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THE IDEA OF MORTALITY IN TENNYSON'S CLASSICAL AND ARTHURIAN POEMS: "HONOR COMES WITH MYSTERY"

GERHARD JOSEPH

Two of Alfred Tennyson's early poems, "Nothing Will Die" and "All Things Will Die," open in their very titles the dialogue of contrary voices that was to express one of his obsessive themes—the tragic inevitability of change and human mortality. Throughout his work he was hypersensitive to the possibility that a meaningless decay might be the essential principle of the cosmos. The oft-cited Tennysonian "passion of the past," the desire to fix in art moments of departed joy, arose from a need both to deny and pay a grudging heed to ineluctable change. Such moving lyrics as "Tears, Idle Tears" and "Break, Break, Break" capture the lacrimae rerum which the memory of days that are no more could make rise in the heart and gather to the eyes of the poet. But it was the most crushing personal instances of mutability—the death of a father, a friend, or a son—that could transform a free-floating, habitual melancholy into the intense and all-inclusive mourning of works like In Memoriam and "Demeter and Persephone." An apocalyptic running down of "all things" was the soft dirge that Tennyson's priestess Sorrow could hear echoing out from the death of Arthur Hallam to the extinction of the human race and to the final wasting of the earth itself.

"The stars," she whispers, "blindly run;
A web is woven across the sky;
From out waste places comes a cry,
And murmurs from the dying sun"

[In Memoriam, Vs. III].

1 All quotations from Tennyson's poetry, unless otherwise noted are taken from The Poetic and Dramatic Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. W. J. Rolfe (Boston, 1898).

[Modern Philology, November, 1968]

To the extent that Tennyson's major poetry tried to come to terms with this "dying sun," to reconcile the fact of decay and death with the beneficent God in whom he believed, his work may be read as a lifelong struggle to justify the ways of a God of Love to himself and to his fellow Victorians. While the intellectual design of his theodicy was not startlingly new, Tennyson did convey his vision in the original and powerful imaginative structures that we associate with a major poet. I should like in this essay to sketch that deepening vision as it formed itself in the elegiac dignity, the allusiveness, and the sensuous concreteness of myth—to suggest, in other words, that Tennyson's classical and Arthurian poems, taken as a body, explore the theme of natural change and human mortality as the recurring confrontation of his eternal deities and mortal heroes.

I

Tennyson's earliest mythic consideration of mortality appears in "The Hesperides," the fascinating work that he suppressed after its initial appearance in his 1833 volume and that did not see print again until its publication in Hallam Tennyson's Memoir of his father in 1897. The body of the poem is the Song of the Three Sisters that the Carthaginian commander, Hanno, hears while sailing along the western coast of Africa. In anxious song the Hesperidean Sisters ask their father Hesperus, the evening star, to help them keep awake the dragon who guards the sacred tree of the Hesperides lest Heracles, "one from the East," success-
fully steal an apple from it as his eleventh labor. In the standard critical explication, G. Robert Stange sees the poem as Tennyson's early parable of the artist's secret life, which must be actively defended against the destructive prying of the world. The Hesperidean song defines "the spiritual conditions under which the poetic experience comes to life" and pays rhapsodic tribute to the rare genius of the poetic imagination that can flourish only in a Western garden of art cut off from the sophistries of ordinary humanity. The daughters of Hesperus, Hesperus himself, and the dragon who guard the tree represent the artist who both nourishes the tree of imagination through song and at the same time draws his vitality from it.²

While such a reading is in part convincing, there are several important lines that it does not seem to explain. What, for instance, is "the old wound of the world" that would "be healed" (I. 69) were the golden apple stolen by Heracles? Or why would "the world...be overseize" (II. 63-64) should the fruit be taken? The symbolic resonance of Tennyson's mythological poems is unrestricted enough for us to see that while the "ancient secret" that Heracles intends to steal may indeed be the vatic key to poetic creativity, it may at the same time be the formula of immortality that would explain such otherwise puzzling lines.

The eternal life that man has attempted to wrest from the gods since the beginning of time has frequently been represented by the symbol of a holy fruit tree in the mythological systems of the East.³ Because the apples are magic devices for gaining immortality, the minor Hesperidean goddesses must

\[...\] watch, watch, night and day, Lest the old wound of the world be healed, The glory unsealed, 
The golden apple stolen away, And the ancient secret revealed [II. 68-72].

