

# “Many a Beast Therein”: Christianity and Evolution in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and *Idylls of the King*

「多くの獣」: アルフレッド・ロード・テニソンの詩のキリスト教と進化

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[Abstract] Alfred Lord Tennyson’s famous poem *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) demonstrates his struggle with grief and doubt before reaffirming his Christian faith. In his later Arthurian epic *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), however, the poem addresses the decline of King Arthur’s Christian ideals, which are shown as a temporary interlude in a bestial human history. The religious juxtaposition between the two poems indicates how they were affected by changing evolutionary theories during the nineteenth century. While *In Memoriam A.H.H.* was influenced by Lamarckian evolutionary theory, and in particular Robert Chamber’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) - which argued that humankind was gradually evolving towards a state of perfection - Tennyson’s *Idylls* responded to the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin’s theory of natural selection based on competition affected not just scientific thinkers but a wide-range of writers and poets such as Tennyson. His reading of Darwin is evidenced by the later published sections of the *Idylls*, such as “The Coming of Arthur”, “Pelleas and Ettare” and “The Holy Grail” (1869), which display a pessimistic world view. This indicates that ultimately, for Tennyson, the more savage, Darwinian aspects of human nature could not be ignored.

## 1. Introduction

Published at the midway point of the nineteenth century, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) is the most famous and influential poem of the Victorian era. Composed as an elegy for Tennyson’s close friend Arthur Henry Hallam, it demonstrates the poet’s struggle with grief and religious uncertainty. By the poem’s conclusion Tennyson’s speaker appears to have resolved his internal conflict, reaffirming his religious faith. Further, in Canto CXVIII, he looks towards a more hopeful future in which humankind will “Move upward, working out the beast” (line 27). In his later published Arthurian epic *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), however, Tennyson appears to reverse this process. The poem addresses the inevitable decline of King Arthur’s high chivalric ideals, and, in “The Passing of Arthur” (1884), he faces the challenge of the traitor Sir Modred while reflecting that “all my realm / Reels back into the beast, and is no more” (lines 24-25). In the final part of the epic poem his kingdom reverts back to the pre-Arthurian feral state described in the opening chapter of the work, “The Coming of Arthur” (1869), which contains “many a beast therein”

(line 21). Despite the rising sun at the poem's conclusion indicating future regeneration, the high courtly ideals of Tennyson's Camelot are shown as a temporary interlude in a bestial human history.

This tonal juxtaposition with *In Memoriam A.H.H.* reflects the ways in which Tennyson's *Idylls* was influenced by a bloody Arthurian tradition stretching back to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485) and beyond. At the same time, Tennyson's depiction of the Arthurian myths also signposts the significant ways in which he was influenced by changing evolutionary theories during the nineteenth century. While *In Memoriam A.H.H.* was influenced by Lamarckian evolutionary theory, and in particular Robert Chamber's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) - which argued that humankind was gradually evolving towards a state of perfection - Tennyson's *Idylls* also responded to the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin's theory of natural selection based on competition shocked Victorian society, affecting not just scientific thinkers but a wide-range of writers and poets such as Tennyson. This is evidenced by the final section of the *Idylls*, "The Passing of Arthur", in which the civilized world of Camelot is ultimately vanquished by the many wild and competitive beasts who lie inside and outside its walls.

The influence of evolutionary thought upon Tennyson's poetry has increasingly become the subject of scholastic interest. John Holmes, in *Darwin's Bards* (2009), has discussed the influence of evolutionary ideas upon a number of poets, noting that Tennyson, like Robert Browning, was troubled by the ways in which Darwin's theory offered a lack of progressive hope (22). Elsewhere, in "The Challenge of Evolution in Victorian Poetry" (2014), Holmes observes that in Tennyson's poetry "from the 1860s onwards, he asserts the primacy of faith over science" (51). In the collected volume *Darwin, Tennyson and Their Readers* (2013), several scholars have examined other aspects of Darwin's influence upon Tennyson's work. Valerie Purton, for example, in her article "Darwin, Tennyson and the Writing of The Holy Grail", argues that the darker tone present in Tennyson's "Holy Grail" section of *The Idylls* appears indicative of Darwin's influence (58). My study builds more widely upon this position, discussing multiple sections of the *Idylls* - and Tennyson's many uses of the term 'beast' - in juxtaposition with its employment in the earlier *In Memoriam A.H.H.* By comparing the contrasting influence of Chamber's *Vestiges* and Darwin's *Origin* upon Tennyson's two most famous poems, I argue that they help further reveal the struggles he experienced in coming to terms with a Darwinian bestial world.

