CHAPTER III

IDYLLS OF THE KING
The age of Queen Victoria is one comparable to the Great Elizabeth Age in the vitality and splendour of its literary achievements both in poetry and prose. Among the poets of this period Tennyson (1809-92) stands out pre-eminently. For more than half a century Tennyson held the attention of the public with the brilliance of his poetical skill and his power of interpreting the age to itself.

Among Tennyson's works, the most ambitious was 'Idylls of the King'. "From his youth, Tennyson had wished to write a national epic poem celebrating the life and times of King Arthur and concentrating in the figure of the King himself the virtues of the good and faithful ruler, the model of the true Christian Knight as he was understood in the Victorian Age. In describing the life of Arthur, his wisdom and goodness were for a certain time to prevail only to be conquered in the end by evil and treachery from within his own household and kingdom. This plan Tennyson realized in a series of poems, Idylls of the King, which in his role of poet Laureate, he dedicated to Queen Victoria".  

'Idyll', a 'little picture', was the title originally used in Greek literature for short picturesque poems, such as the Idylls of Theocritus, the Sicilian (B.C.280); these generally depict common incidents in the life of simple folk in country or in town - the loves and jealousies of

1. Victorian Narrative Poems, Methuen's English Classics 821.8 Dy.99522 / 185)
shepards, the toils of fisherman, or sight-seeings in a great city. Later imitators, Theocritus and Virgil, for example, took rural life almost exclusively as the scenery of their Idylls; hence 'Idyllic is now generally understood as implying an idealised rusticity, the simplicity of the country without its coarseness. So Tennyson calls the shepherd love-song, quoted by Ida in The Princess ' a small sweet Idyll ' and has given the title of English Idylls to poems like his Dora, The Gardner's Daughter, and Sea-Dreams. But the term 'Idyll' may rightly be used of any 'picture poem'; that is, a poem which gives a highly-wrought and complete representation of any scene of life and has for motive one leading sentiment. "An Idyll is a 'little picture' of a character or mood coloured by a single, dominant emotion." The Idylls of the King are not pastoral poems; they are of a loftier and noble strain and are informed with a more serious purpose. Each Idyll is complete in itself as presenting a separate picture, but each at the same time fills its place in a connected series grouped round a central figure. The twelve books of the Idylls of the King form one great poem, characterised by epic unity of design and grandeur of tone; they present a full cycle of heroic story and have a right claim to be known as the 'Epic of Arthur."

Tennyson's choice of the plural Idylls stresses his intention, as Jerome Buckley points out, to portray " not a
single unified narrative but a group of chivalric tableaux selected from a great mass of available legend....Each of the Idylls moves through a series of sharply visualized Vignettes toward its pictured climax, its moment of revelation."

The story is derived from an early cycle of legends which centre round the figure of King Arthur. Their origin is obscure. But through research we may say that Arthur is a semi-historical and semi-legendary figure. Two great kings, Arthur of England and Charlemagne of France were made in the middle ages the Centres of two great cycles of Romance. Each cycle presented its King as the visible head of Christiandom, with a group of faithful knights. The chief of these knigths was distinguished above others, and was the type of manly valour.

All that can be said with any certainty about Arthur is that there was in the sixth century a war-leader in Britain called Artus or Arthur, who, after the departure of the Romans, headed the tribes of Cumbria and by his valour and martial skill drove away the encroaching Saxons from the east and the Picts and Scots from the north; and that five or six centuries later, "the name of King Arthur had come to stand for an ideal of royal wisdom, chivalric virtue, and knightly prowess which was recognised alike in England,

France and Germany.

The development of the Arthurian legend in English lit can be clearly traced. The earliest legends of Arthur are to be found in the Welsh Tales, in the Breton and German Romances;

Between 1130 and 1147 Geoffrey of Monmouths, gave a long account of Arthur's exploits in his Historia Britanum, a fabulous Latin Chronicle of Britain. Geoffrey's work was turned into French verse by Gaimar and also, with many additional details about Arthur, by Wace, a Jersey poet. The Round Table was first mentioned by him. The Arthurian story was then developed in French lit and Arthur became the centre of a mass of legends in various tongues.

In 1470, Sir Thomas Malory used the materials he found in 'many noble volumes', for the making of his "Book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table." The book is called by Caxton, who printed it in 1485, "thys noble and joyous book entitled le Morte 'D' Arthur." Malory's work became the basis of poems by Tennyson, Morris, Swinburne, Arnold, etc.

Tennyson had shown from an early date, a strong interest in those Arthurian romances which have so powerfully attracted the imaginative minds of England, France and Germany from the Middle Ages downwards. "Perfection in Art", Tennyson marked "is perhaps more sudden
sometimes than we think, but then the long preparation for it, that unseen germination, that is what we ignore and 1 forget ". The unseen germination of the Idylls of the King goes back at least to that moment in Tennyson's early youths when he first read Malory and "the Vision of Arthur as I have drawn him had come upon me ". The vision remained with him until his death, within a few months of which he made the last of the innumerable revisions of the Idylls. As early as 1832, he published The Lady of Shalott, the incidents of which afterwards formed the framework of the Idylls of Elaine. Ten years later his Morte 'd' Arthur appeared; an introduction to this poem represented it as a fragment of a long epic. Five years previously to this publication, Walter Savage Landar, who had heard the Morte 'D' Arthur read aloud from manuscript, wrote " It is more Homeric than any poem of our time, and rivals some of the noblest poetry in the Odyssea."

The germ of the whole epic, the fragmentary 'Morte 'D' Arthur' drafted in 1833, revised in 1835, and published in 1842, was so instinctually right in tone and design that over a quarter of a century after its first publication Tennyson could incorporate it without change into the still unfinished Idylls of 1869. During the next two decades he continually altered and expanded the design of the larger poem without violating the verbatim integrity of this first

1. Tennyson, Memoir, I, 453.
2. Ibid., II, 128.
composed but last in sequence of the Idylls. At this stage in the decline of the Round Table, the cast of characters has dwindled to Arthur and the sole surviving knight who witnessed his passing and the overriding theme of the poem—the wasting away of human aspiration in the face of time is felt at its keenest. Drawn to that part of the Arthurian myth which most compelled his imagination, Tennyson begins abruptly upon a conjunction—"so all day long the noise of battle rolled"—which implies everything that comes before it yet leaves him the maximum freedom in later developing the full story (see ibid., p.p.86-88).

In 1835 the coincidence of a personal catastrophe with what can only be described as a lifelong obsession led Tennyson to begin his two 'Arthur' poems, the Morte 'd' Arthur and In Memoriam. The obsession concerned some apocalyptic upheaval—of a city, a civilization, of the earth itself—and is present in Tennyson's earliest writing. The catastrophe was the sudden death of Arthur Hallam. The Morte 'D' Arthur was as much a reaction to the actual Arthur's death as was in Memoriam. Tennyson himself strongly hints at their common origin in the autobiographical 'Merlin and the Gleam' (1889):

"Clouds and darkness
Closed upon Camelot;
Arthur had vanished
I knew not whither
The king who loved me,
And can not die......"
The king who 'loved me' and can not die is clearly Arthur Hallam, yet he is also the Arthur of the Idylls. The two are virtually indistinguishable. "Thou art the highest and most human too", Guinevere says of her king (G,644); Sir Charles Tennyson's comment on the connection between Hallam's death and the 'Morte 'd' Arthur' strikes me as indisputable. Tennyson in part sublimate (d) in Morte 'd' Arthur his own passionate grief at the death of Arthur Hallam. Beneath the measured cadences of Bedivere's lament for Arthur's passing, one senses the urgency of personal statement, as if Tennyson himself were forced to "go forth companionless" into an alien world. His profoundly personal quest for reunion with Hallam in In Memoriam - "Descend, and touch, and enter " (Sec XCIII) - becomes in the Idylls a profoundly impersonal despair for the passing not only of a hero but of civilization.

Haunted all his life by the ghosts of such passings, Tennyson was understandably drawn to the story of the doomed king who falls with the death of his kingdom. In his boyhood, before he had read Malory, Tennyson had written a whole series of poems whose titles alone betray his preoccupation with the subject : "The Fall of Jerusalem, The Vale of Bones, Babylon, Lamentation of the Peruvians." The fall of the fair city of imagination is one of the most striking anticipations in Tennyson's early verse of the fall of Camelot, in both 'Timbuctoo' and the 'Idylls' the
'Brilliant Towers' of the mind's own building give way to a desolate, post civilized landscape of forgotten peoples and waste sands.

That's why Tennyson's imagination was so strongly predisposed to the story of Arthur, and why in the year of Hallam's death he was moved to begin his first major poem on what he called "the greatest of all poetical subjects."

"At twenty four I meant to write an epic or drama of King Arthur," he remarked after the Idylls was nearly completed: "I said I should do it in 12 years, but the Reviews stopped me." Hypersensitive to criticism, he began with that part of the Arthurian cycle which, together with "The coming of Arthur", most lends itself to epic treatment: the national hero who creates a kingdom and dies in single combat in its defence. Tennyson himself pointed out that the form and style of these two frame poems are "purposely more archaic" than the Ten Round Table Idylls which they enclose."

"Once the final design completed itself in his mind, he turned the initial disparity to aesthetic advantage. He added to the original epic fragment the great opening lines of 'The Passing' (1-169) that draw together all the dominant symbols of the Idylls, thereby binding the 'Morte' to all that precedes it. And by setting off from the Round Table

Idylls the paired poems which mark Arthur's coming into the mutable world and passing into another, Tennyson incorporates into the very structure of the Idylls its cyclic themes of change and permanence, of time and eternity.

Four Idylls appeared in 1859 centered on the theme of true love and false: 'Enid' (finally divided as 'The Marriage of Geraint' and 'Geraint and Enid'); 'Vivien' (later 'Merlin and Vivien') 'Elaine (Lancelot and Elaine), and 'Guinevere', existing originally as a unit in the way they represent 'Woman's influence' on the 'Dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin'. Except for 'Enid', drawn from the Welsh 'Mabinogian', all of these pieces and the seven other 'Idylls' were derived primarily from Malory's Morte 'D' Arthur, though Tennyson felt free to supplement Malory with other sources, to make original additions, and in general to adapt his materials to his own designs. His central purpose became apparent with the publication in 1869 of 'The Coming of Arthur', 'Pelleas and Ettarre', 'The Holy Grail' and 'The Passing of Arthur' (this last incorporating his early 'Morte 'D' Arthur'); he would trace through narrative and description the rise and decline of a goodly fellowship and suggest through symbol and allegory the value on which the health of any good society must depend. To complete his pattern he wrote 'Gareth and

1. 'Idylls of the King; 'Evolving the form' by Rosenberg.
Lynette' (1872) a study of innocence and young idealism, to stand near the beginning of the sequence, 'Balin and Balan' (1885), a tale of evil comingling with good, to come near the middle, and 'The Last Tournament'(1871), a dark and bitter parallel to the tragedy of Lancelot and Guinevere, to be placed near the end. Both "the coming of Arthur" and the epilogue 'To the Queen' intimate the moral intention of the whole and its relevance to a modern world.

(The tangled history of the composition and publication of Idylls is unravelled in Sir Charles Tennyson's 'Alfred Tennyson', in his "The Idylls of the King" (Twentieth Century 51 (1957), 277-286) and in Kathlean Tillotson's 'Studies' p.p.80-109

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<th>Idyll</th>
<th>Date of Composition</th>
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<td>1. Morte 'D' Arthur</td>
<td>1833-1834</td>
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<td>2. Merlin and Vivien</td>
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<td>4. Geraint and Enid</td>
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<td>6. Lancelot &amp; Elaine</td>
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<td>9. The Coming of Arthur</td>
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<td>10. Pelleas and Ettarre</td>
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11. Gareth and Lynette 1869-1872 1872
12. The Passing of Arthur 1869 1869
13. The Last Tournament 1870-1871 1871
14. To the Queen 1872 1873
15. Balin and Balan 1872-1874 1885

When we remember that Tennyson worked on the Idylls for some four decades, the whole poem at first seems surprisingly unified. The formal opening and closing act as a frame to the other ten Idylls, which he referred to as "The Round Table". Tennyson's insistence in 1873 that he needed two more idylls to complete the poem indicates that his vision of it as a whole had come to him by then, but it was not a vision that had been before his eyes all during the long conception of the work, and what unity it has was imposed upon it, rather than growing organically from its matter.

Tennyson certainly recognised the danger of disunity that his method of writing risked, and he deliberately paired sections that referred to each other, both by likeness and by contrast 'Gareth and Lynette', for example, has the same initial situation as 'Pelleas and Etтарre', with a young and untried knight acting as champion (for a beautiful maiden; 'Gareth', however, shows how Lynette finally learns to respect constancy, service and bravery, while Etтарre reflects the moral decadence of the court in her deceit, trickery, and sexual betrayal of Pelleas. In the
'Enid' Idylls the situation is reversed, and the wife is the patient, uncomplaining servant of an unreasonable husband, her steadfastness standing in contrast to the behaviour of Isolt and Guinevere. The same point is made by the constancy of Elaine in her Idyll. The death of Balin and Balan as a result of Guinevere's adultery is an only too clear parallel to her coming between Arthur and Lancelot, while the restoration in death of the fraternity of Balin and Balan is meant as a contrast to the final sundering of the king and his favourite knight.

The connection between idylls is also reinforced by verbal parallels. The opening and the closing idylls, for example, are both written in language more archaic than the ten central ones: 'The passing of Arthur' because it was an enlargement of the already archaic 'Morte 'D' Arthur', and 'The Coming of Arthur' because it needed to match the other. Although he was writing the initial idyll at a later date, Tennyson tried hard to make verbal anticipations in the opening that would be echoed in the conclusion.

Tennyson himself indicated another way in which the idylls are unified, pointing out that Arthur's coming is on the night of the New Year, he is wedded in the spring, the vision of the Holy Grail on a summer night, the Last Tournament takes place in early autumn, Guinevere's flight in full autumn, and Arthur's death at midnight in mid-winter. Since then there have been many conscientious — and
ingenious – attempts to show the essential unity of the idylls through theme, narrative structure, and allegorical intent.

It is true that the Idylls are, in essence, a series of illustrative episode and lack to some extent the sweep of a straightforward epic narrative. But Tennyson launched and concluded the main story so strongly (with the coming of Arthur and The Passing of Arthur) and so skilfully wove the main thread of the tragedy into the intervening Idylls, that the episodic nature of the treatment is largely compensated for. His method also has the advantage of giving each of the twelve books a lively independent interest.

The theory that the unity of the Idylls is to be found in its allegory has some truth in it. Tennyson himself spoke of the idylls as "new-old, and showing Sense at war with Soul". An examination of the dates of publication strengthens our doubt. The earliest idylls are those in which the allegorical element is least prominent. Only towards the end do we see the unmistakable marks of symbolism. In any case, the allegory is vague, shadowy and of dubious interpretation.

There is no doubt that, from the very first, Tennyson intended an allegorical treatment of his subject. He never liked to re-tell an ancient legend unless he felt that he could give it some relevance to the conditions of his own
day. In one of his brief notes, he plainly stated that Modred was to represent the sceptical understanding, Merlin science, Excalibur war, and the Round Table liberal institutions. When the Coming of Arthur and The Holy Grail appeared in 1869, the critics began to perceive the poet's deeper purpose and this was confirmed by the "Epilogue to the Queen" of 1872, in which he described his poem as "shadowing sense at war with soul". He made an even clearer statement some years later: "My meaning was spiritual. I only took the legendary stories of the Round Table as illustrations. Arthur was allegorical to me. I intended him to represent the ideal in the soul of man coming in contact with the warring elements of the flesh".

With the aim of giving his medieval stories as much human reality as possible, Tennyson avoided the pervasive allegorical treatment that characterises the Faerie Queen; he felt that allegory could be pressed too far, but admitted that "there is an allegory or perhaps rather a parabolic drift in the poems (idylls). 'Poetry is 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.".

"The work bears some resemblance to Tasso's Gerusalemme Literata, where the significance of the

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1. Memoir, ii, 127.
2. Ricks, Poems, P.1463.
besieging army, representing body and soul in unison, is offset by ignoble soldiery who reflect the grosser human appetities. Led by Godfrey, the disciplined army sees God in Christ, the word made flesh. Arthur is 'Ideal manhood closed in real man; the Round Table, representing the passions and capacities of a man,' succeeds for a time in keeping its vows to 'follow the Christ, the King'. It is 'the tableland of life, and its struggles and performances' between the two mysteries of birth and death. At the end Arthur laments that the house which vowed loyalty to him has been his doom; Merlin had known that vows were such 'as is a shame, A man should not be bound by, yet the which No man can keep'. Tancred fails Godfrey as Lancelot fails Arthur, because concupiscence prevails over principle. The struggle which the Idylls presents in varying facets is 'not the history of one man or of one generation but of a whole cycle of it is unending and 'world-wide', 'typified in individuals, with the subtle interaction of character upon character.' Tennyson goes on to say that 'the Central dominant figure' is 'the pure, generous, tender brave, human hearted Arthur. "It would be more true to say 'the key figure', for Arthur is an undominating background figure in much of the idylls, and thus reflects life, the ideal, though acknowledged, is often remote and ignored. The struggle is within: 'The king who fights his people fights himself' ".

When asked once by the Bishop of Ripon whether those persons were right who interpreted the three Queens, who accompanied King Arthur on his last voyage, as Faith, Hope and Charity, Tennyson replied "They are right and they are not right. They mean that and they do not. They are three of the noblest of women. I hate to be tied down to say 'this means that because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation."

In his first notes for the poem, Tennyson identified Arthur with religious faith, Modred with sceptical understanding and the Round Table with liberal institutions. Later he declared that Arthur represented the soul.

F.E.L. Priestley develops an enthusiastic defence of the much criticised Idylls as "One of Tennyson's most earnest and important efforts to deal with major problems of his time. Tennyson is asserting in the Idylls that Christianity is not so much a set of facts to be argued about as a system of principles to be lived by ..... He wants to make the reader understand how these principles become neglected, and what must happen to individuals and societies who neglect them. He is voicing a warning to his own age and nation and to all ages and nation."

Arthur, in Tennyson's scheme, represents the ideal or spiritual principle trying to realize itself in the world of

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sense (through marriage with Guinevere). Lancelot may be taken as an embodiment of the poetic spirit which should be the chief support and interpreter of the spiritual (Lancelot was Arthur's Chief Knight and sent by him to fetch Guinevere for the marriage), and Merlin seems to embody the rationalistic and scientific intellect. When the poetic spirit is overcome by the sensual and science succumbs to the lure of materialism, fatal blows are struck at the Quest for the ideal, the inevitable failure and undying persistence of which are symbolized by the defeat of Arthur and his promised return form Avalon, while the relativity of even the noblest human embodiments of the ideal is implied in the famous lines of 'Morte 'D' Arthur':

"The old order Changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

King Arthur, the central figure, is a man in whom the higher instincts of his nature dominates the lower, and whose whole life is governed by the law within. He is, as Guinevere too late acknowledges, "the highest and most human too." The kingdom which 'for a space' he establishes, and which in spite of downfall he will come to establish again, is the rule of conscience; and in his coming, his foundation of the Round Table 'of love of God and men', his continued endeavour to keep his knights true to their vows, his failure, and his mysterious passing which is not death, we see a reflection of the conflict eternally waged in human
life between the spirit and the flesh, "with the lusts thererof". Arthur's visible enemies are the heathens, whom he overcomes, but more subtle foes than the heathens are the evil passions and the mystic delusions of his own Christian court and household, which in the end prevail over and ruin his "boundless purpose."

"The Idylls is essentially a religious poem (the lady of the lake, who takes especial care of Arthur and is described as the mystic foster-mother of Lancelot, undoubtedly typifies the Christian Religion) and the whole poem is deeply charged with Christian feeling and symbolism. The 'Grail' obviously represents the extreme mystical approach to religion. Tennyson was at heart a mystic with a capacity for true mystical experience, and many critics have thought it strange that he should have made the Quest of the Grail one of the principal causes of the collapse of Arthur's scheme and depicted Arthur himself as so unfriendly to the Quest. This attitude illustrates Tennyson's deep-seated conviction that the highest life is 'with man and for man', a conviction which is illustrated from a different angle by the conclusion of 'Sixty Years After'. He saw that for the ordinary mind to turn away from the ordinary duties of human society in order deliberately to seek mystical experience, or deliberately cultivate religious exaltation, is dangerous and almost certain to be injurious, although for the exceptional spirit, like Galahad
or Perceval's sister, the Holy Nun, the effort may be 1 fruitful."

"It will be enough to say while talking on Tennyson's politics that the poet's main object was to emphasize the vital importance for men and nations of maintaining a spiritual ideal, and the danger of this succumbing to the combined forces of sensuality and materialism, as Arthur's ideal polity did, in the 'Last Weird Battle of the West'. Yet the poem ends on a note of hope, for Sir Bedivere, watching from the top of the crag the barge which carries the wounded king away to the island of Avalon, hears:

'As from beyond the limits of the world,  
Like the last echo born of a great cry,  
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice  
About a king returning from his wars.'

and while he strains his eyes to watch the large pass on;  
From less to less and vanish into light he sees;  
2 The new sun rise bringing the new year."

Early in 1872, Tennyson added, in Strahan's 'Library' edition of his works, an Epilogue to the Queen, in which he made clear the application of his Arthurian allegory to the problems of the time, which he says, seemed to many seriously menaced by....

fierce or careless looseness of the faith,
And softness breeding scorn of simple life,
Or Cowardice, the child of lust for gold,
Or Labour, with a groan and not a voice,
Or Art with poisonous honey stol'n from France,
And that which knows, but careful for itself,
And that which knows not, ruling that which knows,
To its own harm; the goal of this great world —
Lies beyond sight; yet — if our slowly-grown
And Gown'd Republic's crowning common-sense,
That saved her many times, not fail — their fears
Are morning shadows huger than the shapes
That cast them, not those gloomier which forego
The darkness of that battle in the West,
Where all of high and holy dies away."

Tennyson was a lover of law and ordered progress. In
domestic sphere, he wants disciplined passion and restrained
emotion. His Lancelot and Guinevere deal with the subject of
guilty love, but he takes care deliberately to avoid its
sensuous aspects. Love has taught him that:

"Self-reverence, self knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power."

Tennyson calls Love — "Strong son of God, immortal
love". In this poem (Idylls) he emphasises the spiritual
love of King Arthur and condemns the sinful love of
Guinevere.

There is no doubt that Tennyson is remembered more as
an artist than anything else. R. Brimley Johnson
writes:"Tennyson was before all things a flawless artist."
This statement is proved true when we read 'Idylls of the
King'.

The Idylls have been regarded as Tennyson's greatest experiment in the blank verse; next to Milton's 'Paradise Lost', they are the finest body of non-dramatic blank verse in the language. One of the finest features of Tennyson's verse is the flexibility with which it adopts itself to the soft idyllic tone appropriate to Enid, to the darkness of moral degradation in The Last Tournament, to the crisis of the parting of Arthur and Guinevere, to the spiritual rapture of the Holy Grail and to the mysticism of The Passing of Arthur.

Tennyson used a variety of metres and treated all of them with a great remarkable freedom. Idylls of the King is in iambic metres, broken up to adjust them to the character of the speaker and the nature of the subject. We accept that Tennyson's blank verse has not the majesty of Milton's, nor the rhetorical splendour and freedom of Shelley's, but it has striking merits of its own, chief among which are its amazing flexibility and its power of achieving, through rhythm and vowel music, a lyrical, singing quality which no other poet has attained in the same degree. The lyrical quality appeared strikingly in 'Oenone', and also in Morte 'd' Arthur the opening line of which provides an admirable example, if read with due emphasis on the broad and open vowel sounds—

"So all day long the noise of battle rolled"
It is the flexibility of Tennyson's verse and his varied control of rhythm that enabled him to use metre successfully for the infinitely diversified narrative of the Idyls of the King.

Critics have sometimes found a too deliberate artistry and refinement in Tennyson's blank verse, particularly that of the English Idyls, and the later Idyls of the King.

In addition to these broad and striking contrasts of rhythm, "Tennyson's delicate ear enabled him to enhance his verse with innumerable felicities of detail, creating, by subtle variations of rhythm and vowel sound, mental and sensual images to reinforce the literal meaning of his words".  

Idyls of the King provides countless examples of such felicity:

"The hoof of his horse slipt in the stream, the stream Descended and the sun was washed away."

(Gareth and Lynette)

"...........the spires.
Prick'd with incredible pinnacles into heaven".  
(The Holy Grail)

"The long low dune, and lazy-plunging sea."
(The Last Tournament)

"Whereat the novice, crying with clasp'd hands Shame on her own garrulity garrulously......"
(Guinevere)

1. 'Six Tennyson Essays' by 'Sir Charles Tennyson' from 'On Reading Tennyson'; p.p.188-195.
In order to get the best out of Tennyson's verse it is essential that it should be read aloud. His poems whether sentimental, tragic, lyrical, were intensely felt, and he himself read them with great intensity.

The most important sound element is the broad vowel. He achieved a great variety of sound with the vowel 'a' and 'o'. Confirmation of Tennyson's treatment of these vowels comes from the description of the poet in the Prologue to Morte 'D' Arthur, who read:

"Mouthing out his hollow oes and aes."

He did not care much for alliteration. Examples of its use can, however, be found - as, for instance, the well known lines in Morte 'D' Arthur:

"The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels---"

Here the alliteration of 'b', 's' and 'c', 's' in the first line is much helped by the changing vowel sounds, 'bare', 'black', 'clanged'.

Another famous example comes from Lancelot and Elaine:

"His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true."

Tennyson's use of simile and metaphor is characterised by originality and aptness. His imagery is highly original,
and individual, and it seems to vivify a scene and present it to the imagination of the reader. A remarkable instance of this originality occurs in Gareth and Lynette:

"Gareth lookt and read
In letters like to those the vexillary
Hath left crag-craven over the streaming Gelt."

that Gelt being a small stream in Cumberland, not named in any of the ordinary gazetteers or atlases; and the reference is to an inscription on a limestone rock near this stream.

The problem of the use of obsolete language was one that Tennyson never solved satisfactorily. He attempted to make the diction lofty and grave, but the result is sometimes another kind of gravity than he intended, that of heaviness. Kay's outburst at Gareth's quest, for example, shows how carefully Tennyson had swotted up his archaism, and perhaps how much Browning he had read, but it hardly reflects spoken speech, either in the Court of Arthur or in that of Victoria:

"Bound upon a quest
With horse and arms—the king hath past his time—
My scullion knave! Thralls to your work again,
For an your fire be low ye kindle mine!
Will there be dawn in West and eve in East?

What is most interesting is that Tennyson's verbosity and lack of precision nearly always occur in his attempts to deal with human nature rather than the natural world. What come close to redeeming the whole poem are the description
and metaphors, almost all drawn from natural imagery, which linger in the mind after the main concerns of the work are forgotten. Some of the most miraculous lines Tennyson ever wrote are scattered with a lordly prodigality throughout the poem, so complete in their rhythm and language that they are unforgettable even when they are not closely related to the main concerns of the poem.

'Then, because his wound was deep,  
The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,  
And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,  
A broken chancel with a broken cross,  
That stood on a dark strait of barren land,  
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one  
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

('The Passing of Arthur', lines (174-89) )

From the same idyll comes the evocation of a loneliness in man that can be communicated only in natural phenomena:

and from them rose  
A cry that shivered to the tingling stars,  
And, as it were one voice, an agony  
Of lamentation, like a wind that shrills  
All night in a waseland, where no one comes  
Or hath come, since the making of the World."

(lines 366-71)

Once more, the clicking into place of the conclusion of the simile is a short-lived resolution, momentarily giving the reader a feeling of concord.

In 'Merlin and Vivien', the idyll most explicitly concerned with sensuality, the most arresting simile seems slightly off the main theme of the poem as it describes
Merlin's premonition of disaster, in an image made many years before in the caves of Ballybunion:

he was mute;
So dark a forethought rolled about his brain,
As on a dull day in an ocean cave
The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall.
In silence.....

(lines 227-31)

"The words that Tennyson puts into the mouth of Arthur when he speaks of his search for God night, with an appropriate change of pronoun, apply equally well to his own search for meaning in nature and in man:

I found Him in the shining of the stars;
I marked Him in the flowering of His fields,
But in His ways with men I find Him not."
(The Passing of Arthur, lines 9-11)

The idylls of the King sold extraordinarily well and soon took a place among Tennyson's most popular publications.

It has been urged with truth that the Idylls are not really medieval, that King Arthur is a modern English gentleman, and that the knights and ladies are as undoubtedly Victorian as in the poem in which the valour and their beauty are sung. They wear the armour and are dressed in the garments of the middle ages, but they speak the speech and think the thoughts of the 19th Century. Their sentiments, their morality, all that belong to them except

1. From "Tennyson: An unquiet heart". 
the barest externals, are modern. In truth Tennyson was never medieval. He frequently went back to the middle ages for a theme, but he never reproduced their spirit in his poems. In spite of an elaborate art, he often seems almost utilitarian in his spirit. He has a 'message', like his friend Carlyle; and he can make it more intelligible in the language of his own time than in that of centuries ago. The question of the quality of the work is far more important than that of its fidelity to the time in which the scene is laid.

Douglas Bush says:

"Idylls of the King which bulked so largely in Tennyson's later work, and which especially made him a popular prophet, are not much read in our time. The handling of the romantic materials and the spiritual allegory-sense at war with soul and the stylized elegance are alike unreal to us. King Arthur seems to wear the white flower of a blameless life in the lapel of a Prince Albert. Yet, in the midst of artifice, Tennyson can still paint Nature, and his pictures of a society in decay have their moments. The Holy Grail is impressive as a whole, as a Victorian wast-land, in its presentation of decadence and neurosis, the quest of spurious spirituality and excitement."

Some have objected to the mixing up of modern ethical standards with the old stories. But it should be remembered
that to retell the old stories as if to a medieval or to primitive audience would have been absurd, and quite foreign to Tennyson's nature. It has also been alleged that Tennyson's allegorical purpose interfere at times with the telling of the story and weaken its characterization. Tennyson in his Idylls quite rightly did not aim at great subtlety of characterization. He drew his men and women with bold strokes emphasising their main qualities and aiming, above all, at emotional truth. With the exception of the King, he certainly succeeded in making them solid and distinctive figures, whose actions flow naturally from their dispositions. Each of the separate Idylls seems to be skilfully and tellingly constructed.

Harold Nicolson, a modern critic, accuses Idylls of intellectual insincerity, though he acknowledges that they contain passages of excellent poetry and the The Passing of Arthur, in particular, is a magnificent poem magnificently treated. Whatever be the quality of the overall achievement and of the message of the Idylls, there can indeed be no doubt of the effectiveness of Tennyson's description of the "last weird battle in the West", with its mingled unreality and horror, and its disturbing waste land imagery.

Tennyson undoubtedly considered The Idylls of the King the most important work of his life. Charles Tennyson believes that none of his poems is richer in beauties of imagery and description, or instinct with a deeper humanity,
than the Idylls. The Idylls of the King are not only a moving recapitulation of one of the World's greatest sages—certainly the finest—retelling of it which has yet been made and perhaps the last that will be attempted—not only an unfailing treasure-house of poetic vision, form and fancy, but the spiritual testament of one of the wisest and most single-minded of men in a great and crucial epoch of world history."

"This part of Tennyson's work is little in favour today, but it bulked large in the esteem of his contemporaries and meant much to the poet himself, enshrining his and their ideas and ideals of personal and social ethics.... A fairer criticism of the idylls is that here, as elsewhere, Tennyson was not successful in portraying character in the round, that he oversimplified its problems but that there is much narrative skill, even though it is at times too mannered, and there are many lovely passages in these poems."

Cazamian Says —

"As for the Idylls of the King, intended by the poet to be his most spacious effort they only remain a typical product of Victorian art. The choice of the episodes, the quality of the images, the hieratic (priestly) attitude of the figures, the ecstatic simplicity of the outline the restrained ardour of the feelings, the rich light as from a
stained - glass window which suffuses the whole work, all suggest the contemporary painting of Rossetti and Burne Jones. During this phase of his career, Tennyson fell a victim to the fascination of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal to which he had already been drawn by his partiality for precise detail and minute observation. By a sheer miracle he fulfilled his intention, and gave a genuine human interest to the cycle of tales in which, round the magic name of Arthur, he wove symbolic and modern allegories. Some of his characters are living, and it must be admitted that the touch of the writer, the artist, or the musician in language, has never more been exquisite.

Now we describe Different Idylls that come one by one in Idylls of the King and analyse them side by side in order of their being published.

The first four Idylls were published in 1859, as 'Enid', 'Vivien', 'Elaine' and 'Guinevere', studies in 'The True and the False'. Each was later worked into the whole series: for example, 'The Coming of Arthur', Gareth and Lynette, and Balin and Balan all finally prepare the way for the revised Merlin and Vivien.

1. **Merlin and Vivien** has great imaginative significance and interest. Vivien is a Temptress who parades 'feminine' wiles: Born of death on a battlefield, while her mother dies on her father's corpse, she sneers at the purity of Arthur
and all and promises to bring back the hearts of the Round Table Knights. Pretending to be menaced by Mark, she seeks protection at Arthur's Court, and is granted it by the Queen. She spends her time sowing scandal, then quietly withdraws like 'an enemy that has left death in the living waters'. Having failed to win the attention of 'the blameless King', she aims at winning Merlin, the 'Wizard' who created Arthur's hall, heavens, and ships.

With Merlin's final fall and enslavement, Arthur's lose of power is inevitable. Merlin, followed by Vivien, becomes 'lost of life and use and name and fame.' 'It is the little rift within the lute, That by and by will make the music mute.' As Vivien slanders Arthur and his knights, Merlin regrets that the King's purity is not intelligible to base minds. However, by flattery and tears she wins the secret that makes him her prisoner. Merlin's submission to her deprives Arthur of magical assistance as Lancelot's betrayal will finally deprive him of half his physical forces.

In spite of its unconvincing psychology and moral that man can be made a fool of by sex, Merlin and Vivien has some interest in relation to the Idylls as a whole. Like Tristram in The Last Tournament she signifies 'the lustfulness of the flesh' which 'could not believe in anything good or great' (Ricks, Poems, p.1593). Her imprisonment of Merlin in a hollow oak by means of his own learning represents the
condition of knowledge in the nineteenth century - with no book of revealed truth and no direct access by magic the understanding of things is locked up in the things themselves, accessible only by accumulated observation, experiment and speculative theory.

The poem's strongest images are of emptiness, blindness, vastness. The best of the poetry foreshadows his imprisonment, when what Keats called 'the feel of not to feel it' will lack even language:

"he was mute;
So dark forethought rolled about his brain,
As on a dull day in an Ocean Cave
The blind wave feeling round his long sea-hall
In silence ...." (227-31)

2. The Enid story (which became 'The Marriage of Geraint' and 'Geraint and Enid') was drawn principally from Lady Charlotte Guest's Mabinogion. It was divided in 1873 into The Marriage of Geraint and Geraint and Enid, forming then the third and fourth Idylls, to follow Gareth and Lynette (1872), the spring Idyll of initiation into manhood and marriage.

Geraint dotes on his wife Enid, the Queen's favourite, but when he hears a rumour of Guinevere's guilty love for Lancelot he urges the need to protect his marches as a pretext for taking his wife from a court which might taint her morals. We are introduced to the story of Geraint's earlier venture when he left court to avenge an insult to
the Queen.

He comes to a town and spends his night in the ruined castle of yniol, whose daughter Enid he falls in love with as soon as he sees her. As Enid's champion, Geraint defeats Edyrn, Enid's second suitor who insulted the Queen, and sends him to seek pardon at Arthur's court, where he becomes the king's faithful follower. The first part of the divided story ends inartistically with their marriage at Caerleon.'

After days apart in the wilderness, the mistrusted wife leading the way, Geraint and Enid reach a town where Limours, Enid's first suitor, protests his love, and Enid prepares Geraint's armour for sudden encounter. Before they leave at early dawn she tells him what has happened. Limours overtakes them and falls. After tending his wound, Enid takes Geraint to an empty hall and nurses him. Geraint being healed, they return to Caerleon, where the Queen clothes Enid in 'apparel like the day'. Geraint can not regain the serenity he knew before doubting Guinevere's disloyalty, but he keeps the King's justice in his own country, and wins high esteem until he dies fighting against the heathen.

The Enid stories are not without excitement, but they lack a greatly inspiring and significant subject. A few ancillary images call for admiration, especially in the simile which conveys Enid's joy when at last she feels Geraint hers again: 'She did not weep, But o'er her meek
eyes came a happy mist like that which kept the heart of Eden Garden before the useful trouble of the rain.' The description of the ivy on the ruins of Yniol's castle shows close observation. Much simple pleasure in 'Enid' comes from its natural images. Enid is associated with hidden, shy, sudden presences, birds, fish, water. The dress offered to Enid in the domain of Earl Doorm pays tribute to the qualities she gives the Idyll.

These descriptions have the fresh, homely, inward quality of the English Idyls, of working to what is familiar and loved:

and wings
Moved in her ivy, Enid, for she lay
With her fair head in the dim-yellow light
Among the dancing shadows of the birds....

(The Marriage of Geraint, 559-602)

This naturalist's precision, startling in a romance, and all of the imagery cited, of moments of sensitivity, awareness, attraction, suspicion, offer what D.H. Lawrence would have called a 'passional' underfeeling. Enid is really more concerned with the husband's bad behaviour than with the wife's exemplary submission. Attractively impulsive and sensual, Geraint is aligned with Guinevere.

'Lancelot and Elaine', the story of 'the lily maid of Astolat' which Tennyson transmuted in 'The Lady of Shalott' is much the brightest of the early Arthurian idylls. Though
turning on the unrequited love of Elaine, it depends inauspiciously on the doom stricken diamonds which Arthur found before he became king Lancelot, after winning one of the diamonds at each of eight successive annual jocusts, hopes to win the last, the central diamond and present them all to the Queen. She persuades him to enter unknown, all for glory.

Lancelot, angry with himself, comes to Astolat, where he speaks of the twelve great battles won by Arthur against the heathen. Elaine loves him at first sight. He leaves her his shield, with which she lives in fantasy. Sir Gawain is commanded to find him, and present the diamond, but the king is angry to hear of Lancelot's deception. Gawain tries to win Elaine's love. Rebuffed by the king for leaving the diamond with her and not fulfilling his commission, he retaliates by spreading news of Elaine's love, which reaches the Queen.

Elaine finds Lancelot in a hermit's cave, presents the diamond, and tends him daily until his life is saved.

"His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true."

These heavy oxymorons define Lancelot as the lover of Arthur's Queen. Lancelot loves her 'with all love except the love of man and woman when they love their best'. Elaine knows she must die if he cannot love her. She confesses her
love. When she hears he cannot return it, she swoons. She prepares for her death, making arrangements for her body's conveyance to Comelot, a queenly figure to meet the Queen. Lancelot presents the diamonds to Guinevere, but, telling him to give them to his lady-love, she flings them out of the palace window into the river, while watching listlessly, he sees the barge passing where they fell, and Elaine lying on it, 'like a star in blackest night.' After reading the letter she carries, Lancelot declares that she loved him with a love surpassing the love of all other women he had known. Guinevere asks him to forgive her jealousy and the King commands that the maid of Astolat be buried like queen. Lancelot is left wishing, the Lady of the Lake. The climactic scene is moving and perhaps the most dramatically memorable in the whole of the Idylls. Like the Lady of Shalott, Elaine is a kind of artist, dwelling on Lancelot's image to summon up a new story of legitimate love. Elaine's love story, however, is secondary and instrumental, offering a prospective on the love of Guinevere and Lancelot, which is the real subject of this Idyll and of Guinevere; melodramas in marble of innocent and sinful love.

Guinevere:

The ideal represented by Arthur and his Round Table (unwritten, like the code of the English ruling class, the constitution, and the civilizing mission of Empire) is destroyed by the adultery of his Queen with his most famous
Guinevere, a short work written in about a fortnight, presents the disruptive Modred as the villain, a subtle beast, once caught spying on 'the high top of the garden-wall' by Lancelot - a reminder of Satan in Paradise Lost (IV, 172). The Queen is fearful, grim faces come and go in the dark night, if she sleeps, she has an awful dream. She urges Lancelot to return to his own land, and arranges a last meeting. "As she is lost reflecting on the glorious days of Lancelot and Arthur, the King comes from war against Lancelot, and reports Modred's revolt. He expatiates on her sin; he can not allow a wife who is false to rule his home. He forgives her grandly, though he loathes her polluted body. Perhaps, if she purifies her soul, they will meet in heaven. Grovelling at his feet, Guinevere perceives his hands blessing her in the darkness. The final scene between Arthur and the Queen shows the nobler qualities of both, but its denunciatory absoluteness illustrate Tennyson's artistic problem. The king, as Guinevere reminds us, is 'the highest and the most human too'. Their last meeting seems entirely human in its presentation, and by human standards Arthur seems inhumanly perfect. Like that of Modred, the parabolic role of the king is not yet adequately conveyed, at this stage it is merely emergent. It seems to confirm the view of George Meredith in Sandra Bellone: 'Alas! in our world, where all things must move, it becomes, by-and-by, manifest that
an 'ideal', or idol, which you will, has not been gifted with two legs.'

F.J. Furnivall commented furiously on the blaming of Guinevere: 'If any one is to be blamed for men's lusts let it be men' - though he is right about Tennyson going easy on Lancelot, he chivalrously assumes that women are not lustful.

What damns Guinevere is the high valuation put on the influence of the good women, from within her proper sphere of the home, a Victorian value which survives hardly in the notion that women are nicer than men (but if they are not they're horrid). Given her story Guinevere never had a chance in this role, yet it is made part of the novice's story of Arthur's destiny:

'and could he find
A woman in her womanhood as great
As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,
The twain together well might change the world.

(Guinevere, 296-9)

Guinevere's fault is like Merlin's, half-commitment, because she did not 'see' Arthur soon enough. It is also a characteristic of Tennyson's writing, that produces the most striking effects of the Idylls, the eerie pessimism that environs them:

"Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still.

(Guinevere, 6-8)
Guinevere was much admired for the dignity of Guinevere's silence, not defending herself. Guinevere found Arthur too much of a soul, too faultless, with no touch of earth - 'The low sun makes the colour' (Lancelot and Elaine, 131-4). If we reason from the Sense/Soul, ideal/real oppositions, it would be Lancelot who was real and ideal, as in Guinevere's metaphor of the sky and earth at sunset, while if Guinevere represented sense, Arthur as Soul would be at war with his wife, a conflict hardly likely to fulfil his early hope:

"Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything
Have power in this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live."

(The Coming of Arthur, 90-93)

The confusion in Tennyson's opposition derives from his pessimism, which makes ideal aspirations seem like ill-tempered complaints, if they are not realizable. The Holy Grail attempts to find a more adequate role for poetic idealism.

The next book to be written, after an interval of almost ten years, was 'The Holy Grail', pressure from his 'wife and the Queen, doubting whether it could be handled without incurring a charge of irrelevance'. It is the story of quests after visions of the cup into which Christ's blood was said to have flowed when he was crucified. The image of the Holy Grail appears only to those in abnormal states of
mind. A frustrated, oversexed girl, after becoming a nun, hears much on the subject, with the fervent hope that it will now appear and save the Round Table from its adulterous decline. Having seeing it one night, she asks other knights to fast and pray, that the world may be healed. The knights leaving their duties search for it and forget the principle which is cardinal to Tennyson's work, 'that man's duty is to forget self in the service of others'.

Arthur's opposition to the Quest is maintained to the end. He is angry when he hears of the vows his kights have taken, tells them they will be maimed in consequence. To those who hold that he too would have sworn the vow had he 'seen the sight', he replies that man has earthly duties which must be fulfilled. His views are the poet's, utterly in opposition to spiritual quests which withdraw men from everyday tasks 'leaving human wrongs to right themselves'. Tennyson thought 'The Holy Grail' one of his most imaginative poems, because it expressed his 'strong feeling as to the Reality of the Unseen'.

Mythologists and theosophists like Bryant and Boehme interpreted the cup, into which Christ's blood was said to have flowed, as a female symbol. Tennyson retained androgyne as an ideal: 'They will not easily beat the character of Christ, that union of man and woman, strength and sweetness' (Ricks, Poems, p.1687). Hallam Tennyson thought that this note referred to the close of the Holy Grail, where Arthur
speaks of his visionary experiences and their relation to Christ as the divine made real and human.

Tennyson handled the legend of the Grail Quest in such a way that the value of religious symbols and levels of experience to which they relate could be acknowledged without propagating superstition and without denying sceptical reservation. For the first time in the Idylls the story is told indirectly — although Guinevere had pointed the way, in using the innocent novice to animate the Queen's reveries with the stories she has heard from her father about the magical early days of Arthur's reign. This is a poem which wants to give mysticism its due, in the figure of Sir Galahad; not to do so would shred the shot silk of poetry.

Once Tennyson had found this method he used it for The Coming of Arthur, written in February 1869, where stories of Arthur's doubtful origins and possibly miraculous birth are given by different speakers according to their disposition. Leodogean, investigating all this in order to decide whether to marry Guinevere to Arthur, finally makes his decision on intuition, after a dream. (The Coming of Arthur, 424-45). The writing of The Holy Grail between 9 and 14 September made a way for the new idylls published with it in 1869, 'The Coming of Arthur', 'Pelleas and Etterre', and 'The Passing of Arthur', which incorporated the 'Morte d' Arthur'. Tennyson made The 'Coming and The Passing of
Arthur' more archaic to suggest the uncertain legendary character of the 'gray ghost' emerging into the practical life of history, and dissolving again; the original titles are The Birth and The Death of Arthur. If The Holy Grail was finally a way through, it had long been a stumbling block. Tennyson's comment on the end of his poem values the figure of Christ without wishing to examine the grounds of belief:

"There is something miraculous in man, and there is more in Christianity than some people think. It is enough to look on Christ as Divine and Ideal without defining more." 
(Ricks, Poems, p.1687)

The language of The Holy Grail is too aesthetically fixed and pictorial. On the other hand it could be compared to Browning's Bishop Blougram's Apology (1855), which also attempts to rescue something of religious intuition from rationality. Tennyson's argument is that values do not come from idealistic searching but from getting the immediate business of the world done.

The most important meanings of the Idylls of the King were achieved by 1869, with the publication of The Holy Grail and other poems, as six Idylls titled 'The Round Table' and framed between The Coming and The Passing of Arthur. The major imaginative effort of adapting the old material to the 19th Century had been made. In this effect, it is repressive both about women's powers and about sexual love and pleasure, with the kind of repressiveness that
makes sex exciting because it is bad and doomed, a far city from both the 'English Idylls' and 'The Princess'. But in responding to the conflict between mystical religious and humanist rational accounts of the world it succeeds intelligently and imaginatively, because in this area it is sensitive to differences.

The Coming of Arthur and The Passing of Arthur (1869) are brief and complementary. They present more than the origin and conclusion of a regime; they indicate the cyclical significance of the Idylls as a whole, and provide the keys to its symbolism. Before Arthur's coming the land was laid waste by war; Arthur slays the beast, fells the forest, and lets in the sun. The legendary uncertainty about his genealogical origin is insignificant; what matters is the account given by Bleys, Merlin's master, to Bellicent. As soon as Uther died at Tintagel, the two magicians, saw high up, a ship like a winged dragon, bright with shining people, which instantly disappeared. The ninth and largest wave was aflame, and it bore a child to Merlin's feet; the wave lashed round, clothing him and the child in fire (signifying that Arthur was born of God; Cf. Daniel vii.10). When Bellicent asked Merlin to confirm the story, he concluded with the unqualified statement 'From the great deep to the great deep he goes.' These deeps, the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, of the Idylls, are one, synonymous with God, as in Revelation. Representing the
Soul or the Ideal (from the Christian or the Platonic Heaven), Arthur, following Christ, takes flesh to do God's work on earth. He marries Guinevere in the hope of lifting her from a land of beasts up to his throne, that they may live and reign as one, and 'Have powers on this dark land to lighten it, And power on this dead world to make it live.' The fire of God descended on him, and the heathen were defeated. It was Merlin who had Arthur crowned, the three queens who would help him at his need standing by his throne. When the Lady of the Lake presented him Excalibur to drive out the heathen, a voice from heaven was heard among the hymns. It was by this means that Arthur was able, in words repeated at the beginning and the end of the idyll, to "make a realm and reign."

The marriage of Guinevere to Arthur would be the realizing in the world of the spiritual authority which Arthur represents, and Leodogran has the responsibility of deciding whether this authority is the true one.

Arthur reigned for twelve years and then at the end of the Idyls, in a precisely parallel action, another ordinary man, Sir Bedivere, is entrusted with the equally heroic task of relinquishing this spiritual authority and attempting to live on into a new world of anarchy. The context of Morte 'd' Arthur in 'The Passing of Arthur' adds little to this. The whole is from the story told by Sir Bedivere, 'First made and last left of all the knights.' Arthur perishes by
the people he had made, and all his realm reels back into the beast. Arthur strikes the last blow with Excalibur in killing Modred. After watching the barge which conveys him with the three queens towards the eastward horizon, Bedivere remembers the weird rhyme 'From the great deep to the great deep he goes.' The speck-like barge vanishes in light, 'And the new sun rose bringing the new year.' Idylls of the King does not end in failure and despondency, but with a reminder that despite periodic setbacks the war of soul and sense, of the ideal and man's imperfections, continues.

The fragment, Morte 'D' Arthur, which in the completed version of Idylls of the King appears late in the story as part of The Passing of Arthur was actually written some years earlier than the other poems and is, perhaps, the finest of the whole cycle and representative of Tennyson's narrative poetry at its best. Here we have the story of the inevitable end. King Arthur after having wounded bids Sir Bedivere cast away Excalibur, the mystic symbol of the spiritual power within his soul; and with the ocean of his life behind him he voyages out, on the great water, to another land of hope and renewal. The symbolic purpose of the whole epic i.e. to represent the continual struggle in man's heart between the Soul and the Flesh – or between good and evil is clear here. Evil may overcome good but victory can not last long. King Arthur represents goodness and high
ideals. The death of Arthur has no cause for pessimism. Arthur, champion of noble virtues, will come again to rule the world and will be given new weapons wherewith to fight against evil. Such is the ethical purpose of Tennyson's epic. This idyll is also rich with some of Tennyson's finest imagery and music.

Progress, it appears, is God-ordained, beneficial, and necessary. The compulsion for the poet to address the world about the world's problems emerges as the voice of the preacher. Yet there are doubts and hesitations dramatised within the poem itself, mainly through the presentation of the puzzled, conscience—tormented, and ultimately lonely figure of Sir Bedivere, and these have much in common with the doubts and hesitations, dramatised explicitly or implicitly, in The Two Voices, Locksley Hall and The Vision of Sin.

In Morte 'd' Arthur, Tennyson first tried his art upon the legends that are to be gathered upon the shores of old romance, enlarging the picture, and filling up his canvas with a profusion of exquisite details, the sights and sounds, the figures of the King and his Knights, the ruined shrine, the lake in the full moon, the clanging of Sir Bedivere's armour, the ripple of the water on the bank.

This poem gives us a fair idea of Tennyson's gift of story-telling. A feeling of excitement and a sense of
mystery and supernaturalism are aroused in us by the description of the magic sword. The element of suspense is introduced when Sir Bedivere failed with a mental conflict. There is a dramatic quality in the lines which describe King Arthur's rage on hearing the lie that Sir Bedivere has flung the sword in to the lake.

We here, breathe the air of medieval chivalry. We are filled with great admiration for King Arthur and his heroic Knights.

An outstanding feature of this poem is the descriptive lines which are vivid in the pictures and images they contain. These are the lines which contain a combined picture of the sky and of the magic sword:

"There drew he forth the grand Excalibur,  
    And over him, drawing it, the winter moon,  
    Brightening the skirts of a lone cloud, ran forth  
    And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt;  
    For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,  
    Of subtlest jewellery."

We have a characteristic nature-picture in the following lines:

"Dry clash'd his harness in the icy caves.  
    And barren chasms, and all to left and right.  
    The bare black cliff clang'd round him as he based  
    His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang  
    Sharp-smitten with the dirt of armed hills -  
    And on a sudden, lo ! the level lake,  
    And the long glories of the winter moon."

Tennyson was heir to much that was good in the poetry
of the Romantic writers who had gone before him. He had
their understanding of nature and capacity for minute
observation of her beauties, their love of splendid colour
and sound, their varied metres and skill in narrative. Like
Coleridge and Keats, in telling a story, Tennyson knew how
to create the atmosphere by unerring choice of detail in his
description of the background. In sympathy with the tragic
theme the scene in Morte 'D' Arthur is desolate. The wounded
King is carried to -

A Chapel nigh the field,
A broken channel with a broken cross,
That stood on a dark strait of barren land,
set near a wintry sea among the mountains.

The description of the gentle beauty of Avalon is
exquisitely drawn to fit in with the melancholy scene of
Arthur's passing. Here is no bright, triumphant heaven but a
peaceful land whose soothing loveliness can heal the
'grievous wounds' of mind and body.

In the same manner as with his pictures, the
characteristic sounds which accompany the descriptions of
the background and action of his story, are all sensitively
attuned to help in creating the successive emotional or
dramatic effects. The story opens with the ominous noise of
battle rolling among the mountains and closes quietly, when
all the strain and agony is over, with the line:

And on the Mere the wailing dies away.
The language is at once dignified and rich. Almost every line has its individual beauties of metaphor, picture, or sound. Tennyson was a master in his use of onomatopoeia. Not only does he make the sound of his words enhance their sense but he adds a further effect by making one group of such words succeed a contrasting group. Take the lines:

Where lay the mighty bones of ancient men,
Old knights, and over them the sea-wind sang
shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping down
By zig-zag paths, and juts of pointed rock,
Came on the shining levels of the lake.

This rich language has no need of rhyme. The blank verse line is used throughout. To please the ear and avoid monotonous regularity, the pattern of the blank verse line is skilfully varied from time to time.

This idyll is also remarkable for some very valuable thoughts contained in these lines:

"Old order changeth ........ corrupt the world"
"More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of."

The Coming and The Passing of Arthur, then stand like twin pillars at the beginning and the end of the poem establishing the authority of Arthur as a spiritual absolute. In the rest of the poem Arthur is a remote and shadowy figure, present only as Gloriana is present in the Faerie Queen, but here, though the central dramatic actions are performed by other characters, Arthur is the great
spiritual authority that dominates the poem.

The next two he began were Pelleas and Ettarre and Gareth and Lynette. The latter created much difficulty, and was not completed until 1872, but as it is the first of 'The Round Table' idylls the inner ten), and antithetical to 'Pelleas and Ettarre', which belongs to the period of Arthur's fast-waning power, it may advantageously be given priority. Having concentrated on stories illustrating the forces which militated against the King's success, Tennyson must have felt obliged to choose a counter balancing subject. Yet, though almost the longest book in the Idylls, 'Gareth and Lynette' is a light weight, the most charade-like among them. It is strange to find a youth fighting against the temptation of the three ages of life in the Morning Star, Noonday Sun, and Star of Evening, much less against Death, all four representing the 'War of Time against the soul of man'. The book is spirited and brightness prevails, Gareth's resolve and idealism are undaunted, despite the raillery of Sir Kay and the taunts of Lynette. Tennyson uses the story to illustrate the utter conscientiousness of Arthur in rectifying wrongs, and prepares for 'The Last Tournament" by introducing the villainy of Mark, King of Cornwall.

Most important of all, near the beginning of the Idylls, he reinforces his parabolic drift with reference to Camelot. An old man (Merlin) tells him that Camelot was
built to Music, and 'there is nothing in it as it seems
Saving the King', though some think that he is a shadow, and
the city real. If Gareth heard music, 'like enow they are
building still seeing the city built to music, therefore
never built at all. And therefore built for ever.'
Materialists may discount the spiritual, but the existence
of the 'faircity' on earth depends on vision, an informing
spirit which is part of the eternal reality.

Pelleas, youthful and undaunted like Gareth, becomes
one of the Arthur's knights after the deflection of the Round
Table by the Quest. Pelleas is abashed by the fleshly beauty
of Ettarre and mistakes it for beauty of soul. Ettarre
avoids him as she rides with her escort to her castle,
outside which she turns her three knights against him. The
lover overthrows them. After watching him overthrow the
knights again, Sir Gawain proposes an exchange of arms, so
that he may plead his cause, after gaining entrance by
claiming that he has slain Pelleas. Pelleas agrees; Restless
and mindful of the song 'A worm within the rose', he rides
to the castle and finds Gawain and Ettarre asleep in
another. He creeps out in shame, then returns tempted to
slay them; remembering the views of Arthur's brotherhood, he
leaves his sword across their throats. He feels the King's
vows have fooled him, and reflects sardonically that lawless
race of brutes to whom love is but lust are great and sane.
Then he vanishes through the night.
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His sleep at the monastery is broken by a dream in which he sees Gawain fire Merlin's hall, and the morning star reel in the smoke, burst into flame, and fall. When he hears that Queen is false, he questions the integrity of the Round Table and the King. Challenged by Lancelot he says that he is 'wrath and shame and hate and ill-fame.' Modred, the Judas-like traitor, is certain that the time is at hand.

Pelleas is morally shattered, and becomes the Red Knight of The Last Tournament, who forms title, like the use of 'red' with reference to Etтарre's drunken knights (and Tristram), suggests complete abandonment of the moral and spiritual for fleshly indulgences. He mocks the king. The king rides with a hundred knights to the tower in the marshes, where he is cursed and insulted by his drunken foe. Maddening rage dehumanizes Arthur's knights, they also reel back into the beast as they trample their enemy's face, sink his head in the mire, and beslime themselves.

Tristram is the centre of interest. However, The Last Tournament begins on a treacherous note, when a babe with a ruby necklace is rescued from an eagle's nest in a half-dead oak with roots that cling to crag as if they were a black coil of snakes. The child dies, and the carcanet becomes the honour at the Tournament of Dead Innocence. The detail of the symbolism is perfect, even to the red hand with which Tristram receives the prize, at the end of a journey which
is irregularly conducted. Tristram, playing his harp, meets Dagonet the fool, whom Gawain had made mock-knight of the Round Table, asks him to skip. He will not skip to broken music, for Tristram has broken Arthur's music in deserting his wife Isolt of Brittany for Isolt, wife of Mark, King Cornwall. Tristram sings a song on free love.

Tristram's libertinism accounts for his heartless reply to a woman who has lost her husband, as he journeys to his paramour at Tintagel. Isolt entreats him to swear, even if he lies, that he will love her in old age; 'lie to me: I believe'. She speaks bitterly of what vows had meant in Arthur's prime; Tristram says they served their time, when 'every follower eyed him as a God', but began to gall with the sullying of the Queen; he is the 'worldling of the world', and chooses to love while he may. After talking of their woodland paradise and mocking ungainly Mark, he sings to his harp and displays the Carcanet he has won for her. As he makes love with Isolt, Mark Clove him through the brain. That same night Arthur returns from his war against the Red Knight, and hears sobbing at his feet as he climbs the stairway. It is Dagonet the jester, broken hearted like King Lear's fool before the final catastrophe; he will never make his master smile again.

"The Idylls are often technically brilliant, Tennyson was proud of his use of metre for imitative form; less predictable is the expressive use of cross-cutting
Last Tournament, when the brutal massacre of the Red Knights and his men by Arthur's youngest knights is inset into Tristram's story of adulterous love and murder, so that the killing seems part of Tristram's dream in which the ruby necklace he has won seems like frozen blood, melting in the rivalry of his two Isolts (The Last Tournament, 406-88). The connection of sex and battle recalls Maud. Apprehension of a materialist view of the world produces some really impressive writing. Swinburne's Tristram of Lyonesse was written in response to The Last Tournament, but Tennyson's idyll was already, partly, an expression of horror at the sensuality and atheism of Swinburne's play Chasteland and his Songs before Sunrise. Swinburne and F.J. Furnivall (the defender of Guinevere) were in collusion to contradict Tennyson's use of Arthurian material; In their view the story could only gain tragic human significance if Arthur's incest were acknowledged as the cause of his disaster, the idealization of Arthur was as unconvincing for them as it was for Tennyson's Vivien. On the other hand, Tennyson was still Hallam's 'poet of Sensation', so that Idylls are alert to how the world feels to his materialists.

Tennyson needed the world to return an image of man sustained by God; but his poetry could understand what Swinburne was always conscious of, a material world that preceded and survived human purpose and desire.
Balin and Balan suggests a split personality. Balin, after an outburst of violent rage, is restored to favour by the King, and he and his brother Balan, his good Counsellor, are introduced in a symmetrical tableau, as if the pair are one. Balan leaves to fight a demon in the wood of worldly error. Balin, emulating Lancelot, is allowed to wear a replica of the Queen's crown-royal on his shield. At Pellam's overgrown castle he hears slander of Lancelot and the Queen from Sir Garlon, whom he attacks, hearing the approach of men-at-arms, he escapes. While he is in gloom and torment over his renewed violence, Vivien with her squire rides through the woods towards him, singing 'The fire of heaven has killed the barren cold', a reference to passionate protests such as those of Swinburne against Christian asceticism. She invents a story of Guinevere's perfidy with Lancelot. Immediately his evil spirit possesses him, and with a yell he seizes his shield, and hurls it from him. His yell is mistaken by Balan for that of the wood-demon. The two brothers clash mortally. Before they die, Balan hears what has happened. Garlon is the slanderer-demon of the woods, who issued from the Mouth of Hell, where he is wont to dally with Vivien. The Queen, Balan holds, is pure. Born and dying together, the brothers are one; the wood land demon is a projection of the Balin self. 'To lay that devil would lay the Devil in me', he says. Most of the story is original, and Tennyson could readily sympathize with it. It is the signature—piece with which he concluded Idylls of
the King; without losing his ultimate faith, he could be subject to violent feelings against the iniquitous state of Victorian England, as Maud and Locksley Hall Sixty Years After show.

The stories in the Idylls of the King show Tennyson as a narrative poet. In childhood Tennyson used to fascinate with stories not only his own brothers and sisters but his cousins at Bayons Manci. At Cambridge and afterwards he was renowned as a recounter, which at least suggests that he had an appreciation of the significant in character and incident and the power to express this vividly and economically, lastly, of all this extensive output, the two most popular volumes were the Idylls of the King of 1859 and the Enoch Arden volume of 1864. It is difficult to believe that these would have had so wide an appeal that they would have been admired as they were by Dickens and Thackery, if the poems contained in them had not been effective as stories.

Indeed, a careful consideration of Tennyson's work shows, I submit, that he was a singularly versatile story teller. In 'The Revenge', The defence of Lucknow', and 'The charge of the heavy brigade' he showed himself fully capable of swift dramatic movement in widely varying and quite original styles. Mysterious and evocative poem, "The Lady of shalott" owes much of its effectiveness of the story which is so subtly and appealingly suggested.
Of another rustic tale 'Dora', told in a very different manner, Words Worth said that in it Tennyson had achieved something which he himself had been attempting of all his life without success.

Mr. Eticot's agreement is that Tennyson was incapable of anything less static than an 'Idyll' which he defines as 'a short poem descriptive of some picturesque scene or incident, 'Tennyson's poem (including the Idylls of the King) he, says, always descriptive, always picturesque, but never really narrative. He implies that Tennyson cannot, as the great narrative poets do, set before you real men talking, carry you on in real events moving. 'I hope I have shown that in poems of small scale Tennyson was fully capable of meeting these last-mentioned requirements. In fantasies like the Idylls and 'The Princess', of course, he had a harder task, but even here I think he had succeed in creating the impression of real men talking and real events moving.

I would select 'Lancelot and Elaine' and, 'The Holy Grail' as being pre-eminently successful in both respects for example, in 'The Holy Grail' the conversations between Percivals and Ambrosius, the adventures of Galahad and Lancelot; the coming of the Grail and the departure of the knights on the quest, and the final scene with Arthur's closing speech, in 'Lancelot and Elaine, Elaine's love story, death and last voyage, and the final scenes between
Lancelot and Gainevere, and Lancelot and Arthur.

If further example are needed, I would refer to the opening scene of 'Pelleas and Ettarre', and the greater part of 'Merlin and Vivien.' the dialogue between Guinevere and the little maid in 'Guinevere' and Arthur's long march to the great battle in the west which begins 'The Passing'. The above are only a few examples and many more might be quoted.

Tennyson had his own way of telling a story. Very sensibly he chose a method suitable for the development of his special gifts. Though he was perfectly capable of rapid narrative, he was not particularly interested in this, and preferred a slower movement, which gave scope to his unrivalled power of creating background and atmosphere. The slower movement also gave the poet time to apply his dramatic talent, which is so admirably employed, for example, in 'Merlin and Vivien', in the sixth canto of 'The Princess', at the opening of the 'Last Tournament'. Two rather unconventional practices of the poet may be mentioned. He liked, especially in the Idylls to begin a story with a picture or description — e.g. of Merlin with Vivien lying at his feet, of Elaine gazing at Lancelot's shield in his turret chamber at Astolat and then to work backwards in time (The beginnings of 'The Marriage of Greakint', 'The Holy Grail', 'The Last Tournament and 'Guinevere).
In general he preferred to concentrate on truth of emotion and sentiments, drawing his characters on broad and simple lines to fit in with and support the emotional development of the story. He emphasized simply those qualities and only those, which were fundamental to the emotional development of the poem, loyalty, unselfishness, self control and determination.

But for the consideration of Tennyson's narrative power it is perhaps most valuable to compare his version of the story with that of Malory (BK XVIII) from which its main outlines are taken. Such a comparison reveals that Tennyson's omissions, additions and alternations were made with the greatest skill.

"The inner evidence of the Idylls suggests, it has been estimated time-schedule of 12 years for the main action. If the story of 'Lancelot and Elaine', hinging on the last of nine annual tournaments, belongs to the tenth year, half the books relate to the last quarter of Arthur's reign. Very little is devoted to the early years, for Tristram is a knight when Gareth arrives at Arthur's court, and, as 'The Last Tournament' discloses, the former comes late. The 'rift within the lute' begins in the third book with the rumour of the Queen's guilty love and its effect on Geraint. Arthur's victories and glory are no more than a background by which to measure forces which corrupt high moral values; through the King's idealism, Tennyson affirms
with Wordsworth that national greatness cannot be achieved or sustained without spiritual strength. The chronology of rise, decline, and fall constitutes a cycle; at the beginning of Arthur's victorious campaigns, and with his ultimate defeat, 'the old order changeth, yielding place to new'."

Details of this chronology are far less significant than those of the seasonal cycle which contribute subliminally, and markedly in the closing stages, to an imaginative sense of the whole. Beginning earlier with Arthur's birth, it is summarized by Tennyson; The coming of Arthur is on the night of the New Year; when he is wedded 'The world is white with May'; on a summer night the vision of the Holy Grail appears; and the "Last Tournament" is in the "yellowing autumn-tide". Guinevere flees in "the mists of autumn", and Arthur's death takes place at midnight in "mid-winter".

'I have no doubt', Tennyson told H.D. Rawnsley, 'the old order will yield place to new, and we shall find higher gods than Mammon and materialism'; 'the battle of Modred in the west will yet be fought. Mammon and materialism, however, do not contribute noticeably to Arthur's fall; if the main cause appears that is largely due to the prominence of the Lancelot - Guinevere story. Lancelot's significance is wider, to him may be applied what Tennyson said in 1887

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about Zola and the need for reticence and idealism in art. 'The higher moral imagination enslaved to sense is like an eagle caught by the feet in a snare, baited with carrion (rotten flesh) so that it cannot use its wings to soar.' Undoubtedly the poet regarded free love as a serious factor in national decline. The implication of the Vivien - Merlin story extend far beyond the sexual, and 'The Holy Grail' indicates how strongly Tennyson felt the disservice done to Catholic countries when large numbers of the most able are withdrawn from the community for spiritual pursuits.

For man the trial is on earth, where soul and flesh are interdependent; Arthur cannot accomplish his mission without marrying Guinevere. Arthur is the living spirit, and the question is how long that spirit can ennable, how far its influence can extend, and whether it can prevail over fleshly and worldly temptations. Tennyson intended him to represent 'the Ideal Soul of Man coming into contact with the warring elements of the flesh' (the latter being most apparent in 'The Last Tournament'). The 'house' which is his doom is the body; Vivien rejoices that 'Great Nature through the flesh herself hath made Gives him the lie'. In the Idylls he is repeatedly designated 'the blameless king'; Merlin, disgusted with Vivien before he gives way to her, reflects:
"O true and tender! O my liege and King!
O selfless man and stainless gentleman,
Who wouldst against thine own eye-witness fain
Have all men true and real, all women pure;
How, in the mouths of base interpreters,
From over-fineness not intelligible
To things with every sense as false and foul
As the poached filth that floods the middle street,
Is thy white blamelessness accounted blame!"

Weaknesses of the flesh are fairly apportioned to men and women in the Idylls, with Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Isolt, Gawain and Ettarre, and Enid and Elaine more than compensate for Vivien's feminine wiles. The impact of the Vivien — Merlin episode, however, is more general than personal. Merlin is the mage who knows all the arts, and he made Camelot. Its existence is shadowy, not material, everywhere it is 'symbolic of this gradual growth of human beliefs and institution and of the spiritual development of man'. Tennyson wrote — Merlin is inseparable from Arthur's greatness and power, as the hall are built for the king illustrates, with its four evolutionary zones; the first showing the lower beasts prevail over men; the second, men slaying beasts; the third, 'warriors; perfect man', the fourth, 'men with growing wings'. Regeneration must be active, among mankind; and Arthur's hall suffers irreparable damage when knights abandon his cause for the wasteful quest. The Round Table is weakened, and Merlin is already 'lost to life and use and name and fame'; Tennyson's vision is Shelleyan, and no doubt he was influenced by 'A Defence of Poetry', published posthumously in 1840. All creates
(embodied in Merlin) in this world of shadows and poets, and their vision of excellence (the Platonic Ideal) is heaven-born. Without it there can be no greatness or progress in the arts, philosophy, morals, citizenship and government, and therefore 'poets' are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Medieval romances which are purely descriptive-narrative can command only a transient adult attention. 'Lancelot and Elaine' is pictorially attractive and reaches a climax combining rare dramatic and poetic distinctiveness. The ending of 'Merlin and Vivien's is memorably descriptive, the elements of the outer storm being resonant with disaster not just for Merlin but for all Arthur's hopes. Had Tennyson's deeper purposiveness been more defined and creatively integrated from the outset, Idylls of the King might have been shorter, more vivid and concentrated and more artistically admirable. Sometime a surrealist impression is given, as with Guinevere's dream or the maddened despairing final efforts of Lancelot to find the Grail. There are imaginative overtones of two kinds, which are psychological, where outer scenes communicate the outlook, mood, or feelings of a central character, and others, more widespread and often in frequent succession in which images are correlated with the moral on spiritual import of the situation.
"Intensiveness of such kinds makes the *Idylls* more rewarding in parts than as a whole. 'Poetry is like shot silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his own ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet.' Tennyson wrote full appreciation depends on sympathy with the innermost subject or theme. It had a contemporary relevance; it is relevant today, and always will be, as long as readers are interested in the progress of civilization. There were times of depression when the poet, like Arthur, could not find God in his ways with men rather in the universe from stars to flowers. Yet he retained his belief in man's unconquerable spirit: 'I believe in God, not from what I see in Nature, but from what I find in man', he said, this view is consonant with the spiritual tonor of the *Idylls*, and the poem concludes with the 'new sun' which brings the 'new year'. Arthur's battles do not belong solely to the past; they are depicted 'as if Time were nothing'.

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