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THE ABSENT NARRATOR IN TENNYSON'S *IDYLLS OF THE KING*

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The English Poet Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) wrote his first Idylls about King Arthur between 1856 and 1859 and the others between 1868 and 1874. He established the present form in twelve Idylls in 1886 and the definitive form in 1890 (10,289 lines). The primary source for the *Idylls of the King* is Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, which had become available again in 1816 in Walker & Edwards' edition. The English translation of the Welsh *Mabinogion* by Lady Charlotte Guest appeared in 1840, which also contributed details to Tennyson's vision.

In England since 1600 interest in King Arthur had virtually disappeared. Samuel Taylor Coleridge could maintain as late as 1833: "As to Arthur, you could not by any means make a poem on him national to Englishmen. What have we to do with him?" (*Table Talk*).[1] But Tennyson does by no means share the Romantic view, as we shall see. His contemporaries William Morris, Matthew Arnold and Algernon Swinburne (all writing on King Arthur) were much more working in the Romantic tradition: their Arthurian poems were written as 'medieval' and 'gothic', but not particularly as English. Their aim was psychological drama rather than social. They were not nationalistic, which Tennyson clearly is, as the epilogue to the *Idylls of the King* demonstrates.

My argument in this essay is that Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* does not make use of an omniscient narrator – in contrast to the medieval romances – and that there are reasons for this choice. Instead, the poet's control over the narrative is expressed in his particular choice of imagery, as I will demonstrate. Tennyson differs from his contemporaries – at least in the *Idylls of the King* — by his use of an imagery that is non-Romantic: the *Idylls* employ an imagery akin to Classicism, of the Roman-imperialist kind, as used earlier by Edmund Spenser (not in *The Faerie Queene*, but in *The Shepheardes Calender* and 'Epithalamion') in the sixteenth century and by Milton in the seventeenth. Not the explorative soul-landscapes ('paysage-etat d'âme') of the Romantics, but a classicist decorative imagery by which the narrative facts are animated with vision and significance.

As a first illustration, ll. 373-401 of the first Idyll, 'The Coming of Arthur', shows some of the complex characteristics of this expressionistic manner of writing. Leodegran (Guenevere's father) hears from Bellicent (King Lot's wife, mother of Gawain and Modred) that she had heard from Bleys (Merlin's master) that he and Merlin had gone down from Tintagel to the sea on the night King Uther had died.

It seem'd in heaven, a ship, the shape thereof
A dragon wing'd, and all from stem to stern
Bright with a shining people on the decks,
And gone as soon as seen. And then the two
Dropt to the cove, and watch'd the great sea fall,
Wave after wave, each mightier than the last,
Till last, a ninth one, gathering half the deep
And full of voices, slowly rose and plunged
Roaring, and all the wave was in 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!" And the fringe
Of that great breaker, sweeping up the strand,
Lash'd at the wizard as he spake the word,
And all at once all round him rose in fire,
So that the child and he were clothed in fire.
And presently thereafter follow'd calm,
Free sky and stars: "And this same child," he said,
"Is he who reigns; nor could I part in peace
Till this were told." And saying this the seer
Went thro' the strait and dreadful pass of death,
Not ever to be question'd any more
Save on the further side; but when I met
Merlin, and ask'd him if these things were truth –
The shining dragon and the naked child
Descending in the glory of the seas –
He laugh'd as is his wont, and answer'd me
In riddling triplets of old time,…

('The Coming of Arthur' , ll. 373-401)[2]

One notices two things immediately: the totally subjective presentation of the 'facts' and the couching of them in powerful images. Bellicent's direct speech repeating heard speech from Bleys and Merlin is doubly subjective -- in fact, trying to convince the listener (Leodegran) that the speaker is inclined to believe what she has not seen, on the authority of two wise men, one of whom is dead while the other is speaking in riddles. So, either: the truth is entirely subjective, or: the truth can only be believed, not verified. Both, in fact, I will argue.