## 2. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and The Way of the Soul

On the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1833 Tennyson received the shocking news that the poet Arthur Henry Hallam, his close friend and fellow alumni of Trinity College, Cambridge, had died of a stroke at just 22 years old. The blow to Tennyson was sharp and sudden, but his poetic response was slow and considered; between 1833-1849 he crafted 131 elegiac lyrics in memory of Hallam (Harrison 28), culminating in the 1850 publication of the epic *In Memoriam A.H.H.* The poem reflects the way in which Hallam's death shook Tennyson's Christian faith. Nevertheless, it also illustrates how his religious doubt ultimately strengthened his belief, exemplified by the famous lines in Canto XCVI: "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me,

than in half the creeds” (lines 11-12). *In Memoriam A.H.H.* was immensely popular with the Victorian public, while the Christian morality which underscored the work also made it the favorite poem of Queen Victoria. The grieving monarch found it greatly consoling after the loss of her consort Prince Albert, Kirstie Blair noting that, “Several of the funeral sermons for Albert conclude by citing passages from it, reading them as symptomatic of hope and trust in God” (249).

The period from 1833 to 1850, in which Tennyson’s poem was composed, saw English society experience a number of major transitions (Larsen 2). As the industrial revolution transformed the countryside, new scientific ideas entered the public consciousness and shook people’s religious beliefs. Movements in geology and astronomy, for example, challenged the Biblical account of the age of the Earth. In his poem “Parnassus” (1889), Tennyson’s speaker imagines glimpsing the famous home of the Greek Muses, rhetorically asking, “What be those two shapes high over the sacred fountain / Taller than all the Muses, and huger than all the mountain?” (lines 9-10). The answer, for Tennyson, was troubling: “These are Astronomy and Geology, terrible Muses!” (line 16). In a time of great social change, the Anglican Church experienced problems in reacting to these new questions posed by science, or in restoring people’s faith in the basic tenets of Christianity. Timothy Larsen therefore argues that we can understand “Christianity in the Victorian age as contested ... given to rancorous disputes between different factions and versions of Christian thought” (2).

At a time of religious uncertainty, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* expresses his own doubts, but concludes with a powerful reaffirming of Christian faith. This is achieved through an honest engagement with doubt in its earlier stages. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the poem’s original title was “The Way of the Soul” (Sendry 105), reflecting the way in which a grief-stricken Tennyson searches for solace in the face of wavering uncertainty. The poem’s Prelude commences by introducing a benevolent God who, having made the world, leaves it to run by itself. Tennyson’s speaker must therefore guess and ponder, being left with nothing tangible to grasp hold off other than his compromised faith:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove;  
(lines 1-4)

As the elegy proceeds, Tennyson’s poetic speaker resolves his struggle. This religious commitment involves the speaker not just seeking solace in the sermons of Christ but juxtaposing him with the deceased Hallam. In the Epilogue, Tennyson compares Hallam to a Christ-like figure who will ultimately transcend to a higher plane, writing:

Whereof the man, that with me trod  
This planet, was a noble type

Appearing ere the times were ripe,  
That friend of mine who lives in God,  
(lines 137-140)

At the poem's conclusion, Tennyson holds onto the hope that God will find his soul and convey him to Heaven. He must maintain a sense of faith in the afterlife so that he can be admitted into the presence of Christ and rejoin his friend Hallam. While Tennyson frequently linked Christian faith with Anglicanism, and its associations with Church and state (Bowles 589), *In Memoriam A.H.H.* achieves greatness through avoiding didacticism. Tennyson's poem resists false certainties; his belief rests primarily upon the intuitive sense that there must be something, as he writes in Canto LVI "Behind the veil, behind the veil" (line 28) rather than attempting to define it. As I will discuss, however, this intuitive faith is also subtly shaped and complimented by Tennyson's engagement with nineteenth-century evolutionary theory.

### 3. Christianity and Lamarckian *Scala Naturae*

The sense of religious struggle that underscores Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* is also indicative of the complex ways in which nineteenth-century scientific ideas opposed and complimented Christian beliefs. While a Christian, Tennyson was avidly interested in several fields of science, the English biologist and natural historian T.H. Huxley famously praising Tennyson's knowledge and understanding as "equal to that of the best scientists" (cited in Holmes 2014 40). In particular, Tennyson was a keen amateur astronomer, developing a strong understanding of cosmology (Gossin 38) while also taking an eager interest in geology. Indeed, his religious inner conflict in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* reflects, as Isobel Armstrong has noted, "two different and antagonistic accounts of geological processes" (255). These dual influences upon Tennyson's thought were the oppositional ideas of the Anglican Archbishop and poet Richard Chenevix Trench and the geologist Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) (Armstrong 256). Lyell's geological treatise questioned narrow Biblical conceptions of time and instead proposed that Earth's geological changes took place over a vast period. These aspects are reflected in Canto LV where Tennyson's speaker describes falling upon a set of stairs leading to God, lamenting that "I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope, / And gather dust and chaff" (lines 17-20). Antony H. Harrison therefore notes that "geological treatises (Lyell's in particular) constitute the metaphorical strata of this poem" (28).

