can be agonizing, if not impossible. D.H. Lawrence is not so far from Tennyson's assumptions as the ludicrous surfaces of the comparison might suggest. The decline of religious faith left a void that has preoccupied major writers for more than one hundred years. When is it conceivable before the nineteenth century that a personal relationship and a social institution might be expected to bear such heavy burdens? What is frequently called

our decadence is perhaps a simple function of the insufficiency of available beliefs and institutions to satisfy deep human needs.

d. Merlin and Vivien

In the pages of Malory, Merlin is considerably more than the legendary mystic who predicts future events. He is not only the power behind Arthur's throne, he is responsible for Arthur's very existence. At the beginning of the Morte we are told how Uther summons to his court the Duke of Cornwall, with whose wife, Igraine, Uther proceeds to fall in love:

> the king liked and loved this lady well, and he made them great cheer out of measure, and desired to have lain by her. But she was a passing good woman, and would not assent unto the king.
> (I, 5)

To protect her virtue, Igraine successfully urges her husband to flee with her, and they barricade themselves in separate castles. One of Uther's knights, Ulfius, seeks Merlin to discover a plan by which the king may win the lady. Merlin's response is the following:

> if King Uther will well reward me, and be sworn unto me to fulfil my desire, that shall I be his honour and profit more than mine, for I shall cause him to have all his desire.
> (I, 6)

After Uther has consented to Merlin's conditions, Merlin becomes specific:

> the first night that ye shall lie by Igraine ye shall get a child on her, and when that is born, that it shall be delivered to me for to nourish there as I will have it; for it shall be your worship, and the child's avail as mickle as the child is worth.
> (I, 7)

Merlin then transforms Uther into the semblance of the Duke of Cornwall, who is killed in battle three hours before Arthur is conceived. Uther subsequently marries Igraine ("and so in all haste they were married in a morning with great mirth and joy." (I, 8)) and confesses Merlin's strategems to her: "Then the queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child." (I, 8) Merlin arranges for Sir Ector to raise the child as though he were his own, and on Uther's deathbed, Merlin asks him before all his barons:

> Sir, shall your son Arthur be king after your days, of this realm with all the appurtenances? Then Uther Pendragon turned him, and said in hearing of them all, I give him God's blessing and mine, and bid him pray for my soul, and righteously and worshipfully that he claim the crown upon forfeiture of my blessing.
> (I, 9-10)

The old mage then establishes as the test of strength and virtue sufficient to merit the throne a sword embedded in a stone:

> there was seen in the churchyard, against the high altar, a great stone four square, like unto a marble stone, and in midst thereof was like an anvil of steel a foot on high, and therin stuck a fair sword naked by the point, and letters there were written in gold about the sword that said thus:--Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England.
> (I, 10)

For years no one is able to pull the sword from the stone, until the time at the feast of All Hallowmass when Arthur, almost by accident, accomplishes the feat. He is required to repeat it several times because of the barons' great disbelief and distrust:

> And at the feast of Pentecost all manner of men essayed to pull at the sword that would essay, but none might prevail but Arthur, and pulled it out afore all the lords and commons that were there, wherefore all the common cried at once, We will have Arthur unto our king, we will put him no more in delay, for we all see that it is God's will that he shall be our king, and who that holdeth against it, we will slay him. And therewith they all kneeled at once, both rich and poor, and cried Arthur mercy because they had delayed him so long, and Arthur forgave them, and took the sword between both his hands, and offered it upon the altar where the Archbishop was, and so was he made knight of the best man that was there.
> (I, 13-14)

Merlin assures the dissident barons that Arthur is the son of Uther and Igraine and warns them he cannot be defeated: "for ye shall not here prevail though ye were ten times so many." (I, 16) The barons, however, are undaunted by the "dream-reader" and hold against Arthur. In the subsequent few years Merlin designs the battle strategy and alliances through which Arthur is ultimately successful. The pages describing Arthur's military activities to secure his throne are filled with such phrases as "by counsel of Merlin," "as Merlin had devised," "and as thou hast devised, so shall it be done." The fact that Merlin's strategies and deceptions are responsible for Arthur's success is most clearly indicated by the battle in which Lot is killed. Merlin deceives Lot with "a tale of

prophecy" to keep him from battle until Arthur shall have defeated most of Lot's allies:

> Alas, said King Lot, I am ashamed for by my default there is many a worshipful man slain, for an we had been together there had been none host under the heaven that had been able for to have matched with us; this fayter with his prophecy hath mocked me. All that did Merlin, for he knew well that an King Lot had been with his body there at the first battle King Arthur had been slain, and all his people destroyed; and well Merlin knew that one of the kings should be dead that day, and loath was Merlin that any of them both should be slain; but of the twain, he had liefer King Lot had been slain than King Arthur.
> (I, 58)

All of Merlin's enigmatic and oracular pronouncements on future events are fulfilled, but there are several passages that suggest, if not ineptness, at least fallibility in the magnificent and devious old man. He is unnecessarily responsible for some of the hostility to Arthur. Ulfius accuses Igraine of treason before Arthur and all the court:

> this Queen Igraine is causer of your great damage, and of your great war. For, an she would have uttered it in the life of King Uther Pendragon, of the birth of you, and how ye were begotten, ye had never had the mortal wars that ye have had; for the most part of your barons of your realm knew never whose son ye were, nor of whom ye were begotten.
> (I, 37)

When Igraine defends herself by claiming not to know what has become of her child, Ulfius admits "Merlin is more to blame than ye." (I, 38) Later, Merlin tells Arthur to destroy all children born on May-day in an attempt to avert God's wrath in the form of Mordred, and considerable hostility is earned for the king. Despite

his knowledge that Guenever is fated to love Launcelot, Merlin consents to Arthur's desires and sues Leodegrance in the King's name for the hand of his daughter.

Merlin's last significant acts on Arthur's behalf appropriately concern the firm establishment of his court. Merlin finds twenty-eight knights to help fill the Round Table, which Leodegrance had given along with one hundred knights as a wedding present to his son-in-law. With golden letters Merlin magically designates the seats appropriate to each knight, reserving the Siege Perilous for the stainless knight who is to achieve the Grail. He instructs Arthur in knightly precedence and his obligations as ruler:

> When she was gone the king was glad, for she made such a noise. Nay, said Merlin, ye may not leave these adventures so lightly, for these adventures must be brought again or else it would be disworship to you and to your feast.
>
> (I, 76)

Immediately after Arthur's famous Round Table oath, Merlin's work evidently is finished, and he tells Arthur that he has to leave.

The passage immediately following the oath is the only one that describes Merlin and a woman, and it is only slightly longer than one page. The following parts of it have specific reference to his passion:

> So after these quests of Sir Gawaine, Sir Tor, and King Pellinore, it fell so that Merlin fell in a dotage on the damosel that King Pellinore brought to court, and she was one of the damosels of the lake, that hight Nimue. But Merlin would let her have no rest, but always he would be with her. And ever she made

> Merlin good cheer till she had learned of him all manner thing that she desired; and he was assotted upon her, that he might not be from her. So on a time he told King Arthur that he should not dure long, but for all his crafts he should be put in the earth quick . . . And within a while the damosel of the lake departed, and Merlin went with her evermore wheresomever she went. And ofttimes Merlin would have had her privily away by his subtle crafts; then she made him to swear that he should never do none enchantment upon her if he would have his will. And so he sware . . . . And so soon after the lady and Merlin departed, and by the way Merlin showed her many wonders, and came into Cornwall. And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him, and fain would have been delivered of him, for she was afeared of him because he was a devil's son, and she could not beskyfte him by no means. And so on a time it happed that Merlin showed to her a rock whereas was a great wonder, and wrought by enchantment, that went under a great stone. So by her subtle working she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there, but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin.
>
> (I, 90-1)

Merlin, then, is responsible in the most literal sense for Arthur's birth, rearing, and ascent to the throne. He uses his military and political sagacity to defeat Arthur's major enemies and secure the kingdom. And he instructs Arthur in the decorum, organization, and responsibilities appropriate to his court. Having completed these Herculean tasks, Merlin succumbs to unrequited passion and consents to his own demise.

In appropriating Merlin from the pages of Malory, Tennyson therefore is committing himself to represent the wisest and most powerful man in the world.[31] Such adjectives are not used in the

Morte to characterize Merlin but rather are ones that we can appropriately attach to him on account of his actions and influence as specifically related there. Tennyson apparently feels, in accord with his commitment to types, that he does not have to establish Merlin's superiority by showing it, as it were, in action. He assumes that the name "Merlin" immediately conjures up a recognizable, substantial, and established figure. Merlin, then, embodies supreme wisdom; but the serious inadequacy of Tennyson's method can be demonstrated in the multiple incongruities that characterize situations involving Merlin. Furthermore, Tennyson's morbid preoccupation with sexuality can be further illuminated by examining Merlin's relationship with Vivien and the ways that relationship differs from the original in Malory.

He predictably removes Merlin's complicity in Uther's seduction of Igraine. After slaying Gorlois, Tennyson's version of the Duke of Cornwall, Uther storms Ygerne's castle, and all her men flee:

> And there was none to call it but himself.
> So, compass'd by the power of the king,
> Enforced she was to wed him in her tears,
> And with a shameful swiftness; afterward,
> Not many moons, King Uther died himself,
> Moaning and wailing for an heir to rule
> After him, lest the realm should go to wrack.
> And that same night, the night of the new year,
> By reason of the bitterness and grief
> That vext his mother, all before his time
> Was Arthur born, and all as soon as born
> Deliver'd at a secret postern-gate
> To Merlin, to be holden far apart

> Until his hour should come, because the lords
> Of that fierce day were as the lords of this,
> Wild beasts, and surely would have torn the child
> Piecemeal among them, had they known.
> ("The Coming of Arthur," 201-17)

Tennyson makes sure that the couple are married first and that Ygerne is a reluctant partner. Merlin's briefly mentioned role amounts to the function of a kind of physical guardian, rather than to the deliberate rearing and education of a prospective king.

Even this pale version is undercut, however, by the fact that it is only one of several different tales of Arthur's origins, and Tennyson does not express a preference for one over the others. The additional stories are of course invented, and are quite obscure and speculative in presentation. In "The Coming of Arthur" Bellicent tells Leodegran a story told her on his deathbed by Bleys, "our Merlin's master." It describes a phantom ship coming into a cove where Bleys and Merlin have wandered; the ninth wave comes and is in a 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!"
> (382-5)

Bleys died after telling Bellicent this tale, and when asked to confirm it, Merlin only laughs and riddles, concluding "From the great deep to the great deep he goes." (410) Apart from the fact that Merlin refuses to comment on this fanciful story, presumably a

device to indicate that his wisdom is too profound and enigmatic to be transmitted to mere earthlings, his role is presented as utterly passive: the child is simply deposited at his feet.

Although Tennyson may not feel it necessary to demonstrate the workings of Merlin's superiority, he does cite certain accomplishments to sanction his position at court. In the idyll "Merlin and Vivien" there are five brief lines:

> Him, the most famous man of all those times,
> Merlin, who knew the range of all their arts,
> Had built the King his havens, ships, and halls;
> Was also bard, and knew the starry heavens;
> The people call'd him wizard.
> (164-8)

His knowledge is perfunctorily pictured as essentially static and abstract; and since we never see him using it, his relationship to this knowledge appears fundamentally passive. His one active accomplishment is that of a builder, a role which bears the greatest similarities to the kinds of achievement Arthur preaches in the Grail section. In that idyll Merlin is again called responsible for "our mighty hall,/ Which Merlin built for Arthur long ago!" (226-7) although it should be noted that even these accomplishments are located in the distant past--a fact that further mitigates what vitality and vividness they might suggest.

Tennyson's method is based on an assumption that there is general and unquestioned agreement on what wisdom is and how it acts. But the stolidness and vapidity of his Merlin belie such an

assumption. It seems obvious that Tennyson is at a loss to know how to realize the highest intelligence, and to imagine what its proper uses are. His problems in doing so were hopelessly magnified when he decided to make his court essentially Utopian, thereby removing the action from the realm of the real world. It is not surprising that he rejects Merlin's bargain with Uther; Merlin as pimp would doubtless have been difficult for any poet to make credible. But virtually everything else that in Malory establishes Merlin's claim to our respect is also lacking. In the Idylls Merlin shows no concern for political strategy and executes no military machinations on behalf of Arthur, and Tennyson's few vague references to mystic knowledge and building feats are all the poet can credit as unobjectionable and necessary. Again Tennyson's decision to remove his moral fable from the practical problems of the real world results in a disturbing impoverishment of presentation and conception.

The idyll "Merlin and Vivien" is one of the two most objectionable in the collection, even when one considers it without reference to its source. Harold Nicolson has given an uncompromising judgment of the poem:

> It is an abominable tale and confirms the impression that Tennyson could not describe physical passion with delicacy or taste. I agree with those who regret that the Laureate refused to follow the advice of those who urged him to eliminate "Merlin and Vivien" from the collection.[32]

Yet when we consider it in connection with Malory, we

discover the most revealing changes. Merlin appears frequently in the first ninety-one pages of the Morte, busy at the tasks previously described of establishing Arthur in power. His fixation on Nimue is the last incident narrated; it occupies slightly more than one page of the book. The proportions are completely reversed in the Idylls. There are few allusions to Merlin's achievements, but "Merlin and Vivien," which is the third longest idyll in the series, elaborates a tale of Vivien's seduction of the old wizard. Tennyson contorts the relationship between Merlin and his lady even more than he does that between Arthur and Guenever, and his misogyny is thereby allowed extraordinary latitude of expression. We must recall that in Malory Nimue is the pursued and indeed has no particular character; Merlin is simply "assotted." Erotic feeling is quite definitely present, though cryptically presented; this feeling, however, is Merlin's, while Nimue "was ever passing weary of him, and fain would have been delivered of him." Tennyson has not only made Vivien into the pursuer, he has made her into a harlot. There is no convincing erotic feeling in the idyll; Vivien is grasping merely for prestige and revenge.

In his conception of Vivien, Tennyson is fulfilling his expressed intention of working with types. Stopford Brooke describes Tennyson's plans regarding her. She is to represent "the incarnation of that impurity of sense which is, in Tennyson's mind, the

bitterest enemy the soul can have, which more than all else breaks up and ruins not only States but also the powers by which States are made and held together . . [she is]. . close to the traditional symbolism of Luxuria. She is born of rebellion, that is, of disobedient pride . . . . The first of sins in the mind of the ancient Church is pride, and the second lust, and death is their child."[33] Tennyson is hardly the only poet who would have difficulty in giving flesh to such ponderous abstractions, but the romantic material he has chosen as a vehicle is particularly unsusceptible to such inflation. Unless one can view Vivien in the allegorical sense Brooke suggests, the idyll is peculiarly unpleasant. And the writing, for one thing, is simply too weak to sustain such a burden:

> As love, if love be perfect, casts out fear,
> So hate, if hate be perfect, casts out fear.
> My father died in battle against the King,
> My mother on his corpse in open field;
> She bore me there, for born from death was I
> Among the dead and sown upon the wind--
> And then on thee! and shown the truth betimes,
> That old true filth, and bottom of the well,
> Where truth is hidden.
> (40-48)

In the first two lines the poet uses the same constructions, and even the same language, with the exception of the two words he varies. There is an obvious and sluggish progression from "father" to "mother," from "bore" to "born," from "death" to "dead," and "sown" to "shown," "truth" to "true" and back to "Truth" again.

Every line but one is end-stopped, and that one demands a voice pause. Such facile syntax and unsubtle rhythm characterize many of the passages dealing with Vivien, although they can have a certain crude vigor that is a relief from excessive mellifluousness.

Tennyson's presentation of her depends upon the stereotyped expressions and postures of the seductress; but it evokes, in effect, a Vivien who is merely a flippant little tart, and not at all a power significant enough to threaten the stability of states. First he shows her prostrate in adoration at Merlin's feet and then in at least as stock a pose as temptress:

> 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.
> (236-40)

Further along there comes another well-tested stance:

> And Vivien, like the tenderest-hearted maid
> That ever bided tryst at village stile,
> Made answer, either eyelid wet with tears.
> (375-7)

The overwhelming tendency of this kind of scene-sketching to be trite in idea and language can be illustrated at random:

> So tender was her voice, so fair her face,
> So sweetly gleam'd her eyes behind her tears
> Like sunlight on the plain behind a shower.
> (399-401)

The conversations which furnish the bulk of the idyll in no way illuminate the character of either Merlin or Vivien, nor do they

provide information interesting in its own right.

Who can conceive a man who is really the wisest and most powerful in the world susceptible to these kinds of enticements? True, it might happen in life; it certainly might happen and be believable in Dostoevsky. But then we would be dealing with tangible, contradictory reality and not theoretical possibility. All we can do with "Merlin and Vivien" is to abstract even further from the lines and say that the wisest man in the world is also susceptible to human temptations. This perception, however, was a part, though a small part, of Tennyson's "given," and his devotion to types allows him to evade the responsibility of making it credible in human terms.

There are two other disturbing characteristics of Vivien's seduction of Merlin. One is Merlin's overwhelming passivity. He first leaves Arthur's court because he has sensed its coming doom and the triumph of "dying flesh," with "The meanest having power upon the highest,/ And the high purpose broken by the worm." (193-4) Thus an emotional conviction of inevitable loss inspires him to escape, to run away. In Malory, of course, Merlin leaves to pursue Nimue. He knows that fate has decreed the destruction of Arthur and his realm, and he tells this to Arthur, although he also gives him considerable advice on how to mitigate or delay the inevitable. He also knows, and is justified in believing, that he has

already done as much for Arthur as one person well can.

In the Idylls Merlin is pursued in his flight by Vivien, who covets notoriety "As fancying that her glory would be great/ According to his greatness whom she quench'd." The subsequent sequence of tableaux elaborates the wearing down of his defenses, and neither love nor lust is convincingly present. Merlin is simply tenacious of his "life and use and name and fame." (212) The arbitrary and compulsive nature of this formula becomes obvious because it is repeated, with slight variations, six times. Such abstract properties are Tennyson's substitute for concrete human reality, and even so he can only conceive of Merlin as trying to "hold on" to them.

Merlin's passivity is quite obviously, though unwittingly, revealed. He confesses to his pursuer,

> for shall I tell you truth?
> You seem'd that wave about to break upon me
> And sweep me from my hold upon the world,
> My use and name and fame.
> (299-302)

Again, a desperate tenacity is metaphorically presented as the only content of wisdom. The image becomes even more vaporous:

> But since you name yourself the summer fly,
> I well could wish a cobweb for the gnat
> That settles beaten back, and beaten back
> Settles, till one could yield for weariness.
> But since I will not yield to give you power
> Upon my life and use and name and fame,
> Why will ye never ask some other boon?
> (367-73)

The world's wise man can apparently think of nothing to do to turn away this importunate little harlot, despite the fact that he is understandably not in love with her.

> But, Vivien, when you sang me that sweet rhyme,
> I felt as tho' you knew this cursed charm,
> Were proving it on me, and that I lay
> And felt them slowly ebbing, name and fame.
> (432-5)

Finally he does in fact yield for weariness:

> For Merlin, overtalk'd and overworn,
> Had yielded, told her all the charm, and slept . . .
> (963-4)
> And in the hollow oak he lay as dead,
> And lost to life and use and name and fame.
> (967-8)

There is a certain irony in recalling again the comparatively straightforward passage from Malory: "And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood."

Tennyson's characterization of Merlin through his exchanges with Vivien displays even further an impoverished notion of what intelligence is. Merlin has simply chanced upon the magic charm for which Vivien pesters him; neither intention, calculation, nor untoward effort discovered it to him. Its source is obscure, but primarily because the charm is written in tiny script in an antique, forgotten tongue. Mere diligence, not extraordinary insight and intellectual power, made the marginal comments, though not the text, accessible to him:

> O, the results are simple; a mere child
> Might use it to the harm of any one,
> And never could undo it.
> (682-4)

Wisdom becomes the ability to decipher a puzzle. A measure of persistence and cleverness exercised on a forgotten book can elicit a formula that requires then no mental powers whatsoever to employ. Merlin's genius is essentially static, arbitrary, inflexible, and mechanical--or at best scientific--not necessarily related to human or divine concerns, unaffected by changing circumstances or discoveries.

A major portion of the exchanges between this incongruous pair is marked by a culpable confusion between wisdom and wilful ignorance. Vivien scorns the Round Table's professions of chastity and challenges Merlin to explain certain apparent sexual lapses. Anyone even vaguely familiar with the old tales would be well aware that they abound in love affairs; therefore Merlin's indignant and automatic disclaimers have a rather comic quality. The fact that the first two episodes Vivien used were invented for the Idylls cannot in any serious way mitigate our incredulity. Merlin's rebuttals are marked by excessive ingenuity and even simplemindedness, and we are faced with the extraordinary dilemma that the harlot's analysis seems more credible than that of the wisest man in the world. The exchanges offer yet another example of Tennyson's compulsive distortion of a major aspect of the material he

chose as a vehicle.

Merlin is finally constrained to admit the "commerce" between Lancelot and the Queen, but he explains that it happened when Guinevere saw Lancelot first and mistook him for King Arthur: "So fixt her fancy on him." (775) So far as I have been able to discover, Tennyson invented this explanation of Guinevere's love for Lancelot. It is at least neither in Malory nor in Chretien de Troyes, the best known Arthurian sources, so if he did discover it elsewhere he had to go rather far afield. The convention of love at first sight is then modified by the implication that Guinevere willed to fall in love with her future husband and was thwarted in so doing by mere chance. Since this love is held to be the central cause of the Round Table's disintegration, the whimsy and superficiality of such an explanation is particularly damaging. We have neither love potion, as in the original Tristram-Isolt story, or deep and permanent love, as in the relationship between Guenever and Launcelot. Our wise man is thus content to offer a mindless conventional notion of love, modified only by the curious implication that love could be willed.

3.

"The Holy Grail"

For some years Tennyson felt reluctant to attempt the Holy Grail theme, and he spoke of this reluctance with a characteristic seriousness and modesty: "I doubt whether such a subject as the San Graal could be handled in these days without incurring a charge of irreverence. It would be too much like playing with sacred things." (II, 126) When he actually began writing the poem he felt inspired, and the writing came quickly and to his satisfaction. (II, 57) He thought it "one of the most imaginative of my poems," and Hallam recalled an exposition he made of it:

> He pointed out the difference between the five visions of the Grail, as seen by the Holy Nun, Sir Galahad, Sir Percivale, Sir Lancelot, Sir Bors, according to their different, their own peculiar natures and circumstances, and the perfection or imperfection of their Christianity. He dwelt on the mystical treatment of every part of his subject, and said the key is to be found in a careful reading of Sir Percivale's vision and subsequent fall and nineteenth century temptations. (II, 63)

Extensive comparisons with Malory will reveal Tennyson's changes and will suggest aspects and modes of the spiritual life that were perhaps no longer available to him.

We must initially confront another basic confusion in the _Idylls_ that throws a curious ambiguity over the Grail Quest.[34] The _Memoir_ unwittingly suggests the difficulty:

> And in some, as faith declines, religion turns from practical goodness and holiness to superstition: "This madness has come on us for our sins." These seek relief in selfish spiritual excitement, not remembering that man's duty is to forget self in the service of others, and to let visions come and go, and that so only will they see "The Holy Thing."
> (II, 130)

Superstition and madness are implicitly linked here with the Quest, which then can be called "selfish spiritual excitement." Furthermore, there is a significant and historically unwarranted identification of "practical goodness and holiness." It seems that Tennyson has forgotten or lost the aspect of medieval Christianity that lauded the mystic vision for its own sake; that fasted in the desert; that mortified the flesh; that even courted martyrdom in the belief that the earth was only a testing ground for heaven.

The Quest in Malory, as in traditional Christianity, is clearly a pursuit of mystical participation with God, for which earthly concerns have to be renounced; its goals are different from and superior to the characteristic activities of the Round Table knights.[35] It is true, certainly, that Galahad is called a man of surpassing strength and goodness and that along the way he battles against wicked customs. However, the good deeds are not presented as the goal of the Quest, which is on the contrary to attain a fuller vision of Holiness.

The different order of the Quest experiences is indicated in a passage on Gawaine:

> When Sir Gawaine was departed from his fellowship he rode long without any adventure. For he found not the tenth part of adventure as he was wont to do. For Sir Gawaine rode from Whitsuntide until Michaelmas and found none adventure that pleased him. So on a day it befell Gawaine met with Sir Ector de Maris, and either made great joy of other that it were marvel to tell. And so they told every each other, and complained them greatly that they could find none adventure. Truly, said Sir Gawaine unto Sir Ector, I am nigh weary of this quest, and loth I am to follow further in strange countries. One thing marvelled me, said Sir Ector, I have met with twenty knights, fellows of mine, and all they complain as I do.
>
> (II, 213)

A hermit subsequently explains why they have found so few adventures:

> the adventure of the Sangreal which ye and many other have undertaken the quest of it and find it not, the cause is for it appeareth not to sinners. Wherefore marvel not though ye fail thereof, and many other. For ye be an untrue knight, and a great murderer, and to good men signifieth other things than murder. For I dare say as sinful as Sir Launcelot hath been, sith that he went into the quest of the Sangreal he slew never man, nor nought shall, till that he come unto Camelot again, for he hath taken upon him for to forsake sin. And nere that he nys stable, but by his thought he is likely to turn again, he should be next to achieve it save Galahad, his son. But God knoweth his thought and his unstableness, and yet shall he die right an holy man, and no doubt he hath no fellow of no earthly man. Sir, said Gawaine, it seemeth me by your words that for our sins it will not avail us to travel in this quest. Truly, said the good man, there be an hundred such as ye be that never shall prevail, but to have shame.
>
> (II, 219)

We shall deal later with Launcelot but one passage may help to underline the difference between the ordinary knightly adventures

and those relevant to the Quest. A recluse interprets for Launcelot his recent failure in a visionary tournament:

> Ah, Launcelot, said she, as long as ye were knight of earthly knighthood ye were the most marvellous man of the world, and most adventurous. Now, said the lady, sithen ye be set among the knights of heavenly adventures, if adventure fell thee contrary at that tournament have thou no marvel, for that tournament yesterday was but a tokening of Our Lord . . . anon thou turnest to the sinners, and that caused thy misadventure that thou should'st know good from evil and vain glory of the world, the which is not worth a pear. And for great pride thou madest great sorrow that thou haddest not overcome all the white knights with the covering of white by whom was betokeneth virginity and chastity; and therefore God was wroth with you, for God loveth no such deeds in this quest.
> (II, 212)

No longer can one be praised for defending the weak and battling valiantly; pride in accomplishment is suddenly suspect because it can confuse one's ability to determine a just cause. The glory of the world, which is worth a great deal in the rest of the Morte, is now "not worth a pear."

In the Morte Arthur is present and shares the experience when the partial vision of the Grail comes into the hall:

> Then there entered into the hall the Holy Greal covered with white samite, but there was none might see it, nor who bare it. And there was all the hall fulfilled with good odours, and every knight had such meats and drinks as he best loved in this world. And when the Holy Greal had been borne through the hall, the Holy Vessel departed suddenly, that they wist not where it became: then had they all breath to speak. And then the king yielded

> thankings to God, of his good grace that he had sent them. Certes, said the king, we ought to thank our Lord Jesu greatly for that he hath shewed us this day, at the reverence of this high feast of Pentecost. (II, 171)

He never disapproves of the Quest, though he is saddened to know he must lose his knights. When he first meets Galahad, he says, "Sir, ye be welcome, for ye shall move many good knights to the quest of the Sangreal, and ye shall achieve that never knights might bring to an end." (II, 168) And after many knights have followed Gawaine in swearing to pursue the Grail in order to see it fully, Arthur responds:

> Anon as King Arthur heard this he was greatly displeased, for he wist well they might not again say their avows. Alas, said King Arthur unto Sir Gawaine, ye have nigh slain me with the avow and promise that ye have made; for through you ye have bereft me the fairest fellowship and the truest of knighthood that ever were seen together in any realm of the world; for when they depart from hence I am sure they all shall never meet more in this world, for they shall die many in the quest. And so it forthinketh me a little, for I have loved them as well as my life, wherefore it shall grieve me right sore, the departition of this fellowship. (II, 172)

His sorrow has an intensely human note, but nowhere does he or anyone else belittle the worthiness of their undertaking.

Tennyson has dissociated Arthur, his representative of the highest good, indeed of the Soul, from the pursuit of the Grail-- the only portion of the old tales that has a clear spiritual meaning. In the Idylls, Arthur does not share the partial vision of the Grail

that inspires his knights' vows. He is returning from avenging "an outraged maiden" and sees from the plain below "thunder smoke" enveloping Camelot. When Percivale tells him what has happened,

> his face
> Darken'd, as I have seen it more than once,
> When some brave deed seem'd to be done in vain,
> Darken; and 'Woe is me, my knight,' he cried,
> 'Had I been here, ye had not sworn the vow.'
> ("The Holy Grail," 272-6)

He questions the reality of the quest: "have ye seen a cloud?/ What go ye into the wilderness to see?" (285-6) Tennyson can believe the spiritual life possible only to a few: "'Ah, Galahad, Galahad,' said the King, 'for such/ As thou art is the vision, not for these.'" (293-4) And he cannot believe that even the attempt to participate in it is worthwhile for most of his knights.[36] In an entirely original passage, he expresses his firm conviction as to their proper role:

> 'What are ye? Galahads?--no, nor Percivales'--
> For thus it pleased the King to range me close
> After Sir Galahad;--'nay,' said he,
> With strength and will to right the wrong'd, of power
> To lay the sudden heads of violence flat,
> Knights that in twelve great battles spash'd and dyed
> The strong White Horse in his own heathen blood--
> But one hath seen, and all the blind will see.
> Go, since your vows are sacred, being made.
> Yet--for ye know the cries of all my realm
> Pass thro' this hall--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!'
> (307-320)

They should, then, busy themselves with good works essentially unrelated to and uninspired by man's position as a son of God. We are here in Victorian England, concerned to direct its vast energies toward social amelioration, to remedy obvious inequities, to clean up palpable swamps.

It might be argued that only a few knights in Malory succeed in the Quest and that for most of them the pursuit of the Grail is futile. I earlier quoted a hermit telling Gawaine that because of his sinfulness he could not achieve the Grail, and such a passage might give a measure of credence to the argument that Tennyson took the essentials from his source and did not make significant changes. Gawaine in the Morte is sinful and incapable of spiritual experience, and so is his counterpart in the Idylls. Such a position, however, would fail to consider with sufficient seriousness Tennyson's changes in emphasis.

Tennyson's overall allegorical purpose and his strong emphasis on practical achievements require us to find in the Idylls a greater measure of coherence than we expect from Malory. Malory's Arthur is not Soul, but a very human king, and knights such as Gawaine are accused of unworthiness only by religious recluses, who clearly speak in the Morte for the spiritual life. Tennyson's Arthur, unlike Malory's, cannot believe that the Grail Quest is of its kind superior to the ordinary Round Table pursuits;

he can only say that it is different. And since Tennyson has specifically told us to consider Arthur as Soul or Reason, he inadvertently reveals his own loss of a sense of the availability and relevance of spiritual experience. At the end of "The Holy Grail," there is again an unresolved scepticism about the reality of the spiritual vision:

> But if indeed there came a sign from heaven,
> Blessed are Bors, Lancelot, and Percivale
> For these have seen according to their sight.
> (869-71)

Arthur's reservations and his sense of priorities and even possibilities are further expressed:

> And out of those to whom the vision came
> My greatest hardly will believe he saw.
> Another hath beheld it afar off,
> And, leaving human wrongs to right themselves,
> Cares but to pass into the silent life.
> And one hath had the vision face to face,
> And now his chair desires him here in vain,
> However they may crown him otherwhere.
> (891-8)

The radical change in emphasis can most clearly be seen when we compare this passage with the first lines in Malory that follow the section on the Quest:

> So after the quest of the Sangreal was fulfilled, and all knights that were left on live were come again unto the Table Round, as the book of the Sangreal maketh mention, then was there great joy in the court; and in especial King Arthur and Queen Guenever made great joy of the remnant that were come home, and passing glad was the king and the queen of Sir Launcelot and of Sir Bors, for they had been passing long away in the quest of the Sangreal.
> (II, 271)

Arthur's response in Malory is the merely human delight at the return of many of the men he loves. Tennyson's Arthur has to evaluate; he can no longer take for granted the possibility of spiritual experience. And the burden of his judgment is a thoroughgoing distrust of any morality that cannot be tested in the course of everyday experience.

