CHAPTER IX

POST-VICTORIANS
The tradition of King Arthur received a temporary setback in literature when the age of romance died with the beginning of the Renaissance. Yet its potent significance was never lost sight of, and poets like Spenser, Milton, Jonson and Dryden felt its lure though each of them abandoned it for one reason or the other. The Restoration rekindled some interest in medieval legends but the biggest impetus was given to it when the legend of King Arthur was related to William of Orange. It is interesting to note that in the seventeenth century the whole interest was centred round the figure of King Arthur and the legend, completely shorn of its romance, was used by statesmen for the practical purpose of politics.¹ On the authenticity of King Arthur depended the claim to the throne of England. Therefore, in Blackmore’s Epics on Arthur, the stress is laid on the historicity of King Arthur and his brave exploits. Blackmore allegorises the legend of King Arthur to

¹ Roberta F. Brinkley, Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century, p. 194.
comment upon contemporary events and characters. King Arthur stands for William of Orange and the plots instigated by Louis XIV to restore James to the throne are veiled in the uprising of Mordred.

The eighteenth century evinced interest in medieval romance, its mystic fervour and romantic pursuits; in chivalrous knights and their colourful trappings. Consequently, the image of King Arthur receded into the background and the knights and their romantic errands caught the limelight. A group of poets led by Walter Scott not only edited several of the old Arthurian poems but also ventured into new poems on Arthurian themes, for example, Reginald Heber's *Morte Arthur*, Thomas Love Peacock's *Misfortunes of Elphin* and Wordsworth's, *The Egyptian Maid* or *The Romance of the Water Lily*. The interest in romance, in this age, however, is superficial, limited to the external trappings. The ancient names, scenes and words are used merely to build up a particular kind of medieval atmosphere; to create an air of suspense and horror. They fail to penetrate to the spirit of the medieval world, which explains their arbitrary treatment of the legends. Poets like Wordsworth did try to relate the old legends to the present by making them symbolically significant but this was a feat meant to be mastered later by the Victorian poets.

The gradually developing interest in the Arthurian legends reached a second crescendo in the Victorian age. The numerous
factors that contributed to this feature included national and cultural consciousness, romantic legacy, return to catholicism, the squalid contemporary scene and the social, political, and religious polemics of the age. A host of major and minor poets were drawn to the Celtic legends. A close examination of the work of these poets reveals two chief currents — one led by Lord Tennyson and another by William Morris. Yet in all Arthurian poetry of this age, a genuine interest in romance and a deep comprehension of its true ideals and values are perceptible. Although most of the Arthurian enthusiasts followed Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* as their Arthurian Bible, many went back to the earliest existing sources of these legends and studied them at first hand for better understanding before attempting their own versions.

Picking up the weak strand of Wordsworth's guidance to relate the old legends to the contemporary scene, Tennyson wove a dazzling fabric of intricate pattern in *The Idylls of the King* which is modern in appearance and utility, yet woven with colourful ancient yarn. He cast the old legends into a modern frame to save his poems from the charge of flimsiness. He employed the legends as literary vehicles to express his thoughts and views and gave them a 'parabolic drift'. At the same time the poet explained 'Yet there is no single fact or

incident in The Idylls however seemingly mystical which cannot be explained as without any mystery or allegory whatever. Thus his poems operate simultaneously at two levels — at surface, as pure romance but with a substratum of deep moral significance for his times. The Idylls embodies the complete philosophy of Tennyson which informs all his poetical works; in it are incorporated his reflections on the society, culture, science and religion of his age; in fact, it is a chronicle of his times. Not only that; it is apocalyptic too. In the fall of King Arthur's kingdom he perceived causes inherent in his own civilization and predicted its doom. He invested the Arthurian legends with all the bad tidings of the new sciences. Yet, on the other hand, The Idylls is a powerful narrative full of interesting scenes, images and situations, for the enjoyment of which, reference to its underlying significance is not at all essential. As for the influence of Tennyson on other poets of the day, he was the unquestioned monarch of the Arthurian field. He inspired emulation and the list of his followers contains such eminent poets as Matthew Arnold, G. A. Simcox and Sebastian Evans.

William Morris, on the other hand, under the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite school, reacted sharply against the Tennysonian wave. He wished to capture the true spirit and colour of romance without any reference to its moral significance. The medieval legends provided him with a means of escape from the

3 Memoir, ii, p. 127.
sordid reality of the industrialised England that he abhorred. The set, orderly world of medieval romance provided Morris and Swinburne with shelter, security and a pleasure which they could not hope to gain from the fragmented world of their own. They turned to the Arthurian storehouse in search of perennially fascinating stories, and whereas Morris was content to tell a tale well, Swinburne loved to play upon emotions for their own sake. Both made a lasting impact on the course of English poetry in forestalling the Aesthetes of the eighteen-nineties.

