As an adherent of the doctrine of becoming, Tennyson is as full of contradiction and paradox as the Bible. “All truth is change,” he says in an early poem, “for nothing is, but all is made.”¹ And embracing this Heraclitean concept, he writes poems of contrasting and discrepant views expressive of his understanding that cosmos arises from chaos and sinks into chaos again. “Nothing Will Die” is matched in the Poems, Chiefly Lyrical (1830) by “All Things Will Die.” “Tithonus,” about the desire for dissolution, was composed as a companion to “Ulysses,” “about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life” (Ricks, p. 560). Such contradictions are, however, generally held beneath the surface in In Memoriam (1850), which gives an apocalyptic view of human perfection resulting from physical and spiritual evolution. Yet, significantly, upon completing it Tennyson stated that his poem was far more optimistic about the fate of humankind than he was. “It’s too hopeful, this poem, more than I am myself,” he said. “I think of adding another to it, a speculative one, showing that all the arguments are about as good on one side as the other, and thus throw man back more on the primitive impulses and feelings” (Ricks, pp. 859–60). Idylls of the King fits this description beautifully, for it presents a narrative fully informed by the poet’s concept of becoming.
At the close of the poem, as the light fades following the Great Battle in the West, King Arthur in his dying moments laments, "[A]ll my realm / Reels back into the beast, and is no more." The land where he felled the forest and which he cleared of beast and pagan reverts to the condition in which the King originally found it. What has caused the collapse of Camelot and all the spiritual ideals to which its maker aspired? This has been a subject of debate in Tennyson studies over the past forty years. On one side are those who hold the traditional view that "the one sin [of Lancelot and Guinevere] determines the calamity of the kingdom"; on the other side, those who maintain that different destructive forces are responsible for the downfall and that "the sin of Guinevere is merely the symbol and not the source of the decline of the Round Table." In my opinion both views, though contradictory, are tenable and were, in fact, held by the poet himself.

Of the completed *Idylls* Tennyson commented: "The whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin" (Ricks, p. 1463). And of the individual idylls he said, for example, of "Lancelot and Elaine" that here "the tenderest of all natures sinks under the blight" (Ricks, p. 1621), and of "The Last Tournament" that "the great sin of Lancelot was sapping the Round Table" (Ricks, p. 1710n). Speaking of "The Holy Grail" he claimed, "I have expressed there my strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen" (Ricks, p. 1661). Yet in his notes to this idyll the poet undermined this "Reality" by saying of the Grail quest, "It was a time of storm when men could imagine miracles, and so storm is emphasized" (Ricks, p. 1676n), and by saying of Bors's vision of the Grail, "It might have been a meteor" (Ricks, p. 1680n). Of Merlin's vision of heavenly signs in "Gareth and Lynette" (ll. 249–50), the poet notes that it was "Refraction by mirage" (Ricks, p. 1490n). Further, when his friend J. T. Knowles wrote a letter to the *Spectator* (1 January 1870) praising the "realism" of the *Idylls* that allows "accounting naturally for all the supernatural adventures and beliefs recorded
in the story itself,” Tennyson acknowledged that Knowles’s was “the best, and indeed the only true, critique of the Idylls.”

Tennyson was usually pleased to have his readers recognize a higher, allegorical significance in the Idylls, but he disliked being pinned down as to his exact meaning. “They are right, and they are not right,” he said of some interpreters of his poem. As for certain details, “They mean that and they do not. . . I hate to be tied down to say, ‘This means that’” (Ricks, p. 1463). His exegetes have, he maintained, “taken my hobby, and ridden it too hard, and have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poem” (Ricks, p. 1463). “Poetry is,” he held, “like shot-silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet” (Ricks, p. 1463).

We seem to have Tennyson’s own warrant, then, for at least two interpretations of the Idylls—one that, as we have remarked, the poet authorized, an idealist reading; and one of which he was more than half conscious but refrained from sanctioning explicitly, namely, a realistic or naturalistic reading. Such contradictory views of his poem, the author realized, were inherent in his treatment of the Arthurian material, the nature of which he dealt with, in barely disguised fashion, in the first of the idylls that he wrote with the specific intention of forming a cycle of poems, the one finally called “Merlin and Vivien.” Tennyson had been fascinated by the story of Arthur since early youth: “The vision of an ideal Arthur as I have drawn him had come upon me when, little more than a boy, I first lighted upon Malory” (Ricks, p. 1464). Yet when he looked into other Arthurian sources, he discovered a less than “ideal Arthur.” “On Malory, on Layamon’s Brut, on Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the Mabinogion, on the old Chronicles, on French Romance, on Celtic folklore, and largely on his own imagination, my father founded his epic,” Hallam Tennyson noted (Ricks, p. 1460). Yet, as Swinburne with his usual keenness observed, the materials were
incongruous and “radically incapable of combination or coherence. Between the various Arthurs of different national legends there is little more in common than the name. It is essentially impossible to construct a human figure by the process of selection from the incompatible types of irreconcilable ideals.” Tennyson himself admitted, “How much of history we have in the story of Arthur is doubtful. Let not my readers press too hardly on details whether for history or for allegory” (Ricks, p. 1469). To get at the real Arthur, then, meant dealing with a wealth of sources that might or might not yield the “ideal” for which the poet was searching.

