

Between the Man and Beast:
Reactions to Evolutionary Science in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T. H.
White's *The Once and Future King*

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the
School of Communications
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts in English

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November 13, 2013

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For my husband and best friend, Jonathan Feldman. Thank you for supporting my academic endeavors and encouraging me daily.

Special thanks to my parents for their prayers and help throughout my academic career.

Thanks to those who invested hours into helping me present this argument. Your dedication and skill were appreciated every step of the way.

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Introduction

Before I examine the relationship between Tennyson's and White's retellings of the Arthurian legends and Darwin's scientific theories, I must first establish the seemingly tenuous connection between fantastic literature and science. The two have always shared a symbiotic relationship, both inspiring and influencing the other. Science, like fantastic literature, is inherently concerned with the universal values of the society that performs or produces it: "At the heart of a culture's science," writes Robert M. Young, "we find a culture's values. Both are irreducibly anthropomorphic and social" (125). While literature can be used as a testing ground for the moral and philosophical implications of scientific discoveries, those discoveries are often delicately linked to the literary impulse of their day, in part because science lends itself so naturally to such connections. Morton notes both the "mythopoeic capacities" of biologists in Darwin's time and the "imaginative suggestiveness of issues within biology" (5), illuminating another relationship between science and imagination: science sparks the imagination, while human imagination colors how we interpret scientific discoveries.

In his book *Unweaving the Rainbow*, evolutionist Richard Dawkins argues that scientific understanding of our material universe has always been partly responsible for the lofty themes, archetypes, and scope of vision involved in producing great literature. In his opinion, "[s]cientists transform the way we think about the larger universe. They assist the imagination back to the hot birth of time and forward to the eternal cold, or, in Keats's words, to 'spring direct towards the galaxy'" (16). Dawkins also claims that the scientific and literary impulses are fundamentally the same, rooted in wonder and curiosity. The science of origins, in particular, has the power to stimulate the thinker's imagination, as it seeks to answer the fundamental philosophical questions of where we came from but leaves the matters of why we are here and

where we are going entirely up to imaginative speculation.¹ Mary Midgley claims that evolutionary science is perhaps the defining ideological presence in literature after Darwin: “Evolution is the creation-myth of our age. By telling us our origins it shapes our views of what we are. It influences not just our thought, but our feelings and actions too, in a way which goes far beyond its official function as a biological theory. In calling it a myth, I am not of course saying that it is a false story. I mean that it has great symbolic power, which is independent of its truth” (154).² Midgley’s observation applies regardless of whether evolutionary theory is true: as myth, if not as science, it is powerful and therefore real. Michael Page, along with Midgley, calls the Darwinian account of evolution “one of the central myths of modernity,” identifying it as truth and yet myth in that it explains our origins and everyday experience (3).³

Evolutionary theory has always maintained a special connection with the literary imagination: it both feeds imaginative thought and feeds off of it. In *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer explains how Darwin’s theory spoke to the literary and fantastic sensibilities of his day:

Evolutionary theory brings together two imaginative elements implicit in much nineteenth-century thinking and creativity. One was the fascination with growth expressed also in *Natürphilosophie* and in *Bildungsroman*. The other was the concept of transformation. The intellectual interest in märchen, fairy-tale, and myth, which increased as the century went on, was fuelled by these preoccupations, while its methodology was indebted to evolutionary patterns of argument. (97)

Beer here recognizes the symbiotic relationship between Victorian literature and evolutionary science: Darwin’s theory gained quick popularity because it resonated with his nineteenth-century audience, and in return, an accepting public led to further research into evolutionary science beyond Darwin’s contributions. Beer’s claim that Darwinian science inspired research

¹ See Paul M. Shafer on evolutionary theory and the philosophical imagination. For Shafer, evolution as a premise widens the boundaries of imagination because within its context “we are free to construct a self-image and a social worldview as we see fit” (91-92).

² See Robert Segal. 4-5, on his definition of myth as story. This definition functions independently of truth value.

³ Page views Mary Shelley’s fictional Frankenstein myth and the true Darwin myth as nearly equally important in defining our modern relation of science to literature (4).

into fairy tales and myths and even affected the way this research was performed indicates one of the earliest of many influences that Darwin would have upon fantasy literature.

This close connection between Darwinian theory and fantastic literature exists in part because they both deal in universal archetypes. Beer points out that these archetypes are not limited to the realm of science; she sees in Darwinian evolution the same archetypal ideas as ancient myths:

Darwinian theory calls on many of these mythic elements and challenges others by inversion. For example, there is an 'umgekehrte Erhabene' or 'inverted sublime' in Darwin's treatment of 'divine marriage' and 'hero-ancestry, fall and flood'. Instead of descent from a lofty deity his mythic history shows the difficult ascent from swamp, from an unknown progenitor, but asserts the nobility of this story. It was possible in evolutionary theory to trace a new form of quest myth, and to transpose the paradise garden from the past to present: the past consisted of a few simple forms, the present is burgeoning and various. (106)

Beer continues,

[Darwin] offers a new creation myth which challenges the idea of the fall, and makes the tree of life and the tree of knowledge one, and central to meaning. Moreover, his representation of natural order sways between an optimistic and a pessimistic interpretation: it gives room to both comic and tragic vision. (107)

For Beer, evolutionary theory contains within itself the seeds of great literature: the quest, the hero, the comic, and the tragic; thus, it naturally inspires and is inspired by imaginative literature. Whether scientific discoveries are made through archetypal intuition or whether we trace mythic archetypes in science after the fact because of our predisposition to find these archetypes is a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum. A sufficient conclusion would be that the worlds of science and myth are inextricably connected by an ideological current which flows both ways.

The idea that myth, or fantasy, holds power independently of its truth value, as Midgley asserts, is fundamental to the argument for the value of fantasy literature⁴—an argument worth making before any serious study of the impact of a dubious scientific theory upon fantasy literature gets well underway. In “Rambler 4,” Samuel Johnson ridicules the “lilies,” “roses,” “saytrs,” and “dryads,” in which a writer may “employ giants to snatch away a lady from the nuptial rites” and “knights to bring her back from captivity” (56). Johnson insists that the superior literary works, which he terms “the comedy of romance,” “are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind” (56). Johnson’s Enlightenment attitude towards the fantastic is still alive today; although fantastic literature enjoys immense popularity, it is often written off as escapism or pure entertainment. While Johnson’s condescension towards the fantastic can be explained by Enlightenment preoccupation with science and empiricism, current views towards fantastic literature are additionally shaped by postmodern cynicism. Crane points out that “the problems of the modern world which have spawned naturalistic, deterministic, and fatalistic literature seem to overshadow anything fantasy could possibly deal with. Fantasy seems now a retreat from the problems of the world (which, in part, it is) rather than being, as it was in Swift’s day, a confrontation of them” (35).⁵ Crane’s sentiment is echoed in our present culture’s affectionate disparagement of those labeled “geeks”

⁴ For the purpose of this study, I define fantasy literature as that set outside the bounds of probability or possibility in real life. This definition would include both science fiction and fantasy, the difference being that science fiction generally strives to establish plausibility within its own context while fantasy is less concerned with the factual plausibility of plot elements. See Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn’s *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* for an explanation of Coleridge’s distinction between fancy and imagination. Whereas, for Coleridge, fancy deals with the recollection, or memory, of what is known, imagination deals in entirely new creations (9). I define pure fantasy literature as imaginative rather than fanciful.

⁵ Swift used fantasy to confront current political and social issues of his day; however, there is a profound difference between Swift’s use of fantastic elements and true fantasy, to which Johnson refers; I address this distinction on page 3.

and “nerds” who prefer fantasy worlds of fiction or gaming to real-life pursuits like work, socialization, and family.

However, in an age of science and of cynicism, the fantasy genre is expanding as never before, rapidly spreading from small pockets of subculture to the mainstream. Tondro explains that “the literature of the fantastic is a robust and unkillable beast; like the serpent, it sheds its skin periodically to be reborn in a more youthful form” (2), and the plethora of fantastic and supernatural films, novels, games, and television shows produced by our age competes with the volume of pseudo-science and scientific research we generate. This is not entirely due to our wish to escape the problems of the current world, but due in part to fantasy’s unique potential as a ground for solving those problems. Fantasy is a notoriously difficult literary term to define⁶; a statement from Darko Suvin may help to illuminate what I mean by the term. Suvin writes that “the first . . . paradox of fantasy . . . is that it begins where deep belief in supernatural values disappears” (217). Suvin would not consider Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* to be fantasy literature, for instance, because they are based upon non-universal value systems which the author and intended audience hold to be true. Pure fantasy literature, rather than reinforcing metaphysical values which the reader actually believes in, draws him into a world governed by values which, the reader and author have tacitly agreed, are a product of the author’s imagination.⁷ This contract of disbelief between author and reader renders true fantasy literature an ideal playground for the materialist because it does not require true belief in anything supernatural. Thus, fantasy literature provides a safe setting in which the “problems of the world,” such as the implications of evolutionary science, may be explored. Realistic, as well

⁶ James and Mendlesohn admit that “Fantasy literature has proven tremendously difficult to pin down” and offer the general consensus among scholars of the genre that it involves “the construction of the impossible” (1).

⁷ Universal values, such as love, altruism, and hatred, are still found in pure fantasy. However, the presence of an external structured value system, such as Christian theology, stands in the way of this contract of disbelief between author and reader, rendering a work less than pure fantasy.

as fantastic, literature may also be used to conduct theoretical experiments; Peter Allan Dale writes that George Eliot thought of her novels as “‘experiments in life’ that repeatedly test the positivist proposition that there is something in our ‘central structure’ that tends to altruism” (Baker and Womack 86).

However, fantasy literature lends itself especially well to such experimentation because it offers a laboratory where theories about the human condition can be tested and proven within a hypothetical and controlled fictional setting without the constraints of trying to achieve realism. In fact, according to Jake LaJeunesse, T. H. White uses literature in this way, putting his ideas about humanity (based on his understanding of science) to the test in order to establish their workability. LaJeunesse claims that “the *Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn* should be viewed as a literary science experiment in which White attempts to engage the subject of war with the intent of producing a real-world solution” (23). This aspect of the close relationship between science and literature, in which literature is used as a testing ground for the implications of science, will be the foundation of my study of both Tennyson’s and White’s works: both men appropriate the Arthurian legend as a laboratory in which to test the implications of evolutionary science.

The Arthurian legend lends itself particularly well to an exploration of scientific ideas. Its timeless and universal quality allows it to speak to each passing generation in an immediate and powerful way. According to Archibald and Putter, a priest around the year 1200 predicted that the Arthurian legend would serve as “food for storytellers till the end of time” (1), and to this day, storytellers continue to feast upon it. One reason for this timelessness is that the Arthurian legend fits the previous description of pure fantasy literature, carrying within itself its own value system. This value system is largely a part of the artistic creation of the Arthurian world; while it

does draw upon external codes like chivalry, the story's ethical system is largely a product of the story itself. Archibald and Putter write that this value system is unique to the Arthurian legend, citing Jane Gilbert's theory of an Arthurian ethics that unites all Arthurian tales under a single identity (10-11).⁸ This self-contained value system renders the Arthurian story a perfect ground for experimentation with scientific theory, as the author and reader can unite beneath the fictional ethics of the tale itself whether or not they share the same ethical system. Furthermore, the Arthurian legend is particularly useful for exploring evolutionary theory because it strikes at the heart of the spirit/flesh dichotomy. The idea that the world is natural, rather than spiritual, is perhaps the most significant philosophical implication of evolutionary science, raising concerns about man's moral nature, potential for redemption, and cosmic significance. At the heart of the Arthurian legend is a battle between the spirit and the flesh, exemplified in the love triangle between Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenevere, in which the spiritual bonds between Lancelot and Arthur and between Guenevere and Arthur compete with the physical bond between Guenevere and Lancelot. In the end, the flesh wins; Guenevere and Lancelot are discovered, and Arthur's kingdom crumbles—at least for the present. Many versions of the legend, including Malory's, end with the implication that the spirit will once again triumph when Arthur returns for a second reign (Malory cites the inscription supposedly written on Arthur's tombstone, which means in Latin "Here lies Arthur, the once and future king") (926). Yet the story as it stands ends with an intriguing question unanswered: can the spirit really triumph over the flesh, after all? The Arthurian legend is a perfect testing ground for the implications of evolutionary science because they both raise this same fundamental question.