That the "old wound of the world" may refer to the fact of nature's mutability and man's death is suggested by the Miltonic context that the poet supplies. Tennyson's epigraph to the poem,

Hesperus and his daughters three, 
That sing about the golden tree,
is taken from the Epilogue to Comus, in which the Attendant Spirit describes his Edenic home (ll. 976-1,023). That same passage alludes to the myth of Adonis, whose archetypal "deep wound" (ll. 999-1,000) did indeed have its correlative in the old wound of the world, as a late Victorian like Sir James Frazer has described in detail and as such sophisticated mythologists as Milton and even the early Tennyson would have known. Furthermore, given such a Miltonic key as the Epigraph, we cannot avoid an association between the "old wound" of "The Hesperides" and the "wound" that earth feels when Eve first tastes of the apple in Paradise Lost (IX, 780-84), a wound that brings death and mutability into the world.⁴


³ See George Stanley Faber, The Origins of Pagan Idolatry (London, 1816), III, 231. W. D. Paden, in Tennyson in Egypt: A Study of the Imagery in His Earlier Work (Lawrence, Kan., 1942), pp. 154-55, believes "The Hesperides" to be a thorough-going adaptation of Faber, a famous mythologist of the early nineteenth century whose work, Paden argues, supplied Tennyson with a continuing supply of myth, symbol, and imagery. According to Faber's interpretation of all gentile mythologies as versions of a Mosaic archetype, the Garden of the Hesperides was a type of Eden and Ararat, the Hesperidean tree an adaptation of the fatal tree in Eden, and the Hesperidean Sisters themselves a triplicated Eve. Stange (n. 2 above), p. 109, feels that there is no conclusive evidence that Tennyson was exposed to Faber's work.

The old wound of the world that assures the inevitable death of man differentiates him from the gods. It must be kept from healing so that the Olympian gods will remain unchallenged:

If the golden apple be taken,
The world will be oversize [ll. 63–64].

Should Heracles, the hero in quest of the ancient secret, manage to steal the apple and take it back into the East—the world of activity and everyday life in Tennyson’s lifelong symbolic geography—such “wisdom” in the possession of humanity would presumably heal the wound and thereby threaten the serenity and the very rule of the gods. It is absolutely imperative to their “eternal pleasure” (l. 24) that “kingdoms lapse, and climates change, and races die” (l. 46), for they are secure only in the certitude of nature’s constant mutability. Their immortality raises them to a supreme height above dying man, and their assurance of uniqueness directly assuages their pride.

Heracles is thus the first in a line of Tennysonian figures who try to wrest a “wisdom” from the gods. To the extent that Tennyson’s classical poems are veiled parables concerning poetic aspiration, such wisdom may allude to the poet’s “vatic nature, the qualities of the poetic charism.” Yet the term achieves a wider metaphysical reach—the ancient secret that man seeks can take such various forms as the heavenly beauty that Paris takes as a gift in “Oenone,” the knowledge that Ulysses insists upon following beyond the utmost bound of human thought, the “passionless bride, divine Tranquility” of “Lucretius,” the divine knowledge associated with Pallas Athene in “Tiresias,” and the immortality that Tithonus asks of the goddess Eos in “Tithonus.”

Each of the heroes is doomed to frustra-

tion whether he gains the object of his quest or not, because the gods are able to fend him off or betray him with the weapon of mystery. The Sisters know that

Honor comes with mystery;
Hoarded wisdom brings delight [ll. 47–48].

Elsewhere in his poetry Tennyson claims for his own uses the “quiet Gods” of Lucretius’ De rerum natura, deities who, “careless of mankind,”

... lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl’d
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl’d
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world;
While they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands
[“The Lotos-Eaters,” ll. 110–16].

While the Hesperidean Sisters lack the serenity of the quiet gods and their amused “secret smiles” at the universal chaos far below them, the guardians of the sacred tree do understand that it is the fact of universal change—of kingdoms lapsing, of wave clashing against wave, of mountains weakening—counterposed against the enigma of divine immobility and repose that makes for the “bliss of secret smiles” among the gods:

Wandering waters unto wandering waters call;
Let them clash together, foam and fall.
Out of watchings, out of wiles,
 Comes the bliss of secret smiles.
All things are not told to all [ll. 75–79].