In a section of “Merlin and Vivien” that Tennyson noted was not in any of his sources (Ricks, p. 1611n), the poet tells of a book that had belonged to a wise man who, penetrating the wall dividing spirit and matter, set down, with “an inky cloud,’ what “charms” he had discovered (ll. 616–48). Now in the hands of Merlin, the book consists of twenty pages, each containing in the middle a microscopic text “writ in a language that had long gone by” (l. 672). Surrounding the text are margins “scribbled, crost, and crammed / With comment, densest condensation, hard / To mind and eye” (ll. 675–77). No one can read the text, and only Merlin can read the comment. The ur-text, in other words, is quite irrecoverable. Only the commentary—the tradition, as it were—can be reclaimed, but that by one man alone, the mage with whom the poet obviously identifies. From the matter of history and earliest legend it is impossible to penetrate the “inky cloud” to get at the real Arthur. What the “comment”—the many incongruous retellings of the Arthurian story—provides is only a shadowy figure about whom the most contradictory attributes are said to be true. There may be, as Tennyson held, “no grander subject in the world than King Arthur” (Ricks, p. 1464), but for the poet who undertakes a long poem based on it there is always the possibility of being “charmed” by it into inactivity, an inability to complete his project, as Merlin was charmed by Vivien and so “lost to life and use and name and fame” (l. 968).

Aware then, however faintly, of incompatible sources offer-
ing a hero of irreconcilable qualities, Tennyson proceeded to draw the antitypes of "The True and the False" (as his first two idylls were called when set up in a trial edition in 1857) revolving around his central figure. From the beginning Tennyson held a double focus on his idylls, providing, as David Shaw remarks, an "anatomy of the saint and soldier, the skeptic and the dupe, the sensualist and the stoic." His poem, said the poet in the epilogue "To the Queen," was an "old imperfect tale / New-old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul." If his audience wished to stress sensuality as the "one sin" ruining "the dream," they apparently had the sanction of the poet himself, who seemed to revise and expand the Idylls to relate all manifestations of the collapse of Camelot to Guinevere's infidelity.

According to this reading, in the first idyll, "The Coming of Arthur," a veil of lustre is thrown over Arthur's origin, his authority hidden in mystery. However, his claim to kingship is confirmed by his subsequent deeds, his knights' faith in him, Belligcent's belief in his supernatural birth, Leodogran's dream of his legitimacy, and Merlin's claim that "from the great deep to the great deep he goes" (CA, l. 410; LT, l. 133; PA, l. 445), meaning that he will never die but will come again. As soul or spirit, Arthur seeks in his marriage to Guinevere a means of embodiment in order to achieve the wholeness of what Tennyson called "the character of Christ, that union of man and woman, strength and sweetness" (Ricks, p. 1687). The King joined to his Queen and surrounded by knights sworn to reverence him and do his bidding, this Maytime at Camelot is a season of unity and hope.

"Gareth and Lynette" represents, in the words of the poet's wife, "the golden time of Arthur's court" (Ricks, p. 1484), characterized by perfect courage, perfect faith, perfect love. Gareth is the type of youthful, enthusiastic loyalty and hardihood, gladly willing to undertake any chore, no matter how lowly or ignominious, in the service of the King. In aid of virtue he fights and overcomes the allegorical figures of the day and night (life and death), un masks the last (which is shown to be a mere boy), and
Idylls of the King delivers the captive spirit from the enthrallments of the flesh in the Castle Perilous. By the time of the third and fourth idylls—"The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid"—the infection of disloyalty has set in, breeding distrust as the rumor of Guinevere’s unfaithfulness spreads out. "The sin of Lancelot and Guinevere begins to breed, even among those who would 'rather die than doubt,' despair and want of trust in God and man," Hallam Tennyson commented (Ricks, p. 1551). Camelot has been shown to be governed by the interacting ideals of Christian duty, courtly love, and chivalric valor, for the knights of the Round Table have sworn to "utter hardihood, utter gentleness, / utter faithfulness in love, / And uttermost obedience to the King" (GL, ll. 542–44). Any chink in the towering city, any false or discordant note in this edifice built to music (GL, ll. 272–73), can cause the collapse of the whole. In time Geraint recognizes Enid’s spotless innocence and is reclaimed from distrust and death by it and the King’s healing influence. The reformation of Edryn further illustrates the Round Table in its early purity, when love and loyalty are rewarded.

