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TENNYSON'S GOTHIC: IDYLLIC, UNROMANTIC ARTHUR

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In this article I want to demonstrate that interpretations of *Idylls of the King* based on “Romantic” assumptions make use of models of interpretation that yield readings which an unbiased, sensitive reader recognizes as unacceptable, or at least as other than good or helpful evaluations. Secondly, I will argue that Tennyson’s use of Gothic material is markedly different from Wordsworth’s, Coleridge’s, Keats’s or Byron’s. This is not exactly a new point of view, but it will enable me to contribute one new point, which has to do with the precise role of the imagery in the *Idylls*. I will also claim that Tennyson’s Gothic is more aesthetic than that of the original Romantic poets and, politically, more of a Blut und Boden nationalistic or imperialistic type.

Implicitly, I will be addressing myself to the question of period terms: do the terms “Romanticism” and “Victorian” have any useful literary historical and literary critical value? To which, from the point of view of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, the answer will be, quite tediously, yes: the old traditional distinction is perfectly reasonable, Tennyson cannot be read as a Romantic, the marks of the transition are distinctly more than an illusion, and they can be demonstrated. At least, as far as the *Idylls* are concerned. Tennyson’s earlier poems, apparently, struck Arthur Hallam as connected with Keats’s symbolism. But the *Idylls* are distinctly not Romantic. It may be interesting to remember that Coleridge had, in fact, denied the possibility, in the same year, 1833, that Tennyson published the first “Morte d’Arthur”. Coleridge claimed:

In my judgment, an epic poem must either be national or mundane. As to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem on him national to Englishmen. What have we to do with him? Milton saw this, and with a judgment at least equal to his

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Tennyson's Gothic

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genius, took a mundane theme — one common to all mankind.²

Tennyson persisted, presumably stimulated by a different outlook. Whether the differences are typically, or even distinctly, Victorian is a moot point. The *Idylls* are akin to Ruskin's idea of non-assertive art. It seems to me, however, that "Victorian" is by far the vaguer label of the two. Swinburne's, Morris's, and Arnold's use of Gothic material is again quite distinct from Tennyson's. So, the variety of fundamental responses seems to me much greater in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The differences among the Victorian poets in their use of the Gothic is an interesting subject in its own right, but here I must concentrate on Tennyson's *Idylls* alone. First a few, admittedly fairly random, instances of readings of the *Idylls* as if they belong in the purely Romantic vein to be analysed with approaches that have become traditional for that kind. For instance, W. David Shaw applies Kierkegaard's analysis of the paradoxes of the Idealist: but in order to make this stick, his article is full of misreadings and strained interpretations.³ A few examples: Shaw claims, because he needs to, that Gareth's mother's love dominates the whole of the Idyll of "Gareth and Lynette". In fact, the hero (Gareth) distances himself from his mother as early as line 25 (of the 1394 lines of that Idyll), after which she tries on two more brief occasions to influence him again, but with no effect. And her attempts certainly do not shape or transform or otherwise dominate the action or the considerations of the Idyll, which is really, I think, about the lonely experiences of an untried knight. And the value-system imposed is that of Arthur's dream, not the mother's love.

I am going into such detail because I do not want to appear too high-handed, for the misreadings and strained interpretations are really so demonstrable. Shaw also claims, because he needs to, that Arthur's "silent music" is inaudible even to most of the king's own knights, a point made to support his claim for the application of Kierkegaard's paradox. As proof he mentions "the suffering of his followers, who are

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strung up in trees by members of King Mark's Satanic counter-order''.

This refers to a tiny incidental detail in lines 430-32 of "The Last Tournament", which is wilfully overstated in Shaw's reading — for there is only one knight swung up on a single tree. The "suffering" is taken from lines 56-88 of the same Idyll, where it applies to a churl, however, and not a knight; while the perpetrator is not King Mark, but the Red Knight of the North, a figure who is rather a parallel to Pellam and Garlon in "Balin and Balan" that to King Mark. Furthermore, the word "Satanic" is not used by Tennyson anywhere in the Idylls: in any case, the notion would not apply either to King Mark or to the Red Knight, but might pertain to Modred and his association with "Heathen, the brood by Hengist left" mentioned in "Guinevere" (l. 16), the Idyll immediately following "The Last Tournament". Finally, the "counter-order" turns out to consist of a drunkard who topples over by his own weight when Arthur confronts him ("The Last Tournament", ll. 441-67); and apart from being overcharged, this detail is, proportionally (except in its own place in "The Last Tournament") practically insignificant in the Idylls as a whole compared to the many moments when Arthur's knights are listening to their king's music, however critically and even doubtfully. The article then concludes with the predictable claim that "Arthur's idealism fails to consolidate its innocence in its confrontation with experience". This, indeed, must be about a text Tennyson never wrote. I cannot find any suggestion in the Idylls that this was in any way the point of Arthur's idealistic construction.