The “honor” of the Hesperidean Sisters thus depends upon their ability to veil their formula in mystery in order to preserve their monopoly on immortality;

5 Stange (n. 2 above), p. 102.

6 See also “Lucretius,” ll. 73–79.
the “delight” and “eternal pleasure” that accompany the honor of the gods flourish at the expense of a suffering humanity. The particular form of the Hesperidean “wiles” is suggested by the blank-verse Prologue to their song, in which the Carthaginian commander Hanno, passing between the southern and western Horn, hears the Sisters’ melody “like voices in a dream / Continuous; till he reached the outer sea” (ll. 12–13). Their mysterious song is a siren song of the kind that lured weary sailors into a destructive enchantment in “The Sea Fairies” of Tennyson’s 1830 volume.

The gods do tantalize man with an intimation of the mystery’s meaning through the riddle of numbers. “The Hesperides” abounds in references to “five” and “three.” The incantatory lines,

Five links, a golden chain, are we,  
Hesper, the dragon, and sisters three,  
Bound about the golden tree  
[ll. 65–67, 106–8],

appear twice, and the arcane portentousness of such magic numerals is evident from the message that Wisdom whispers “in a corner”:

Five and three  
(Let it not be preached abroad) make an awful mystery [ll. 28–29].

The Sisters repeat these numbers over and over to keep the sleepy dragon awake:

Number, tell them over and number  
How many the mystic fruit-tree holds  
Lest the red-combed dragon slumber  
Rolled together in purple folds [ll. 49–52].

Both the history of numerology and Tennyson’s symbology in this and other works have tempted commentators upon the poem to assign meanings to the numbers: perhaps the association of the “three” with the root, the bole, and the fruit of the sacred tree “suggests the ancient distinction among body, soul, and spirit, as well as the organic principle of multiplicity in unity,” and the “five” refers to the five senses upon which the poetic imagination depends; ⁷ perhaps “the five and three make up an awful mystery because they add up to eight, the sacred ogdoad of the mysteries,” according to the speculations of George Stanley Faber which Tennyson may have been following in “The Hesperides”; ⁸ perhaps there was a book in the Rev. George Clayton Tennyson’s extensive and widely ranging Somersby library, an obscure work, gnomic or hermetic in nature, that would supply the key to Tennyson’s numerology.

My own feeling is that all such attempts to render explicit the magic symbolism of numbers violate the “awful mystery” that Wisdom, whispering in her corner, wishes to keep secret; such efforts represent the critical equivalent of Heracles’ invasion of the Western garden. Tennyson’s poetry is full of numbers whose numinosity and power defy wholly persuasive explication. The number symbolism of “four,” as a case in point, is a significant motif in “The Palace of Art”: the speaker builds four courts for his proud soul within the great mansion, while four currents of water flow down from it through four jets. And The Idylls of the King, as we shall see below, frequently has recourse to mysterious numbers. But while the ingenuity of mankind can certainly discover plausible ways to pierce their mystery, numbers in Tennyson’s poetry are merely another of the silent forms that the immortal gods use to tease us out of thought as doth eternity.

Although “The Hesperides” is one of Tennyson’s most interesting early works,

⁷ Stange (n. 2 above).
⁸ Paden (n. 3 above).
it is a poem whose complexity and importance have not been generally acknowledged. If we move on to the dramatic monologues on classical subjects which are recognized as being among his most mature and lasting productions, it is in "Tithonus" that Tennyson mounts the most direct and representative classical variation of the mortality theme that he broached in "The Hesperides."

The Hesperidean song is chanted entirely by the divine Sisters, who wish to protect their ancient secret; Heracles, the intruder from the East, is alluded to in a single line. If "The Hesperides" dramatizes in the voices of the gods their attempts to ward off the challenges of man, "Tithonus" inverts that perspective and provides the lament of a mortal who has managed to wrest eternal life from the gods, only to find that he has been cursed with a "cruel immortality" which does not include eternal youth.

The goddess Eos, who had fallen in love with Tithonus, is as despondent at the effects of her careless generosity as Tithonus himself. She had given her gift easily, and she is genuinely regretful at what it has done to her human lover: her tears flow down the cheeks of the wizened old man (l. 45).

And yet the changes that took place between Tennyson's first version of the Tithonus story, the "Tithon" that appeared in the J. M. Heath Commonplace Book, and the final poem suggest that the goddess's tears do not mitigate her role in a divine plan whereby human pride must be severely chastised, even if she herself does not desire such revenge. In the 1833 "Tithon" the possibility that Tithonus is being punished for agreeing to unite himself with a heavenly beauty is missing. The lines that open the second verse paragraph outlining his dilemma stress only his pain:

Ay me! what everlasting pain,
Being immortal with a mortal heart,
To live confronted with eternal youth:
To look on what is beautiful nor know
Enjoyment save thro' memory [ll. 11–15].

In the "Tithonus" published in the Cornhill Magazine of February, 1860, and reprinted in the Enoch Arden volume of 1864, these relatively neutral lines give way to ones which emphasize the narcissism of Tithonus and the hubris of believing himself a god:

Alas, for this gray shadow, once a man—
So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,
Who madest him thy chosen, that he seem'd
To his great heart none other than a God! I
I ask'd thee, "Give me immortality"
[ll. 11–15].

The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, upon which Tennyson based his poem, does not accentuate the vengeance of the gods. There Eos' failure to ask Zeus for eternal youth as well as eternal life is just a mistake. "Tithonus" does not allude to Zeus at all. That the terrible gift seems to come directly from Eos makes her responsibility for Tithonus' plight even more direct than it was in Tennyson's source. Tithonus himself indict the agency not of Zeus but of the goddess in the description of his aging:

... thy strong Hours indignant work'd their wills,
And beat me down and marr'd and wasted me,
And tho' they could not end me, left me maim'd
To dwell in presence of immortal youth,
Immortal age beside immortal youth,
And all I was in ashes [ll. 18–23].

* The history of the poem's composition and an indispensable, detailed comparison of the various versions in the Heath Commonplace Book, Cornhill Magazine, and the Enoch Arden volume appear in Mary Joan Donahue's "Tennyson's Hall Briton! and Tithon in the Heath Manuscript," PMLA, LXIV (1949), 383–416. The quotation from "Tithon" is taken from Miss Donahue's article, which reprints the poem.
Despite appearances, Eos thus resembles—if faintly, equivocally, and despite her best intentions—Tennyson’s other relentless classical goddesses, the mythic counterparts of his “fatal women,” who (with the single important exception of Demeter in “Demeter and Persephone”) blast the mortal lives they touch. When they are not the indifferent quiet gods, such deities become the mocking Aphrodite, who bestows Helen upon Paris only to bring an entire civilization to ruin for that gift in “Oenone,” or the furious Pallas Athene, who blinds Tiresias for his audacity in searching her out. (“Lucretius” considers the alternate possibilities that the Venus who oversees the disintegration of the questing poet-philosopher is either one or the other, either one of the aloof quiet gods of his De rerum natura or a jealous goddess intent upon revenge for his slighting of her while she occupied several mythical forms.) Tennyson’s classical goddesses, when they enter the world of men, do so like the Zeus of William Butler Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan”: their ravaging gifts are too terrible for man to bear; the price they exact for the power they offer or are forced to relinquish is catastrophic. Tithonus realizes too late that far better than his own lot is the lot of those “happy men” who, untouched by divinity, “have the power to die” (l. 70).

If we, then, compare Tennyson’s fastidious quiet gods who take their ease far above a struggling humanity, the Sisters who jealously guard their Hesperidean garden at the edge of the world from human intrusion, and the Eos who takes a human lover, we see that the differences among them are not as important as their similarity. All three kinds of classical deities, even when not actively hostile, are ruinous to mankind.


II

The work which treats the Christian equivalent of the “awful mystery” that the classical gods try in one way or another to keep away from man is The Idylls of the King. “The Coming of Arthur” offers three natural explanations of Arthur’s birth and a supernatural one, but we are clearly meant to believe Bellicent’s tale of Arthur’s miraculous coming on the crest of a flaming ninth wave. The presence at his coronation of the Lady of the Lake and of the three queens who support him through life testifies readily enough to his mysterious nature, as does Camelot itself, his “city built to music” that “moved so weirdly in the mist” (“Gareth and Lynette,” ll. 238–74).

But the burden of man’s relation to Arthurian mystery is shadowed forth in the story of Arthur’s passing and in the attempt of Bedivere, the first and last of his knights, to frustrate its inevitability by prolonging Arthur’s honor and fame. That the death of Arthur constituted the key to the king’s entire life for Tennyson is indicated by the fact that the trial run for The Idylls of the King, the “Morte d’Arthur” of the 1842 volumes, concerns itself entirely with Arthur’s end. Bedivere’s two refusals in “The Passing of Arthur” to relinquish Excalibur, Arthur’s magic sword, as his dying king has commanded, may be read as an Arthurian echo of Heracles’ mission in “The Hesperides.” In his first attempt Bedivere keeps Excalibur from the mere for reasons that are clearly selfish. He is dazzled by its rare beauty, by its haft that... twinkled with diamond sparks,

Myriads of topaz-lights, and jacinth-work
Of subtest jewellery [ll. 224–26].

But as Bedivere tries unsuccessfully a second time to fulfil his king’s command, Tennyson complicates the motive of simple
greed. It is, to be sure, a grievous fault to disobey one's king, "seeing obedience is the bond of rule." But what if the king in his sickness unto death is making a mistake? If Excalibur disappears from the earth, Bedivere speculates,

"... What record, or what relic of my lord Should be to aftertime, but empty breath And rumors of a doubt? but were this kept, Stored in some treasure-house of mighty kings, Some one might show it at a joust of arms, Saying 'King Arthur's sword, Excalibur, Wrought by the lonely Maiden of the Lake. Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps Upon the hidden bases of the hills'"

[ll. 266-74].

Though the narrator assures us that this rationalization is made by a Bedivere "clouded with his own conceit" (l. 278), the reader cannot but treat it with a measure of respect. If Bedivere can show Excalibur to doubters, Arthur's legend is more apt to sound credible when "some old man," like himself, "speak in the aftertime / To all the people, winning reverence" (ll. 276-77) for Arthur (as well, perhaps, as for himself). There is after all a difference between the voice of an old, broken Bedivere and the voice of a living Arthur, which has received at least part of its authority from his skilful wielding of Excalibur. "The Passing of Arthur" is, as a matter of fact, related by a Bedivere who in the "white winter of his age" is "no more than a voice" (ll. 3-4). One can well imagine the "rumors of a doubt" that must have dogged the ancient knight's retelling of his fabulous tale. It is therefore understandable that Bedivere should have tried to do all in his power to keep a cloud of mystery from Arthur's name and deed. Bedivere had not actively sought out the "ancient secret" that Arthur brought to cleanse the wasteland of the world. But once that wisdom has made its power felt through Arthur's work, Bedivere does insist upon trying to retain its talisman. Bedivere's initial reluctance to return the magical brand to the Lady of the Lake is thus a defensive, less aggressive version of Heracles' attempt to steal the golden apple from the Hesperidean Sisters.

"Much honor and much fame were lost," Bedivere believes (l. 277), were Excalibur to disappear from the earth. In answer, Arthur's insistence that Excalibur be thrown into the mere implies the theme of "The Hesperides" that "honor comes with mystery." But whereas the Hesperidean Sisters were concerned with the protection of their own honor, Arthur cares primarily for the welfare of his realm—his good name was bound to the former perfection of Camelot. Arthur knows that his own honor and that of the world through which he moved will be kept alive not through vain quests after palpable fact and material evidence of his existence but by the ability of his legend to inspire noble belief and virtuous deed as his mystery moves through time. ("The Holy Grail" had made a related point about the Christian mystery: the holy quest after visions of the chalice used at the Last Supper is for most of human society a vain, destructive pursuit of wandering fires. Visions will come "as they will" to those who do not strive to penetrate the mystery, to those who do not stray from their allotted tasks in the fields of the world.)

A similar distinction can be made between the Hesperidean garden and Avilion. The Avilion, "deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard lawns / And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea" (ll. 430-31), to which Arthur travels to heal his wounds is the Celtic equivalent of the Garden of the Hesperides. Both evince Tennyson's lifelong fascination with a Miltonic


. . . bowery loneliness,
The brooks of Eden mazily murmuring,
And bloom profuse and cedar arches
["Milton," ll. 9–11],

places of rest, fecundity, and freedom from worldly cares. But while the Hesperidean grove is a refuge of divine repose and generation jealously guarded against human intrusion and utterly hostile to man, Avilion will send Arthur back into the world after his recovery to will his will and work his work anew for the good of mankind. The ultimate character of Avilion's ancient secret may remain clothed in mystery, but the effective agent of that mystery will move with a "power on this dark land to lighten it, / And power on this dead world to make it live" ("The Coming of Arthur," ll. 92–93) after periodic regeneration in the island valley of the West.

The relations that the Hesperides and Avilion bear to the world are best illustrated by the different ways that the works in which they appear use the same image. The guardians of the Hesperidean sacred tree form a "golden chain" about it:

Five links, a golden chain are we,
Hesper, the dragon, and sisters three,
Daughters three,
Bound about
The gnarléd bole of the charméd tree
[ll. 106–10].

In contrast, Arthur in his final speech of consolation assures Bedivere that

. . . the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God
[ll. 422–23].

The golden chain of "The Hesperides" serves to exclude mankind, to hem in the tree from the depredations of the world; the gold chains of the Idylls fasten the world to a beneficent God.

That God asserts himself through the mystery of numbers. When Bedivere finally throws Excalibur into the mere, an arm "clothed in samite, mystic, wonderful . . . caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him / Three times, and drew him under the mere" (ll. 310–13). The Idylls of the King is filled with threes. What, we ask, is the significance of the "vast charm" in the stars that Merlin contemplates, that

. . . single misty star,
Which is the second in a line of stars
That seem a sword beneath a belt of three?
["Merlin and Vivien," ll. 506–8].

Why do three queens follow Arthur through life and accompany him to Avilion? To such questions we can again supply the numerologist's answer that three is the primary odd number, the emblem of multiplicity in unity, or the mythologist's answer that, like the three Sisters of "The Hesperides," the three queens are a type of triplicated Great Mother, a cosmic female presence that broods over the life of Camelot in several forms, both natural and supernatural. Tennyson himself insisted upon the inviolability of his symbols in a way that makes him appear less simple-minded than some of his severest critics have been willing to allow. When the Bishop of Ripon, Boyd Carpenter, asked him whether those who had interpreted the three queens as Faith, Hope, and Charity were correct, Tennyson characteristically tried both to embrace and to disavow an allegorical intention: "They are right, and they are not right. They mean that and they do not. They are three of the noblest of women. They are also those three Graces, but they are much more. I hate to be tied down to say, 'This means that,' because the thought within the image is much more than one interpretation." 11 Such equivocation may suggest

that in his treatment of classical and Arthurian myth Tennyson meant to evoke the sacred, undecipherable mystery of numerical as well as verbal symbol. But, again, while the incantation of numbers in "The Hesperides" was intended to keep a misanthropic dragon awake, the numbers of the Idylls are mystical signs of a universe through which man can walk in metaphysical self-assurance because of Arthur’s benign, if intermittent, presence.

The benignity of this universe and its God must somehow encompass the fact of mutability and mortality, of Arthur’s death and the disappearance of Excalibur, that Bedivere finds so hard to accept. The conclusion to "The Passing of Arthur" answers Bedivere’s doubt with a Christian variation of the Hesperian "wisdom" and of the understanding that Tithonus had come to by the time of his monologue:

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world" [ll. 408–10].

This climactic message seems to repeat a Hesperian notion: it is necessary that Arthur die and that Camelot come to blight, that “kingdoms lapse, and climates change, and races die” ("The Hesperides," l. 46). But the Hesperian Sisters had celebrated natural mutability because it assured the “bliss of secret smiles” and the smug knowledge of divine uniqueness. The “High God” of the Idylls, who beholds the world from beyond and enters it to make it beautiful ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 16–17), withholds immortality from the world for man’s good, as well as his own, lest man come to know the “corruption” of a Tithonus. Furthermore, while the Hesperian Sisters oversee a random clashing of “wandering waters,” the High God of the Idylls “fulfils” himself in a teleology, a controlled evolution wherein man moves progressively toward God as he increasingly adapts the world to express himself in his changing forms and as he evolves to man’s apprehension of him. To retain a single good custom too long would frustrate this process.