In "Balin and Balan" rumor has become slander with the introduction of Vivien, who as the personification of lust is, in Hallam Tennyson’s words, "the evil genius of the Round Table who in her lustfulness of the flesh could not believe in anything either good or great" (Ricks, p. 1593). Language has become debased, religion (in the observances of Pellam) turned to superstition, obligation deformed to selfishness. "Loyal natures are wrought to anger and madness against the world," Tennyson said in reference to this idyll (Ricks, p. 1576), as the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere becomes more widely known. In "Merlin and Vivien," Tennyson commented, "Some even among the highest intellects become the slaves of the evil which is at first half disdained" (Ricks, p. 1595). The flesh, in the figure of Vivien, corrupts and immobilizes the intellect, Merlin, who, though recognizing true spirituality, is yet not endowed with its moral power, a quality that is shown when Arthur withstands Vivien’s
seductive moves. Intellect thus victimized, the soul is robbed of its shrewdest ally. Even though the corrosive influence of Guinevere’s infidelity is thus demonstrated, Camelot is not yet totally perverted. The knights resist Vivien’s blandishments, because nothing external, as it turns out, can seriously threaten the city, the corruption lying within.

In “Lancelot and Elaine” the lily maid’s first love is contrasted with the Queen’s jealousy and guilty passion. Arthur’s influence declines and Gawain, the type of man indifferent to all save pleasure, trifles with the King’s orders. Lancelot’s suffering and remorse prepare the way for the thirst for expiation in “The Holy Grail,” in which the characters display a yearning for wonders and a mystic passion for the unseen at the expense of practical duty and social responsibility. Although all the knights, except Gawain, who go on the journey find some kind of spiritual enrichment, the quest for the holy cup of healing in fact maims Arthur’s order. Guinevere is entirely correct when she says to the departing knights, “This madness has come on us for our sins” (l. 357).

In “Pelleas and Ettarre,” in the poet’s opinion “almost the saddest of the Idylls” (Ricks, p. 1687), the victory of lust is complete. With the growth of sensual anarchy, Pelleas, a type of youthful and enthusiastic purity like Gareth, is betrayed by a member of the Round Table. Deceived by Gawain and having no Enid to support him, the raw, idealistic youth turns, in reaction and desperation, into the Red Knight, the wild antithesis to Arthur, and establishes the Round Table in the North, representing the opposite of all that for which Camelot stands. Whereas in this idyll the ideal of courtly love fails, leaving innocence impotent, in “The Last Tournament” the whole notion of love, chastity, and fidelity is depraved. Using doubt as a convenience, Tristram assumes license in all things. Because the idealism of Camelot was betrayed, he turns to “nature,” the world of animal lust, for his sanction. “Crown’d warrant had we for our crowning sin” (l. 572), he tells his mistress Isolt, while her husband, Mark, the
type of undisciplined and unprincipled intelligence, cleaves him through the brain. Only Dagonet, the fool, upholds the King.

In "Guinevere," which has been called "the central idyll in terms of moral design," evil has almost conquered, while one of those persons whose actions permitted evil to enter recognizes the extent of her misconduct. Modred, the type of beastly, shadowy malignity and antagonist of all good in Camelot, has taken over the city. Guinevere, now in refuge, is vaguely aware of her serious offense; only when faced by Arthur himself does she become fully conscious of her sin. The downfall of the kingdom has come about "all through thee" (l. 489), the King tells her, at the same time forgiving her. Now realizing that she was a traitor to love when her duty was to love the highest, she turns away from her passionate love for Lancelot to love for Arthur and hopes for reunion with her husband in heaven. Absolved of her sin, she sees the King as the embodiment of virtue and herself as seduced by "false voluptuous pride, that took / Full easily all impressions from below" (ll. 634–37). After repentence and years of good deeds and a pure life, she is redeemed.