Besides, the true nature of the 'facts' is couched in a string of images: a ship from heaven, mighty waves, light in darkness, fire and water (and air and earth, the

four elements), a biblical witness to the birth of the Redeemer before his own death (Bleys echoing Simeon in Luke, 2:25-35) , followed by rain, sun and rainbow – as at the covenant after Noah's Flood. This is not the subjectivity of the Romantic I-person poet, but that of characters embedded in the narrative. Nor are the images 'objective correlatives',[3] but decorative natural phenomena and allusions to, in this case, biblical events. The fact that subjectivity and the need to believe are linked together is, I think, the essence of the *Idylls*. Leodegran is not completely convinced in the poem; he needs a dreamvision of his own before he consents to give his daughter in marriage to the king of doubtful descent.

My point is that this imagery (and the subjectivity) enable Tennyson to stay out of range as an omniscient narrator. There are no intrusive authorial comments (except 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. It is the imagery that ties this suspended existence to reality and serves as objective referent. By 'objective' I mean here: putting the poem before the reader as an object. The omniscient narrator appears to have become a questionable concept through the nineteenth century, from Wordsworth's and Coleridge's claim of the relevance of subjectivity to capture 'real' experience (cf. the 1805 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) at the one end, and Nietsche's tragic subjectivity at the other end (witness Robert Browning's dramatic monologues and later Aestheticism).

Tennyson's *Idylls* is not only in the middle between these extremes, but is unique in not using the absence of an omniscient narrator to simply 'psychologize' the lyric, but precisely to present idealism (of a nationalistic kind) in a new light. The narrative manner is completely indirect: assertions are representations by someone to someone else in the story – always a character's personal point of view. Adjectives become unreliable because they reflect a single private sensibility. Conditional clauses and references to prophecies and dreams blur the distinction between the actual and the imagined (by a character) even further. The predominant use of similes makes for an ambiguous indeterminacy – because similes make more tentative analogies than metaphors do. Tennyson did, apparently, not mean his multiple levels of signification to cohere into a single explication.[4]

In short, we are constantly looking through the eyes of the participants in the story and get only their reactions to what they themselves see. The poet-narrator only speaks to us directly in his imagery, which is made to take care of our vision of the developments: an imagery of sun and flame, beasts and flowers serves to stress, for us, the need of subordinating personal desires and petty self-concern to social service and use – a view and precisely the kind of images picked up later by the totalitarian Nazi's and fascists of the twentieth century.

To illustrate this point about the imagery, I should like to concentrate on the flower-images and the pattern of moral and social ideals that evolves from them. In a

descending scale of these ideals, the scene between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenevere in the fifth Idyll 'Balin and Balan' sets the tone.[5] Sir Balin is secretly or accidentally witnessing a meeting between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guenevere:

> Then chanced, one morning, that Sir Balin sat
> Close-bower'd in that garden nigh the hall.
> A walk of roses ran from door to door;
> A walk of lilies crost it to the bower:
> And down that range of roses the great Queen
> Came with slow steps, the morning on her face;
> And all in shadow from the counter door
> Sir Lancelot as to meet her, then at once,
> As if he saw not, glanced aside, and paced
> The long white walk of lilies toward the bower.
> Follow'd the Queen; Sir Balin heard her "Prince,
> Art thou so little loyal to thy Queen,
> As pass without good morrow to thy Queen?"
> To whom Sir Lancelot with his eyes on earth,
> "Fain would I still be loyal to the Queen."
> "Yea so" she said "but so to pass me by –
> So loyal scarce is loyal to thyself,
> Whom all men rate the king of courtesy.
> Let be: ye stand, fair lord, as in a dream."
> Then Lancelot with his hand among the flowers [the lilies!]
> "Yea – for a dream. Last night methought I saw
> That maiden Saint who stands with lily in hand
> In yonder shrine. All round her prest the dark,
> And all the light upon her silver face
> Flow'd from the spiritual lily that she held.
> Lo! these her emblems drew mine eyes – away:
> For see, how perfect-pure! As light a flush
> As hardly tints the blossom of the quince
> Would mar their charm of stainless maidenhood."
>
> "Sweeter to me" she said "this garden rose
> Deep-hued and many-folded! sweeter still
> The wild-wood hyacinth and the bloom of May.
> Prince, we have ridd'n before among the flowers
> In those fair days – not all as cool as these,
> Tho' season-earlier. Art thou sad? or sick?
> Our noble King will send thee his own leech –
> Sick? or for any matter anger'd at me?"
>
> ('Balin and Balan', ll. 235-271)