Apart from Arthur's various reservations and disclaimers, there are several narratives that we must read as descriptions of spiritual experience. There are important differences between Malory's Quest and Tennyson's, and it is important to understand those differences in order to be sympathetic to many of the poet's difficulties in the Idylls. Since Tennyson himself said that "the key is to be found in a careful reading of Sir Percivale's vision and subsequent fall," I shall deal with it and its counterpart in Malory in considerable detail. I shall reverse my earlier procedure and deal first with Tennyson's Percivale who, it should be noted, is presented as narrating the whole to a fellow monk long after the event. He describes how his initial elation at the beginning of the quest gave way, upon recalling Arthur's warning and scepticism, to a sense of guilt:

> Then every evil word I had spoken once,
> And every evil thought I had thought of old,
> And every evil deed I ever did,
> Awoke and cried, "This quest is not for thee."
> (371-4)

This conviction of guilt and inadequacy is followed by an experience that might easily be called surrealistic. He stops to rest, drink from a stream and eat "The goodly apples" he finds on the bank; but everything turns to dust, "and I was left alone/ And thirsting in a land of sand and thorns." (389-90) Subsequently he sees a motherly woman before a modest home and a splendidly armored knight--both of whom turn to dust at his approach. Next he is attracted by a splendid city at the top of a hill, with a throng of people cheering and praising him. When he reaches it, it too is ruined, and he can find only one old man who, before he too turns to dust, gasps "Whence and what art thou?" (435) This sequence of experiences has understandably left Percivale feeling morbid and poisonous: "Lo, if I find the Holy Grail itself/ And touch it, it will crumble into dust!" (438-9) And a hermit then accuses him of lacking sufficient humility, which he calls "The highest virtue, mother of them all." (445)

Subsequently he meets Galahad, who tells him how he has directly seen the "holy thing" which has ridden with him constantly and enabled him to do good deeds:

> And in the strength of this I rode,
> Shattering all evil customs everywhere,
> And past thro' Pagan realms, and made them mine,
> And clash'd with Pagan hordes, and bore them down,
> And broke thro' all, and in the strength of this
> Come victor.
>
> (476-81)

Galahad then invites Percivale to go part of the way with him to "the spiritual city," promising that he too shall see the vision at last. Tennyson described Galahad's influence over Percivale:

> 'While thus he spake, his eye, dwelling on mine,
> Drew me, with power upon me, till I grew
> One with him, to believe as he believed.
> (485-7)

Then follows a highly fanciful and melodramatic account of Percivale following Galahad up a high hill, with storm, fire, and death surrounding them, and then watching Galahad racing along a variety of bridges toward the sea: "And every bridge as quickly as he crost/ Sprang into fire and vanish'd, tho' I yearn'd/ To follow." (505-7) He finally sees the Grail at a great distance with Galahad: "And o'er his head the Holy Vessel hung/ Redder than any rose, a joy to me,/ For now I knew the veil had been withdrawn." (520-2)

After this lengthy description, he answers a question of the monk's by saying that for one on such a quest ordinary people seem as phantoms. He confesses how nearly he had abandoned the search because of an experience he has neglected to relate to the sequence of experiences previously recounted. He talks of coming upon a castle and finding there his first love:

> The princess of that castle was the one,
> Brother, and that one only, who had ever
> Made my heart leap; for when I moved of old
> A slender page about her father's hall,
> And she a slender maiden, all my heart

> Went after her with longing, yet we twain
> Had never kiss'd a kiss or vow'd a vow.
> And now I came upon her once again,
> And one had wedded her, and he was dead,
> And all his land and wealth and state were hers.
> (577-86)

He is greatly tempted when she and her people solicit him to become her husband and rule over them, "but one night my vow/ Burnt me within, so that I rose and fled." (606-7)

Before trying to describe and understand the nature of Percivale's experience, let us examine its counterpart in Malory. It is considerably longer than the related narrative in Tennyson, and I shall omit what seems repetitive or incidental. Upon encountering an aunt who was a holy recluse, he discovers from her how to find Galahad and goes in determined pursuit of him. On the way, he hears mass and sees King Evelake, who reportedly came with Joseph of Aramathie to England and had lived three hundred years until he might be healed by Galahad.

Next Percivale comes upon twenty armed men who try to kill him and do succeed in killing his horse, but Galahad "by adventure" rescues him, driving the attackers into the forest and following them. Percivale laments the lack of a horse, and does not seize the chance to take one from a yeoman who claims that its owner would kill him if he lost it. Next an armed knight passes, riding the very horse Percivale has declined to steal, and the frantic yeoman loans Percivale his own hackney to pursue the

villain. However, the armed knight, when challenged, kills Percivale's hackney and rides away:

> When Sir Percivale saw he would not turn he cast away his helm and sword, and said: Now am I a very wretch, cursed and most unhappy above all other knights. So in this sorrow he abode all that day till it was night; and then he awaked and saw afore him a woman which said unto him right fiercely: Sir Percivale, what dost thou here? He answered, I do neither good nor great ill. If thou wilt ensure me, said she, that thou wilt fulfil my will when I summon thee, I shall lend thee mine own horse which shall bear thee whither thou wilt. Sir Percivale was glad of her proffer, and ensured her to fulfil all her desire.
> (II, 197-8)

The horse "within an hour and less . . . bare him four days' journey thence," (II, 198) and carries him to the edge of a body of roaring water. When Percivale realizes that the horse is going to plunge into the water, he makes the sign of the cross on his forehead:

> When the fiend felt him so charged he shook off Sir Percivale, and he went into the water crying and roaring, making great sorrow, and it seemed unto him that the water brent. Then Sir Percivale perceived it was a fiend, the which would have brought him unto his perdition. Then he commended himself unto God, and prayed Our Lord to keep him from all such temptations.
> (II, 198)

His next encounter brings him to side with a lion battling a serpent, and after the serpent is killed the lion follows him about. He prays to God that "no temptation should bring him out of God's service, but to endure as his true champion," (II, 199) and then he has a dream, in which a young woman sitting on a

lion tells him that on the morrow he will fight

> the strongest champion of the world. And if thou be overcome thou shalt not be quit for losing of any of thy members, but thou shalt be shamed forever to the world's end.
> (II, 199)

An old woman riding a serpent complains that he has killed her beast and warns that she will be after him:

> I ensure you in what place I may find you without keeping I shall take you as he that sometime was my man.
> (II, 200)

The dream is interpreted by an old man who suddenly appears on board,a ship covered with white samite. According to him the young woman "betokeneth the new law of holy church, that is to understand, faith, good hope, belief, and baptism." The old woman is of course the old law, "and that serpent betokeneth a fiend." (II, 201)

This mystic ship departs and later in the day another comes, this one covered with black silk. In it is a richly dressed and beautiful woman, who tells Percivale she will bring him to Galahad if he promises to do her will, and he so promises. She also tells him that the holy man he had seen earlier in the day

> is an enchanter and a multiplier of words. For an ye believe him ye shall plain be shamed, and die in this rock for pure hunger, and be eaten with wild beasts; and ye be a young man and a goodly knight, and I shall help you an ye will.
> (II, 202)

Claiming to have been disinherited, she pleads for his help in re-establishing her rights and gives him lavish food and drink:

> Also he drank there the strongest wine that ever he drank, him thought, and therewith he was a little chafed more than he ought to be; with that he beheld the gentlewoman, and him thought she was the fairest creature that ever he saw.
>
> (II, 203)

After provocations to arouse him further, she agrees to make love with him if he promises in return "to do nothing but that I shall command you." (II, 203) He promises:

> And then Sir Percivale laid him down by her naked; and by adventure and grace he saw his sword lie on the ground naked, in whose pommel was a red cross and the sign of the crucifix therein, and bethought him on his knighthood and his promise made tofore hand unto the good man; then he made a sign of the cross in his forehead, and therewith the pavilion turned up so down, and then it changed unto a smoke, and a black cloud, and then he was adread and cried aloud.
>
> (II, 203-4)

He stabs himself in the thigh in penance for almost succumbing to fleshly lusts and calls himself a wretch. The old man on the ship again appears and tells him who the woman was:

> O good knight, said he, thou art a fool, for the gentlewoman was the master fiend of hell, the which hath power above all devils, and that was the old lady that thou sawest in thine advision riding on the serpent.
>
> (II, 204)

Much later in the Grail section Percivale reappears in company with Galahad, who had been made king to take the place of King Estorause. The latter had imprisoned Bors, Percivale, and Galahad

for some time, during which period "Our Lord sent them the Sangreal, through whose grace they were always fulfilled while that they were in prison." (II, 268) After a year as king, Galahad at the mass is confronted by Joseph of Arimathie, who claims to have been sent by God to show Galahad the spiritual truths of things:

> And then he began to tremble right hard when the deadly flesh began to behold the spiritual things. Then he held up his hands toward heaven and said: Lord, I thank thee, for now I see that that hath been my desire many a day. Now, blessed Lord, would I not longer live, if it might please thee, Lord.
> (II, 268)
>
> And therewith he kneeled down tofore the table and made his prayers, and then suddenly his soul departed to Jesu Christ, and a great multitude of angels bare his soul up to heaven, that the two fellows might well behold it. Also the two fellows saw come from heaven an hand, but they saw not the body. And then it came right to the Vessel, and took it and the spear, and so bare it up to heaven. Sithen was there never man so hardy to say that he had seen the Sangreal . . . . When Percivale and Bors saw Galahad dead, they made as much sorrow as ever did two men. And if they had not been good men they might lightly have fallen in despair.
> (II, 269)

Among the most striking characteristics of Percivale's quest in Malory are its astonishing vividness and concreteness. There is nothing abstract, obscure, or theoretical about Percivale's temptations, and the reality of the spiritual realm is never questioned. Hitherto earthy, palpable figures may suddenly prove deceptive, and he may realize they had been fiends in human disguise; however, his trials always take the form of having to

decide how to deal with an apparently human or actual situation. The major temptation is clearly that of succumbing to sexual enticements. There can be found in the Morte a dichotomy of soul and body such as the one Tennyson tried to work out in the Idylls. But in Malory the discordant demands of flesh and spirit are not held reconcilable by means of social arrangements: marriage is not at issue. The life of the spirit demands the mortification of the flesh; erotic urges cannot be temporized with by making them domestic and respectable. When Percivale realizes how nearly he had succumbed to lust and lost his chance for the highest spiritual experience, he punishes himself violently. The dichotomy of soul and body is, however, not pervasive in the pages of Malory. The vast bulk of the Morte quite unashamedly relishes the things of this world, and even in the Sangreal sections the conflict is on the whole presented as merely ultimately irreconcilable.

At the risk of making it sound simpler and more comprehensible than it is, let us note that the Grail first attracts the knights by appealing to the senses and satisfying physical needs: "every knight had such meats and drinks as he best loved in this world." (II, 171) When Bors, Percivale, and Galahad are imprisoned, the Grail provides physical sustenance for a year. Yet these are presented as only partial experiences of Holiness. Unlike his counterpart in Tennyson, Galahad, though consistently presented as the

chosen of God, does not live constantly in the full presence of the holy mysteries. After coping successfully with many trials and dangers, he is granted the vision for which he has struggled, and the final incompatibility between body and soul is clearly indicated: "And then he began to tremble right hard when the deadly flesh began to behold the spiritual things."

Percivale's world is, furthermore, enormously active and meaningful. There are forces at work definitely external to him. There is a power actively trying to deceive and ruin him, and there is also a power working for his salvation. There is a constant interplay between him and these powers of the otherworld; and though it occasionally seems that his salvation is due to chance, or more accurately to grace, still he does act, and his actions have decisive significance. He must choose, and he is held accountable for his choices. He fights and he takes chances. For something he believes he needs, he makes promises by which he apparently does not feel irrevocably bound. There are dreams that must be interpreted because they give valuable information about what is threatening or what has happened. Experiences that seem innocuous, such as those involving the horses, become relevant because they can be used to trap him. He seeks counsel, but finally he must be able to evaluate the counsel; he must be able to decide whether the old man or the beautiful woman is more worthy of belief.

Furthermore, as Percivale struggles vigorously in his cause, he has unquestioning access to traditional ways of confronting his temptations and trials. Ritualistic observations work for him: the sign of the cross at least twice routs the fiend. At virtually every crucial moment he prays for guidance or strength, and he daily observes the rituals and disciplines of mass and confession. His world may be threatening, peculiar, and quixotic, but the institution and the dogma that interpret it and prescribe the manner with which it should be treated are accessible to him and to all men.

In Tennyson's version of Percivale's experience we are remote from the constant, active struggle we find in Malory. The experience of urgency and immediacy is technically distanced by a narrative device. Percivale tells the story considerably after the event to a monk in the cloister to which he has retired. Before the tale begins, we are twice told that the speaker has died. Tennyson substitutes for the reader's vivid experience of watching an unresolved series of important encounters and temptations, an informal, relaxed conversation recalling events concluded and emotions long since dissipated. The monk to whom Percivale speaks is mildly curious about Percivale's quest, but he, a member of a religious order, is unabashed in feeling the reality of the Grail irrelevant to him. Unlike the monks and hermits in the <u>Morte</u>,

Ambrosius contents himself with participating in the homely affairs of simple people:

> 'O brother,' ask'd Ambrosius,--'for in sooth
> These ancient books--and they would win thee--teem,
> Only I find not there this Holy Grail,
> With miracles and marvels like to these,
> Not all unlike; which oftentime I read,
> Who read but on my breviary with ease,
> Till my head swims, and then go forth and pass
> Down to the little thorpe that lies so close,
> And almost plaster'd like a martin's nest
> To these old walls--and mingle with our folk;
> And knowing every honest face of theirs
> As well as ever shepherd knew his sheep,
> And every homely secret in their hearts,
> Delight myself with gossip and old wives,
> And ills and aches, and teethings, lyings-in,
> And mirthful sayings, children of the place,
> That have no meaning half a league away;
> Or lulling random squabbles when they rise,
> Chafferings and chatterings at the market-cross,
> Rejoice, small man, in this small world of mine,
> Yea, even in their hens and in their eggs--'
> (540-560)

The monk's explicit disregard for the mystic vision and the temporal removal from the exigencies of the quest itself combine to mute one's sense of its reality and to render questionable its real importance.

Tennyson could not seriously imagine that salvation or damnation could be determined through encounters with otherworldly beings in human form. A belief in ghosts may not have died with Dr. Johnson, but Tennyson apparently felt he could not make credible the direct, tangible intervention of the spiritual world. We realize, by means of the contrast with Malory, that Percivale's experiences

have become highly subjective; his dilemmas arise from within himself, rather than from the challenge of another being, be he human or spirit. The first "experience" he relates is in fact a recollection: that of Arthur warning "That most of us would follow wandering fires." (369) This, I should assume, is an experience of doubt, and the doubt victimizes Percivale. He apparently has no way to cope with it, no way to determine either the truth or relevance for him of Arthur's warning. The doubt then turns to an oppressive sense of guilt: "Then every evil word . . . every evil thought . . ." etc. And guilt leads to a sense of inadequacy, impotence, and perhaps despair: "This quest is not for thee." It might be helpful to recall here that Percivale in the Morte, after losing several horses, calls himself a "wretch" and "most unhappy knight," but such imprecations do not inspire a morbid preoccupation with himself. He retains a healthy sense of proportion, and when the woman asks what he is doing there he sensibly remarks, "I do neither good nor great ill." And he immediately, even rashly, seizes the opportunity to do something.

In the Idylls, however, action seems suspect; Percivale's experience is characterized by a deep passivity. His apparent action is in fact only restlessness and forward motion. He wants to stop: "'I will rest here,'/ I said, 'I am not worthy of the quest,'" (385-6) but he cannot. He is not denied some activity; he is only denied meaningful activity. All he can do is keep

moving. The remainder of his account, which I have characterized as surrealistic, may be an hallucination or may be a dream; it has none of the tangible features of Malory.

It is true that the scenes which presumably represent temptations for Percivale prove ephemeral and crumble, as those in Malory disappear. But Tennyson's Percivale does nothing to make this happen; he has no exchanges with the people in them, and he seems to have no access to rituals or traditional beliefs which can affect or evaluate them. Things happen to him, but he can apparently do nothing to engage himself with these happenings, and he too questions their reality by referring to them as "phantoms." (444)

There is a curious irony here. "The Passing of Arthur" includes one of the most often-quoted lines in Victorian poetry: "More things are wrought by prayer/ Than this world dreams of." (415-16) We should accordingly expect prayer to play a major role in the section of the _Idylls_ most concerned with the spiritual life. There are references to the efficacy of prayer. The nun, Percivale's sister, "pray'd and fasted" in order to see the Grail and believed that she had seen it. There are several other allusions of a formulary nature to fasting and prayer. But in the actual experiences described, no one prays. Never does a knight pray for help in resisting temptation or judging rightly. Divine guidance, it would seem, is no longer so accessible as Tennyson would have liked to believe.

After Percivale's series of frustrating experiences a hermit tells him he lacks "true humility/ The highest virtue, mother of them all." (445-6) One is somewhat baffled to understand this charge; Percivale has previously shown no particular symptoms of excessive pride or self-importance. And I think the accusation makes sense only if we insist that Percivale's dilemmas are self-created, that he is preoccupied with his own weaknesses and imperfections. Furthermore, his self-absorption betrays no necessarily wilful refusal to dedicate himself to more important concerns but rather reflects a loss of certainty about what these concerns are and what to do about them. Again an erosion of belief seems evident. The hermit can say to Percivale that he lacks humility, but he cannot even suggest, much less prescribe, steps by which it can be acquired. No longer can one believe in hair shirts, bread and water, physical deprivations or tortures as legitimate means to a spiritual end. Humility is all-important but the path to it unclear.

The major person in Percivale's story who clearly exists apart from him is the rich young woman whom he declines to marry--or rather from whom he runs. The "temptation" she represents is as different as can be from that in Malory. Rather than offering illicit sexual delights, she represents the promise of domestic affection and social usefulness. The combination is essentially that which

Tennyson exalts throughout the Idylls. The several incongruities in Tennyson's position combine to make Percivale's renunciation ambiguous. Surely this is not the "fall" to which Hallam referred. On the other hand, what was Percivale's fall? He succeeded in seeing the Grail at a great distance, so that in terms of the Quest itself he did not fail. However one may attempt to reconcile such apparent discrepancies, the relevant fact is that Tennyson has been unable to utilize a clear and coherent scheme of values in terms of which we can measure the relative achievements of his knights.[37]

Let us turn then to Lancelot, who is after all the only major figure in both the Grail section and the bulk of the Arthurian tales. In Malory he is clearly the most admirable human being represented; and in Tennyson the central importance of his adultery with Guinevere requires us to pay special attention to what happens to him in the Quest. In the Idylls we hear of his experiences in pursuit of the Grail primarily when he tells them to Arthur upon his return. There is one earlier passage that shows Bors telling Percivale of seeing Lancelot:

> he dash'd across me--mad
> And maddening what he rode; and when I cried,
> 'Ridest thou then so hotly on a quest
> So holy.' Lancelot shouted, 'Stay me not!
> I have been the sluggard, and I ride apace,
> For now there is a lion in the way!'
> So vanished."
>
> (638-44)

Bors grieves that Lancelot's madness has returned, and Percivale

later says "methought I spied/ A dying fire of madness in his eyes." (764-5)

Lancelot began by telling Arthur that he is different from those who "welter in their sin" and describes his dilemma in terms of intertwined flowers:

> 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 pluck'd asunder.
> (769-74)

He has vowed to seek the Grail only in the hope that the vision might cause them to be "pluck'd asunder," and a saint has told him his quest would be in vain unless indeed they were "pluck'd asunder."

> to whom I vow'd
> That I would work according as he will'd.
> And forth I went, and while I yearn'd and strove
> To tear the twain asunder in my heart,
> My madness came upon me as of old,
> And whipt me into waste fields far away.
> (780-85)

In the Idylls, then, Lancelot's madness returns as a direct result of an ill-defined struggle with his guilt.

The long passage that follows is highly pictorial and again almost surrealistic. It resembles vision or hallucination more than actual event, especially since Lancelot has described himself as victimized, in effect, by madness. After being beaten by "mean knights," he "came" to a desolate shore, where he hears a loud

blast and sees an anchored boat:

> And in my madness I said,
> 'I will embark and I will lose myself,
> And in the great sea wash away my sin.'
> (801-3)

The boat takes him after seven days to "the enchanted towers of Carbonek." He climbs the steps to the castle with much difficulty, after passing two lions whom a voice commands him not to fear. He hears

> A sweet voice singing in the topmost tower
> To the eastward. Up I climb'd a thousand steps
> With pain; as in a dream I seem'd to climb
> For ever; at the last I reach'd a door,
> A light was in the crannies, and I heard,
> 'Glory and joy and honor to our Lord
> And to the Holy Vessel of the Grail!'
> Then in my madness I essay'd the door;
> It gave, and thro' a stormy glare, a heat
> As from a seven-times-heated furnace, I,
> Blasted and burnt, and blinded as I was,
> With such a fierceness that I swoon'd away--
> O, yet methought I saw the Holy Grail,
> All pall'd in crimson samite, and around
> Great angels, awful shapes and wings and eyes!
> And but for all my madness and my sin,
> And then my swooning, I had sworn I saw
> That which I saw; but what I saw was veil'd
> And cover'd, and this quest was not for me."
> (831-49)

Launcelot's adventures in the Morte are much longer than the comparable passages in Tennyson, and they are not sufficiently diffferent in kind from those of Percivale to merit elaboration. Let us then examine only those passages that illuninate changes Tennyson made.

Malory's Launcelot vows to seek the Grail for the same reasons that inspire the other knights, and not in the hopes of disentangling himself from sin. Early in the quest he has to face the fact, however, that his sinfulness will seriously impair his chances of attaining the vision. He has an experience in which, while sleepling, he seems to see another knight cured of some malady by kissing the holy vessel; Launcelot tries but finds himself unable to move toward it: "for he was overtaken with sin that he had no power to rise ageyne the holy vessel." (II, 188) When he wakes he hears a voice commanding him because of his unworthiness to leave holy ground. In misery and repentance he leaves and seeks out a hermit: "And then Launcelot kneeled down and cried on Our Lord mercy for his wicked works." (II, 189) He begs the hermit to hear his confession, and the old man tells him again that his sin and presumption have angered the Lord. There follows a passage that suggests, in its lucidity and particularity, how different Malory's possibilities and emphases are from Tennyson's:

> Sir, said the good man, hide none old sin from me. Truly, said Sir Launcelot, that were me full loth to discover. For this fourteen year I never discovered one thing that I have used, and that may I now wyte my shame and my misadventure. And then he told there that good man all his life. And how he had loved a queen unmeasurably and out of measure long. And all my great deeds of arms that I have done, I did for the most part for the queen's sake, and for her sake would I do battle were it right or wrong; and never did I battle all only for God's sake, but for to win worship and to cause me to be the better

> beloved, and little or nought I thanked God of it. Then Sir Launcelot said: I pray you counsel me. I will counsel you, said the hermit, if ye will ensure me that ye will never come in that queen's fellowship as much as ye may forbear. And then Sir Launcelot promised him he nold, by the faith of his body.
> (II, 190-91)

In a subsequent passage the injunctions of the holy man are even more specific:

> I require you to take this hair that was this holy man's and put it next thy skin, and it shall prevail thee greatly. Sir, and I will do it, said Sir Launcelot. Also I charge you that ye eat no flesh as long as ye be in the quest of the Sangreal, nor ye shall drink no wine, and that ye hear mass daily and ye may do it. So he took the hair and put it upon him, and so departed at evensongtime.
> (II, 207)

The ship that brings Lancelot to Carbonek presumably has its origin in the one in which Launcelot and Galahad lived for half a year, while they "served God daily and nightly with all their power." (II, 255) After Galahad has left, Launcelot hears a voice telling him to "go out of this ship and enter into the castle, where thou shalt see a great part of thy desire." (II, 256) The passage which describes him passing the lions is essentially the same as that in Tennyson, although it does not speak of great physical weariness. He comes to a closed door, that seems to be his goal.

> Then he enforced him mickle to undo the door. Then he listened and heard a voice which sang so sweetly that it seemed none earthly thing; and him thought the voice said: Joy and honour be to the Father of Heaven. Then Launcelot kneeled down tofore the chamber, for well wist he that there was the Sangreal within that chamber. Then said he: Fair sweet Father, Jesu Christ,

> if ever I did thing that pleased Thee, Lord for Thy pity never have me not in despite for my sins done aforetime, and that Thou show me something of that I seek. And with that he saw the chamber door open, and there came out a great clereness, that the house was as bright as all the torches of the world had been there.
>
> (II, 257)

When he starts to enter, a voice warns him to leave. Sadly he stops and sees inside what seems to be the celebration of the mass with the Grail:

> And it seemed to Launcelot that above the priest's hands were three men, whereof the two put the youngest by likeness between the priest's hands; and so he lift it up right high, and it seemed to show so to the people. And then Launcelot marvelled not a little, for him thought the priest was so greatly charged of the figure that him seemed that he should fall to the earth. And when he saw none about him that would help him, then came he to the door a great pace, and said: Fair Father Jesu Christ, ne take it for no sin though I help the good man which hath great need of help. Right so entered he into the chamber, and came toward the table of silver; and when he came nigh he felt a breath, that him thought it was intermeddled with fire, which smote him so sore in the visage that him thought it brent his visage; and therewith he fell to the earth, and had no power to arise, as he that was so araged, that had lost the power of his body, and his hearing, and his seeing.
>
> (II, 257-8)

He is awakened after twenty-four days and said:

> Why have ye awaked me, for I was more at ease than I am now. O Jesu Christ, who might be so blessed that might see openly thy great marvels of secretness there where no sinner may be! What have ye seen? said they about him. I have seen, said he, so great marvels that no tongue may tell, and more than any heart can think, and had not my son been here afore me I had seen much more. Then they told him how

> he had lain there four and twenty days and nights. Then him thought it was punishment for the four and twenty years that he had been a sinner, where-fore Our Lord put him in penance four and twenty days and nights.
>
> (II, 258)

Like Percivale's in the Idylls, Lancelot's Quest experiences do not seem to involve anyone outside himself. He is preoccupied by a sense of sin that seems to him more important than anything else, and he claims to have entered upon the Grail quest, the pursuit of the spiritual life, hoping to be strengthened in battle with his sin. Priorities have become reversed, so that instead of the ethical life subserving the spiritual, now the spiritual exists to bulwark the ethical. Like Percivale, Lancelot is obsessed with his own unworthiness, but he clearly has no adequate means either to face or to struggle with his sin. He speaks only in the most general, categorical terms of "a sin" and "my sin." The fact that Lancelot is talking to Arthur does not adequately explain his in-ability to be more concrete and explicit, though one wonders why Tennyson needed to foist this gratuitous burden on Lancelot; he could easily have shown him as in Malory talking to a hermit in trying to come to grips with his dilemma. Nonetheless, every reader knows he refers to his adultery with Guenevere, but the comparison with Malory shows how little Tennyson's Lancelot is able to handle guilt. In the Morte he confesses--and incidentally not to adultery--that he has "loved a queen unmeasurably and out

of measure long." The sin is excessive love for an earthly creature, whom he has honored more than he has honored God. He has not merely violated a social arrangement or even a sacred trust but rather has confounded the proper relations between man and his God. After confessing, Launcelot prays to the hermit for counsel and promises on demand to try to keep away from Guenever. The hermit charges him to put on a hair shirt, renounce wine and meat, and hear mass daily.

In the Idylls Lancelot "spake" (not confessed) to a hermit, "to whom I vow'd/ That I would work according as he will'd." Again, the unnamed sin is described as coexisting with good qualities in such interdependence that the image used to describe them is that of intertwined flowers. Lancelot claims that he follows the hermit's advice, but the nature of that advice is not indicated. All he knows is that the "flowers" must be "pluck'd asunder," but how this might be done remains a mystery. The verbs "yearn'd and strove" have no object, an absence which betrays Tennyson's uncertainty about what Lancelot can seek. Again we see that the rituals, institutions, and penances so crucial in Malory are no longer accessible, whereas the guilt is, perhaps accordingly, exacerbated. The combination of oppressive guilt and spiritual or moral impotence is not unlikely to produce madness.

The allusions within the Quest tale to Lancelot's madness are original with Tennyson. In the Morte Launcelot's madness precedes

his experiences on the Quest; he is cured before he vows to pursue the Grail, and his madness never recurs. It is inspired by Guenever's jealousy of Elaine--the other Elaine in the Morte whose story Tennyson chose not to tell. This Elaine is the daughter of King Pelles, and Launcelot rescues her from enchantment:

> Ah, fair knight, said they all, here is within this tower a dolorous lady that hath been there in pains, many winters and days, for ever she boileth in scalding water; . . . And so Sir Launcelot went into the chamber that was as hot as any stew. And there Sir Launcelot took the fairest lady by the hand that ever he saw, and she was naked as a needle; and by enchantment Queen Morgan le Fay and the Queen of Northgalis had put her there in that pains, by cause she was called the fairest lady of that country; and there she had been five years, and never might she be delivered out of her pains unto the time the best knight of the world had taken her by the hand.
> (II, 125)

King Pelles unaccountably knows that Launcelot is destined to sleep with Elaine and father Galahad, "by whom all the foreign country should be brought out of danger, and by him the Holy Greal should be achieved." (II, 126) A woman called Dame Brisen undertakes to enchant Launcelot so that he would sleep with Elaine, believing her to be Guinevere. Enraged on discovering the deception, Launcelot exclaims "Alas . . . that I have lived so long; now I am shamed," (II, 127) but he pardons the girl when she begs forgiveness. Elaine so loves the father of her son that several years later she comes to Camelot to see him. Again Dame Brisen casts an enchantment over Launcelot so that he mistakes

Elaine's room for Guenever's, which is next door. Sounds carry, and in a towering rage Guenever banishes Launcelot from the court; because of her anger he goes mad and stays so for two years.

By interjecting Lancelot's madness into "The Holy Grail" Tennyson does two unfortunate things: he calls our attention to his omission of this rather important tale in the Morte, underlining his preference for the slighter, less adult, and less complicated Elaine story. More important, he adds to the ambiguities already surrounding the Grail quest by wondering, in effect, if spiritual experience is tantamount to madness. Furthermore, he does not allow us to consider this possibility lightly. Apart from comments by other knights, four times in his speech Lancelot himself refers to his actions or visions as inspired by madness. The difficulty here, as with so many other weaknesses in the Idylls, is that Tennyson does not squarely face the possible equation between madness and spiritual exaltation. He uses the suggestion of madness to cast an ambiguity or a doubt on the quest, but he can not straightforwardly disavow a belief in spiritual experience.[38] He can neither live with it nor live without it.

The Launcelot of the Morte succeeds in great part in participating in Holiness; the Lancelot of the Idylls fails. It is a crucial contrast. The latter may seem to be an overstatement, but let us examine more carefully the pertinent lines;

Blasted and burnt, and blinded as I was,
With such a fierceness that I swoon'd away--
O, yet methought I saw the Holy Grail,
All pall'd in crimson samite, and around
Great angels, awful shapes, and wings and eyes!
And but for all my madness and my sin,
And then my swooning, I had sworn I saw
That which I saw; but what I saw was veil'd
And cover'd, and this quest was not for me.
(841-9)

The description of him seeing the holy celebration is so undercut and qualified that the possibility of even minimal success is hopelessly ambiguous. The lines might be slightly paraphrased: had I not been mad, sinful, and in a faint, I might have been able to commit myself about my vision; as it was I saw only through a glass darkly "and this quest was not for me." Instead of "yet methought I saw the Holy Grail," we have in Malory "wel wist he that there was the Sangreal within that chamber." The certainty and clear conviction of the old tales is no longer possible for Tennyson, nor can he consider prayers, devotions, and rituals truly efficacious. Malory's Launcelot is fully as humble as Tennyson's but he does not despair. Tennyson's Lancelot is overcome with a sense of sinfulness and unworthiness, about which he can do nothing. He cannot act to help himself, nor is he sure of anyone or anything else that can help him. Malory's Launcelot can be made unconscious for twenty-four days of symbolic penance for his twenty-four years of willing sin; the Lancelot of the Idylls can only doubt that he has had any experience undetermined and

unqualified by his own inner turmoil.

It is interesting to see how completely remote Tennyson was from the world of the great Christian, St. Augustine, who complained to God that He had counselled better than He had permitted. Such a plea assumes a world of vigorous conflict and moral struggle, while the story of Augustine's life testified that triumph was possible. Tennyson apparently feels he can use the Christian vocabulary without incongruity. He virtually equates the cause of the Round Table with that of the Church: "The King will follow Christ and we the King." ("The Coming of Arthur," 499) In Malory there was an explicit distinction between the Christian portion of his tale and the political and worldly reality of the Round Table:

> for by the Round Table is the world signified by right, for all the world, Christian and heathen, repair unto the Round Table.
>
> (II, 193)

In the Idylls the enemy is always referred to as heathen. The difficulty of course is that Christianity has become essentially a rhetoric; it has been deprived of its uniqueness, its specificity, above all its ways of coping with human reality, which it fundamentally recognizes as imperfect. It can of course be argued that Tennyson would not have wanted his occasional references to be taken so seriously and that he did not presume to be writing a great Christian poem. This is partly true. But it would be evasive to dismiss so casually a problem in the poem that we know to have been a major problem of the age. After all, Tennyson was

a great friend of Jowett and Maurice, but without presuming to introduce and interpret biographical material, the Idylls themselves show that his sympathies would have lain with the Broad Church movement, rather than with Newman and the Tractarians. The perfunctory use of Christian references in the Idylls makes us question how much doctrine one can dispense with and still have a right to the terminology. The major burdens and themes of the poem--of inevitable defeat and inexorable corruption--run counter to the Christian message of hope and salvation. The occasional allusions to the hereafter ring hollow even when not so offensive as Arthur's self-righteous and vapid command to Guinevere:

> Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,
> And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,
> Hereafter in that world where all are pure
> We two may meet before high God, and thou
> Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know
> I am thine husband--not a smaller soul,
> Nor Lancelot, nor another.
> (558-64)

Such an outrageous passage reminds us, to Tennyson's considerable discredit, of the story of Christ and Mary Magdalene; and it further adds to one's doubt that the Christianity of his times was seriously available to him.

Tennyson obviously feels a desperate need for the ethical life, but it seems he can no longer truly believe in the religious institution that in his culture had traditionally defined it and offered the disciplines for achieving it. He seems, however, unable to

face his dilemma squarely. He does not understand the incongruity of Christian references in an allegory not essentially Christian, imposed on material traditionally referred to as romance, or "the matter of Britain." The Arthurian legends were story-telling, and they had historical implications; they can, as I think I have shown, afford a description of a society in the comparatively early stages of its development. But they were not primarily about transcendent ideals, although certain ideals were clearly important to most of the people whom they describe. Tennyson's failure suggests that they were not susceptible to philosophical inflation.

4.

"The Passing of Arthur"

Tennyson was a great poet, and, consequently, I have felt justified in taking the Idylls seriously. There are any number of beautiful passages in the Idylls that show Tennyson's remarkable technical skill and his distinctive sensibility. Rather than catalogue such passages, I should like to examine in some detail the idyll that is the most successful. As Harold Nicholson says, "The Passing of Arthur" is "a fine poem, well-constructed and written in the most majestic of Tennyson's many manners."[39] It should be fruitful, then, to try to discover why and in what ways this poem

is so successful, to examine the circumstances that liberate the poet's peculiar genius.

"The Passing of Arthur" is story-telling, unimpaired by overt moralizing or the imposition of meanings external to the material itself. In retelling Bedivere's tale of Arthur's last days, the return of Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake, and the mystic ship that sailed away with the dying Arthur, the poet has exploited legitimate anbiguities, those basic to the mysteriousness in human existence. The method of the poem is essentially pictorial; in a literal sense, its content is what its title would indicate, but the brilliance of the poem lies in representing a state or condition of mind. The lines often have the mellifluous, incantatory quality so recognizably Tennysonian. The diction is simple but not trite because of its control, understatement, and appropriateness as dramatic utterance.