"The Passing of Arthur" represents, said Tennyson, "the temporary triumph of evil, the confusion of moral order, closing in the Great Battle of the West" (Ricks, p. 1742). In this last idyll Arthur, like Christ in the final hours, experiences forsaken suffering and a feeling of betrayed innocence. Spirit seems to fail utterly and virtue to pass entirely. Yet in the end, when the arm catches the sword Excalibur and the barge bearing the three Queens comes to fetch him to the island-valley of Avalion, spirit triumphs over flesh. Rising from the doubt of "My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death" to the affirmation of "Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die" (ll. 27–28), and promising to come again, the King sails off into the distance while from the dawn echoes a great cry and the sun rises, hopefully, bringing a new year. "The purpose of the individual man may fail for a time," the poet observed of the close of his poem, "but his work cannot die" (Ricks, p. 1754n).
No doubt "the vision of an ideal Arthur" (Ricks, p. 1464) had inspired the poet. Ruminating on his subject, he had held that "in short, God has not made since Adam was, the man more perfect than Arthur," as an old writer says" (Ricks, p. 1469). Yet dealing with his diverse, incompatible sources offering an incoherent picture of his hero, Tennyson could not conceal from himself or his readers the irreconcilable elements lying at the heart of his story. In his own idealistic formulation of the legend certain discrepancies became immediately apparent. Why, for instance, in "Gareth and Lynette," in the springtime of Camelot, is Sir Kay so boorish? Why does the illicit relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere begin apparently even before or possibly soon after her marriage to the King (MV, ll. 772–75)? Why, if Vivien is "the evil genius of the Round Table" personifying lust (Ricks, p. 1593), does Lancelot's adulterous affair with the Queen commence before Vivien appears? Why, more importantly, is Arthur so blind to the world around him, "against [his] own eye-witness fain [to] / Have all men true and leal, all women pure" (MV, ll. 791–92)? Such anomalies could not be explained away, and in order to deal with them, Tennyson had to look at his Arthur, at least his original conception of him, in a different, less idealistic way.

Of the Idylls of the King the poet's son noted that "the completed poem, regarded as a whole, gives his innermost being more fully, though not more truly, than In Memoriam" (Ricks, p. 1464). And of In Memoriam itself, as we have seen, the poet said that it was too hopeful and that he thought of adding another poem to it to show that the arguments were about as good on one side as the other. This is a characteristically Tennysonian way of proceeding, first asserting and then, in some fashion or other, undermining the assertion. Thus Arthur Hallam, who in In Memoriam represents the type of idealized manhood that posits the way to perfected humanity, is balanced by another Arthur, "the flower of kings" of Joseph of Exeter, the idealized type who witnesses the retrogression inevitably attendant upon progress. Where
Arthur Hallam appeared “ere the times were ripe” (*In Memoriam*, epilogue, l. 139), the earth not yet ready to receive its saints; King Arthur appears at the opportune time to demonstrate that the earth will never be ready to receive them permanently. As a speaker in another of Tennyson’s poems says, it is a case of “Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos!”—of “Evolution ever climbing after some ideal good, / And Reversion ever dragging Evolution in the mud” (“Locksley Hall Sixty Years After,” ll. 127, 199–200).

In the *Idylls* Arthur appears mysteriously, with the authority of the spiritual deep or of legitimate succession—or without any authority at all. Whatever his origin, he must impose his authority by force, ridding the land of beast and pagan, felling the forest and letting in the light, and subjecting his followers to his will. As part of his plan for rule he has had erected the marvelous city of Camelot, the objective embodiment of his will, always in process, it being “built / To music, therefore never built at all, / And therefore built for ever” (*GL*, ll. 272–74). He then marries Guinevere so that their union will be a model of love and marriage: “for saving I be joined / To her I cannot will my will, nor work my work / Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm / Victor and lord” (*CA*, ll. 84–89). Further he binds his knights “by so strait vows to his own self” that they assume “a momentary likeness of the King” (*CA*, ll. 261, 270), and demands of them “utter hardihood, utter gentleness, / And, loving, utter faithfulness in love, / And uttermost obedience to the King” (*GL*, ll. 541–44). Asking them in effect to be little Arthurs, the King imposes himself on them by robbing them of their own wills. “The King will follow Christ, and we the King,” they sing, so that “Arthur and his knighthood for a space / Were all one will” (*CA*, ll. 499, 514–15).

