CLOSING THE FRAME: HAVING FAITH AND KEEPING FAITH IN TENNYSON’S “THE PASSING OF ARTHUR”

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THE Passing of Arthur magnificently closes Tennyson’s Idylls of the King by recapitulating the motifs, structure, and main concerns of the preceding parts of the poem to dramatize once more the poet’s central themes of having faith and keeping faith. At the same time, it closes the frame upon the poem’s magical world, preparing us for return to our own. Until this closing section we have found ourselves within Tennyson’s version of the world of the Romance, a world characterized by passionately sworn oaths, visions, heroic tests, and sharply resounding clashes of steel on steel. The mist-hidden landscapes, the doubts, and the difficulties in “The Passing of Arthur” prepare us for our return to another, a later, a lesser time, one in which men’s perceptions are as limited as their faith. The poet’s ability to create in his reader the sense that with this last idyll the great deeds of Arthur’s realm recede into the obscuring reaches of time long past strikes a note simultaneously heroic and elegiac; for Tennyson convinces us not only that his characters, like those in all epic and heroic verse, stand larger than life, but also that their passing from the earth should occasion in us a piercing sense of loss. In conveying this conviction that something great, something irreplaceable, has vanished from the world, The Idylls of the King sounds that note of bitter yearning for what cannot return with a power that had not appeared in English poetry since the Anglo-Saxon bards.

Five lines which attribute the tale to “bold Sir Bedivere,/First made and latest left of all the knights” (1-2), act as a narrative frame that provides the aesthetic distance necessary in the Victorian age for both the Romance and heroic elegy.

1 The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 1742. Numbers in text following quotations refer to the line numbers of the Idylls according to this edition.
Bedivere tells his tale when “the man was no more than a voice/In the white winter of his age” (3-4), and the poet thereby suggests the effect of a voice reaching through time: justly so, for of all Arthur’s great deeds, friends, and ideals now only a verbal record remains. By having the old man tell his tale long after Arthur has left this world, Tennyson sets the events of “The Passing of Arthur”, which itself acts as a narrative frame to the ten central idylls, within its own frame—a device which sets it apart in fictive space and time, both emphasizing and protecting its imaginative nature.

“Morte d’Arthur”, the earlier version of “The Passing” which Tennyson published in 1842, had employed a more awkward, self-conscious frame. According to Ricks, the trial version of the poem appeared without any such device, but when the poet published his Arthurian piece he added a fifty-one line introduction set in Victorian England. This introduction, “The Epic”, tells how “At Francis Alien’s on the Christmas-eve” the narrator listens to his friend recite the fragment of an Arthurian tale which he had written and then burned because he believed it unsuitable for what Matthew Arnold would term “an iron time”. By stating objections to the use of Arthurian legends beforehand, Tennyson attempts to use the ancient rhetorical refutatio to anticipate and hence weaken opposition. But the very self-consciousness of this strategy unfortunately does more harm than good, and when Tennyson published his modified version of the poem as “The Passing of Arthur” in 1869, the existence of the other sections of The Idylls now permitted him to avoid this problem by making Bedivere the narrator. Tennyson also uses this device, well known to readers

1 Ricks, p. 583, line 1. When one recalls that the original version of “The Passing of Arthur”—like In Memoriam, “The Two Voices”, and “Ulysses”—was intimately related to the poet’s response to Hallam’s death, the lines he assigns in “The Epic” to Parson Holmes are especially interesting. The Narrator tells how “half-awake” (line 13) he heard

The parson taking wide and wider sweeps...
Now hawking at Geology and schism;
Until I woke, and found him settled down
Upon the general decay of faith
Right through the world. (lines 14, 16-19)

