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## The Apostle Peter, Henry Vaughan, and "Cock-crowing"

by James E. Hewitt

And Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-2).

The effect of Peter's denial, until the resurrected Lord himself appeared unto him to allay his fears, effectively made of him an outcast, at least in his own mind. That either he, the disciples, or a combination of the two realized Peter's different position can be seen by the words of the angel to the women who visited Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, because the angel made a distinction between the disciples and Peter in his charge to the women: "Go . . . and tell his disciples and Peter" (Mark 16:7).

What thoughts must have gone through Peter's mind between Good Friday and Easter morning? In Peter's later life, what memories must have been stirred by such mundane events as a rooster's greeting the morn or the reproving glance of a parent upon hearing a child deny what is known to be true? One will attempt to illustrate a connection between Henry Vaughan's "Cock-crowing" and those stray thoughts of Peter's later life.

Henry Vaughan's poems are filled with such stray thoughts, pulled from the recesses of his creative mind by his mind's associative power. Pettet sees in the works of Vaughan definite allusions to the works of both Cartwright (5) and Herbert (63), purposeful allusions which, Pettet claims, carry with them a "rich but shadowy margin of mainly subconscious associations" (62). While some might argue that Vaughan's poetry, to the twentieth-century mind, is weaker for its extensive borrowing, Pettet, does not see the numerous allusions as a basis for condemning Vaughan's work out of hand, and in fact, contends that the greater of Vaughan's poems (a list of which includes "Cock-crowing") have in their essence little direct, substantive relation to the poetry of others (67). The core of his argument lies in the fact that Vaughan used these "sub-

conscious associations" as a mental stepping stone that allowed him to cross over into other areas of investigation, just as a poet of any age may expand upon a chance word spoken in an entirely different context, possibly even forgetting the source of that inspiration in the heat of composition. Such an associative mind as Vaughan's must also, at times, turn back upon its own prior work and knowledge for images and phrases. Possibly, Vaughan's poems would be best seen in relationship to each other. For example, Allen cannot complete the first two paragraphs of his definitive explication of "Cock-crowing" without alluding sixteen times to other poems of Vaughan (226-8). Holmes' short explication of the poem is introduced by an allusion to "Repentance" (36). Durr sees overtures of "Vanity of Spirit" in "Cock-crowing" (36).

It is reasonable to assume that Vaughan's mind not only freely associates and assimilates ideas from other poets, his own poetry, and his brother's hermeticism (Holmes 36-7), but also from the events of his life, specifically his religious life. Garner claims that Vaughan experienced a true conversion of the soul and that his poetry is an assertion of that experience (131). The preponderance of religious themes in his later poetry and the dedication of Part II of *Silex Scintillans* in which he labels his poetry as "hymns" and then dedicates them to God (Vaughan 253-63) both give little cause to accept Kermode's reading of Vaughan's conversion as a poetic rather than religious experience (206); that his language was purely poetical, not mystical in any way (225). Garner is correct in asserting that Kermode "has over-emphasized the Hermetic in order to undervalue the Christian" (134). The present author, too, sees not a "private imagery" in the poetry of Vaughan in respect to his use of the Dionysian-Hermetic language, but rather a subconscious outpouring of his entire experience into that poetry.

This outpouring of experience, then, forces one to look at each image, each symbol, in Vaughan's poetry from more than one perspective. Each image, each symbol may be at once Hermetic, Christian—with a tincture of Neo-Platonism (Sandler 214)—and Dionysian or any combination of the three. The symbols in Vaughan's poetry must be seen from varying perspectives in much the same way in which we look at the word-play of Donne. To understand, we must step back and look at Vaughan's use of multifaceted symbols from differing perspectives; we must be free from classifying his poetry as "merely" Christian, Hermetic, or Dionysian. To bring to "Cock-crowing" a facet heretofore unexplored in depth, one must see the allusions to and overtones of the Apostle

Peter present within the subconscious associations of the poem, acknowledge them, and understand them. The recognition of this facet of Vaughan's symbolism does not preclude the validity of earlier critics who have seen his poetry as Christian—it reinforces this interpretation—nor does it preclude the recognition of the Hermetic or Dionysian within the poem, except insofar as critics who espouse these symbols deny the existence of differing facets within the poetry. Allen's masterful explication of the poem in light of the classical symbolism of the cock is, thus, here complemented by the personal, spiritual symbolism of the cock to both Peter and Vaughan.

Whether one sees Vaughan's conversion as religious or poetic, no one questions that Vaughan was steeped in religious knowledge. Sandler sees the affirmation of the Atonement for Vaughan in line 37 of "cock-crowing": "Onely this Veyle which thou hast broke" (213). Sanders and Garner refer to the persona of Ishmael that Vaughan assumes in various poems (Sandler 214; Garner 21). Fogle's edition of "Cock crowing" lists four direct references to the Bible in the poem itself, two from the Old Testament, two from the New (276-7).

The use of Biblical material as a basis for meditation, Vaughan's common use of Biblical persona as the speaker of the poem, and the manner in which Sandler asserts Vaughan's meditation proceeds are the bases for a speculative reading of Peter as a semi-persona of the poem, with Vaughan himself as a second semi-persona.

Not only is there an admixture of personae in this poem, resulting in Vaughan's speculating through the persona of Peter, but the temporal sequence of the poem is also a mixture of present, past, and future that reflects the meditative nature of the poem. Sandler asserts that these meditations are detached from a consideration of "temporal sequence" in their flights to Gethsemane, the Wilderness, or the Temptation (214). In short, Vaughan lets his associative mind roam unconstrained and unconcerned with questions of time, place, or historicity.