As the epilogue explains, Arthur is “Ideal manhood closed in real man.” The knights of the Round Table, however, are not ideal men, nor is Guinevere the ideal woman; and swearing to perfect behavior is, of course, swearing to the impossible and thus provides the ground for guilt. Merlin, the highest intellect in Cam-
elot, makes this very clear to Gareth when he outlines what the King requires:

Yet take thou heed of him, for, so thou pass
Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become
A thrall to his enchantments, for the King
Will bind thee by such vows, as is a shame
A man should not be bound by, yet the which
No man can keep. (GL, ll. 263–68)

As we shall see, the knights’ feeling of guilt, resulting from their inability to keep their vows, and their subsequent emotional dependency on someone or something to sustain selfhood are pervasive in the succeeding idylls.

The notion of role-playing—or the search for a stable identity or “name” to which the notion is closely allied—is an important theme in the Idylls almost from the beginning. Costumes and disguises figure prominently, as do verbal distortions and outright lies, the linguistic mask of thought. Correctly viewed from the idealist standpoint, all disguises, sartorial or linguistic, are reprehensible in that they misrepresent the truth, the thing itself. Even at the commencement of those ten idylls forming “The Round Table” disguise enters into the story of Arthur’s kingdom and, paradoxically, is tolerated and encouraged by the King. Gareth dresses as a youth of low birth, serves as a kitchen-knave, and goes on a quest under the pretense that he is working his way up from the kitchen. “Let be my name until I make my name!” he says (GL, l. 562). Merlin views all this as misbehavior: Gareth has set about “to mock the King, / Who cannot brook the shadow of any lie.” And Gareth himself is uneasy in this feigned role: “Our one white lie sits like a little ghost / Here on the threshold of our enterprise” (GL, ll. 286–87, 291–92). Yet Arthur, who is fully aware of the circumstances, acquiesces in the pretense first to Kay and then to Lynette. The reason for this, as Tennyson makes explicit later, is that the ideal is transcendent and can be
even partially manifested or grasped only when brought down to
earth, embodied in the imperfections of phenomenal reality.
Arthur cannot, in other words, be effective, be other than a figure-
head ideal, unless he descends from ethereal perfection into the
falsities of matter. And if Arthur acts this way, how can his
subjects be expected to do otherwise?

Geraint pretends that his lands are imperiled so that he can
take his wife away from the corrupting influence of the Queen,
about whom he has merely heard a rumor of misconduct. Falsely
believing Enid unfaithful, he insists that she return to her earlier,
pristine state and dress in the lowly costume in which he originally
saw her, although he had previously aimed "to dress her beauti-
fully and keep her true" (GE, l. 40). Eventually restored to
physical and moral health by his wife, on whom he had become
fully dependent, Geraint recovers his proper status in Camelot,
forswears disguise, and relishes Enid clothed by the Queen "in
apparel like the day" (GE, l. 947).

Balin is dependent upon Balan for his balance. Without his
twin he believes, guiltily, "Too high this mount of Camelot for me" (BB, l. 221). As a prop for his identity he bears the Queen's
crown-royal upon his shield, but when he discovers her false, he
tramples the shield, mistakenly murders his brother, and dies.
Before his death, however, he is persuaded that those who had
told him tales about the Queen were liars and that "pure as our
own true Mother is our Queen" (BB, l. 606), which means that he
is as deluded in sanity as he was in madness. Although it is the
purpose of the King to be a light unto his people—and indeed he
is usually associated with images of blazing light—the fact re-
 mains, as the narrator says earlier, that men do but grope
"through the feeble twilight of this world" forever "taking true
for false, or false for true" (GE, ll. 4–5).

Merlin is the first to recognize that, however high the aspira-
tions of the King for the inhabitants of the towering city of Cam-
elot, the hopes can never be realized, that, in fact, they are the
cause of their own undoing. Against all evidence of fallibility, the
King has persevered in his aim to make his subjects perfect. He has been unable to accommodate himself to the world in both deed and word, his “over-fineness not intelligible” (MV, ll. 791–94). Foreseeing the destruction of Camelot, Merlin has left the city in melancholy and distress, and looking for someone to sustain him, he turns to Vivien “and half believed her true” (MV, l. 398), in the end yielding to her wiles and becoming “lost to life and use and name and fame” (MV, l. 968).

“Lancelot and Elaine” returns to the theme of disguise when Lancelot enters the tournament unidentified. The knight worries about the pretext he must make to the King to do this, but Guinevere, no doubt rightly, argues that the King will allow the ruse because it is done for glory. “No keener hunter after glory breathes,” she says. “He loves it in his knights more than himself: / They prove to him his work” (LE, ll. 155–57). Only in overcoming the not-self is the spiritual “I” realized. For this very reason Arthur has been “rapt in this fancy of his Table Round, / And swearing men to vows impossible” (LE, 129–30). To Guinevere as to others at court it is the King’s unforgivable fault to be faultless. How is it possible to love an ideal, an abstraction, a remote heavenly presence? “For who loves me must have a touch of earth,” she says not unreasonably, and therefore, turning to Lancelot, “I am yours” (LE, ll. 133, 134). The guilt engendered by their adulterous relationship is almost intolerable for her lover and leads to the next idyll in which the knights of the Round Table, all too conscious of their failure to live up to what they have sworn, seek to substitute allegiance to a higher cause for their vows to the King.