In a later article, Shaw applies the Hegelian dialectic to the Idylls.\textsuperscript{5} Here he even admits that this analysis requires a regrouping of the poems for it to work. And after this tampering with the text follows the inevitable claim that the "forms", which apparently means the imagery, "are antecedent to the conflicts" — in the typical dialectical manner. That this is not so is, in fact, the next step in my argument, so I'll delay it for the moment. But it leads Shaw to the inevitable conclusion that the whole of King Arthur's idealism had been intellectually and philosophically futile from the start. Shaw's romantic poet Tennyson has, apparently, devoted a good deal of his life and poetical effort to a basically simple demonstration of the ultimate silliness of the material, which, at the same time, apparently also greatly fascinated him,

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\item[4.] \textit{Ibid.}, 42.
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although it leaves us only a few moments of tragic grandeur in nearly 300 pages of poetry. Some of us may well share the general feeling, but this is clearly not evaluative criticism. Moreover, there are so many “recognitions” in the Idyls of a much more hopeful and suggestive nature, even for the reluctant reader, that Shaw’s conclusion cannot be justified. His oppositions are simplified beyond recognition, postulating a formalism of a typically Romantic kind which is not there.

An article by Fred Kaplan, written about the same time, looks much more promising. He makes a convincing case that, in the particular Idyll of “Merlin and Vivien”, Tennyson is confronting the typical Romantic concern of the failure of the imagination to sustain creativity. That may well be true of this one Idyll, though it is not of any of the others, nor is it the only possible reading of even this one. But the reader becomes really suspicious when Kaplan claims that Vivien, like Keats’s nightingale, is a “deceiving elf”. This analogy is obviously strained: to any serious reader Vivien is a different, far more destructive force, certainly in the final edition of 1875. His comparison of Merlin with Kubla Khan works better, although it does not really answer any questions. Kaplan himself admits that Merlin’s creations are instruments for the loss of oneself, and of one’s existence as an artist. He also admits that Tennyson’s dealing with the destructive aspect of the Romantic “correspondent breeze” goes beyond the Romantic doubts and fears of failure of the imagination, to concentrate on “the end of energy, the end of ‘use’”.

Enough pole-axing. The field is clear for more affirmative action. But Tennyson’s own words to his son seem to apply here, too:

They have taken my hobby, and ridden it too hard, and have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical, or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem .... 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 ....


What, then, is so different between the Romantic idylls and Tennyson's *Idylls*? If one places Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" beside the description of Camelot in "Gareth and Lynette"—both "built to music" by bardic figures; or "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" or "The Eolian Harp" or other Dejection Odes beside "Merlin and Vivien"; or Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas: Peele Castle" beside the description and role of Pellam's castle in "Balin and Balan"; or his "Solitary Reaper" or "Daffodils" beside the various fields of lilies and roses in which Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere are regularly observed in "The Coming of Arthur", "Balin and Balan", "Pelleas and Ettrarre"; and many more notable Romantic texts, including *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Endymion*; one notices that the difference in every case is primarily one of the use of the imagery, and secondarily of the presence or absence, respectively, of a self-conscious self. In the Romantic poems one sees the images doing the work: giving shape to the thought, being observed and creating simultaneously. Experience and imagination are one.

This is not so in *Idylls of the King*. Experience is expressed in action and expressed thought. The imagery confirms, strikes warning notes, elucidates occasionally, or generally widens the scope of the particular experience. As has often been argued, it is Spenserian rather than Romantic; but not the Spenser of *The Faerie Queene*, but of the "Epithalamion", perhaps even of *The Shepheardes Calender*—in other words, not the gothic allegorist, but the classicist—in Roman imperialist tendencies, I will argue later. So the imagery of *Idylls of the King* is, in fact, anything but Romantic: it is medieval in its sense of a reality infused with meaning, vision, animation. It is decorative rather than explorative, in the neo-classical manner—Milton also comes to mind.

Obviously, it would not have taken the form it did without the Romantic experiments preceding it, but it goes beyond those, in both pre- and post-Romantic ways. It is closer to the "mask"—poetry of Browning's dramatic monologues than to the characters of *Lyrical Ballads*. This is closely connected with the other difference: the absence of a self-conscious self in the concrete scenes. *Idylls of the King* differs from its medieval source-material, strikingly, in the absence of an omniscient narrator. And it differs from Romantic Gothic in the absence of self-consciously self-explorative experiences in the manner of *The Ancient Mariner* or *Endymion*. There is no central "I", nor any self-conscious Romantic irony.

My contention is that in *Idylls of the King* the imagery fulfills the function of the omniscient narrator. The *Idylls* are constructed throughout of scenes and episodes strictly presented—"seen"—each
from the point of view of an individual character, a persona or "centre of consciousness". There are no intrusive authorial comments (except, of course, in the "Dedication" and in the epilogue "To the Queen"). The whole exploration and debate is composed of interdependent points of view kept in suspended existence. And it is, as I have said, the imagery that ties this suspended existence to reality, and that serves as objective referent.

A concrete example: Gareth's vision of Camelot "built to music" is not a record of a "participation mystique", but shows the subjective effects of a collective or social imagination — an idealism not yet his own — on a bewildered but willing self. This seems to me to be rather more complex than the Romantic situations, in that both the individual experience and that which is experienced are in flux. Both the novice and the ideal are "suspended". This is subjectivity, not "recollected in tranquility", nor ever allowed to solidify into significance, but simply "celebrated" — "mourned" is perhaps a better word — as a complex of subjectivities juxtaposed and related, in every sense of the word.

In a sense the Idylls are more "realistic" than most Romantic poems, but the realism is political rather than personal: the realism of the rule of kingdoms, of empires. This probably also explains the epic — rather than romance — quality of Idylls of the King. It is tragic, full of recognitions, and dramatic. It does not, however, have the sacrificial element inherent in epic, those highest heroic moments of epic; there are no sacrifices in the service of the people in the Idylls. The epic is mutated into elegy. Nor is there the happy ending typical of the romances. Instead there is the lyricism of the imagery as the controlling consciousness of this vast panorama. Tennyson may have had Spenser and Milton and Lyrical Ballads in common with the Romantics, but then they go different ways.

Instead of giving more instances from the Idylls to illustrate my point in detail, I should like to mention a few critics who, in their own ways, unbiased by doctrinaire romantic approaches, have provided very fine readings of the Idylls. William Brasher, for example, gives a very insightful analysis of the tragic subjectivity of the poet in the Idylls, from a Nietzschean perspective. He argues that the tragic subjective poet recognizes the impossibility of objective values and, hence, the necessity of heroic Apollonian illusions. These, sustained by the human will, save men from Dionysian despair. Brasher claims that all of

Tennyson's poetry embodies the struggle of the individual to sustain an illusion of self that can withstand the disturbing force of the Dionysian realm of consciousness. In the *Idylls* King Arthur’s will sustains for a time the illusion of a civilization — Camelot — above the Dionysian chaos and delays the regression into bestiality. The evil characters, lacking faith or self-confidence, such as King Mark, Vivien, Sir Modred, do not believe in these illusions. They use the weaknesses in others (who do believe, up to a point) to break up the realm. In my view, this is very much like what the description of Camelot “built to music” reflects. William E. Buckler admits that Tennyson had the notion of “the exercise of imagination as an act of faith” (James Heffernan’s term) in common with Wordsworth, but stresses that Tennyson’s practices and motives are very different, in fact more lyrical and more epic. He points to the Romantic German *Kunstmärchen* as a model, and explores the notion of “the Ruling Passion of the Whole Mind” and the *personae* it produces as a helpful way towards understanding. His analysis of the different characters in these terms is really revealing. And last but not least, John Dixon Hunt’s is the most sensitive, honest analysis I have seen. His notion of every scene being presented as completed speech and action, as *artefact* rather than chronicle, as scenes picturesque and complete in themselves, static, presented in a montage-technique, especially offers a rewarding and revealing perspective on the whole. Tennyson’s iconic conception of art in the *Idylls* strikes me as pre-Romantic. Hunt’s reference to Dante’s *dolce stil nuovo* is telling.

Buckler stressed, quite rightly, the total fragmentation at work in the *Idylls* as a deep concern of the poet. And that brings me to my last point: such a deep concern for fragmentation and the threat it poses to society is characteristically a nationalistic concern. Combined with the fact that much of the imagery in *Idylls of the King* is of a particularly earthy kind, a suspicion arises that the *Idylls* reflect a *Blut und Boden*-type nationalistic attitude. The following lines from the epilogue “To the Queen” seem quite clear on that score. The trigger was, according to Tennyson himself, an article in *The Times* suggesting that Canada should secede:

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And that true North, whereof we lately heard
A strain to shame us "keep you to yourselves;
So loyal is too costly! friends — your love
Is but a burthen: loose the bond, and go."
Is this the tone of empire? here the faith
That made us rulers? this, indeed, her voice
And meaning, whom the roar of Houguomont
Left mightiest of all peoples under heaven?
What shock has fool'd her since, that she should speak
So feebly? wealthier — wealthier — hour by hour!
The voice of Britain, or a sinking land,
Some third-rate isle half-lost among her seas?

(II. 14-25)11

Fortunately the poetic image-making poet is wiser than the thinker Tennyson. The imagery of the actual *Idylls*, with its apparent paradoxes and rich natural ambiguities, has a great deal more to say than such explicit statements suggest. Yet, I suspect that the urge to produce a kind of national epic is itself an illustration of this nationalistic attitude. Or perhaps, remembering the Spenserian experiments, imperialistic is more accurate than nationalistic. In any event, I believe that the carefully absent poet of *Idylls of the King* has, what Keats would again have had to call, had he lived longer, a “palpable design” on the reader.