⁸ See also Jane Gilbert's "Arthurian Ethics," chapter 9 of Archibald and Putter's *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* (154-170).

Another reason that the Arthurian legend provided both Tennyson and White with such an excellent basis for experimentation as they struggled to make sense of their worlds after Darwin is that the Arthurian material has always maintained a mercurial and uncertain treatment of nature. Evolutionary science inspired both a fascination with the wonders and beauty of nature and a fear of its destructive power—two attitudes toward nature that can also be found in Arthurian tales. In tales such as “Lancelot, or, the Knight of the Cart,” the forest presents the dangerous and unexpected; in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” nature’s cruelty contrasts with the welcoming hospitality of Arthur’s court and the Lord’s castle. However, in “Yvain and the Lion,” the forest becomes a portal to wonder and magic; it is here that Yvain meets the lion who becomes a loyal friend. The forest in early Arthurian tales can serve as an arena for testing but also for magic; the lake is also the locus of magic in the many tales involving the Lady of the Lake. The traditional Arthurian world is a place where nature and mysticism collide—just as nature and the magic of science collide in evolutionary theory.

Chapter Two: The Evolution of Evolution

A primary objective of this study is to establish Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* as responses to the theory of evolution in fantasy literature form. Later examination of these texts will reveal a stark contrast between the two men's understanding of evolutionary science and its implications. This can be attributed, in part, to the development of the British understanding of evolutionary science between Tennyson's and White's eras. An understanding of how evolutionary theory, and the public and literary response to it, evolved from the Victorian period to the Modern era will be vital to understanding both writers' responses to it in their retellings of the Arthurian legend. Tennyson rejects the positive Romantic view of Nature for a negative Darwinian view of Nature as heartless and mindlessly fertile. He mourns the loss of a unifying and ordering supernatural ideal inherent in Darwin's view of a Nature with no transcendent force to order her. In both *In Memoriam* and *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson reacts with disillusion and pessimism to the implication of evolutionary science that change in nature is organic and disorderly and that man is at the core nothing more than an animal. White, on the other hand, writing between the two world wars, is long past the initial shock of Darwin's theory to Western culture. Rather than resisting or mourning the implications of evolutionary science, White finds in them an alternate source of the transcendence that Darwin's theory seems to preclude. His view of Nature is profoundly different from Tennyson's. White does not question the Darwinian implication that man holds no special position above nature or animals; rather, he sees in man's animal identity a hope that, in the future, the problems unique to mankind will no longer exist as man learns to mimic his fellow animals rather than trying to transcend them. Tennyson, whose world was being shaken by evolutionary theory itself, reacts with horror and disgust; White, whose world had accepted evolutionary theory but was

being shaken by human war, attempts to use the implications of evolution to find a solution to human problems such as war. Thus, evolutionary theory progresses between Tennyson's and White's retellings of the Arthurian legend from being the snake in Tennyson's garden to being the key to White's problems.

Tennyson's Victorian England was a world captivated by both science⁹ and fantasy. Ruse describes how the industrial revolution set Britain apart from other nations as early as the 1830s; scientific developments in agriculture contributed to a growing, and rapidly urbanizing, population (16). With new technology arose new ethical debates; Malthus' theory of geometric population growth that could not be sustained by an arithmetically growing food supply was competing in the Victorian mind with the Christian impulse towards charity and support of the poor, whose numbers steadily increased throughout the industrial revolution (Ruse 19). Seeking to answer the questions raised by scientific advancements, Victorians eagerly turned to more science; scientific societies and publications grew in popularity, and science began to slowly make its way into the college curriculum.¹⁰ Yet the same society that eagerly read Darwin, Lyell, and Spencer was also captivated by imaginative literature for both children and adults, from Coleridge to George Macdonald to Lewis Carroll.¹¹ Wolfe explains how the nineteenth century was bookended by a revival of fairy tales and myth, driven in part by a strong interest in German literature (18).¹² Victorian interest in both the scientific and the fantastic centered around the idea of growth and change; fairy tales presented a world where people, mythical beings, and worlds

⁹ According to Whitworth, "the modern meaning of science entered the language only in the Victorian period" (112). In the nineteenth century, the word science came increasingly to describe not merely an academic discipline but the scientific method of hypothesis and experimentation.

¹⁰ See Ruse, Chapter 2, "British Society and the Scientific Community"

¹¹ See Wolfe's "Fantasy from Dryden to Dunsany" in James and Mendlesohn for further exploration of the Victorian fascination with the fantastic; Wolfe discusses the fantastic in Victorian art and music as well as literature.

¹² Wolfe cites diverse Victorian texts, including the publication of dozens of fairy tale books, Yeats' mystical poetry, and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as evidence of this keen Victorian interest in fantasy and myth (18).

could magically transform, while evolutionary science depicted a world in constant flux and development.¹³

This fascination with change was only natural for a society whose entire way of life was changing before their eyes, leaving them in a strange middle ground between an old way of life and a new one. According to Michael H. Whitworth's "Science and the Scientist in Victorian Fiction" in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, the single most important element of Victorian science was "the theorization of transformation" (111). This interest in transformation, in Whitworth's view, was partnered with a Darwinian "impulse to theorize" both scientifically and metaphysically. In the literary realm, this interest was reflected not only in the Victorian fondness for fairy tales but even in the Victorian realist novel. For Whitworth, the scientific concept of transformation is manifest in the concept of character in the Victorian novel: whereas character had once denoted a static personality profile, in the Victorian novel it became a fluid and constantly developing persona (111). Thus, Victorian science and literature reflected an interest in transformation on the biological and personal levels. Evolutionary theory thrived in such a climate; it held cultural appeal while at the same time potentially offering a sense of security to an uncertain world. The *Origin* ends with an exclamation of wonder that "from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved" (374), offering an enchanting picture of the world slowly becoming better and even more fantastic. At the same time, the *Origin* offers a relatively stable view of the future; Darwin concludes that "we may look with some confidence to a secure future of great length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection" (373). Darwin's science assured

¹³ See Beer, 97, for further discussion of the relationship between Victorian interest in growth regarding both science and literature.

Victorians that, although their world was changing, it was changing slowly and predictably—and certainly for the better.

Along with the Victorian fascination with change and growth through evolution came a new understanding of nature. The Industrial Revolution drastically changed the British way of life during the Victorian era, leading to more awareness of, and interest in, the natural world. As factories began to crowd out the countryside, nature became a clearly delineated entity to be found on excursions into the countryside rather than the backdrop for all of life's activities as it had been in an agricultural Britain. The atmosphere of uncertainty was deeply disturbing to many Victorians, who, according to Ruse, grasped eagerly at any hope for upward growth which evolutionary theory could be construed to promise. Ruse cites the “rapidity of change,” the “lack of security,” and the growing problem of poverty in Victorian society as reasons why the hope of progress through evolution was so eagerly embraced (151). Nature, in this sense, became a source of hope and a refuge from the ugliness of urbanization.

However, as the lines between nature and culture became more pronounced, Victorians became more keenly aware of nature as a thing to be not only studied and admired but possibly feared. Greene explains how Victorian views toward nature were altered profoundly by the progress of various sciences including “astronomy, geology, and paleontology,” which destroyed the “static view of nature that had been taken for granted by both Christians and deists” (4) for centuries. Greene emphasizes that although Darwin played a crucial role in solidifying the Victorian view of nature as evolving rather than static, Victorians had already begun, under the influence of earlier evolutionary theories, to see nature as less safe and predictable than she had seemed through the lens of Newtonian or Baconian science or Deism, both of which portrayed an

orderly nature governed by God and immutable laws (4-6). Nature through the lens of evolution was organic, unpredictable, and sometimes vicious.

The English Romantics, including writers like Shelley and Wordsworth, had presented nature as an object of beauty, rapture, and spiritual connection.¹⁴ Wordsworth's "Daffodils" exemplifies the Romantic sentiment towards nature; the speaker escapes from real life to blissful memories of his walk in nature, "And then," he exclaims, "my heart with rapture fills / And dances with the daffodils" ("Poems of Imagination" 12, lines 23-24). However, evolutionary science destroyed the Romantic idea of nature as serene and spiritual; natural selection meant that nature essentially feeds upon itself, relying on death to create life. The question of whether this nature is beautiful or frightening remains to the interpreter. For Tennyson, it is ghoulishly "'Red in tooth and claw"; (section 56 line 16) for Darwin, it is a bittersweet but ultimately redemptive cycle of life and rebirth. The "war of nature" described in *Origin of Species*, which includes "famine and death," may be ugly indeed, but its end result is "the most exalted object" of advanced life forms (374). In either case, nature after Darwin gradually came to represent neither a refuge from the problems of life nor a god to be praised and admired—at best, she became an indifferent agent of pain and suffering which ultimately worked for the greater good; at worst, she became a cruel and vindictive force.¹⁵

The Romantic and naturalist views of nature coexisted throughout much of the Victorian era. However, through the course of the nineteenth century, the literary response to nature gradually shifted further from Romanticism into the pessimistic naturalism of Hardy and Conrad. Woodring explains that by the 1890s, scientists and artists alike "had in common the

¹⁴ Woodring attributes the Romantic movement to the contemporary meaning of the word "nature; he calls the Romantic movement "a turn . . . from representations of social action to ecstasies over a desolate pond, or a lugubrious nightingale, or a lonely cloud" (1).

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy's nature is perhaps the most representative of this view.

disappearance of the nature that had been substituted for God” (198). Romantic nature could be communed with, loved, and delighted in; post-Darwinian nature could not remain on such a pedestal. Woodring largely attributes this shift to Darwinian theory, which no longer permitted the Romantic substitution of nature for God; somewhere between Romanticism and modernism, “Thomas Hardy and Mark Twain each awoke one morning and found that Wordsworthian God withdrawn” (199). In the years surrounding Darwin’s publications, Romantic sentiment clashed with the evolutionary concept of the survival of the fittest, leaving Victorians with a conflicting and unsettling view of the natural world. The century that had begun with an exciting new way of looking at nature—as a constantly flowing, living entity rather than a mechanically governed system of laws—ended with a wave of mistrust and suspicion towards this mysterious and unaligned force.

At the same time as Victorian society was mesmerized by changes in their world and ways of looking at it, it was also undergoing a crisis of faith, for which science—and particularly evolutionary theory—was partly responsible. Greene believes that this crisis began much earlier than Darwin, as early as Newtonian physics, which subtly undermined the view of nature set forth by the Bible.¹⁶ However, Darwin, according to Greene, dealt the hardest blow to the Victorian belief in inspiration by popularizing as science a theory that could not harmonize with the biblical account of creation (10). Henkin explains that German criticism was already undermining belief in the literal truth of Scripture; whereas “Victorian decency had been tactfully closing its eyes” to its implications regarding the Christian faith, it prepared the way for evolutionary science to effectively negating the power of religion for many Victorians (63-64). Although evolutionary science existed before Darwin—Whewell, Chambers, and Lyell, to name

¹⁶ Green claims that Newtonian physics, which portrayed nature as “a law-bound system of matter in motion,” conflicted with the biblical view of nature governed directly by God, in which “the line between ordinary and miraculous was very thin” (6).

a few, had already published texts based on the theory—Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is an important marker on the timeline of evolutionary theory because, unlike previous texts, it offered a view of the world’s history and future that did not require special interference from a deity; Ellegard points out that “none of the pre-Darwinian development hypotheses could do altogether without a supernatural element” (15). Earlier evolutionary texts had had a profound impact upon the Victorian imagination; however, Darwin cemented evolutionary science as fact in the mind of the public and of academia and severed the tie binding earlier evolutionary theories to belief in a higher power.