One reason for the success of the poem lies in its conception of Arthur. Rather than Soul, Reason, or "Ideal manhood closed in real man," in "The Passing of Arthur" the central figure is more akin to "that gray king whose name, a ghost,/ Streams like a cloud, man-shaped." ("To the Queen," 39-40) The reality Tennyson gives Arthur in this poem is not abstract, but deeply human. The king is a man who has failed, who doubts, and who dies. The elegiac mode is one Tennyson can most deeply imagine and as a poet most effectively present.

The poem begins with a device frequently used in the Idylls, one noted in the discussion of "The Holy Grail." In the first five lines Tennyson places the story to come in the distant past, as told by Bedivere, the sole survivor of Arthur's last day, when he himself is "In the white winter of his age." In the Grail poem the device tends to vitiate the reality and relevance of the spiritual experience; here it is more in keeping with the mood and burden of the whole idyll. It instantly strikes the notes of loss, decay, and change, establishing the poignant tone so brilliantly maintained in the poem. Then Tennyson begins his tale, quickly introducing us to Arthur, mourning and alone:

> I found Him in the shining of the stars,
> I mark'd 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 not 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 were 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.
> (9-21)

In the "Guinevere" Arthur claims, unconvincingly, to feel lonely and desolate. In the passage just quoted, he displays, rather than discusses, regret. The sentiment comes with appropriate dramatic force from a man confronted at the close of his life with the ambiguities his experience has forced upon him. In trying to

come to terms with these ambiguities, he suggests to himself two alternative explanations, or descriptions, for the evident pain and suffering in the world. The second, in lines 18 to 21, is essentially a traditional Christian explanation; but he has stated it conjecturally and preceded it with a less conventional suggestion. The former description rejects the discrepancy between the felt limitation of the world as it exists and the belief that it was created by an omnipotent God. In the remainder of this monologue Arthur makes the double recognition that people have broken faith with him and that his own perception of the issues may have been inadequate ("For I, being simple, thought to work his will,/ And have but stricken with the sword in vain.") (22-3) The passage has no inflated philosophical pretensions; it is simply and beautifully the dramatic expression of a sensitive, undoctrinal soul in his gropings for understanding.

No longer must Tennyson's Arthur expound authoritative truth, and the flexibility and stateliness of the poetry testify to the conviction with which Tennyson could handle such a figure. An illuminating contrast can be made with a brief passage from "Gareth and Lynette," in which Arthur was supposedly at the height of his powers:

> And the King:
> 'But wherefore would ye men should wonder at you?
> Nay, rather for the sake of me, their King,

> And the deed's sake my knighthood do the deed,
> Than to be noised of.'
> (556-60)

It is awkward, turgid, and thoroughly lifeless, and although other less objectionable passages might be found in the earlier speeches of Arthur, I am convinced that the poetic quality of any of them would be markedly inferior to most in this last idyll.

There are several instances in which Tennyson's considerable classical and literary culture appears in allusions that strengthen and enrich the poem. We most often hear echoes from Virgil, surely the classical poet whom Tennyson most loved and emulated. The passage following the one discussed above contains Arthur's dream of Gawaine's ghost, and I do not think it far-fetched to hear in the following lines a recollection from the Aeneid:

> but in going mingled with dim cries
> Far in the moonlit haze among the hills,
> As of some lonely city sack'd by night,
> When all is lost, and wife and child with wail
> Pass to new lords.
> (41-45)

A few lines earlier Tennyson has discreetly and effectively alluded to the conception Dante exploited that in hell one received the punishment particularly appropriate to the nature of one's sin. In the "Inferno," the lustful were buffeted eternally by the dark whirlwind, symbolic of their earthly surrender of reason to immoderate passion. So Gawaine, who has been traditionally conceived as the fickle dilettante, is forced to recognize in death the poverty of

the standards by which he had lived. Tennyson portrays his ghost blown by a "wandering wind" and echoing "Hollow, hollow all delight!" (33) Such allusions give substance to the poetry by subtly suggesting traditional connections and affiliations without trying to impose upon the story incongruous meanings and excessive weight.

Another speech of Arthur's to Bedivere further illustrates the essentially slow, meditative movement of much of Tennyson's verse:

> Far other is this battle in the west
> Whereto we move than when we strove in youth,
> And brake the petty kings, and fought with Rome,
> Or thrust the heathen from the Roman wall,
> And shook him thro' the north. Ill doom is mine
> To war against my people and my knights.
> The king who fights his people fights himself.
> And they my knights, who loved me once, the stroke
> That strikes them dead is as my death to me.
> Yet let us hence, and find or feel a way
> Thro' this blind haze which, ever since I saw
> One lying in the dust at Almesbury,
> Hath folded in the passes of the world.
> (66-78)

Most of the lines are either end-stopped or require for grammatical reasons a substantial voice pause. Repetition, which Tennyson often uses in sluggish and facile poetry, here is used discreetly, calling attention to what is most impressive in the statement. The repetition of variant forms in the words "stroke" and "strikes," and "dead" and "death," legitimately embodies the gropings of meditation. The mind moves slowly and tentatively from that which

it knows to that which it tries either to understand or to face. As in Arthur's previously quoted speech in his tent, the most impressive aspect of this statement is the wondering perception of felt complexity expressed in clear and simple diction. One yearns in the rest of the Idylls for this lack of self-righteousness, this presentation of Arthur as a man whose efforts and good intentions have, in the nature of things, been thwarted. Furthermore, there is the suggestion in lines 72 to 74 that goodness triumphant but alone is perhaps not a morally satisfying reward for a sensitive soul.

The description of the battle between Arthur and his disloyal knights is a particularly good example of characteristically Tennysonian interests, emphases, techniques, and limitations.

> Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
> And ever push'd Sir Modred, league by league,
> Back to the sunset bound of Lyonnesse--
> A land of old upheaven from the abyss
> By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
> Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
> And the long mountains ended in a coast
> Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
> The phantom circle of a moaning sea.
> There the pursuer could pursue no more,
> And he that fled no further fly the King;
> And there, that day when the great light of heaven
> Burn'd his lowest in the rolling year,
> On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.
> Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
> Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.
> A death-white 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.
> For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
> And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;
> And some had visions out of golden youth,
> And some beheld the faces of old ghosts
> Look in upon the battle; and in the mist
> Was many a noble deed, many a base,
> And chance and craft and strength in single fights,
> And ever and anon with host to host
> Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,
> Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash
> Of battle-axes on shatter'd helms, and shrieks
> After the Christ, of those who falling down
> Look'd up for heaven, and only saw the mist;
> And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights,
> Oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,
> Sweat, writhings, anguish, laboring of the lungs
> In that close mist, and cryings for the light,
> Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.
> (79-117)

One of the most striking aspects of the description is its lack of narrative or dramatic power. There is little verbal impetus, but rather the poetry is heavily substantive and adjectival. Very seldom in Tennyson, even in descriptions of battles and jousts, does one have the sense of vigorous conflict, but here the absence of energy is not out of keeping with the general tone of the poem or the purpose of these lines. Tennyson's approach in this passage is typically pictorial, and the technique is to use physical description to create mood and indicate a condition of mind. The poet is evidently concerned with a sense of fatality and seeks to emphasize the elusive and insubstantial. He dwells upon such words as "abyss," "fragments," "forgotten," "ever-shifting," "phantom," and "moaning," and the dominant tone is again sustained, meditative

melancholy. The final physical picture suggests, if not describes, the last hopeless, undirected gropings of a man lost, and the diction in the subsequent lines further emphasizes this condition: "lowest," "waste," "last, dim battle," "chill," "cold," "formless fear."

In line 95, Tennyson uses "white" in a more ambiguous sense than is typical of most of the idylls. He tends to make it stand for purity, goodness, or youth. The mist that envelops, obscures, and chills Arthur and his men is "death-white." This can be understood in a purely realistic sense, but since the passage itself is far from realistic, I think we are warranted in a more imaginative interpretation. It partakes intrinsically of that ambiguity which Frost deliberately exploits in "Design," or, more obviously, Melville in Moby Dick: "not so much a color as the visible absence of color . . . a colorless, all-color of atheism." At least Tennyson no longer makes the trite and simplistic equation that can become so wearisome.

Tennyson's verse at its best can be highly affecting, and "The Passing of Arthur" demonstrates this quality. The major impact of the battle passage, managed with numerous caesuras and the predominance of noun and adjectival forms, is that of suffocation and general claustrophobia; it is the representing of a sensation rather than a perception or judgment. But the sensation is

not only a physical but also a moral and psychological one, and the ability to make this extension of significance is one of Tennyson's most impressive skills.

Arthur subsequently kills Modred, is fatally wounded, and is carried by Bedivere to a nearby chapel:

> A broken chancel with a broken cross,
> That stood on a dark strait of barren land.
> On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
> Lay a great water, and the moon was full.
> (177-180)

Arthur's well-known speech which follows is particularly effective and dramatically appropriate in its context because it is recorded nostalgia:

> The sequel of to-day unsolders all
> The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
> Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep
> They sleep--the men I loved. I think that we
> Shall never more, at any future time,
> Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
> Walking about the gardens and the halls
> Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
> I perish by this people which I made,---
> (182-90)

There is a generality of diction and a lack of specification that elsewhere can, and do, contribute to a vagueness and emptiness in the poetry: "goodliest fellowship," "famous knights," "souls," "loved," "knightly deeds," "gardens and halls." Tennyson's treatment here, however, is effective because Arthur is recalling that which is irretrievably past, and in the memory scenes and events tend to become idealized and void of particularity. The

last line quoted, suggesting both pride, hopelessness, and saddened dignity, makes even more poignant the preceding description.

With Arthur's injunction to Bedivere to take Excalibur and throw it into the lake, Tennyson has begun to exploit the mystical elements of the legend. He allows us to remain in the realm of romance and keep to the essential elements of his source. He plays with the ritual, mystic three; and there is a frequent repetition of lines or phrases as though he were rehearsing magic charms. To impose a heavy allegorical meaning upon the rest of the poem would be to distort its surface texture as well as to obscure some of the mythic or archetypal patterns to be found there; such resonances are characteristic of romance at its best and come from the configuration and depths of the material to give it substance and more profound implication. The mystical elements do not vitiate the reality Tennyson has established of Arthur as the defeated and dying king, partly because Arthur is only intermittently present in the next 150 lines, so that the focus is either upon the simple mystification or upon Bedivere's struggle with the discordant demands of loss and loyalty. Tennyson continues to refer to Arthur's suffering and his waning strength, and the end of the poem is ambiguous enough to mitigate any conviction of Arthur's apotheosis.

There is in this section of the poem a large element of stateliness and ceremony, which is appropriate for the seriousness

of the occasion. We can see this in the slow, measured exchanges; in the repetition of incident, phrase, and line; in the prevalence of the descriptive passages which give it such an elegant texture; in the actual ritual of returning Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake; and in the fulfillment of the prophecy of Arthur's going to Avilion. In these passages, we have a relevant and important combination of ritual and the essential mysteriousness of things. Ritual can seem empty or frivolous primarily when it is merely decorative; but when it represents a patterned response to the terrible unknown, it both suggests and embodies one of the basic sustaining functions of civilized behavior in confronting what it can neither understand nor ignore. Similarly, Bedivere's hesitation in following Arthur's command to throw Excalibur into the lake can be taken to suggest man's reluctance to surrender to mystery. He rationalizes in an attempt to avoid direct confrontation with the unknown and unknowable, and he is tenacious in grasping for support a brilliant and sustaining facade. More literally, Bedivere wants, like all men, to have the actual proof of the existence of something finer than ordinary life, of a tangible connection between the natural and the supernatural:

> What record or what relic of my lord
> Should be to aftertime, but empty breath
> And rumors of a doubt? But were this kept,
> Stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings,
> Some one might show it at a joust of arms,
> Saying: "King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,

> Wrought by the lonely Maiden of the Lake.
> Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps
> Upon the hidden bases of the hills."
> So might some old man speak in the aftertime
> To all the people, winning reverence.
> But now much honor and much fame were lost.
> (266-77)

When Tennyson refuses to impose nineteenth century needs or meanings on the medieval material, he is all the more capable of molding the legend to bring forth its inherent and more profound, because more universal, implications.

In the portion leading up to Arthur's departure in the ship, Tennyson has effectively used natural and local descriptions to counterbalance or contrast the elegance and mystery of much of the rest. One such passage is the following:

> But the other swiftly strode from ridge to ridge,
> Clothed with his breath, and looking, as he walk'd,
> Larger than human on the frozen hills.
> He heard the deep behind him, and a cry
> Before. His own thought drove him like a goad.
> Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves
> And barren chasms, and all to left and right
> The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based
> His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
> Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels--
> And on a sudden, lo, the level lake,
> And the long glories of the winter moon!
> (349-60)

He describes and emphasizes the harshness of reality, using such words as "tortuous," "dry," "barren," "cold," "black cliff," "place of tombs," "juts of pointed rock," "many-knotted," and "frozen hills." In effect he suggests with such language the

crudeness and ugliness of the raw human material which civilization and ritual have to mold and to some extent obscure.

The poet benefits from a discreet use of the legend in the associations of water and the lake with rebirth and eternity. The harshness, bareness, and angularity of man and the earthen world contrasts effectively with the calm of "the level lake,/ And the long glories of the winter moon." We can say of the water that it has symbolic resonance without a stultifyingly precise one-to-one relationship with what it suggests. Its more positive significations are qualified by the solemn occasion and by the mystery and ambiguity deliberately exploited; even the figures on the ship mourn rather than rejoice on seeing Arthur.

Some of the language is particularly effective; and the following passage reminds us of Eliot's compliment to Tennyson's extraordinary ear.

> and from them rose
> A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,
> And, as it were one voice, an agony
> Of lamentation, like a wind that shrills
> All night in a waste land, where no one comes,
> Or hath come, since the making of the world.
> (266-71)

Both "agony" and "lamentation" are well placed, the latter being followed by a mid-foot caesura which gives it additional emphasis. They are polysyllabic, and each receives two major stresses which are further emphasized by the slow movement of the verse. The metrics here are particularly impressive and show Tennyson bringing

to bear all his technical abilities as a poet. The third foot of line 369 is minor and consequently demands a very heavy, accumulated accent on the succeeding "wind." The assonance of the "i's" in "shiver'd," "tingling," "wind," "shrills," and "night," in addition to the movement of lines 369 to 370, creates an onomatopoetic effect. The enjambement of lines 369 to 370 puts particular emphasis on the first foot of the second line, in which "all" receives a secondary accent, and since it follows an insignificant second foot, it receives additional stress.

Such an analysis is admittedly tortuous, but it is important to realize the purely technical virtuosity that Tennyson has at his disposal and that allows him to render with extraordinary effectiveness a particular sensation. Here the combined influence of rhythm, alliteration, assonance, stress, and diction create the impression of a high, hopeless, and sustained scream, tinged with the nightmarish because somehow insubstantial and elusive; the passage ends with the stunned and bewildered silence that the rhythm and repetition of the last line and one-half effect. It suggests the justice of Miss Pitt's comment that Tennyson characteristically manages "the suggestion of spiritual states and moods by the evocation of physical imagery."[40]

Arthur's final speech shows him for the last time as king and man, resigned to his defeat and accepting finally the ambiguities of his experience. Lines 408 to 413 are extraordinarily powerful

as dramatic utterance:

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
> Comfort thyself; what comfort is in me?
> I have lived my life, and that which I have done
> May He within himself make pure!

The dignity and control of the statement is consonant with the human grandeur Tennyson envisioned for Arthur but successfully rendered only in this idyll. Here again the context requires simple language and keeps it from being trite. On the other hand, the following lines are something of a <u>potpourri</u> of "appropriate" sentiments that seem demanded less by the dying Arthur than by the omniscient poet:

> More things are wrought by prayer
> Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
> Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
> 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?
> For so the whole round earth is every way
> Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.
> (415-23)

Perhaps the familiarity of the passage makes it difficult to read without a jaundiced eye, although the same difficulty does not arise with the equally familiar passage quoted immediately before. In any case, a general disquisition upon the distinction between men and beasts, and the relation of the whole to God is dramatically inappropriate here, particularly for one about to go, not to Heaven, but to Avilion. This incongruity echoes some of the

difficulties Tennyson has had in using romantic material with ulterior motives.

The image following, which resembles the haunting and well-known lines from "Tithonous," is extraordinarily beautiful:

> So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
> Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
> That, fluting a wild carol, ere her death,
> Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
> With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
> Revolving many memories, till the hull
> Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,
> And on the mere the wailing died away.
> (433-400)

The technical variations here are many and subtle, while the diction is both appropriate and precise. The swan itself is perfectly described as a swan, and the symbolic resonance of the lines can be explored more fruitfully than can many in the _Idylls_. The swan of course suggests noted and ephemeral beauty; perhaps it has also the connotations both of richness and purity. The "wild carol" parallels the death lament of the queens, telling at once of exotic beauty and poignant death. The same mystery awaits both the swan and Arthur, and their confrontation of it has comparable dignity.

The end of the poem preserves the ambiguities of meaning and death upon which it has on the whole insisted. Tennyson focuses on Bedivere's experience of loss and continues to use natural and local imagery to embody the qualities of spiritual desolation:

> But when that moan had past for evermore,
> The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn
> Amazed him, and he groan'd, 'The King is gone."
> And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,
> 'From the great deep to the great deep he goes.'
>
> Whereat he slowly turn'd and slowly clomb
> The last hard footstep of that iron crag,
> Thence mark'd the black hull moving yet, and cried:
> (441-8)

In showing Bedivere watching to the last the gradual disappearance of the boat and Arthur, he effectively represents a sense of the slow and agonizing defeat of the ideal. All affirmations are qualified by such words and phrases as "seem'd," "faint," "as if," and "or thought he saw":

> Then from the dawn it seem'd there came, but faint
> As from beyond the limit of the world,
> Like the last echo born of a great cry,
> Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
> Around a king returning from his wars.
>
> Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
> Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,
> Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
> Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
> Down that long water opening on the deep
> Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
> From less to less and vanish into light.
> And the new sun rose bringing the new year.
> (457-69)

The affirmations are not denied, but, in the effective tension of the verse, they are called into question so that the statement of the last line is made almost ironic by the loss described in the preceding ones. The last line partakes of that fundamental recognition that the universe continues, oblivious to all man's aspirations and suffering.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER II

[1]Harold Nicolson, _Tennyson_ (New York, 1962), p. ix.

[2]See especially Valerie Pitt, _Tennyson Laureate_ (London, 1962); Jerome Buckley, _Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet_ (Cambridge, 1960); Douglas Bush, _Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English_ Poetry (New York, 1963); F.E.L. Priestley, "Tennyson's _Idylls_," _Critical Essays on the Poetry of Tennyson_, ed. John Killham (London, 1960).

[3]Hallam Tennyson, _Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son_, 2 vols. (New York, 1897). (All subsequent page references to this work will be parenthesized in the body of the text.)

[4]Biographical material on Tennyson can be found in the following works: Hallam Tennyson, _Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son_, 2 vols. (New York, 1897); Nicolson, _Tennyson_; Basil Willey, _More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters_ (London, 1963), pp. 53-105.

[5]Nicolson, p. 310.

[6]T.S. Eliot, "Tennyson's 'In Memoriam,'" _Selected Prose_, ed. John Hayward (London, 1958), pp. 176-77.

[7]George Saintsbury, A History of Nineteenth Century Literature: 1780-1895. (New York, 1896), pp. 266-8.

[8]Bush, pp. 226-7.

[9]Coventry Patmore, "Tennyson's Idylls of the King," Edinburgh Review, CX (1859), p. 249.

[10]anon., "The Laureate and His 'Arthuriad,'" London Quarterly Review, XXXIV (April, 1870), pp. 158-9.

[11]A.C. Bradley, "The Reaction Against Tennyson," A Miscellany (London, 1929), p. 17.

[12]Morton Luce, A Handbook to the Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson (London, 1906), pp. 325 ff., 353 ff; Stopford Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life (London, 1929), pp. 249-253; Paul Baum, Tennyson Sixty Years After (London, 1963), pp. 176-213.

[13]Pitt, p. 208.

[14]Pitt, p. 208.

[15]Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New Haven, 1946), pp. 65-6.

[16]Baum, p. 204.

[17]C.S. Lewis, "The English Prose _Morte_," _Essays on Malory_, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford, 1963), p. 24.

[18]Patmore, p. 248.

[19]Alfred Lord Tennyson, _The Poems and Plays of Alfred Lord Tennyson_, (New York, 1938). (All subsequent line references to this text will be parenthized in the body of the essay.)

[20]Two previously mentioned essays, by Buckley and by Priestley, try from different points of view to argue the opposite; they refuse to take into account the many sound criticisms that have been made of the work as a whole, and to this extent their observations are not convincing.

[21]Graham Hough, _An Essay on Criticism_ (New York, 1966), p. 42.

[22]There is an overwhelming emphasis on primary human relationships. Of the twelve books, six are specifically named for a man and a woman, and in all but one of them, "Gareth and Lynette," the relationship is sexual. Two others, "The Last Tournament" and "Guinevere," deal essentially with erotic or marital relations. "Balin and Balan" is of course about brothers, which

leaves only "The Coming of Arthur," "The Passing of Arthur," and "The Holy Grail" to cope mainly with some of the other basic areas of human experience. Such statements are of course only useful simplifications. The materials in each idyll do not exist necessarily to define the relationships between people; they include the usual romance furniture of tournaments, quests, journeys, and pageants. But in a work assuming the original sin to be not disobedience to the will of God, but adultery, it is perhaps inevitable that Tennyson structure his tales on the relations between the sexes.

[23]Brooke, p. 272. Brooke's attitude to the type was, however, very different from Tennyson's: "Tennyson seems to like this kind of womanhood . . . . She is gracious, but she is one of those women who do a great deal of harm to men. The defects of their patience make in men tyranny and selfishness, jealous overbearing and ugly suspicion."

[24]Lynette is only apparently an exception to this rule. Her behavior is quite deliberately assumed for the purpose of protecting Gareth; and when she sees that such protection is not necessary, she becomes her real self, essentially like Enid.

[25]Henry James, <u>The Awkward Age</u> (New York, 1958), p. 63.

[26] Eliot's general observations are interesting on this point: "Tennyson himself, on the conscious level of the man who talks to reporters and poses for photographers, to judge from remarks made in conversation and recorded in his son's Memoir, consistently asserted a convinced, if somewhat sketchy, Christian belief. And he was a friend of Frederick Denison Maurice--nothing seems odder about that age than the respect which its eminent people felt for each other. Nevertheless, I get a very different impression from In Memoriam from that which Tennyson's contemporaries seem to have got. His biographers have not failed to remark that he had a good deal of the temperament of the mystic--certainly not at all the mind of the theologian. He was desperately anxious to hold the faith of the believer, without being very clear about what he wanted to believe; he was capable of illumination which he was incapable of understanding." (pp. 180-1) "Tennyson's feelings . . . were honest; but they were usually a good way below the surface . . . [In Memoriam] 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." (p. 183)

[27] cf. Brooke: "Yet, he makes the whole effort utterly break down, and I do not comprehend his position. I sometimes think that the hopelessness of the years in which he wrote the Idylls seized upon him, and he ceased for a time to believe in the

victory of good. For it is not only the partial failure of purity of life which he represents in the Idylls; it is its complete overthrow. Everyone, with the exception of Arthur, Percivale, his sister, and Sir Bors, becomes unchaste. I sometimes think that he wished to illustrate the truth that vows imposed from without were not only useless, when the character remained unchanged, but that they drove men and women into their opposites; and perhaps that his hatred of monkery influenced him further in this direction; but the astonishing result to which he comes is more than these motives should produce. Not a soul keeps the vows, except Arthur and those who have left the world for the cloister. I do not understand why he works out a result which seems not only to contradict the possibility of his rule of chastity being observed, but which makes that rule issue in a wholly shameless society. It is as if he despaired of purity. The thing he most insists on is made by him to be the impossible thing." (pp. 363-4)

[28] See "The Laureate and his 'Arthuriad'" p. 159; Brooke, p. 368, ff.; Winters, pp. 69-70; Pitt, p. 208, ff.; Luce, p. 330, ff.; Baum, p. 203, ff.

[29] Nicolson, p. 323.

[30] T.S. Eliot, "Henry James," The Shock of Recognition (New York, 1955), p. 856.

[31]Winters has called Tennyson's Merlin "a senile and incredible stock figure." p. 63. This judgment is on the whole true; but it should nonetheless be valuable to discover what are the particular elements in Tennyson's figure that combine to justify such a verdict.

[32]Nicolson, p. 323.

[33]Brooke, pp. 301-2.

[34]The writer of the essay in the Contemporary Review suggests a plausible, yet entirely untraditional interpretation of Tennyson's handling of the Grail: "Then comes Sir Percivale, with ready pure and fervid heart and tongue--whose warm and natural love 'being rudely blunted'--has made of his impressible temperament--as of his sister's--a proper soil for asceticism. He turns finally to the holy vision at the cost of a mean treason impossible to such a nature save under the hardening impulse of fanaticism, and shuts himself away from a world which he finds himself unequal either to combat or to help.

How different from Sir Bors, his fellow-enthusiast--who never could have told the story of the Grail--nor desecrated by any speech the things which belonged to God and his own heart. His tender, true, and loyal spirit had its roots down so deep, that none but such love as the King's could pierce to where they fed on hidden and perennial springs of faith and prayer.

And both of these again how different from Galahad--the wild, unearthly cometary knight; the monk in armour; slave of his own illusions; deaf and blind to everything besides; as ignorant of the world as Gawain of the soul; a pseudo-Curtius who makes the gulf he leaps into, and draws down after him those who might else have 'fulfilled the boundless purpose of the King,' and served and saved the common weal with 'crowning common sense.'" (p. 948) This is surely perverse, but Tennyson's various ambiguities make it impossible for him to disclaim entirely the legitimacy of such an interpretation.

[35] For somewhat conflicting views on Malory's treatment of the Grail theme see Vinaver and Lewis in Bennett's Essays on Malory. For the purposes of the present comparisons, which consider Malory as the synecdoche of the English version of the Arthurian legends, Malory's personal feelings and possible alterations from his French original are relatively unimportant.

[36] Brooke: " Tennyson contends in 'The Holy Grail' that ascetic religion, an exciting pursuit of signs and wonder, severance from home and from the common love of man and woman, and a retreat from the daily work of the world into cloistered seclusion or in pursuit of a supernatural spiritualism, are, save for a few exceptional characters, entirely evil." (p. 323) But if, as it has been

traditionally conceived, the Grail represents a Holy Vision sent by God, it must be potentially accessible to all His children and equally relevant to them all. It is not a topic on which ambiguity is possible.

[37] Pitt: "What was true of the Romantics was even truer of the Victorians. Every right-minded Victorian was engaged in making his own soul. He had to work hard at the highly individualistic task of absorbing the new science, the new philosophies, the new social conditions, and achieving, against the continued flux of things, an inward integrity. Every good Victorian was in one sense an eccentric: he was outside the central tradition because there was, in fact, no central tradition to be inside. Arnold pleads in vain for a central criticism, for authority; the tide of the times, and indeed his own preconceptions, made such a thing impossible . . . . Tennyson . . . would have responded eagerly to an acceptable authority. Yet he was open to every wind of the Victorian weather. He could not find an acceptable and authoritative tradition in which to shelter, and he found no comfort in outright scepticism. He suffered the difficulties in religion, in intellectual and social development, which afflicted his generation, and he made an honest attempt to deal with matters of public moment, but like everyone else, he could only offer private answers to public dilemmas." (p. 251)

[38]In fact, Tennyson spoke of spiritual experience as central to the Idylls: "'The Holy Grail' is one of the most imaginative of my poems. I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen. The end, when the king speaks of his work and of his visions, is intended to be the summing up of all in the highest note by the highest of human men." These three lines in Arthur's speech are the spiritually central lines of the Idylls:

> In moments when he feels he cannot die,
> And knows himself no vision to himself,
> Nor the High God a vision."

Such a statement bears a fundamentally ironic relationship to what he actually implies in the Idylls in general, and in "The Holy Grail" in particular.

[39]Nicolson, p. 329.

[40]Pitt, p. 212.

Chapter III

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S *MERLIN* AND *LANCELOT*

"The golden horoscope of imperfection"

1. Introduction

Tennyson was, of course, not the only nineteenth century English poet who used the Arthur legends in his own work. Arnold, Morris, Hardy, and Swinburne also wrote on Arthurian themes, and surely the charm and frequent loveliness of all these poems persuaded the American, Edwin Arlington Robinson, to try his own hand with them. Since the outlines of Robinson's life, at least as compared with Tennyson's, are not well-known, I shall briefly record them.

He was born in Head-of-the-Tide, Maine, in 1869, but moved with his family shortly thereafter to Gardiner, where he spent his youth and early maturity.[1] For two rather desultory years he was a special student at Harvard; he had not further academic experience or formal training. When he was twenty-eight he moved to New York City, where his life continued to be a remarkably lonely and uneventful one; he seems to have lived only to write poetry, for which he received little acclaim until he was well into middle-age.[2] In 1896 he had the not wholly atypical experience of paying for the first private edition of his poems, The Torrent and the Night Before, published by the Riverside Press. It was not until 1910, with The Town Down the River, that he enjoyed an "independent, commercial publication."[3] In 1919, his

fiftieth birthday was celebrated by an issue of the New York Times Book Review; in 1921 the first collected edition of his poems received the Pulitzer prize for poetry.

For a good part of his adult life he was dependent financially upon his friends, and clearly one of the most important events in his life was his discovery in 1911 of the MacDowell colony, at Peterborough, New Hampshire. His gratitude for the opportunity to spend his summers there expressed itself in a decision to give up alcohol, to which he had been seriously addicted for several years. In 1927, Macmillan published Tristram, which won his third Pulitzer prize and was, amazingly, a popular success. For the first time in his life, his poetry began to bring him an income sufficient to his modest needs. In 1935 he died of cancer in New York Hospital.

Robinson's early work is either short or of medium length, and he is perhaps best known for his short poems celebrating "Tilbury Town," the Gardiner of his youth. Poems such as "Bewick Finzer," "Luke Havergal," "Eros Turannos," "Richard Cory," "Aaron Stark," and "Reuben Bright" deal with obscure villagers, usually lonely failures and outcasts. His penchant for writing about the experiences of others, rather than his own, is equally evident in the medium-length poems such as "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," "The Three Taverns," "The

Wandering Jew," and "John Brown." In these he imagines a well-known historical figure, usually at a critical moment in his life, when his earlier power and success seem to be lost forever; when he must confront and evaluate the moral texture of his life and the nature of his choices.

> the 'irony and pity' with which he regarded his victims of fate struck the new note of the novelists as well as of the poets. His probing, questioning, doubting mind was the mind of the new generation; and his portraits, even his sonnets, were novels in little. His longer psychological poems continued the line of Howells and James . . . He had sought for the spoken phrase, for the neat and plain; and, if his style was too prosaic, if it was too bare and cold, it was hard, it was clear and it was honest . . . Robinson eschewed the nebulous, the blurred and the vague, as he abhorred the fatuous and the stereotyped. In short, in a poetical world of baker's bread and confectionary, Robinson brought forth real bread again.[4]

It would be inaccurate to say that Robinson has been neglected, but the major energies of twentieth century readers and critics have been dedicated to the study of other men. In 1937, Morton Zabel wrote perceptively about Robinson's differences from his various contemporaries and implicitly predicted that his enthusiasts would be comparatively few:

> There is too little in his work of 'growth' or variety to make him a creative force like Yeats or Pound; too little invention to make him a discoverer like Eliot or Auden; too little journalistic tact to give him the popular following of Sandburg or Millay;

> only a small part of the proverbial Americanism that endears Frost; and of course none of the spasmodic brilliance and sentiment that divide him, as by a polar distance, from the expert sleights and trade tricks of the average talents who outbid him in esteem.[5]

Since Zabel wrote, Robinson's characteristic work has come to seem even more alien to current modes and interests. While Denis Donoghue calls him "relentlessly unfashionable,"[6] James Dickey observes:

> The course of poetry has to a certain extent turned away from him, making his greatest virtues appear mediocre ones and directing public scrutiny from his introspective, intellectual, and ironic verse toward poetry in which more things seem to be taking place in a smaller area--poetry in which the poetic line is compressed and packed to the point of explosion and the bedazzlement of the reader is considered synonymous with his reward.[7]

It seems unlikely, in our increasingly frenetic modern world, that Robinson will ever again be a popular poet; it is all the more challenging to discover in his work that which deserves the attention it will rarely receive.