Guenevere is not (yet) presented here as a sinner. The paths of roses and of lilies are both still there, albeit at cross-purposes. The image of the roses suggests a passionate nature-goddess, differing from the (male) ideal as Edmund Spenser's Duessa did from Una: as a-moral rather than immoral.

At this early stage the lily and the rose still co-exist. [6] In the seventh Idyll 'Lancelot and Elaine' – the first of the 'autumn' Idylls – Elaine is constantly presented as, in the opening lines, "Elaine the Fair, Elaine the lovable,/ Elaine the lily maid of Astolat". When, at the end of that Idyll, Lancelot is arguing against Guenevere's jealousy of Elaine, who is dead by then, he states: "To doubt her fairness were to want an eye,/ To doubt her pureness were to want a heart" (1365-66). The white lily has become an emblem of the beauty of purity, for which Lancelot was still yearning in 'Balin and Balan', but which he is now losing.

In the ninth Idyll 'Pelleas and Ettarre', the last of the 'autumn' or decay Idylls, the image for Ettarre is of the rose only. Ettarre is unkind to her loyal and virtuous suitor Pelleas, and eventually unfaithful to him with Sir Gawain – who had promised Pelleas to persuade Ettarre in Pelleas' favour. She is presented, by the rose imagery, as the opposite of Elaine and having a dark side in common with Queen Guenevere. But these roses are no longer 'nice'. First there is the song she sings to Sir Gawain:

> 'A rose, but one, none other rose had I,
> A rose, one rose, and this was wondrous fair,
> One rose, a rose that gladden'd earth and sky,
> One rose, my rose, that sweeten'd all mine air –
> I cared not for the thorns; the thorns were there.
>
> 'One rose, a rose to gather by and by,
> One rose, a rose, to gather and to wear,
> No rose but one – what other rose had I?
> One rose, my rose; a rose that will not die, –
> He dies who loves it, – if the worm be there.'
>
> ('Pelleas and Ettarre', ll. 391-400)

The rose now suggests a self-seeking quality in the rose itself and in the 'worm' which taints it further. This explains the situation of Ettarre and Sir Gawain, but also widens the perspective on Queen Guenevere and Sir Lancelot. A few lines further down Sir Pelleas arrives on the scene of Ettarre and Sir Gawain lying together:

> And spied not any light in hall or bower,
> But saw the postern portal also wide
> Yawning; and up a slope of garden, all
> Of roses white and red, and brambles mixt

> And overgrowing them, went on, and found,
> Here too, all hush'd below the mellow moon,
> Save that one rivulet from a tiny cave
> Came lightening downward, and so spilt itself
> Among the roses, and was lost again.
>
> ('Pelleas and Ettarre', ll.410-18)

Like the 'rivulet from a tiny cave', Pelleas has spilt himself on his love for Ettarre – although this may equally well be a cautionary comment on the kind of love Sir Gawain is making. In the next Idyll Pelleas is Arthur's knights' opponent at a 'grim and dead tree' ('The Last Tournament', l. 430) and dies ignobly as a de-moralized drunkard.