As Darwin’s theory began to undermine the Christian idea that God personally directs the course of nature, Victorians turned either to faith or science—or to a blend of the two—as a foundation for their belief in progress. Throughout the Victorian era, Western man took for granted that he was progressing toward a higher existence and that science would help him achieve it.¹⁷ Both Christianity and evolutionary theory, with a few adjustments, could be fit into this picture of evolutionary meliorism which enchanted so many Victorians. Christian meliorism painted a bright picture of God’s kingdom coming to earth through social work and evangelism, while Darwin’s *Origin* promised a world in which “natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being,” so that “all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection” (373). As the Darwinian theory of progress began to eclipse the Christian vision in the Victorian mind, it swept the comforting rug of faith from under man’s feet only to replace it with a newfound sense of self-sufficiency and agency. Shermer explains that “for some, abandoning the Genesis story meant the loss of special status, a fall from grace and a second coming out of the garden to face the harsh reality of waste, struggle, and purposelessness” (285).

¹⁷ At a conference entitled “The Transformation of the Idea of Progress,” Frederick A. Olafson defined the Victorian idea of progress as “an ideology which asserted the existence of a positive, though undefined relationship between scientific and technological advance and general progress” (26).

Yet evolutionary theory offered a newfound sense of power and knowledge to fill this void; Victorians could place their faith not in the God of Christianity or in the Nature of Romanticism but in man's ability to rise above nature through science. Cervetti explains that late-century Victorians, "feeling less at the mercy of an incomprehensible universe, found a new 'faith' in human authority and responsibility to understand and even control nature. Once awake, once out of the cave, there were new tools such as sociology, psychology, and chemistry to investigate natural laws and develop this new faith, and Swinburne proclaimed, 'Glory to man in the highest!'" (Baker and Womack 83).

However, the two World Wars would forever destroy this vision of progress, and the Modern era would usher in a new—but equally conflicted—view of evolutionary science and nature itself as man began to question the idea of inevitable progress, along with his superior status in the natural world and his justification in asserting control over it. Parrinder explains how the Victorian belief in Positivism, the belief that science can only involve the observable and testable (need footnote citing book on Positivism) was discounted in the early twentieth century, in part by Einstein's and Heisenberg's theories which effectively debunked classical physics and its picture of a world "in which everything could be charted and everything was predictable" (11-12). Thinkers including H. G. Wells, Hulme, and Nietzsche recognized that "logical analysis could never keep pace with the natural world's ability to throw up new and surprising forms" (Parrinder 12). With the death of Positivism came a new uncertainty as to the projected path of evolution; the view of a predictable progression towards a higher existence gave way to a view of the universe in which anything—including the worst--was possible. Neil Smelser claims that the evolutionist model of progress had been largely abandoned by the time World War II was over, largely because of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud, who, "by

emphasizing the persistence of irrational forces, undermined the assertion that the course of Western civilization represented the progressive triumph of reason” (“The Transformation of the Idea of Progress” 22). No longer could nature be trusted to constantly ascend upward for the ultimate good of all living things. H. G. Wells’ treatment of evolution serves to illustrate that the belief in a natural upward progression through evolution was dying out by the end of the nineteenth century. According to Henkin, Wells’ doctrine holds that man has the power to evolve above his current state and cement his position as master of the world, but that this uprising will not occur automatically. Rather, Wells believed, man must struggle to rise above the natural order of things; “Dame Nature . . . can no longer be looked upon as a kind mother . . . but as an indifferent hag . . . who has to be bestriden and tamed” (243). Evolutionary meliorism, for Wells, must be actively pursued, not taken for granted. Whereas Darwin had painted a reassuring vision of upward ascent through natural selection, by the turn of the century Wells realized that nature’s course often leads towards devolution rather than progress.¹⁸

Equally as significant as this loss of faith in nature’s upward ascent was the Modern loss of faith in the assumption that man himself can be an agent of progress. The new field of psychology quickly put an end to the idea that man could rise above his animal state to a higher existence. Shermer explains that for Freud, Darwin’s theory was the second in a series of blows to the collective human ego; the first being Copernicus’ debunking the geocentric view of the solar system and the last being Freud’s own theory of psychoanalysis; all of these, for Freud, contribute to our present understanding of our insignificance and lack of agency (285). Whereas, as Cervetti explained, science appeared to the Victorians as a tool by which to rise above nature

¹⁸ See also Chapter 4, “Laying the Ghost of the Brute: The Fear of Dgeneration,” in Ruse’s *The Vital Science*. Ruse cites Wells’s belief that we must “confront a self-chosen future rather than the one nature will otherwise foist upon us” (114).

and control his own destiny, Freud denied the possibility of human agency and mastery over nature; for Freud, man was not even master of his own mind.

The twentieth century advancement of the social sciences, founded solidly on evolutionary principles, helped to further undermine the idea that human agency truly aids progress. As social theorists began to apply the principles of natural selection to human society, the doctrine of the survival of the fittest began to look more and more distasteful. Gunther Stent illuminates the difference between nineteenth and twentieth century attitudes towards natural selection: whereas social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer championed the idea that the fittest should survive, applying Darwin's idea of natural selection in the animal kingdom to human affairs, the early twentieth century movement towards eugenics by the Neo-Darwinians and the distastefulness of the Nazi doctrine of racial superiority raised doubts as to whether fitness to survive should be a "value-laden" term. Stent claims that post-World War II biologists have been increasingly wary of the idea that society should be structured according to the principle of natural selection. However, redefining fitness to survive has proven problematic. Man intuitively knows that his life is more valuable than that of microscopic life forms—yet, in a biological sense, an amoeba may possess more fitness to survive in terms of adaptability to its environment. Thus, by the mid-twentieth century, Darwin's promise of a better future for all through evolution had begun to have a hollow ring ("The Transformation of the Idea of Progress" 14-15). A society where natural selection reigns unchecked through eugenics, genocide, or euthanasia is not progressive but barbarian, as the world wars demonstrated quite effectively; a society where natural selection no longer weeds out the biologically unfit may mean the evolutionary regress of the human race. Greene, too, alludes to this inherent contradiction within the evolutionary idea of progress—a contradiction which, Greene claims,

has led modern biologists to increasingly “minimize the role of natural selection in human history and to treat mankind as a single unit undergoing progressive transformation” (101). If progress is to mean the survival of the biologically fit, then human altruism—the very quality which seems to set us apart from the animals as higher beings—is actually capable of destroying our race. Herbert Spencer, a contemporary of Darwin’s, was among the first to wrestle with this contradiction. Spencer connected Darwinian evolution to social evolution, identifying racial conflict and the destruction of weaker nations by stronger ones as a catalyst of progress. However, Spencer found himself in a dilemma between valuing personal and national freedom and recognizing that “Nazi race theory, not free enterprise, was the logical outcome of the biologizing of social theory” (Greene 95). The world wars illustrated beyond a doubt that natural selection carried to its logical conclusion by human society was hideous and destructive.

The world wars served to demonstrate exactly how harsh the doctrine of the survival of the fittest can be and to destroy any illusions that man was progressing upwards in his evolution. Neither Christian nor evolutionary meliorism held much water by the end of World War II; Greene describes the modern belief in progress as having been “shaken to its foundations by the events of the twentieth century—two devastating world wars, a great economic depression, and the nightmare of totalitarian dictatorship” (53). The world wars were undoubtedly the most significant of these three factors. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell describes World War I as a “hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century” (8). Parrinder cites the intellectual development of L. T. Hobhouse, the only British sociology professor of his time, as an example of how World War I eroded the Victorian vision of evolutionary meliorism. Hobhouse maintained this faith in social progress through science until after World War I, when, “[f]ar from continuing to expect global

evolution to reach ever-greater moral heights, Hobhouse came to doubt whether humanity had the moral wisdom needed for its own survival” (20-21). In the world wars, man emerged as the villain and nature as the victim; the Romantic vision seemed destroyed forever by man’s evil. World War I British war poetry strongly contrasts the beauty of the pastoral English countryside with the ugliness of war. Clausson explores the trench lyric, a genre that emerged in World War I, as both an extension of the Romantic nature lyric and a reaction to the horrors of war.¹⁹ The trench lyric, written mostly by soldiers during or after their time on the battlefield, typically mourned the loss of an idyllic past to modern warfare. A dominant pattern throughout the poems Clausson cites is to begin with a pastoral scene set in the poet’s past and to end by shifting forward to the poet’s present situation in a trench or on a battlefield. Poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon offer ample examples of this progression; an exemplary poem in Clausson’s study is Robert Coullson’s “From the Somme” (1916). Coullson begins with pastoral reminiscence:

In other days I sang of simple things
 Of summer dawn, and summer noon and night
 The dewy grass, the dew-wet fairy rings,
 The lark’s long golden flight.
 Deep in the forest I made melody
 While squirrels cracked their hazel nuts on high (108).

But the poet ends by mourning the loss of this pastoral bliss, lamenting,

A singer once, I now am fain to weep
 Within my soul I feel strange music swell

¹⁹ Clausson claims that World War I poetry is patterned after Romantic lyrics in style, language, and tone in part because soldiers did not have any other genre available to serve as a poetic model.

Vast chants of tragedy too deep—too deep
For my poor lips to tell (108).

This poem and the genre it represents bear witness to the change in how nature was perceived after the war. The vision of progress through nature or through human agency was forever marred, and communion with nature's beauty seemed lost to what Piette calls "the wasteland of technological warfare" (23). Thus, whereas nature in the Victorian era—and even for H. G. Wells in the early Modern era—had seemed a threat to the progress of man, the early twentieth century saw a shift towards viewing man, with his warfare and technology, as a threat to the world and to nature itself.

Coupled with the post-war sense of a lost pastoral idyllism was the realization in the early twentieth century that the laws of entropy and thermodynamics predicted nature's eventual spiral towards destruction. Robert Frost's 1920 poem "Fire and Ice" reflects an interest early in the twentieth century in new models of the world's end; whether through fire or in ice, the new physics assured the public that the end of the world was coming and would be brought about through natural means—the future held neither a glorious revolution as man evolved into new and better forms, nor a religious climax in which God would establish his kingdom on earth. Parrinder explains how this "materialist eschatology" led to an ultimately meaningless view of the future of the human race; nothing ultimately matters if the universe is simply winding down to a halt to disappear forever. This new view of the world's end rendered a belief in progress impossible and ushered in a relativistic view of truth—truth became whatever was most instrumental to man's present happiness. A totally meaningless view of life, without the hope of redemption through either biological or religious progress, left a vacuum that had to be filled; any belief that made life worth living became acceptable, regardless of its correspondence with

reality (27-28).²⁰ This pragmatic view of truth opened the door to a new search for beliefs—whether true or untrue—that would make life meaningful. Morton points out that Darwin’s materialism has been further vindicated as science by the work of modern geneticists like Mendel, chemists, and physicists, and yet “[n]o scientific assumption of the period up to 1900 now seems more question-begging . . . than that materialism is the simplest and most coherent philosophical position” (223). As discussed in Chapter 1, Darwinian materialism as a scientific position has not hindered the modern literary imagination and its foray into the imaginary supernatural; throughout the Modern era and into postmodernity, materialistic science fiction and fantasy writers continued to explore new ideas in the search for a belief system that might sustain modern man with meaning and purpose.

A comparative study of Tennyson’s and White’s retellings of the Arthurian legend will illuminate the many ways in which these authors responded to the implications of evolutionary science through rewriting a preexisting story. The stories of the past look different in the light of the present, and the existence of these two works offers us a rare glimpse at the drastic effect of evolutionary thought on how the literature of the past is interpreted. Both men would radically alter the Arthurian legend, preserving characters, plot, and setting, but inserting post-Darwinian values. Tennyson’s pre-Darwinian response to evolutionary science in *In Memoriam* and post-Darwinian response in *Idylls of the King* are both attempts to reconcile new scientific theories with old religious beliefs. In contrast, White’s post-World-War-I response to evolutionary science in *The Once and Future King* is an attempt to forge a new set of beliefs out of the ruins of Christianity—a faith which, for White, as for many twentieth century scientists, is simply assumed to be defunct. Tennyson would focus on the tragedy of eroded religious faith and failed

²⁰ Parrinder cites William James’ pragmatism as an important forerunner to Modern relativism.

evolutionary progress, whereas White would explore the possibility of a new system of value and meaning in the face of Darwinian materialism.