Robinson's Arthurian poems are the first of the long ones that increasingly occupied his energies. _Merlin_ was published in 1917; _Lancelot_, in 1920. Before he published _Tristram_, in 1927, he had done three other lengthy narratives, "Avon's Harvest," (1921) Roman Bartholow, (1923) and _The Man Who Died Twice_ (1924). The Arthurian narratives are unique among the long poems in having been inspired by well-known material; they deal

with and draw from a story very much a part of the Western literary inheritance. In the other poems, the plot and situation are invented, and they are the most justly neglected of Robinson's work.[8]

There is little material to tell us about the writing of the poems. Hagedorn's biography includes the following brief account:

> [Merlin] seemed to Robinson, as he wrote Isaacs, "the least bad thing that I have done, with perhaps the exception of Ben Jonson." He overworked himself on it and had a bad winter--"pretty much in hell," he wrote Ledoux--trying to begin its sequel, Lancelot. But at Peterborough, the new narrative came with a rush; over 600 lines the first fortnight, and 1500, the first month . . . Macmillan's, with a world war to compete with, balked at Lancelot. Robinson, chagrined and humiliated that he must once more become a supplicant for publication, let it lie for a year. He rewrote much of the poem, "taking out more of the colloquialisms," he wrote Isaacs, "and a large part of the bilious comedy," and won a prize of $500 with it in a competition organized by the Lyric Society, a more or less mythical entity incarnated in Samuel Roth, editor of a magazine called The Lyric. The publisher, Thomas Seltzer, brought out the book . . . Lancelot, like its companion piece, had what Robinson called, in a letter to Arthur Davison Ficke, a "refrigerating effect on the critics." They did not know what to make of either poem.[9]

Robinson clearly felt pleased with his achievement in the two poems. In a letter to Mrs. Louis Ledoux on July 30, 1916, Robinson wrote of Merlin: "The thing seems to me interesting and, on the whole, entirely moral. It all depends on the point of view. You may still call me an evangelist of ruin when you have read it but you musn't forget the redemption--even if you don't see it."[10] On August 25 of the following year he wrote his friend Isaacs: "What

Lancelot's fate will be is more than I can say. All I can say is that it seems to me rather the best thing that I have done, if that means anything."[11]

Unlike Tennyson, Robinson said little about what he intended his Arthurian poems to mean. Winfield Scott records an amusingly laconic comment of Robinson's: "Merlin and Lancelot were 'World War poems. If you read them with that in mind you'll get more out of them. The passing of an old order and the beginning of a new."[12] Ellsworth Barnard does probably as much with this comment as can be done when he writes of Merlin:

> The crash of kingdoms and the anguished voices of dying men and of a dying social order (less a matter of course to his generation than to ours) were in the ears of the poet as he wrote; and the sickening sense of waste and folly that Merlin's foreknowledge cannot prevent him from feeling as he sees the lights going out in Arthur's kingdom is what Robinson himself was feeling as he watched World War I pursue its ruinous course.[13]

The somewhat fuller comments in Robinson's letters or in the recollections of friends tell us little more of his intentions than we can find in the poems themselves. According to Chard Powers Smith,

> The double epic Merlin and Lancelot was planned in the summer of 1915 as a comment on the World War and the necessary destruction of nineteenth-century culture because, like Camelot, it was built on rotten foundations of self . . . Robinson wrote Hagedorn . . . that Lancelot may, "if one insists . . . be taken as a rather distant symbol of Germany." . . . But when it came to composition, these social sources faded out of importance . . . . In the summer of 1915 the two

> poems were planned as a unit, Lancelot to carry and resolve the main theme, with Merlin to be "written in anticipation of" it, "to complement its various incompletenesses."[14]

To my knowledge, no one has been able to make anything of the bizarre idea that Lancelot is "a rather distant symbol of Germany." The comment deserves to stand among the many suggesting that a writer's conscious intention often has little bearing on his actual achievement.

In a letter to Hagedorn, Robinson restated ideas developed more elaborately in the poems; their adequacy and relevance will be dealt with subsequently:

> I have made [Merlin], without any legendary authority, such a lover of the world as to use Arthur and his empire as an object lesson to prove to coming generations that nothing can stand on a rotten foundation . . . . Galahad's "light" is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of things and their significance. I don't see how this can be made more concrete, for it is not the same thing to any two individuals . . . the most significant line in the two poems, considered from a purely practical point of view, is, perhaps, "the world has paid enough for Camelot"--in Lancelot and Guinevere.[15]

Much later, Robinson was almost willing to renounce the "larger significances" to which he had before alluded. In a letter to Helen Grace Adams on January 1, 1930, he wrote:

> There is no symbolic significance in [Tristram], although there is a certain amount in Merlin and Lancelot, which were suggested by the world war--Camelot representing in a way the going of a world that is now pretty much gone. But possibly these two poems may be read just as well as narrative poems with no inner significance

> beyond an implication of an ordered universe and a sort of deterministic negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of "rational" thought.[16]

Even Robinson's earlier comments tell us more about the atmosphere, the mood of the poems; they do not insist on a philosophical interpretation without which the poems cannot be considered valid and coherent. They leave us, on the whole, to understand and interpret as we may.

Even by those who admire his achievements, Robinson's Arthurian poems have received little serious critical attention, and they have been generally considered inferior to his shorter work. In a 1927 review of Tristram, Edmund Wilson trenchantly observed,

> With all respect for a fine poet and for one of the few really honorably won American reputations of our time, I would still give the whole of Mr. Robinson's Arthurian cycle, with its conventional romantic stage properties of unrecreated castles, seas and wars and its false starts at passionate expression always foundering in "before we knew what we were yet to see" and "until we saw as far as we should know," for a single one of his New England elegies.[17]

For Louise Bogan,

> Mr. Robinson's Arthurian poems and the nonlegendary narratives of his later period mark a distinct lapse in power: a lessening of grasp not only on technical, but on psychological essentials. Merlin, Lancelot, and Tristram are tragedies at a fourth remove. Mr. Robinson's temper lacks dramatic depth. He is incapable, technically, of effects adequate to the great matters in hand, and he is emotionally limited. He was betrayed, no doubt, into his choices of the Morte d'Arthur legends by the temerity of nineteenth-century poets. His success with them is certainly greater than Tennyson's. He did not realize, however, that the lust, barbarity and agony inherent in these tales could

> not be tamed to Tilbury Town's measure. Their flavor and power, under such treatment, thins out to the back-chat of gaffers around the stove of a country store . . . . The style fails the matter. The philosophy breaks down and a kind of dispirited mysticism is the result.[18]

Yvor Winters, who has written at some length about the poems, believes that "Merlin and Lancelot . . . contain the best poetry to be found in Robinson's longer works, regardless of structure; Lancelot, moreover, is the best constructed of Robinson's longer poems and strikes me as one of the most powerfully constructed long poems in English."[19]

It would be foolish to dispute or try to ignore the virtually unanimous critical judgment that ranks Robinson's Arthurian poems below the achievements of his shorter works. A long poem, by its very nature, cannot be so perfectly executed and finely imagined as a shorter piece. As in a novel, there will be dull, second-rate passages, less distinguished lines, failures of conception. These works of Robinson's have justly been called "verse novels,"[20] and the criteria by which they are judged must be less exacting than and indeed different from those appropriate to the lyric poem. Although Merlin and Lancelot are quite uneven, they have virtues impossible in poems of briefer compass. The Arthurian material released strengths in Robinson that we can only suspect in his other work; and they are quite superior in conception and general coherence to the Idylls of the King.

The sections that follow are primarily an attempt to understand and to explain the first two of the three Arthurian poems, and to point out those virtues that have been unjustly overlooked. Tristram, unusually popular when it was first published, has come to be regarded as decidedly inferior to the earlier poems.[21] Robinson himself said "I didn't intend to write Tristram, but somehow it couldn't be denied."[22] In the letter, earlier quoted, to Helen Grace Adams, he admitted that Tristram was different from the earlier two poems. He had more difficulty in writing it[23]; and a letter to Mrs. Louis Ledoux makes us suspect he wrote it to prove something about himself: "The key and color of the thing are altogether different from those of Merlin and Lancelot and may cause some readers to suspect that I'm getting a little tired of hearing too much about my New England reticence--which may be pretty true."[24] The poem is forced and frequently off-key. It has the same virtues and defects that the other two share, but the prolixity to which Robinson was prone virtually overwhelms its strengths. As Ellsworth Barnard says,

> Passion is vaporized into speech, and although this is periodically interrupted by breathless embraces, we begin to question whether a love that is so much talked about but so rarely evident in real action is as overpowering as it is declared to be.[25]

The lovers talk so endlessly that our sense of probability, as well as our literary patience, is flagrantly violated. Tristram suggests the way a writer can lose his particular tension and become, as

it were, a parody of himself.

I shall begin by exploring Robinson's two most successful Arthurian poems by examining their structure in order to see both how this aspect differs from those of Tennyson and Malory, and how well suited it is to Robinson's peculiar artistic and imaginative talents. The poems are not equally successful, but they are equally characteristic products of a highly distinctive and comparatively narrow sensibility. Although it is less coherently planned than Lancelot, Merlin can be shown to reveal Robinson's typical subject matter, as well as his method of introducing and developing it. Lancelot, then, can be most fruitfully examined to discover what has become of the narrative line and the abundant action of Le Morte D'Arthur. It will be illuminating to examine further Robinson's curious relation to Malory and Tennyson, discovering the material and the themes he takes from his predecessors and the way he works with them to make them distinctively his own; it will be necessary to locate the intellectual weaknesses in Robinson's poems and to determine how much they damage the work as a whole. By examining the way Robinson presents and understands King Arthur, we can evaluate the poet's relationship to traditional ethical understanding and see how his pervasive emphasis upon conscious choice mitigates or counterbalances his tendency to moral relativism. By studying Robinson's Merlin, we can see how subjective and complex are both his technique of character presentation and his mode of understanding human nature. Finally, we

shall carefully look at several different but characteristic passages that embody Robinson's strengths as a poet and a few more that suggest the aesthetic weaknesses of these poems.

In the course of my discussion I shall have occasion to compare Robinson both to poets and to novelists. Although at first glance it may seem inappropriate to compare a poet to a novelist or writer in prose, Robinson's work virtually demands to be considered by criteria other than those traditionally applied to poetry. I have said that his poems have been called "verse novels" and quoted Van Wyck Brooks, who named his poems "novels in little." Yvor Winters has made this point at greater length and with considerable historical insight:

> it has long appeared to me that his closest spiritual relatives, at least in America, are to be found in the writers of fiction and of history in his generation and the two or three generations preceding. I have called attention to his having certain more or less Jamesian vices as a narrator, but I am thinking now of his virtues: of the plain style, the rational statement, the psychological insight, the subdued irony, the high seriousness and the stubborn persistence. In respect to one or another of these qualities, one may find him related to such a mind as that of Henry James, but perhaps more obviously to Edith Wharton and Motley and Francis Parkman, and perhaps even at times to Henry Adams. He is, it seems to me, the last great American writer of their tradition and not the first of a later one; and the fact that he writes verse is incidental.[26]

The novel, more often than the poem, is concerned with character creation and development, but this concern is also central to

Robinson's work. Ellsworth Barnard has described how Robinson differs in this from most contemporary poets and has justly pleaded that this preoccupation in his poetry be given its due:

> Most twentieth century poets are concerned primarily with either themselves or the universe; with their private experiences, which they often seem to offer as unique, or with traits, tendencies, "problems," which somehow seem more important than the fate of the individual persons in whose lives they are exemplified; in short, with either the singular or the symbolic. The creation of characters who have a sort of objective existence and an identity of their own, and whose main appeal is simply that they are people, has been left largely to the writer of prose . . . there seems no reason why the poet should surrender his interest in human character as such.[27]

2.

The Structure of *Merlin*

The structure of Robinson's Arthurian poems conforms significantly with the bent of his mind, so that his is a fruitful form for his particular excellence.[28] When we compare this structure with those of Malory and Tennyson, we can see not only a radically different technique at work, but also a different attitude to and use of the material. Robinson's choice of form reveals the speculative cast of his mind; and though *Lancelot* is more coherently arranged than *Merlin*, the latter poem can reveal, when examined in some detail, Robinson's unique development of his legendary subject matter.[29]

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* has, if not an open-ended form, a middle with virtually limitless possibilities for extension and addition. Almost any lively, or even tedious, material can be and is included between the set beginning and end. Again, it is a story-teller's form, a narrative. It reveals a great deal that Malory does not specifically discuss; but since he makes little attempt to discuss or evaluate his material, he does not arouse expectations that he cannot satisfy. He provides us, as it were, with the raw material of speculation and judgment.

Tennyson gives the *Idylls* a "parabolic drift." The beginning and end are prescribed, and the stories in between are supposed to have exemplary value. It is a much more controlled, deliberate

structure than Malory's, and, as I have tried to show, there is an imperfect relation between the moral and the matter. Unlike Malory, he needs to give meaning to the stories, but the meaning he gives is imposed upon incongruous material and hence, too often a violation of it.

With Robinson, both the narrative and exemplary elements have been reduced to a minimum. His poems are comprised of several sections, almost all of them presenting two or more people in intense, though restrained conversation. Sometimes these sections are merely juxtaposed to one another; sometimes they are linked by a brief narrative passage. They exploit the relationships between these people and their somewhat different views of the situation in which they find themselves. Each of the two poems I am discussing is finally concerned with the consciousness of a highly sophisticated and intelligent man, and the somewhat less comprehensive awareness of several others among whom he lives. Robinson's poems render in sometimes baffling complexity the relationship between this man and several others, most powerfully and particularly between this man and a woman.[30] Each begins when the protagonists have begun to realize that the end of their exciting lives is near, and each ends when they have been able to accept this fact. It is thus a reflective, speculative form, and it reveals the cast of Robinson's mind. The discrepancy in Tennyson between the moral and the matter of the poems has been

reduced to a minimum, if not entirely eliminated, by virtue of the fact that the poems represent people who are themselves reflecting upon the significance of the drama in which they participate. There is little evidence of an "omniscient narrator" who can manipulate them at will; we realize not only that they tell their own story but that they are their own story.

Lancelot is more coherently arranged than Merlin, mainly because it has a single action and traces it from what we might call the beginning of the end almost to the end. Merlin has two "actions" or subjects: the love of Merlin and Vivien, and the awareness of the great in Camelot of its incipient collapse. The two themes are linked only by the figure of Merlin, and the relationship between them is not defined so that we are quite sure there is one. In Lancelot the relationship between the love affair and the fall of Camelot is roughly as clear as these terribly complicated human situations can be. The love affair is one among several causes of the final catastrophe; the destruction of the society ensures the end of the love affair. Robinson observes the personal relationship and the society moving together to the end. In the other poem Merlin, unlike Lancelot, is no longer a part of Arthur's kingdom and can only comment, as it were, from a distance. Needless to say, he does participate in the love affair, and his experience of it is one of the great strengths of the poem. There is no causal relationship between the two themes, nor does

Merlin play the same kind of role in both; and consequently there is a different perspective at work in each. In the one theme he is emotionally at several removes from the action; in the other, his emotion _is_ the action. Perhaps one can finally accept the discrepancy with the same attitude that one accepts the discrepancy in James's _The American_ between the part that is polished, comic social commentary and the part that is about an intense personal experience. Each part has very real virtues, though they are not entirely consistent with one another. A detailed description of _Merlin_ will reveal the way the structure in part discovers the content.

Merlin has seven sections of irregular length: the first two are seven pages each; the next two are nine and ten pages respectively; section five is fifteen pages; and the last two are sixteen pages each. Sections 1, 2, 3, and 7 are about the ruin of Camelot; sections 4, 5, and 6 deal with the love affair. In bulk each theme is treated at roughly the same length, though one is unconvinced that this parity was quite intentional. Robinson seems to have responded to what he felt to be the demands of the situation at hand, and probably this flexibility brought forth many of his great strengths. Still, the absence of more rigorous formal requirements must surely have fostered the prolixity that mars the poem.

Section I works through the dialogue between Gawaine and

Dagonet about each one's sense of the significance of "Merlin's rumor-laden resurrection." It is highly elliptical, introducing elements of the story in an almost offhand fashion. There is a considerable--and to an extent unfathomable--tension between the two men. In these poems, as so often in James's late novels, there are hovering significances, implications, intimations; and each man, in his own way, is trying to come to terms with them. The subject, in its deepest sense, can be understood as the problem of knowledge. How do we know, and what does knowing _signify_? The subject is, further, the complication of that problem by the hazards and ambiguities of a personal relationship. Dagonet, to Gawaine's discomfort, seems to know the more, but both his mood and his utterances are enigmatic. Whether or not Robinson thought himself in control of the ambiguities here, I cannot say. I do not think he was entirely in control of them, because there is something that remains unnecessarily baffling about the way they react to one another. We can perhaps accept this as an inevitable function of an intensely subjective mode of presentation, but it is nonetheless annoying that no amount of research or pondering can make fully comprehensible such lines as the following:

> A twitch of an impatient weariness
> Played for a moment over the lean face
> Of Dagonet, who reasoned inwardly:
> "The friendly zeal of this inquiring knight
> Will overtake his tact and leave it squealing,
> One of these days."
> (p. 238, ll. 11-16)

This weakness manifests itself in terms of the poetry in words that are only apparently precise and in some tedious circumlocutions. But this weakness does not pertain to, and hence does not damage, the function of the section itself, which is both to introduce Merlin and to begin to suggest his stature. Robinson's method is thus essentially oblique: we are in effect told that Merlin must be extraordinary because two obviously intelligent men, and according to them all of Camelot, are preoccupied with him.

Section II employs the same devices, presenting Lamorak, Bedivere, and Kay talking together of Merlin and of the state of Arthur's kingdom. The relationship between the three is strained and uncertain; the fact that Robinson simply presents them in this way suggests that for him the inadequacy of people to one another approaches being a permanent human fact. The constant threat of violence that we find in Malory has been transmuted into a constant awareness of vulnerability to others. Each has a different point of view and what appears to be at least a measure of truth. Robinson thus structures his poem on the relativity and imperfection of knowledge, the inevitability of subjectivity and partisanship. He further assumes the impossibility of overt action.[31] These three speakers have an implicit need to act decisively, and they know they cannot do it. Here again the form of Robinson's poem is a reflection of his narrow sense of life's possibilities; conversation,

discussion, dialogue have quite taken the place of action, and this conversation is the more highly charged because the protagonists know it is their only means of coming to terms with their situation. Robinson, unlike Tennyson, was extremely clever in beginning to appropriate from Le Morte D'Arthur at a point where the material was most congenial to his own talent and sensibility. I observed earlier that in the last sections of Malory's book prior to Arthur's death, every action or decision contributes in some way to the general disaster, suggesting the pathetic inadequacy of conscious individual intention or action to stem the forceful movement of history. This is where Robinson, in effect, begins his poems, and since action is no longer efficacious, speculation necessarily takes its place.

We can also notice that in Robinson's poems there is a continuing tension and interplay between emotion and reason. Emotions play an often overwhelming, though incalculable part. The first four lines can briefly suggest how much account Robinson takes of feelings:

> Sir Lamorak, the man of oak and iron,
> Had with him now, as a care-laden guest,
> Sir Bedivere, a man whom Arthur loved,
> As he had loved no man save Lancelot.
> (p. 241, ll. 26-29)

His simple introduction of Bedivere depends upon Bedivere's emotional state at the moment and upon his capacity to inspire love. And Robinson, with an irony that is both structural and native to

his thought, proceeds to challenge the happy efficacy of love. Arthur has best loved Lancelot, but, as we all know, Lancelot has betrayed him. This kind of qualification works structurally in that a statement of sorts is often made, and a various number of subsequent lines are devoted either to qualifying or challenging it. In the section as a whole this penchant for alternation and qualification works itself out in the three men's differing loyalties and judgments: to Lamorak, "The King, if one may say it, set the pace." (p. 243, l. 18); for Bedivere, "Lancelot/ Has wrought a potent wrong upon the King, / And all who serve and recognize the King" (p. 244, ll. 14-16); to Sir Kay, Guinevere's "estate, / Is one for less complacent execration / Than quips and innuendoes of the city / Would augur for her sin--if there be sin--" (p. 245, l. 33, p. 246, ll. 1-3). Each is, in effect, trying to explain and understand what has happened, but because of inevitable emotional inclination and a limited perspective, each is partial.

Section 3 first shows us Arthur and Merlin, then Arthur and Dagonet. It includes ethical evaluations that are both more stern and more comprehensive than anything that preceded them, though it is still significant that the actions being evaluated are in the past. The present relationships which Robinson renders have their own distinctive dynamics. The pattern of the section, as of the relationships, is that of a request for help, followed by a response that is unavoidably inadequate to the need; each person

is then left alone, trying to accept this insufficiency. Neither Merlin nor Dagonet is or can be adequate to give the help for which Arthur asks. This pattern of need--expressed and unfulfilled--is dominant in both poems.

Furthermore, in the passages describing Arthur and Merlin we discover again a powerful dialectic between reason and emotion. Such a statement risks a terrible over-simplification, because the goal of both the protagonists and the poet is to achieve some satisfactory fusion between the two. Still, it is useful to realize that the goal has not yet been achieved. There is no tranquility and no full acceptance. Each man is deeply affectionate toward the other, and each is uncompromisingly hard on the other. And the grounds for their mutual criticism is that each has surrendered to emotions and that the surrender has been demeaning or corrupting. Arthur says that this is a world

> where you yourself--God save us!--
> Have gone down smiling to the smaller life
> That you and your incongruous laughter called
> Your living grave. God save us all, Merlin,
> When you, the seer, the founder, and the prophet,
> May throw the gold of your immortal treasure
> Back to the God that gave it, and then laugh
> Because a woman has you in her arms . . .
> (p. 251, ll. 9-16)

However, one measure of Merlin's superiority to Arthur is that he seems better able to understand and accept his own fallibility, as well as that of others. Of the prospect of the Grail experience he says

> Once I dreamed of it,
> But I was buried. I shall see no Grail,
> Nor would I have it otherwise. I saw
> Too much, and that was never good for man.
> The man who goes alone, too far goes mad--
> In one way or another. God knew best,
> And he knows what is coming yet for me.
> I do not ask. Like you, I have enough.
> (p. 254, ll. 1-8)

The remainder of the section shows that Arthur, though he has claimed that he has "enough," has not yet learned to accept necessity; and the remainder of the poem shows that Merlin too has a great deal of emotional torment yet to survive.

Thus we begin to see that the dynamics of each section are somewhat different; there is no necessary and inevitable pattern that Robinson requires his material to reveal. Instead, he structures each section on what seem to him the psychological realities that the given situation might convincingly reveal. His scope is therefore limited, but true to its possibilities.

Sections 4 through 6 deal with the love affair between Merlin and Vivian. They contain a few passages that beautifully describe a powerful and present love. This represents the only real attempt in Robinson's poems, apart from Tristram, to render a love relationship while it is in full flower; the sections are marred by the prolixity that overwhelms the other poem, but they are impressive nonetheless. It is most noteworthy that in terms of the overall structure of the three sections Robinson first describes the situation that is the beginning of the end of the love affair. Section 4 begins

with apprehension on Vivian's part and a statement of Merlin's that has a decidedly ominous resonance:

> "He said he would come back, and so he will,
> He will because he must, and he is Merlin,
> The master of the world--or so he was;
> And he is coming back again to me
> Because he must and I am Vivian.
> It's all as easy as two added numbers:
> Some day I'll hear him ringing at the gate,
> As he rang on that morning in the spring,
> Ten years ago; and I shall have him then
> For ever. He shall never go away
> Though kings come walking on their hands and knees
> To take him on their backs." When Merlin came,
> She told him that, and laughed; and he said strangely:
> "Be glad or sorry, but no kings are coming.
> Not Arthur, surely; for now Arthur knows
> That I am less than Fate."
> (p. 259, ll. 20-35)

This can be considered merely a framework, but it can also seem to reflect Robinson's characteristic habit of seeing the happy, positive periods of life through a perspective of loss and mortality. He seems to be almost incapable of a quite straightforward approach, though perhaps this framework or qualification allows him to release for once those powerful emotional depths we usually see more obliquely. The portion of section 4 that describes Merlin's first going to Broceliande has more of a narrative line than any other part of the poem. His first conversations with Vivian display Robinson's awkwardness with such material in an excessive dependence on gates, fishes, colors, and Merlin's beard. The awkwardness is very understandable in human terms, but the poetry, for all that, is not up to Robinson's standard. We can perhaps accept the

tedium for the sake of those occasional passages that brilliantly and poignantly render the relationship Robinson understands:

> Said I, 'When this great Merlin comes to me,
> My task and avocation for some time
> Will be to make him willing, if I can,
> To teach and feed me with an ounce of wisdom.'
> For I have eaten to an empty shell,
> After a weary feast of observation
> Among the glories of a tinsel world
> That had for me no glory till you came,
> A life that is no life. Would you go back
> To Camelot?'--Merlin shook his head again,
> And the two smiled together in the sunset.
> (p. 267, ll. 1-11)

Section 5 begins with the consummation of their love and ends with the event that forebodes its end: Merlin's return with Dagonet to Camelot. It has more successful narrative than any other section of the poem, and at its best it is a thoroughly convincing description of two people briefly at one with each other, satisfied with defining each in terms of the other.

> With a long-kindling gaze that caught from hers
> A laughing flame, and with a hand that shook
> Like Arthur's kingdom, Merlin slowly raised
> A golden cup that for a golden moment
> Was twinned in air with hers; and Vivian,
> Who smiled at him across their gleaming rims,
> From eyes that made a fuel of the night
> Surrounding her, shot glory over gold
> At Merlin, while their cups touched and his trembled.
> (p. 276, ll. 4-12)

We must perhaps realize how diminished has become the scope of significant action; the only positive action Robinson has been able to imagine and render is that between two people. The descriptions are warm, almost relaxed, occasionally approaching a gentle

playfulness that Robinson seldom manages elsewhere:

> She looked up at him till his way was lost
> Again in the familiar wilderness
> Of night that love made for him in her eyes,
> And there he wandered as he said he would;
> He wandered also in his prison-yard,
> And, when he found her coming after him,
> Beguiled her with her own admonishing
> And frowned upon her with a fierce reproof
> That many a time in the old world outside
> Had set the mark of silence on strong men--
> Whereat she laughed, not always wholly sure,
> Nor always wholly glad, that he who played
> So lightly was the wizard of her dreams:
> (p. 281, ll. 22-34)

The section is marred by pseudo-profundity; Robinson evidently is unable to resist inflating his material. Perhaps simply the subject is not one that can sustain a more extensive treatment; neither ecstasy nor fulfillment lend themselves readily to verbal expression. And Robinson simply indicates that the wholeness of their relationship endured for a long time--an indication immediately followed by the fatal impingement of the outside world.

> And so for years, till ten of them were gone,--
> Ten years, ten seasons, or ten flying ages--
> Fate made Broceliande a paradise,
> By none invaded, until Dagonet,
> Like a discordant, awkward bird of doom,
> Flew in with Arthur's message.
> (p. 282, ll. 4-9)

The last lines of the section ring with the somber tones so characteristic of Robinson and depend upon his sense of the interrelatedness of his lovers' sensibilities:

> She had not even asked him not to go;
> For it was then that in his lonely gaze

Of helpless love and sad authority
She found the gleam of his imprisoned power
That Fate withheld; and, pitying herself,
She pitied the fond Merlin she had changed,
And saw the Merlin who had changed the world.
(p. 282, ll. 31-32;
p. 283, ll. 1-5)

Section 6 describes, not the degeneration of their love, but their recognition that forces beyond them have so fundamentally intruded that they can no longer believe their love will answer and endure. The situation is of course Robinson's invention; he imagines a two year period between Merlin's return from Camelot and the time he leaves Broceliande. Section 6 represents his growing awareness during this period of time that the end of his life is near and that he must leave Vivian. The relationship between the two becomes similar to the other relationships Robinson has described, but it is more poignant because he has shown it as such a different sort of thing. They suspect and hurt each other, not deliberately but in the nature of things. Doubts, self-doubts, and loneliness possess them, inspired by a new awareness of mortality. Robinson develops this section primarily by means of conversations that reflect his considerable psychological understanding. Such passages reveal their fear that total candor would be disrupting; they instinctively retreat from admitting to one another what they feel to be the full truth. The pattern of the section is a movement from flawed solidarity to separation; at another level it is a movement toward an acceptance not yet achieved. A few simple lines can suggest

the poignance that Robinson achieves:

> He drew her slowly into his embrace
> And held her there, but when he kissed her lips
> They were as cold as leaves and had no answer;
> For Time had given him then, to prove his words,
> A frozen moment of a woman's life.
> (p. 297, ll. 26-30)

The first part of section 7 describes an encounter between Gawaine and Bedivere, who are joined briefly by Dagonet. Bedivere unsuccessfully urges Gawaine to change his course of action; Gawaine is failing Bedivere, and both are failing Arthur. These passages again reveal that the counsel of reason is constantly inadequate to the demands of the emotions. Human relationships, which are all they have, are perilous and incomplete. Dagonet the fool describes the dilemma of Arthur's kingdom in a way most faithful to the tenor of the legend, although Robinson has narrowed the possible causes of collapse essentially to personal responsibility:

> Then Dagonet said on to Bedivere,
> As if his tongue would make a jest of sorrow:
> "Sometime I'll tell you what I might have done
> Had I been Lancelot and you King Arthur--
> Each having in himself the vicious essence
> That now lives in the other and makes war.
> When all men are like you and me, my lord,
> When all are rational or rickety,
> There may be no more war. But what's here now?
> Lancelot loves the Queen, and he makes war
> Of love; the King, being bitten to the soul
> By love and hate that work in him together,
> Makes war of madness; Gawaine hates Lancelot,
> And he, to be in tune, makes war of hate;
> Modred hates everything, yet he can see
> With one damned illegitimate small eye
> His father's crown, and with another like it
> He sees the beauty of the Queen herself;

> He needs the two for his ambitious pleasure,
> And therefore he makes war of his ambition;
> And somewhere in the middle of all this
> There's a squeezed world that elbows for attention.
> (p. 301, ll. 25-33;
> p. 302, ll. 1-13)

And Bedivere, with philosophic detachment, suggests that it is only by submission to experience that understanding can be achieved:

> The doctor, like ourselves, may now be learning;
> And Merlin may have gauged his enterprise
> Whatever the cost he may have paid for knowing.
> We pass, but many are to follow us,
> And what they build may stay;
> (p. 302, ll. 22-26)

The second part of the section, and the last part of the poem, shows us Dagonet with Merlin, and they speculate together about the Camelot that lies at their feet. Again Robinson dwells upon their peculiar relationship, their sense of each other, and the slender possibilities for them. The overwhelming emphasis, though, is on the past and their personal attempts to come to terms with it. A number of passages are damaged by Merlin's dubious and ponderous interpretations of the Round Table's collapse, but when Robinson comes to the passages informed by the acceptance of necessity, the commitment to renunciation, the writing is again at his best:

> Merlin smiled,
> Faintly, and for the moment: "Dagonet,
> I need your word as one of Arthur's knights
> That you will go with me to the end
> Of my short way, and say unto no man
> Or woman that you found or saw me here.
> No good would follow, for a doubt would live
> Unstifled of my loyalty to him
> Whose deeds are wrought for those who are to come;

And many who see not what I have seen,
Or what you see tonight, would prattle on
For ever, and their children after them,
Of what might once have been had I gone down
With you to Camelot to see the King.
(p. 312, ll. 30-32;
p. 313, ll. 1-11)

Merlin and Dagonet have hurt each other--Merlin by speaking in ways Dagonet cannot understand, and Dagonet by almost taunting Merlin with Vivian. Still, they need each other's help, fragile as it is, and they can accept that fact. The close of the poem is highly effective:

They arose,
And, saying nothing, found a groping way
Down through the gloom together. Fiercer now,
The wind was like a flying animal
That beat the two of them incessantly
With icy wings, and bit them as they went.
The rock above them was an empty place
Where neither seer nor fool should view again
The stricken city. Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot.
(p. 314, ll. 10-21)

3.

The Role of Narrative in Lancelot

Despite Robinson's close adherence to the "facts" he derives from Le Morte D'Arthur, his poems are virtually polar opposites to Malory's work in several fundamental respects. One of these is the extraordinary diminution of the proportion of narrative. Merlin

and Lancelot are not uniform in the amount of narrative they include; but they are essentially alike, and a line count to determine the exact role narrative plays would be tedious and unprofitable. It would also be difficult to isolate it, because in Robinson's work narrative always tends quickly to become something else; the understated narrative elements often are handled so as to describe the psychological or moral state of the protagonists. By examining the relevant parts in Lancelot of sections 6 through 9, we can see that Robinson is not really interested in action and event but rather his protagonists' consciousness of that action and its resonance in their lives. And after examining the two sections of Lancelot that come close to being very bad indeed, we shall realize that Robinson has to be at a considerable distance from action and raw fact in order to write satisfactory poetry.

Section 6 of Lancelot begins with the following lines:

> The dark of Modred's hour not yet availing,
> Gawaine it was who gave the King no peace;
> Gawaine it was who goaded him and drove him
> To Joyous Gard, where now for long his army,
> Disheartened with unprofitable slaughter,
> Fought for their weary King and wearily
> Died fighting. Only Gawaine's hate it was
> That held the King's knights and his warrior slaves
> Close-hived in exile, dreaming of old scenes
> Where Sorrow, and her demon sister Fear,
> Now shared the dusty food of loneliness,
> From Orkney to Cornwall. There was no peace,
> Nor could there be, so Gawaine told the King,
> And so the King in anguish told himself,
> Until there was an end of one of them--
> Of Gawaine or the King, or Lancelot,
> Who might have had an end, as either knew,

> Long since of Arthur and of Gawaine with him.
> One evening in the moonlight Lancelot
> And Bors . . . .
> (p. 401, ll. 13-32)

The section goes on to present Bors' plea to Lancelot to end the war by killing Gawaine and Arthur, and Guinevere's subsequent conversation with him on the same subject. The lines quoted above represent no more than one-seventeenth of the whole section, though nothing else in it comes so close to telling the story that is happening. But it is important to realize how much action has been either not mentioned at all or alluded to only elliptically. In the period of time, as it were, between sections 5 and 6, Lancelot and Guinevere, with many of Lancelot's men, have escaped to Joyous Gard; Gawaine and Arthur have levied an army, left Modred in charge of the kingdom, and pursued them to France; they have laid waste the land and besieged the castle; the war has continued for long enough to be at a stalemate and for all of them to know that Lancelot at will could end it by killing the two leaders; and, as we learn near the end of the section, the Pope has been asked to intervene and end an "endless" war.

Furthermore, even the lines quoted above are highly interpretive and evaluative; they are not a straightforward account of an event. Robinson immediately emphasizes the responsibility for action, not the action itself ("Gawaine it was . . ."); he characterizes the brutal and ruthless quality of Gawaine's determination by using such verbs as "goaded" and "drove." Lines 17-19

("Disheartened . . . Died fighting") evoke an emotional situation, a sense of impasse and futility, while "unprofitable slaughter" constitutes a brief though very powerful indictment of what is happening. The subsequent lines brilliantly and discreetly describe the lot of Arthur's men: exiled, manipulated, forced to fight a battle not their own. And they also, with profound humanity, record the further costs of war; the men dream of homes and a past that have been changed, perhaps irreparably, by fear and desolation. The lines that follow the melancholy statement, "There was no peace," subtly reveal Robinson's great psychological understanding and build up to Lancelot's ethical dilemma. Arthur "in anguish told himself" that one of them had to die; the expression reveals his tormented awareness that he is deluding himself--that he is following someone else's commands rather than his own better judgment. The lines are extraordinarily powerful, and they depend for much of that power on a story far in the background. Robinson may be narrow in scope; but no story teller could do so much in anything like so brief a space.