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of fantasy, satire, and utopian fiction, in "The Day Dream", and within The Idylls "The Holy Grail" similarly employs it with particular effectiveness. Percival's narrating the visionary quests to Ambrosius superbly sets off this section's magical, often surrealistic experiences from the world of everyday expectations. "The Passing of Arthur" further serves as a frame to the inner sections by reiterating the motifs, themes, and poetic structure of the entire poem. In particular, this section repeats in darker outline the motif of trial or test, which has always been a mainstay of the Romance. In the opening section of The Idylls of the King, we remember, Tennyson had arranged his tale in terms of a series of tests which Arthur had to pass to make himself true king: he had to succeed at his first deed of arms by driving the heathen foe from Leodogran's realm, next he had to defeat the rebellious nobility, and, finally, he had to conquer the doubts of Leodogran himself in order to win Guinevere. These very different kinds of tests appear throughout the individual idylls as Gareth, Geraint, Enid, Balin, Pelleas, Lancelot and the other characters reveal themselves to us by the way they encounter such physical, moral, and spiritual trials. "The Passing of Arthur" symmetrically closes the frame by echoing the trials of the opening section. Now, however, the trials the King must survive are less physical than spiritual. In fact, before he passes from this world now once again darkened by the destruction of the Round Table, he must endure three, each in its own way a test of his faith: first, he must overcome his own doubts about the presence of God in history; second, he must fight that last grim battle, slaying Modred; and third, he must work his will for the last time, forcing the loyal, if uncomprehending Bedivere to obey his difficult command to cast away Excalibur. Arthur meets each of these trials alone, in the sense that only he can decide what he will believe and how he will act: loneliness, or at leastaloneness, is the fundamental condition of all human decision, even in the midst of community. The Idylls of the King, In Memoriam, and "The Two Voices" all reveal that assent, which must provide the basis for all human community, paradoxically must take place in isolation. Every man thus necessarily makes his decisions by himself, within himself. But
as Arthur's trials progress, this fundamental human isolation becomes even more strongly emphasized as he increasingly finds himself stripped of whatever moral support he might receive from his fellow men. On the march westward, when he doubts God's purpose, he has already lost Lancelot, the Queen, and those knights now dead or traitors. By the close of that nightmare battle on the barren strand he has lost all his men but Bedivere and, as he says, seems but a king among the dead. Finally, when he must surmount the betrayals of Bedivere, he stands starkly, nakedly alone, for even this last, most loyal companion has now become an antagonist during this time of trial.

As we shall observe, each of Arthur's tests—and those of Bedivere as well—emphasizes Tennyson's idea that belief and commitment must provide the centre for human life if it is to rise above the bestial. For the poet there is an essential relation between man's capacity to believe—to have faith—and to live morally and loyally—to keep faith with oneself, one's fellow men, and one's god. Since this closing idyll is presenting the pessimistic side of the problem, he emphasizes the major, fundamental difficulties man has in having and keeping faith, and in so doing he explains once more how the Round Table failed. In contrast, "The Coming of Arthur" begins the poem by demonstrating a successful example of the process by which men authenticate their beliefs, enabling them to act; and though Tennyson quite frankly reveals the essentially subjective, non-rational nature of such decision, yet he manages to present a hopeful picture—just as he does in In Memoriam, the poem in which he presents his own experience of faith, doubt, and authentication.¹ "Gareth and Lynette" similarly presents an

optimistic picture of the problems of having and keeping faith, for it depicts the springtime of the realm. In this happiest, most youthful section of The Idyls of the King we perceive Arthur's new knight able to prove himself a true member of the Round Table because he has faith and keeps faith with his king. In the Geraint poems the mood has already begun to darken, and although all ends happily, we observe the painful effects of a jealousy which leads a great knight to break faith with himself, his wife, his people and his king. But by the close of these two Idylls both Geraint and Edryn, the proud warrior he had earlier subdued, are seen to have found regeneration in new faith. "Balin and Balan", Tennyson's last contribution to his Arthurian cycle, reveals human limitations in starker outline, for the madness of Balin leads to the bitter tragedy of one whose psychology and fate—including Vivien—will not permit him to believe in himself, knighthood, or Arthur. Fortune's wheel is already on a downward turn, and the only regeneration, the only restoration, comes when the two brothers die happy in their illusions. "Merlin and Vivien" next dramatizes the failure of faith even more darkly, showing how Vivien, who can neither keep faith nor even conceive of keeping it, seduces the ancient wizard whose faith in himself and Arthur has begun to weaken. In "Lancelot and Elaine", which reveals a heroine who is all in truth that Vivien had pretended to be, we see for the first time the adultery of Lancelot and the Queen, and the direct effect of this broken faith upon another person. "The Holy Grail", perhaps the most brilliant of the Idylls, shows the further destruction of the Round Table as many of its members seek a short cut to heaven, in essence breaking faith with Arthur to receive religious forgiveness. "Pelleas and Ettarre" continues this theme by presenting a young knight, an elaborate foil to Gareth, who becomes a member of the Round Table for the wrong reasons—not to keep faith with God, man, and the king, but to win an as yet unknown lady. The cruel, false Ettarre, like the false Gawain, breaks faith with the young knight who has continually placed his faith in the wrong people and ideas. When he learns that even Lancelot has not been able to keep his vows, he becomes untrue to himself, denying that he
had ever really loved. Turning himself into a cynical incarnation of unfaith, Pelleas calls himself the Red Knight and sets up a bestial parody of the Round Table. He and his followers meet with dreadful deaths in “The Last Tournament”, which Tennyson realized was the saddest part of the *Idylls*. When Arthur leads his young knights to restore the order that had savagely been destroyed by Pelleas’s followers, they betray their vows and wreak massacre upon their drunken enemy. Meanwhile, Lancelot further betrays Arthur by carelessly conducting the tournament at which all break faith. The discourteous and disloyal Tristram captures the prize, taking it to his mistress, Mark’s wife, to whom he has already been unfaithful, only to meet death at the hands of the faithless king of Cornwall. When Arthur returns he discovers he has been betrayed by the two people in whom he placed greatest faith, and that Modred has finally shattered the Round Table. “Guinevere”, which reviews the Queen’s guilty love, ends on a note of qualified optimism, for after Arthur has come to her in the nunnery where she has fled for refuge, she experiences what we may well term a “conversion”—for the first time she believes in Arthur, and though she cannot fully understand him, she realizes both what he had tried to accomplish and what she has destroyed. By the last part of *The Idylls of the King*, doubt and breaking faith have brought us to the point where we find Arthur lying wounded within a barren wasteland of rock and ruin. Nonetheless, however much Tennyson may remain sceptical about man’s capacity to have and keep faith enough to create an ideal, completely humane society, he yet sees some cause for hope in the fact that even men with the limitations of Bedivere, and they are many, can make soul triumph over sense.