Chapter Three: Science, Faith, and Doubt in *In Memoriam*

In order to understand the influence of evolutionary science on Tennyson's reinterpretation of Arthurian legend, it is vital to examine his explicit attempt to reconcile faith and evolution in *In Memoriam*, an expression of grief over the death of Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam. T. S. Eliot famously describes Tennyson's faith in the poem as "a poor thing," (626), and Willey describes him as "a soul unprovided with Christian supports" confronting universal problems (146). Willey describes Tennyson's well-known fascination with the science of his age, citing in particular his interest in geology, which Willey describes as "the most decisive shock" to the Christian faith Tennyson seemed to embrace in his early years (148).²¹ Most critics agree that by the time Tennyson finished writing *In Memoriam*,²² he was fully convinced of the truth of materialism. August echoes the widespread twentieth-century view that the poem is, indeed, an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile materialism and Christianity. Yet, August asserts, the poem stands as "one of the few poems in which an attempt is made to see man as a biological phenomenon with a past, present, and future Tennyson, studying works like the *Principles of Geology*, *the Vestiges of Creation*, and *the Preliminary Discourse on the study of Natural Philosophy*, was making this effort to see the phenomenon of man as contemporary science revealed it" (10).²³ Thus, if the poem is a failure at producing a workable synthesis of faith and science, it nonetheless succeeds as an honest attempt to portray man as he really is, if early evolutionary science were assumed correct. Sacrificed in that endeavor is any real attempt at faithfulness to Christian doctrine—despite the poem's reception by Tennyson's contemporaries as a triumphal theodicy. Ruse describes Tennyson's Victorian readership as a "gullible public"

²¹ Tennyson's reading of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* in 1837 did much to undermine his faith, according to Willey; Lyell's explanation of species extinction seemed, to Tennyson, to preclude a belief in a loving and sovereign God and the Christian doctrine of immortality (Willey 149).

²² The poem was written over a span of seventeen years, from 1833 to 1849.

²³ Ruse specifically identifies Chambers' evolutionary texts as a primary influence upon *In Memoriam* (150).

who accepted the poem as a Christian text, although it “followed the doctrine [of evolution] into a blasphemous perversion of Christianity” (150). Tennyson does periodically insert passages throughout the poem that reassure his audience of his belief in God, but the poem’s real conclusions about the universal problems it confronts are distinctly naturalistic. Tennyson had many reasons for maintaining this appearance of faith; Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had not yet been published, and Victorian society as a whole was not yet ready to wholly abandon faith for science.²⁴ Gray maintains that Tennyson’s pretense of faith in *In Memoriam* was, in part, a successful strategy to reassure his fiancé of ten years, Emily Sellwood, that he still held to Christianity; the poem “allayed her misgivings” about his religious beliefs and enabled him to finalize his marriage to her (xiii). While still maintaining the appearance of clinging to the reassuring bank of Christian faith, Tennyson ultimately abandons Christian doctrine to face several grim implications of evolutionary science in *In Memoriam*: a materialistic view of the universe in which Man is no longer a special creation and God is either distant or absent; and a lack of order or design in man’s daily existence and the universe as a whole. Furthermore, Tennyson challenges the contemporary idea of progress through evolution in the poem, questioning whether men may indeed “rise on stepping-stones / Of their dead selves to higher things” (stanza I, lines 3-4). Finally, Tennyson depicts Nature as a cruel and malevolent force, realizing that if evolutionary theory is correct, the Romantic view of nature as friendly and nurturing is anything but accurate. These themes would persist in *Idylls of the King*, written later in Tennyson’s struggle to reconcile faith and science. Whereas *In Memoriam* predates Darwin’s *Origin of Species* by nine years, it does display the profound impact of early evolutionary science

²⁴ Tennyson, however, was ahead of his culture in his willingness to entertain the possibility of biological evolution as an explanation for human origins. Willey, explaining Tennyson’s early interest in embryology, states that Tennyson is known to have posited human evolution from lower life forms as an undergraduate (148).

on Tennyson's thinking and is worth examining before a study of the impact of evolutionary science on *Idylls* is undertaken.²⁵

Tennyson found evolutionary science so disturbing, in part, because of the type of beauty he was drawn to. Whereas Tennyson values the beauty of order, purpose, coherence, and unity in his writing, he is mistrustful of organic beauty, which he calls "fantastic" or false beauty. While praising the masterful structure and unity characterizing Tennyson's poetry, Day sees in this order a "perfection that frequently gestures beyond itself towards the unseemliness, the grotesqueness of that which cannot be ordered . . . [or] mapped" (79-80). In section 34 of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson describes the organic beauty of a purely material world as

This round of green, this orb of flame,
 Fantastic beauty; such as lurks
 In some wild Poet, when he works
 Without a conscience or an aim (5-10).

Although the words "fantastic beauty" may sound positive, according to Gray's footnotes the word fantastic here means "meaningless, like an artistic accident." For Tennyson, a disorderly world ungoverned by God's sovereign purpose is horrifying; if there is no beauty but the fantastic and aimless, the best course of action is simply to "drop head-foremost in the jaws / Of vacant darkness and to cease" (section 34 lines 15-16). Tennyson's is a profoundly anti-Romantic sentiment; Woodring explains that the English Romantics hated the idea of "[reducing] nature academically to mathematical and logical order. They saw nature, like mind, as willful, energetic, and dynamic" (196). Woodring calls this beauty the "asymmetry of the sublime,"

²⁵ See Gray's introduction to the Norton edition of *In Memoriam*; Tennyson was "particularly disturbed by reading Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) in 1837," (xxii), in which Lyell sets forth the theory of uniformitarianism, proposing that the human race will be eradicated by the same forces of time and nature which killed off previous species

(196) and for Tennyson, the sublime is not true beauty at all.²⁶ Keats' *Lamia* provides a reference point of contrast between the Romantic vision of natural beauty and Tennyson's. Sweetkind cites Keats, along with Poe, as one of many who saw "the emergent power of science as destructive to beauty" (364) in its mysterious and organic splendor; Keats loathes science for its power to "Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine / Unweave a rainbow" (60). As a Romantic, Keats prizes the organic above the scientific. Darwin, too, finds beauty in the organic and disorganized; for Darwin, natural asymmetry is sublime in its fecundity and fertility. In the *Origin* he asks us to consider "a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each to other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us" (373). Darwin sees in nature's randomness an underlying adherence to principle; Tennyson sees chaos ungoverned by a unifying purpose. Tennyson's discomfort with the organic is even apparent in his flaws as a storyteller; Eliot writes that "Tennyson could not tell a story at all" (622). Tennyson's valuation of constructed over organic beauty would influence both *In Memoriam* and his interpretation of the Arthurian legend in *Idylls of the King*.

Tennyson's ambiguous adherence to Christian doctrine in *In Memoriam* foreshadows his religious stance in *Idylls of the King*, a work in which he delves even more explicitly into the implications of Darwinian materialism unmitigated by Christian hope. *In Memoriam* opens with a traditional hymn to God:

Strong Son of God, Immortal Love,

²⁶ The sublime is recognized in philosophy as related to the beautiful but not identical to it; beauty is typically associated with pleasure and symmetry whereas sublimity is typically associated with fear and even death.

Whom we, that have not seen they face,
 By faith, and faith alone, embrace
 Believing where we cannot prove” (Prologue lines 1-4).

Although the prologue identifies God as the sovereign creator of all, man’s inability to prove God’s existence takes center stage at once. Tennyson then explains the difference between faith and knowledge: “We have but faith: we cannot know; / For knowledge is of things we see; / And yet we trust it comes from thee” (Prologue lines 12-23). By Tennyson’s definition, faith is not knowledge in the Positivist sense that science can be called knowledge.²⁷ Already, although God has been affirmed and praised, we are told that we cannot truly know him; distance and uncertainty are both implied. The poem does not reflect Tennyson’s efforts to relate personally to God; neither does it suggest any particular experiential or scriptural knowledge of God on Tennyson’s part. The poet is completely consumed with human relationships and concerns. For Tennyson, God’s main purpose is as a unifying device; the idea of God creates the harmony and order necessary to turn the universe and the individual into a coherent whole. In the Prologue, Tennyson prays

Let knowledge grow from more to more,
 But more of reverence in us dwell;
 That mind and soul, according well,
 May make one music as before (lines 26-29).

Scientific knowledge, for Tennyson, must be tempered by religious sensibilities if man is to have an orderly and balanced existence. These religious views cannot be founded upon knowledge or experience, but they are nonetheless essential to man’s happiness. Tennyson again turns to God

²⁷ For further discussion of the relationship of Positivism to Victorian literature, see Peter Allan Dale’s *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture: Science, Art, and Society in the Victorian Age*.

as a source of coherence at the end of the poem; the last stanza of the epilogue rejoices that Hallam is alive in God:

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 141-144).

For Tennyson, this unity is the ultimate consolation; the nature of the divine event may be unknown and the God may be unknowable, but to invoke him is to paint a coherent and satisfying picture of time and the universe. It is the idea of God, not God himself, which Tennyson sees as powerful. Tennyson does appear to gain some consolation for his grief in God's existence; Tennyson asks God to forgive his mourning and tells God "I trust [Hallam] lives in thee" (Prologue line 39). However, most of the poem is centered on earthly consolation—the kind which can be known according to the Positivist definition of knowledge, rather than merely believed.

The next major implication of evolutionary science explored in both *In Memoriam* and *Idylls of the King* is man's profound insignificance. This sense of cosmic unimportance is reflected in section 6 of the poem:

One writes, that 'Other friends remain,'
 That 'Loss is common to the race'—
 And common is the commonplace,
 And vacant chaff well meant for grain.
 That loss is common would not make
 My own less bitter, rather more:

Too common! Never morning wore

To evening, but some heart did break (lines 1-9).

These lines reflect Tennyson's rejection of a primary implication of evolutionary science: that man is merely a speck on the vastness of time and space and that the whole, or species, is more important than the individual. The process of species formation and extinction, a foundational tenet of Lyell's work, placed man in a disturbing new perspective as a temporary visitor on the stage of history; section 2 of the poem reflects Tennyson's sense of despair that man is nothing compared to the larger forces of nature. Describing an old yew-tree which has stood for at least a "thousand years of gloom" (line 12), Tennyson muses on the cyclical movement of nature surrounding the tree: spring and summer come and go century after century, while "the clock / Beats out the little lives of men" (lines 7-8). For Tennyson, the enduring nature of the tree is not fascinating or beautiful; he resents the tree's "stubborn hardihood" (line 14) in the light of his own transience. That man, who thinks himself above nature, should flourish and wither while nature itself carries on unchanged seems to Tennyson a travesty.

Another major theme regarding evolutionary science which manifests both in *In Memoriam* and in *Idylls of the King* is Tennyson's profound hatred of randomness and disorder. Evolutionary theory implies a lack of any imposed order or goal, and for Tennyson, such a world is a frightening prospect. For the Darwinist, the universe is fragmented and variant—perhaps splendid and fascinating in its variation, but lacking the unity and order so essential to Tennyson's concept of beauty. As discussed earlier, Tennyson valued the beauty of order and purpose but considered organic, freely formed beauty to be meaningless and even frightening. Section 45 of the poem expresses Tennyson's intense fear of discontinuity between man's identity before and after death:

The baby new to earth and sky,
 What time his tender palm is prest
 Against the circle of the breast,
 Has never thought that 'this is I:'
 But as he grows he gathers much,
 And learns the use of 'I' and 'me,'
 And finds 'I am not what I see,'
 And other than the things I touch.'
 So rounds he to a separate mind
 From whence clear memory may begin,
 As thro' the frame that binds him in
 His isolation grows defined.
 This use may lie in blood and breath
 Which else were fruitless of their due,
 Had man to learn himself anew
 Beyond the second birth of Death (lines 1-16).