Section 7 is almost entirely comprised of the tortured discussion between Lancelot and Guinevere about whether she has an alternative to returning to Camelot. There are a few scattered passages that are in the poet's voice, but they primarily describe the way one or the other of them feels. Only at the end do we find another brief passage that is almost narrative; it is less than

one-thirtieth of the entire section:

> At some strange hour
> It ceased, and there was light. And seven days after,
> With a cavalcade of silent men and women,
> The Queen rode into Camelot, where the King was,
> And Lancelot rode grimly at her side.
>
> When he rode home again to Joyous Gard,
> The storm in Gawaine's eyes and the King's word
> Of banishment attended him. "Gawaine
> Will give the King no peace," Lionel said;
> And Lancelot said after him, "Therefore
> The King will have no peace." ---And so it was
> That Lancelot, with many of Arthur's knights
> That were not Arthur's now, sailed out one day
> From Cardiff to Bayonne, where soon Gawaine,
> The King, and the King's army followed them,
> For longer sorrow and for longer war.
> (p. 427, ll. 8-23)

Malory's account of their return relishes the physical spectacle, with their attendants in green velvet, on horses "trapped to their heels," while Launcelot and Guenever wear "white cloth of gold tissue." Malory's Launcelot has hopes of being readmitted to Arthur's fellowship, else he would not have returned the Queen. He makes lavish offers to Gawain in reparation for the fact that he has inadvertently killed Gawaine's brothers. Malory takes five chapters to tell what Launcelot said and how the people reacted to it. He dwells upon the exchanges between Gawaine and Launcelot; the parting of Launcelot and Guenever; and Launcelot's departure with a swollen retinue to France.

In Robinson, as usual, we have virtually no idea what any of these people look like. The mood is uniformly somber, and this is underlined by such words as "silent" and "grimly." There

is little sense of a community of which these people are the leaders. Robinson's lines are concerned essentially with the psychological and emotional climate that the action signifies. And he does manage, especially in the last few lines, to evoke an atmosphere of dread and doom.

Even more revealing, however, are the first lines of section 8, which immediately follow those quoted above:

> For longer war they came, and with a fury
> That only Modred's opportunity,
> Seized in the dark of Britain, could have hushed
> And ended in a night. For Lancelot,
> When he was hurried amazed out of his rest
> Of a gray morning to the scarred gray wall
> Of Benwick, where he slept and fought, and saw
> Not yet the termination of a strife
> That irked him out of utterance, found again
> Before him a still plain without an army.
> (p. 427, ll. 24-31;
> p. 428, ll. 1-2)

In this instance the events that have occured, as it were between the sections are equally vast in seriousness and magnitude. The second war has dragged on; Lancelot has reluctantly battled Gawaine, refusing to kill him, but unwittingly giving him a fatal wound; Modred has usurped the throne and tried to marry Guinevere, who hastened to barricade herself in the Tower; Arthur has been informed of Modred's treason, withdrawn his army from the siege against Lancelot, and set out to reconquer his own kingdom. Robinson alludes only elliptically to these events and quickly concentrates on their effect upon Lancelot.

Finally, let us examine the first lines of section 9, which reveal many of the obvious and radical differences between Robinson and Tennyson. The lines are a brief and excellent statement of the catastrophic end of Arthur's reign.

> So Lancelot, with a world's weight upon him,
> Went heavily to that heaviest of all toil,
> Which of itself tells hard in the beginning
> Of what the end shall be. He found an army
> That would have razed all Britain, and found kings
> For generals; and they all went to Dover,
> Where the white cliffs were ghostlike in the dawn,
> And after dawn were deathlike. For the word
> Of the dead King's last battle chilled the sea
> Before a sail was down; and all who came
> With Lancelot heard soon from little men,
> Who clambered overside with larger news,
> How ill had fared the great. Arthur was dead,
> And Modred with him, each by the other slain;
> And there was no knight left of all who fought
> On Salisbury field save one, Sir Bedivere,
> Of whom the tale was told that he had gone
> Darkly away to some far hermitage,
> To think and die. There were tales told of a ship.
> (p. 435, ll. 22-31;
> p. 436, ll. 1-9)

Before he begins to describe "that last weird battle in the West," Tennyson has dispensed with Lancelot, whose sense of the final catastrophe is evidently uninteresting to him. His last and best idyll, "The Passing of Arthur," elaborates the story of the battle and the state of mind of the dying King Arthur. The last sentence in Robinson's passage baldly, and rather awkwardly, refers to the scene Tennyson describes beautifully and at length: the scene in which Bedivere watches while Arthur is taken upon a "dusky barge" which then disappears over the horizon.

Robinson is characteristically interested, not in what happens, but in what it means to Lancelot, who has "a world's weight upon him." He uses physical detail, not for its own sake, but for what it can convey in emotional and psychological terms. The white cliffs are first "ghostlike," suggesting apprehension; they become "deathlike" in a stroke that tells us the news of the catastrophe. Robinson's sense of irony shows itself as he plays off "little men" against "larger news." The most devastating information, the fact that Arthur and Modred have killed each other, is quietly conveyed in slightly more than one line. The passage is more straightforward and literal than the ones discussed earlier. But by beginning with Lancelot, Robinson in effect ensures that we hear this news with Lancelot's ears; we participate in his weary, unutterably sad sense of the tragedy.

The narrative passages we have just observed are not uniformly great poetry, but they are undoubtedly quite good. The fact that they represent a relatively small proportion of the poem indicates that Robinson is not really comfortable with overt action. His considerable skill at succinct and highly selective narrative summary suggests also that he is most congenial with fact and event at a marked distance. Tennyson is not similarly constricted. His second idyll, "Gareth and Lynette," is a narrative poem, as, indeed, are a number of the others. He tells stories in verse, and they are frequently charming. We may object to the philosophical

burden he puts upon them; but when we can overlook these pretensions, the poems are good enough.

Robinson cannot merely tell a tale, and on the whole he does not try to do so. However, there are times when he comes too close to the actual story that inspired Lancelot. He does not allow himself to preserve the distance he needs between raw fact and what, through the prisms of time and speculation, that fact may come to signify. The material can be, after all, extremely difficult. Tennyson avoids much in it that is inherently brutal, though his own method has its severe pitfalls. Robinson tries to be more faithful to it, but there are places where we must recognize that he handles it poorly. Two parts of Lancelot, by their failure, confirm one's suspicion that he cannot write well of an event unless he is at several removes from it.

The last half of section 4 is Arthur's nearly hysterical speech assuming that Guinevere is, at that moment and by his order, being burned at the stake. It is essentially a monologue, though he is in the presence of Gawaine and Bedivere. A passage selected virtually at random reveals its weaknesses:

> What? Hark! Whose crass insanity is that!
> If I be King, go find the fellow and hang him
> Who beats into the morning on that bell
> Before there is a morning! This is dawn!
> What! Bedivere? Gawaine? You shake your heads
> I tell you this is dawn! . . . What have I done?
> What have I said so lately that I flinch
> To think on! What have I sent those boys to see?
> I'll put clouts on my eyes, and I'll not see it!

> Her face, and hands, and little small white feet,
> And all her shining hair and her warm body--
> No--for the love of God, no!--it's alive!
> She's all alive, and they are burning her--
> The Queen--the love--the love that never was!
> Gawaine! Bedivere! . . .
> (p. 392, ll. 11-25)

I doubt that any good poetry is able to render emotional torment; when Lear is mad, he speaks mainly in prose. Of this passage in Robinson, Yvor Winters trenchantly observes, "one feels that if the King could have done no better, the poet should have done so." (p. 75) From a somewhat less formalistic point of view, we can see that the poet is simply too close to the experience of the brutal event. The content and moral tone of the speech are not offensive, as they are in Arthur's last speech to Guinevere in the _Idylls_. But there is an apparent and extremely unpleasant discrepancy between the possibilities of the form and the demands of the emotional situation. Robinson's measured, urbane, sadly ironic style is most appropriate for sophisticated discourse, analysis, and sympathetic judgment, but not at all for the rendering of hysteria. He does not attempt here to tell the story of Guinevere's being led to the stake, but he does try to describe Arthur's reaction to what he assumes is happening at the moment. He thus attempts to put himself at some remove from the event, but the distance is insufficient. The poetry is so obviously bad that its weaknesses need not be pointed out in detail. Why Robinson did not see this remains a mystery to me. It is only when Guinevere is at Joyous Gard, far

in time and distance from this event, that Robinson can write of it successfully. The Queen says to Lancelot: "Am I, because you saw death touch me once, / Too gross a trifle to be longer prized?" The allusion is so quiet and modest that the real barbarity of the fact has disappeared, and the lines are brilliant.

The other objectionable part of the poem is even longer, as it occupies most of section 5. The messenger Lucan tells Arthur, Gawaine, and Bedivere that Lancelot has rescued Guinevere and, in the process, killed many knights--most significantly Gareth and Gaheris, brothers to Gawaine and friends to Lancelot. Robinson presumably uses the device of the messenger to put some distance between the terrible events and his listeners' sense of them. Some writers may have been able to handle this; Sophocles and Shakespeare come first to mind. But Robinson simply cannot render the immediate impact of dreadful pain. He seems to have mistaken loquaciousness and circumlocution for adequate perspectives on brutality, and the result is almost parody:

> "Sir, will your patience with a clement ear,
> Attend the confirmation of events,
> I will, with all available precision,
> Say what this morning has inaugurated.
> No preface or prolonged exordium
> Need aggravate the narrative, I venture.
> The man of God, requiring of the Queen
> A last assoiling prayer for her salvation,
> Heard what none else did hear save God the Father.
> (p. 394, ll. 17-25)

There are a number of indications that Robinson is doing this deliberately; one example is Arthur's command: "Be still, or publish

with a shorter tongue / The names of our companions who are dead." (p. 396, ll. 10-11) There are, similarly, passages that show he understands the barbarity of the material:

> a hewing down of heroes,
> Not like to any in its harsh, profound,
> Unholy, and uneven execution.
> (p. 395, ll. 11-13)
>
> Not even in the legendary mist
> Of wars that none today may verify,
> Did ever men annihilate their kind
> With a more vicious inhumanity,
> Or a more skilful frenzy.
> (p. 395, ll. 28-32)

Still, he somehow fails to sense the terrible discrepancy between either the loquaciousness or the judicious appraisal of what has happened, and the demands of the situation he has established. Lucan is talking to those whom this news will literally shatter. The device of the messenger by no means puts fact at a distance sufficiently great for Robinson to be able to deal with it. Subsequently Gawaine becomes hysterical, as Arthur does before him, and the poetic results are equally unfortunate.

There are of course several later references to these barbaric events, references made at a time remote enough from the catastrophe itself to permit expression in Robinson's characteristic note. One of them fundamentally resembles Guinevere's lines to Lancelot alluding to her experience at the stake. In thinking of the Queen Lancelot recalls the events of that day "Where blood paid irretrievably the toll / Of her release." (p. 415, ll. 27-8) The immediacy

has vanished, and the context has utterly changed. The poet is finally at a sufficient distance from the brutality of the material so that he can dwell upon its significance for the character in whom he is most interested.

4.

Robinson's Inadequate Ideas

At the risk of some repetition, let us examine further Robinson's curious relation to the two earlier writers we have been discussing. It seems paradoxical that he is closer in spirit and emphasis to Tennyson, while his attitude to Malory is virtually the opposite of Tennyson's: he shows a determined willingness to accept the essentials of _Le Morte D'Arthur_ and a stern refusal to change or omit that which seems harsh and offensive. Yet the diminution in scope that characterizes the _Idylls of the King_ also characterizes Robinson's poems. Neither gives us the sense that we are observing a functioning society, with its peculiar threats, needs, institutions, and rituals. The social problems revealed in the pages of Malory--problems concerning the administration of justice and the tenuous maintenance of social stability--are no more present in Robinson than in Tennyson. The disastrous war between Arthur and Lancelot, with all the events and themes related to it, serves Robinson primarily as a vehicle for rendering his

characters' conscious need to come to terms with the facts of loss and death.

In Malory, Gawaine is a figure who can be described as characteristic of a recognizable period in social and political history; a period in which the transition from clan loyalties to allegiances of a more comprehensive and stable nature has been imperfectly made. In the Idylls he is a type of the worldly dissolute; his minor function is to represent certain varieties of spiritual blindness and sensual corruption. Robinson's figure bears the responsibility he has in Malory for relentlessly pushing Arthur to war on Lancelot, but, like Tennyson, Robinson concentrates on his personal weaknesses. Personal responsibility plays the largest, if not the entire role in Robinson's account of the reasons for the collapse of Camelot. Robinson's reduction is just as great as Tennyson's, and he is equally susceptible to the charge of overemphasizing certain aspects of human life to the exclusion of other perhaps equally important ones. Nonetheless there is an overwhelming reality in Robinson's poems that we cannot find in Tennyson's. It is primarily a reality of the inner life, of spiritual and moral conflict as it is felt by the individual. Perhaps we can say that Robinson is willing to submit himself to the reduction, to explore it, to live with it. Robinson brings to conscious realization several of the most important underlying assumptions in Tennyson and subjects them to deliberate scrutiny and analysis. Although Robinson,

like Tennyson, is preoccupied with individual responsibility, he knows that personal morality cannot sustain the burden of supporting an entire civilization. He knows no more than Tennyson, or most of us, what can sustain one; but, unlike the earlier poet, he does not pretend to know. He seems to have appreciated his own limitations and strengths better than the Tennyson of the Idylls did. He almost certainly knew a good deal less than Tennyson, who Jewett said was "very much of a scholar, but was not at all a pedant."[32] But in the Arthurian poems he clearly understands himself and his subject better than Tennyson does.[33] Tennyson does not seem to realize that if the disaster is inevitable, as the "parabolic drift" of the Idylls makes certain, then the massive moral denunciation Arthur heaps on Guinevere is shockingly irrelevant and out of place. For Robinson, fate has become something like inevitable human weakness, and he sets himself to imagining and rendering the characters' awareness and experience of their lives. His poems become attempts to imagine what it might be like to see the world and themselves as the legendary Arthurian figures could have done. His interest is primarily in understanding, rather than in judging.

Like Tennyson's Idylls, Robinson's Arthurian poems overwhelmingly concern themselves with the relations between men and women; each of the three poems is about a great love. Like Tennyson, Robinson is more concerned with Merlin's romantic compulsions than with his particular qualifications for establishing Arthur in

power. But again, the poems are about love; the love is not a sign of depravity or corruption but is instead a profound experience to be understood. Robinson, very much unlike Tennyson, makes us believe he knows and sympathizes with women, and his women are thoroughly adult. They are unquestionably seen from a man's point of view, but they are not mere projections of his needs or fantasies. Vivian is not so successful a creation as Guinevere; the fact that she is entirely invented may have something to do with her tendency to sound periodically off-key. She is an exotic, and there are incongruous elements in her that suggest someone rather like Cleopatra ("I'm cruel and I'm cold, and I like snakes." (p. 264, l. 33)) A figure of such direct power and overwhelming magnificence is of course quite beyond Robinson's restricted New England sensibility. Nonetheless this objection is a relatively minor one, and the idea "behind her" is brilliant: to create a woman so marvelously attractive that we can believe that the most powerful man in the world would give up everything in order to go to her.

> But soon she turned and found him, now alone,
> And held him while her beauty and her grace
> Made passing trash of empires, and his eyes
> Told hers of what a splendid emptiness
> Her tedious world had been without him in it
> Whose love and service were to be her school,
> Her triumph, and her history.
> (p. 263, ll. 8-14)

In realizing her powerful attraction for Merlin, in rendering the effect she has on him, Robinson is entirely successful.

In another and mutually unfortunate way, Robinson and Tennyson are alike in the inadequacy of the theoretical ideas that find expression in the poems. If we had only these two poets, we should have to question the possibility that serious and defensible ideas are accessible to poetry. This conceptual inadequacy is severely damaging to the _Idylls of the King_, but the comparable aspects in Robinson are not so destructive of the poems because they are not central to their meanings. A responsible editor could have cut the damaging passages in Robinson's poems and thereby improved them considerably; Tennyson's theoretical weaknesses are inextricably expressed in the structure and fabric of his poems. The strength and substance of Robinson's poems lie in the rendering of love, loss, frustration and doubt. These are not philosophical or theoretical issues but, rather, human experiences. Still, we must locate the passages that reveal Robinson's intellectual insufficiencies, if for no other reason than not to be taken in by them and spend a disproportionate amount of time trying to decipher that which will not reward the effort. We can always sympathize with a poet or with any man who tries to go beyond perceptual awareness to find principles and ideas that can make general sense of his experience. Nonetheless, in Robinson's case the effort is more commendable than the achievement. Certain bad stylistic habits of his can often warn us of these dubious, inflated pronouncements which those habits doubtless allowed his intelligence to leave undetected.

Let me demonstrate, beginning with Merlin.

Many of the philosophically and poetically objectionable passages in Merlin depend upon the capitalized abstraction, "Time" and "Fate." A fair and brief example of the characteristic quality of such passages can be found in Merlin's last speech to Vivian:

> I saw too much when I saw Camelot;
> And I saw farther backward into Time,
> And forward, than a man may see and live,
> When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,
> But not so far as this. Fate played with me
> As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,
> Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance.
> On Fate there is no vengeance, even for God.
> (p. 297, ll. 18-25)

This frequent repetition of words, particularly when they are arranged and rearranged in such a way as to claim a clever paradox, is often a clue to Robinson's pretentious passages. The content of the experience to which the passage alludes is hopelessly vague. We not only do not know what Merlin "saw," we do not know why it was "too far" or "too much." Again, the fact in Robinson is seldom important; but here we do not know sufficiently what the fact signifies, and that vagueness is damaging to him. In such passages, we can usually get some general idea of what he is trying to say, but this general idea comes more from what seems to be appropriate in the context than what the lines specifically tell us.

The theme of Time, and the relationship of Broceliande to it, begins in the fourth section, and it is thoroughly confusing. In their first meeting, Merlin says to Vivian, "Whatever I am / I have

not lived in Time until today." (p. 265, ll. 14-15) Later, when their love is apparently at its fullest, Vivian makes the following speech to Merlin:

> You are the wisest man that ever was,
> And I've a prayer to make: May all you say
> To Vivian be a part of what you knew
> Before the curse of her unquiet head
> Was on your shoulder, as you have it now,
> To punish you for knowing beyond knowledge.
> You are the only one who sees enough
> To make me see how far away I am
> From all that I have seen and have not been;
> You are the only thing there is alive
> Between me as I am and as I was
> When Merlin was a dream. You are to listen
> When I say now to you that I'm alone.
> Like you, I saw too much; and unlike you
> I made no kingdom out of what I saw--
> Or none save this one here that you must rule,
> Believing you are ruled. I see too far
> To rule myself. Time's way with you and me
> Is our way, in that we are out of Time
> And out of tune with Time. We have this place,
> And you must hold us in it or we die.
> Look at me now and say if what I say
> Be folly or not; for my unquiet head
> Is no conceit of mine. I had it first
> When I was born; and I shall have it with me
> Till my unquiet soul is on its way
> To be, I hope, where souls are quieter.
> So let the first and last activity
> Of what you say so often is your love
> Be always to remember that our lyres
> Are not strung for Today. On you it falls
> To keep them in accord here with each other.
> For you have wisdom, I have only sight
> For distant things--and you. And you are Merlin.
> Poor wizard! Vivian is your punishment
> For making kings of men who are not kings;
> And you are mine, by the same reasoning,
> For living out of Time and out of tune
> With anything but you.
>
> (p. 280, ll. 16-35;
> p. 281, ll. 1-19)

I quote virtually the whole speech to indicate how ineptly he handles abstractions, how prone he is to circumlocution, how forced is his will to be profound, and how he can play with words to such a degree that he thoroughly sacrifices precision ("You are the only one who sees enough / To make me see how far away I am / From all that I have seen and have not been."). Why, for example, should Vivian want Merlin to talk to her only of things he knew before he knew her? How are we to understand that they are each other's punishment? How is she alone yet totally dependent upon him? (If we understand this in the basic human sense that everyone is finally alone, what is the point of the uniqueness she claims, the peculiarity of their situation?) Does she regret her past, and if so why? Merlin says he had not lived in "Time" until he came to Broceliande, and we can perhaps best understand this as stating that when one submits to the demands of a deep human relationship one inevitably experiences one's human fallibility, knows joys and sorrows that will come to an end. Still, this seems ponderous, and Vivian's statement is the opposite: according to her, they are "living out of Time."

The theme recurs after Merlin has returned from Camelot. When Vivian asks him what is disturbing him, he replies

> Whatever you or I may choose to name it,
> The name of it is Fate, who played with me
> And gave me eyes to read of the unwritten
> More lines than I have read. I see no more
> Today than yesterday, but I remember.
> My ways are not the ways of other men;

> My memories go forward. It was you
> Who said that we were not in tune with Time;
> It was not I who said it."--"But you knew it;
> What matter then who said it."--"It was you
> Who said that Merlin was your punishment
> For being in tune with him and not with Time--
> With Time or with the world; and it was you
> Who said you were alone, even here with Merlin;
> (p. 287, ll. 14-27)

When Merlin, our wise man, says this, it makes no better sense than it did coming from the wilful, whimsical Vivian. And in Merlin's last exchange with Dagonet, the writing becomes even more vague and tenuous:

> All this that was to be
> Might show to man how vain it were to wreck
> The world for self if it were all in vain.
> When I began with Arthur I could see
> In each bewildered man who dots the earth
> A moment with his days a groping thought
> Of an eternal will, strangely endowed
> With merciful illusions whereby self
> Becomes the will itself and each man swells
> In fond accordance with his agency.
> Now Arthur, Modred, Lancelot, and Gawaine
> Are swollen thoughts of this eternal will
> Which have no other way to find the way
> That leads them on to their inheritance
> Than by the time-infuriating flame
> Of a wrecked empire, lighted by the torch
> Of woman, who, together with the light
> That Galahad found, is yet to light the world.
> (p. 307, ll. 4-21)

Robinson is apparently suspicious enough of such awkward ponderousness that he allows Dagonet to play satirically with these "ideas"; but Merlin after all is the greater man, and he later says to Dagonet: "I do not ask / Of you to say that you see what I see,/ Where you see nothing; nor do I require / Of any man more

vision that is his." (p. 309, ll. 29-32) We might detect here some influence from Tennyson, in the allusion to the "torch/ Of woman" that wrecked the empire, though mercifully Robinson claims that it affords some future salvation. But what, after all, is he talking about? A subsequent and almost equally undecipherable passage may suggest the way he tries to inflate material that cannot sustain the inflation:

> I see no more for me to do
> Than to leave her and Arthur and the world
> Behind me, and to pray that all be well
> With Vivian, whose unquiet heart is hungry
> For what is not, and what shall never be
> Without her, in a world that man are making,
> Knowing not how, nor caring yet to know
> How slowly, and how grievously they do it,--
> Though Vivian, in her golden shell of exile,
> Knows and cares, not knowing that she cares,
> Nor caring that she knows. In time to be,
> The likes of her shall have another name
> Than Vivian, and her laugh shall be a fire,
> Not shining only to consume itself
> With what it burns. She knows not yet the name
> Of what she is, for now, there is no name;
> Some day there shall be. Time has many names,
> Unwritten yet, for what we say is old
> Because we are so young that it seems old.
> (p. 310, ll. 34-35;
> p. 311, ll. 1-17)

The passage begins with promise, on the entirely human note that Robinson can do so well; but the quality of the writing degenerates drastically as we see Robinson trying to make the woman Vivian into something of a life-principle, necessary to the world of the future. Tennyson had tried to make a woman into an abstraction: "the incarnation of that impurity of sense which . . . more than

all else breaks up and ruins not only states but also the powers by which States are made and held together."[34] Robinson's attempt is not objectionable on moral grounds, and since for the most part his Vivian is a very real woman there is much to appreciate about his conception of her. But when, as in the passages quoted above, he tries to make her into something other than a woman, his poetic and philosophical pretensions are no more substantial than Tennyson's.

Robinson's dubious use of abstractions and inflated rhetoric needlessly confuses what at his best he renders as a profound human experience. If we subtract "Time," Fate," and their like from Robinson's conception, the sojourn of Merlin and Vivian in Broceliande becomes quite understandable. To neither of them are the recognizable ways of the world worth a lifetime's effort and devotion--Merlin because he is so great as to be able to manipulate them, and Vivian because she is essentially a solitary, an asocial being. In a fine passage near the end Robinson divests himself of pretentions, and we hear again the true note of the poet. Merlin is speaking, and we may incidentally note that he does not bemoan the time, intelligence, or imagination he has wasted in Broceliande:

> But I shall see
> No more the lady Vivian. Let her love
> What man she may, no other love than mine
> Shall be an index of her memories.
> I fear no man who may come after me,

And I see none. I see her, still in green,
Beside the fountain. I shall not go back.
We pay for going back; and all we get
Is one more needless ounce of weary wisdom
To bring away with us.
(p. 311, ll. 22-31)

The major intellectual weakness in Lancelot is Robinson's use of the term, "Light" to stand for spiritual experience. As we observed in the case of Tennyson, there is no longer available to Robinson a firm belief in a religious institution or even in a coherent, stable faith to the authority of which he could refer for details of that spiritual experience. Everything has become highly subjective, and one can never be sure; yet Robinson, like Tennyson, believes that there is something higher than earthly life. He calls Lancelot's experience of it the "Light." To Gawaine Lancelot says,

The way that we have gone so long together
Has underneath our feet, without our will,
Become a twofold faring. Yours, I trust,
May lead you always on, as it has led you,
To praise and to much joy. Mine, I believe,
Leads off to battles that are not yet fought,
And to the Light that once had blinded me.
When I came back from seeing what I saw,
I saw no place for me in Camelot.
There is no place for me save where the Light
May lead me; and to that place I shall go.
(p. 368, ll. 32-34;
p. 369, ll. 1-9)

We shall observe in Robinson's handling of Merlin that he saves himself from Tennyson's vapidness by refusing to try to define Merlin's knowledge and power; he convinces us of those qualities by means of the impression they left on evidently intelligent men. Here too he refuses to try to define Lancelot's spiritual experience,

concentrating on Lancelot's sense of its relevance to the rest of his life. He also saves himself from the suggestion so marked in Tennyson that the experience may have been a manifestation of insanity. There is a fair amount of incidental reference to the "Light," but it is in the last section that it again becomes important. Robinson shows Lancelot going to see Guinevere for the last time before finally pursuing the "Light." He meditates to himself:

> The Light came, and I did not follow it;
> Then she came, knowing not what thing she did,
> And she it was I followed. The gods play
> Like that, sometimes; and when the gods are playing
> Great men are not so great as the great gods
> Had led them once to dream.
> (p. 439, ll. 3-8)

After they have parted, Robinson gives vent to the mysticism that underlay his notion of the Light:

> a Voice within him said:
> "Where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died
> For you, that a world may live. There is no peace."
> (p. 448, ll. 14-16)

> But the Voice within him said: "You are not free.
> You have come to the world's end, and it is best
> You are not free. Where the Light falls, death falls;
> And in the darkness comes the Light." He turned
> Again; and he rode on, under the stars,
> Out of the world, into he knew not what,
> Until a vision chilled him and he saw,
> Now as in Camelot, long ago in the garden,
> The face of Galahad who had seen and died,
> And was alive, now in a mist of gold.
> He rode on into the dark, under the stars,
> And there were no more faces. There was nothing.
> But always in the darkness he rode on,
> Alone; and in the darkness came the Light.
> (p. 449, ll. 10-23)

The passage is not without its power, but it is primarily a rhetorical power insufficiently informed by genuine conviction. It depends upon such Biblical paradoxes as the notion of losing one's life to save it, but what does it mean for the "Voice" to say "a world has died / For you, that a world may live."? It is a curious and indefensible inversion of the idea of Christ's dying that all may have life. Robinson's use of "Light" is weak because it is a kind of shorthand that points to something he cannot describe.

But further, there is a weakening ambiguity about whether he should really have pursued it, and the ambiguity comes probably from an absence of total and positive conviction that there is truly a higher form of experience. The absence of Malory's very solid world here takes its toll. Robinson puts such a strong emphasis on the practical, the essentially negative reasons why their love must be renounced that one tends to credit them as the over-riding considerations. In Lancelot's first encounter with Guinevere he dwells upon the dangers of Modred:

> It is yourself
> That I see now; and if I saw you only,
> I might forego again all other service,
> And leave to Time, who is Love's almoner,
> The benefaction of what years or days
> Remaining might be found unchronicled
> For two that have not always watched or seen
> The sands of gold that flow for golden hours.
> If I saw you alone! But I know now
> That you are never more to be alone.
> (p. 377, ll. 25-34)

To Guinevere at Joyous Gard he says:

> Do you not see that I go from you only
> Because you go from me?--because our path
> Led where at last it had an end in havoc,
> As long we knew it must--as Arthur too,
> And Merlin knew it must?--as God knew it must?
> (p. 420, ll. 30-34)

Guinevere, for personal and quite feminine reasons, questions the reality and validity of his vision, and we are inclined, because of the vaporous references to the experience, to believe that Lancelot may well have been simply weary of the world he knew:

> You told yourself,
> When first that wild light came to make men mad
> Round Arthur's Table--as Gawaine told himself,
> And many another tired man told himself--
> That it was God, not something new, that called you.
> (p. 379, ll. 25-29)

It is of course easy enough, and somewhat defensible, to say about such ambiguities that they are reflections of the personal limitations of the speaker, that they represent a certain stage in his or her "spiritual" or intellectual growth rather than convictions or even inclinations of an omniscient author. Furthermore, Lancelot's vacillations are part of the "given," and Robinson can be understood merely to have made them credible. But finally such explanations are not quite good enough, and perhaps a passage from Malory will sharpen our awareness of the radical change that has occurred. After he has left Guevever at Almesbury Launcelot comes upon an hermitage and a chapel:

> and then he heard a little bell ring to mass, and thither he rode and alit, and tied his horse to the gate, and heard mass. And he that sang mass was the Bishop of Canterbury. Both the Bishop and Sir Bedivere

> knew Sir Launcelot, and they spake together after mass. But when Sir Bedivere had told his tale all whole, Sir Launcelot threw his arms abroad, and said: Alas, who may trust this world. And when he kneeled down on his knee, and prayed the Bishop to shrive him and assoil him. And then he besought the Bishop that he might be his brother. Then the Bishop said: I will gladly; and there he served God day and night with prayers and fastings . . . and then Sir Launcelot took the habit of priesthood of the Bishop, and a twelvemonth he sang mass. And there was none of these other knights but they read in books, and help for to sing mass, and rang bells, and did bodily all manner of service. And so their horses went where they would, for they took no regard of no worldly riches. For when they saw Sir Launcelot, endure such penances, in prayers, and fastings, they took no force what pain they endured, for to see the noblest knight of the world take such abstinence that he waxed full lean.
> (II, pp. 295-6)

Such a passage reveals the tangible modes of worship available to the original protagonists of the Arthurian story. The faith and the institution of the Catholic Church were <u>there</u> for them--prescribed, organized, and wholly respected. There was not even a competing Protestant faith, much less a scepticism about the claims of religious authority in general. These people evidently did not consistently feel the need to submit themselves to the austere demands of the faith; but when they did, there was no question about the manner of doing it.

The contrast makes clear the abstractness and weakness of Robinson's treatment. There is too much vagueness, combined with vacillation and ambiguity, to make us thoroughly convinced of the reality of this spiritual quest to which Lancelot devotes himself in the end. There is not enough substance and clarity to counter our

sense that Robinson is simply getting him off stage; in both the aesthetic and moral senses it is too much like an escape. We could of course go to great length describing the historical situation that left Robinson with a dearth of dogma and ritual of which his use of the "Light" is a reflection.[35] Nineteenth century New England had witnessed the spread of Unitarianism, and its emphasis upon morals, to the neglect of theological dogma, inspired that marvellous quip: "Unitarians believe that there is--at most--one God." It is no surprise to realize that Robinson is clearly a son of his era and his region. The "Light" passages of _Lancelot_ suggest one of their weaknesses.

5.

Traditional Ethical Wisdom vs. Moral Relativism

E.A. Robinson's overwhelming preoccupation with human beings is largely responsible both for his greatness and for his narrowness. He had the habit of mind that sees and depicts everything in terms of its human relevance, and he pays his characters the highest possible compliment of trying to understand them. Robinson is the man who at least started a poem on Modred, a villain _par excellence_; and in the completed Arthurian poems the references to Modred are always informed by an unsentimental sympathy and understanding.

It is in his concern to create believable and sympathetic characters that Robinson is most like a novelist. His debt to Malory in this is profound, because from the man who "reduced" the Arthurian legends into English he takes all the essential character traits of the major figures with whom he deals. While in Malory these traits seem almost incidental to the narrative, in Robinson they are crucially important. His poems are almost meditations, both by the poet and by the characters themselves, on their responsibility for the events of the story and on the moral quality of that responsibility. The tension in Robinson's poems between a commitment to traditional ethical standards and a mode of presentation that is subjective and relativistic creates ambiguities difficult, if not impossible, to resolve. A careful study of Robinson's Arthur can discover to us the complexities of his approach, while an examination of the role _choice_ plays in his poems can illuminate his preoccupation with ethical questions.

In this undeviating emphasis on the individual, Robinson is distinctly a son both of the 19th century and the great, though by his time attenuated, tradition of New England Puritanism. His characters can have the solidity of those in fiction--no minor accomplishment for a poet; and they are likely to inspire the reader to think of fictional counterparts. Vivian, who is the least successful of the major Arthurian characters, is nonetheless strong enough to call to mind Charlotte Stant. Like James's young woman, she

is magnificent, selfish, wilful, gracefully and ruthlessly oblivious to truths that seem too unpleasant to face. She is highly intelligent, no less compassionate than most, and genuinely capable of love. Robinson's characters, then, are seldom mouthpieces and their actions convincingly spring from their natures as Robinson portrays them.