Further, the religious doubt of Tennyson's speaker, and the eventual reaffirming of his Christian faith, also connects to Tennyson's engagement with pre-Darwinian theories of evolution. These ideas gave a teleological account of species development, reflecting the ways in which they were partly shaped by the religious beliefs of natural theologians. Across the English channel, a teleological notion of evolutionary theory had originally been proposed by the French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. In his famous *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809), Lamarck argued that organisms followed a *scala naturae*, or great chain of being, drawing upon the classical ladder model of Aristotle (Stafleu 411). At the same time, he saw the species as demonstrating continuity rather than a rigid hierarchical taxonomy, being changed by their

habits from simple to complex. He writes “if the most perfect animals are at one extremity of the chain, the opposite extremity will necessarily be occupied by the simplest and most imperfect animals found in nature” (Lamarck 68). This positioned lifeforms as beings upon a natural escalator that was forever moving upwards, with humans at the very top (Brooke 329).

In Britain, the Scottish publisher Robert Chambers, a lay writer rather than a naturalist, widely introduced Lamarckian evolution to the Victorian public (Moore 143). Chambers’ *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) drew on Lamarck’s notion of evolutionary theory, becoming one of the publishing sensations of the nineteenth century (Brooke 302). The book’s influence reached broadly across Victorian society and provoked pessimistic reactions in some quarters. Some, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, viewed Chambers’ evolutionary ideas as a depressing challenge to religious faith (Secord 167). John Hedley Brooke, moreover, observes that *Vestiges* “was read by many critics as an atheistic tract masquerading as natural theology” (305). This despondent mood was further illustrated by Matthew Arnold’s pessimistic “Dover Beach” (1867), which was originally composed in 1851 and was likely influenced by *Vestiges*. In his poem, Arnold’s speaker bemoans the fading of religious belief:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
(lines 21-25)

At the same time, as its impressive sales figures would imply (Brooke 302), *Vestiges* functioned as a wellspring of academic and creative inspiration as well as a source of dismay. A number of young Oxford scholars and thinkers, for example, including the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, were directly influenced by Chamber’s book (Secord 253-4). One of the reasons for the popularity of Chamber’s work was that *Vestiges* combined evolutionary ideas with religion (Secord 1), Brooke noting that “Chambers presented it as a treatise on natural theology” (303). Chambers writes in *Vestiges* that “*design* presided in the creation of the whole - design again implying a designer, another word for a Creator” (324). Further, in arguing for the existence of an intelligent designer, or God, Chambers evidences older theological works such as William Paley’s 1802 *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* and *The Bridgewater Treatises* (1833-36) (324). This theological underpinning ensured that Chamber’s work offered a more hopeful, teleological notion of evolution in which species, and indeed humans, were developed and perfected by God rather than undergoing a process of change midwived by a random series of events.

Upon publication, Tennyson obtained a copy of *Vestiges* from his bookseller and engaged with the text excitedly (Secord 9). Its ideas would not have taken him by surprise; Tennyson would have encountered Lamarck’s theories, and Lyell’s criticism of them, in *Principles of Geology* but, as John

Holmes notes, this knowledge was “undoubtedly reinforced by his reading of *Vestiges*” (2014 44). Upon having examined Chamber’s text Tennyson saw no cause for pessimism, proclaiming that there was “nothing degrading in the theory” (Cited in Secord 10). Published just six years after *Vestiges*, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* reflects Chambers’ account of evolution. In the face of Lyell’s deep time, in which strata and species were subject to immense change rather than created perfectly, *Vestiges* offered Tennyson a religious interpretation whereby evolution could yield a teleological end. His poem, therefore, tied evolution to an overarching spiritual belief, depicting a transmutation of the species that was represented as providential and progressive, God appearing in Canto CXXIV “out of darkness” (line 23) to “reach thro’ nature, moulding men” (line 24).

Elsewhere in the poem Tennyson’s more hopeful sentiments echo Chambers’ interpretation of a Lamarckian notion of evolution. In *Vestiges*, Chambers maintained that humans would rise above their baser, animal instincts through self-control and moral sense: “In infancy, the impulses are all of them irregular ; a child is cruel, cunning, and false, under the slightest temptation, but in time learns to control these inclinations, and to be habitually humane, frank, and truthful” (355). Similarly, Tennyson’s speaker bemoans, in Canto LVI, how a violent natural order appears to undermine civilized values and faith in God: “Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw / With ravine, shriek’d against his creed –” (lines 15-16). At the same time, despite this, he expresses a hopeful belief in the power of humankind to self-discipline and transcend this bestial state. In Canto CXVIII the speaker implores humankind to “Move upward, working out the beast, / And let the ape and tiger die” (lines 27-8). In Tennyson’s poem, evolution is ultimately represented as an upward process, with humans representing biological, moral and spiritual perfection. The final lines of the Epilogue also appear to directly reflect Chamber’s influence, as all life is presented as part of a great chain of being, moving towards the creator:

That God, which ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element,  
And one far-off divine event,  
To which the whole creation moves.  
(lines 141-44)

While the sense of doubt which pervades Tennyson’s elegy reflects the influence of these new evolutionary ideas, Chamber’s teleological view of life also serves to aid the poetic speaker’s more hopeful reaffirming of his Christian faith at the poem’s conclusion. Unlike Tennyson’s memorial to Hallam, however, his later epic poem *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) was to take a darker turn, reflecting a much older literary tradition, but also the way in which later evolutionary ideas presented a challenge to his religious beliefs.