For Tennyson, the continuity of one's identity between life and death is of the utmost importance; otherwise, life is indeed meaningless. In section 50, Tennyson refers to "Time, a maniac scattering dust, / And Life, a Fury slinging flame" (lines 7-8). These, for Tennyson, are forces of random destruction which must be ordered by God for the universe to be bearable.

In section 54, Tennyson expresses a desire for meaning and purpose in the universe and turns to a vague idea of God to provide this purpose:

Oh yet we trust that somehow good

Will be the final goal of ill,
 To pangs of nature, sins of will, . . .
 That nothing walks with aimless feet;
 That not one life shall be destroy'd,
 Or cast as rubbish to the void,
 When God hath made the pile complete.
 That not a worm is cloven in vain (lines 1-9).

These lines reflect Tennyson's strong resistance to the randomness and meaninglessness of individual lives implied within the theory of evolution. Tennyson expresses a weak belief in some future reckoning, but the seeds of doubt are clearly visible within his vague vision of hope:

Behold, we know not anything;
 I can but trust that good shall fall
 At last—far off—at last, to all,
 And every winter change to spring.
 So runs my dream: but what am I?
 An infant crying in the night:
 An infant crying for the light:
 And with no language but a cry (lines 13-20).

Tennyson here returns to the dichotomy between knowledge and faith. For Tennyson, faith is inadequate and weak, a poor substitute for knowledge. His self-doubt in the phrase “but what am I?” signals that he has reluctantly accepted his personal insignificance as a product of evolution. To trust that good shall fall at last holds instrumental value in the here and now, lending structure to an otherwise meaningless existence. However, Tennyson's understanding of man's

insignificance in the light of evolutionary theory casts doubt on the notion that God will eventually step in to rightly order the universe.

The third theme of interest in tracing Tennyson's response to evolutionary theory throughout the two works is Tennyson's dismissal of the evolutionary meliorist model. Wickens, in discussing Tennyson's 1847 poem "The Princess," remarks that "Man's free will is to play an important part in the ascent upwards [which Tennyson envisions], and thus, fittingly, Tennyson [presents] a Lamarckian idea of willed evolution" (387). Wickens' article discusses Tennyson's attempts to reconcile the "dark" side and the "bright" side of evolutionary science. For Tennyson, the dark side of evolution encompasses its implications regarding God's agency, man's significance, and the comforting idea of a unifying principle within the universe. However, he also perceives a bright side of evolution: man's ability to consciously evolve upward through his own volition. According to Ruse, the hope the poem provides is rooted in "evolutionism and its prospect of progress to a race of supermen"; Ruse calls the poem a "travesty of Christianity" and attributes the fact that Tennyson's public embraced the poem as a Christian apologetic to Victorian lack of subtlety and desperation for hope and to Tennyson's poetic ambiguity (151).

While the hope of the poem is related to evolution, it is based not upon evolution's natural progress but upon man's ability to triumph over nature's course and forge his own evolution. Victorians were fascinated with the idea of growth and transformation, but this growth was typically assumed to be positive. Tennyson rejects the notion that man is naturally evolving to a higher existence, concluding that if Nature, and not God, is the true ruler of the universe, man is "A monster then, a dream / a discord." (lines 21-22). If death and violence, rather than love, truly rule the world, then man is horribly deceived and out of harmony with reality, even

more so than beasts; “Dragons of the prime, / That tare each other in their slime, / Were mellow music match’d with him” (lines 22-24). Man may have progressed physically, intellectually, and even spiritually, but if his soul is permanently out of sync with the reality of nature, his condition is to be pitied rather than praised.

Section 143 of the poem presents a meliorist model which seems superficially based upon evolution: Tennyson muses that the world

In tracts of fluent heat began,
 And grew to seeming-random forms,
 The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
 Till at the last arose the man;
 Who throve and branch’d from clime to clime,
 The herald of a higher race,
 And of himself in higher place,
 If so he type this work of time
 Within himself, from more to more;
 Or, crown’d with attributes of woe
 Like glories, move his course, and show
 That life is not as idle ore,
 But iron dug from central gloom,
 And heated hot with burning fears,
 And dipt in baths of hissing tears,
 And batter’d with the shocks of doom
 To shape and use. Arise and flee

The reeling faun, the sensual feast;
 Move upward, working out the beast,
 And let the ape and tiger die (lines 9-28).

This hopeful view of mankind's future is based upon man's orderly self-improvement. Nature is not working to produce a better man; man must fight against nature to forge himself like an iron sword, imposing order upon an otherwise random existence. Prehistoric man, in Tennyson's view, did not emerge passively from the primordial slime; he fought his way out of it and must continue to do so. The poem's last section expresses a vibrant hope that a future human race will possess knowledge rather than merely faith; he will be "No longer half-akin to brute" (line 133) and, instead of disorder and randomness, will know that "one far-off divine event / To which the whole creation moves" (lines 143-44). This man does not simply arise; neither is he created. The forerunner of this race actively produces his own existence from out of the void: "A soul shall draw from out the vast / And strike his being into bounds" (lines 123-24). He will "be born and think, / And act and love" (lines 126-127), and his progress and the progress of his "crowning race" (line 128) will be the result of present human agency: "For all we thought and loved and did, / And hoped, and suffer'd, is but seed / Of what in them is flower and fruit" (lines 134-36). If the future is to be bright, it will be through human agency, not through randomness or chance; Tennyson's vision of man exercising his will so as to rise above his animal origins could be termed volitional evolution. This type of willed progress, which moves against the forces of nature, can occur, in Tennyson's view, on both a personal and a racial level. The "crowning race" foretold in line 128 of the Epilogue represents volitional evolution on a racial level, but their forefather is the hypothetical child whose birth Tennyson foretells; this child will exercise volitional evolution on a personal level, effecting an immediate change in himself that will ripple

into future generations. Tennyson predicts that this child will “be born and think, / And act and love, a closer link / Between us and the crowning race” (Epilogue lines 126- 128). This child, in a sense, is the Christ figure of Tennyson’s vision of evolutionary redemption; he will make choices that raise him above the level of “half-akin to brute,” (Epilogue line 133) and thus will father a new generation of supermen like himself. Tennyson’s theory of volitional evolution, the true source of peace and comfort in the last section and throughout *In Memoriam*, is the consolation with which he replaces Christian meliorism in the poem.

A last important concept introduced in *In Memoriam* which develops further in *Idylls of the King* is Tennyson’s mistrust and fear of Nature itself. This is not to say that Tennyson cannot find beauty in nature; rather, Tennyson finds in nature the meaningless, frighteningly random beauty to which he refers as “fantastic beauty” in section 34: beauty without order or reason. For Tennyson, this particular form of beauty is frightening rather than pleasurable. Several sections of *In Memoriam* present a pastoral and idealized view of Nature during the years when Hallam was still alive; however, like Time in Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill,” Tennyson’s Nature was simply holding these youths “green and dying” (line 53) in the mistaken belief that she cared for them. In section 24 of the poem, Tennyson admits that this remembered pastoral paradise may very well be an idealized figment of his imagination: “And was the day of my delight / As pure and perfect as I say?” (lines 1-2). Section 55 of *In Memoriam* reflects perhaps most clearly Tennyson’s negative view towards Nature after Hallam’s death:

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life;

That I, considering everywhere
 Her secret meaning in her deed,
 And finding that of fifty seeds
 She often brings but one to bear (lines 5-12).

Here Tennyson refers to the evolutionary concept that Nature selects individuals to be sacrificed for the good of the species, a concept which he finds repulsive. Tennyson's nature is like an unnatural and heartless mother, who conceives many children only to abort most of them.

Adams asserts that Tennyson's personification of nature in various works subverts not only the archetypal idea of "Mother Nature" but also the Victorian ideal of woman as a complement and caretaker for man. Tennyson views the Nature of evolutionary science as the direct opposite of the ideal Victorian woman: she is calculating and harsh where she ought to be nurturing and gentle. Later, in section 56, Tennyson recognizes that evolution's Nature has no feeling or love, even for the group or the species:

'So careful of the type?' but no.
 From scarped cliff and quarried stone
 She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
 I care for nothing, all shall go (lines 1-4).

The thought that Nature cares only for the group and not for the individual was horrible indeed, but what is even more horrid for Tennyson is the realization that Nature simply does not care—that there is no purpose, not even a purpose which tramples the individual for the good of the whole.

Tennyson recognizes that Christianity provided both kinds of purpose: the individual and the global. He contrasts the false sense of importance and purpose man has so long enjoyed with

the reality of evolutionary science: “Man, her [Nature’s] last work, who seemed so fair, / Such splendid purpose in his eyes,” is completely unjustified in believing in such a purpose. This man,

Who trusted God was love indeed

And love Creation’s final law—

Tho’ Nature, red in tooth and claw

With ravine, shriek’d against his creed—(lines 13-16).

has utterly deceived himself. Nature, for Tennyson, is not so much an active antagonist as an uncaring mother whose children mistakenly believed in the existence and agency of their supposed father, God. Just as Nature is a failed mother, Tennyson’s God is in many ways a failed father, betraying his children’s trust and constantly “at strife” with their mother. These themes of God’s absence, man’s insignificance, the world’s lack of order, and nature’s cruelty can all be traced through *Idylls of the King*, in which, in the absence of Arthur as Christ figure, “there grew great tracts of wilderness / Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came” (“The Coming of Arthur” lines 10-12). Furthermore, in *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson would espouse a less optimistic view of the prospect of man’s overcoming his animal identity through exercising his will; Tennyson’s concept of nature and man’s animal identity becomes stronger in comparison to man’s will between *In Memoriam* and *Idylls*. Although these views are less explicit in Tennyson’s Arthurian poem than in *In Memoriam*, they are revealing in a different way because they are applied to a pre-existing work of fiction, allowing us to examine what happens when the grim implications of evolutionary science are transported to the world of fantastic fiction.

Chapter Four: Rebuilding Arthurian Legend in *Idylls of the King*

Although Tennyson's *Idylls* is not regularly examined as a response to evolutionary science in the way that *In Memoriam* has been, the work is a less didactic and more imaginative outworking of many of the same ideas. Furthermore, whereas *In Memoriam* is a response to pre-Darwinian evolutionary science, *Idylls* was written between 1856 and 1874, directly surrounding the publication of *Origin of Species*. While *In Memoriam* offers at least a measure of optimism and hope, *Idylls* is heavy with a sense of impending doom. T. S. Eliot cites evidence that Tennyson, disillusioned by "the progress of industrialism and the rise of the mercantile and manufacturing and banking classes . . . contemplated the future of England, as his years grew out, with increasing gloom" (626). By the late 19th century, Tennyson appears to have resigned himself to the idea that "[t]he old order changeth, yielding place to new" (*PA* line 408),²⁸ leaving old faith open to doubt. Even Tennyson's King Arthur, departing for a Christianized afterlife in Avalon, is unsure that the afterlife exists, admitting that his "mind is clouded with a doubt" (299). Whereas *In Memoriam* ends with a bright vision of a future race "no longer half-akin to brute," living in harmony with "God, who ever lives and loves," *Idylls* ends with Arthur's civilization reeling back into the primal darkness, and with Arthur himself doubting the existence of the immaterial. *Idylls of the King* repurposes the original content and structure of the Arthurian story to express Tennyson's increasing certainty since his writing of *In Memoriam* that faith must be discarded in the light of evolutionary science and his increasing doubt in the potential for evolutionary progress—even the progress through human agency which he hoped for in *In Memoriam*. As evolutionary science developed an increasing hold upon popular

²⁸ This chapter will use the section abbreviations standard to critical discussion of *Idylls of the King*. CA will denote "The Coming of Arthur"; GL will denote "Gareth and Lynette," MG will denote "The Marriage of Geraint," GE will denote "Geraint and Enid," BB will denote "Balin and Balan," MV will denote "Merlin and Vivien," LE will denote "Lancelot and Elaine," HG will denote "The Holy Grail," LT will denote "The Last Tournament," G will denote "Guinevere," and PA will denote "The Passing of Arthur."

thought, Tennyson moved from attempting to synthesize it with old beliefs in *In Memoriam* to exploring its darker implications in *Idylls of the King*. The central problem of *Idylls* is man's animal identity, and the failure of Tennyson's experimental solution—belief in an ideal that lacks validity precisely because of man's animal identity—is the central tragedy of the work. *Idylls* employs Christian symbolism, turning Arthur into a Christ figure, in order to experiment with belief in a supernatural ideal as a means of facilitating volitional evolution. Through Tennyson's lens, the main theme of the Arthurian legend becomes the tragedy of man's inability to raise himself through his own agency from an animal to a higher being, and the fall of Camelot becomes a tragic parable about the failure of volitional evolution: the failure of man's will to transcend his biology. This failure, for Tennyson, is a necessary consequence of the absence of a unifying ideal that can motivate man to will his own self-improvement; Tennyson sees that in a material world, ideals must be artificially manufactured, but that man's natural intelligence tragically outruns his ability to believe in these ideals, and thus as Leodegran tells Arthur, "Here between the man and beast we die" (CA 45).