Robinson writes about his characters as neither Malory nor Tennyson had any inclination to do. While Malory is primarily interested in event and movement, Tennyson dwells most fondly upon scene, decoration, physical description. For the most part, Robinson's poems are creations of his own quite distinctive imagination and sensibility, devoted primarily to creating and analyzing character, to understanding experience. Lancelot, for example, can be said to derive almost wholly from the following passages in the Morte. In the first, Malory is telling us what happened after Lancelot returned to Camelot from the Quest of the Sangreal.

> Then, as the book saith, Sir Launcelot began to resort unto Queen Guenever again, and forgat the promise and perfection that he made in the quest. For, as the book saith, had not Sir Launcelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knight passed him in the quest of the Sangreal; but ever his thoughts were privily on the queen, and so they loved together more hotter than they did tofore-hand, and had such privy draughts together, that many in the court spake of it, and in especial Sir Agravaine, Sir Gawaine's brother, for he was ever open-mouthed. So befel that Sir Launcelot had many resorts of ladies and damosels that daily resorted unto him, that besought him to be their champion, and in all such matters of right Sir Launcelot applied him daily to do for the pleasure

> of Our Lord, Jesu Christ. And ever as much as he might he withdrew him from the company and fellowship of Queen Guenever, for to eschew the slander and noise; wherefore the queen waxed wroth with Sir Launcelot. And upon a day she called Sir Launcelot unto her chamber, and said thus: Sir Launcelot, I see and feel daily that thy love beginneth to slake, for thou hast no joy to be in my presence, but ever art out of this court, and quarrels and matters thou hast nowadays for ladies and gentlewomen more than ever thou were wont to have beforehand. Ah madam, said Launcelot, in this ye must hold me excused for divers causes; one is, I was but late in the quest of the Sangreal; and I thank God of His great mercy, and never of my desert, that I saw in that my quest as much as ever saw any sinful man, and so was it told me. And if I had not had my privy thoughts to return to your love again as I do, I had seen as great mysteries as ever saw my son Galahad, outher Percivale, or Sir Bors; and therefore, madam, I was but late in that quest. Wit ye well, madam, it may not be yet lightly forgotten the high service in whom I did my diligent labour. Also, madam, wit ye well that there be many men speak of our love in this court, and have you and me greatly in a wait, as Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred; and madam, wit ye well I dread them more for your sake than for any fear I have of them myself, for I may happen to escape and rid myself in a great need, where ye must abide all that will be said unto you. And then if that ye fall in any distress through wilful folly, then is there none other remedy or help but by me and my blood. And wit ye well, madam, the boldness of you and me will bring us to great shame and slander; and that were me loth to see you dishonoured.
>
> (II, 271-2)

After Launcelot has been discovered in Guenever's room and killed the men who tried to betray them, he says to Guenever:

> Madam, now wit you well all our true love is brought to an end, for now will King Arthur ever be my foe; and therefore, madam, an it like you that I may have you with me, I shall save you from all manner adventures dangerous. That is not best, said the queen; meseemeth now ye have done so much harm, it will be best ye hold you still with this. And if ye see that as tomorn

> they will put me unto the death, then may ye rescue me as ye think best. I will well, said Sir Launcelot, for have no doubt, while I am living I shall rescue you. And then he kissed her, and either gave other a ring; and so there he left the queen, and went until his lodging.
>
> (II, 345)

Launcelot asks his supporters what he should do if Arthur condemns Guenever to the fire, and when they answer that he should rescue her, he replies:

> My fair lords, wit you well I would be loath to do that thing that should dishonour you or my blood, and wit you well I would be loath that my lady, the queen, should die a shameful death; but an it be so that ye will counsel me to rescue her, I must do much harm or I rescue her; and peradventure I shall there destroy some of my best friends, that should much repent me; and peradventure there be some, an they could well bring it about, or disobey my lord King Arthur, they would soon come to me, the which I were loath to hurt.
>
> (II, 352)

There is a considerable amount about the war, which continues because Launcelot refuses to kill either Gawaine or Arthur; and the king is shown to be victimized by Gawaine's hate. In the Morte Gawaine does not see Launcelot before dying but instead writes a letter to him. The following portion of it is the most relevant to Robinson's treatment:

> Unto Sir Launcelot, flower of all noble knights that ever I heard of or saw by my days, I Sir Gawaine, King Lot's son of Orkney, sister's son unto the noble King Arthur, send thee greeting, and let thee have knowledge that the tenth day of May I was smitten upon the old wound that thou gavest me afore the city of Benwick, and through the same wound that thou gavest me, I am come to my death day. And I will

> that all the world wit, that I, Sir Gawaine, knight of the Table Round, sought my death, and not through thy deserving, but it was my own seeking; wherefore I beseech thee, Sir Launcelot, to return again unto this realm and see my tomb, and pray some prayer more or less for my soul . . . . Also Sir Launcelot, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, make no tarrying, but come over the sea in all haste, that thou mayst with thy noble knights rescue that noble king that made thee knight, that is my lord Arthur, for he is full straitly bestad with a false traitor, that is my half-brother, Sir Mordred; and he hath let crown him king, and would have wedded my lady Queen Guenever, and so had he done had she not put herself in the Tower of London.
>
> (II, 382-3)

When Guenever and Launcelot see each other for the last time it is in the presence of a number of "ladies and gentlewomen," and Guenever's words are intended as much for them as for Launcelot. Although part of this scene has already been quoted, I should like to quote it again in order to have the major elements of the story together:

> There, Sir Launcelot, wit thou well I am set in such a plight to get my soul heal . . . . Therefore, Sir Launcelot, I require thee and beseech thee heartily, for all the love that ever was betwixt us, that thou never see me more in the visage; and I command thee, on God's behalf, that thou forsake my company, and to thy kingdom thou turn again, and keep well thy realm from war and wrake; for as well as I have love thee, mine heart will not serve me to see thee, for through thee and me is the flower of kings and knights destroyed . . . [Launcelot says] . . . sithen ye have taken you to perfection, I must needs take me to perfection, of right. For I take record of God, in you I have had my earthly joy; and if I had found you now so disposed, I had cast to have had you into mine own realm . . . . But sithen I find you thus disposed, I ensure you faithfully, I will ever take me to penance, and pray while my life lasteth, if I may find any hermit,

> either gray or white, that will receive me. Wherefore, madam, I pray you kiss me and never no more. Nay, said the queen, that shall I never do, but abstain you from such works; and they departed. But there was never so hard an hearted man but he would have wept to see the dolour that they made; for there was lamentation as they had been stung with spears; and many times they swooned, and the ladies bare the queen to her chamber. And Sir Launcelot awoke, and went and took his horse, and rode all that day and all night in a forest, weeping.
>
> (II, 394-5)

Obviously there are more suggestions that Robinson found in the pages of Malory. There are, especially, passages dealing with Gawaine and with Arthur which describe the occasions that inspire their dilemmas and feelings. But the passages quoted above are those most relevant to Lancelot; they are sufficient to illuminate how differently Robinson used the material.

The first thing to notice about these passages is the bare fraction they represent of _Le Morte D'Arthur_. The love story does not assume special importance until Malory's narrative is three-fourths done. Even then, between the passages quoted there are a substantial number of pages devoted to the events and action that the _Morte_ is about. There is, furthermore, a certain public quality about even the most private conversations. There may be an occasional phrase or sentence that reveals the human being that we know is there, but the rhetoric of high chivalry subordinates the sense of individuality to the sense of style. We can never forget that these are intensely public figures.

These qualifications are extremely important and will allow us to see how different from Malory's are Robinson's interests. Nonetheless, we must also observe that what Robinson takes from Malory he takes seriously. He not only does no violence to his source--he changes it very little indeed. Of course there are a few omissions and shifts in emphasis. Robinson's Lancelot, for example, has never been mad; his Guinevere neither banishes Lancelot from the court because of her jealousy nor later suggests that he marry someone else. Perhaps Robinson's major shift in emphasis is that Lancelot's Grail experience remains more vivid and important to him, so that, although he wavers at the last when he sees Guinevere, we know their parting is consistent with his own deepest convictions. This is important, but it is still little more than a shift in emphasis. The core of Robinson's poem is almost entirely in Malory, and Robinson has set himself to realize it in human terms. Clearly, what I have quoted is no more than a very rich suggestion; but it provides, as it were, the framework and the background for Robinson's poem. Without this hard core of fact, this lucid story line, Robinson is capable of lapsing into a tenuousness and vagueness that can overwhelm his very real virtues.

In his other long poems the characters and the plots are entirely invented, and we consequently have no recourse outside of the poem itself to what it is about. In the Arthurian poems Robinson can be highly allusive, yet we know where to find out what he

is referring to. He does not threaten to bewilder us to the point of exasperation with an essentially subjective and oblique presentation of an action about which we can discover little or nothing. Yvor Winters describes Cavendar's House as "the most nearly perfect example of Robinson's worst vices as a narrator." His description and judgment of it may suggest for us what Robinson avoided in using well-known material:

> The poem is thus a study in conscience; but it is not until we have got to about page 990--not, that is, till we have read about thirty pages and are about seventeen pages from the end--that we know enough about the action to understand the poem as it progresses; and when we have arrived at that point, the portion which we have read is not remembered as a clear sustaining structure, but is remembered as a confused emotional haze from which we have at last managed to disentangle a few simple but necessary facts. The greater part of the poem is devoted to discussing the emotions arising from a very particular situation, but from a situation to which we are given no clues until three-fifths of the discussion is past; to understand the greater part of the poem, we must reread it after we have once read it to the end. A poet has a right to expect us to read his work twice or even many times, but not, I think, for this reason; the poem is defective in structure, for the rhetoric of emotion is unsupported either by narrative or by expository structure and the emotion remains necessarily as indefinite as everything else. When we have mastered the poem, we have no understanding either of Cavendar or of Laramie. We have a man, in the abstract, who has murdered his wife, in the abstract, because he suspected her of infidelity, in the abstract, and who repents. The poem is merely a shell.[36]

Robinson's habit of dealing at length with a character's sense of an event is a great strength in the Arthurian poems because he preserves a minimum but firm narrative structure and because he already has available so familiar a part of the Western literary heritage.

The old story elements must have appealed to Robinson's characteristic sense of the way life presents us with intolerable dilemmas, but they also assumed a previous history of grace, possession, joy, and glory, about which Robinson knew very much less. He comes closer in these Arthurian poems to demonstrating, even if obliquely, that he knows what happiness is--closer to realizing the pathos of loss because we can believe in the fullness of joy that preceded it.[37] The authority and glamor of the tale perhaps save Robinson from the charge of romantic pessimism, of a merely psychological bent to loss. The material provided him with the attributions of guilt and responsibility; he accepts essentially all of them and then writes his poems about his characters' awareness of this culpability.

The critic of Robinson can become tormented while trying to determine how to place him in relation to traditional ethical wisdom. The question is whether or not he is essentially a moral relativist. There are powerful voices in literary criticism that say it is not necessary to ask that question, since Robinson is not a philosopher but a poet. However, our dilemma cannot be so easily evaded by a scornful refusal to consider a man's ethical sense relevant to his poetry, especially when his subjects almost always concern a human being and his relation to others. Unlike the work of, say, Frost or Stevens, Robinson's poems in effect raise the question themselves, but they do not provide us with a clear and unequivocal answer.

Here one finds Robinson's spiritual and literary ancestors again in his New England: the devious Hawthorne, whose great book, The Scarlet Letter, has set its critics at virtually irreconcilable odds: and the late James, renowned and damned for his myriad ambiguities.[38] We can say that there is in Robinson's Arthurian poems a tension between traditional and accepted ethical standards and a subjective, relativistic mode of understanding. But "tension" is such a critical shibboleth that, before resorting to it, we must at least examine in detail the way Robinson proceeds in rendering his characters.

Let me then demonstrate, in the case of Arthur, the ways Robinson characteristically establishes his characters. We have seen how Arthur was handled both by Malory and by Tennyson and Robinson's treatment of him can be studied more briefly than that of his other two major male figures. There are numerous incidental references to Arthur, and though they do not deserve to be quoted they testify to his stature and dignity in his world. In Merlin Robinson first records the evidence of Arthur's guilt through the words of Lamorak, "the man of oak and iron"; the judgment is expressed in tones that are worldly, rather cynical, and somewhat callous:

> The King had eyes; and Lancelot
> Won't ride home to his mother, for she's dead.
> The story is that Merlin warned the King
> Of what's come now to pass; and I believe it
> And Arthur, he being Arthur and a king,

Has made a more pernicious mess than one,
We're told, for being so great and amorous:
It's that unwholesome and inclement cub
Young Modred I'd see first in hell before
I'd hang too high the Queen or Lancelot;
The King, if one may say it, set the pace,
And we've two strapping bastards here to prove it.
Young Borre, he's well enough; but as for Modred,
I squirm as often as I look at him.
And there again did Merlin warn the King,
The story goes abroad; and I believe it.
(p. 243, ll. 8-23)

Bedivere, to whom Lamorak makes this accusation, does not quarrel with its accuracy but believes there is a superior or more realistic way to evaluate the crisis in Camelot. He insists that necessities of state and pity for the king demand that one consider Lancelot the more culpable. And he ends by expressing the utmost sympathy for Arthur in recognition of the terrible price he has paid:

Whatever the stormy faults he may have had,
To look on him today is to forget them;
And if it be too late for sorrow now
To save him--for it was a broken man
I saw this morning, and a broken king--
The God who sets a day for desolation
Will not forsake him in Avilion,
Or whatsoever shadowy land there be
Where peace awaits him on its healing shores.
(p. 244, ll. 18-26)

Robinson apparently is not content with total sympathy and gives Lamorak another chance to express himself on this particular subject:

As for the King, I say the King, no doubt,
Is angry, sorry, and all sorts of things,
For Lancelot, and for his easy Queen,
Whom he took knowing she'd thrown sparks already
On that same piece of tinder, Lancelot,
Who fetched her with him from Leodegran
Because the King--God save poor human reason!--

> Would prove to Merlin, who knew everything
> Worth knowing in those days, that he was wrong.
> (p. 245, ll. 3-11)

Yet Robinson wants us to understand that life is too complicated for such an easy and stern assessment of responsibility. His Lamorak continues by claiming that Arthur's wilfulness is a present danger as well, but Bedivere follows with a convincing claim that Lamorak is imperceptive about the overwhelming power of a man's emotions:

> "Is the King blind--with Modred watching him?
> Does he forget the crown for Lancelot?
> Does he forget that every woman mewing
> Shall some day be a handful of small ashes?"
>
> "You speak as one for whom the god of Love
> Has yet a mighty trap in preparation.
> We know you, Lamorak, said Bedivere:
> "We know you for a short man, Lamorak,--
> In deeds, if not in inches or in words;
> But there are fens and heights and distances
> That your capricious ranging has not yet
> Essayed in this weird region of man's love.
> Forgive me, Lamorak, but your words are words."
> (p. 247, ll. 18-30)

Thus Robinson has typically begun to characterize a man by means of the subjective, inevitably partial, and disparate evaluations of two observers.

Section III presents Arthur, first with Merlin, next with Dagonet, and finally alone. It is the only section in Merlin where we actually see Arthur. It typically begins with a further qualification, this time in the poet's voice, of the attitude Lamorak has expressed in the previous section. He refers to "Sir Lamorak's apathetic

disregard / Of what Fate's knocking made so manifest / And ominous to others near the King." (p. 249, 9-11) I am unable to understand what Robinson means by Lamorak's "apathetic disregard," or what he refers to with "what Fate's knocking." Lamorak is hardly apathetic about the dangers threatening Camelot, and something like "disbelief," rather than "disregard," would seem more appropriate if the line refers to his unwillingness to consider Arthur a ruined man. Whatever it means, however, it has the obvious purpose of undercutting the authority of Lamorak's stern judgment of Arthur's culpability, and Robinson's presentation of Arthur himself displays the poet's characteristic deep compassion for a suffering man. This compassion can be suggested by a single word in the first line: "King Arthur, as he paced a lonely floor," (p. 249) It is of course the king, rather than the floor, that is lonely; and we can incidentally note how Robinson uses physical detail to indicate emotional reality. He subsequently describes Arthur's perception of Merlin in a way that renders both the king's intelligence and his capacity for sympathy. Merlin's face showed

> for the King's remembering eyes,
> A pathos of a lost authority
> Long faded and unconscionably gone;
> And on the King's heart lay a sudden cold.
> (p. 249, 28-31)

Merlin's advice to Arthur is stern advice, addressed to him as King, adjuring him to give up the hope of satisfying his personal needs and desires and instead live only for his role as leader. This

sobering revelation of the terrible demands that are made of Arthur enhances his bid for our sympathy while mitigating the impulse to judgment. There follows a description of his suffering that even further reduces the relevance of blaming him:

> The King, who sat with folded arms, now bowed
> His head and felt, unfought and all aflame
> Like immanent hell-fire, the wretchedness
> That only those who are to lead may feel--
> And only they when they are maimed and worn
> Too sore to covet without shuddering
> The fixed impending eminence where death
> Itself were victory, could they but lead
> Unbitten by the serpents they had fed.
> (p. 250, 23-31)

In his reply to Merlin, which includes a brilliant analysis of Merlin's own choices, he shows that he is totally aware of his own frailties:

> We are alone, and I shall be alone
> As long as Time shall hide a reason here
> For me to stay in this infested world
> Where I have sinned and erred and heeded not
> Your counsel;
> (p. 251, 5-9)

> I am still
> A king,--who thought himself a little less
> Than God; a king who built him palaces
> On sand and mud, and hears them crumbling now,
> And sees them tottering, as he knew they must.
> (p. 251, 25-29)

In Merlin's next long speech of advice to Arthur, advice even sterner than what had preceded it, there occurs a beautiful yet morally ambiguous consolation to Arthur:

> But say not you have lost, or failed in aught
> Your golden horoscope of imperfection

> Has held in starry words that I have read.
> I see no farther now than I saw then,
> For no man shall be given of everything
> Together in one life.
> (p. 252, 14-19)

The fatalism so pronounced in Malory has not been in any sense transformed in Robinson, but it is far more self-conscious in its recognition of inevitable human frailty; Merlin's insight into events is that of a man who deeply understands himself and others, grounding his sense of what is to come on his knowledge of human nature: "For no man shall be given of everything / Together in one life."

The passages that follow give even stronger emphasis to the power of fate, the ironic inevitability of blindness, self-mutilation, and the betrayal of trust. Merlin describes what is coming and speaks of Galahad:

> The son of him you trusted--Lancelot,
> Of all who ever jeopardized a throne
> Sure the most evil-fated, saving one,
> Your son, begotten, though you knew not then
> Your leman was your sister, of Morgause;
> (p. 252, 31-35)

> But Lancelot
> Will have you first; and you need starve no more
> For the Queen's love, the love that never was.
> (p. 253, 14-16)

Arthur's response, while demonstrating his acceptance of his fate, still recognizes that his own actions have compromised his capacity for experience:

> Yet I'll not ask for more. I have enough--
> Until my new knight comes to prove and find
> The promise and the glory of the Grail,

> Though I shall see no Grail. For I have built
> On sand and mud, and I shall see no Grail.
> (p. 253, 30-34)

Robinson then shows us Arthur, suffering and alone, disappointed of company and relief even by Dagonet, whom Arthur nonetheless treats with gentle kindness. We last see Arthur in his torment. Since most of this passage is quoted elsewhere, I shall select only a few poignant lines:

> The King was long awake. No covenant
> With peace was his tonight; and he knew sleep
> As he knew the cold eyes of Guinevere
> That yesterday had stabbed him, having first
> On Lancelot's name struck fire, and left him then
> As now they left him--with a wounded heart,
> A wounded pride, and a sickening pang worse yet
> Of lost possession.
> (p. 256, 29-30; p. 257, 1-6)

> No spoken doom
> That ever chilled the last night of a felon
> Prepared a dragging anguish more profound
> And absolute than Arthur, in these hours,
> Made out of darkness and of Merlin's words;
> No tide that ever crashed on Lyonnesse
> Drove echoes inland that were lonelier
> For widowed ears among the fisher-folk,
> Than for the King were memories tonight
> Of old illusions that were dead forever.
> (p. 257, 26-35)

We can see, then, in Robinson the extraordinary complexity of such a presentation, and the subjectivity by means of which a character is both described and evaluated. The reader of Robinson begins to sense that the impulse to moral judgment is mitigated by strong and compassionate emphases on the texture of experience, especially the experience of suffering.

The last long passage evaluating Arthur's role would at first seem to belie a morally ambiguous emphasis on experience, and its tone is similar to that in Robinson's letters when he tells what he intended the poems to mean. It is the most trenchant, the most "sin-oriented," but at the same time its purpose and disinterestness are most dubious. It comes when Merlin, knowing that he must soon leave Broceliande, tells Vivian the story of a king. Robinson describes his impulse to tell it as desperate and rash: "something in him that was not himself / Compelled an utterance that his tongue obeyed, / As an unwilling child obeys a father/ Who might be richer for obedience / If he had obeyed the child." (p. 288, 25-29) It is clearly the story of Arthur and Camelot:

> There was a king
> Who would have made his reign a monument
> For kings and peoples of the waiting ages
> To reverence and remember, and to this end
> He coveted and won, with no ado
> To make a story of, a neighbor queen
> Who limed him with her smile and had of him,
> In token of their sin, what he found soon
> To be a sort of mongrel son and nephew--
> And a most precious reptile in addition--
> To ornament his court and carry arms,
> And latterly to be the darker half
> Of ruin. Also the king, who made of love
> More than he made of life and death together,
> Forgot the world and his example in it
> For yet another woman--one of many--
> And this one he made Queen; albeit he knew
> That her unsworn allegiance to the knight
> That he had loved the best of all his order
> Must one day bring along the coming end
> Of love and honor and of everything;
> And with a kingdom builded on two pits
> Of living sin,--so founded by the will

Of one wise counsellor who loved the king,
And loved the world and therefore made him king
To be a mirror for it,--the king reigned well
For certain years, awaiting a sure doom;
For certain years he waved across the world
A royal banner with a Dragon on it;
And men of every land fell worshipping
The Dragon as it were the living God,
And not the living sin.
(p. 288, 29-34; p. 289, 1-26)

The parable does not distort Arthur's story, but Merlin is interpreting it in this way for reasons of his own--reasons that remain obscure. Furthermore, the fatalism we noticed before is at work even here. Merlin is "Compelled" to tell the story, and in it he says he consented that the kingdom be founded "on two pits,/ Of living sin." Arthur is never accused of malice or deceit, and the fatalism undercuts the categorical nature of the description. Obviously, an adequate and specific generalization is extremely difficult. Arthur is clearly a guilty man, and we know precisely those acts for which he is considered most culpable. So too is everyone else in Robinson's pages limited, guilty, and suffering. How is it then that Robinson avoids a kind of flaccid relativity? Whence comes the conviction we have that Robinson's is an extremely firm and sensitive moral nature? We might begin to answer such questions by examining the role of choice in Robinson's poems.

Unlike the works of his predecessors in the Arthurian vineyard, they are permeated with the problems of choice and dominated by the vocabulary of the ethical life. Unlike Malory, Robinson shows "a pervasive and consistent concern with issues of moral choice";

unlike Tennyson, he makes us understand that choice is possible, even though extremely difficult. Such claims for Robinson may seem perverse in view of the fact that his poems begin very close in time to the final catastrophe; that is, the range of possible courses of action is no longer wide. By the time we see them, his characters in effect can acquiesce in disaster or willingly accept renunciation; as a matter of fact, they usually do both. Nor can we overlook the role of fatalism in qualifying our sense that the characters have freedom of choice. Lancelot states in fatalistic terms his "decision" to satisfy his love for Guinevere, thereby mocking his loyalty and obligation to Arthur. Guinevere has claimed that she should have died, rather than inspire a war in which so many men have died for her. Lancelot replies,

> They died because Gawaine went mad with hate
> For loss of his two brothers and set the King
> On fire with fear, the two of them believing
> His fear was vengeance when it was in fact
> A royal desperation. They died because
> Your world, my world, and Arthur's world is dying,
> As Merlin said it would. No blame is yours;
> For it was I who led you from the King--
> By flowery ways, that always end somewhere,
> To fire and fright and exile, and release.
> (p. 416, 21-31; p. 417, 1)

Merlin has at least as strong an element of fatefulness. The great wizard is several times described in language suggesting that he is overpowered:

> cherry-boughs
> Above him snowed white petals down upon him,
> And under their slow falling Merlin smiled

> Contentedly, as one who contemplates
> No longer fear, confusion, or regret,
> May smile at ruin or at revelation.
> (p. 261, 8-13)

> Embroidering doom with many levities,
> Till now the fountain's crystal silver, fading,
> Became a splash and a mere chilliness,
> They mocked their fate with easy pleasantries
> That were too false and small to be forgotten,
> And with ingenious insincerities
> That had no repetition or revival.
> (p. 265, 18-24)

Yet despite the strong element of determinism, his characters' speculations on events and their own role in them, along with their meditations on alternatives are the very stuff of the poems. They think about what they have done and should do; they talk about it, agonize together and alone about it. And even if neither they nor we can ever unambiguously believe they could have acted in a significantly different way, still the questions of choice and responsibility remain of the utmost importance. In making such issues the very matter of the poems, Robinson brings into explicit consideration what had been on the whole implicit in Malory. Malory's characters show contemplation and self-awareness only fitfully and suggestively. Robinson's characters are essentially speculative and self-conscious, determined to understand and interpret the actions that involve them.

The poems are about inevitable human conflict, almost always between those whose earliest relationship has been either close friendship or love. More than two people are always involved, and

Robinson is at his most powerful when he renders his characters' awareness of the conflict, and of the loss they face. Robinson's Lancelot is not radically different from Tennyson's, in that neither has the active, aggressive orientation of his prototype in Malory. Yet we do not think of Robinson's Lancelot as essentially passive or hopelessly debilitated by conflicting loyalties. This fact is doubtless explained by Robinson's concern with rendering Lancelot's awareness of his dilemma, with presenting his own understanding and analysis of the conflict within him, and between him and others. There is a vigor and richness in his emotional life that serve as counterweights to our disbelief in him as an active man. In Robinson's poems the activity of the Arthurian world has become an inner reality.

Furthermore, Robinson derives from Malory a lucid chain of cause and effect that also counterbalances any ruinous sense of moral confusion. Arthur, at the end of section V in Lancelot, understands the human factors that will shape the future:

> With Modred here,
> And Agravaine with Gareth, who is dead
> With Gaheris, Gawaine will have no peace.
> Gawaine or Modred--Gawaine with his hate,
> Or Modred with his anger for his birth,
> And the black malady of his ambition--
> Will make of my Round Table, where was drawn
> The circle of a world, a thing of wreck
> And yesterday--a furniture forgotten;
> And I, who loved the world as Merlin did,
> May lose it as he lost it, for a love
> That was not peace, and therefore was not love.
> (p. 4-1, 1-12)

Robinson's poems, then, are based on his imagining how the characters might understand and cope with their own responsibility. And there are issues remaining, alternatives never to be wholly discounted.

Let us briefly note in Lancelot the questions that the characters still feel to be alive and valid at the time they are discussed. In section I, the protagonists elliptically discuss whether or not Lancelot must leave Arthur's kingdom; what in the past or present makes his departure seem advisable; and what he might anticipate in the future. In section II, Lancelot and Guinevere disagree on why he is planning to leave: has he greater understanding and a more exalted goal, or has he wearied of Camelot and the queen, yearning for something new? Section III describes his pained awareness of the two pulls upon him, represented by Galahad and Guinevere, concluding with his realization that he cannot wrench himself from the known and loved.

Sections IV and V are less yielding to this kind of inquiry, and this may well be one of the reasons they are markedly inferior to the rest of the poem; perhaps Robinson needs a scene in which the speakers are subtly at odds concerning the problem they discuss.[39] In section IV, the protagonists wonder, after the event, whether the disaster could have been avoided, and whether Arthur could have evaded the law, refusing to condemn Guinevere to the fire. Section V depends less upon recognizing alternative

possibilities for acting than upon the discrepancy between the various degrees of knowledge among the protagonists, and between fearful anticipation and horrified revelation.

Section VI represents Robinson's dramatization, through individuals, of Lancelot's moral dilemma when Joyous Gard is under siege. The two people closest to him, his kinsman and the woman he loves, challenge him to kill Gawaine and Arthur in order to end the war. As Bors puts the case:

> Why carve a compost of a multitude,
> When only two, discriminately despatched,
> Would sum the end of what you know is ending
> And leave to you the scorch of no more blood
> Upon your blistered soul?
> (p. 403, 5-9)

Guinevere makes an essentially feminine and highly personal appeal:

> Is Arthur, at whose word I was dragged out
> To wear for you the fiery crown itself
> Of human torture, more to you than I am?
> Am I, because you saw death touch me once,
> Too gross a trifle to be longer prized?
> (p. 406, 10-14)

Robinson structures section VII on his lovers' different attitudes to the crucial question: do their public responsibilities and other private obligations now require them to renounce each other? Must Guinevere go back to Camelot? Let us recall that in Malory there is never a question that Guenever should or would return when her physical safety is guaranteed. The closest Malory comes to suggesting the possibility that she might have remained with Launcelot occurs after Launcelot has taken her back and been banished from

Arthur's kingdom. He says to his followers:

> My fair fellows, said Sir Launcelot, I must depart out of this most noble realm, and now I shall depart it grieveth me sore, for I shall depart with no worship, for a flemyd man departed never out of a realm with no worship . . . and else, my fair lords, be ye sure, an I had not dread shame, my lady, Queen Guenever, and I should never have departed.
>
> (II, 369)

When discussing Malory I noted his great and legitimate concern with fame and honor. In the passage just quoted Launcelot admits their value for him and in effect says that Guenever is less important. Furthermore, we must observe that this confession comes after the possibility for keeping her has passed. The extraordinary power of section VII in Robinson's poem largely derives from the complexity of their dilemma brought forth by Robinson into conscious realization; he fully renders the terrible burden of awareness and of loss, the conflict between reason and necessity on the one hand, and desire and human need on the other. Although they differ, they are deeply involved with each other's sensibilities and judgments. They cannot claim to be guided positively by any absolute certainties but rather must proceed by understanding the costs of action, the burden of the past. Lancelot knows what they cannot do and why. He argues that Guinevere cannot escape to France because she is the "Queen of the Christian world" and cannot have anonymity even if she were wilfully to choose it. He knows further that she could not long survive, isolated and abstracted from

the world which nourished and defined her; that is, she could not become a non-social creature:

> You are a Queen,
> And you may be no other. You are too brave
> And kind and fair for men to cheer with lies.
> We cannot make one world of two, nor may we
> Count one life more than one. Could we go back
> To the old garden, we should not stay long;
> The fruit that we should find would all be fallen,
> And have the taste of earth.
> (p. 425, 30-34; p. 426, 1-3)

Robinson brings Malory's hints to full development in Lancelot's conscious awareness. His Lancelot knows that his experience of the "Light" and the war brought on by their love have made it impossible to find again the joy they have known. But he must convince Guinevere and remain convinced himself, while condemning this woman he loves to a lonely fate that terrifies her. Robinson's Guinevere, unlike either Malory's or Tennyson's, has tried to persuade Leodegran, her father, not to marry her to Arthur:

> I wronged him, but he bought me with a name
> Too large for my king-father to relinquish--
> Though I prayed him, and I prayed God aloud,
> To spare that crown.
> (p. 424, 4-7)

She is also the only Guinevere who lives with the horror of having been rescued at the last moment from a gruesome death:

> Go home, you say?
> Home?--where I saw the black post waiting for me
> That morning?--saw those good men die for me--
> Gareth and Gaheris, Lamorak's brother Tor,
> And all the rest?
> (p. 422, 26-30)

If we find it hard to believe that these are the people who have lived out this hard, sometimes barbaric tale, nonetheless we must realize that in the other versions we often find it hard to believe that the characters are so much as human beings.

Section VIII deals less with choice than a recognition that past choices have led to disaster. It works with a constant awareness that a deep and fatal antagonism has been, even if at death's door, overcome. To be sure, Lancelot knows that Gawaine might entrap him and chooses to gamble yet again with his life. The final encounter between the two is original in Robinson and allows him to exploit characteristically the discrepancy between an apparently calm exchange, and the inner torments that have little superficial manifestation.

Section IX depends, finally, upon the ultimate choice between life as it has been understood and lived, and an unknown life pointed toward by an inscrutable spiritual experience. It is a choice between a person--<u>the</u> person--and a life that denies the self for the sake of a higher truth. This final section can be overwhelmingly powerful, and the reader is never absolutely sure which of the lovers has been the stronger in making his renunciation.

Thus Robinson takes Malory's "facts" in the spirit of something very like Malory's tolerance and expresses them through his own distinctive concentration on the individual sensibility. The choices he illuminates are never simply between good and evil, or

right and wrong. They inevitably have to do with deep conflicts in loyalty to other human beings.

Robinson is preoccupied with the individual sensibility, but he is utterly remote from the almost enviably naive belief that "I am the master of my fate./ I am the captain of my soul." The glorification we observed in Tennyson of the powers of the individual has vanished, even though in Robinson we find just as little evidence that the poet is writing of a solid, functioning society with particular institutions and an historically explicable structure. In Robinson's world the individual is inevitably and profoundly affected by other individuals, and they mutually shape and determine each other's worlds. Robinson apparently considers this interdependence both necessary and, on the whole, good; his Merlin claims, "The man who goes alone too far goes mad--/ In one way or another." (p. 254, 5-6) There is both pathos and poignance in these relationships as Robinson creates them; his characters have great needs, but they are seldom able to find in each other something approaching complete satisfaction. His famous lovers have known this completeness, but we are made aware of it for the most part obliquely. The "I-Thou" lurks in the background, most often as a lost reality. We sense in all the dialogues the tension, conflict, and frustration that reveal their anguished realization of eternal separateness.

