

ARTICLE III.

✓ TENNYSON'S "IDYLLS OF THE KING."

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EVERY critic of Tennyson raises, at the outset, the question as to the appropriateness of the term "Idyll" as used by the poet. Meaning, in its Greek form, a little image or representation, it is then applied to a short, descriptive poem of the lyric order, and especially adapted to pastoral themes. There is no reason, however, why such a poem should not be long as well as short; any more than that the lyric should always take the form of the sonnet, and never that of the extended poem, as "L'Allegro" or "Comus." What Tennyson evidently emphasizes in the poem before us is the quality, or literary type of the verse, rather than its length—its descriptive, symbolic, or pictorial character, while the term "Idyll" that he uses is all the more appropriate, in that the poem is made up of a series, a gallery of word pictures, each in itself being entitled to the name "Idyll," applied to the poem as a whole. The name "The Divine Comedy," given by Dante to his celebrated poem, is far more rightfully open to criticism as to literary adaptation.

I. We notice, first, the *Origin of the Poem*. This is partly historical and partly traditional. We are taken back at once to the name of the notable Sir Thomas Malory, the Welshman, whose "La Morte d'Arthur" was finished in the ninth year of the reign of Edward the Fourth, of England, and based on the legends and traditions gathered up in the French Romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth

centuries. There are the so-called Arthurian legends of Merlin and Tristan, and Lancelot and the Round Table. Malory's work is, of course, a modification or free compilation of the material which he had in hand from these earlier sources in foreign literature; and, yet, it is so well executed that Saintsbury, in his "Specimens of English Prose Style," begins with Malory as rightly entitled to open the illustrious list of English Prose Writers. He speaks of the version as "having caught the whole spirit and beauty of the Arthurian Legends, and as one of the first monuments of accomplished English Prose." His selections open with "The Death of Lancelot." The issue of this work from Caxton's press in 1485, and its immediate and continuous popularity evince the esteem in which it was held by scholars and the general public. An edition by Southey, as late in English literary history as 1817, confirms the same opinion as to its comparative merits.

As Malory's version takes us back to the days of Chaucer, we must go still further back to 1138, to the days of the old Welshman, Geoffrey of Monmouth, the idol and the butt of later chroniclers, as he, in turn, takes us back to the fifth and sixth centuries. Be his character what it may, it is well known that at this time King Arthur was a commanding personage in history and legend, the synonym for all the virtues, the representative of the medieval and chivalric, and so portrayed in prose and song down to the days of Malory and Elizabeth.

In this mass of data, as revised and adorned by Malory, Tennyson found the occasion and subject-matter of his poem, bringing to Malory's version a far defter hand than Malory brought to the story of Geoffrey. One of the Idylls, "Geraint and Enid," is taken, as we learn, from "The Mabinogion," a translation of old Welsh legends, published in 1838. As Malory with Geoffrey and Walter Map, so Tennyson with Malory, took his own way in the

material at hand, and, moreover, may be said so thoroughly to have modernized it, as to make it, in a sense, a poem of the present age. Without entering into the precise form and measure of these changes made by the Laureate in the re-casting of the story, suffice it to say, that his two leading objects seem to have been to put the story into better artistic shape, by omission, modification, and addition, and to give to it a more pervading ethical purpose, doing here somewhat as Chaucer and Spenser did with the Italian Romances which they consulted. He aimed, indeed, so to reconstruct it as to make it somewhat appropriate to the nineteenth century, just as Spenser in his semi-medieval poem, "The Faerie Queene," treats of Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots, and Leicester, and the leading historical events of the day. The exception taken by Swinburne and others to the liberties which Tennyson has assumed with Malory would be more timely, were Malory's story, as based on Geoffrey, unmixed historical fact.

2. *The Structure or Plan of the Poem* should next be considered. The poem, as a whole, is made up of twelve distinct parts, corresponding, in this respect, to the twelve books of the "Æneid" and "Paradise Lost" and the twelve contemplated books of "The Faerie Queene." These twelve Idylls are made up of "The Introduction," under the name of "The Coming of Arthur," and the conclusion, called "The Passing of Arthur," including, in lines 170-440, "Morte d'Arthur," the first part of the Idylls that was composed, appearing in 1842. Between these opening and closing Idylls are the ten Idylls pertaining but indirectly to King Arthur. They are as follows: "The Marriage of Geraint," "Geraint and Enid," "Merlin and Vivien," "Lancelot and Elaine," "Guinevere," "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," "The Last Tournament," "Gareth and Lynette," "Balin and Balan." It

will thus be seen that the time of the poem's preparation runs from 1842, the date of the fragment, "Morte d'Arthur," to 1885, the date of "Balin and Balan," a period, in all, of forty-three years, as compared with the seventeen years of the preparation of "In Memoriam." When critics speak of the "Idylls" as covering "more than half a century" in preparation, reference is made to such a poem as "The Lady of Shalott," published in 1832, as it prefigured the story of Elaine. The poem thus covers the best years of the author's life and work, and may naturally be expected to embody the best elements of his mental and poetic power.

What Elsdale has called "the growth of the Idylls" is here worthy of note. As already stated, the poem opens in 1842 with "Morte d'Arthur," which the poet calls the Fragment, the eleventh book of a young poet's epic, King Arthur, the remaining books having been destroyed by fire, just as the six closing books of "The Faerie Queene" are supposed by some critics to have been lost. This reference is, of course, to be taken figuratively, as indicating that the author had prospectively in mind the composition of such an elaborate work, without having, as yet, realized it. To him it seemed in a sense as real as if it had been written and published. Several years later, in 1859, the actual development of the poem began in the preparation of four separate Idylls: "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere"; "Enid" being divided into two parts or poems: "The Marriage of Geraint," "Geraint and Enid." In 1869, what is now the Introduction, "The Coming of Arthur," appeared, as also "The Holy Grail," "Pelleas and Ettarre," and what is now the Conclusion, "The Passing of Arthur," including "Morte d'Arthur," the first fragment.

In 1871, 1872, and 1875, respectively, there appeared the remaining portions: "The Last Tournament,"

"Gareth and Lynette," and "Balin and Balan," this last Idyll being included in the Collection "Tiresias and Other Poems."

One of the singular features of the poem as to structure is seen in the fact that the order of original composition is by no means the order of later arrangement, the Introduction appearing in 1869, and the Conclusion in 1869, a portion of it, "The Death of Arthur," having been the first part published, 1842. There is absolute correctness, therefore, in the statement of critics "that he began with the end ('Morte d'Arthur'), and continued with the beginning ('The Coming of Arthur'), and ended with the middle of the story" ("Balin and Balan" and "Gareth and Lynette"). He thus made it evident, that, while he had the entire content of the poem in mind, it was only in the most general way and without any very definite idea as to just how the different sections or Idylls were to stand related to each other and to the poem as a whole.

Hence, the open discussion as to the Unity of the Idylls, the safest position being, that, while there is enough sequence and symmetry to affirm that the various Idylls have a common idea, and constitute one poem rather than twelve poems, there is, on the other hand, such a freedom of adjustment and commingling of facts and truths, that the principle of unity cannot be pressed to its logical fullness. There is, as Aristotle demands, a beginning, a middle, and an end, but, this said, all is said, while, as already seen, these very parts in their relation to each other, as the poem now stands, do not express the original order of composition.

It is not improbable, moreover, that some portions of the poem, such as "Gareth and Lynette," were afterthoughts, nor is there such an absolute need of each of the twelve parts to complete the supposed unity, that one or more of them could not be spared and the logical unity of the poem be preserved.