The flower-imagery had already reached its lowest ebb with Vivien in the sixth Idyll 'Merlin and Vivien' , the last of the 'summer' Idylls. Vivien, who seduces Merlin and 'charms' him into oblivion, is the truly callous and treacherously self-seeking villain of the piece. For her there are no flowers at all, just a woodland setting – no park, but ungoverned nature. This Idyll presents Merlin in melancholy old age:

> World-war of dying flesh against the life,
> Death in all life and lying in all love,
> The meanest having power upon the highest,
> And the high purpose broken by the worm.
>
> ('Merlin and Vivien', ll. 191-94)

From the retrospect of Ettarre we see that Vivien is the worm in the flower. She is the worm to end usefulness, a concept which is described expressly by Merlin as 'life and use and name and fame' on three occasions in this Idyll. When all is said and done, says Merlin, his preferential ideal is "rather use than fame" (l. 478), since "Use gave me Fame at first, and Fame again/ Increasing gave me use" (ll. 491-92). This key-concept adds the final perspective onto the flower-image pattern. The poet is saying it with flowers, indeed! An analysis of the flame or sun or animal images through the Idylls would, however, provide very similar effects.

This – what one might call – 'indeterminacy principle' was, in a sense, Tennyson's contribution to the debate in the second half of the nineteenth century – between Jeremy Bentham, Cardinal Newman, John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle and others – about ideals of civilization that can unite people and enable them to disseminate them; about what is practicable and useful to fuse together imperfect individuals into an ideal society, whose ethical grandeur could justify the national pride

of the imperialist Britain of that time.[7]

Tennyson's approach is likely to have been coloured by another Arthur, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In his *The World as Will and Idea*[8], Schopenhauer suggests that the perception of things and transactions, of nature and ideas, is necessarily distorted by the personal will of the observer. This is not yet quite Nietsche's tragic subjectivity of the 1870s and 80s, and certainly not the disconnection of art and morality of the later Aestheticism.

As a medium between Schopenhauer and Tennyson the influential art-critic John Ruskin must also come into the picture. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) he had praised the gothic architecture of the late Middle Ages as: the result of the labour of inferior minds, who managed to elevate these fragments full of imperfection, which betray that imperfection in every touch, to a stately and blameless, unaccusable whole. Striving for realized perfection – he says – leads to a limiting narrow-mindedness and turns men into animals. (Wolves and horses play a prominent part in Tennyson's imagery.) It is precisely the tardy understanding, and the failures, that also make the majesty of man visible. Ruskin argues for a non-assertive art. 'Truth' should be presented so that it will always need the imagination of the observers to make it 'true'[9].

In the *Idylls* Tennyson does, as many have observed, shape – or rather: suggest – the ideal by presenting Arthur's willpower and how this sustains the *illusion* of a civilization.[10] Every one of the characters in the *Idylls* is introduced as "striving for" sustaining the ideal embodied by Arthur, each to his or her ability, imperfectly, worried about it, often frustrated, and gradually with increasing cynicism. In accordance with Ruskin's ideas, the ideal world of King Arthur has been built up in the *Idylls* out of his imperfect, but ever so human, followers. Whatever beauty and idealism we perceive in the *Idylls* is part of the work that they are realizing, however fragmentary. And it is the glory of the *Idylls* that it shows all these characters, in their personal struggles with the ideals of civilization, without a framing omniscient narrator. The ideals may very well be illusory – the presentation is entirely fluid: both what is perceived and the perceivers themselves are in a state of flux, only determined by the moment. The most powerful illustration of this presentation is in the second Idyll 'Gareth and Lynette'. The young Gareth and two servants are approaching Camelot in disguise, hiding their identity. This is after Easter, when 'redemption' and 'resurrection' have already taken place (in the first Idyll 'The Coming of Arthur'):

> The three were clad like tillers of the soil.
> Southward they set their faces. The birds made
> Melody on branch, and melody in mid air.
> The damp hill-slopes were quicken'd into green,
> And the live green had kindled into flowers,
> For it was past the time of Easterday.