As *In Memoriam*, *The Idylls* strongly reflect Tennyson's doubt in the existence and agency of God and the supernatural—this time without a return to the appearance of belief at the work's end. For Tennyson as the writer of *Idylls*, belief in the supernatural is valuable to the extent that it can help us to impose order on the wildness of nature, both in our world and in ourselves. Recognizing that man with no ideal cannot hope to evolve above the level of the beast, Tennyson explores in *Idylls* the Jamesian idea that the existence of a supernatural ideal is worthwhile because of its pragmatic value if not its truth value. As Malory had done, Tennyson

casts Arthur as a Christ figure.²⁹ However, Arthur's function as a Christ figure may be contrasted with the child in the Epilogue of *In Memoriam* to illustrate the difference between *In Memoriam*'s cautious optimism and the disillusioned pessimism of *Idylls*. Whereas the child functioned as an effective Christ figure, successfully fathering a new race of men who will rise above their animal origins, Arthur is a failed Christ figure in that his efforts to redeem man from his animal nature are not successful.

Tennyson's Arthur is unique as a Christ figure in that his identity, and even his reality, are doubtful. Arthur, like Tennyson's God, is distant and unknowable; his perspective is rarely shown and his actions are rarely explained. This vagueness is consistent with Tennyson's repeated suggestions that Arthur is perhaps not real, and that at any rate, his reality is not where his potential value lies. Whereas Malory makes no mistake about the fact that Arthur's kingship was legitimate, beginning *Le Morte D'Arthur* with a detailed account of Arthur's conception and birth, Tennyson's Arthur's identity remains shrouded in unresolved doubt. While trying to determine Arthur's parentage to decide whether to give Arthur his daughter Guinevere's hand in marriage, Leodegran learns that the truth of the king's identity is known only by Merlin and Bleys, (CA 145-160) neither of whom voices any definitive answer to the question of Arthur's origins. Leodegran also questions the Queen of Orkney about Arthur's origins to no avail; finally Leodegran has a dream in which a "phantom king" (CA 429) hovers above a scene of war and destruction "Now looming, and now lost" (CA 430). The partakers in the violent scene below continue their slaughter, "crying, 'No king of ours, / No son of Uther, and no king of ours'" (CA437-38). Suddenly, in Leodegran's dream, "the haze [descends], and the solid earth [becomes] / As nothing, but the King [stands] out in heaven, / Crown'd" (CA 440-443). On the

²⁹ Malory's Arthur, in addition to the prediction of a second coming on his tombstone, is rumored not to have died but passed "by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and men say that he shall come again, and he shall win the holy cross" (926).

basis of this dream, Leodegran immediately decides to grant Arthur his daughter—not because of who Arthur truly is, or because of anything Arthur has done, but because of the power of Arthur’s image to drive away disunity and animal-like violence. Shaw explains that Tennyson “resolves the debate over Arthur’s divine origin by judging the proposition by the quality of life and action that belief in it promotes” (44). In this sense, Arthur mirrors the God of *In Memoriam*, who does not so much merit belief and trust on principle as he offers men a method of ordering their own existence through belief in him.

Tennyson’s Arthur resembles Malory’s and other early Arthurs in that his principles are sometimes difficult to reconcile. According to Machann, the poem represents a “broad cultural movement whereby idealized versions of 'chivalry' were associated with attempts to improve society,” yet Machann notes Tennyson's “own conflicted attitudes toward the central figure of King Arthur” which reflect the poet’s ambiguous treatment of the chivalric code and the Arthurian value system (37). Tennyson’s Arthur’s values are far less defined even than Malory’s. Malory’s Arthur commits adultery and slaughters children, like the biblical Herod, in a vain attempt to sidestep the prophecy that a child born on May-Day will be his doom; however, Malory sets him up as a Christian hero who will rise again to “win the holy cross” (926). Malory also makes it clear that Arthur stands for a specific chivalric code; he gives his knights very specific instructions “never to do outrageousness or murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy . . . and always to do ladies . . . succour, upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, nor for no world’s goods” (100-101). Malory’s Arthur, though not perfect, clearly stands for a value system beyond himself. Tennyson’s Arthur, on the other hand, issues no such clear moral code; Tennyson’s

focus on Arthur in *Idylls*, like his focus on God in *In Memoriam*, seems largely to concern Arthur as a unifying ideal rather than as an acting agent.

Although Arthur is presented as an ideal, it is the mere presence of an ideal, and not the substance of the ideal itself, that Tennyson finds meaningful—Tennyson sees the absence of a cultural ideal as a potentially irreparable loss. The poem begins with a dedication to Prince Albert, which eulogizes him as “my king’s ideal knight” (Prologue line 7), connecting Albert and Arthur as stabilizing ideals. However, immediately we are told that this ideal knight is dead: “The shadow of His loss drew like eclipse, / Darkening the world. We have lost him: he is gone” (Prologue lines 14-15). The connection between Albert and Arthur is made a trio through the capitalization of the word “His,” which recalls Christ as the ultimate ideal who is, perhaps, as lost in the post-Darwinian Victorian consciousness as Albert. Albert’s death leaves a void to be filled by a new stabilizing ideal, just as the decline of Christian faith after Darwinian materialism creates a vacuum where a unifying ideal used to be. Tennyson creates a celestial image to emphasize Albert’s representation of the distant and perhaps unreachable ideal, calling Albert a “star” which the surviving queen must remember (45). He further develops this imagery throughout the poem, applying it most often to Arthur, who represents the unifying ideal of the main narrative.

Although Albert and Arthur are both Christ-like ideals, they do not, like Malory’s Arthur, enjoy the certain prospect of resurrection. Tennyson establishes that Albert is dead and England’s future bliss is uncertain; he hopes for “some inheritance / Of such a life, a heart, a mind as [Albert’s] (31-32), but sees no certain return of Albert’s glory. Just as in *In Memoriam*, Albert and Arthur as Christ figures represent order and harmony, which, for Tennyson is essential for beauty. The Christ figure is valuable precisely because he is not organic or natural;

he works against nature to create order out of chaos. However, Tennyson's timeline in *Idylls* does not conclude with "one far-off divine event" as *In Memoriam* does; the ordering influence of religion applies only to the here and now.

Tennyson experiments with Arthur's potential as a Christ figure to remedy the central problem of evolutionary science: its reducing man to the level of beast. In lines 41-45 of CA, Arthur is called upon to remedy a situation in which human and animal identities have become confused, just as they did in the Victorian consciousness after Darwin. As a Christ figure, Arthur mirrors the Victorian need for a supernatural ideal to assure man that he is capable of rising above nature. King Leodegran, unable to stop the bloodshed in his realm, calls for Arthur's help but is met by "an uproar made by those / Who cried, 'He is not Uther's son'" (43-44). Arthur, like Christ, is faced by those who doubt his paternity, and although his legitimacy is never verified, he is still useful: Uther begs him to rescue his kingdom from their current situation, in which "here between the man and beast we die" (45). This statement reflects Tennyson's intense opposition to the Darwinian concept of human and animal identities blurring and intermingling, an opposition which Tennyson develops throughout *Idylls*. To create this distinction between man and beast is of primary importance; the ideal is merely a tool towards this end. Arthur does temporarily remedy this crisis of identity by imposing order on the kingdom and driving out the beast; however, this victory is short-lived, and by the poem's end, man has shown himself to be just as much beast as he was at the poem's beginning.

The attempts of other characters to probe the truth behind Arthur's illusory ideal illustrate the threat posed by empirical knowledge to the belief in a supernatural ideal. Like the Victorian Christ, Arthur evokes two different public responses: some "hold him less than man," and some "deem him more than man, / And dream he dropt from heaven" (CA 180-82). Multiple theories

are set forth regarding Arthur's origins; however, a definitive answer is never given. The reality of the supernatural is secondary, for Tennyson, to what the illusion of the supernatural is able to do: to impose order, at least temporarily, on an otherwise random world. Bellicent's and Leodegran's lines of rational questioning are intentionally blocked by Merlin, as though the search for empirical knowledge cannot and should not extend to the supernatural ideals man holds to. As Bellicent relays to Leodegran a miraculous story of Arthur's birth in which Arthur drops from a flying dragon-shaped ship into a flaming ocean wave, she admits that the details of the story have not been confirmed. She reports that, upon asking Merlin to confirm its veracity, "He laugh'd as is his wont, and answer'd me / In riddling triplets of old time" (CA 400-01).

Merlin's reply is a tribute to agnosticism and relativism; he tells Bellicent "truth is this to me and that to thee" and asks "where is he who knows? From the great deep to the great deep he goes" (CA 406-10). Pinion explains, "These deeps, the alpha and omega . . . are one, synonymous with God, as in Revelation, " (183) connecting Arthur's mysterious appearance in time at the beginning of *Idylls* and his departure from time at the work's end to Christ's incarnation.

However, Arthur's "deeps," unlike Christ's, are undefinable and perhaps unreal, as the questions of where he came from, where he went, and who he is remain deliberately unanswered throughout the poem. Merlin's stubborn refusal to confirm or deny the supernatural elements of Arthur's identity emphasizes Tennyson's theme that what can be known in a scientific sense is not sufficient to motivate man's volitional evolution, and thus an illusion to believe in must be maintained. However, the probing questions of scientific minds like Bellicent's and Leodegran's will discover no substance behind these illusions, which are better left unprobed. Tragically, nature has endowed man with a rationality that drives him to discover whether his ideals contain substance. In the epilogue entitled "To the Queen," Tennyson describes *Idylls* as "shadowing

Sense at war with Soul” (36). The collapse of Arthur’s kingdom, robed in illusion and mystery, represents the tragic triumph of Sense over Soul. As more and more characters become disillusioned with Arthur’s ideals, realizing that no one in Arthur’s court is superhuman or spiritually superior, the intellect renders belief in a supernatural ideal impossible.

This theme that empirical knowledge threatens the belief in illusions necessary for human progress continues throughout the *Idylls*, explored at length in “Gareth and Lynette” and “Balin and Balan.” When Gareth and his companions arrive at Arthur’s castle to join his knights, they meet an old man to whom Gareth explains that his men doubt whether the city is real or built “[b]y magic, and by fairy Kings and Queens; / Or whether there be any city at all, / Or all a vision” (GL 244-46). The old man responds, like Merlin, in riddles, telling Gareth, “Know ye not then the Riddling of the Bards? / Confusion, and illusion, and relation, / Elusion, and occasion, and evasion” (GL 280-82). Rather than answering Gareth’s inquiry as to whether Camelot is real or illusory, the old man shields the illusion of the supernatural from Gareth’s invasive desire for answers and turns the subject to Gareth’s own reality, revealing that he knows Gareth to be lying about his identity. This fascinating exchange reinforces Tennyson’s attitude toward empirical knowledge: Gareth’s attempt to achieve volitional evolution by becoming one of Arthur’s knights in order to rise above the plane of ordinary humanity is based on multiple illusions which must be maintained in order for his plan to work. Not only must Gareth believe in Camelot, which, Tennyson implies, is likely to be an illusion, but he must also ironically operate upon a lie about his own identity to enjoy this chance at self-betterment.