Still further, as to poetic structure, the excellence of Tennyson's Blank-verse as seen in the "Idylls" should be emphasized. Having the benefit of all the preceding use of it by English authors, from the time of Surrey and Milton to his own day, he so brought to the application of it his own poetic genius and sense of beauty that, as Stedman states it, "it impressed itself upon the English mind as a new and vigorous form of our grandest English measure." It is, moreover, noticeable that his use of it in the earlier portions is superior to that of the later, and this, in part, from the fact that the four Idylls of 1869, taken together, are of such poetic excellence as to have evoked the poet's best ability as a mechanician in verse. Here, as elsewhere, it is evident that the better the poetry is in its essential quality, the better is the external structure that it may be made to assume.

3. We may now inquire as to the *Central and Subordinate Teachings of the Poem.*

As to its main teaching, the poet himself has not left us in doubt, as he states it in the "Dedication to the Queen" at the close of the Collection—

"Accept this old, imperfect tale,
New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul."

It is, thus, subjectively, the old and ever new struggle between the flesh and the spirit; the lower and the higher nature, the essence of the Pauline doctrine represented in legend and song.

On the objective side, the central truth may be said to be the fortunes of King Arthur and his knights; the glory, decline, and downfall of the Round Table, its dissolution and ruin being caused by the grievous sin of Queen Guinevere in her relation to Launcelot. It is to this external teaching that the poet especially refers at the opening of the "Idylls," as he dedicates them to the memory of Prince Albert, the Good, and consoles the sorrowing

queen by comparing him to Arthur, the ideal knight. Critics have spoken of this dominant teaching under various forms, as—"Man's conflict with sin and fate," as the protest in man against the supremacy of the bestial; as the mission of man to his fellows, or, in the words of Elsdale, "as one long study of failure." Whatever the form, the primal principle is the same, and makes the poem a great object-lesson on the Philosophy of Life, its evil and good; its rewards and punishments.

Closely connected with this central teaching are others of subordinate, and yet important, interest; such as, the poet's lofty ideal of womanhood, given us in "Enid" and "Elaine"; his devotion to the beauty of the natural world, as seen in Lynette's spontaneous outbursts to stars and sun and birds and flowers; the vanity of fame and wealth; the mighty power of evil in the soul and in the world; the sureness of Nemesis to the guilty; the temptations of youth and manhood and old age; the evil workings of suspicion, as in Geraint's attitude toward Enid; passion and retribution, as in Elaine; the glory of fidelity to simple duty, as in the Holy Grail, and so on from one teaching to another through the series as a whole.

In fine, we see here a great ethical or meditative poem, evincing all that variety of truth which naturally belongs to so profound and fruitful a topic in the hands "of one who is aware of the profound realities . . . lying everywhere beneath the visible surface of things in this world." Dr. Van Dyke has gathered up, in an interesting way, "A List of Biblical Allusions and Quotations in the Works of Tennyson." Not a few of these are from the "Idylls"; so much so as to give to the poem a decidedly devout tone, and make its final purpose conducive to the development of conscience and character. It is, in fact, one of the distinctive merits of the poem, that the author has taken this confused mass of earlier legend and conjecture, and, on the

basis of it, constructed a poem of an elevated order. There is a sense in which, in this particular, there is a strong resemblance in the final purpose of the "Idylls" and of "The Faerie Queene." Just as Spenser aimed to set forth the character and life of an English gentleman in the most exalted meaning of the term, for a pattern to the youth of England, so Tennyson has pictured an "ideal knight," if so be English youth might be stimulated thereby to high endeavor and worthy living. Here, also, the "Idylls" and "In Memoriam" agree, in that, with all their many differences, they exalt the supremacy of truth and right and justice and love; the triumph of beauty over the beast; the incoming of the kingdom of God; the final triumph of the Son of man.

4. We are now prepared to note the *Characteristics or Salient Features* of Style, Method, Scope, and Content, by which the "Idylls" are best judged, and through which they have obtained that place in English Letters which they may now be said to hold.