The tone of Vaughan's unconstrained, associative meditations embodied in "Cock-crowing" are clearly confessional. Garner's summation of the mystic's three stages of sanctification (purgation, illumination, and perfection) are present throughout the poem, but most clearly in the last stanza (56):

O take it off! make no delay  
 But brush me with thy light, that I  
 May shine into a perfect day,  
 And warme me at thy glorious Eye!  
 O take it off! or till it flee,  
 Though with no Lillie, stay with me! (Vaughan 277)

Take off that veyle which stands between man and God (purgation); "brush me with thy light" (illumination) so that I may "shine unto a perfect day" (perfection).

Vaughan believed man "an exile from Paradise" (Holmes 53). "Cock-crowing," then, clearly can be seen as an embodiment of Vaughan's desire for a return to Paradise through the persona of Peter, himself a penitent self-exile from the Lord's grace because of his denial of Jesus. If Peter were able to return from an exile imposed because of his personal denial of his Lord, so also would there be hope for man generally and Vaughan specifically.

The similarities between a Vaughan, who expresses in numerous poems a desire for a closer relationship with God, a stripping away of that which hinders such relationship, the bestowal of His "light" through which that relationship is finally effected, and a Peter both at the time of the denial and later in life, are striking. It is reasonable to assume that, while writing such poems in Part II of *Silex Scintillans* as "Ascension-day," "Ascension-hymn," "White Sunday," "Trinity-Sunday," "Palm-Sunday," "Jesus weeping," "St. Mary Magdalen," "The Men of War" (an account of Herod's soldiers stripping and mocking Jesus), and "The Daughter of Herodias," Vaughan would have happened onto or been reminded of the account of the denial of Jesus and have used, consciously or subconsciously, that account as the stepping stone to meditations upon his own condition.

Those references are easily found within the poem. It was the combination of the last crow of the cock and the glance of Jesus that brought Peter to realize his denial of his Lord. Allen, almost in passing, equates the cock in "Cock-crowing" with the cock of Peter's denial, making the cock not only the "herald of God's light . . . but also the grave Judge" (235). Throughout his explication, however, Allen focuses upon the classical and Christian historical symbolism of the cock, rather than upon the immediate and personal meaning of the cock to Peter; the post-Apostolic rather than the post-crucifixion Christian provides for Allen the greater interest.

Allen does not refer to the glance of Jesus in his explication. In fact, he uses St. Ambrose's explanation of the cock as a combina-

tion forgiving and reproving figure (233). The very fact, though, that lines 2 and 41 are borrowed from or inspired by Herbert's poem "The Glance" (177-8) may be more evidence of Vaughan's associative mind at work; free association that could leave the final product far from the original germ, yet logically connected to it.

The allusions to sleep in lines 25-30 can be connected to Peter in that it was Peter who, along with James and John, had been reproved earlier that same evening for sleeping in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus wrestled in prayer (Matthew 26:40). That sleep had been restful for Peter, unlike any sleep experienced during the night following Peter's denial and Jesus' crucifixion, which must have been close to Vaughan's picture in lines 25 and 26: "To sleep without thee, is to die; / Yea, 'tis a death partakes of hell:"

This image of the Garden of Gethsemane is reinforced by the echoing in lines 15-6 of the very words that Jesus used as a mild reprimand to the just-awakened, formerly sleeping disciples who were to watch, not sleep, while Jesus prayed. "What, could ye not watch with me one hour" (Matthew 26:40)?

A less obvious allusion to Peter may be seen in the couplet at the end of stanza three: "If a meer blast so fill the sail, / Shall not the breath of God prevail?" Peter, the fisherman, had been present during both of the times in which Jesus, a boat, and a storm had had a significant impact upon the disciples. Matthew 8:23, Mark 4:37, and Luke 8:22 all record the stilling of the tempest by Jesus through the power of His word (breath). Matthew 14:25, Mark 6:48, and John 6:19 record Jesus walking on the water and the attempt to do so by the Apostle Peter. This couplet remains unsatisfactorily explicated and integrated into the poem, and unless seen as an outpouring of the soul of a nautical Peter, the couplet appears as an intrusion of extraneous matter into the body of the poem.

That the purpose of these images and allusions is not revealed within the poem is indicative of Vaughan. These meditations seem to be more private ("private ejaculations" is part of the subtitle to Part II of *Silex Scintillans*), focused inward upon a mind that knew how it worked and knew its own associations. Rather than a conscious building of the whole, these images seem rather to be undercurrents that do not force the issue but assist what one proposes, along with Pettet (95), is the primary focus of the poem—the desire for the "unveiling."

Like the rest of the poem, this unveiling must be seen in many concurrent lights. It is definitely a longing for a physical unveiling of the body, a changing to a celestial body, that would occur at the

Last Day; or an unveiling of the entire imperfect world to reveal a perfect, glorious one (Pettet 176). It is, at the same time, a physical-spiritual unveiling of the light within the cock's eye (a removal of the nictating membrane) so that that same light which God has put into the cock's eye can be seen in man's. It is also a reference to the veil of the Temple broken at the moment of Christ's death, that veil that symbolized the distance between man and God. Most importantly, however, it is Vaughan's personal veil of "the sense of the frustration of mortal life and of the severance between man and God . . . a highly characteristic Vaughan word" (Pettet 176). It is here that the connection between Peter and Vaughan is both most tenuous and most taut—tenuous, because it underlies the surface of the poem; taut, because it is bound up in the meaning and significance of the poem. This frustration of the mystic with the present life that is so evident in Vaughan is the same frustration expressed in Peter's epistles as he speaks of being "tried with fire" (I Peter 1:7); as he says that "flesh [is] as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass" (I Peter 1:24); who calls Christians "a chosen generation . . . called out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9); and who says that we might become "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4).