In Tennyson human relationships tend to be crudely, even

schematically handled, probably because they are manipulated in the interests of preconceived ideas. Robinson, however, renders them in suggestive detail. He can develop extraordinarily complex relationships at least partly because he can assume and refer allusively to traditionally understood events and friendships; he does not have to establish them entirely from his own resources. But the old tales reflected a particular social structure that allowed, mitigated, shaped these personal relationships. Robinson is unconcerned with broad social realities and their power over individuals; he wants to interpret these legendary figures in such a way that they will become thoroughly human and highly personal. In Malory, when Gawaine spurs Arthur to war with Launcelot, the stress is on the disintegration of a tenuous social structure by the reversion to a more primitive mode of securing "justice." Gawaine in Malory is a social-political type. Robinson interprets him psychologically; the stress is on those personal weaknesses or habits that may be channeled to disastrous ends. Guinevere refers to his power over her and Lancelot: "He knows and laughs / And we are at the mercy of a man / Who, if the stars went out, would only laugh." (p. 372, 5-7); and Lancelot, speaking of Gawaine's "gay complacency," says they need not fear him "Till I have crossed him in some enterprise / Unlikely and unborn." (p. 372, 27-28). And much later Arthur's interpretation of the future stresses the entirely personal: "Gawaine with his hate, / Or Modred with his anger for his birth, / And the

black malady of his ambition . . ." (p. 401, 4-6) This represents both a reduction in scope and a gain in intensity. Unlike their prototypes in Malory, Robinson's characters are not preoccupied by the need to maintain a social facade. In the Morte, the most admirable people lie, and the fact that they are lying is often obvious. In Robinson everyone is speaking his own kind of truth, and we consequently understand this truth to have become subjective, complex, relative, and vulnerable. Robinson, as opposed to Malory, is concerned more with integrity than with honor. Let me again quote Irving Howe:

> Honor points to what one is in the world, integrity to what one is in oneself. Honor involves a public relation to others, a standard of pride and dignity, a level of status and reputation; integrity, an ease of being and security of conscience. Honor requires an act of the will, integrity is a condition that cannot be summoned. Honor depends upon an assertion of one's worth, integrity upon a readiness to face the full burden of one's existence.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that "integrity" is essentially the goal of these people, because we cannot claim for them "an ease of being and security of conscience." They are too tormented in their self-consciousness to be at ease--too aware of the injuries they have given others, even if without malice, to have security of conscience. The major characters are never static; in each poem the major figure changes, if not from what he is at the beginning of the poem, at least from what we understand him to have been at some earlier date.[40] He, and the other characters

as well, must come to terms with these changes, and perhaps we can call this the process of attaining integrity. Unlike those who have spiritual grace as, in effect, a birthright, for these people it is won at very great cost.

In Robinson, even the fool Dagonet and the dilettante Gawaine have considerable self-knowledge; it is no longer enough to fill a traditional role: the person must know that he is filling it. The major figures are even more self-conscious. Merlin, for example, "knew himself immune / To no least whispered little wish of hers / That might afflict his ear with extasy." (p. 258, 16-18) And Vivian, in Merlin's absence, might have entertained "a few brave fears, / And a few more, she knew, that were not brave, / Or long to be disowned, or manageable." (p. 258, 31-33) These are of course only psychological notations, but Robinson develops his poems from an imaginative understanding of how each of these people might have reacted, what they might have experienced, in the face of the important events of the story. After Merlin has returned from Camelot, Robinson begins to describe the change that becomes a part of his experience:

> Although he wandered rather more than ever
> Since he had come again to Brittany
> From Camelot, Merlin found eternally
> Before him a new loneliness that made
> Of garden, park, and woodland, all alike,
> A desolation and a changelessness
> Defying reason, without Vivian
> Beside him, like a child with a black head,
> Or moving on before him, or somewhere
> So near him that, although he saw it not
> With eyes, he felt the picture of her beauty

And shivered at the nearness of her being.
Without her now there was no past or future,
And a vague, soul-consuming premonition
He found the only tenant of the present;
(p. 285, 13-27)

The fulness of their love, when a disagreement would be merely playful, is over; their emotional strength and wholeness are no longer invulnerable. And Merlin begins to apprehend the change, although he cannot yet candidly admit it to himself. The passage I quoted suggests that he must have Vivian, as some kind of sensation and constant distraction, to keep him from admitting wholly his judgment of himself: that he has thrown away his greatest gift, that he has become a mere portion of himself. Furthermore, he senses that to do so, to admit this, will destroy the love, which he therefore cherishes more desperately than ever.

Robinson furthermore complicates his portrait by seeing Merlin not only with Vivian's eyes, but with Vivian's feelings:

In Vivian's eye,
There was a quiet kindness, and at times
A smoky flash of incredulity
That faded into pain. Was this the Merlin--
This incarnation of idolatry
And all but supplicating deference--
This bowed and reverential contradiction
Of all her dreams and her realities--
Was this the Merlin who for years and years
Before she found him had so made her love him
That kings and princes, thrones and diadems,
And honorable men who drowned themselves
For love, were less to her than melon-shells?
Was this the Merlin whom her fate had sent
One spring day to come ringing at her gate,
Bewildering her love with happy terror
That later was to be all happiness?

Was this the Merlin who had made the world
Half over, and then left it with a laugh
To be the youngest, oldest, weirdest, gayest,
And wisest, and sometimes the foolishest
Of all the men of her consideration?
(p. 296, 11-32)

We come to realize in such quotes that Robinson is portraying a relationship, and not simply two people in juxtaposition. The experience of love is central to these poems, and the notion of "unrequited love" is evidently meaningless to this poet. The extraordinary complexity of emotional experience is even better rendered in Lancelot, and we can get some sense of it even in the only section where we see Lancelot alone. In three brief lines Robinson manages to suggest that Lancelot is unsure of the authority of whatever spiritual experience he has had, and that he realizes his going will prove the destruction of the woman he loves:

What am I?
What have I seen that I must leave behind
So much of heaven and earth to burn itself
Away in white and gold.
(p. 383, 9-12)

for I am he
That shall have hastened it and hurried on
To dissolution all that wonderment--
That envy of all women who have said
She was a child of ice and ivory;
And of all men save one. And who is he?
Who is this Lancelot that has betrayed
His King, and served him with a cankered honor:
Who is this Lancelot that sees the Light
And waits now in the shadow for the dark?
Who is this King, this Arthur, who believes
That what he has been, and is, will be for ever,--
Who has no eye for what he will not see,

> And will see nothing but what's passing here
> In Camelot, which is passing?
> (p. 383, 15-29)

Robinson is thus concerned to reveal both Lancelot's characteristic fault and his awareness of it. In the Morte a hermit tells Gawaine of Lancelot:

> for he nys not stable, but by his thought he is likely to turn again, he should be next to achieve it [the Grail] save Galahad, his son. But God knoweth his thought and his unstableness, and yet shall he die right an holy man, and no doubt he hath no fellow of no earthly sinful man.
> (II, 219)

By the time we get to Robinson, the commands and judgments of the hermits have become totally internalized; it is through the characters' self-consciousness and their relations with others that we understand their natures. In Malory the narrative makes us recurrently aware of the vulnerability of even the noblest in Arthur's kingdom; in Robinson we discover this by means of their own awareness of vulnerability. Robinson's approach is the far more intense one. In Lancelot the first scene introduces the two friends whose violent separation will ensure the destruction of Arthur's world, and each of them is aware of the distance that has developed between them. In Merlin we first hear troubled speculations about the untoward return of the man who founded Arthur's kingdom and whose reappearance forebodes its end.

Robinson portrays his characters' fatal and necessary dependence upon others in a mode that is essentially ironic; he reveals

that they know they cannot live fully in accordance with either their reason or their desire. And his poems exploit that discrepancy. Robinson's perception of the power of wilfulness, of the triumph of passion and need over reason, is fundamental to him; it is basic to his sense of tragedy and can perhaps be understood as a counterweight in an emotional sense to renunciation. He makes us understand the intolerable strain that human affection puts on judgment. Lancelot's love and pity for Guinevere exert the most powerful influence over him, despite his knowledge of wrong and danger; and it is only at the most devastating personal cost that reason finally triumphs. Robinson's poems depend upon his characters' awareness of tragic tensions, of each others' dilemmas and suffering. It is this terrible burden of awareness that is the informing experience for Robinson's poems: the experience upon which they depend, from which they spring, to which they refer, and which they illuminate. It is a highly charged experience, primarily emotional and ethical. And it is from this kind of experience that Robinson views traditional ethical understanding. He cannot justify the latter theoretically, but he can render its power when it has been violated by sensitive and intelligent people. He cannot make a forthright confession of faith in the commandments, to exhort to virtue in big words, as Tennyson does; but he understands, in a deeper way, all there is to understand about the Erinyes. In this he resembles Thomas Hardy, of whom Katherine

Ann Porter writes: "he did not need the Greeks to teach him that the Furies do arrive punctually, and that neither act, nor will, nor intention will serve to deflect a man's destiny from him, once he has taken the step which decides it."[41]

6.

The Subjective Presentation of Character

In Malory, Tennyson, and Robinson, the figure of Merlin is extremely important because he represents the highest level of intelligence and power. The way an author imagines him may reveal his sense of human duty and possibility, and the way he tries to convince us of his stature may tell us a great deal about how he feels we learn, about how he thinks we are compelled to believe.

In Malory we see Merlin in action--conniving, advising, and arranging for the kingdom. From his _performance_ we imply his stature; we are not told in descriptive, evaluative terms what kind of man he is. In Tennyson the procedure has been reversed. We are told that Merlin is "the most famous man of all those times," but Tennyson is unable to imagine an action that gives credence to that description. Nor can he convince us that he knows _how_ great intelligence is most properly and powerfully exercised. Again Robinson is closer to Tennyson than to Malory, but his method

does not reveal the weakness or vagueness of his notion about how wisdom should be used. Robinson thoroughly convinces us of Merlin's power and supreme intelligence, and we must briefly examine how he does it.

We are not surprised to discover that his first device is essentially subjective. He depends upon the sophisticated conversation of obviously intelligent men to suggest elliptically Merlin's importance to the world of Camelot. The fact that these evidently impressive men are so preoccupied about Merlin initially establishes his claim to our respect. There is some usefulness in imagining these men to be Robinson's equivalent of the Greek chorus. If we think of them in such a way we must conclude that common sense, or communal wisdom, is no longer seen as unitary, coherent, and accessible. They are necessarily limited and partisan. We may incidentally note an aesthetic problem that frequently occurs in works that seem predicated on such a view of the world: the knights' lengthy speculations can become as tedious as Strether's many disquisitions to James's "ficelle," Maria Gostrey.

The poem first presents Gawaine overlooking the city from the vantage point of Merlin's rock, consumed with foreboding about what Merlin's return might mean. He

> had thought himself alone,
> Had there been in him thought of anything
> Save what was murmured now in Camelot
> Of Merlin's hushed and all but unconfirmed
> Appearance out of Brittany.
> (p. 235, ll. 14-18)

All of section I is devoted to his guarded speculation with Dagonet about Merlin, his "gay grave" in Brittany, and his purpose in returning to Camelot. Section II similarly represents a conversation, this time between Lamorak, Bedivere, and Kay which they begin by drinking in tribute to Merlin. While arguing about who is more greatly to blame for the catastrophe that hangs over Camelot, Lamorak suggests a reason for Arthur's having taken Guinevere as a bride; it implies a firm tribute to Merlin. According to Lamorak, Arthur wanted Guinevere

> Because the King--God save poor human reason!--
> Would prove to Merlin, who knew everything
> Worth knowing in those days, that he was wrong.
> (p. 245, ll. 9-11)

What Merlin knew is here, if anything, vaguer than it was in Tennyson, but Robinson makes no attempt to define it. He typically assumes that it finds ultimate expression in a human relationship: here it is an insight into human behavior that prompts Arthur to doomed defiance. In subsequent lines, Kay suggests Merlin's power by claiming how much other people need him; he says

> That Merlin has come out of Brittany--
> Out of his grave, as he would say it for us--
> Because the King has now a desperation
> More strong upon him than a woman's net
> Was over Merlin--for now Merlin's here,
> And two of us who knew him know how well
> His wisdom, if he have it any longer,
> Will by this hour have sounded and appraised
> The grief and wrath and anguish of the King,
> Requiring mercy and inspiring fear
> Lest he forego the vigil now most urgent,
> And leave unwatched a cranny where some worm

Or serpent may come in to speculate.
(p. 246, ll. 9-21)

The passage suggests a further complexity in Robinson's conception of Merlin. His commanding wisdom was primarily exercised in the past, and one of the questions that provides much of the substance of the poem is whether or not he still possesses it. For the moment, we are only interested in examining how Robinson makes us believe that Merlin has been supremely powerful. We are given little specific information about what Merlin ever did; but we believe that he did it--whatever it is--because these people testify to it. Even "testify," in this context, is too forthright; that Merlin had supreme intelligence and power is an assumption upon which they proceed, and we are given to understand that they assume it because they have experienced it, seen it at work. Kay's lines further suggest Merlin's capacity to view himself with disinterestedness ("Out of his grave, as he would say it for us"), his capacity to respond to human needs, and his firm perspective on priorities between the public and private spheres. We must observe that the emphasis still is heavily subjective and dependent upon human relationships. Whereas in Malory we would have been told in detail the strategy Merlin devised to help Arthur, here we are only obliquely told that there is a need for strategy--a need that demands considerable personal sacrifice.

The first part of section III describes Arthur's confrontation with Merlin, and we realize that Robinson, almost as a matter of

decorum, has led up to the tribute of the most important man in Camelot. There are brief passages, quoted elsewhere, that describe Merlin as a diminished man, but they are followed by a jealous admission on Arthur's part that stands as a backhanded compliment to Merlin:

> This Merlin is not mine,
> But Vivian's. My crown is less than hers,
> And I am less than woman to this man.
> (p. 250, ll. 3-5)

The power, dignity and perspective revealed in Merlin's subsequent speech to Arthur establish his stature in its own right.

> For you are King,
> And if you starve yourself, you starve the state;
> And then by sundry looks and silences
> Of those you loved, and by the lax regard
> Of those you knew for fawning enemies,
> You may learn soon that you are King no more,
> But a slack, blasted, and sad-fronted man,
> Made sadder with a crown.
> (p. 250, ll. 13-20)

Robinson's Merlin shows no fear of being "stained" or "soiled," no horror of being corrupted by experience. In fact, Merlin suggests to Arthur that he may have to evaluate his position by means of a certain kind of experience; that is, he will learn to understand himself through other people's responses to him.

Again Arthur pays a tribute to Merlin that partially mitigates the earlier allusions to his diminished power:

> Merlin, you say the truth:
> There is no man who could say more to me
> Today, or say so much to me, and live.
> But you are Merlin still, or part of him;

I did you wrong when I thought otherwise,
And I am sorry now. Say what you will.
(p. 250, ll. 32-3;
p. 251, ll. 1-4)

The remainder of their talk is simply more of the same; it provides further evidence of Merlin's own intelligence and Arthur's dependence, past and present, upon him: "You are the man who made me to be King--/ Therefore, say anything." (p. 251, ll. 30-1) The intelligence is characterized by an ironic awareness, similar to what we find in Malory, of the limits of will and good intentions; an understanding of the personal costs of public achievement; and a fateful knowledge of the future apparently derived from a profound insight into human nature.

For it is Modred now, not Lancelot,
Whose native hate plans your annihilation--
Though he may smile till he be sick, and swear
Allegiance to an unforgiven father
Until at last he shake an empty tongue
Talked out with too much lying--though his lies
Will have a truth to steer them.
(p. 253, ll. 1-7)

Section IV begins with another oblique testament to Merlin's command over others. It describes the jealousy Arthur and Vivian feel for one another, each fearing that the other is more important to Merlin. There are charming lines that express Vivian's sense of Merlin's stature and make some reference to the "facts" in the legend:

She had not even asked him not to go;
She might as well, she thought, have bid the wind
Throw no more clouds across a lonely sky
Between her and the moon,--so great he seemed

In his oppressed solemnity, and she,
In her excess of wrong imagining,
So trivial in an hour, and, after all
A creature of a smaller consequence
Than kings to Merlin, who made kings and kingdoms
And had them as a father;
(p. 259, ll. 7-16)

Subsequent passages reveal Merlin's self-knowledge, as well as his understanding of others and of circumstances, and they convince us that he was "the master of the world." By the time we arrive at the following lines, his grandeur has been fully established:

cherry-boughs
Above him snowed white petals down upon him,
And under their slow falling Merlin smiled
Contentedly, as one who contemplates
No longer fear, confusion, or regret,
May smile at ruin or at revelation.
(p. 261, ll. 8-13)

Such a passage suggests Olympian understanding and acceptance. It stands as one answer--the negative one--to a question the poem relentlessly asks: has Merlin, in abandoning Camelot, abandoned his responsibility and demeaned himself? This question, like other important ones, is never unambiguously answered; perhaps it cannot be. I earlier discussed the role of choice in Robinson's poems, suggesting that the emphasis on awareness and experience subsumes the necessity for moral judgment. Merlin's story can be as usefully examined as Lancelot's or Arthur's for seemingly limitless and irreconcilable attitudes to the ethical dilemmas the story reveals. But such speculations are the stuff of the poems, and we may realize more about Robinson's emphases if we pay brief attention to

their conclusions.

Unlike Tennyson or Malory, Robinson is not interested even in making a footnote of his protagonists' deaths. Such an omission suggests how little he is interested in the story for its own sake. He emphasizes hard-won understanding brought to bear so strongly upon conduct that it results in renunciation, but the anguish of the renunciation is brilliantly captured.

> But I shall see
> No more the lady Vivian. Let her love
> What man she may, no other love than mine
> Shall be an index of her memories.
> I fear no man who may come after me,
> And I see none. I see her, still in green,
> Beside the fountain. I shall not go back.
> We pay for going back; and all we get
> Is one more needless ounce of weary wisdom
> To bring away with us.
> (p. 311, ll. 22-31)

It may seem disingenuous to claim that death does not conclude these poems. In Merlin it is unquestionably imminent. For Lancelot an undefined spiritual quest is to follow his rejecting all the known and loved, while Guinevere appears an essentially unreligious novice:

> When the bell rings, it rings for you to go,
> But not for me to go. It rings for me
> To stay--and pray. I, who have not prayed much,
> May as well pray now. I have not what you have
> To make me see, though I shall have, sometime,
> A new light of my own. I saw in the Tower,
> When all was darkest and I may have dreamed,
> A light that gave to men the eyes of Time
> To read themselves in silence. Then it faded,
> And the men faded. I was there alone.
> I shall not have what you have, or much else--
> In this place. I shall see in other places

> What is not here. I shall not be alone.
> And I shall tell myself that you are seeing
> All that I cannot see. For the time now,
> What most I see is that I had no choice,
> And that you came to me.
> (p. 445, ll. 15-31)

We are not convinced that there is really anything in the future for them; there seems to be too much wishful thinking at work. Yet Robinson's heaviest emphasis falls upon their understanding of the past, rather than their illusions about the future. It is not the _fact_ of the story that Robinson reveals to be important but rather the person's recognition of the fact and willed acceptance of it. In writing of Henry James, Yvor Winters describes his particular goal as a writer in terms that are quite relevant to these poems of Robinson's. Mr. Winters has been discussing the elements that restrict Isabel Archer's total freedom in the conduct of her life. These include the facts that she is human; that she has a certain temperamental bent of which she is insufficiently aware; and that she has had particular experiences "which result in certain forms of knowledge and certain forms of ignorance, and which may consequently lead her to judge a situation on the basis of imperfect knowledge."

> Elements of this sort are what we call the given facts of the plot: they are the ineliminable facts of character and of initial situation. We have a certain group of particularized individuals in juxtaposition; the particularity is destiny, the juxtaposition chance. But the understanding and the will may rise in some measure superior to destiny and to chance, and when they do so, we have human victory; or they may make the effort and fail, in which case we have tragedy; or

> the failure having occurred, there may be a comprehension of the failure and a willed adjustment to it, in which case we have the combination of tragedy and victory. It is this combination, the representation of which Henry James especially strives to achieve.[42]

Guinevere's renunciation, like Merlin's and to some extent Lancelot's, is inspired by her determined realization of the inevitable limits of her life. Theirs will seem to many a grey triumph, but it is a triumph nevertheless. And it is essentially on this note that Robinson ends his poems.

7.

The Aesthetic Qualities of Merlin and Lancelot

Finally we must examine several passages from Merlin and Lancelot to discover their essentially "poetic" characteristics, to see how Robinson typically uses metaphor, and to isolate the aesthetic weaknesses of the poems. It would be both unjust and inaccurate to accuse Robinson of having only one "manner," but the similarities among his good passages are more marked than the differences. They tend to be restrained, if not somber; imbued with pathos; inspired by humaneness; and disciplined by great though comparatively unobtrusive suffering. They seem to be the product of a compassionate, though firm-minded and disinterested spectator who both must and can live his life in contemplating the lives of

others. They frequently employ the ironic mode in juxtaposing aspiration with achievement; the limited possibilities of expression with the vast and anguished emotions that demand expression; the discrepancy between what people need from one another and what they can afford to give. They are eminently controlled and, given what we know of Robinson's life, curiously urbane. They have very little verbal excitement and even less variety and change of pace. His characters do not speak in a recognizably distinct personal idiom; that is, apart from the content of their speeches, there is little in their respective lines to distinguish, say, Guinevere from Gawaine.[43] Robinson's poetry is virtually devoid of decoration relished for its own sake; it has nothing of Tennyson's ornateness or Stevens's dazzle. And he can seldom, if ever, manage a passage approaching the symbolic power of that which closes "Sunday Morning" or that which informs the whole of Frost's "The Most of It." One has the sense in Robinson's poetry that every picture and image have been carefully, sometimes too carefully, chosen to fit into the reflective, speculative texture of the verse. At its best the poetry is characterized by straightforward syntax, plain and often abstract diction tending at moments of emphasis to the polysyllabic, unobtrusive alliteration, and adjectival or adverbial qualification devoted to ethical and emotional definition. Let us then look more specifically at several passages from the two poems we are considering here.

Few of the successful speeches in these poems--and they far outnumber the poor ones--have less urbanity and control than the following one from Merlin. Arthur is speaking to Merlin, whom he has brought back from Broceliande to Camelot after a ten year absence:

> But you are Merlin still, or part of him;
> I did you wrong when I thought otherwise,
> And I am sorry now. Say what you will.
> We are alone, and I shall be alone
> As long as Time shall hide a reason here 5
> For me to stay in this infested world
> Where I have sinned and erred and heeded not
> Your counsel; and where you yourself--God save us!--
> Have gone down smiling to the smaller life
> That you and your incongruous laughter called 10
> Your living grave. God save us all, Merlin,
> When you, the seer, the founder, and the prophet,
> May throw the gold of your immortal treasure
> Back to the God that gave it, and then laugh
> Because a woman has you in her arms . . . 15
> (p. 251, ll. 2-16)

There is no literal physical description in this passage; we are given little indication of what we might see if we were witnesses to this scene. Virtually every detail, every adjective and adverb are evaluative. The vocabulary of the ethical life is dominant, and this is evident in the first line: "You are Merlin still, or part of him." We observe it not just in such obvious instances as Arthur's confession: "I have sinned and erred and heeded not / Your counsel" but also in his description of Merlin's going "down smiling to the smaller life / That you and your incongruous laughter called / Your living grave." The syntax is quite straightforward, and this is probably necessary to a reasonably convincing rendering of

conversation. There are four lines that have feminine endings (lines 9, 12, 13, and 14), and these contribute a slight degree of informality that further enhances the conversational tone. There is no unusual or exotic diction, though the placing of such words as "infested" and "incongruous" is particularly skillful. The passage is essentially ironic in that it plays off the past against the present, an abstract standard of conduct against the realistic fact of behavior, Arthur's willingness to hear what he implicitly knows cannot assuage the great sorrow or fill the great need he has. It expresses Robinson's characteristic view of life as something that people in the nature of things are likely to mess up. Its poignance derives in great part from the emotional situation Robinson has imagined: a relationship once extremely close and now flawed beyond repair. I wonder it there has ever been a more moving, tantalizingly brief description of choice made on the basis of emotion and desire rather than reason, flouting both common sense and a sense of duty. And it is expressed through someone else's perturbed and rather envious recognition that Merlin has inscrutably disregarded the standards by which he himself has, if not lived, at least judged himself.

Another passage, less succinct but even more moving, occurs in the first scene between Lancelot and Guinevere. The Queen has asked him, with great apprehension, why that day is different from any other, and Lancelot replies as follows:

"For me today is not as other days,"
He said, "because it is the first, I find,
That has empowered my will to say to you
What most it is that you must hear and heed.
When Arthur, with a faith unfortified,
Sent me alone, of all he might have sent,
That May-day to Leodogran your father,
I went away from him with a sore heart;
For in my heart I knew that I should fail
My King, who trusted me too far beyond
The mortal outpost of experience.
And this was after Merlin's admonition,
Which Arthur, in his passion, took for less
Than his inviolable majesty.
When I rode in between your father's guards
And heard his trumpets blown for my loud honor,
I sent my memory back to Camelot,
And said once to myself, 'God save the king!'
But the words tore my throat and were like blood
Upon my tongue. Then a great shout went up
From shining men around me everywhere;
And I remember more fair women's eyes
Than there are stars in autumn, all of them
Thrown on me for a glimpse of that high knight
Sir Lancelot--Sir Lancelot of the Lake.
I saw their faces and I saw not one
To sever a tendril of my integrity;
But I thought once again, to make myself
Believe a silent lie, 'God save the King' . . .
I saw your face, and there were no more kings."
(p. 376, ll. 1-30)

Again the context qualifies and gives to the passage an extraordinary though subdued complexity of feeling. Lancelot speaks, at a time of deep sorrow and fear, of the prelude to his greatest joy. He is speaking to the woman who has earlier been called "his inventory of the world / That he must lose, or suffer to be lost / For love of her." (p. 371, ll. 30-32); and he is preparing to tell her they must part. Robinson's sense of irony is pervasive. The first lines imply that Lancelot has recognized earlier what

only now he is able to admit to her; the poet is telling us, as he frequently does, that knowledge and the ability to act on that knowledge are different things. Lancelot says to the woman he loves that his loving her has been the violation of his most sacred trust. He says he had the awareness of incipient disloyalty but could not prevent himself from acting it out, while at the same time he recognizes the human frailty and culpability of the man to whom he owed that loyalty. ("I knew that I should fail/ My King, who trusted me too far beyond / The mortal outpost of experience.")

There is more narrative in this passage than we usually find in Robinson, though it is quite obviously narrative in the service of something else. The story is important only insofar as it reflects an action that is crucial in the life of both the speaker and the listener, and it is colored by a sense of its significance then and its significance at the time it is recalled. Robinson is concerned to define in ironic terms how it came about that Lancelot "alone" went "with a sore heart" to sue Leodogran on Arthur's behalf for Guinevere's hand. Again we find the vocabulary markedly ethical in its nature. Arthur, "with a faith unfortified," "trusted" Lancelot but only because he had passionately assumed "his inviolable majesty" superior to Merlin's wisdom. Like the story itself, the physical setting is useful to Robinson only insofar as it reflects Lancelot's emotional state. There is something essentially abstract about "more fair women's eyes / Than there are stars in autumn."

Robinson wants to give the sense of an exciting situation, and he succeeds in doing so. Even Guinevere's appearance serves only to stand for the temptation that finally proves too much for Lancelot.

There is nothing in the passage that is dazzling or elevated, but it is in the style that can sustain a long poem, even if the emotional complexity it reflects cannot be maintained. There are two instances of Robinson's particularly deft handling of metaphorical language. His use of metaphor not as ornament but as a mode of perception can be seen in the lines "My King, who trusted me too far beyond / The mortal outpost of experience." Here "outpost" is a metaphor that stands for the farthest limits of the known, the safe, the reasonable. In this context the simple words "too far beyond" take on suggestions and meanings which they would as a rule rarely yield. The other example is in the line "To sever a tendril of my integrity." In appropriating the word "tendril" from the world of nature Robinson insists that the ethical sense is organic to man, an inevitable and healthy part of him. His unobtrusive use of such language is quite characteristic and highly effective.

Let us finally notice the lines "Which Arthur, in his passion, took for less / Than his inviolable majesty." They exemplify Robinson's unrivalled ability at succinct moral and psychological definition. The "passion" is both sexual passion and arrogance; the word is simple and common, but Robinson has used it with such

precision that one cannot imagine another word in its place. Similarly, what combination could be more acute than "inviolable majesty"? The polysyllabic quality of the line suggests the way he manipulates language for the sake of special emphasis. For all its apparent simplicity, the passage is very skillfully managed.

Another passage, this one in Robinson's voice, may suggest the ways he characteristically handles description. His subject here is the lonely Arthur, whom Merlin has left to return to Broceliande:

> The King was long awake. No covenant
> With peace was his tonight; and he knew sleep
> As he knew the cold eyes of Guinevere
> That yesterday had stabbed him, having first
> On Lancelot's name struck fire, and left him then
> As now they left him--with a wounded heart,
> A wounded pride, and a sickening pang worse yet
> Of lost possession. He thought wearily
> Of watchers by the dead, late wayfarers,
> Rough-handed mariners on ships at sea,
> Lone-yawning sentries, wastrels, and all others
> Who might be saying somewhere to themselves,
> "The King is now asleep in Camelot;
> God save the King."--"God save the King, indeed,
> If there be now a king to save," he said,
> Then he saw giants rising in the dark,
> Born horribly of memories and new fears
> That in the gray-lit irony of dawn
> Were partly to fade out and be forgotten;
> And then there might be sleep, and for a time
> There might be peace. His head was hot
> And throbbing; but the rest of him was cold,
> As he lay staring hard where nothing stood,
> And hearing what was not, even while he saw
> And heard, like dust and thunder far away,
> The coming confirmation of the words
> Of him who saw so much and feared so little
> Of all that was to be. No spoken doom
> That ever chilled the last night of a felon

Prepared a dragging anguish more profound
And absolute than Arthur, in these hours,
Made out of darkness and of Merlin's words;
No tide that ever crashed on Lyonnesse
Drove echoes inland that were lonelier
For widowed ears among the fisher-folk,
Than for the King were memories tonight
Of old illusions that were dead for ever.
(p. 256, ll. 29-30;
p. 257, ll. 1-35)

Partly by means of comparison and contrast Robinson succeeds in rendering the experience of suffering, both extending and sharpening our sense of its universality: he goes from the king to felons to fishermen, and back to the king. The passage is essentially comparative and ironic; it plays off sleep against wakefulness, cold against fire, dead illusions against new fears, hallucinations against foresight, the humble against the proud. It tends rhetorically to negation: "No covenant . . .," "No spoken doom . . .," "No tide . . . ." By using the same word in slightly different senses Robinson can suggest parallels that are startling and effective; the comparison, "he knew sleep / As he knew the cold eyes of Guinevere" says both that he did not possess sleep and that its uncomforting aloofness taunted him. His particular skill with sequences can be seen in "a wounded heart, / A wounded pride, and a sickening pang worse yet / Of lost possession." Here he proceeds from the obvious to the unusual and penetrating, calling special attention to the last of the three both by choice of diction and by metrical emphasis. "Sickening" is so much more powerful a word than "wounded"; and whereas each of the first two items is contained

in two iambic feet, the third takes up 5-1/2 feet, the stress tending to be both stronger and less regular (the first foot is an anapest).

Let us make a partial list of adjectives and adverbs Robinson uses, the ones that noticeably qualify the lines in which they occur: "long awake," "cold," "wounded," "sickening," "worse," "lost," "wearily," "late," "horribly," "gray-lit," "partly," "hot and throbbing," "profound and absolute." This language, we realize, is highly emotional; the qualifications Robinson is typically interested to make are pertinent to feelings and changes in them. This particular passage is perhaps more concerned with emotion as a subject than many other passages in the poems, but the difference is more one of degree than of kind. We can also see in this passage the effective use of a device Robinson tends to overuse--that of repeating words whose second application is ironically different from the first: "As he lay staring hard where nothing stood,/ And hearing what was not, even while he saw/ And heard . . . ." The first two lines suggest hallucinations, waking nightmares, products of a tormented brain. The second "saw/ And heard" pertain to his apprehensive recognition of the truth that Merlin has prophesized. Finally, in the last lines of the passage we can see again Robinson's typical use of detail: "No tide that ever crashed on Lyonnesse/ Drove echoes inland that were lonelier / For widowed ears among the fisher-folk . . . ." Instead of describing "echoes" so as to suggest what they sound like, Robinson makes them "lonelier," focussing

on the impression they make on those who hear them. The phrase "widowed ears" is another such example. There is nothing physical or visual about the combination; the poet uniquely, with one word, tells us why a certain physical sensation, the sound of the tide, inspires the emotional state of loneliness.

One passage somewhat different from these three is neither conversation, narrative, nor relatively straightforward description. In it Robinson renders Lancelot's experience of Guinevere, at a time when he is fully aware that they must part.

> Once more he frowned away a threatening smile,
> But soon forgot the memory of all smiling
> While he gazed on the glimmering face and hair
> Of Guinevere--the glory of white and gold
> That had been his, and were, for taking of it,
> Still his, to cloud, with an insidious gleam
> Of earth, another that was not of earth,
> And so to make of him a thing of night---
> A moth between a window and a star,
> Not wholly lured by one or led by the other.
> The more he gazed upon her beauty there,
> The longer was he living in two kingdoms,
> Not owning in his heart the king of either,
> And ruling not himself. There was an end
> Of hours, he told her silent face again,
> In silence. On the morning when his fury
> Wrenched her from that foul fire in Camelot,
> Where blood paid irretrievably the toll
> Of her release, the whips of Time had fallen
> Upon them both. All this to Guinevere
> He told in silence and he told in vain.
> (p. 415, ll. 10-30)

The beauty of the woman and the extent of his love are not described in fulsome detail. The "glory of white and gold" is an epithet Robinson frequently uses for Guinevere, but we <u>see</u> her much less than we <u>feel</u> her, through Lancelot. There is an almost

simultaneous rendering of Lancelot's experience of her and his awareness of what that means to him--the way his love leaves his will infirm, his intentions unrealized. In Robinson's measured, controlled way he is highly dramatic; the passage implies a physical situation, a very emotional confrontation between two people, and it renders the dramatic conflicts within Lancelot. Furthermore, we know that the resolution of the drama must come from within the protagonists--there can be no *deus ex machina*--and this fact makes the drama all the more intense. There is an interplay between the implied physical scene and Lancelot's thoughts and memories, and Robinson manages this simply by telling us repeatedly that Lancelot is looking at Guinevere: "While he gazed . . ." (1. 12), "The more he gazed . . ." (1. 20), "he told her silent face . . ." (1. 24), "All this to Guinevere / He told . . ." (11. 29-30) The accumulation of such simple facts effectively embodies his infirmity of will where she is concerned, his actual preoccupation with her contrasting, as it does, with what he is thinking at the time. Instead of giving us abstract, theoretical temptation, Robinson has been remarkably able to make us feel it at work.