“The Holy Grail” shows the increasing impotence of Arthur’s will and the appearance of other dominant wills. Even though earlier Arthur had been successful in the creation of knights “stampt with the image of the King” (HG, l. 27), the disaffection with Camelot is evident in the three preceding idylls. Then comes news of a frisson nouveau in the kingdom. In an erotic ecstasy a nun claims to have had a vision of the Holy Grail. When this
information is communicated to Galahad, he visits the nun, who "laid her mind / On him, and he believed in her belief" (ll. 164–65). Soon after, while Arthur is away, there arises a storm, and what may be a burst of lightning sends blinding light into the hall where the knights are assembled. They all believe that it is the Grail appearing unto them, although no one seems to have seen it. Percivale swears, because he has not seen the Grail, to ride in quest of it, and in this vow he is followed by others, although earlier they had sworn, "The King will follow Christ, and we the King" (CA, l. 499). As happens with others who depart from Camelot, they are left unsupported and become either lost or mad. Galahad attains the vision, apparently because the nun had willed him to see it. Percivale, too, claims to see it, because, he says, Galahad with his eye "drew me, with power upon me, till I grew / One with him, to believe as he believed" (ll. 486–87). Whether the others saw anything is unclear. Arthur himself is suspicious of all the visions save Galahad’s, guardedly saying, "if indeed there came a sign from heaven" (l. 869). He is fully cognizant of the meaning of this exchange of their vows of allegiance from himself to a vision, and he ends the idyll by saying that the questers should have followed his example, postponing heavenly vision till earthly work be done.

As much in love with love as Elaine, who "lived in fantasy" (L.E., l. 27), Pelleas seeks a beloved who will be "my Queen, my Guinevere" so that he can be "thine Arthur when we meet" (PE, ll. 44–45). As it happens, Ettarre is false to him, and so is Gawain, whom he sent to woo on his behalf. The untrue love and the untrue knight’s betrayal argue in his mind that "the King / Hath made us fools and liars. O noble vows!" (PE, ll. 469–70). Because built "too high," Camelot has turned into a "black nest of rats," and Pelleas is left with "no name, no name" (ll. 543–44, 553). Totally disillusioned with all that Arthur represents, Pelleas becomes the Red Knight and establishes a Round Table in the North which is the antithesis to Camelot and where men profess themselves no better than they are.

Even though he remains nominally in Arthur’s camp, Tristram
Idylls of the King

belongs emotionally and morally with Pelleas in the North. Admitting that he has broken his vows, he argues that they never should have been made in the first place. Arthur has been totally unrealistic all along. In demanding so much, he has planted the seed of failure: "The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself—/ ay, being snapt— / We run more counter to the soul thereof / Than had we never sworn' (LT, ll. 652–55). Admittedly, in the beginning the vows, "the wholesome madness of an hour," served their use, for every knight believed himself capable of higher things than he had ever dreamed. But then disillusion set in, and the vows began to gall. Whence, the knights ask,

Had Arthur right to bind them to himself?
Dropt down from heaven? washed up from out the deep?
They failed to trace him through the flesh and blood
Of our old kings: whence then? a doubtful lord
To bind them by inviolable vows,
Which flesh and blood perforce would violate:
we are not angels here
Nor shall be . (LT, ll. 679–84, 693–94)

Tristram is of course rationalizing and justifying his failure to perform as he had sworn, but the appositeness of his utterance is brought home by Dagonet, the fool, who, recalling Merlin's remarks about the stainless King, terms Arthur "my brother fool, the king of fools" who "conceits himself as God that he can make / Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk / From burning spurge, honey from hornet-combs, / And men from beasts." The aim may be noble, but ultimately it is foolish. And so in half praise and half dispraise he apostrophizes Arthur: "Long live the king of fools!" (LT, ll. 354–58).