In “Balin and Balan,” Tennyson experiments with this belief in illusions as a potential route of escape from the pronouncement of evolutionary science that men are nothing more than animals. Balin is known before he becomes Arthur’s knight as “Balin, ‘the Savage’” (BB 51) for

the lawless and animal-like existence he has led; Arthur calls him to a higher existence, to “walk with me, and move / To music with thine Order and the King” (BB 73-74). For a while, the ideal in which Balin believes enables him to rise above his animal identity—he believes he is something better than before, and so, for a time, he is something better. This ideal demands a volitional evolution of sorts from him: he is able to struggle against nature under its influence. Once forgiven for his crimes and knighted, he decides to “strictlier set himself / To learn what Arthur meant by courtesy, / Manhood, and knighthood” (BB 154-56). Struggling against his animal nature in the name of supernatural illusions, Balin takes Lancelot as a model of the ideal knight but soon finds that Lancelot possesses a biological fitness that surpasses Balin’s, and begins to guess that nature, not man’s will, determines this fitness. Examining Lancelot’s superior physical prowess, Balin realizes, “These be gifts, / Born with the blood, not learnable, divine, / Beyond *my* reach” (BB 170-73). Here Balin first begins to question the notion that biology cannot be overcome through force of will as Tennyson implied in *In Memoriam*.

Although Balin realizes the biological limitations nature has imposed on him, he mistakenly believes he understands the key to overcoming biological limitations, imagining that belief in an ideal can endow man with gifts that nature did not bestow. Balin concludes that Lancelot has achieved his own superior fitness to survive by believing in and reverencing ideals that transcend nature; he posits that Lancelot’s “worship of the Queen” is “the sunshine that hath given the man / A growth” (BB 175-78). Balin, like Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, is intrigued by the idea of rising above his evolutionary station by believing in an ideal. The substance or lack thereof of the ideal does not matter; in fact, Balin specifically desires a false Queen, determining to obtain “some token of [Arthur’s] Queen / Whereon to gaze” (BB 184-85) rather than the Queen herself. By carrying “some goodly cognizance of Guinevere, / In lieu of this rough beast

upon my shield . . . tooth'd with grinning savagery" (BB 191-93), Balin hopes to replace his own savagery with order and discipline. Arthur agrees to this prescription of an ideal as a remedy for animal nature, telling Guinevere to give Balin her image because "The Crown is but a shadow of the King, / And this a shadow's shadow, let him have it, / So this will help him of his violences!" (BB 199-201). Balin protests that the image of the Queen's crown is "no shadow" to him but "light" and "golden earnest of a gentler life" (BB 203-05). Like a prisoner in Plato's cave, Balin clings to an image thrice removed from reality. For a while, Balin's remedy is successful; he "[feels] his being move / In music with his Order, and his King," (BB 207-08), and the image allows him to exercise self-restraint of his beastlike tendencies as he "[strives] / To learn the graces of their Table, [fights] / Hard with himself, and [seems] at length in peace" (BB 233-34). However, Tennyson inserts a disturbing image shortly before Balin's artificial and forced belief in this ideal is crushed, suggesting that the randomness and disorder of nature is stronger than the exercise of will which a belief in the supernatural may temporarily grant man. Among his descriptions of Balin's efforts to overcome his own nature through his will, Tennyson compares Balin to a nightingale, which "Hath ever and anon a note so thin / It seems another voice in other groves" (BB 210-11). Balin, like the nightingale, is a product of nature with its tendency towards disorder and decay, and his artificially imposed self-control, maintained through a belief in the supernatural, cannot hold off his inner beast forever. Tennyson compares Balin's tendency towards nature and away from order by comparing him to the nightingale's changeable song: "Thus, after some quick burst of sudden wrath, / The music in him seem'd to change, and grow / Faint and far-off" (BB 212-14). The power of Balin's belief cannot overcome the power of his natural instincts.

With the collapse of Balin's already shaky program to rise above his animal nature through exercising his will, Tennyson illustrates the failure of a pragmatic solution to the lack of an ordering ideal in a world where no man can truly transcend his animal nature. For Tennyson, an ideal does not need substance to promote temporary order and unity; however, an order founded on an illusory ideal will come tumbling down as soon as the illusion is destroyed by experiential knowledge and the Emperor is seen to have no clothes. When Balin overhears a conversation between Lancelot and Guinevere, his ability to sustain his upward evolution by belief in an ideal is destroyed, because he realizes that they, his ideals, are no more supernatural than he is. Whereas Tennyson maintained in *In Memoriam* a belief in the superman who can rise above the animal state of most men, the very best characters in *Idylls* have feet of clay, demonstrating evolution's lack of power to raise its most exemplary human products above the rest of nature. Lancelot's and Guinevere's conversation about flowers reveals that even Guinevere, to whom Balin looked as an ideal outside of nature, is not above nature herself. Lancelot relates to Guinevere a recent dream of "That maiden Saint who stands with lily in hand / In yonder shrine," holding a "spiritual lily" and shining "perfect-pure" in the flower's glow" (BB 255-61). Guinevere tells Lancelot that she is not attracted to such supernatural scenes, preferring "this garden rose / Deep-hued and many-folded!" and finding "Sweeter still / The wild-wood hyacinth and the bloom of May" (BB 264-66). The rose represents earthy, romantic, and sexual love, while the lily represents spirituality and resurrection. According to Joseph, "In Guinevere's refusal of apotheosis, she makes Lancelot . . . sit down to the sensual feast of this life; in her insistence upon remaining a flesh-and-blood woman, a "garden rose," rather than becoming the "spiritual lily" into which Lancelot tries to crystallize her ("Balin and Balan," 11.

235-75), we see the . . . Tennysonian "fatal woman," the carnal subverter of man's flight heavenward (425).³⁰

The significance of this image of the nature-bound woman, who destroys man's attempts at transcending nature, to Tennyson's reaction to evolutionary science in *Idylls* becomes apparent when contrasted with Tennyson's personified Nature "red in tooth and claw" in *In Memoriam*, who "Shriek'd against [God's] creed," destroying man's trust in "God" and "love" as "Creation's final law" (section 56, lines 13-16). Whereas in *In Memoriam* Nature was an evil mother, spawning children without nurturing them, Nature is similarly represented in *Idylls* by Guinevere as a *femme fatale* who destroys man's ability to believe in ideals. Guinevere represents the organic or fantastic beauty that Tennyson considers false; she prefers the organic wildness of Darwin's tangled bank to the cultivated and unnatural image of a religious statue holding a sacred lily. Tied by biology to an attraction to Guinevere's earthy beauty, Lancelot lacks sufficient willpower to overcome her influence. When Balin realizes that the Queen herself is not above nature, he regrets the empirical knowledge that has disillusioned him from his dream of overcoming biology, finding that knowledge ironically retards, rather than assists, his evolution towards a higher existence: "I suffer from the things before me, know, / Learn nothing; am not worthy to be knight" (BB 279-80). For Balin, to be undeceived by observational knowledge is not a blessing but a curse. He immediately reverts to his former beastlike violence, "blind and deaf to all / Save that chain'd rage, which ever yelpt within" (BB 314). According to Machann, Balin's decline to "bestiality, like Dr. Jekyll receding into Mr. Hyde" illustrates "the relationship between madness and unregulated male violence," (40) suggesting that instinctual aggression is stronger than reason. For Machann, Balin's and Balan's simultaneous murder illustrates the inability of reason to conquer instinct once stripped of illusory ideals: "Balan and Balin have

³⁰ Joseph compares this scene to Poe's *Ligeia*.

been consistently portrayed as a divided self, and in the end the rational self (Balan) can control the savage, bestial self (Balin) only by destroying it" (40). Arthur, too, destroys the beast in the work's beginning as he cleanses the land of violence and wildness; however, his attempt ultimately succeeds only in the downfall of Arthur himself. Belief in an ideal ultimately becomes impossible to sustain in a world where nature and reason consistently reveal ideals to be nothing more than illusions.

Throughout the *Idylls*, Tennyson continues to explore the meaninglessness implicit in a Darwinian view of life—a view in which the illusions of supernatural ideals give way to naturalistic reality. Evolutionary science implies the lack of a central moral code or supernatural purpose to lend meaning to man's actions, and it also suggests that the species is more valuable than the individual, rendering the individual life and actions seemingly insignificant. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin insists, "When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings . . . they seem to me ennobled: Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity" (373). Whereas Darwin sees this loss of the individual's special status and lasting legacy implicit in the theory of evolution as ennobling, Tennyson uses the Arthurian legend to mourn the tragedy of man's dethronement from his seat at the center of creation. One function of Tennyson's Arthur—and his God in *In Memoriam*—is that they bring at least illusory purpose and importance to individual lives. In both works, without this ordering purpose, life becomes ugly and meaningless. Although Arthur temporarily succeeds in uniting and ordering his kingdom, it ultimately crumbles as entropy sets in and the beast in man dominates once more. Closely following this breakdown in the order Arthur has imposed is a sense of profound insignificance among various characters. At the work's outset, actions done in the name of

Arthur's ideal are significant and meaningful; as the illusion of Arthur as an ideal disintegrates, the context that infused heroic deeds with meaning is lost.

Gareth's pleas to his mother in "Gareth and Lynette" as he begs for permission to join Arthur's court display the importance of this ordering purpose: Gareth cries that he must "Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King-- / Else, wherefore born?" (GL 117-18). While these lines reflect the idealism and energy of youth, they also reflect the meaninglessness implicit in a life without such ideals. As Gareth adventures with Lynette, he comes across a Baron about to be killed by a band of murderers likened to animals (the Baron compares them to "vermin") (GL 802). When Gareth frees the Baron and is asked what reward he expects, he replies, "None! For the deed's sake I have done the deed, / In uttermost obedience to the King" (811-12). Here Gareth admits that his actions are meaninglessness beyond the context of belief in the ideal which infuses them with purpose. In slaying the four brothers on his quest, called "the Day, / Morning-Star, and Noon-Sun, and Evening-Star," (GL 618-19) Gareth symbolically battles the forces of both nature and time. Despite the story's happy ending in which "Death" turns out to be a "blooming boy" (GL 1390) in a frightening costume, Gareth's victory has no real-world value; its value lies entirely in the realm of ideas and illusions. He celebrates with the lady he rescues, and they "[make] merry over Death, / As being after all their foolish fears / And horrors only proven a blooming boy" (GL 1388-90). However, the fact that their fears are foolish and unfounded means that Gareth's actions, heroic in the context of chivalry and knighthood, were insignificant in the world of reality; he has subdued nature for the "Deed's sake," but has not really conquered death or nature at all. Without the ordering purpose of Arthur's manufactured code, Tennyson suggests, Gareth would lack any motivation even to struggle against the forces of nature.

However, this sense that life has purpose and meaning erodes as Arthur's ordering power over nature decays later in the work. In "Merlin and Vivien," Merlin finds his "use, and name, and fame" (MV 302) stolen from him by Vivien, another of Tennyson's fatal women who, like Guinevere, represents Nature's power to destroy the unifying and ordering ideals of religion and morality. In "Balin and Balan," Vivien foretells the death of religion and a return to primitive nature-worship: "This old sun-worship . . . will rise again, / And beat the cross to earth, and break the King / And all his Table" (451-53). As Vivien tries to seduce Merlin into revealing the magic that will allow her to imprison him in a tree, Merlin dimly perceives that his identity and significance are about to be eradicated by Vivien, that "wave about to break upon me / And sweep me from my hold upon the world, / My use and name and fame" (MV 300-03). Likening Vivien to an unconquerable force of nature about to erase his identity, Merlin correctly foreshadows Vivien's plot to destroy him and the ideals of Arthur's court. Vivien, as a representative of Nature, sees no one as a special creation, not even the King; she scoffs to Mark at the idea that Arthur is more "pure" than other men, claiming that "Great Nature thro' the flesh herself hath made / Gives him the lie!" (MV 49-51) and promising to, like an animal, "[ferret] out [the] burrowings" of Arthur's "Order" and destroy them (MV 55-56). Armed with this disbelief in the ability of any man to transcend nature's downward pull, Vivien plots to attack Merlin, a man considered special for his role in building Arthur's "havens, ships, and halls" and for his otherworldly knowledge (MV 166). Vivien's success in wearing down Merlin's will and imprisoning him within nature itself—with no hint of a future return—illustrates the lack of any man's special significance in the light of Nature's power to eradicate and erase.

As Vivien continues to wear down Merlin's will, he foresees the approach of a "World-war of dying flesh against the life, / Death in all life and lying in all love, / The meanest having

power upon the highest, / And the high purpose broken by the worm” (MV 191-94). Merlin’s dark thoughts echo the “evil dreams” sent by Nature in *In Memoriam* as Tennyson muses on the implication of evolutionary science that Nature cares nothing for the individual lives she generates: “So careful of the type she seems, / So careless of the single life” (section 55 lines 5-7). The Darwinian “war of nature” and “the Extinction of less-improved forms” (*Origin* 374) implies for Tennyson a tragic loss of individual significance and a warped reversal of value, as the “worm” may have more biological significance, from a Darwinian standpoint, than the man. As Merlin’s special status gives way to oblivion, encased in an oak tree forever, Tennyson paints a cruelly ironic picture of man’s significance outlasted by Nature. When Vivien triumphantly calls Merlin a “fool,” Nature itself mocks the individual it has just erased: in the last line of “Merlin and Vivien,” “the forest echo’d ‘fool’” from Vivien’s lips, (MV 970-72) gloating, like Vivien, in the triumph of nature over those who wish to transcend it. The Round Table which Merlin helped Arthur to build represented the glory of individual accomplishments; it “was to be, for love of God and men / And noble deeds, the flower of all the world” (MV 410-11). However, the order represented by the Table will soon, like Merlin, give way to oblivion, swept away by the forces of nature.

By the last section, “The Passing of Arthur,” Arthur himself realizes his own insignificance and transience as nature’s forces consume his carefully cultivated kingdom. As Arthur is dying, Bedivere mourns the decay of Arthur’s Order and the loss of significance it lent him:

But now the whole Round Table is dissolved
Which was the image of the mighty world,
And I, the last, go forth companionless,

And the days darken round me, and the years,
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds (PA 402-06).

For Bedivere, Arthur's ability to infuse men and deeds with meaning mirrors Christ's ability to do so; he observes that "the true old times are dead,"

When every morning brought a noble chance,
 And every chance brought out a noble knight.
 Such times have been not since the light that led
 The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh (PA 397- 401).

When Arthur and Christ held power, life was meaningful and hopeful; now that his civilization is "[Reeling] back into the beast" (LT 125), individual lives and deeds are of little value. Arthur answers Bedivere with tragic resignation:

'The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
 And God fulfills himself in many ways,
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world' (PA 408-10).

Although Arthur here seems to hint that God still offers hope that man can rise above his natural station, claiming that men who do not pray are no "better than sheep or goats / That nourish a blind life within the brain" (PA 418-19), Arthur expresses a doubt in the supernatural that undermines the halting religious assurance he voices; also, Arthur's focus in urging Bedivere to pray is on the ability of prayer to raise a man's status from that of a sheep or goat, suggesting that the praying man transforms himself through belief in an ideal. Telling Bedivere that he is departing to Avilion to heal from his fatal injuries, Arthur interrupts himself with a telling correction: "if indeed I go / (For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)" (PA 425-26). Arthur could be headed to paradise, but the perception of Arthur himself, the best and keenest character

in Tennyson's work, seems to indicate that this belief is perhaps a comforting way to infuse one's dying with a measure of meaning and significance.

Bedivere is not so resigned to this uncertainty; like the soldiers dying in the battle, who "Look'd up for heaven, and only saw the mist" (PA 112), he strains for some assurance to the question of the afterlife and existence of the supernatural. To Bedivere, "it seem'd" there came sounds of victory welcoming Arthur from beyond the world (PA 457), but he cannot be sure, and one of his last thoughts displays a desire of the Soul to believe but an impulse of the Sense towards disbelief: "He (Arthur) passes . . . [and] comes again; but—if he comes no more—" (PA 449-51). Tennyson again undercuts belief with skepticism as Bedivere strains to see the departing king, telling us that Bedivere "saw . . . Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King" (PA 463-65). Bedivere's honest evaluation of sensory input is certainly questioned here. Both Arthur and Bedivere seem to cling to belief as a source of significance and continuity between life and death, but neither is able to fully convince himself; unlike *In Memoriam*, the work ends not with a confident assurance that man can transcend nature but with a nagging doubt that anything beyond nature exists.

When Bedivere overhears Arthur mourning in his tent before the last battle, he discovers Arthur tracing the same paths of thought that Tennyson explored in *In Memoriam* regarding the significance of man's deeds on the sweeping timeline implied by evolutionary science, as well as man's significance to a God who once seemed so concerned with his welfare. Arthur muses,

'I found Him in the shining of the stars,
I mark'd Him in the flowering of His fields,
But in His ways with men I find Him not.
I waged his wars, and now I pass and die.

O me! For why is all around us here
 As if some lesser god had made the world,
 But had not force to shape it as he would,
 Till the High God behold it from beyond,
 And enter it, and make it beautiful?
 Or else as if the world were wholly fair,
 But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
 And have not power to see it as it is:
 Perchance, because we see not to the close;--
 For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
 And have but stricken with the sword in vain;
 And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
 Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
 Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
 My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death:
 Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die' (PA 9-28).

Although the last line hints at the hope of an afterlife, Arthur's and Bedivere's aforementioned doubts belie Arthur's belief in this hope. In these lines, Arthur bemoans his lack of agency in a world ruled by Nature rather than God. His bitter words contrast darkly with the hope expressed in *In Memoriam* that God's master plan allows for but also transcends the violence and apparent waste of natural selection; "That not one life shall be destroy'd, / Or cast as rubbish to the void, / When God hath made the pile complete (section 54 lines 6-8). Although Arthur defended an ideal against the destructive forces of Nature, imagining himself to be a specially favored servant

of God, Nature, represented by his beastlike men, will soon eradicate his identity and the effects of all his heroic actions. The opening lines of Arthur's monologue, in which he admits to finding God in Nature but not in human life, are chilling rather than comforting; either Nature is the nearest real thing to God in this world, or God is just as indifferent to His children as the Nature of *In Memoriam*. Indeed, if Arthur's God exists, he seems more akin to Hardy's "purblind doomsters" or "vengeful god" ("Hap," lines 1,13). This God is not so cruel as he is simply absent, turning a blind eye to man's individual suffering just as Nature in *In Memoriam* generates children only to destroy them. In either case, Arthur tragically realizes the vanity of all his actions in the light of Nature's power to erase and destroy.

Tennyson's mourning for this loss of individual significance, connected in *In Memoriam* explicitly with the implications of evolutionary science, is accompanied by his mourning for the triumph of disorder over order in a Darwinian worldview. As discussed in chapter 3, Tennyson values the beauty of cultivated order rather than organic spontaneity, finding Darwin's "tangled bank" to be frightening rather than beautiful. Tennyson, who has often been thought insipid and overly genteel, startlingly remarked to his son Hallam that "'the lavish profusion . . . in the natural world appalls me, from the growths of the tropical forest to the capacity of men to multiply, the torrent of babies. I can almost understand some of the Gnostic heresies" (*Memoir*, I, 314). In this antisocial and profoundly naturalistic statement, Tennyson echoes not only the concern of Victorian evolutionists, derived from Malthus' work, that human reproduction is occurring too quickly, but also Darwin's vision of the "tangled bank" inhabited by varying plants and animals thriving upon the laws of "Growth and Reproduction" (373). Joseph assures us that this remark remembered by Hallam was not uncharacteristic of the poet: "Tennyson's affinities to the world of pure spirit frequently assume this shrinking form, a terror at the ease with which

vegetative and inorganic life—weeds, insects, and houses—take on a morally ambiguous animation and a menacing sentience” (421).

Tennyson introduces this theme of negative fertility in the poem’s first section, “The Coming of Arthur,” describing a time when “the heathen host / Swarm’d overseas . . . so there grew great tracts of wilderness, / Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came” (CA 8-12). Here Tennyson introduces the idea of negative fertility: Nature left to its own devices will reproduce, creating havoc. Tennyson describes the sorry condition of pre-Arthurian Britain thus:

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;
So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear
Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,
And wallow’d in the gardens of the King (20-25).

This primal setting is excessively fertile—the “wet woods” reminiscent of the swamps of evolutionary theory make a perfect environment for undesirable creatures to spawn. Tennyson goes on to describe how these beasts would capture and raise feral human children, who eventually “grew up to wolf-like men, / Worse than the wolves” (32-33). Here Tennyson confronts the Darwinian concept of man’s animal identity; for Tennyson, unchecked natural fertility results in a blurring of the distinction between man and beast. Whereas, in *In Memoriam*, man struggled against nature to rise above the level of beasts, in the *Idylls* man’s struggle is primarily with his own animal nature. Darwin established man’s animal identity more firmly

than ever before, and this is the primary source of Arthur's failure in *Idylls*; Nature is no longer pictured merely as an external force but as an insurmountable enemy within man himself.

Hill sheds some light on the connection between man's Darwinian animal identity and Tennyson's idea of negative fertility: "The Darwinian hypothesis—that man and ape were biologically descended from some common ancestor—was a hard pill for Victorians to swallow. Well before *The Origin of Species* appeared, however, they had already become highly sensitized to any association between animal and human behavior, particularly of a sexual nature" (Hill 676). As Victorians began, under Darwin's influence, to view sexuality as an animal urge rather than as a spiritual or supernatural impulse, it became associated with man's animal nature, connecting him to lower life forms rather than to God. Hill cites the euphemism for the sexual union which gained popularity in Victorian times, "making the beast with two backs," (676) as an example of the Victorian equation of sexuality with bestiality. For Hill, post-Darwinian Victorians' stereotypical discomfort with sexuality betrayed a fear of their newfound knowledge of the animal within man himself: "However much their language and manners may seem to deserve the adjective prudish, underneath lay a deep dread that animalistic license in human conduct would or could become fatal to the species, beginning with the dissolution of the family" (Hill 676). In this light, Tennyson's callous remark about the "torrent of babies" becomes an expression of his suspicion that man is truly no higher than the beast, unable to control his reproductive urges. If this is the case, Tennyson realizes, the Victorian image of motherhood is entirely upturned; maternity is not a sacred calling but an uncontrollable instinct representing man's affinity with beasts.

Guinevere, as a symbol of Nature, mirrors the Nature of *In Memoriam* whose reproductive potential is bestial rather than sacred. Remaining faithful to previous Arthurian

material, Tennyson presents Guinevere as childless, but Arthur gives us an idea of the sort of mother she would have been as he castigates Guinevere at their final meeting: “Well is it that no child is born of thee. / The children born of thee are sword and fire, / Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws” (G 421-23). Here Tennyson refers back to the Nature of *In Memoriam*, who, “red in tooth and claw,” inverted the Victorian ideal of the feminine as discussed in the previous chapter; her capacity for biological reproduction becomes a threat rather than a thing of beauty as she lacks the gentleness and nurturing instinct that should characterize a mother; her children would be no less animal than she is.

It is no coincidence that Arthur, as Tennyson’s Christ, represents sterility and even virginity, contrasting with Nature’s negative fertility. He is not earthy and imperfect enough for Guinevere’s natural sexual tastes; in her banter with Lancelot, Guinevere scoffs at Arthur’s “passionate perfection,” asking “who can gaze upon the Sun in heaven?” (LE 122-23). Her criticism of Arthur as a lover reveals the incompatibility Tennyson perceives between “fantastic” or false beauty and the supernatural ideal: “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 color” (LE 132-34). Guinevere, who represents nature throughout the work, values the organic beauty of fertility above the ordered beauty which would dictate that she select Arthur as the fittest and most advanced partner, just as Tennyson’s Nature in *In Memoriam* produces children haphazardly without regard for them or their well-being. