

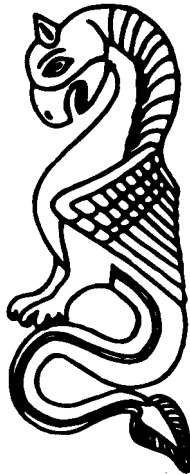
# Leeds Studies in English

**Article:**

W. Nash, 'Tennysonian Topography', *Leeds Studies in English*,  
n.s. 18 (1987), 55-69

**Permanent URL:**

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## TENNYSONIAN TOPOGRAPHY

the name  
Went wandering somewhere darkling in his mind.  
*The Last Tournament*

W. NASH

In all the length and breadth of the *Idylls of the King*<sup>1</sup> - that great serial poem, the much-laboured, little-loved, often lovely, sometimes lamentable work that occupied most of Tennyson's creative life - there are surprisingly few place-names. Here is a Britain of uncertain date, a Victorian-Celtico-Tudoresque realm. Here be adventures. Here are tales of unremitting restlessness, in which people are ever setting spur to steed, riding on quests, succouring damsels, cheering churls, tilting in tournaments, getting lost, getting found, committing adultery, murder, treason, pitting themselves against each other and against the hordes of brute barbarism; and the map of all this activity is strangely blank. Camelot - Caerleon - Astolat - Tintagel - Lyonesse - the names that plot or pinpoint the action of the poem are few indeed.

So different, in this respect, is Tennyson's major source, Malory. Malory's text abounds in names, sometimes confusingly; when he cannot discover one, he invents one; he has an onomastic passion that might recommend him to the president of a learned society. He does not allow his readers to languish in the yearning for exactitude that has set some scholars pointlessly searching for Arthurian locations. He confidently identifies Camelot with Winchester, and Astolat with Guildford. He makes London, as much as Camelot, a centre of critical events. (Riding to rescue Guinevere, Lancelot takes to the water at Westminster Bridge and makes his horse "swymme over the Temmys unto Lambyth"<sup>2</sup>.) Where the French romancers report in general terms the arrival of the conquering Arthur in "la Grant Bretagne", Malory documents the port of entry as Dover. He is always the realist, but judicious in his realism, willing to distinguish knowledge from hearsay. Of Joyous Garde he observes that "Somme men say it was Anwyk, somme men say it was Bamborow"; and of Lancelot's native region of Benwick - reached unmysteriously, in the normal way of commercial traffic, by ship from Cardiff - he reports that "som men calle hit Bayan" (Bayonne) "and some men calle hit Beawme" (Beaune) "where the wyne of Beawme ys". He is also as precise as a man can be without benefit of grid-references. The stronghold in which Sir Mellyagaunt holds Guinevere prisoner is described as "a castell of the gyfte of King Arthure within seven myle of Westemynster"; and when Merlin meets King Uther at "the castel of Terrabyll" (in the French sources,

Tarabel), he helpfully informs him that "the castel of Tyntygaill" (Tintagel) "is but ten myles hens". Malory, in short, tries by all realistic means to put a recognizable Realm of Arthur on to the map.

Whether he actually regarded himself as a chronicler of historical fact, or whether this was simply the narrative posture he found most effective and convenient to adopt, there can be no doubt of his intention to present "real" people living and acting in "real" places. Eugene Vinaver notes:

M[alory]'s tendency to localize the story and to refer the place-names he found in his source to real places is noticeable throughout . . . , and it has the effect, which he no doubt desired to achieve, of transferring the action from the vague fairyland of romance to a precise and familiar geographical setting.<sup>3</sup>

This is admirably observed, and in making the right point about Malory's abundant concern for names and topographical references, it invites a corresponding observation about the apparent paucity of these things in Tennyson's *Arthuriad*: there, the aim is clearly not to establish "a precise and familiar geographical setting", but rather to transfer the action *back* to "the vague fairyland of romance", or perhaps to a vague hinterland of the symbolism described by Tennyson as a "parabolic drift".<sup>4</sup> Not for him the posture of chronicler; he thought of his tales of ancient time as raising timeless concerns - civilization, mind, order, control, the haplessly chaotic struggle against chaos. Possibly there was more to be learned about these things in fairyland than from the charts of reality. He studied other authors than Malory; he was deeply read in Spenser; he knew the *Mabinogion*; and even in Malory himself he could hardly fail to find intimations of myth and magic, rumours of an old symbolic order under the tidied and tabarded histories. His concern with place was a poet's concern with tropes, and with a form of symbolism; not *toponymic*, therefore, so much as *topothetic*.

Topothesia, a standard device in classical and mediaeval literary rhetoric, attaches to places in narrative a significance that goes beyond simple location.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, location in the cartographer's sense of the word is barely relevant. Topothesia assigns a *setting*, and the setting may have a general symbolic significance (the castle, the cave, the clearing in the forest), or a structural significance in the design of the narrative (the humble cottage versus the lordly mansion), or, less powerfully, a conventional significance as a kind of iconographic punctuation (after the wild wood comes the tower of the temptress, and the perilous ocean yields to the enchanted isle). Now topothetic passages are frequent in *Idylls of the King*, and are generally linked to the rudimentary schemes of "oppositive" symbolism with which Tennyson invests his sequence of poems (sun-moon, day-night, land-sea, field-forest, man-beast, music-speech, nearness-farness, &c). That such passages are often free from toponymic reference is

hardly surprising; identifiable locations in "real" domains resist the free play and free trade of fantasy - the more mapping the less mumming, so to speak. Nevertheless, it is hardly possible for Tennyson to exercise his toponymic invention without an occasional gesture towards toponymy. To frame the narrative, some outline of Arthur's realm has to be sketched, however perfunctorily, with a few names for the reader to take as signposts of a sort; then there are the more important habitations of the action - Camelot, the castles; then at last there are the badlands and the bogeylands and the barrenlands, where names are dangerous and big images rule the roost. For anyone interested in the poetic process, here is a fascinating gradation, from naming to half-naming and so into the escape from naming.

*Names in the realm*

At the end of *The Coming of Arthur*, Tennyson declares that his hero, having overcome the heathen in twelve great battles, "made a realm and reigned". It would actually be rather hard for anyone unprimed in Arthurian matters to deduce, from the remaining *Idylls*, the shape and constituency of this realm. One of the few passages of composite topography occurs in *The Coming of Arthur* itself, where Tennyson lists the petty kings and kingdoms banded against Arthur, and overthrown by him in his grand exercise of military pacification:

And leading all his knighthood threw the kings  
Carados, Urien, Cradlemont of Wales,  
Claudias, and Clariance of Northumberland,  
The King Brandagoras of Latangor,  
With Anguisant of Erin, Morganor,  
And Lot of Orkney. (CA 110-15)

This of course is a conventional *topos* of a kind found in classical poetry, in mediaeval romance, in Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton: the list of heroes, chiefs, territories, battles. Tennyson's essay in the device is interesting for two reasons. First, we can compare it with his source, Malory, and note how he has made phonaesthetic adjustments to please his own ear. The origin of the passage is the first book of Malory's *Tale of King Arthur*, where we find *Claudas* (who becomes "Claudias"), *Uryens* (changed to "Urien"), and, for "Cradlemont", *Cradilmans*, *Cradilmente*, or *Cradilmante* (also known as *Cardilmans*, alias *Cradulmas*; in the French romances, *Tradelinant*, *Tradelmant*, *Tradelmans*, *Tradelmas*). "Clariance of Northumberland" first appears in Malory as *Clarivaus*, then as *Clarivauns* or *Clarivaunce*, then finally in the form adopted by Tennyson, *Claryauunce*. The name Anguisant is another piece of Tennysonian remodelling. He is the subject of more spelling variants than practically any other personage in Malory - *Angwysshauns*, *Angwysshaunce*, *Angwysauns*, *Anguysauns*, *Agwysaunce*, *Angwyshe*, inter alia - but never figures in the form Anguisant. Possibly the change of his name's final consonant from a fricative [s] to an alveolar stop [t] was motivated by the impulse of the

alveolar consonants [d], [t], in the preceding line, "The King Brandagoras of Latangor". That particular line constitutes the boldest stroke of invention, phonaesthetic and semiotic, in the whole passage. This Disneyland despot, The King Brandagoras - the definite article is a shrewd touch - figures in Malory as *Brandegoris*, or *Brandygoris*, or *Brangoris*, *King of Strangore* (in French, "de la Terre d' Estrogoire"). "Latangore" is entirely of Tennyson's invention. It chimes with *Morganore* (in line 114); it is rhythmically interesting; most important of all, it manifests, in combination with *Brandagoras*, those sonorities of open back vowels, nasal consonants, and approximants ([r], [l]), which Tennyson found particularly attractive. The list of chiefs thus becomes, in part, an exercise in rhythms and sonorities.

It is also in part a semiotic exercise, and here is its other point of source-exploiting interest. The domains of these petty rulers are to become the under-kingdoms of the great Arthurian empire; therefore in naming them, we name much of the realm. Once more, Tennyson adjusts Malory, in whose text *Cradilmans* is King of North Wales, *Angwyssshauns* is "of Irlonde" (the name *Erin* does not occur in Malory), and *Lot* (OFr. *Loth*) is the eponymous ruler of Lothian and Orkney. Uryens, we learn is king "of the land of Goore" (a phrase which may have given Tennyson his hint for *Latangor*), and also numbered among the insurgent kings is one "Idres of Cornuaille". In Tennyson, this list is adroitly shortened and simplified. *Cradlemont* is given a much bigger kingdom; *Anguisant* is given a realm with a more romantic sound (at least to ears trained in Victorian parlour balladry); and *Lot's* portion in Lothian is ignored. J.M. Gray comments ingeniously on the allusion to *Lot* and his modified kingdom:

. . . it is at the end of a geographical progression outwards in being at the very periphery, Orkney, suggesting that the weight and scope of opposition to Arthur is almost total . . . If Tennyson in a note said 'The kingdom of Orkney and Lothian composed the North and East of Scotland', he nonetheless knew the reader would take the modern sense first, a few scattered islands north of the Scottish mainland.<sup>6</sup>

Gray is probably right here; Tennyson - especially in the *Idylls* - is an adept in the art of eating an ancient phrase and having a modern meaning. He certainly knows that the reader will "take the modern sense" of Northumberland and Wales, will take the romantic sense of *Erin*, will take the distant sense of Orkney, and will take the grave nonsense of *Latangor* - just such a name as might, in latter days, have denoted some fearful fief in Professor Tolkien's Middle-Earth. This is the realm of the *Idylls*. Somewhere west by south-west is sea-girt *Lyonesse*, and somewhere on the fairyland compass is Camelot.

*Camelot as topos*

In the rhetoric of the *Idylls*, Camelot is a topos. It is the place of places, the ethical and aesthetic centre of things. All other places are implicitly or explicitly compared with it; and the concrete imagery of its architecture and decoration becomes the ideational imagery of the poetic cycle. It is Merlin's artefact, a city built to music, with music's elusive interplay of substance and idea. Merlin tells the young Gareth:

And Fairy Queens have built the city, son;  
They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft  
Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand,  
And built it to the music of their harps.  
And, as thou sayest, it is enchanted, son,  
For there is nothing in it as it seems  
Saving the King; though some there be that hold  
The King a shadow, and the city real:  
.....  
For an ye heard a music, like enow  
They are building still, seeing the city is built  
To music, therefore never built at all,  
And therefore built for ever. (GL 255-62, 271-4)

"Therefore never built at all and therefore built for ever" - this is certainly not Winchester. The theme of music, song, harmony, as something that unifies, something expressive of joy and creativeness, something controlled by an inner order, and something ultimately fugitive and intangible, is one of the master-symbols of the *Idylls*, and it has its root in the topos of Camelot.

Camelot therefore cannot be located. It is the place that never was and always is, a concept, an intuition, a moral sense. Tennyson, however, gets trapped in his own paradox; there are times when this numinous place has to be realistically represented. That is why, in the *Idylls*, there are two ways of looking at Camelot: from within the gates, when it has a quaint and corbelled concreteness, and from without, when it is much less solidly Victorian-antique and much more like the hallucinations of mediaeval magic or modern narcosis. Camelot-within-the-gates is described by Sir Percevale, in *The Holy Grail*:

O brother, had you known our Camelot  
Built by old kings, age after age, so old  
The King himself had fears that it would fall,  
So strange, and rich, and dim; for where the roofs  
Tottered toward each other in the sky,  
Met foreheads all along the street of those  
Who watched us pass; and lower, where the long  
Rich galleries, lady-laden, weighed the necks  
Of dragons clinging to the crazy walls,  
Thicker than drops from thunder, showers of flowers  
Fell as we past; and men and boys astride  
On wyvern, lion, dragon, griffin, swan,

At all the corners, named us each by name . . .  
(HG 339-51)

Here we have seemingly forgotten the work of the Fairy Queens, and the city that is always a-building; this Camelot is the creation of "old kings", and is evidently in need of a competent Clerk of Works. It is hard to escape the suspicion that its ornate fancies represent Tennyson's own architectural tastes. R.B. Martin, describing the house the Laureate built at Aldworth in Sussex, writes:

. . . it would be difficult to imagine an architectural style less suited to the simple heath and expansive view than the hard-edged, elaborate carving of the crockets, pinnacles, and arches of the house that Knowles designed . . . There were emblazoned shields on the windows, a motto cut into the stone of the cornice under the roof, corbels, arcades, parapets, heraldic beasts and birds . . . It was as if Tennyson were trying to demonstrate how a country house should be built.

Professor Martin quotes a guide to Sussex which describes Aldworth (now in commercial hands) as "a fussy small hotel half-way between the French and English C16 style". That would be a devastatingly accurate characterization of the gadzookery and joyaunce of the *Idylls*, in those passages where Tennyson attempts to depict or evoke the substance of the chivalric world.

The "interior" account of Camelot includes a representation of Arthur's hall, the crown of the whole civic edifice:

O brother, had you known our mighty hall,  
Which Merlin built for Arthur long ago!  
For all the sacred mount of Camelot,  
And all the dim rich city, roof by roof,  
Tower after tower, spire beyond spire,  
By grove, and garden-lawn, and rushing brook,  
Climbs to the mighty hall that Merlin built,  
And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt  
With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall;  
And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,  
And in the second men are slaying beasts,  
And on the third are warriors, perfect men,  
And on the fourth are men with growing wings,  
And over all one statue in the mould  
Of Arthur . . . (HG 225-39)

The streets of the city may ramble crazily, but here all is parabolic symmetry. This continues in the description of the hall's interior:

And, brother, had you known our hall within,  
Broader and higher than any in all the lands!

Where twelve great windows blazon Arthur's wars,  
And all the light that falls upon the board  
Streams through the twelve great battles of our King.  
Nay, one there is, and at the eastern end,  
Wealthy with wandering lines of mount and mere,  
Where Arthur finds the brand Excalibur,  
And also one to the west, and counter to it,  
And blank; and who shall blazon it? when and how? -  
O there, perchance, when all our wars are done,  
The brand Excalibur will be cast away. (HG 246-57)

The answer to Percevale's question, "who shall blazon it? when and how?", is, of course, "Alfred Tennyson, in *The Passing of Arthur*". The poet's own presence intentionally shadows the text, with this artful reminder that he has begun the symbols of Camelot, and he will complete the pattern.

Camelot-without-the-gates is much less solid and programmatic. The gate itself, to be sure, is as busily and betokeningly decorated as the exterior of the great hall. Thus, in *Gareth and Lynette*:

For barefoot on the keystone, which was lined  
And rippled like an ever-floating wave,  
The Lady of the Lake stood; all her dress  
Wept from her sides as water flowing away;  
But like the cross her great and goodly arms  
Stretched under all the cornice and upheld:  
And drops of water fell from either hand;  
And down from one a sword was hung, from one  
A censer, either worn with wind and storm;  
And o'er her breast floated the sacred fish;  
And in the space to the left of her, and right,  
Were Arthur's wars in weird devices done,  
New things and old co-twisted, as if Time  
Were nothing, so inveterately, that men  
Were giddy gazing there; and over all  
High on the top were those three Queens, the friends  
Of Arthur, who should help him at his need.

Then those with Gareth for so long a space  
Stared at the figures, that at last it seemed  
The dragon-boughts and elvish emblemings  
Began to move, seethe, twine and curl: they called  
To Gareth, 'Lord, the gateway is alive'. (GL 210-31)

"New things and old co-twisted, as if Time were nothing", might be read as a declaration of stylistic intent for the *Idylls* themselves. As for the description of the gate, it begins with dutiful invocations of Christian imagery ("like a cross", "the sacred fish"), but ends in fairyland, with "the dragon-boughts and elvish emblemings". And with that the city is no longer solid-seeming. "The gateway is alive"; and seen from a distance, the entire fabric seems shifty and evanescent. So Gareth and his companions first see it:



Far off they saw the silver-misty morn  
Rolling her smoke about the Royal mount,  
That rose between the forest and the field.  
At times the summit of the high city flashed;  
At times the spires and turrets half-way down  
Pricked through the mist; at times the great gate shone  
Only, that opened on the field below;  
Anon, the whole fair city disappeared. (GL 187-93)

This is not the cartographer's Camelot, nor yet the architect's, nor the set-designer's; this is the Camelot of poetic fable, wrapped in mist, as Arthur's legend is wrapped in mist, as the last battle of all will be fought in the daylong mist. Tennyson repeatedly calls his capital "the dim rich city"; and also, lifting an epithet from Milton, "the slope city", with reference to its prominent position on a steep hill. Of this city his characters have different visions. It appears in hallucination to Sir Percevale, on the Grail quest:

And I rode on and found a mighty hill,  
And on the top a city walled; the spires  
Pricked with incredible pinnacles into heaven. (HG 421-3)

For Percevale, the vision is not only "incredible", but also insubstantial; it dissolves in a moment. For Sir Pelleas, betrayed by Gawain and the Lady Etarre, the sight of Camelot on its hill is all too hatefully solid:

but when he saw  
High up in heaven the hall that Merlin built,  
Blackening against the dead-green stripes of even,  
'Black nest of rats', he groaned, 'ye build too high'.  
(PE 541-4)

Music; mist; enchanted; sacred mount; black nest of rats; these are the poetic appellations, the periphrases, the metonymies of Camelot.

#### *Towers, and toponymic counterparts*

The towers of Camelot are not the only castellations in the *Idylls*. Other habitations are found here and there in the epic landscape, and some of these are named; for example, Astolat, which Tennyson at one time had called Shalott, following an Italian novella relating how *la Damigella di Scalot morì per amore di Lancialotto de Lac*; <sup>8</sup> and Carbonek, the Grail castle, in Malory called Corbenic, or Pounte de Corbyn, the description of which, in *The Holy Grail* 810-37, closely follows Malory, though the latter's account is in this instance much more mysterious and unearthly.

In two of his *Idylls*, Tennyson makes castles or halls into toponymic counterparts, and hence into contrasting or complementary emblems; interestingly enough, though perhaps coincidentally, in each case one of the counterparts is named and the other remains

nameless. This is clearly marked in the first of the two examples, where one of the halls is Camelot itself, centre of civilized values, and the other an anti-habitation, emblematic of barbarity. The contrast is the iconographic nucleus of the poem *Balin and Balan*, in which Sir Balin, a disturbed and ferocious personality, is driven to distraction by his discovery of Guinevere's adulterous love for Lancelot. He rides furiously away, deep into the forest, not stopping until

the castle of a King, the hall  
Of Pellam, lichen-bearded, grayly draped  
With streaming grass appeared, low-built but strong,  
The ruinous donjon as a knoll of moss,  
The battlement overtopped with ivytods,  
A home of bats, in every tower an owl. (BB 325-31)

There is a cunning touch of Tennyson here in *ivytods*, a rhythmic and consonantal reflection of "overtopped", and a literary borrowing, caught in the first instance from *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* and the Hermit's description of

Brown skeletons of leaves that lag  
My forest-brook along:  
When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,  
And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,  
That eats the she-wolf's young.

This word alone helps to fix the passage in the mind; it assumes something like the function of a name.

The low-built, overgrown house - the description of which, in "lichen-bearded" and "grayly draped", curiously suggests the personality of its master - is less like a hall than the dray or warren of some woodland animal. It has been described, earlier in the poem, by Arthur's ambassadors, as "bushed about with gloom". This sombre place invites obvious contrast with lofty, light-aureoled Camelot. Pellam's castle, though strongly built, is a prisoner of its setting, besieged by a disorderly nature, to which it has been passively surrendered; the "mount of Camelot", on the other hand, towers up in earnest of Arthur's benign empire, and with its "four great zones of sculpture" expresses the ascendancy of Man over Nature, humanity's rise out of feral savagery.

The interior of Pellam's hall is a dark hollow scarcely resisting the ingressive melancholy of the wild wood that crawls and sprawls outside. Tennyson describes how Sir Balin

found the greetings both of knight and King  
Faint in the low dark hall of banquet; leaves  
Laid their green faces flat against the panes,  
Sprays grated, and the canker'd boughs without  
Whined in the wood; for all was hush'd within . . .  
(BB 337-41)

Balin's reception in this "low dark" place contrasts pointedly with his earlier welcome in the high hall of Camelot:

With joy that blazed itself in woodland wealth  
Of leaf, and gayest garlandage of flowers,  
Along the walls and down the board; they sat,  
And cup clash'd cup; they drank and some one sang,  
Sweet-voiced, a song of welcome, whereupon  
Their common shout in chorus, mounting, made  
Those banners of twelve battles overhead  
Stir . . .

(BB 79-87)

Here are marked topos contrasts: wholesome nature - "gayest garlandage of flowers" - versus nature sinister and sick - "the canker'd boughs without"; the "faint greetings" of knight and King versus the "common shout in chorus"; and most significant of all, the opposition of "sweet-voiced" song and the disaffected wilderness's grating and whining. The music of Camelot is not heard in this place, for this nameless "donjon" is Camelot's anti-topic.

The other instance of a topos contrast is no less powerful, and no less central to the poem in which it occurs, *The Last Tournament*. In this poem, Tennyson's version of the Tristram story, Sir Tristram is a recreant knight, one of the new order whose cynical rejection of old notions of chivalric honour both heralds and symbolizes the fall of Camelot. Tristram's counterpart is the renegade Sir Pelleas, the quondam idealist who, driven to despair by the caprice of a vicious woman (Etarre) and the opportunism of a corrupted man (Gawain), has denounced Camelot as an edifice of lewd hypocrisy, and has fled into exile to establish his own frankly bestial counter-court "in the North". He is never mentioned by name in *The Last Tournament*, where he is called only "the Red Knight".

The Red Knight's open challenge to the power of Camelot forces Arthur to undertake a punitive expedition. The *Idyll* describes how the King, with a hundred men,

Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,  
And many a glancing splash and sallowy isle,  
The wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh  
Glared on a huge machicolated tower  
That stood with open doors, whereout was rolled  
A roar of riot . . .

(LT 420-25)

This passage, and the scene that follows, has been the object of some adverse criticism, mainly on the grounds of topographic vagueness - which seems an unreasonable, and indeed misguided objection. It would be a stern judge indeed who would refuse to acknowledge the power of Tennysonian artifice here. The sense of marshiness that the first two lines convey is created by phonetic suggestion rather than visual image. Vague generalized indications of reeds and sallows could not of themselves account for the sensory conviction of these lines, in which the moist earth squelches under the

traversing hooves. And then comes the word *machicolated*, as one of those "opaque" lexical items which Tennyson so often uses to engage and distract his readers; such words create their own strenuous impressions, and at the same time divert attention from some contextual piece of legerdemain. In this case, the trick in the background is making the resplendent lyric image, "the wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh" the subject of the verb "glared". The result is a personifying illusion, suggesting the terrible frowning presence of some red angel presiding over the lawless marsh; but *machicolated* takes attention away while the illusion is worked.

While the tower in the North is under assault, Sir Tristram rides to the south and westward, deep into the woods of Lyonesse, until he reaches

Tintagil, half in sea and high on land,  
A crown of towers. (LT 504-5)

There, the description continues,

Down in a casement sat,  
A low sea-sunset glorying round her hair  
And glossy-throated grace, Isolt the Queen.  
And when she heard the feet of Tristram grind  
The spiring stone that scaled about her tower,  
Flushed, started, met him at the doors, and there  
Belted his body with her white embrace . . . (LT 505-11)

The last line is perhaps one of Tennyson's less successful *tours de force*; but it reminds us, at least, that *this* tower's occupant also has a symbolic colour. This is Isolt the White, a figure no less fatal than the Red Knight. Other lexical details prompt comparison with the "tower in the North". There, the "wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh" *glared* on the tower; here, the "low sea-sunset" is described as *glorying* (ie. "with glory" and "like a *gloria*, or halo") round the hair of Isolt, the tower's occupant. Here, too, a tricky lexis permits the formation of latent images; *scaled*, for example - at one level merely a synonym for *climb*, phonaesthetically dictated by the running consonantal/alliterative pattern of "Tristram" - "spiring" - "stone" - "scaled" - "started" - is at another level an ambivalent word, suggesting that the tower is "scaled", like some petrified dragon or sea-beast, by the investing stone. So often in Tennyson, what his words put into play is not so much a type of ambiguity or ambivalence, as the shiftiness of a wayward insight tugging against an overt intent. This deceptiveness in his diction corresponds well with Valerie Pitt's astute observation that: "There is a constant play between Tennyson's apprehensions of the shifting world of sense, and the symbols in which he has defined and crystallized his meditations on that world."<sup>9</sup> In the shifting world of Idyllic sense, people and places may not only lose their names, but also their natures as human identities or habitations; they are transformed, and become images of the wild.

*The wild wood and the bad places*

The mount of Camelot stands "between the forest and the field", in accordance with the general symbolism of the *Idylls*, in which mountains are for visions and endeavours, fields for dutiful human ordinariness, and the forest or the desert for peril, misadventure, anarchy, madness. When Balin and Pelleas go mad, they take the wilderness road. The dissident Tristram is called by Tennyson "Sir Tristram of the Woods" - as though to emphasize his apostasy from the values of the urban court - and indeed characterizes himself as "woodman of the woods".

The wilderness is overwhelmingly a place of horror and nightmare. Even when the narrative accommodates a "good place", a *locus amoenus*, in the tradition of mediaeval romance, the amenity is sinister, foreboding some unpleasant turn of events. So Pelleas, riding "at noon . . . across the forest called of Dean", is almost overcome by the heat -

but saw  
Near him a mound of even-sloping side,  
Whereon a hundred stately beeches grew,  
And here and there great hollies under them;  
But for a mile all round was open space,  
And fern and heath; and slowly Pelleas drew  
To that dim day, then binding his good horse  
To a tree, cast himself down; and as he lay  
At random looking over the brown earth  
Through the green-glooming twilight of the grove,  
It seemed to Pelleas that the fern without  
Burnt as a living fire of emeralds,  
So that his eyes dazzled looking at it. (PE 23-35)

Here is a demonstration of a classic theme - a shady place in a "mixed" forest (convention demands the naming of more than one kind of tree) where the weary knight may take his rest. But the "dazzle" of those closing lines is the glitter of a fatal hallucination; the lady Etarre is about to appear, to set in train the events leading to Pelleas's humiliation, madness, mutiny and death.

It is easy enough to see why the wilderness lacks good places. The good place is Camelot, and only Camelot; to leave Camelot is to forsake the human good place and run into the bad place of nightmare. Balin and Balan illustrates this pointedly. The garden in which Balin, an unlucky eavesdropper, discovers the truth about Lancelot and Guinevere, is another model of the *locus amoenus*:

A walk of roses ran from door to door;  
A walk of lilies crost it to the bower; (BB 237-8)

The symmetry, the symbolic dialogue of rose and lily, might be recognized and approved by any romancer. From this, Balin flees to the forest, to Pellam's castle, so consumed with rage that he does not see

on his right a cavern-chasm  
Yawn over darkness, where, nor far within,  
The whole day died, but, dying, gleamed on rocks  
Roof-pendent, sharp; and others from the floor,  
Tusklike arising, made that mouth of night  
Wherout the Demon issued up from Hell. (BB 307-12)

The contrast of *locus amoenus* and *locus malus* is pointed in the rival symmetries - the crossing walks of rose and lily, the opposed "tusks" of rock in the roof and floor of the cave. Behind the topothesia lurks a narrative theme: Balin, unintentionally eavesdropping in the garden, hears something he does not want to hear - and then, in his journey into the wild, passes, without noting it, the semblance of an evil mouth. It is of no poetic consequence that this cave is nameless; the description itself is a name for a notion (gossip, slander, the wicked tongue) that informs much of the poem.

The ultimate Good Place is "the island-valley of Avilion" -

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawn  
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea . . .  
(PA 427-31)

But this is outside the realm of the *Idylls*. To reach it, Arthur must fight one more battle. The "twelve great battles" fought to make the realm are named by Tennyson, in *Lancelot and Elaine* (284-305).<sup>10</sup> The last battle, however, the long fight in the mist, is nameless; it takes place on the last day of the year, in some unspecified place. We may compare this haunted uncertainty with the businesslike realism of Malory, who describes the battle as taking place "uppon a downe bysyde Salysbyry and nat farre from the seesyde", on "the Monday aftir Trynyte Sunday".<sup>11</sup> In Tennyson's narrative the blind mist and the dying year have a significance that transcends the realism of locations and dates. Similarly, it is symbolic topothesia, not realistic topography, that motivates the description of the place where Arthur is carried by Bedivere:

a chapel nigh the field,  
A broken chancel with a broken cross,  
That stood on a dark strait of barren land:  
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one  
Lay a great water, and the moon was full. (PA 177-80)

The symbolic purport of the place is marked for the reader by the words *the moon was full* - one of the *Leitmotif* phrases of the *Idylls*, connecting this passage with the description of the Grail castle, Carbonek:<sup>12</sup>

A castle like a rock upon a rock,  
With chasm-like portals open to the sea,  
And steps that met the breaker! there was none

Stood near it but a lion on each side  
That kept the entry, and the moon was full. (HG 811-15)

The passages mark theme and counter-theme: a *castle like a rock upon a rock* and a *broken chancel with a broken cross*. They each have verbal and figurative connections with *The Coming of Arthur*; the extract from *The Passing of Arthur*, in particular, recalls the settings and imagery of Arthur's personal myth - the mysterious coming of the child from the sea, in "the night of the new year", the dragon ship that brings him, the sword that comes from the enchanted mere (the "great water") and must be returned to it. Arthur has come full circle; the place where this happens is not a map-location, not a real place, with such a name as might "cleave to cairn or cromlech", but a terminus in a mythical, psychological, iconographic journey.

\* \* \* \* \*

There is no part of speech more limited and concrete in reference than the proper noun. A name exclusively denotes, and in doing so excludes the mysteries and multiplicities of association; as Malory well knew, there is nothing so effective as a personal name or a place-name if one's wish is to promote the illusion of a factual chronicle. For this reason, the proper noun is *per se* antipoetic, or at least poetically neutral. Names, however, can be *poeticized*, through their inclusion in phonaesthetic patterns, their incorporation in the rhetoric of lists, or by endowing them with connotations which will irradiate any context in which they occur. In each of these arts, Tennyson is adept. His clear purpose in *Idylls of the King*, however, is to escape from name into image into symbol into myth - into that state in which names cease to typify the landscape, and the landscape itself typifies a realm of feeling. That is why the topography of these poems is not a gazetteer topography, as Malory's sometimes affects to be. With Tennyson, toposhesia is a game of symbols; and the terrain of his *Idylls* might be described in the words of a character in the *Mabinogion*, who says to Geraint, son of Erbin:

Down below there is a hedge of mist, and within it  
there are enchanted games, and every man that has gone  
thither has never come back.<sup>14</sup>

This is a warning to literary critics; linguists have passport rights; and onomasticians, of course, may come and go as they please.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All references to the *Idylls* are cited from the text printed in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1969). Abbreviations: CA = *The Coming of Arthur*; GL = *Gareth and Lynette*; HG = *The Holy Grail*; BB = *Balin and Balan*; PE = *Pelleas and Etarre*; LT = *The Last Tournament*; PA = *The Passing of Arthur*.
- <sup>2</sup> All references to Malory are cited from *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 3 vols. (2nd ed., Oxford, 1967).
- <sup>3</sup> Ed.cit., pp.1333-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: a Memoir*, 2 vols. (London, 1897) II, p.126.
- <sup>5</sup> On toposhesia and kindred themes see E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London, 1953) ch.10, "The Ideal Landscape".
- <sup>6</sup> J.M. Gray, *Serialism in the Idylls: Lists* (Lincoln, 1974) pp.8-9.
- <sup>7</sup> R.B. Martin, *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (Oxford, 1980) pp.473-4.
- <sup>9</sup> See Hallam, Lord Tennyson, *Materials for a Life of Alfred Tennyson* (privately printed, no date) IV, p.461: "The following is the Italian novella on which *The Lady of Shalott* was founded: Novella LXXXI *Qui conta come la Damigella di Scalot morì per amore di Lancialotto de Lac*. From the *Cento Novelle Antiche* dated conjecturally before 1321. Text from the Milan edn, ed. G. Ferrano, 1804".
- <sup>9</sup> Valerie Pitt, *Tennyson Laureate* (London, 1962) p.46.
- <sup>10</sup> Tennyson took the names of the battles from Nennius, but remodelled the list a little, after his own poetic fashion. See J.M. Gray, *Thro' the Vision of the Night. A Study of Source, Evolution and Structure in Tennyson's Idylls of the King* (Edinburgh, 1980) pp.48-51.
- <sup>11</sup> On Tennyson's re-working of Malory in the account of the last battle, see W. Nash, "Tennyson: 'The Epic' and the Old 'Morte'", *The Cambridge Quarterly* 6 (1975) pp.326-49.
- <sup>12</sup> The phrase *the moon was full* is adapted from Malory's "and the moone shone ryght clere". This is in the description of the Grail Castle; no such phrase occurs in Malory's account of the last battle.
- <sup>13</sup> See the epilogue poem, "To the Queen", in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed.cit., pp.1755-6, lines 35-41.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted from *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949; repr. 1970) p.270. Tennyson made considerable use of the *Mabinogion*, in Lady Charlotte Guest's annotated translation (1849).