(a) First of all, the Diction of the poem is noteworthy. Tennyson's English in this poem, as elsewhere, has evoked the highest eulogium of all literary critics; so that the text of such a work would form a good basis for the study of poetic usage, and reveal the wealth of the English language in this regard.

We may view the subject in several phases. There is, for example, a pronounced Old English element in the "Idylls." G. C. Macaulay, in his study of "Gareth and Lynette," has called the attention of students to this, remarking that the poet, in this respect, followed Spenser as Spenser followed Chaucer, using such words as "ruth" and "clomb," "bought," in the sense of "fold," and "worship," in the sense of "honor," carrying out, thus, the general method of the Elizabethan writers, as indicated by Abbott and others. The use of such terms as "increas-

cent" and "decrecent" exhibits a strict etymological sense. The simplicity and strength of Tennyson's English are thus among its notable features, seen not only in his preference for shorter words and native words, but in his selection, among foreign words themselves, of the simplest forms and those most akin to the vernacular. So manifest is this, that it may be clearly confirmed by a minute examination of separate Idylls and sections taken almost at random. A writer in the *Edinburgh Review* has given us the results of such an examination of one hundred lines from different poems, comparing the percentage of foreign, and, especially, Latin words, with that found in other writers, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, and Wordsworth. The result is reached, that Tennyson ranks with Chaucer and Shakespeare in the nativeness of his diction, secured, on his part, by a definite purpose to keep within the lines of his own speech, and thus reveal what could be done therein. Here and there, it is true, there is noticeable a peculiar usage of words, purely Tennysonian, of words obsolete and obsolescent, or of words and phrases in special senses. Thus, the word "spate," in "Gareth and Lynette," meaning "flood-water," and "wit," in the sense of "knowledge." Thus, the phrase "made it spire to heaven," spoken of Merlin. So, in the same poem,

"Oilily bubbled up the mere."

So, in the scene between Tristram and Iseult, it is said—

"And after these had *comforted* the blood."

In these and similar passages, the poet insists, and rightly, that the departure from the established usage is exceptional, and justified on the grounds of variety and poetic interest.

The alliteration of his verse is apparent on every page; so much so that it would appear to be an essential part of the poet's poetic nature and method, often carried, it must

be conceded, to the extreme of studied effort and mechanism. Thus, in "Gareth and Lynette"—

"And tallest, Gareth, in a showerful spring
Stared at the spate. A slender-shafted pine
Lost footing, fell, and so was whirled away."

Again, in "Enid"—

"But when a rumor rose about the Queen,
Touching her guilty love for Lancelot."

So, of Arthur—

"There on a day, he sitting high in hall,
Before him came a forester of Dean,
Wet from the woods."

So, in "Elaine"—

"Lightly, her suit allowed, she slipt away,
And while she made her ready for her ride,
Her father's latest word humm'd in her ear."

So regular, indeed, is the alliteration, that a large number of lines may be chosen in which the Old English formula of sub-letters and chief letters is exactly carried out; as in "Gareth and Lynette"—

"And then, when turning to Lynette, he told
The tale of Gareth."

Tennyson's compound epithets are, also, a striking feature of the Diction, special attention being called by Van Dyke to a similarity of usage here of Tennyson and Milton. Thus we note, "autumn-dripping," "tip-tilted," "many-knolled," "ruby-circled," "gloomy-gladed," "silvermisty," "princely-proud," "crag-carven," "ever-higher-ing," "tourney-falls," "kitchen-knaves," "life-bubbling," "wan-sallow," "Lent-lily," "co-twisted," and so on—a feature common to Tennyson and Homer, Spenser and Swinburne.

In fine, the diction, as the style, is marked by what Swinburne has called "synthetic perfection," by a choice selection and use of words, by beauty of form and a due relation of sound to sense, by the specifically artistic or

architectural side of verse; so that all is resonant and rhythmic, pleasing to the ear and taste and every cultivated sense.