Peter's encounter with the cock in the courtyard must have affected his later life. The mystic his writings show him to be must have mused many times upon that moment. The sound of a cock, the smell of a fire, a reproving glance, a forgiving look; all must often have brought back vivid memories of that morning. If intermingled with the burning recollections of Good Friday and the rending of the veil of the temple, there conceivably also would be musings about the rending of the final veil on Judgment Day.

The frustrations, problems, and instability that marked Vaughan's life at the time he wrote this poem (Hutchinson 165) would, to a mind as freely associative as Vaughan's, strike harmonious chords with the accounts of Peter's manic-depressive life as an apostle as well as with his role as a mystic in his Epistles. It is but a short journey within Vaughan's imagination to create a poem that expresses his own desires and frustrations through the persona of Peter looking back upon his life; to infuse Peter, the persona, with the associative, imaginative mind of Vaughan himself and, then, close the poem rendered by Vaughan-Peter with the words of the disciples on the way to Emmaus that first Easter, "Stay with me!"

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## The Cyclical Structure of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

by Lesley A. Brown

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* has been praised and damned by critics in the ninety years since its publication. Those who dislike the work tend to view it as a collection of descriptive episodes lacking a controlling structural unity, blaming Tennyson's prolonged period of composition. Without a doubt, Tennyson's method of composition has clouded the issue of the *Idylls* as a unified work, for he published all twelve over a span of some thirty years. He first produced "Morte d' Arthur." The first four idylls to be published (in 1859) were "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere." (He later split "Enid" into two separate idylls, "the Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid.") In 1969, he added "The Coming of Arthur," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettare," and "the Passing of Arthur." The final three, "The Last Tournament," "Gareth and Lynette," and "Balin and Balan," were published in 1871, 1872, 1885, respectively. The completed sequence, first published in 1891, however, does not reflect the order in which the individual idylls were written.

Some think Tennyson's process of composition haphazard, implying that his protracted work on the *Idylls* resulted in a lack of unity in the finished product. Paul F. Baum, in 1948, characterizes the *Idylls* in this manner: "a hope rather than a plan, never carefully thought through . . . fitfully undertaken, laid aside and timidly resumed . . . a collection of fragments united by threads" (205). Christopher Ricks, in his 1972 work, *Tennyson*, asserts that Tennyson's composition process consisted of "strange indecisions" and "compromises and timidities" (264). To argue that the work lacks unity because of its composition process is less than convincing, however. Even if Tennyson did not have the final form of the *Idylls* in mind when he began, he constantly revised and adapted the first few idylls as his project grew. Furthermore, it is important to note that, since "Morte d' Arthur" was written first, Tennyson had his end point in mind during his thirty years of work upon the *Idylls*.

Tennyson's narrative techniques are frequently attacked, as well. For example, Baum condemns what he calls the "conflicting manners" of the idylls. Among the first four idylls, he finds a "domestic encounter, a dramatic dialogue, a poetic narrative, [and]

the end of a tragedy" (205). Baum, who apparently felt that the diversity of Tennyson's narrative techniques somehow detracted from the overall value of the work, is certainly not alone in this appraisal of the *Idylls*. T. S. Eliot wrote that "Tennyson could not tell a story at all" (337), and Ricks calls the *Idylls* "strikingly uneven" (264). Other critics agree that the work has no unity. Those who hold this view often praise, in Baum's words, "many splendid descriptions, many fine fragments of narrative" (213), while they tend to dismiss any consideration of the work as an organic whole. However, the *Idylls* can and should be viewed as a unified whole, not as a series of disparate parts, because a close reading of the work clearly shows that Tennyson adapted the idyll form to his own purposes, creating a structural unity based upon the cyclical repetition of character, action, image, and symbol. Part of the confusion over the *Idylls* is the result of its narrative diversity, as reflected in Baum's comments, cited earlier. Those who have tried to categorize its form within traditional genres usually have the most difficulty in accepting the work. The *Idylls* has been viewed as an inferior epic, as an allegory, as a parable, as a romance, and as a tragic drama. Even those willing to accept the work as a collection of idylls often complain that the individual poems are too long to be considered "little pictures" (the meaning most often ascribed to the term "idyll").

Critics who insist on viewing the *Idylls* as an epic in the classical sense are inevitably dissatisfied with the work. Although the final form of the poem, with its twelve books, suggests that the author wanted readers to associate it with the classical epic, Paul Turner asserts that Tennyson was "far too familiar with the traditional genres ever to confuse the idyll and the epic" (172). Those who insist on a strict allegorical interpretation nevertheless find the allegorical elements to be inconsistent, often nonexistent. Tennyson himself both accepted and rejected an allegorical interpretation of the *Idylls*. Hallam Tennyson reports in the *Memoir* that, when his father was asked if the Three Queens stood for Faith, Hope, and Charity, he responded, "They mean that and they do not. . . . I hate to be tied down to say, 'This means that,' because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation" (127). Clearly, Tennyson did not wish to be restricted to an overly narrow interpretation of his work: rather, he believed that a strict allegorical interpretation of the work would diminish its symbolic impact, and recent critics seem to agree. F. E. L. Priestley, for example states that Tennyson was not content "To develop a didac-



tic allegory in which the symbols are two-dimensional items adding up directly to the sum of the general scheme" (240-41). Turner asserts that the poem "is primarily not an allegory, which means something quite different (*allos*) from what it says, but a parable, which implies, alongside (*para*) a realistic narrative, a generalizing comment on human life" (151). Thus, although some elements in the *Idylls* may be interpreted on an allegorical level, a strict allegorical reading is plainly too reductive for a work of such texture and complexity.

This confusion over genre, over how to classify the *Idylls*, is not surprising. Tennyson did, in fact, incorporate many different narrative styles in the work and manipulated the conventions of the traditional genres—all within the framework of the idyll. Robert Pattison asserts that it may have been the "ambiguity" of the form that attracted Tennyson to the idyll (26), and that it is not surprising that "the fusion of so many different forms and traditions at first bewildered the poem's readers" (136). Tennyson was merely taking advantage of the flexibility of the idyll form—one that had been present from the very beginning.

Theocritus, generally credited with developing the idyll in the fourth century B.C., incorporated techniques from lyric, epic, and dramatic poetry into the idyll form (Mackail 219). The classical idyll is characterized by ambiguity and flexibility of form, and by emotional distance. The form is considered to be flexible, because Theocritus freely borrowed techniques from other genres. He borrowed from the Homeric epic, detaching the individual myths and stories from their original contexts. He also borrowed conventions from the lyric poetry of his day. Because the lyric elements of a classical idyll were often set within a framing device in which two characters challenge each other to a singing contest, elements of dramatic poetry were incorporated, as well. The result of Theocritus' manipulation of techniques from other genres is an emotional distance. When the poet removes a familiar myth or story from its original context or presents a lyric poem set within a framing device, he creates the effect of emotional distance for the reader. This emotional distance accounts, in part, for the term, "little pictures." Many idylls present a highly descriptive fragment of life—an isolated scene, frozen in time—in which the characters are viewed as if from a great distance, and the reader reacts to the poem as if viewing a picture.

Given the origins and history of the idyll form, the variety of narrative techniques in the *Idylls* is less disturbing. Tennyson was

operating within a long-established tradition, and many of the elements of the classical idyll may be seen in his work. He detaches the individual stories of Arthur's court from their original context. (The fact that he did not remain faithful to Malory is often a source of negative criticism.) Tennyson also makes use of a framing device. The entire cycle is framed by "The Coming of Arthur" and "The Passing of Arthur," and each individual idyll is placed in a frame as well. Tennyson even incorporates the conventions of the lyric in the *Idylls*. Nearly every idyll introduces a central character who sings a song; in fact, the song is often a key to the character's personality. However, even though Tennyson borrows from the tradition of the classical idyll, he adapts the form to his own purposes. For example, although the idylls are distanced through the framing device, the reader still experiences an emotional intensity in many individual scenes. Tennyson often heightens the mood when presenting his fragments of life. His technique is seen in the following lines from "The Holy Grail":

And all at once, as there we sat, we heard  
A cracking and riving of the roofs,  
And rending, and a blast, and overhead  
Thunder and in the thunder was a cry.  
And in the blast there smote along the hall  
A beam of light seven times more clear than day;  
And down the long, beam stole the Holy Grail  
All over cover'd with a luminous cloud,  
And none might see who bare it, and, it past.  
But every knight beheld his fellow's face  
As in a glory, and all the knights arose,  
And staring each at other like dumb men  
Stood, till I found a voice and sware a vow.  
(HG 182-194)

Here the reader is distanced from the action, because Percival is recounting the story after-the-fact. The action is frozen in time, yet the emotional intensity of the scene is characteristic of Tennyson's use of the idyll.

In the *Idylls*, Tennyson relies also on the characteristics of the form to present what Jerome Buckley calls "a group of chivalric tableaux selected from a great mass of available legend" (172). According to Buckley, "each of the *Idylls* moves through a series of sharply visualized vignettes toward its pictured climax, its moment of revelation" (172-3). The danger that Tennyson faced in creating such a long work in the idyll form was that the final product might

be static. John Rosenberg believes that the vignettes presented in each idyll are so intense that the reader experiences them as actions, rather than pictures (26). He asserts that Tennyson solves the problem of narrative action in the *Idylls* by adapting the idyll form to his own purposes:

Building on the techniques of the classical idyll, with its intensification of mood, its highly allusive texture, its startling juxtapositions, flashbacks, and deliberate discontinuities, Tennyson creates an inclusive psychological landscape in which all the separate consciousnesses in the poem participate and in which each action is bound to all others through symbol, prophecy, or retrospect. (27)

Although Tennyson utilizes the characteristics of the classical idyll, he goes beyond the presentation of isolated scenes to create a work that has both psychological and structural unity. As Rosenberg noted, Tennyson unites the action and character in each idyll with the actions and characters in the other idylls, creating a cyclical structure in which symbols, characters, and actions are repeated to give the poem its unity.

Cycles are an important aspect of the structure of the *Idylls*. Tennyson employs a variety of cycles at many different levels of the poem, but one of the most obvious is the cycle of the seasons. Buckley points out that each of the idylls "is given an appropriate seasonal setting so that the colors of the background may accent the prevailing temper of the protagonists in the foreground and symbolize the moral condition of the realm itself" (173). Henry Kozicki suggests that the structure of the work "mimes the twelve months of the year, a conception carefully woven into the whole fabric. . ." (17).

The cycle of seasons begins in springtime with the "Coming of Arthur." He comes to Camelard at the end of winter desiring to marry Guinevere to "'Have power on this dark land to lighten it / And power on this dead world to make it live'" (CA 92-3). As the idyll progresses, the season advances, and the couple are married at the height of spring: "Far shone the fields of May thro' open door, / The sacred altar blossom'd white with May" (CA 459-60). Next, the purity and the promise of spring is reflected in the following idyll, "Gareth and Lynette," which represents the virtues of Arthur's newly formed kingdom. Gareth sets out to join Arthur's court when "The damp hill-slopes were quicken'd into green, / And the live green had kindled into flowers" (GL 181-2). In the Geraint idylls and especially in "Balin and Balan," one sees the beginnings of

doubt that will eventually destroy Arthur's dream. The season has moved into summer; the kingdom is prosperous, but Vivien sounds a warning: "This old sun-worship, boy, will rise again, / And beat the Cross to earth, and break the King / And all his Table" (BB 450-52). Kozicki states, "In the late summer of the Arthurian world, heavy with premonition, Vivien is the catalyst that hastens the inevitable alteration; she sings of cyclic growth and decay" (18). The Grail search takes place in the last days of summer, when nine-tenths of the knights "are cut down in the hopeless quest for that vision of departed purity and innocence" (Kozicki 18). The cycle of decay accelerates as the poem moves into the last few idylls and the season turns from fall to winter. "The Last Tournament" begins with Dagonet's dancing "like a wither'd leaf" and ends "all in a death—dumb autumn—dripping gloom" (LT 750), and Arthur dies amid "the stillness of the dead world's winter dawn" (PA 442).

Although the poem encompasses more than one calendar year, the seasons represented in each idyll form one complete, yearly cycle from winter to winter. The kingdom progresses and then regresses, from prosperity to decline, from innocence to decadence, and Tennyson uses the passing of the seasons as a means of intensifying the reader's awareness of this cycle of decay. Moreover, the cycle of the seasons, underscores the degeneration among Arthur's knights. A few critics have found fault with these descriptive passages in the *Idylls*; some find them, however, vivid—to be gratuitous. Nevertheless, Tennyson's careful descriptions of the cycle of the seasons are not mere decorative passages, but units that reinforce the thematic elements of the poem.

The cycle of the seasons is only one of the structural devices in the poem. For example, Turner notes that Tennyson utilizes the medieval concept of the wheel of fortune to represent the "'cycle of generations', the historical process by which the human race advances, through alternating periods of progress and regress, rise and fall" (151). He further states that, by placing the middle ten idylls under the separate rubric of "The Round Table," Tennyson "almost invited the reader to see these Idylls as a revolving Wheel of Fortune, on which Arthur is first raised, and then . . . flung down. . ." (166). Just as the cycle of the seasons represents the progression of growth and decay, the cycle of the wheel of fortune represents the rise and fall of Arthur's kingdom. The doom of civilization is foretold in "Gareth and Lynette," when Arthur and his kingdom are at their height. The old seer who confronts Gareth at the beginning of the idyll tells him, ". . . Son, I have seen

the good ship sail / Keel upward, and mast downward, in the heavens' " (GL 249-50). This concept of the wheel of fortune dictates that a man is most in danger when he reaches the top of the wheel; destiny ordains that those who reach the top inevitably must fall. Thus, Tennyson uses the wheel and the cycle of generations to bring coherence and unity to the *Idylls*. Although Arthur's realm replaces a barbarous world, his realm is doomed to failure and will itself be replaced by a barbarous world. The downward progression in the poem, the further decay of civilization evident in each successive idyll, illustrates fortune's rise and fall and unites the separate idylls thematically.

In addition, Tennyson relies on the cyclical patterns to emphasize the relevance of the Arthurian subject matter to Victorian England. The cycles of history illustrated in the poem suggest that what happened to Arthur's realm could also happen to Victorian society. Arthur shows an awareness of the cycles of history when he calls from his death barge, 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new, (PA 408). It is ironic that this statement is the same one with which Arthur initiated his kingdom. When the Roman lords come to Arthur's hall demanding tribute, he declares, 'Behold, for these have sworn / To wage my wars, and worship me their King; / The old order changeth, yielding place to the new' (CA 506-8). Arthur's kingdom replaces Rome, but only for a time. If the perfect kingdom of Camelot were doomed to failure, surely the suggestion would be that every civilization, even Victorian England, is in danger of the same fate. The *Idylls* does not end without hope, however. At the end of "The Passing of Arthur," "the new sun" rises, "bringing the new year" with a suggestion of rebirth and the beginning of a new cycle. If every civilization is doomed to fade with time, a new order will come to take its place.

Tennyson's use of cycles as a structural element also introduces the principle of repetition in character, action, and symbol as a further means of uniting the separate idylls. Rosenberg summarized what he calls the "three principles which constitute the underlying structure of the *Idylls*:

No character ever appears only once but instead recurs in the guise of another character or through the reappearance of an image or event with which he is associated. No action occurs uniquely but instead reverberates, in anticipation or retrospect, throughout the poem. No symbol stands for one thing only without also containing its opposite. (134).

Sometimes, the symbols or characters reappear in the same form in subsequent idylls, and, sometimes, they appear as opposites or inversions of the original character or symbol. For example, Guinevere's character is repeated in the character of Vivien and inverted in the character of Elaine. Guinevere's destruction of Arthur is repeated in Vivien's destruction of Merlin. While Guinevere pursues the false and misdirected ideal of a perfect love, Vivien embodies the notion of a perfect hate. It is Vivien who sows the seeds of doubt that hasten the demise of the kingdom. In his characterization of Vivien, Tennyson repeats and intensifies Guinevere's character to show the dire consequences of her adultery. In Elaine, he presents the reverse image of Guinevere, and once again the image is intensified. The inversion or reverse image of the Queen's relationship with Lancelot is illustrated by Elaine's purity and the "holiness of her devotion" (Lewin 34). Elaine, like Guinevere, is obsessed with Lancelot, but the result for Elaine is death. The effect of this repetition and inversion of character is that each idyll, although complete in itself, takes on added significance in juxtaposition with other idylls in the cycle. Thus, each idyll, while remaining a separate entity, becomes a part of the total structure of the poem.

The repetition and inversion of character and action can best be seen in the central relationship of the *Idylls*, the relationship between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, repeated in various forms in the other marriages and courtships within the poem. Lois Lewin notes the importance of the interplay between these three characters, claiming that the "royal triangle" must be seen as the central relationship and that Guinevere's infidelity must be seen as the central event of the poem (32). All "the other human dramas are played out against the background of rising tension created by the growing knowledge of the Queen's affair which both breeds and parallels the increasing corruption in the land" (32). The inversion of the royal triangle is illustrated in "The Last Tournament" where the destructive relationship between Tristram, Isolt, and Mark is a sinister echo of the relationship between Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. Here, Isolt speaks to Tristram:

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 wert nigh.  
(LT 514-20)

Arthur's failure as a husband is mirrored by Mark, who must steal through his own castle. The irony is that Mark's stealth enables him to take Tristram by surprise and kill him. However, if Mark is an image of Arthur, he is a reverse image, for he has none of Arthur's purity or virtue. Lewin points out that Guinevere sins against the highest, while Isolt sins against the lowest of men (34).

Tennyson also uses a repetition and inversion of image and symbol to add unity to the *Idylls*. Rosenberg points out that in the poem "nothing ever happens only once and everything that happens, happens simultaneously with its opposite" (64). This observation includes the many images and symbols in the work: "Camelot and the wasteland, music and discord . . . white roses and red . . . growth and decay." The opposites are "fractured halves of the same identity" (Rosenberg 65). Perhaps, the most frequently repeated symbols in the *Idylls* are the colors, red and white, along with the recurring symbols of gardens and lilies and roses. White, the color of purity, is most prevalent in the opening idylls and in reference to Arthur, while red, the color of passion, is most often associated with battle and with Guinevere. As previously noted, symbols in the *Idylls* frequently contain their opposites, true, also, in the case of the color symbolism. Buckley notes that, in death, Elaine "holds the white flower against her white robe; but the passion which destroys her is clearly represented by a scarlet sleeve that Lancelot carries to the tourney as her token" (182-83). Thus, even the pure Elaine has been undone by passion. A similar mixture of red and white occurs in "The Holy Grail," when Galahad sees the Grail "Clothed in white samite or a luminous cloud" and yet "Redder than any rose" (Buckley 183). The Grail embodies the purity of a spiritual quest, but Galahad's vision indicates that even a spiritual quest can be condemned by passion. The fanaticism of the quest brings ruin to the land, opening the door to the Red Knight and the civil wars he initiates.

Closely tied to the color symbolism are the recurring settings of gardens with lilies and roses. Again, the symbols are used to represent purity and passion, and again, they repeat and echo throughout the twelve idylls. Lancelot and Guinevere are first noticed by Balin in a garden of roses and lilies. The fair Elaine, who dies of love for Lancelot, is called the lily maid of Astolat, while the passionate Guinevere states that she prefers the rose. In the contrast between gardens and untamed wilderness, Tennyson draws upon the pastoral tradition of the idyll to emphasize the details of the natural setting. Arthur is attempting to establish order

throughout his kingdom just as a gardener seeks to impose order upon the wilderness. When Guinevere and Lancelot stroll through the garden in "Balin and Balan," Guinevere remembers the time before the founding of Camelot when all the kingdom was a wilderness, and the garden scene in "Balin and Balan" is recalled when Lancelot strolls alone through the same garden in "Lancelot and Elaine," where he must choose between Elaine and Guinevere, between the lily and the rose (Rosenberg 33). Although the repetition of the garden motif is one more structural link between the idylls, it also embodies the cycle of growth and decay, indicating how intricately woven Tennyson's structural devices are: "everything that happens, happens simultaneously with its opposite."

When one examines the intricacy of Tennyson's structural devices, he finds it difficult to accept the idea that the work is a series of disconnected idylls. Tennyson clearly adapted the form to unite his twelve idylls as an organic whole. The cyclical patterns; the juxtaposition and repetition of moments of fixed intensity; and the repetition and inversion of character, action, image, and symbol unite the twelve idylls. Perhaps, it is the very intricacy of the structural devices that prevents some from seeing unity. Most recent critics, however, are far more sympathetic to Tennyson's achievements, particularly his use of symbol, than were earlier critics. As Rosenberg points out, "we have yet to assimilate into our literature this poem which is at once epic and lyric, narrative and drama, tragedy and romance. Our difficulty with [the *Idylls*] is not its derivativeness but its novelty" (33). The *Idylls* is as novel as it is complex; however, a close reading of the entire work reveals that it is not a collection of fragments or a series of disconnected scenes, but a cohesive and unified whole of striking power and diversity.