In the last idyll of "The Round Table" Arthur confronts Guinevere and rehearses his plans, now laid waste, for Camelot. He speaks to her not as an outraged husband but as an offended ruler. He had established his order of the Table Round "to serve as
model for the mighty world," binding his knights by vows to reverence himself and aim for perfect conduct. He had married Guinevere so that she could feel his purpose and work his work. Now, she having "spoilt the purpose of [his] life," he has no desire to live (G, ll. 449–80). It is no wonder that she had always "thought him cold, / High, self-contained, and passionless" (G, ll. 402–3). For it is clear that he loved her not as a woman but as an idea, the model of an ideal queen, as he was the model of the ideal king.

In the final idyll Arthur in his last moments seems to understand where he had gone wrong. From the beginning he had but one goal in life: to establish a perfect kingdom, to make Camelot a New Jerusalem. But he had not taken into account the impregnable amorality of nature: "I perish by this people which I made" (PA, l. 190). Why, he wonders, "is all around us here / As if some lesser god had made the world, / But had not force to shape it as he would ?" (PA, ll. 13–15). His own pursuit of human perfection has been to little or no avail: "For I, being simple, thought to work His will, / And have but stricken with the sword in vain; / . and all my realm / Reels back into the beast, and is no more" (PA, ll. 22–26).

Arthur achieves the partial understanding that it is impossible to create a perfect man and that it is immoral to attempt to do so. For laying one's will on another means robbing that individual of his own volition. As Tennyson himself said, "Take away the sense of individual responsibility and men sink into pessimism and madness." This is exactly what takes place among the knights, for example Balin, Percivale, Pelleas, even Lancelot. Having "bowed the will" (PA, l. 291) of his Order, Arthur has caused the chaos which now surrounds him. And being thus aware, realizing that he has been simultaneously both right and wrong, he is stripped of his "authority" and acknowledges that "on my heart hath fallen / Confusion, till I know not what I am, / Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King" (PA, ll. 289, 143–45).

Brought by circumstance to an understanding of the doctrine
Idylls of the King

of becoming, Arthur now perceives that “the old order changeth, yielding place to new” and that this is as it should be: “God fulfils himself in many ways, / Lest one good custom should corrupt the world” (PA, ll. 408–10). He, Arthur, had come with the authority of the Absolute to pursue within the realm of the finite the values of the infinite. But in this endeavor he discovered what Schlegel called the “indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative” (L 108; KA, 2:160). For in light of moral law he had proven culpable in compelling assent to those very values which it was his mission to proclaim. Feeling then, like Nietzsche’s tragic hero, both justified and unjustified, Arthur believes himself worthy of reward but doubtful of attaining it. It is right that he now pass on—but to where? To the paradise of Avilion surely. But then immediately he wonders: “if indeed I go / (For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)” (PA, ll. 425–26). In the last lines of the poem he is carried away but to what and where is left ambiguous, as the departing funeral barge is transformed into “one black dot against the verge of dawn” (l. 439).

Much of Idylls of the King is ambiguous, indeed indeterminate. First, we can never know the truth of Arthur’s birth, whether he is illegitimate or a son of Gorlois or of Uther, or of supernatural origin. As Merlin asks rhetorically, “where is he who knows?” It is a matter of individual perception: “And truth is this to me, and that to thee” (CA, ll. 409, 406). Glossing this passage, Tennyson noted: “The truth appears in different guise to different persons. The one fact is that man comes from the great deep and returns to it” (Ricks, p. 1480n). Second, we can never be sure whether the knights ever saw the Grail or some natural phenomenon. As remarked earlier, Tennyson said that he expressed in “The Holy Grail” his “strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen” but then undercut this statement by notes suggesting that the Grail knights were deluded (Ricks, pp. 1661, 1676, 1680) and by having Arthur himself express his doubts (HG, l. 869). Third, we cannot tell whether Arthur goes to paradise or merely disappears into nothingness; that is, we cannot know whether the ending of the poem is pessimistic
or optimistic. Arthur's mind is "clouded with a doubt" as he wonders "if indeed I go" (PA, ll. 425–26), and Bedivere's account of what happens is reported in qualified language, in terms of "seemed," "as," "as if," and "like." As Kerry McSweeney observes, the ending of the *Idylls* "is neither optimistic nor pessimistic; it is indeterminate, offering alternative possibilities." 11

Adding to the ambiguities of the poem is the light and color imagery. Light, in the poem usually associated with good, especially with Arthur, is not only illuminating but also blinding, when, for example, the knights sworn by the King are "dazed, as one who wakes / Half-blinded at the coming of a light" (CA, ll. 264–65). The color red is usually associated with sexual indulgence, but it is also the color of the Holy Grail. White, on the other hand, is generally significant of innocence, but the sleeve of the lily maid of Astolat is red. Tennyson has purposely designed the whole to preclude our saying positively, as he put it, "*This means that*" (Ricks, p. 1463). Probably the best gloss on the poem is Merlin's "riddling," carrying with it the veiled sanction of the author: "Confusion, and illusion, and relation, / Elusion, and occasion, and evasion" (GL, ll. 281–82).