Arthur’s first test in “The Passing of Arthur” comes when agonizing over the existence of evil—which must be the central problem for any religious faith—he asks the same questions that *In Memoriam* does: why does it seem “as if some lesser god had made the world, / But had not force to shape it as he would” (14-15)? Is it perhaps that the earth awaits another god to triumph over evil, making this world good and beautiful? Even as the King voices this doubt (which Tennyson glossed as the
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gnostic belief that lesser Powers created the world" [p. 1742 n.]), he realizes that a more likely explanation of evil is that the world is

wholly fair,
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
And have not power to see it as it is:
Perchance, because we see not to the close. (18-21)

In other words, that essential "war of Sense and Soul typified in individuals" which the previous idylls have dramatized is more a matter of epistemology than morality. Tennyson, one recalls, had originally intended to entitle his poem "The False and the True", and in fact it is precisely this opposition and the way man tries to resolve it that provide the larger subjects of the entire Idylls. As Arthur here emphasizes, the problem of distinguishing false from true—the problem of faith—arises in our limited and limiting faculties. "The Passing of Arthur", like In Memoriam, concerns itself with dramatizing the various roads by which men arrive at belief.

Arthur thus resists the first temptation he faces in this idyll, for he refuses to let the evidence of the limited senses crush the soul's faith. But although he has triumphed over a broad theological doubt, he has yet to face the more specific fear that God has abandoned him. He is in great pain because he knows that although he has had faith and kept faith, his great purpose has come to nought. Because all his trust "in wife and friend" (24), which were the foundation of his rule, have been betrayed—because others have not kept faith with him—his "realm/Reels back into the beast, and is no more" (25-26). Making us think of Christ's plaint on the cross, Arthur exclaims "My God, thou

1 Ricks, p. 1464, quotes the following from Hallam Tennyson, Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir (London, 1897), ii. 130: "if Epic unity is looked for in the Idylls, we find it not in the wrath of an Achilles, nor in the wanderings of an Ulysses, but in the unending war of humanity in all ages,—the world-wide war of Sense and Soul, typified in individuals, with the subtle interaction of character upon character . . . ."

2 See Ricks, p. 1465. Charles Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson (New York, 1949), p. 317 explains that the original title "The False and the True" was abandoned when Lena Eden published a novel with that title. Critics have generally assumed that the conflict between false and true, like that between sense and soul, is entirely a matter of morality. As this entire essay attempts to demonstrate, these oppositions must also be thought of in epistemological terms.
hast forgotten me in my death” (27), but immediately after his brief lapse of faith, he pulls himself up short, affirming his belief that God keeps faith with man: “Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die” (28). Thus having surmounted the doubts which result from his perception of the evils of human nature in general and his own betrayals in particular, the King falls asleep and receives what we may term his reward for steadfastness.

Like Achilles, like Aeneas, like Dante, Arthur is granted contact with the dead; and like Tennyson himself in the ninety-fifth In Memoriam lyric, that contact with the dead acts to confirm a faith, and hence comes as a reward for enduring severe spiritual trial. Although there are other events which resemble dreams in this surrealist idyll, this is the last literal dream we come upon in the poem. It should remind us how Tennyson has previously employed dreams and visions throughout The Idylls of the King. They not only add an element of the marvellous appropriate to the Romance subject, but they also provide opportunity for him to employ his great talent at creating panels, tapestries, and brief set-pieces of symbolic statement which further the action and restate the main themes. For example, the prophetic dreams of Merlin, Elaine, Tristram, and Guinevere all serve to warn of coming disastrous effects of breaking faith, while simultaneously directing our attention to the poet’s ideas about the ambiguous nature of reality. Leodogran’s dream, which provides the climactic moment in “The Coming of Arthur”, further serves to effect the monarch’s conversion to the cause of the young king. Like those waking visions alluded to in “The Holy Grail”, Arthur’s dream in this last idyll comes as a reward for his faith and faithful action.

Gawain’s appearance in this dream also serves to emphasize the Tennysonian concern with man’s need to have faith and keep it. Clearly, Gawain, who had been blown along by the wandering wind of his passions during his life, in Dantesque fashion repeats this action after death; whereas the King, who had remained true to himself, his people, and his God, is promised a place of rest and peace.
There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain killed
In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown
Along a wandering wind, and past his ear
Went shrilling, "Hollow, hollow all delight!
Hail, King! Tomorrow thou shalt pass away.
Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.
And I am blown along a wandering wind,
And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight." (30-37)

Tennyson is apparently alluding to the fifth canto of the *Inferno* where the great lovers—Helen, Cleopatra, Paris, Tristram, and, of course, Paolo and Francesca—are similarly blown about through eternity because, subjecting reason to passion, they allowed themselves to be carried away by physical love. That Dante's Paolo and Francesca fell through reading about Lancelot's adulterous love for Guinevere further enforces Tennyson's point about the tragic results of human inability to keep faith. It is particularly fitting that Gawain, the warrior light of faith, should be the figure thus to come to Arthur in his dream, for again in the manner of Dante, Tennyson seems to be using those damned by their own actions both to prophesy and to teach the reader the nature of the sin that all must shun.

Throughout the *Idylls* this knight represents those who try neither to believe nor to act loyally. In "The Coming of Arthur", where the reader first encounters Gawain, he acts characteristically when Bellicent sends him from the throne room while she and Leodogran confer; for whereas Modred characteristically eavesdrops, ear against door, Gawain carelessly "breaking into song/ Sprang out, and followed by his flying hair/ Ran like a colt, and leapt at all he saw" (319-21). But by "Lancelot and Elaine" his pleasant lightness, perhaps fitting for a young boy, has become rank in manhood: Gawain is neither obedient to his king "Nor often loyal to his word" (557). He disobeys Arthur by giving the jewels won at the disastrous tourney to Elaine, rather than seeking out the victorious knight, and Arthur angrily tells him he has acted with false courtesy to the young maid: "Ye shall go no more/ On quest of mine, seeing that ye forget/ Obedience is the courtesy due to kings" (711-13). In "The Holy Grail" this knight who had so lightly broken his vows to Arthur to seek the holy vessel, equally easily abandons the search when it begins to bore:
For I was much a wearied of the Quest:
But found a silk pavilion in a field,
And merry maidens in it; and then this gale
Tore my pavilion from the tenting-pin,
And blew my merry maidens all about
With all discomfort; yea, and but for this,
My twelvemonth and a day were pleasant to me. (741-7)

The lightness with which Gawain treats matters of faith, such as the Grail, and that faith which must be kept, such as his oath to the King, is seen more darkly in "Pelleas and Ettarre" where he promises to win the heart of the cruel woman for the young knight by lying that he has killed him, thus supposedly provoking her to remorse and wakening love. But after pledging both his own word and the honour of the entire Round Table, he betrays Pelleas—and hence himself, his king, and the other members of the fellowship. The material effect of this faithlessness appears in the servant whom Pelleas savagely disfigures and sends to Camelot in "The Last Tournament".

Thus, it is most appropriate for Tennyson to use Gawain to represent those who break faith in the hierarchy he creates in "The Passing of Arthur". The King, of course, has attained the highest level men can reach, for he has firm faith and keeps faith with all. Below him in the hierarchy stands Bedivere, the loyal, if limited knight who represents natural man at his best—man, in other words, who can only rise above himself when under the influence of someone like Arthur. Gawain then epitomizes those without faith, those too intellectually lazy, too morally lax to concern themselves overmuch with thinking or acting in any way which limits their pleasures. Modred, who like Mark and Vivien has a pathological inability to believe in anything or anybody, takes his place at the very bottom of this hierarchy of human nature as the embodiment of unfaith. If Arthur is very frequently described in terms that remind one of Christ, then Modred's obvious analogue is Satan.¹ Since he, Gawain, and Gareth, who appears in an earlier idyll, are brothers, one is

¹ For instance, in "Guinevere", lines 21-34. Modred is caught spying over the garden wall, like Satan in Paradise Lost, and when Lancelot, not recognizing him, hurls him to the ground, Tennyson likens the evil prince to a worm, a traditional emblem of Satan. The poet also describes Vivien, who in many ways is Modred's analogue, in terms of Satan stealing into the Garden of Eden.
tempted to believe that Tennyson intentionally imitated Dante, whose practice it is to apportion three members of the same family in different realms of the afterlife, placing one each in Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Even within "The Passing of Arthur," itself, this analogy to Dante holds to some extent, since the King is reputed to be related to Gawain and Modred—though, of course, this is not the case.

When Tennyson used Arthur's dream to emphasize his main themes, he characteristically modified both his own earlier work and that of Malory. The "Morte d'Arthur", which provided the core of "The Passing of Arthur", included no such dream. The Heath manuscript of the poem, however, contains a mention of a dream in which Gawain comes to Arthur, as he does in Malory, to warn him not to fight. By the time Tennyson came to rework this Arthurian material for the final section of the Idylls, he retained the dream visitation but modified it to reward the faithful king in his time of trial.

Bedivere, always the man to underestimate the marvellous, dismisses Gawain's ghostly prophecies, telling his king to "go forth and conquer as of old" (64). The far wiser Arthur realizes that their coming battle, his second trial, will be far different from those glorious triumphs when he and his Round Table together drove first the Romans and then the heathen from the realm. Indeed, even if he conquers, he cannot do so "as of old": since whereas he formerly fought an external enemy, he now fights internal ones, men who were once his own. Fully realizing that the "king who fights his people fights himself" (72), Arthur tells Bedivere that the stroke that destroys "my knights, who loved me once... is as my death to me" (73-74). This admission does more than reveal his continued love for those who have sinned against him: it demonstrates his awareness that the blows that will kill the traitor knights will simultaneously kill the Arthur of old, since without these men, once of the fellowship, he cannot remain completely himself—the great king who could unite his kingdom, giving men someone in whom to believe. Thus, Arthur can defeat Modred's forces, preventing them from gaining the realm, but he cannot be victorious in any important sense, since the very fact that the
members of the fellowship fight each other means that his great purpose has failed.

Nonetheless, even though he well perceives the necessarily tragic outcome of the battle, he steels himself with bleak courage to continue driving Modred's forces through the "blind haze" (76) until, at last, he traps them between barren coast and sea. Then, at the winter solstice, "that day when the great light of heaven/ Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,/ On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed" (90-92). "A deathwhite mist" (95) covers all,

and even on Arthur fell
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew.

Both the wasteland setting of the final battle and the mist which makes it a nightmare of confusion are Tennyson's additions to Malory. Here as throughout the Idylls this master of expressionist landscape surrounds his figures with an external nature symbolizing their inner condition. The poet himself pointed out that "This grim battle in the mist contrasts with Arthur's glorious battle in the Coming of Arthur, fought on a bright day when 'he saw the smallest rock far on the faintest hill'". The harmony, the faith, the community with which Arthur and his men act in the first battle raises them above the levels human nature usually reaches: the perception of the senses approaches that of the soul as vision approaches the visionary. When Tennyson implicitly contrasts the preternatural clarity of Arthur's vision in the opening section with his confusion in the last, he is making a statement not only about the way political disorder and death necessarily follow loss of faith, but also about the way an ordering faith, which creates harmony of sense and soul, makes man whole, complete, a being of perfect health. Like Milton who believed in a time of physical joy and health before the Fall, Tennyson traces the very limitation of our perceptions to breaking faith. Considered from this point of view, The Idylls of the King is seen to be another tale of paradise lost.

1 Ricks, p. 1745 n.
At last, however, the mist vanishes, revealing the completely stark setting of Arthur's personal combat with Modred. In these magnificent lines Tennyson uses all his characteristic skill at word and sound painting to describe how

over all that shore,
Save for some whisper of the seething seas,
A dead hush fell; but when the dolorous day
Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came
A bitter wind, clear from the North, and blew
The mist aside, and with that wind the tide
Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field
Of battle: but no man was moving there;
Nor any cry of Christian heard thereon,
Nor yet of heathen; only the wan wave
Brake in among dead faces, to and fro
Swaying the helpless hands, and up and down
Tumbling the hollow helmets of the fallen,
And shivered brands that once had fought with Rome,
And rolling far along the gloomy shores
The voice of days of old and days to be. (120-35)

Clearly, the opposition between Arthur and Modred is so sharp that no ambiguity, no confusion is possible. But before the King notices his enemy he looks about the dead men in a dead world and wonders if he himself be "but King among the dead" (146). Bedivere, whose loyalty is most important at this point, swears that Arthur would be his monarch everywhere—even among the dead. When this loyal servant points out Modred, "the traitor of thine house" (153), Arthur denies that his enemy was ever so:

My house are rather they who sware my vows,
Yea, even while they brake them, owned me King.
And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,
When all the purport of my throne hath failed,
That quick or dead thou holdest me for King. (157-61)

Modred, in other words, has not broken faith like the other traitor knights, for he is incapable of having faith, of keeping it, of believing in anything. With the strength renewed by Bedivere's faith in him, Arthur then does "one last act of kinghood" (163), slaying Modred with Excalibur's "last stroke" (168), and is himself mortally wounded.

Arthur's third trial comes when after defeating both Modred and his own doubts, he commands Bedivere to cast away
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Excalibur. In his struggle to make Bedivere obey him by sheer force of will, and in the knight's struggle to keep faith with his beloved king, we have the climactic double-test of "The Passing of Arthur". This idyll's pattern of three tests recapitulates the structure of the opening section of The Idylls of the King, where after Arthur has proved himself rightful lord of the realm by defending Leodogran's lands and conquering the rebel barons, he must next obtain the hand of Guinevere from her father, the grateful, yet still doubting Leodogran. In both the "Coming" and the "Passing", Arthur's chief test, to which all builds, is a matter of making another man move in harmony with his will, for he must convince both the king of Cameliard and his last knight to believe in him enough to act as he desires. In thus placing Arthur off-stage during the central action of each Idyll, Tennyson not only emphasizes the king's oblique role in the ten central sections, but also enforces the poem's themes of doubt, faith, and their relation to noble action.

Bedivere, whose loyalty to Arthur provides a large part of the concluding idyll's subject, is the average man at his best. Intolerantly loyal, he cannot understand why others do not believe in Arthur, and in "The Coming of Arthur" he tells Leodogran that the only reason the barons do not accept his lord is that they are too bestial. While this explanation is in part correct, it obviously much oversimplifies the problems that some men, including Leodogran, have in granting Arthur's authenticity. Just as he easily dismisses the doubts of others, so, too, Bedivere pays little attention to the possibility that his king is of miraculous origin, for such suggestions have no appeal to the commonsense warrior. These limitations, this same lack of imagination, this inability to distinguish between true and false, appear when he twice disobeys his lord, thus providing one of Arthur's most painful trials.

Reluctantly leaving the wounded king, Bedivere makes his way down to the lake shore prepared to do his bidding. But when he draws Excalibur to hurl it into the lake,

the winter moon,
Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth
And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt:
For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,
Breaking faith with his king for the sake of the beautiful sword, he conceals it and then makes his way slowly back to the ruined chapel. Arthur immediately perceives that his last companion has betrayed him, and "faint and pale" (240) he rebukes him for having broken faith with his nature, his knightly vows, and his king: "Thou hast betrayed thy nature and thy name,/ Not rendering true answer, as beseemed/ Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight" (241-3). He sends Bedivere forth a second time, for he still has faith in him, but once again when the knight sees "the wonder of the hilt" (253) he is unable to obey. Arguing with himself that if he casts away the sword, "Surely a precious thing, one worthy note,/ Should thus be lost for ever from the earth" (257-8), which might give pleasure to many men. He carries the betrayal farther, beginning to doubt the King's wisdom, for although it is, he knows, "Deep harm to disobey" (261) since one has sworn obedience, nonetheless he thinks it not "well to obey" if "a king demand/ An act unprofitable, against himself" (263-4). After all, he continues: "The King is sick, and knows not what he does" (265). With bitter irony Tennyson has Bedivere, who has now temporarily become another faithless knight, argue that without the material evidence of Excalibur no one in later time will give faith to the tales of Arthur's realm. Bedivere is, and always has been, one of those for whom the physical proofs count most.

Bedivere's second betrayal is far more serious than his earlier one. The first time he broke faith with Arthur, the sheer beauty of Excalibur left him confused, but when he breaks faith a second time after the King has explained the serious nature of his first defection, Bedivere now perverts his reason, looking to justify with intellect what had earlier been a natural temptation of the senses. To put the opposition in Dantesque (or Augustinian) terms: when he is first led astray, it is by a forgiveable abuse of natural appetite; but the second time he abuses his reason, a higher faculty.
Thus “clouded with his own conceit” (278), Bedivere once more hides Excalibur and returns to Arthur who harshly accuses him of treason. Immediately comprehending that sense has conquered in the war with Bedivere’s soul, Arthur yet shows his faith in the man and sends him back again.

When Bedivere returns to Arthur, the King sees immediately in his eyes that he has finally triumphed over himself and managed to keep faith. To his question about what he saw and heard upon hurling the sword into the waters, the knight replies:

Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest the gems
Should blind my purpose, for I never saw,
Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I die,
Not though I live three lives of mortal men,
So great a miracle as yonder hilt.
Then with both hands I flung him, wheeling him;
But when I looked again, behold an arm,
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,
That caught him by the hilt, and brandished him
Three times, and drew him under in the mere. (320-9)

The lines well define the speaker’s characteristic limitations. One might well expect that the mysterious arm which caught Excalibur more of a miracle than the sword. Bedivere has been present at Arthur’s coronation when the King received the magical sanction of the light that flowed into Camelot, and he certainly knew about the Grail’s later appearance. But for him the jewels, the gold, the fine work—all purely physical—are more miraculous. This knight, who could see no appeal in the legends of Arthur’s mystic origin, is a practical man, loyal and true within his limitations, but not one who can conceive of the spiritual dimensions of human existence. Nonetheless, with a self-denial that considering his nature is truly heroic, he closes his eyes, enables soul to triumph over sense, and keeps faith with Arthur!

Having successfully passed their very different trials, Arthur and Bedivere receive their appropriate rewards: the three Queens and their mysterious host convey the King to Avilion, while the knight, who must remain behind, is granted first the sight of the magical vessel, then the comfort of Arthur’s words, and finally the vision with which Tennyson ends the poem. Lifting the
wounded Arthur to his shoulders, Bedivere makes his way through the darkened wasteland until they reach the shore when suddenly they see the moon flashing upon the sea and the strange vessel whose " decks were dense with stately forms,/ Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a dream " (364-5). Giving his last command as an earthly ruler, Arthur has his vassal place him in the ship. The Queens come forward to receive him, taking off his helmet, and he lies among them " like a shattered column " (389) in a scene that resembles a pieta. Having obeyed his lord, the good Sir Bedivere, who realizes his coming loneliness in this new, now lessened world, asks " my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go? " (395). He sees, too, that " the true old times are dead " (397), and for him the chance to do great and noble deeds has vanished from the earth. Such an opportunity had not existed, says Bedivere, " since the light that led/ The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh " (400-1) to the Christ-child, and one may have to wait an equally long time for such a magnificent era to come again. Bedivere, who rightly feels himself the last survivor of an heroic age, wants to be assured that life has still meaning. Like the speaker in the Anglo-Saxon " Wanderer ", like Tennyson after the death of Hallam, Bedivere is looking for a centre to life.

Arthur's reply makes two important points that once again emphasize the main themes of *The Idylls of the King*. First, he tells his knight to have faith that God is present in history, and that history, even the destruction of the Round Table, has meaning and purpose. In a particularly poignant and courageous assertion of his own faith, Arthur expands upon his words to the Roman lords come for tribute in " The Coming of Arthur ", telling Bedivere: " The old order changeth, yielding place to new,/ And God fulfils himself in many ways,/ Lest one good custom should corrupt the world " (408-10). Earlier, the assertion that since the " old order changeth " , he would not render tribute to now impotent Rome, acts to demonstrate that the young Arthur well knows in whom to place faith, and he will not do so in those too weak to keep it. Now in this darkened, lessened time, Arthur's recognition that his own time has passed is his final demonstration of faith in God and His ways. He
thus tells Bedivere to comfort himself, bidding him to pray for his king's soul.

More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?

In this most explicit emphasis of the poem's theme of faith, Arthur overtly defines man as the being who is able to pray, as the one being whose nature permits him to have faith. This problem of having and keeping faith which Tennyson investigates continuously throughout the poem is, then, more than a matter of Arthurian times, more than something which concerns man in relation to his religious, personal, and political existence alone: faith, the ability to have and keep it, defines the essence of the human.

At this point, Arthur bids farewell to his vassal, telling him he believes he is going to the "island-valley of Avilion" (427) where he will heal his grievous wound. When he finishes speaking, the boat departs, leaving Bedivere lost in thought. As the ship withdraws into the distance, becoming a "black dot against the verge of dawn" (439), the moan of the mysterious crew dies away as the world becomes deadly still. Thinking "The King is gone" (443), Bedivere suddenly remembers "the weird rhyme" (444) which Merlin had pronounced at Arthur's birth: "From the great deep to the great deep he goes" (445). This, then, is Bedivere's first reward for obeying his king, and Tennyson uses it to point out the intimate relation that obtains between moral action and belief: by keeping faith with Arthur, his knight becomes able to receive faith. Having loyally obeyed his king at last, Bedivere finds that both the words and that higher faith which he had never before been able to comprehend now spontaneously come to him bringing comfort. Turning from the mere, the good knight slowly climbs the "iron crag" (447), which Tennyson transforms into a veritable mountain of vision, to catch a last glance of the black hull. As he climbs,
this knight, who had once so easily discounted tales of Arthur’s miraculous origin, cries out: “He passes to be King among the dead,/ And after healing of his grievous wound/ He comes again” (449-51). Though mixed with doubt, which is the condition of all human faith, this belief comes as a reward for Bedivere. Building to a climax of “vision”, Tennyson next permits the last member of the Round Table to have two more experiences that will support his faith in the difficult times to come. First, from the dawn it seemed there came, but faint

As from beyond the limit of the world
Like the last echo born of a great cry,
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice
Around a king returning from his wars. (457-61)

Thereupon he climbs once more, as Tennyson ends The Idylls of the King with a vision of the rising sun.

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,
Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
Down that long water opening on the deep
Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
From less to less and vanish into light.
And the new sun rose bringing the new year. (462-9)

Like Tennyson’s own mystical experience in In Memoriam, the sight of Arthur moving toward Avilion, Heaven, or wherever he lands is stricken through with doubt even as it occurs; and yet it still suffices to provide faith for life. Good Sir Bedivere, the first made and last left of Arthur’s men, has managed to keep faith with his lord after great trials, and as a reward he becomes aware of mystical and magical dimensions of existence which before were beyond his ken. Most important, his experiences on the mountain crag, however mysterious they may be to him, yet give him the faith and strength to live in a faithless age.¹

In essence, “The Passing of Arthur”, like the entire poem, concerns itself with the same problems as In Memoriam and offers much the same solutions. This close resemblance should

¹Bedivere’s climbing the mountain to catch a last glimpse of Arthur and his resultant vision seem intentionally to echo both Moses’ vision from Mt. Pisgah of the Promised Land (which he cannot enter in life) and Adam’s vision of the future in the last two books of Paradise Lost. In each case, we remember, man is given a sight of future bliss as reward, education, and solace.
remind us that in its earliest form the tale of Arthur's departure from this earth, like Tennyson's great elegy, was a direct response to Hallam's death. Both poems not only emphasize man's essential need to believe but also those forces which make it so difficult for him to do so. Equally important, they both dramatize the process of authentication by which individual men reach the state of belief. When I point to these similarities I am not holding that Bedivere is an allegorical representation of Tennyson, or that King Arthur is Arthur Hallam, or, for that matter, that Arthur, who is so frequently and elaborately described in terms of Christ, is meant to be Him. Rather that Tennyson draws upon these analogous situations to present what remain his main concerns throughout much of his poetic career: that both men and their societies must be founded on faith—or, more accurately, on many faiths, on faith between ruler and ruled, man and woman, worshipper and God; and that such faith, however essential, is necessarily a tenuous, subjective, non-rational matter. In Memoriam appears optimistic because its overall movement shows how one man, Tennyson, achieves faith after great trials, while The Idylls of the King is most pessimistic because it dramatizes the destruction of an ideal when men do not keep faith. "The Passing of Arthur", while making it quite clear how the Round Table failed, yet offers some cause for hope when it presents the trials, triumphs, and conversion of the ordinary man, Bedivere.