So, when their feet were planted on the plain
That broaden'd toward the base of Camelot,
Far off they saw the silver-misty morn
Rolling her smoke about the Royal mount,
That rose between the forest and the field.
At times the summit of the high city flash'd;
At times the spires and turrets half-way down
Prick'd thro' the mist; at times the great gate shone
Only, that open'd on the field below:
Anon, the whole fair city had disappear'd.

Then those who went with Gareth were amazed,
One crying, "Let us go no further, lord.
Here is a city of Enchanters, built
By fairy Kings." The second echo'd him,
"Lord, we have heard from our wise man at home
To Northward, that this King is not the King,
But only changeling out of Fairyland,
Who drave the heathen hence by sorcery
And Merlin's glamour." Then the first again,
"Lord, there is no such city anywhere,
But all a vision."

Gareth answer'd them
With laughter, swearing he had glamour enow
In his own blood, his princedom, youth and hopes,
To plunge old Merlin in the Arabian sea;
So push'd them all unwilling toward the gate.

('Gareth and Lynette', ll. 178-208)

Subjectivity is not solidifying into significance, but celebrated, and mourned, indeed truly 'sung'.

As much stability and grip as is commonly provided by the omniscient narrator, is in *Idylls*, I have demonstrated, provided only by the imagery deployed by the poet. The imagery connects all those subjective experiences to the 'reality' (or: truth?) – a lyrical elegiac realism for the ideal of one land under one king (to quote Boorman's film *Excalibur*, ominously sounding like 'Ein Reich, ein Führer'), without defining it.

In spite of the 'Blut und Boden' imagery, Tennyson is not a proto-fascist -- just and only an imperialist. His concern is with civilizing wild countries, with the expansion of authority and with the transmission of old traditions, even knowing that they are hollow, as witnesses the epilogue 'To the Queen'. The ideal is never specified,

except as "other than beasts". Arthur does not *believe* in an ideal – nor does Tennyson – at least, not in its exclusive truth or existence.[11] A collective illusion, yes, a shared idealism. As Tennyson said elsewhere: "I tried in my Idylls to teach men the need of the ideal.[12]

NOTES

[1)] *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. Kathleen Coburn et al., 16 vols., Princeton & London, 1971ff; XIV: *Table Talk*, ed. Carl Woodring (1990), I, 441.

[2)] All quotations are from *Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Idylls of the King*, ed. J.M. Gray, Penguin Classics, 1983.

[3)] Picked up as a term by T.S. Eliot from the American poet Washington Allston, cf. M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), sixth edition, 1993, p. 136.

[4)] Roger Simpson, *Camelot Regained: The Arthurian Revival and Tennyson 1800-1844*, Arthurian Studies 21, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990, 216-17.

[5)] Accepting the traditional reading of the twelve Idylls as following the progress of the seasons of a natural year as showing the rise, flowering, decay and fall of King Arthur's reign, this would be the middle of the summer or flowering Idylls.

[6)] Cf. Lancelot's and Guenevere's first meeting among the – unspecified – flowers of May in 'The Coming of Arthur', ll. 449-51, introducing the angelic virginity of the following lines.

[7)] For details see William Buckler, *The Victorian Imagination: Essays in Aesthetic Exploration*, New York University Press, 1980, *passim*.

[8)] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* , 1818: Book I.

[9)] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. II, ch. 6, 1853.

[10)] William R. Brashier, "Tennyson's Tragic Vitalism: *Idylls of the King*", *Victorian Poetry* 6 (1968), 29-49, gives a useful analysis of this position. His interpretation of Tennyson's position as a form of Nietsche's tragic subjectivity seems to me to be taking it too far, or in the wrong direction.

[11)] See note 10.

[12)] As quoted by Sir Charles Tennyson, *Six Tennyson Essays*, Cassell, 1954.