Throughout, Tennyson appears careful to evade responsibility for the course of action that his story follows. His narrative manner often suggests redaction, as though he were the editor of Arthurian source material, shaping it into proper narrative form. We find this in the first idyll when the narrator, who had originally seemed omniscient, continues with the story of Arthur's early days by saying, "Thereafter—as he speaks who tells the tale" (CA, l. 94). In "Gareth and Lynette" he alludes to Malory, "he that told the tale in olden times" (l. 1392). Again, in "Pelleas and Ettarre" he cites the authority of his source for the narrative, "And he that tells the tale / Says" (ll. 482–83). In "The Last Tournament" he apparently refers to a source, "he that tells the tale" (l. 226). In two other idylls the narrative is given over to other narrators: "The Holy Grail" is a colloquy but consists mainly of Percivale's relating of the story, and "The Passing of Arthur" is said, in a syntactically
involved sentence fragment, to be the story told by Sir Bedivere but seems in fact to be a retelling by someone else, for Bedivere is referred to in the third person.

All this appears to indicate an objective narrative without any sign of the personality of the narrator. But this is more apparent than real. To be sure, “he that tells the tale” is, as Dwight Culler suggests, a way of avoiding an authoritative voice. Yet Tennyson also makes it a means of getting the author into the poem. We see this in “Gareth and Lynette” when the narrator says, “And he that told the tale in olden times / Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors, / But he, that told it later, says Lynette” (ll. 1392–93), Hallam Tennyson glossing the first “he” as “Malory” and the second as “my father” (Ricks, p. 1525n). At the beginning of “Geraint and Enid” the narrator—in the most obvious instance of parabasis in the poem, recalling that of Dickens’s apostrophe to the lords and reverends upon the death of Jo in Bleak House—addresses directly the “purblind race of miserable men” who take false for true and vice versa in this twilight world “until we pass and reach / That other, where we see as we are seen!” (italics added). In “The Last Tournament” “he that tells the tale” is none other than the author himself, for not only is there no source for one of the most elaborate similes (“Likened them, saying. ”) but Tennyson glosses the passage, “Seen by me at Mürren in Switzerland” (ll. 226–31; Ricks, p. 1711n). Idylls of the King does indeed reveal, as his son said, the poet’s “innermost being”; and Tennyson wanted to be sure to impress this “being” on his poem by signing it, discreetly as it were, in the manner of a painter of a picture. Like God, he is both immanent and transcendent, and he is also like God in that he is inscrutable, presenting us with ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes.

By formal and stylistic means the author also calls attention to his poem as a literary artifice and thereby to himself as the artist. First, there is the title itself, suggestive not of a work in English but of one in Greek. Few titles could be more scholarly or self-consciously literary. Second, there is the mixture of genres upon
which the poem is erected. Worked in the mode of the Hellenistic epyllion, or epic fragment, the poem combines epic, lyric, tragedy, romance, and drama.\textsuperscript{13} At times there are even overtones of the musical masque, especially in "The Coming of Arthur," in which form, according to his son, the poet seems originally to have conceived his work (Ricks, p. 1461). Third, there is the gorgeous, ornate style. The exquisite arrangements of consonants and vowels, even in dramatic passages (for instance, "Which flesh and blood perforce would violate" [LT, l. 684]); the grand rhetorical flourishes like the famous oxymoron "His honour rooted in dishonour stood. / And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true" (LE, ll. 871–72)—what could be more contrived, more designed to impress upon the reader the artificiality of the narrative? Moreover, the style is not consistent: as Tennyson said, the language of the frame idylls is "intentionally more archaic than the others" (Ricks, p. 1742).\textsuperscript{14} Fourth, the idylls, particularly the ten forming "The Round Table," become formally more complicated as the story advances, with the cinematic flashback technique used increasingly to suggest disharmony and discontinuity, as though the narrative were making known its own dissolution into the artifice of eternity, an arabesque of the most intricate jeweled work. By all these means the reader is never allowed to forget that here is a "fantasy"—charades, as G. M. Hopkins called them, "\textit{Charades from the Middle Ages}"\textsuperscript{15}—proceeding from the "fancy" of the poet,\textsuperscript{16} who, hovering above his work, acknowledges its paradoxes and contradictions.