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## Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur": His Answer to the Victorian Problem

by Susan Halloran

When Alfred Tennyson's "Morte d' Arthur" was first published in 1842, the reading public inherited a poetic rendering of the death of Britain's legendary King Arthur that remained faithful to the prose work from which it was generally drawn (Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte D'Arthur*). By the time the poem was published as one of the *Idylls of the King*, an additional two hundred lines had shaped it into "The Passing of Arthur" and the culmination of Tennyson's answer to the problems the British Victorian age held for the sensitive thinker.

Victorian society was a fractious one torn between religious orthodoxy and religious apostasy, social reform, and Social Darwinism. Scientific breakthroughs were balanced by an ever-deepening spiritual void that seemed to hound the most advanced intellects of the period. Complacent in the eye of the societal hurricane dwelt the middle class, described by Richard Altick as "sanguine in temperament and materialistic in its values" (107). "Forward!" was the catch-word of the time, and the majority of Victorians seemed to endow progress with that sense of the divine formerly reserved for the spiritual world. Matthew Arnold's closing image in "Dover Beach" of "darkling plain/ Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night" (lines 35-37), echoes Tennyson's view of Victorian society; his presentation of Arthur's last battle is in kind. He differed from Arnold, however, on an important level; while constantly questioning the validity of the "old" answers and not being fully satisfied with the "new," Tennyson felt it a grave mistake to discard either view completely, and he set about to capture the importance of both in *The Idylls of the King*, because his poem is a tale of the new co-existing with the old, Arthur's Shining Christian Kingdom juxtaposed with sorcery and natural science. At the center is the king, Tennyson's answer to the Victorian crisis: a man of spiritual vision who, though doubting, never wavers from what he knows to be the Real; as the poet remarked, "Depend upon it, the Spiritual is the Real!" (Staines 153). In "The Passing of Arthur," the king is both at one with his eroding kingdom and outside it; although he is part of the cyclical workings of the universe, he is above them. He possesses what Tennyson found absent in his England: a firm foun-

dation. With this concept in mind, the poet addressed contemporary problems in his parable of a kingdom that had come to decadence.

The lines added to "Morte d' Arthur" contain a representation of the differences between Tennyson's king and Malory's. The Arthur of *Morte D'Arthur* is given to fits of temper, is occasionally duped through magic, and is an unwitting participant in incest. On the other hand, Tennyson has created a new monarch "who is the embodiment of the divine will . . . [He must] realize his highest calling in this world through an attempt to make humanity more aware of its full capability" (Staines 152). Possibly, Arthur's role was that which Tennyson pictured for himself as poet, and for all other persons of vision.

In the original draft of his poem, Tennyson closely follows Malory, departing from the earlier narrative in only one major place. In contrast, the added lines take very few events from the older account, and with the exception of Modred's death, these events appear in drastically altered or extended form. Clearly, Tennyson is allowing his vision to frame and permeate the "orthodox" legend. Themes that haunted Victorian society form the fabric that composes this last day of Camelot.

"The Passing of Arthur" is narrated by Bedivere, the first and last of Arthur's knights. Bedivere is recounting the incident after many years to the people "with whom he dwelt, new faces other minds" (1. 5). Immediately, the idea of a legacy connected with Arthur's example is suggested. Bedivere begins the history before the dawn of the last battle, also to be the last day of the kingdom. The poem will end at the dawn of the next day, pointing to Tennyson's belief in a cyclical nature of the universe, one that was supported by contemporary archeologic and geologic findings. Altick writes that "discoveries . . . revealed that . . . several other brilliant civilizations . . . had flourished then vanished . . .", and that it "shattered that comfortable illusion" Victorians held regarding their uniqueness (100).

Bedivere paces outside the king's tent among the "slumbering host" (7) while Arthur agonizes over the doubts that plague him. The two are awake amidst unconscious armies, alone in their unease over the coming events, even though these events point toward destruction. The sensitive Victorian isolated in a progress-worshipping society is mirrored, here. Bedivere, ever-diligent, overhears his king wrestling with the seeming lack of purpose in God's Will for men: "I found Him in the flowering of His fields,"

But in His ways with man I find Him not," (10-11). In his despair, Arthur has a Tennysonian revelation:

Or else...the world were wholly fair,  
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,  
And have not the power to see it as it is:  
Perchance, because we see not to the close....(18-21)

This line of thought had been evidenced in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, ". . . I see in part/ That all, as in some piece of art,/ In toil cooperant to an end," with "The truths that never can be proved/ Until we close with all we loved" (Lyric 78:22-24, 81:10-11). The necessity of religious faith in the face of questioning is an integral element in Tennyson's "answer." The Christ-like Arthur puts aside his doubts to commend his spirit to his Savior: "'Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die' " (28). And so, Tennyson supposed, would not Arthur's legacy.

The king, then, dreams of his dead nephew, Gawain, and receives both warning and reassurance. Tennyson uses this event (from Malory) to point up the folly of materialism. Gawain, the knight devoid of spiritual vision and overfond of sensual pleasures, is "blown/ Along a wandering wind, . . . /shrilling, 'Hollow, hollow all delight!' " (31 33). Bedivere remarks, "'Light was Gawain in life, and light in death/ Is Gawain, for the ghost is as the man. . . ' " (56-57). Tennyson illustrates his concept of the emptiness of a life focused on sense rather than soul.

Gawain's ghost and Bedivere both communicate the idea that Arthur will in some way endure. Although he will pass away, Gawain tells Arthur he will exist on "'an isle of rest' " (35). Bedivere offers, as Arthur's death looms nearer,

O me, my king, let pass whatever will,  
Elves and the harmless glamor of the fields;  
But in their stead they name and glory cling  
To all high place like a gold cloud  
Forever.... (51-55)

Arthur is more than fodder for legend; his example forms the basis of the Real.

The king's musings upon the divisiveness of his land speak both to the sectarian British people and of another link with Christ. Arthur's "'The king who fights his people fights himself./ . . . the stroke/ That strokes them dead is as my death to me,' " echoes Jesus' "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desola-

tion, and ...shall not stand" (71-78; Matthew 12:25). Contemporary England could not fail to catch a chill from so somber a warning.

As he prepares to engage Modred's forces, Arthur mentions a "blind haze" (76) that had risen from the sea as he spoke with Guinevere at Almesbury and came to full realization of the sin that betrayed his ideal. The heavy air forces the king to "feel a way", as it has "folded on the passes of the world" (75-78). That "death-white mist" envelopes the battlefield, and its chill "to him who breathed it, drew/ Down with his blood till all his heart was cold/ With formless fear" (95-98). Unreasoning terror grips those involved in the fray, the courtesy of mist spawned from a loss of faith now covering the kingdom. Confusion afflicts them all, "And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew" (101). Tennyson paints an ugly portrait of a kingdom self-destructing which includes

... shrieks  
After the Christ, of those who falling down  
Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist,  
And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights,  
Oaths, insults, filth and monstrous blasphemies. . . . (110-114)

It bears striking similarities to Carlyle's description in *Sartor Resartus* of the view a Wanderer without faith holds of the Victorian climate,

... wherein is heard only the howling of wild beasts, or the shrieks of despairing hate-filled men. . . . The whole world is sold out to unbelief; their old temples of the Godhead. . . crumble down; and men ask now; Where is the Godhead. . . ?(1978)

Tennyson names the spiritual blindness that brought about the decay of Arthur's kingdom as the same problem that afflicted the Victorians.

As the great battle closes and the end of Camelot draws near, the mist that so clouded the conflict is blown away by a "bitter wind" (124) that enables the sea to encroach upon the beach now covered with the dead. Arthur calls the rising tide "this great voice that shakes the world," "that is the "voice of days of old and days to be" (139; 135). The sea, and with it nature and the universe, are deeper than mere mortal kingdoms, however spiritual they may be, for they are the source of spirituality. Again, the idea of the cyclical nature of creation is interjected; the destruction of Arthur's kingdom is in its final stages.

Yet Arthur himself still remains. Bedivere addresses the wavering monarch as he questions his sovereignty, now reduced to himself and one knight, with "My king,/ King everywhere! And so the dead have kings,/ There also will I worship you as King" (147-149). His kingship reaffirmed, Arthur reflects upon those comprising his kingdom who capitulated to sense yet still "owned him as King" (159). Although they did not adhere to his ideal, they recognized the rightness of it. Modred, though, planned to usurp that ideal and replace it with a false one; therefore, as his "last act of kingship" (163) Arthur **must** destroy this most treacherous of traitors, and in this effort **he** receives his mortal wound. At the heart of this passage lies Tennyson's presentiment that the Spiritual is sovereign, and that those who recognize this, whatever their failings, are far above those who reject it, Victorians included.

Then follows the original "Morte d' Arthur" section of the poem. In it, Tennyson depicts Malory's death of Arthur, adding the image of "A broken chancel with a broken cross" (177), and places somewhat more emphasis on the lure of Excalibur's precious hilt than did Malory—perhaps in response to attitudes already present in society in 1833-4. In the end, the sword is returned to the Lady of the Lake, and another cycle is completed; Bedivere, then, places Arthur on the barge to Avilion, navigated by the three dark queens. Here, Tennyson has Arthur speak to Bedivere's request for direction in a world full of (and Tennyson, here, brings the poem back to its opening image) "strange faces, other minds" (406): "The old order changeth, yielding place to new,/ And God fulfills himself in many ways,/ Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" (408-410). He adds:

"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,  
.....  
For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God." (415-419; 422-423)

Tennyson's answer is a religious one geared to comfort those who felt awash in an age of uncertainty and newness, and to indict those who abandoned his spiritual realm.

In the final section of "The Passing of Arthur," Tennyson ushers in the next order. As Bedivere watches Arthur's Barge disap-

pear into the "verge of dawn" (439), he is startled out of his gloom by the sensation that "'From the great deep to the great deep he [Arthur] goes,' 'The king has returned to the sea whence he came, as had Excalibur, just as Camelot has returned to the dust from which it arose. But there is something "deeper" in these events than an inevitable rising and falling of rulers and empires as Bedivere discovers, climbing an "iron crag" (447):

Then from the dawn it seemed there came, but faint  
As from beyond the limit of the world,  
Like the echo born of a great cry,  
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice  
Around a king returning from his wars. (457-461)

Arthur is passing from the worldly into the fully ideal, where he will reign forever in glory as Bedivere has predicted. The spiritual gives Bedivere that glimpse of the Eternal, the Only Reality.

David Staines writes, "The decay of Camelot is not the tragedy of Arthur nor...of his vision;" for "its momentary incarnation in Camelot [is] a testimony to man's capability" (152). Despite (and because of) the warring, despairing, complacent attitudes present in his society, Tennyson offered Victorians an alternative to emptiness: that they, like Bedivere, need only plant themselves firmly on the seemingly precarious but solid iron crag where they could watch with a measure of assurance as "...the new sun rose bringing the new year" (469).

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