#### 4. The Theocritean Idyll and The Arthurian Tradition

In 1850, Tennyson was awarded the title of Poet Laureate by Queen Victoria. Now a national symbol,

he came under great pressure to write an epic poem that would reflect the values and social mores of the Victorian age. He chose as his central subject the life of King Arthur, a patriotic British symbol who stimulated emotions of pride and admiration. In calling his collected group of separately published poems *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), Tennyson drew upon the influence of Theocritus’ classical *Idylls*, the poem’s title suggesting its debt to the epic tradition (Lovelace 138). Further, he strove to compose twelve separate parts, reflecting the traditional number for an epic poem (Lovelace 138). At the same time, the title reflects an earlier group of poems entitled “English Idyls” composed by Tennyson between 1833-1839 (O’Donnell 127). Tennyson considered an idyl, such as the poems of Theocritus, to be neither solely an epic nor a pastoral, but instead “small images of something great” (O’Donnell 133). Angela G. O’Donnell notes, therefore, that Tennyson represented “English heroic material - the death of King Arthur – in the idyllic manner just as Theocritus treated Greek heroic material in the idyllic manner” (133).

The linguistic connection to Tennyson’s earlier “English Idyls” reflects the way in which Tennyson had already begun considering his Arthurian *Idylls* prior to *In Memoriam A.H.H.* He sketched ideas for various Arthurian projects in the 1830s - publishing “The Lady of Shalott” in 1832 - while in 1833 he began writing “Morte d’Arthur” which was later integrated into the final segment of the *Idylls*, “The Passing of Arthur” (Pfordresher 193). It is no surprise, therefore, that in the Eversley edition - Hallam Tennyson’s published edition of his father’s poems – “Morte d’Arthur” is listed as among a group of “English Idyls” (O’Donnell 126). The *Idylls of the King* grew and evolved over time, the first sections, which were released in 1859, coming over two decades before the publication of the concluding section in 1885. If we take “Morte d’Arthur” as the tale’s starting point, however, then we can see the entire composition of the saga as stretching out over half a century. As John Pfordresher notes, this ensured that “Victorians who read the beginnings of this immense work in their childhood were still observing its growth in their old age” (p.193).

Similarly to *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* was phenomenally popular with the Victorian public, the first books in the series selling 10,000 copies in the first week alone – a large number for a poetry volume at that time (Altick 300). The *Idylls* helped to awaken a new interest in the Arthurian myth, the poem’s success being indicative of the way in which Arthur and his most loyal knights embodied a strict set of codes which reflected Victorian moralistic attitudes. Tennyson’s rendering of the Arthurian legends also placed the topic of Christian morality as a central theme, which further accounted for its huge success with Victorian readers (Gossedge and Knight 114). Tennyson identified Arthur with Prince Albert (Ahern 92), while his kingly code of ethics exemplified Christian virtues drawn from nineteenth-century British Protestantism (Bowles 576). For example, bonds of trust between warriors were sealed by promises which made reference to their religious creator:

And Arthur said, “Man’s word is God in man:  
Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death.”  
(lines 132-33)



Tennyson presents a Christ-like, gentle Arthur, demonstrating Tennyson's credo that in order for humans to rise above a bestial level religious worship and belief should form the central aspect of civilized life.

At the same time, this also reflects his interest in natural evolution and his reading of Chamber's *Vestiges*. In "The Holy Grail" (1869) section of the *Idylls*, Merlin's four great zones of sculpture at Camelot show a number of symbols ranging from low to high. In "the lowest beasts are slaying men," (line 234), but in "the second men are slaying beasts" (line 235). Higher up "on the third are warriors, perfect men" (line 236). Ultimately, Arthur's position can be seen reflected in Merlin's third symbolic level from Tennyson's *Idylls*, where knights are "perfect men" (line 236). The four great zones of sculpture collectively remind us of Lamarck's *scala naturae*, or great chain of being, in which lifeforms ascend upwards. They are also suggestive of Chambers' descriptions of how human society is "in its earliest stages, sanguinary, aggressive, and deceitful, but in time becomes just, faithful, and benevolent" (355). Here it is Arthur's knights, and their courtly values, which represent evolutionary and spiritual perfection.