We should note the particularly careful placing of such words as "insidious," "threatening," and "irretrievably," each so precisely chosen that equally satisfactory substitutes would be exceedingly difficult to find. The metaphor that likens Lancelot to a moth is similarly successful. Again, characteristically, it has

little visual quality; it is appropriate in suggesting the ethical qualities of whimsy and indecisiveness. The sentence beginning in line 25 ("On the morning . . .") and continuing to line 29 shows Robinson's ability to place and order experience at several removes from the event itself. The language is vivid and accurate ("fury," "Wrenched," "foul fire"), and the movement of the passage slows so that almost every word receives heavier than usual stress, particularly calling attention to the all-important word "irretrievably." The rhetorical device in the last line is one that Robinson occasionally employs, often with considerable effect; the structure of each half of the line is the same, the language insisting upon a grammatical parallel between "in silence" and "in vain." But "in silence" is primarily a physical description, while "in vain" has emotional and ethical resonance. The pseudo-parallelism is clever and ultimately yields a note approaching tragic irony.

I have already called attention to Robinson's use of metaphor and literal detail, showing how these are almost never relished for their physical properties but are instead subordinate to the idea being expressed. His imagination is essentially non-visual, and his metaphors are never obtrusive. The metaphors one discovers in Robinson do not "speak for themselves" or stand alone, nor do they, as do the pigeons at the end of Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning," have a haunting resonance and almost

endless suggestiveness.

A few more brief passages can illustrate Robinson's characteristic treatment of metaphor. The first two examples occur when Guinevere is speaking to Lancelot at Joyous Gard.

> What was it made you save me from the fire,
> If only out of memories and forebodings
> To build around my life another fire
> Of slower faggots?
> (p. 413, ll. 24-7)

Guinevere refers first to Lancelot's historic rescue of her, and proceeds to use the idea of death by fire to make a metaphor--if metaphor it be--of her current state of emotional torment. The "faggots," the crude fuel for the actual fire, are transmuted into the more insidious "memories and forebodings" that result in potentially deadly mental anguish. Later on, Guinevere says she knows their world is "going" but pleads to Lancelot for a little more life:

> Why not before it goes, and I go with it,
> Have yet one morsel more of life together,
> Before death sweeps the table and our few crumbs
> Of love are a few last ashes on a fire
> That cannot hurt your vision or burn long?
> (p. 419, ll. 1-5)

The results of trying to imagine such a metaphor in visual terms would be ludicrous. The lines assume that the idea of eating, of physical consumption, can stand for perilous earthly pleasure that ultimately returns to dust. This assumption is revealed in only a few words that effectively bring the tangible world into a highly emotional statement; there is a poignance in "morsel" and "crumbs"

that more abstract words could only with great difficulty convey. The temporal fire implicitly contrasts to the "fires of God," the spiritual pursuit which the earthly cannot deflect. The power of the statement depends ultimately on its context, and this ability of Robinson's to imagine everything in terms of its appropriateness to the situation he has imagined is one of the great strengths of these Arthurian poems.

It might be useful to compare two passages, one from Robinson and one from Tennyson, using essentially the same metaphor; their very different attitudes and poetic techniques can thereby be illuminated further. After Lancelot has left Guinevere for the last time he tries in the field outside the convent to collect himself:

> "No man was ever alone like that," he thought,
> Not knowing what last havoc pity and love
> Had still to wreak on wisdom. Gradually,
> In one long wave it whelmed him, and then broke--
> Leaving him like a lone man on a reef,
> Staring for what had been with him, but now
> Was gone and was a white face under the sea,
> Alive there, and alone--always alone.
> (p. 447, ll. 22-9)

Robinson calls upon our sense of the irresistible and unalterable motion of waves. The effect on Lancelot of his equally natural and powerful feelings of "pity and love" parallels that of a man at the mercy of the sea. His emotions overwhelm him and then leave him desolate, "a lone man on a reef." He is separated forever from what he has loved. Again the metaphor is not visual, but it is effective. These lines are doubtless not Robinson's best

poetry, but they are an adequate portion of a long poem. One would never think of removing them from their context, except for purposes of analysis.

On the other hand, the following lines from the Idylls are frequently cited alone; indeed, Hallam Tennyson tells us where the lines were written: "I can find no further account of this visit to Ireland, except that my father then made the following lines, which occur in "Merlin and Vivien," within one of the caves of Ballybunion"[44]:

> So dark a forethought roll'd about his brain,
> As on a dull day in an ocean cave
> The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall
> In silence.
> ("Merlin and Vivien," ll. 228-31)

As descriptive poetry this is indeed lovely. The notion that the wave is blind and feeling gives it extraordinary concreteness. The retarded rhythm, especially of line 230, with its long vowels and juxtaposed consonants, indicates Tennyson's impressive technical skill. The difficulty comes with what the passage is supposed to indicate. It is in a description of Merlin and evidently is meant to suggest the thought process of the wisest man in the world. But Tennyson's inability to imagine convincingly the uses and workings of supreme intelligence vitiates the beauty of the lines. Even if one expects only that the metaphor describe premonition, it is still inadequate. It suggests none of those elusive flashes of revelation or the interaction between the grasping, penetrating,

analytic intelligence and whatever one might call--perhaps imagination--the faculty that apprehends essentially intuitively. Here Tennyson is clearly responding to a physical scene, as his son's note on the lines makes quite clear. He does not submit himself to the demands of the poem's context that would largely determine how appropriate are details that he thinks of including.

In each poem there are metaphors that Robinson uses several times in such a way as to give them more than local significance. They are more flexible, less binding than the pervasive image in the Idylls of the waning year; Robinson prefers something more susceptible to his own manipulation. In Lancelot he uses, perhaps over-uses, the light / dark / Light imagery, the fundamental meaning of which is too obvious--or too vague--to need lengthy interpretation. The first two terms come of course from the natural phenomenon of day and night; "light" also stands for the attractiveness of the earthly, the known, the things of this world. "Dark" stands both for the destruction of all that had been valued in Camelot and for the "dark night of the soul" that must precede any true spiritual commitment. "Light" is Robinson's shorthand for spiritual experience, and I have already discussed the weaknesses inherent in his use of it.

In Merlin there is a more interesting metaphor, used in a way not typical in Robinson's poetry, and it is very difficult to describe precisely the way it works or what it is about. It is

more suggestive than Robinson's imagery usually is; the poem "Luke Havergal" is the only other one in which the imagery is so little subordinate to a dominant statement or analysis. There are four passages that reflect this metaphor, and I should like to quote all of them before trying to describe what he is doing. The first passage occurs when Merlin is initially led by Vivian to her manor in Broceliande:

> He did not say that he was glad or sorry;
> For suddenly came flashing into vision
> A thing that was a manor and a castle,
> With walls and roofs that had a flaming sky
> Behind them, like a sky that he remembered,
> And one that had from his rock-sheltered haunt
> Above the roofs of his forsaken city
> Made flame as if all Camelot were on fire.
> The glow brought with it a brief memory
> Of Arthur as he left him, and the pain
> That fought in Arthur's eyes for losing him,
> And must have overflowed when he had vanished.
> (p. 266, ll. 7-18)

The second describes the lovers' meeting before dinner on the first evening they are together:

> It seemed
> A flower of wonder with a crimson stem
> Came leaning slowly and regretfully
> To meet his will--a flower of change and peril
> That had a clinging blossom of warm olive
> Half stifled with a tyranny of black,
> And held the wayward fragrance of a rose
> Made woman by delirious alchemy.
> (p. 271, ll. 12-19)

For the close of dinner Robinson writes the following extraordinary lines:

> He stared a long time at the cup of gold
> Before him but he drank no more. There came

> Between him and the world a crumbling sky
> Of black and crimson, with a crimson cloud
> That held a far off town of many towers,
> All swayed and shaken, till at last they fell,
> And there was nothing but a crimson cloud
> That crumbled into nothing, like the sky
> That vanished with it, carrying away
> The world, the woman, and all memory of them,
> Until a slow light . . .
> (p. 277, ll. 9-19)

Finally, in the last section when Merlin is with Dagonet overlooking Camelot, we find the following passage:

> The wizard shivered as he spoke, and stared
> Away into the sunset where he saw
> Once more, as through a cracked and cloudy glass,
> A crumbling sky that held a crimson cloud
> Wherein there was a town of many towers
> All swayed and shaken, in a woman's hand
> This time, till out of it there spilled and flashed
> And tumbled, like loose jewels, town, towers, and walls,
> And there was nothing but a crumbling sky
> That made anon of black and red and ruin
> A wild and final rain on Camelot.
> He bowed, and pressed his eyes: "Now by my soul,
> I have seen this before--all black and red--
> Like that--like that--like Vivian--black and red;
> Across the cups of gold. A flute was playing--
> Then all was black and red.
> (p. 308, ll. 24-34;
> p. 209, ll. 1-6)

At a certain level the references and substitutions are quite obvious and typical for this poet. In the first passage the actual sight of the manor instantly recalls for Merlin the town of Camelot, as he was wont to see it from his favorite spot of seclusion. The lines move quickly from physical fact to his own experience of another human being. They implicitly suggest that a substitution is being made, that Broceliande is taking the place of Camelot in

Merlin's life. The two details that will be significantly picked up in the subsequent passages are the "flaming sky" and the outline of the town or manor, which we assume would be very dark against its brilliant background.

The second passage is not in fact a modulation of the earlier one, but a uniquely evocative description of Vivian. We can immediately realize the non-visual quality of the description by trying to see Vivian as the flower he describes. The stem would be red, the blossom black--an utter reversal of a natural phenomenon. But these details, especially these colors, suggestively recall those in the first passage quoted; and Merlin's distance from what he sees has markedly changed. He is now involved, whereas before he had been an almost disinterested spectator. The colors also are the traditional signs of passion and death, which in a sense Vivian represents for Merlin.

In the third passage the imagery reverts to that of the town and the sky behind it, but the second passage has decisively intervened. The "black and crimson" of Vivian have replaced the "flaming sky" and the dark outline of Camelot. And the activity of the verb forms, "crumbling," "swayed and shaken," and "fell" emulates that of the sexual act, progressing even to the sense of satiation and obliteration that follows it. Both the discretion and the effectiveness of the passage are extraordinary, and it is managed by substitutions that are only apparently simple.

In the last passage Merlin is even further removed from the scene he contemplates than he was in the first, though his experience in Broceliande has changed his way of seeing Camelot. In a literal sense this represents a kind of hallucination, but it is really closer to an imaginative recreation and blending of the two major experiences of his life. It renders his sense of the imminent destruction of Arthur's kingdom; it speaks of the fulness of life that finally and inevitably accomplishes its own defeat. And the two scenes, the one looked upon and the one remembered, are seen no longer in their original brilliance and immediacy; they are seen "as through a cracked and cloudy glass," that is, through the perspective of loss.

A few last words about the aesthetic weaknesses in these poems of Robinson's. Both poems are uneven, and both are marred by prolixity and an excessive sameness of tone; but the extent to which these faults damage the poems can only be subjectively gauged while reading each of them through. Of course we cannot expect a long poem to support consistently the meticulous analysis of its poetic texture characteristic of what we loosely term "new-criticism." Nonetheless, the prolixity and sameness of tone in Robinson's Arthurian poems are not, I think, necessarily characteristic of the long poem but rather, typical of this particular poet. The Robinson enthusiast must finally accept the too frequent dreariness for the sake of those portions of the poems that are incomparable.

When I discussed the intellectual weaknesses revealed in the Arthurian poems, I called attention to the fact that the dubious passages were frequently characterized by a kind of playing with words, sluggish rhythm, and a merely apparent precision of language.[45] Robinson at his best arouses expectations of uniquely precise expression; when he inevitably falls from this high standard, his diction is still capable of seeming to be lucid without truly being so. A minor example, among several in which Robinson's proclivity for repeating words results in a specious appearance of profundity, involves the several references to Merlin's "gay grave" in Brittany. In the first section of Merlin Gawaine says that, according to rumor, Merlin's beard is gone and he is "Crowned with a glory of eternal peace." (p. 238, 1. 24) Dagonet replies:

> I look not to Merlin
> For peace, when out of his peculiar tomb
> He comes again to Camelot.
> (p. 238, 11. 30-32)
>
> No, it is not for peace that Merlin comes.
> (p. 239, 1. 3)

Gawaine replies:

> Well, Dagonet, if Merlin would have peace,
> Let Merlin stay away from Brittany.
> (p. 239, 11. 11-12)

Dagonet answers with an exotic description of the sensual paradise that is Broceliande and ends by saying:

> And you say to me,
> 'If Merlin would have peace, let Merlin stay

> Away from Brittany.' Gawaine, you are young,
> And Merlin's in his grave.
> (p. 240, ll. 12-15)

There is subsequently some dubious banter about graves and being buried alive. The difficulty resides in the repetition of the word "peace." There is first the claim that Merlin has achieved peace; next Dagonet questions the suggestion that he might bring peace to share with others and then the possibility that he might be returning in order to find it. Finally, Gawaine and Dagonet quibble over whether Merlin can find the peace he presumably sought in Broceliande.

Without great effort or undue attention to what he actually says, one can grasp the general idea Robinson is probably trying to express: that tranquility based on surrender and passivity is questionable and threatened, that there is a real equation between peace and death. Robinson's interpretation of the ancient prediction that Merlin was shamefully to be buried alive is original and, as a general conception, brilliant. But the passages I cited above leave a great deal to be desired in the way of clarity. He is trying to impose excessive meanings on material that cannot sustain it and does not need it; he is straining for intensity. This weakness is related to another one to which I alluded earlier: Robinson's capacity to write so obliquely and with such multiple qualifications that he creates to a disturbing degree an atmosphere of unfathomable complexity.

There is at times a tremulous hovering of obscure significances;

the fundamental clarity of line is muddied. Even a careful student of Malory and Tennyson will find it difficult to fathom the relationship Robinson presents in the first section of Lancelot between Lancelot and Gawaine, and also one aspect of that relationship as it relates to Guinevere. Robinson takes from Tennyson the idea that the lovers were fatally discovered together the night before Lancelot was to leave the court forever. Lancelot and Gawaine frequently refer to his imminent departure; it is in the light of this departure that everything else they talk about is understood. Lancelot says, "Yes, Gawaine / I go tomorrow, and I wish you well." (p. 366, ll. 15-15) Yet when Guinevere comes in she does not behave as though the day were a critical one in her life. She asks him

> Why do you set this day--
> This golden day, when all are not so golden--
> To tell me, with your eyes upon the ground,
> That idle words have been for idle tongues
> And ears a moment's idle entertainment?
> (p. 373, ll. 13-17)

Our sense of what people are saying depends upon what we assume them to know, but Guinevere would surely know Lancelot's plan to leave.

I cannot find an adequate, convincing explanation, either within Robinson's poem or in his sources, of why Lancelot is so guarded and even rude to Gawaine. One possibility is that Robinson takes from Tennyson the quality in Lancelot of a surly passivity, and this is Robinson's expression of it--whereas Tennyson displayed it in his physical and moral lethargy at the Last Tournament. But

such an explanation, though it may be correct, does not help us understand why it takes the particular forms it does between these very important men, and it does not help us in the local instances to understand specific words. For example, there is an initial description of Lancelot looking at Gawaine with "Hard eyes, where doubts at war with memories / Fanned a sad wrath." (p. 365, ll. 5-6) We have no way of knowing whether his "doubts" and "memories" are of Gawaine or of the situation in general, and it is important that we know this so as to understand what is going on between them. Lancelot later tells Guinevere that he does not fear or distrust Gawaine any more than he does Gareth, and this is high praise. But if this is true, why is he so defensive toward him? What is the full meaning of lines such as the following?

> Still with a frown that had no faith in it,
> Lancelot, pitying Gawaine's lost endeavour
> To make an evil jest of evidence,
> Sat fronting him with a remote forbearance--
> Whether for Gawaine blind or Gawaine false,
> Or both, or neither, he could not say yet,
> If ever.
> (p. 368, ll. 20-27)

Later Lancelot says to Guinevere of Gawaine:

> Sometimes a random shaft of his will hit
> Nearer the mark than one a wise man aims
> With infinite address and reservation;
> So has it come to pass this afternoon
> (p. 374, ll. 5-8)

This claim predictably frightens Guinevere, who insists on being told what has happened between the two men. But a painstaking search of both the first and second sections has not discovered to

me anything that would warrant the description Lancelot gives or that answers Guinevere's question. Unless what seemed common knowledge, the fact that Lancelot planned to leave the next day was actually something Gawaine guessed. It then might have been unknown to Guinevere and therefore a fact capable of causing her the greatest anguish. Still, this is a possibility that the quality of their love and relationship, as Robinson has imagined it, renders highly unlikely. In general, then, the situation is understandable, but such passages as those I quoted have a particularity and precision that I think examination proves misleading.

One other minor fault in Robinson remains to be noted: a certain awkwardness in dealing with concrete things, physical detail, colloquialism--in short, the mundane. When he tries to handle these things he often displays a lack of taste, even a kind of crudeness; his poetry suddenly hits on false notes and the tone becomes discordant. We find an example near the beginning of Merlin, when Dagonet says, "though I know no more than any churl / Who pinches any chambermaid soever / In the King's palace, I look not . . ." (p. 238, ll. 28-30) It is a dubious note in a portentous situation and reveals Robinson trying to do something not really congenial to his talent. Later Merlin tries to talk about Vivian's green dress:

> If I were young, God knows if I were safe
> Concerning you in green, like a slim cedar,
> As you are now, to say my life was mine;

Were you to say to me that I should end it,
Longevity for me were jeopardized.
Have you your green on always and all over?
(p. 264, ll. 6-11)

The circumlocution almost succeeds in being humorous; but the last two words, "all over," along with the earlier "Concerning," underline a heaviness in Robinson that such subjects tend to call forth. Another example of Robinson's awkwardness with physical fact occurs in Vivian's first references to Merlin's beard, an object which is the subject of several quite tedious, though understandable, passages:

"O, that hair!"
She moaned, as if in sorrow: "Must it be?
Must every prophet and important wizard
Be clouded so that nothing but his nose
And eyes, and intimations of his ears,
Are there to make us know him when we see him?
Praise heaven I'm not a prophet! Are you glad?"
(p. 265, l. 32; p. 266, ll. 1-6)

Later, when he appears at dinner without the beard she calls him her lion and speaks as follows:

"Are you to let me go again sometime,"
She said,--"before I starve to death, I wonder?
If not, I'll have to bite the lion's paws,
And make him roar. He cannot shake his mane,
For now the lion has no mane to shake;
The lion hardly knows himself without it,
And thinks he has no face, but there's a lady
Who says he had no face until he lost it.
So there we are.
(p. 272, ll. 1-10)

What is intended as sophisticated coquetry has a decidedly adolescent ring to it, but fortunately such passages are relatively infrequent for this "great and austere" poet.

FOOTNOTES: CHAPTER III

[1]Biographical material on Robinson can be found in the following works: Ellesworth Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study (New York, 1952); Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography (New York, 1938); Emery Neff, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1948); Chard Powers Smith, Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1965); Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, 1946).

[2]On his deathbed, he said to Chard Powers Smith, "I never could have done anything but write poetry." Smith, p. 367.

[3]Ibid., p. 389.

[4]Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1940), p. 497.

[5]Morton Zabel, "Robinson: The Ironic Discipline," The Nation, August 28, 1937, p. 222.

[6]Denis Donoghue, Connoisseurs of Chaos (New York, 1965), p. 129.

[7]James Dickey, "Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Many Truths," Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, ed. Morton Zabel (New York, 1965), p. xi.

[8]See Winters, pp. 97-130, and Alan Tate, "Edwin Arlington Robinson," Collected Essays (Denver, 1959), pp. 358-364.

[9]Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography (New York, 1938), p. 320.

[10]Edwin Arlington Robinson, Selected Letters (New York, 1940), p. 97.

[11]Ibid., p. 106.

[12]Winfield Scott, "To See Robinson," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XXVI, p. 168.

[13]Barnard, p. 118.

[14]Smith, p. 243.

[15]Letters, pp. 112-113.

[16]Ibid., p. 160.

[17]Edmund Wilson, "The Muses Out of Work," The New Republic, May 11, 1927, p. 319.

[18]Louise Bogan, "Tilbury Town and Beyond," Poetry, January, 1931, pp. 219-220.

[19]Winters, p. 61.

[20]Ellsworth Barnard, p. 109.

[21]Winters, pp. 62, 86-94; Dickey, p. xviii; Barnard, pp. 95-96, 150ff.; Donoghue, p. 133; Conrad Aiken, _A Reviewer's ABC_ (New Haven, 1956), p. 345. For a sympathetic and, indeed, enthusiastic description, see Charles Cestre, _Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson_ (New York, 1930), pp. 98-118.

[22]Scott, p. 168.

[23]_Letters_, p. 146 ff.

[24]_Ibid._, p. 146.

[25]Barnard, p. 151.

[26]Winters, p. 146.

[27]Barnard, p. 122.

[28]For an excellent summary of the two poems, see Winters, p. 62 ff.

[29]Edwin Arlington Robinson, _Collected Poems_ (New York, 1954). All subsequent references to this edition are parenthesized by page and line number within the text of the discussion.

[30]"[Robinson's narrative] is, like the narrative of Henry James, an affair pre-eminently of relations: a narrative, it would be more exact to say, of relations and contacts (between character and character) always extraordinarily _conscious_." Aiken, p. 342.

[31]Denis Donoghue makes this point in a somewhat different way: "Robinson's characters still cling to the metaphor of action because they have nothing else to do. Their suffering is caused by the fact that, for them, the reality upon which the dramatic metaphor depends is dead. Such words as "decision," "choice," "do," "event," or "act" are their only terms of reference, and these terms are--for these people--dead." Donoghue, pp. 136-7.

[32]Hallam Tennyson, _Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir_, II (New York, 1897), p. 463.

[33]Quite unlike Tennyson, he was unconcerned with any knowledge not immediately relevant to poetry. "After the failure of 'Captain Craig'. . . he seems to have lost most of his intellectual curiosity. He continued to admire the authors he had first read at Harvard in 1891-93 and he showed no interest in the new ideas that were sweeping over the world." Malcolm Cowley, "Edwin Arlington Robinson: Defeat and Triumph," _The New Republic_, December 6, 1948, p. 29.

[34]Stopford Brooke, Tennyson: His Art and Relation to Modern Life (London, 1929), p. 301.

[35]Winters, pp. 14-19.

[36]Ibid., pp. 110-111.

[37]"In Merlin, however, where Mr. Robinson's romantic alter ego, so long frustrated, speaks out, we cannot for long doubt that he reaches his zenith as a poet. The sense of scene and portraiture are as acute here, certainly, but the fine actuality with which they are rendered is, as in the best poetry, synonymous with the beautiful; and the poem, though long, is admirably, and beyond any other American narrative poem, sustained." Aiken, pp. 339-340.

[38]Conrad Aiken noted the kinship between these three writers: "We can see the "texture" of Mr. Robinson's poetry , if we like, as we can see the subtle texture of Henry James, or of Hawthorne, as a product peculiarly American--the over-sensitiveness of the sensitive soul in an environment where sensitiveness is rare." p. 343.

[39]"Robinson is perhaps the greatest master of the speculative or conjectural approach to the writing of poetry. Uncertainty was the air he breathed, and speculation was not so much a device with him--though at its best it is a surpassingly effective technique--

as it was a habit of mind, an integral part of the self. As with most powerful poets, the writing proceeded from the way Robinson naturally thought, the way he naturally was, and so was inextricably rooted in his reticent, slightly morbid, profoundly contemplative, solitary, compassionate, and stoical personality and was not the product of a conscious search for a literary "way," an unusual manner of speaking which was invented or discovered and in which the will had a major part." Dickey, p. xv.

[40]"we find that the feature that differentiates them most decisively from the medieval versions of the same stories is that the characters change." Barnard, p. 109.

[41]Katherine Ann Porter, "On a Criticism of Thomas Hardy," Modern Literary Criticism, ed. Irving Howe (New York, 1961), p. 308.

[42]Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason (Denver, 1947), p. 307.

[43]"One might expect that in dialogue even more than in description the characters would come alive through the sound as well as the sense of what they say; but Robinson apparently lacks the power to stamp the utterance of a character with a distinctive, unique accent and rhythm. His people do not all talk the same, to be sure, for the poems vary greatly in form and tone. But within

each poem, no matter how many speakers may appear, all the spoken passages seem much alike in vocabulary, imagery, and sentence structure." Barnard, p. 58.

[44] Hallam Tennyson, I, p. 218.

[45] "In the dialogue, especially, Mr. Robinson too often gives himself up to a sort of overwrought verbalistic _playing_ with an idea . . . . Sometimes these tortuous passages conceal a subtlety worth the pain of extracting--and sometimes they do not." Aiken, p. 346.

CONCLUSION

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By comparing major works of Arthurian literature from different eras and places, we initially demonstrate the process of change. Tennyson's and Robinson's poems may reveal this either straightforwardly or implicitly, and the ways the poets themselves recognize such change and reflect that recognition in their treatment of the material will to a great extent determine the success or failure of their poems. Chivalry, for example, clearly had great practical significance for Malory--even if he used it primarily as an object lesson aimed at a decadent present; in later works of Arthurian literature, chivalry has become at most a metaphor. Tennyson's Arthurian court is Utopian in the sense that the duties of knighthood as he envisions them are essentially abstract; there is no pretense that they actually relate, as in Le Morte D'Arthur they clearly do, to a real society and an actual stage of social development. By the time we reach Robinson, we can almost say that even as a metaphor chivalry has disappeared. The primary usefulness, for Robinson, of the status and dignity of Arthur's court is to certify his characters' claims to our admiration and interest. For all that they are knights, his characters are no different from very intelligent and sophisticated people who could conceivably live in

his own era. Thus what once answered real social needs and performed real social functions has lost its practical relevance to the actual world. In terms of the literature in which chivalry appears, this means that a solid, convincing, important aspect of the-material is no longer accessible, and, if they want to write major poetry, the later poets will be forced to discover other dimensions to compensate for the loss. Neither Tennyson nor Robinson sought for such dimensions in the contemporary public world of activity, responsibility, and power. Tennyson as Laureate of course wrote poems on public events of national significance, but in his longer works, and especially in the _Idylls of the King_, the concerns of the actual social world are revealed only obliquely. Tennyson and Robinson have become the poets of private lives and of private sensibilities.

The way in which the two poets use what was, in Malory, the Quest of the Sangraal demonstrates the loss of traditional Christian faith. The dogma and ritual that had sustained so many centuries of Western thought and idealism is evidently no longer available. Its absence to Tennyson is revealed in his extraordinary and ambivalent account of the search for the Grail--a search he equates with a desire for selfish spiritual excitement perhaps tantamount to madness. He distrusts a morality that cannot be tested in the course of everyday experience, although he cannot disavow

a belief in spiritual experience. The fact that traditional Christianity is no longer available is more importantly shown in Tennyson's devising an allegory that refers perfunctorily to Christian truths while being fundamentally anti-Christian in its themes of inevitable defeat and inexorable corruption. His imperfect recognition of the significance of this basic change leads to damaging ambivalences at the very heart of the Idylls. The absence of traditional Christianity for Robinson is shown in his use of short-hand terms, such as "Light," to point to an experience he cannot otherwise describe. Furthermore, for him the Quest is something that takes place offstage--that affects everyday life primarily by providing a reason, or perhaps an excuse to leave it. Robinson's conscious awareness of this change may have been no greater than Tennyson's, but his use of the Grail theme does not damage the core of his poems, if only because the theme is not central to them.

The disappearance of a clear, coherent, and recognized scheme of values involves the disappearance of prescribed ways of coping with doubt, guilt, and sin. In works that are particularly concerned with morality, the problems of dealing with ethical conflicts become of course quite severe. Tennyson's refusal to recognize the full implications of this historical phenomenon manifests itself in a work which implicitly testifies that significant choice is not possible--that doubt, guilt, and sin inevitably victimize those who experience them.

His characters cannot act effectively in a recognizable world, and consequently they respond passively to difficult or unpleasant situations. There is a fundamental incompatibility between a belief in the inevitable and complete defeat of idealism and a rigid assessment of responsibility. This reveals itself in the Idylls in Arthur's massive moral denunciation of Guinevere, which the "parabolic drift" of the work should have made irrelevant and out of place.

Robinson, on the other hand, accepts the necessary human frailty of his characters and transmutes their inability to act in the public world into an overwhelming need to struggle actively to understand and come to terms with private dilemmas. In Percival, among many others, Tennyson apparently condemns a preoccupation with one's inner self, although he clearly cannot suggest ways or means of avoiding or coping with such a preoccupation. Robinson accepts and explores his characters' total involvement with themselves and those with whom they are closest. Consequently his poems can end with a triumph--an affirmation--of sorts, whereas in Tennyson the positive note is primarily rhetorical.

Another consequence of the disappearance of accepted belief is that the poets feel obliged to make up, in effect, their own ideas and frequently to force upon the romantic material heavy meanings it does not need and cannot sustain. We discover that the romantic material is evidently not congenial with grandiose rhetoric and philosophical pretentions. When the latter are inextricably bound into

the framework and structure of the poems, as is the case of the Idylls of the King, the work fails as a whole and lives only as a collection of occasionally fine fragments. When, as in Robinson's poems, the abstract and pretentious are discovered only in passages incidental to the structure and burden of the work, they can be regarded as mere excrescences.

The dimension that Tennyson chose to add to the Arthurian material was primarily represented by his pseudo-allegory, indefensible because confused in itself and only partially applicable. He refused to recognize that allegory dealt with moral absolutes and could not be adulterated. The confusion of genres represented by the Idylls of the King belies the soundness of his conception. The real world, inherently uncongenial to allegory, is represented almost entirely by the essentially domestic, and most of the rest of real life is omitted. His characters therefore have too little material with which to reveal and exercise their natures.

The dimension that Robinson added was one of psychological exploration and depth. He set himself to discover moral and emotional intensities in traditionally understood relationships--to understand what it might have meant to experience the dilemmas of the major figures in Arthurian literature. Thus it is less accurate to say that he adds than it is to say that he deduces. Consequently he elaborates upon the material, rather than violating it in any fundamental

way. His characters have a depth and solidity quite new to Arthurian literature and unusual to poetry. He explores the germs in his source from an original and highly fruitful point of view--one deeply informed by a commitment to experience.

It has been most revealing in this study to discover in each work the relationship between idealism and realism, between the desire for standards and goals and the inevitable recognition that they cannot be fully attained. This relationship is finally inextricably woven, in such material, to notions of character. In Malory, character is undeveloped and tends to be overshadowed by action. We see the ruling members of a functioning society threatened by the most severe external and internal difficulties. It is a situation in which a character's actions largely reveal the kind of person he is and establish, or fail to establish, his claim to our respect. It is, furthermore, a situation in which honor is necessarily more highly prized than integrity because more relevant to the roles and responsibilities of the characters. Honor provides an external standard that can be emulated by those whom it is the main characters' responsibility to rule. It can serve as the pattern which society must respect and copy if it is to remain strong and hold together. There is, in the _Morte_, a tacitly accepted discrepancy between this social facade and moral reality, and the claims of the social facade are generally considered more compelling than those

of private moral truth.

In Tennyson's Idylls, there is no accepted discrepancy between the highest goals and what fallible human beings can actually achieve. The realistic fact that there can be no total triumph becomes, in the Idylls, an excuse for the total defeat of all aspiration. Because the ideal is expressed in terms too vague and vacuous to be comprehensible or workable, it will necessarily fail. The real world is represented primarily by the essentially domestic, and we are, in effect, given lables to tell us the moral quality of the characters. However, there is so little scope left for relevant action that many of the characters cannot act in such a way as to convince us of the appropriateness of the labels. And since a character's behavior is supposed to reflect accurately his moral stature, Tennyson has made honor substitute for integrity; the status and public dignity of a figure is made to stand for the nature of his conscience and inner life.

Robinson assumes the virtual impossibility of significant action and structures his poems on the relativity and imperfection of knowledge. He concentrates wholly on character, and everyone in his poems has failed in some measure to live by whatever standards he has set for himself or realizes are superior to his own. The poems resemble meditations, by the poet and by the characters themselves, on the moral significance of their past and present dilemmas. Such dilemmas may be caused by a conflict between desire and responsibility, or by

conflicting obligations; and the conflicts are exascerbated by intense personal relationships. The characters reveal themselves by means of their own self-consciousness and by the impressions they make on other highly intelligent and reflective men. There is no discrepancy, as there is in Tennyson, between what they are and what is expected of them; they are not made to illustrate an overwhelming moral action. In a sense, they are their own stories, and the substance of the poems is their struggle with their ethical dilemmas, their struggle, so-to-speak, to achieve integrity. The movement, then, in these three Arthurian works is from the primarily objective, through an uncertain, ambivalent middle ground, to the primarily subjective, and clearly the changing nature of the ethical norms is a partial reflection of changing historical circumstances.

One of the conclusions that comes from observing, in these three works of Arthurian literature, elements of idealism and realism is that the necessary interplay between the two must be revealed through believable characters. The foregoing study leads us to believe that allegory--certainly Christian allegory--in our times is no longer possible; characters can, then, no longer be abstractions but must be fundamentally human. Furthermore, these long poems show us characters in action, in recognizable human situations, caught in a web of circumstance that presents the necessity of choice. Therefore the poet must come closer to satisfying novelistic expectations

of characterization than he would in the lyric or shorter poem. He cannot depend primarily upon picture, mood, or tone, which are not, in themselves, moral quantities and therefore cannot articulate and sustain a work deeply concerned with morality. The long poem offers virtues impossible in the lyric: a fuller, more complex development of situation, a larger number of characters, the opportunity to reflect a more substantial spectrum of human experience. The greater intensity and concentration of poetry allow a most powerful representation of emotions in conflict with one another.

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