Although it does not lie within the purview of this study to trace the course of Arthurian poetry beyond the Victorian age, yet, I think, it would not be out of place to cast a quick glance at its development in the twentieth century, for the contrast can be illuminating.

It is wrongly assumed that the interest in the Arthurian tradition waned or died with the passing of the Victorian age. The interest is still very much alive and may be seen in such diverse poets of the twentieth century as Thomas Hardy, Laurence Binyon, John Masefield, T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis. The twentieth-century treatment is, however, radically different from that of the age preceding it. But in literature a new age is never an abrupt departure from the preceding one. It is a continuation of the old as well as a
fresh start. Similarly in the twentieth-century poets of Arthurian matter, we have the traditionalists, the radicals, and a mixture of both. Thomas Hardy and Laurence Binyon, instead of emerging as pioneers of a new age, linger in the Victorian twilight, although chronologically they lie outside it. In form or spirit, they give no new lead. On the other hand, the impact of Tennyson and Arnold is clearly evident. It was T. S. Eliot who broke away completely from the Victorian manner of dealing with the legends by making a drastically different and subtle use of the Grail myth in The Waste Land. He propounded the sacramental view which was adopted by Charles Williams in Talisien Through Logres and C. S. Lewis in his novels.

The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall at Tintagel in Lyonesse is Thomas Hardy’s version of the old story of Tristram arranged as a play for mummers in one act, and was published in 1923, almost a quarter of a century later than Swinburne’s Tristram of Lyonesse. The poet takes a good deal of liberty with the old legend and modifies it considerably, but Hardy, in no way, adds to the beauty and pathos of the old romance. Following the principle of unities in the Greek drama, the whole action is made to take place in the interior of the Great Hall of Tintagel palace. The preceding events and those that require a change of scene are reported by a chorus named 'The Chanters', who consist of two phantasmal groups of dead
Cornish men and women who, at the call of the poet, come, 'from the tomb . . . to raise An antique spell at moment's here.' The play is introduced by the 'ageless, deathless' Merlin, the Celtic bard. But much of the charm of the story is lost in Hardy's unsuccessful attempt to patch together the two divergent traditional versions of Tristram's death — one through violence at the hand of King Mark, another more pathetic and poetic connected with the story of the sails. Iseult of Brittany, stung with jealousy for her namesake, falsely reported to the dying Tristram that the sail of the boat was black which threw him into a deathlike swoon. Then she rushed out just in time to stop Iseult of Cornwall from landing by telling her that Tristram was dead. When Tristram regained consciousness and learned the facts, he sprang up from his bed and donning the guise of a wild harper rushed to meet Iseult at Tintagel. His wife, in pursuit, soon joined him. After a good deal of melodrama, Tristram is stabbed in the back by King Mark only to be himself stabbed by Queen Iseult who then fled and jumped into the sea with Tristram's hound, Houdaine.

Hardy, on account of his superficial treatment of the legend, fails to evoke our sorrow or pity for the lovers, nor does he develop his characters into full blooded personages or emphasize the dramatic conflict leading to the final tragedy. On the whole, it is a modest achievement. Laurence Binyon's poem,

4 FTCC, 'Epilogue'.


Tristram's End, is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's Tristram and Iseult in granting a reunion between the lovers before they die; in his sympathies with Iseult of the White Hands which he further extends to King Mark whom Hardy calls, King Fox and Tennyson identifies with the dark forces of evil. Binyon presents Mark as the wronged husband who deserves as much of our sympathy as Iseult of Brittany. When Queen Iseult goes out to meet the ailing Tristram at Brittany, King Mark Broods in silence waiting for her return and does not share the loud mirth of his knights. When the bier carrying the corpses of the lovers comes home, he not only forgives them but orders them to be buried together in a splendid tomb specially built for them. This act of forgiveness elevates the character of King Mark. His last lament:

I lack all things, I ever had,
My wife, my friend, yea even my jealous rage,
And empty is the house of my old age5

has a ring of bitter truth.

Equally pathetic is the picture of Iseult of Brittany whose one sin of telling a lie is more than amended by her sincere remorse:

I, I have killed him, I that loved him, I
That for his dear sake had been glad to die6

5 Binyon, Tristram's End.
6 Ibid.
Her ultimate reconciliation to her tragic fate reveals her inner nobility.

"Farewell, my Lord, thy home is far from here,
Farewell, my great love dead and doubly dear:
Carry him hence, proud queen, for he is thine
Not mine, not mine, not mine." 7

On the whole it is a fine poem full of pictorial imagery — a Pre-Raphaelite influence — and tender feelings.

John Masefield, who succeeded Robert Bridges as Poet Laureate in 1930, is another modern poet who was drawn irresistibly to Arthurian matter. He is a versatile narrator who revived in verse Chaucer's simplicity, vigour and metres. His volumes of Midsummer Night and Other Tales in Verse and Minnie Maylow's Story and Other Tales and Scenes contain as many as ten Arthurian pieces. It is said that Malory's Morte D'Arthur was his sole companion when he was leading a vagrant life in America in his early youth. 8 In his poems like Badon Hill, The Fight on the Wall and Guenever and tells the interest is solely centred in the narrative and he keeps close to Malory's version. But from the point of view of a student of Arthurian poetry, his other poems such as King Arthur's Ring, Tristram's Singing and The Love Gift are more

7 Binyon, Tristram's End.
significant because it is here that he departs from the
traditional treatment of the legend and gives a new lead.
Giving a completely imaginative dressing to the old tales,
Masefield conveys through them his views on such complex themes
as the role of Nature; mutability and the Cosmic Cycle, which
he would have found difficult to express in terms of
contemporary events and situations.

In Tristram's Singing, when Isolt abandons Tristram, he,
consumed by his passion, raves and shrieks through the forest
'like a fiend in hell'\(^9\) and weeps for her. Gradually in a
year's time the spirit of Nature heals his wounds and instils
in his heart deep peace so that he once again begins to observe
the marvels of Nature to whom, 'custom had made him deaf and
passion blind.'\(^10\) One day when 'Nature' herself descends to
preside over the spring festival of the deities of hills and
glens, of brooks and pastures, Tristram who now lives blissfully
in one vast unison with birds, beasts and plants, makes bold
to ask who she is and receives the reply:

"I am so swift, that mortals think me slow;
I am so patient, mortals think me dead;
I am too little for men's eyes to know,
Too vast for what I blazon to be read;
Too jubilant with energy for woe;
Too truthful in my justice to be fierce.\(^11\)

\(^9\) Masefield, Tristram's Singing.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
Tristram embodies his newly acquired wisdom in a poem and takes it to the court of Marc who discards it outright as rubbish — such is the blindness of Man to the eternal values which are revealed to the birds, beasts and plants through Nature. Once again his old madness descends on him and once again he is made whole by Nature. And then from his lips bursts forth such ecstasy of Spring — reminiscent of Orpheus's Song — that beasts, birds and men flock to hear him till at last the music pierces the heart of Isolt who gallops down to meet him:

"And then, lo, they were one, and all was over
Their rags and robes were fallen and gleaming things,
Spirits, a lover wing in wing with lover
Were laughing in the air and spreading wings
Shining like stars and flying like plover
Laughing aloft and singing and away
Into some summer knowing no decay".12

Masefield is certainly not concerned with the legend of Tristram. He is using myth as an illustrative metaphor which is but one step from the sacramental use of myth made by Eliot, Yeats, and Auden.

Similarly in *King Arthur's Ring*, King Arthur who all through the literature has stood as the Champion of Christianity, the Defender of Faith, on receiving his engagement ring from Guinever,
visits the temple of Venus beseeching her to sanctify the ring by her touch. In what follows, the poet expresses his views on mutability and the Cosmic Cycle. 'All changes, even Beauty and Power.'\textsuperscript{13} When the day of the pantheon of gods and goddesses is done, they are exiled:

'Destroy the idols, the whole breed... Destroy these statues of the devil's seed!.'\textsuperscript{14}

But the goddess Venus, before she departs, warns Arthur that he must reap his sowing. Before the Order is set up, its destroyer is born. The essence of creation lies in its 'ebb and flowing'\textsuperscript{15} and 'Eternity has many days... The things that will be are the things that were.'\textsuperscript{16} Thus the Cosmic Cycle is continuously moving. The old order changes not always yielding place to new but perhaps to elder, but dressed in a new apparel, it gives the appearance of newness. Thus the Arthurian myth is extended to cosmic myth and it is in this respect that John Masefield has contributed to the development of Arthurian poetry.

With the appearance of T. S. Eliot on the scene, the focus completely shifts from the legend to the myth; from the scenes and events to the values and ideals of the medieval world; from the so called history to the philosophy of that age. The

\textsuperscript{13} Masefield, King Arthur's Ring.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
poet makes use of the myth as a neat stock-pile of imagery to express his views and concepts, which he cannot convey through the disorderly, chaotic, contemporary material.

In The Waste Land (1922) Eliot makes use of the Grail myth taken from Jessie L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance to show the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the modern secular society which has become a barren waste. The Fisher King myth according to Miss Weston is primarily sexual in conception and function. The Fisher King is symbolic of the life principle and his being wounded in the thigh indicates loss of virility, which is reflected in the blight visited upon his land. The myth provides Eliot with a perfect objective correlative to evoke the desired response in the reader because, according to Eliot, truth should emerge from the poetry as a vision rather than as an intellectual concept. He takes a scene from the Wasteland myth and places it in close proximity with a contemporary scene to draw out an instant reaction by comparison. For instance, the poet first introduces the general theme of sterility: 'April is the cruellest month'\(^\text{17}\) which is generally associated with regeneration; 'the sun beats' and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief.'\(^\text{18}\) But then 'there is a shadow under this rock.'\(^\text{19}\) The symbol of the rock refers to the Grail itself (In Wolfram's Parzifal the Grail is said to be a stone).


\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
Thus in the midst of general barrenness, the presence of the Grail indicates a kind of religious fertility which has power to revitalize the wasteland. The Grail myth actually forms the infra-structure of Eliot's Waste Land and enables him to amalgamate disparate experience in ambivalent images. But for the unifying force of the myth, the whole poem would fall apart into a meaningless jumble of words and scenes.

Charles Williams finds in the Arthurian myth a complete analogy to his conception of society and religion. In the Grail myth he reads the story of a civilization destroyed by its failure to act upon religious in opposition to secular values. In his poem Talisien Through Logres (1938), he identifies the causes of the failure of Arthurian civilization with those of his own. He recasts the whole Arthurian myth so that its themes are re-applicable to the contemporary problems. In his poetic conception, Arthur is no longer Tennyson's emblem of perfection. He is guilty of spiritual incest, that is of withdrawing into himself and neglecting religious and civil duties. He sleeps with his own image and gives birth to Modred, the destroyer. The Region of the Summer Stars (1944) is another of Williams's Arthurian pieces.

C. S. Lewis uses the Arthurian myth to depict the eternal struggle between Good and Evil. He extracts from the myth certain leading symbols, for example, the Fisher King, Merlin, the remnants of Logres and, by implication, suggests a comparison
of his own age with the age of Arthur in his novels, The Hideous Strength and The Prelandia. In his poem Launcelot, published posthumously, he deals with Launcelot's quest of the Holy Grail and identifies the coming of the Grail with the 'Gospel of the Advent', the second coming of Christ when the sins of the guilty ones, of Launcelot and Guenevere shall be judged.

A notable American poet who is drawn to the Arthurian legend is E. R. Robinson who shows at his best in long narrative poems. His poem Tristram (1927) won for him the Pulitzer prize and proved his first best-seller. His other poems are Merlin (1917) and Lancelet (1920). In story he is true to his sources - Malory and other continental chroniclers. But, he reinterprets his characters in modern terms. The chaotic world of Arthur, to his mind, closely corresponded to the conditions prevailing just before the first World War. A Glastonbury Romance (1933) by John Cowper Powys proved extremely popular. The novel brings the Grail legend up to date. It has a suitable ending in the famous scene where the Mayor of Glastonbury floats down the river to his death. The Once and Future King, a best-seller of the year 1958 is written by T. H. White who gives in this tetralogy, his rendering of the Arthurian cycle. The version is in key with Arthurian values and updated in psychological treatment. It began in 1938 with The Sword in the Stone dealing with Arthur's boyhood. The Ill-made Knight, the third book in
the series, is a moving reconstruction of the Lancelot and Guinevere story.

To sum up, in the seventeenth century interest was aroused in the historicity of Arthur because on the authenticity of Arthur depended the right to the throne of England. The eighteenth century poets felt the lure of Arthurian romance but were more attracted to its outer trappings than to its spirit. In the Victorian era, a genuine interest in romance and in the medieval age, its spirit and ideals, meets the eye but the majority of poets led by Tennyson tried to make the old legends serve their didactic purposes. Only a handful of recalcitrant poets, refusing to fall in line with the prevalent trend, used the Arthurian legends purely for aesthetic pleasure and escape. Morris and Swinburne are the exponents of this school. In the twentieth century, Eliot blazes a new path by shifting the stress from the legend to the myth which provides matrix for a variety of images which serve as an objective correlative for the emotions of a man confronting a wasteland.

Thus as we study the Arthurian literature down the ages, we see here too a familiar phenomenon. Like the story of the Trojan war, the Arthurian matter too has a vitality of its own and exhibits a capacity to attract the minds of men of different temperaments at various times and places. And the beholders, too, the creative writers, see in it what they wish to see, and
what they are conditioned to see — a thing of beauty, a philosophical truth, or merely a convenient framework for a parable or for propaganda. It has become a part of English heritage, a finished product as well as raw material for the inheritors to use at will. And from the hold it has exercised on the minds of generations, it seems certain that the Arthurian matter is indeed one of those things which age shall not wither nor custom stale its infinite variety.