Unlike the concluding sense of evolutionary optimism encountered in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, however, the *Idylls* demonstrates a tonal reversal in which such perfection is shown to be unrealistic. As John D. Rosenberg observes, "*In Memoriam* begins with a funeral and ends with a marriage-feast; the *Idylls* opens with a marriage - Arthur's to Guinevere - and ends with a funeral" (148). The peaceful code of ethics demonstrated by Arthur is ultimately undermined by the bestial inner nature of his knights (Gilbert 874). Ambition, blood lust and sexual desire indicate, as broadly described in "The Coming of Arthur" (1869), the presence of "Many a beast therein" (line 21). In this way, Tennyson's poem indicates the same theme of heroes struggling to control their darker passions that is encountered in classic literature (Lovelace 137). Tennyson marked where he had borrowed from Homer in his own notes of *Idylls of the King* (Jenkyns 309) and Timothy J. Lovelace specifically connects his treatment of heroic passion to Greco-Roman classic works such as *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, arguing that:

As Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas all fail in the end to restrain the vehemence of their explosive tempers, Tennyson's Arthur fails in the concluding books of the *Idylls* to control the volatile passions of his Knights. (153)

The wild and emotional actions of these knights, however, also reflects the bestial violence of the world outside the court of Camelot. In "The Coming of Arthur" Tennyson describes a pre-Arthurian land and people "Wherein the beast was ever more and more" (line 11). The reference to beasts recalls "the beasts of battle" - the raven, eagle and wolf, who scavenge upon scenes of carnage and symbolize warfare - a common reference in Anglo-Saxon poetry (Magoun, Jr 83). Through using such language, Tennyson places the more savage aspects of his Arthurian world within the context of a much older English literary tradition.

The wilder aspects of Tennyson's *Idylls* draw upon the complex traditions and cultures of the Arthurian historical myths (Dalrymple 265). The literary Arthur first appears as a leader of battles around the year 828 in the *Historia Brittonum*, presiding over the slaughter of his enemies (Hutton 22). This bloodier Arthur is also found in later texts; he appears as a warlord in *The Mabinogion*, composed between



the twelfth or thirteenth centuries from earlier oral traditions (Hutton 23), and functions similarly in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* which was composed around 1136 by Geoffrey of Monmouth. He is frequently depicted as hunting ferocious wild boars in the French tradition of Arthurian romances (Hutton 23), while, in Book 1 of Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* (1485), the monarch, like King Herod, attempts to kill his illegitimate son Mordred by ordering that every newborn boy be slain. Mallory’s text states that “kyneg Arthure lette sende for all the children that were borne in May-day [...] And all were putte in a shyppe to the se; and som were four wekis olde and som lesse” (55). In the Arthurian literary tradition, Arthur inhabits the dual roles of hawk and dove, alternating in different texts between bloody warrior and pragmatic statesman.

The disastrous affair between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, which features in the “Guinevere” (1859) and “Lancelot and Elaine” (1859) sections of the *Idylls*, is also directly influenced by the earlier versions of the Arthurian myths. In “Lancelot and Elaine”, Tennyson presents their passion in earthy rather than spiritual terms, as Guinevere compares the Christian Arthur unfavorably to the more secular, fleshy passion of Lancelot:

He is all fault who hath no fault at all:  
For who loves me must have a touch of earth;  
The low sun makes the colour: I am yours,  
Not Arthur’s, as ye know, save by the bond.  
(lines 132-35)

Tennyson’s poem followed a period in which women’s roles in Victorian society had increasingly become defined by a strict set of androcentric criteria. In particular, Coventry Patmore’s hugely popular *The Angel in the House* (1854) had identified, in homage to Patmore’s own spouse, the perfect Christian wife as housebound and pious. Tennyson’s Queen Guinevere, however, fails to uphold these unrealistic Victorian male standards of purity. While Arthur’s pious condemnation of Guinevere’s behavior reflects nineteenth-century Christian values, Tennyson does not represent these ideas uncritically. As Stephen Ahern argues, “*The Idylls* candidly depicts the problems that result from subscribing to a model of feminine nature that pervaded Victorian thinking” (89). Instead, Guinevere’s passionate behavior reflects the earlier versions of the Arthurian myths such as Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*.

The contradictory nature of Tennyson’s *Idylls* is no paradox, therefore, if one places his Christian and Lamarckian beliefs within the greater perspective of the bloody Anglo-Saxon and medieval Arthurian tradition. Yet, as I shall discuss in the forthcoming section, Tennyson’s rendering of these tales, and their tonal juxtaposition with *In Memoriam A.H.H.* also reflects his later disillusionment with the evolutionary ideas put forward by Robert Chambers in *Vestiges*. As Holmes argues, “where in *In Memoriam* evolution at least offers a counterweight to extinction, from the 1860s Tennyson was increasingly disinclined to put his faith in a creative process that [...] looked more brutal and less purposive” (2017 340). *Idylls of the King* instead broadly reflects Tennyson’s engagement with the later evolutionary theories

of Charles Darwin.

### 5. *Idylls of the King* and Darwinian Evolution

Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* is not just a reworking of the Arthurian legend, Greco-Roman literature, or his earlier "Morte d'Arthur", also reacting to the darker implications of nineteenth-century evolution. This sees his epic poem conclude with a sense of disillusionment, Camelot's fall resembling humankind's failure to rise above its basic animalistic nature. The poem, and its contrast to *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, broadly reflects how the evolutionary zeitgeist had changed by the latter half of the nineteenth century. The primary influence upon this new direction in thought was Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin's *Origin* placed primary importance upon natural selection, seeing species survival as dependent upon competition, environment and chance occurrence rather than any providential cause. While Chambers and Lamarck saw life as analogous to a great chain of being, moving eternally upwards, Darwin explained evolutionary processes as akin to a series of competing branches upon a tree which were stretching out at various angles. In his famous "Tree of Life" passage from the *Origin*, Darwin detailed how surviving species had succeeded in a life or death struggle as the inheritors of a fortuitous and advantageous "divergence of character" (171). While they resembled "green and budding twigs" (171) upon the tree, branching outwards and upwards, the losers were instead represented as a branch that had "decayed and dropped off" (171-2).

The publication of the *Origin* in 1859 produced perhaps the greatest cultural cataclysm of the nineteenth century, founding an epistemological revolution (Holmes 2009 5). It profoundly impacted the humanities as well as science, and influenced a diverse series of cultural responses to the problems posed by the theory of natural selection. The different ideas discussed in George Meredith's *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1863) and Robert Browning's "Caliban Upon Setebos" (1864), for example, are directly traceable to Darwin's theory. Meredith's poetry rejoices in the vibrancy of the natural world as described by Darwin. His "The Lark Ascending" from *Poems and Lyrics* celebrates birdsong as a wonder of the corporeal rather than the spiritual world: "For singing till his heaven fills, / 'Tis love of earth that he instils" (lines 65-66). Browning's dramatic monologue, however, voiced by Shakespeare's Caliban from *The Tempest*, offers a poetic warning against evolutionary ideas. While Meredith's corporeal lark circles upwards, Caliban cowers in fear of what he imagines to be a brutish and arbitrary Setebos, muttering: "Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!" (line 135) Evolutionary thought, and specifically Darwinian theory, had broadly entered poetic discussion, while at the same time influencing a turn away from strictly devotional poetry.

Tennyson read the *Origin* in November 1859 with "intense interest" (Cited in Purton 49), and his *Idylls of the King* is part of a tradition of nineteenth-century poetry that reacted to Darwin's evolutionary ideas. The later published *Idylls*, for example, such as "The Coming of Arthur", "Pelleas and Ettarre" and "The Holy Grail" (1869) illustrate a pessimistic world view which can be attributed to Tennyson's reading of Darwin (Purton 53). Placing specific examples from the *Idylls* within a direct Darwinian context is

“Many a Beast Therein”: Christianity and Evolution in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and *Idylls of the King* problematic however. As I have already discussed, Tennyson demonstrated a vivid awareness of nature’s savagery prior to the *Origin*’s publication, his poetic speaker in Canto LVI of *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, describing it as “red in tooth and claw” (line 25). Further, the twelve connected poetic segments of the *Idylls* were not published in linear fashion, and it is unclear in what order the various parts from 1859 to 1885 were actually written (Pfordresher 193).

If we place the later published *Idylls*, however, within a broad Darwinian context they reflect “the struggle for life”, the title of the third chapter of *The Origin*. In these sections the gentle Christian values of Arthur and his court are contrasted by Tennyson’s use of bestial imagery which symbolizes the competitive violence of the world outside. This imagery is used in “The Coming of Arthur”, published in 1869, by which time Tennyson had definitely read Darwin’s *Origin* (Purton 53). King Arthur arrives as a much-needed hero into a wild and dangerous world:

And thus the land of Cameliard was waste,  
Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein,  
And none or few to scare or chase the beast;  
(lines 20-22).

As a personification of civilized, courtly values, Arthur appears symbolic of Tennyson’s wish in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* to see humankind “Move upward, working out the beast!” (line 27). At the same time, in the *Idylls* this teleological, utopian aim is contrasted and eventually thwarted by the savage bestiality of men. In “The Coming of Arthur” this darkness, “Wherein the beast was ever more and more” (line 11), is briefly chased away by the emergence of the king. At the same time, it is the continued prevalence of such wild forces which ultimately threaten the civilization of Arthur’s court. The fear of returning to a state of savagery therefore permeates Tennyson’s work. This concern leads Arthur’s men to swear the Pentecostal Oath and strive to adhere to The Order of The Round Table.

Yet Tennyson’s *Idylls* demonstrates an ironic juxtaposition where Arthur’s lofty aims at court are frequently undermined not just by the wild world outside but by the brutality of his knights. This presents, as Isobel Armstrong notes, “a society encumbered with custom and habit, struggling with a damaging mind/body split” (382). It also reflects Darwin’s *Origin*, and his descriptions of the way in which all species engage in “the battle of life” (171). This is evidenced in “The Last Tournament” (1872) section of the *Idylls*. The soon-to-be traitor Modred is spotted at the tournament appearing “like a vermin in its hole” (line 165) and Tennyson’s descriptions of Arthur’s knights at joust uses bestial imagery. Tristram wins the competition and is awarded a group of gems by a reluctant Lancelot, who questions his victory. Tristram, taking exception to Lancelot’s ungracious comments, remarks “wherefore toss me this / Like a dry bone cast to some hungry hound?” (lines 195-96). Those in the gallery who witness this unseemly exchange murmur, “‘All courtesy is dead,’ and one, / ‘The glory of our Round Table is no more’” (lines 211-12). The natural elements appear to confirm this mood, as heavy rain falls upon all. Arthur’s court here resembles the same wild and competitive order which exists outside the walls of Camelot, reminding us of the natural

state of things described in Darwin's *Origin*. As Gillian Beer observes, Tennyson was troubled by the way in which Darwin's theory emphasized "drive, deviance and the will to power. It is not a theory which readily accords with ideas of measure or reason" (115).

Tennyson's dismay at Darwin's theory of the natural world was particularly concerned with the way in which it rendered human sexual love as a selfish physical urge. Darwin outlined the sexual selection of species in detail in *The Descent of Man* (1871), famously describing, for example, the competitive nature of birds such as the "intense degree of rivalry between the males in their singing" (53). He also referred to sexual selection much earlier in the *Origin* (1859), equating it with natural selection. Here he defined it as a competitive process which possessed important implications for different species survival. While Darwin noted that sexual selection was "less rigid in its action than ordinary selection, as it does not entail death, but only gives fewer offspring to the less favoured males" he maintained that "sexual selection will have had a wide scope for action" (194). The significance of such natural forces in shaping and changing the world troubled Tennyson, who wrote in his memoirs that "the lavish profusion in the natural world appalls me, from the growths of the tropical forest, to the capacity of man to multiply, the torrent of babies" (Cited in Beer 115).

Darwin's influence upon Tennyson's engagement with these aspects is illustrated by the permissive behavior of Sir Gawain in "Pelleas and Ettarre" and "The Holy Grail" (1869). In these two sections, which were published a decade after the *Origin*, the sexually wanton and bestial Sir Gawain marks a significant departure from earlier representations. Indeed, he is notable for appearing across Middle English poetry in contrasting roles, Geoffrey of Monmouth first establishing the heroic and virtuous tradition of Sir Gawain (Dalrymple 267) that one later encounters in the late fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. In these earlier tales he enjoys an important position as one of Arthur's central knights, but by Tennyson's *Idylls* the image of Sir Gawain has suffered a fall in status. In "Pelleas and Ettarre", Gawain vows to aid Pelleas in winning the love of Ettarre, proclaiming, "here I pledge my troth, / Yea, by the honor of the Table Round" (lines 333-4). Despite swearing a vow upon Arthur's Round Table, however, his sexual desire for Ettarre overcomes his chivalric duty. Instead of being Pelleas' ally he becomes his sexual competitor. A shocked Pelleas encounters Gawain and Ettarre in bed together, Tennyson employing bestial, phallic metaphors as Pelleas retreats, "Back, as a hand that pushes through the leaf / To find a nest and feels a snake, he drew" (lines 427-8). Having been sexually outmaneuvered by Gawain, Pelleas goes mad and abandons Arthur's court.

Sir Gawain displays similarly wanton behavior in "The Holy Grail" section, which borrows little from Malory and appears to have been largely composed following an 1868 conversation between Darwin and Tennyson (Purton 58). Here Gawain becomes distracted from his quest to find the Grail, the pursuit of sexual pleasures replacing the high Christian values of Arthur. He is diverted by wine and women, or as he euphemistically describes it "holy virgins in their ecstasies" (line 864) and is later denounced by Sir Bedivere as "A reckless and irreverent knight" (line 853). While described as "Being too blind to have desire to see" (line 868), and scolded by Arthur, Gawain's wild behavior is also tolerated by the king. This means that the passive and forgiving Arthur contributes to the continuation of the

problem through his forbearance of his errant knight. Further, the Christian Arthur, through his naiveté in dealing with the wilder Gawain, Lancelot and others, ultimately dooms his Kingdom. The Christian ideals exemplified by Arthur are hence of little use when placed in this more natural, physical context, Tennyson illustrating the problem of reconciling high values with the reality of individual ambition and natural sexual desire.

While Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* concludes with the demise of Arthur, it also offers a redeeming image of rebirth. His optimistic treatment of the king’s death in “The Passing of Arthur” (1884), places it, and indeed mankind’s bestiality, within the context of a revivifying cycle of life. The final brighter lines of the *Idylls*, in which “the new sun rose bringing the new year” (line 469), reflect the influence of Tennyson’s much earlier composed, shorter work, “Morte d’Arthur”, which he began drafting in 1833 and published in 1842 (Pfordresher 202). Further, the draft of this more hopeful poem can be found in the same notebook as stanzas from *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (Rosenberg 147). In “Morte d’Arthur”, as the mortally wounded Arthur departs for Avalon, he tells a grieving Bedivere: “The old order changeth, yielding place to new, / And God fulfils Himself in many ways” (lines 240-41). These lines, which are also included in the later “The Passing of Arthur”, position the king’s death within a larger Christian context. Just as Excalibur is returned to The Lady of the Lake, so Arthur returns to God. At the same time, new generations are forecast to take Arthur’s place.

Although the hopeful ending of “The Passing of Arthur” appears to reflect Tennyson’s previously composed “Morte d’Arthur”, this mood is also undercut by a sense of pessimism that does not exist in his earlier poem or in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* When we examine the *Idylls* in its entirety, moreover, its numerous pessimistic aspects reflect the later, more secular influence of Darwin’s *Origin*. “The Passing of Arthur” signposts the return to a pre-Arthurian bestial state, and this circular aspect is signified by the way in which Arthur returns to die in a similar geographical location to the place of his birth. For the final battle against Sir Modred, Arthur’s army journeys into the West country of Britain to be confronted by an opaque and deadly mist. Tennyson’s speaker describes how “A deathwhite mist slept over land and sea” (line 95) filling Arthur’s army “With formless fear; and ev’n on Arthur fell / Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.” (lines 98-99). Lovelace notes that the mist is not found in Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and links it to Homer, and the scene from Book 17 of *The Iliad* where “the Achaïans fall victim to the slaughterous frenzy of Hector” (146). The mist, however, can also be seen as symbolic of natural chaos and the sense that kings, knights and men have been engulfed by wild elemental forces, rendering Christian words and values meaningless.

The “Passing of Arthur” reveals a series of dark images, connecting it to similar language found in “The Coming of Arthur”. In the final chapter, as Arthur sets off for the final battle he bemoans how his kingdom “Reels back into the beast, and is no more” (line 25). This prophecy appears to be confirmed when the world of Camelot fades, returning to the pre-Arthurian state found in “The Coming of Arthur” where the forests are roamed by “Many a beast therein” (line 21). While the *Idylls* - with its final depiction of the rising sun - concludes brightly, this reflects the much earlier composed “Morte d’Arthur” rather than the post-Darwinian period in which it was written. Nature is the chief antagonist in Tennyson’s poem,

directly threatening Christian civilized order. Mists of confusion, treacherous behavior, sexual competition and, most significantly, bestial imagery convey a chaotic natural state of being which is more indicative of Darwinian than Lamarckian evolution.

## 6. Conclusion

In 1892, two months after Tennyson's passing, *The Death of Oenone, Akbar's Dream, and Other Poems* was published. Included in his final selection of poetry was a short two stanza poem entitled "The Making of Man", in which Tennyson made a final attempt to accommodate the different evolutionary aspects which underscore *In Memoriam A.H.H* and *Idylls of the King*. In the first four line stanza Tennyson's speaker directly addresses the subject of humankind's wild and bestial nature, asking "Where is one that, born of woman, altogether can escape / From the lower world within him, moods of tiger, or of ape?" (lines 1-2). In the second stanza he attempts to reconcile his awareness of the human corporeal condition with an imagined progressive telos. Placing his hope upon a future human state of perfection, Tennyson's speaker dreams of an eventual time, waiting "Till the peoples all are one, and all their voices blend in choric / Hallelujah to the Maker 'It is finish'd. Man is made'" (lines 7-8). The speaker therefore imagines the termination of an evolutionary process in which humankind can finally – as described in Canto CXVIII of *In Memoriam A.H.H.* – "Move upward. Working out the beast" (line 27).

Yet for the aged Tennyson, living in a post-Darwinian time, this perfected state in "The Making of Man" appeared to exist as a fanciful hope, constructed as a defense against his unavoidable awareness of man's "lower world within him". Unlike the earlier *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Tennyson's answer to his poetic petition in his later poem illustrated how he had become less certain of the future than before. With no genuine answer to his enquiry at hand, and in the face of Darwinian reality, he was forced to create an imaginative solution to cling to. Here, therefore, humankind's 'working out the beast' carried less conviction than before. The belief in Lamarckian teleology which had brought Tennyson solace in *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, had by his final poems become more fanciful in tone. The darker mood of several of Tennyson's *Idylls* sections helps us to trace this downward trajectory. Ultimately, for the older Tennyson, the more savage, Darwinian aspects of human nature described in the *Idylls* could not be ignored due to containing "many a beast therein".

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