The work that draws together Tennyson’s classical gods and the High God of the Idylls is “Demeter and Persephone,” Tennyson’s evocation of classical myth in his 1889 volume. From her experience with her fellow gods who look on at the kidnapping of Persephone, Demeter comes to know that Zeus, the “bright one in the highest,” and Aidoneus, the “dark one in the lowest,” are brothers in their reserved contemplation of universal suffering. This knowledge makes Demeter curse such quiet gods and refuse to partake in their feasts. In addition, her own suffering encourages in her an identification with and commitment to humanity:

The man, that only lives and loves an hour,
Seem’d nobler than their hard eternities
[ll. 104–5].

It is only when Demeter’s tears and ravings make the earth barren that Zeus, in his vanity at no longer receiving the sacrifices and praises of men, grudgingly forces Aidoneus to surrender Persephone to her mother for nine months of every year. Although partially mollified, Demeter remains. “but ill-content/With them who still are highest” and yearns for the overthrow of the Olympian system. When will they appear, she asks, whom the Fates had predicted, those

... younger, kindlier Gods to bear us down,
As we bore down the Gods before us? Gods,
To quench, not hurl the thunderbolt, to stay,
Not spread the plague, the famine; Gods
indeed,
To send the noon into the night and break
The sunless halls of Hades into Heaven?
Till thy dark lord accept and love the Sun,
And all the Shadow die into the Light,
When thou shalt dwell the whole bright year
with me... [ll. 129–37].

In the coming triumph of a gentle Christianity over the harsh Olympian gods, Demeter envisions the replacement of the quiet or avenging classical gods by the High God of the *Idylls*. Death in Life, the Tennysonian deity of Fear and Sorrow, will give way to a God of Life, and the Queen of Death shall be no more. “Thou,” Demeter assures her daughter,

... that hast from men,
As Queen of Death, that worship which is Fear,
Henceforth, as having risen from out the dead,
Shalt ever send thy life along with mine
From buried grain thro’ springing blade, and bless
Their garner’d autumn also, reap with me,
Earth-mother, in the harvest hymns of Earth
That worship which is Love, and see no more
The Stone, the Wheel, the dimly-glimmering lawns
Of that Elysium, all the hateful fires
Of torment, and the shadowy warrior glide
Along the silent field of Asphodel [ll. 140–51].

To be sure, the “springing blade” will still have to arise out of the “buried grain”; burial in the earth must still precede birth in the springtime; natural process—mutability and corporeal mortality—will still be inescapable. But when the kindlier gods come, Demeter and Persephone will act in a loving harmony throughout the year. The daughter shall ever send her life “along with” her mother’s through the whole of organic process—the sowing, the reaping, and the harvesting. And the harvest will both be a sign of God’s eternal love of man and represent a hymn, a “worship which is Love” on man’s part for such a sign.

Tithonus, we have seen, is punished because “he seem’d / To his great heart none other than a God,” an illusion that makes him ask for the terrible gift of immortality. But the kindlier God of “Demeter and Persephone” will nourish within man an impression of godhead, will enlighten the

... souls of men, who grew beyond their race,
And made themselves as Gods against the fear
Of Death and Hell [ll. 138–40].

Man will thus come to apprehend a God of Life, who, neither the indifferent observer nor the torturer of a classical underworld, allows man’s soul a share in his bright immortality.

It is thus possible to discern a single consistent and coherent pattern in Tennyson’s handling of classical myth and Arthurian legend. Briefly, Tennyson believed in—and sometimes asserted in a poetry of philosophical reflection—the gradual evolution of a “crowning race” (*In Memoriam*, Epilogue), the consummate utopian society of “men with growing wings” whose image Merlin has sculpted in the hall he builds for Arthur (“The Holy Grail,” l. 237), the “men, who grew beyond their race,” of “Demeter and Persephone.” For such a credo—faint trust in a larger hope that it may at times have been—Tennyson found an appropriate mythos in the displacement of the severe Olympian system by the “kindlier Gods” of Christianity. One sign for him of the human race’s burgeoning spiritual maturity was its ability to metamorphose classical gods, who keep their ancient secret from man, into a God of Love, who sends into the world surrogates like Arthur to bring man intimations of the soul’s immortality.

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12 I have described the transformation of a lyrically conceived Death in Life into its mythic equivalent in “Tennyson’s Death in Life in Lyric and Myth: ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ and ‘Demeter and Persephone,’” an essay that will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Victorian Newsletter*. 