(b) Attention should be called to the Dramatic Element in the Idylls. The poem cannot consistently be said to be a drama, as Elsdale has termed it, certainly not in the sense in which "Harold" and "Queen Mary" are such; but it has, from first to last, a dramatic cast and purpose, with here and there distinct dramatic passages. Though the poem is not presented in the regular form of acts and scenes, and though not histrionic in its character, it has definite dramatic and scenic features.

This appears especially in the personages and scenes brought vividly to view; as, Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, the three leading dramatis personæ, to whom must be added Enid, Elaine, Vivien, Tristram, Pelleas, Ettarre, Gareth and Lynette, Bedivere, Sir Bevis Isolt and Dagmet, the seneschal and the sons, Gawain and Modred. Here we have characters and types of character; high and low, innocent and crafty; playing each a part, and together contributing to the sum-total of the effect of the Play as a vivid presentation of human life.

So, as to Scenes; such as the Coronation Scene in "The Coming of Arthur"; the Oriel Scene, in "Elaine"; the Diamond Scene and Castle of Astolat; the Conferences of Guinevere and Lancelot, especially the last, in "Guinevere"; the Parting Scene between Arthur and Guinevere; the Ghost of Gawain, as it appears to Arthur sleeping, and calls aloud; the Battle Scene, in "The Passing of Arthur," and so on, till the visions disappear.

In these and other respects, there is here seen an abundance of dramatic material, though not in dramatic form, the poet's limitations being thus evinced, as in his "Promise of May" and "The Cup and the Falcon." His forte was not here; and yet that criticism is certainly astray

which insists that we have in the "Idylls" no conspicuous dramatic element.

(c) Another marked feature of the Idylls is seen in the happy combination of the medieval and the modern, the old and the new, the mythical and the real. The vexed question as to just in what sense and to what degree the "Idylls" may be called an Allegory need not detain us. Those critics are wrong who say that the poem is virtually a Parable, or that it is in all its parts and meanings allegorical. This element is undoubtedly present, and the skill of the poet lies in the fusion of the symbolic and real without their confusion. The central personage, Arthur, illustrates the principle, in that it is still an open question among critics whether he was a real Celtic character or merely a symbol of heroism and virtue in the early age. That old Geoffrey of Monmouth believed him to be a historic personality is by no means sufficient evidence; while in him, as in the other characters, we feel, as we read, that we are dealing with something more than the visionary and phenomenal.

This skill in combination is especially seen in the way in which the poet puts the thoughts and feelings of the nineteenth century into the language of the sixth, twelfth, and fourteenth centuries. Romance and reality; knights, lords, and ladies, meet and interchange ideas with the modern thinker. The literal and the figurative alternate, and we pass without a warning from Faery Land and joust and tournament to Cheapside and the Strand and Temple Bar.

In all this the poet has subjected himself, as we know, to severe criticism, and, in some respects, justly, as being guilty of anachronism, and double-dealing with words; and yet we must emphasize the fact, that such combinations in their best form are a mark of poetic genius, and in the "Idylls" are presented with unwonted skill.

(d) The Lyric Excellence of the Idylls should be noted.

The author calls the earliest portion of the poem, "*Morte d'Arthur*," a fragment of an epic of King Arthur; and still the battle rages among the critics, as to whether the "*Idylls*" constitute an epic, and, if so, in what sense; whether the author at first so planned the poem, or whether it was an after-thought, or whether, perchance, the poem unwittingly assumed an epic form. When we note that there is a hero; that it is true, as has been said, "that no language has surpassed in epic dignity the English of these poems"; that they have "epic singleness of movement," and are "an admirable example of the grand style,"—this is not to say that the poem is an epic, but that it is epical, as it is dramatic, having the heroic tone and quality and effect, but not the epic type and structure. As to the lyric element, however, all doubt disappears. From first to last, this is a dominant feature; so much so, that a volume of English lyrics might be gathered from these twelve *Idylls*, on the basis of which lyric verse might be studied both as an inspiration and an art. Hence the just comparison made by Stedman between Tennyson and Theocritus; as also, by Van Dyke, between Tennyson and Milton. Hence the correctness of the judgment, that the "*Idylls*" are lyric, rather than philosophic or creative, full of idyllic and descriptive sweetness, and representing in numerous passages the highest reach of poetic art in these directions.

The "*Idylls*" are not without their faults. From their first appearance, critics have not been slow to note them. Taine compares Tennyson with De Musset, to the advantage of the latter. "Mr. Tennyson," writes another, "has no sound pretensions to be called a great poet." Swinburne takes strong exceptions, at many points, to the "*Idylls*," the "*Morte d'Albert*," as he calls them, objecting especially to Arthur as the central character. Devey, in his "*Modern English Poets*," continues the adverse comment; while Elsdale, in his "*Studies*," devotes a chap-

ter to the anachronisms in the "Idylls," and to what he calls their "Drawbacks and Defects." His exceptions are all included in the one sweeping comment, that they exhibit lack of breadth, accretion rather than growth. He insists that they are fragmentary; that the allegory is partial; that the characters are inconsistent; that the conception of character is superficial, and that episodes and digressions mar the unity of the work.

More justly, it may be said, the great defects of the poem are want of epic and dramatic grasp and of profound and soul-moving passion. The defect of the "Idylls" is the signal defect of Tennyson's poetic work as a whole, the "In Memoriam" excepted, the subordination of the poet to the artist, the supremacy, as in Macaulay, in prose, of the antithetic. Just as Macaulay did not hesitate to modify an idea in order to construct an antithesis, so Tennyson often modified an idea to construct an alliteration or a verbal harmony. He is a master of words in poetry, as Peter Lombard was a master of sentences in prose, a literary architect, and herein lies the open question of his prospective fame as transient or permanent. No one of his poems represents as clearly and fully as the "Idylls" his merits and limitations. It is because of the pronounced character of the latter that the "Idylls" must give place to "In Memoriam," while it is because of the pronounced character of the former that the "Idylls" must be called his second great poem. A recent critic is not far astray when he writes, "that the mind of Tennyson is of a somewhat feminine type." It is not possessed of masculinity in the sense of original force and scope. Hence, the superiority of his female characters, and, hence, the prominent excellence of the more subdued qualities of literary style, such as grace, finish, symmetry, propriety, charm of word and manner, and general æsthetic attraction.

Tennyson is a gracious presence in literature, but not a

force, as Goethe, Milton, and Emerson are forces. His gifts are rare, but not plenary and potent. His passion is pure, but not profound and elemental, nor the effect of his work upon us reorganizing and irresistible.

We reverted, at the outset, to the propriety of his use of the word "Idylls," and herein the poet made a safe estimate of his own gift and range.

Odes and sonnets, ballads, elegies, and idylls are the staple of his art, and mark his scope. When we speak of "The Princess" as an epic, and of "Harold" as a drama, it is by way of verbal accommodation, and in deference to the general merits of the author.

It is, indeed, Tennyson's "In Memoriam" that has made it possible to assign him to a higher rank than any of his other poems would justify. This poem is, in every sense, great, and marks the master; so great, indeed, in connection with the "Idylls," as to give a higher place to all his work and, despite his faults of mind and art, make it possible to assign him among England's Immortals in the field of letters.

As the years go on, his name and fame are widening; so that, whatever may be the special estimate of his genius or his work, as compared with that of his contemporaries, he may be said to be the most unique, conspicuous, and indispensable poet of the Victorian age. To have written "In Memoriam" and "The Idylls of the King" is enough to make an author permanently famous. There is, therefore, a high sense in which, in view of modern poetic tendencies, we may say of Tennyson as Wordsworth sang of Milton,—

"Thou shouldst be living at this hour.
England hath need of thee."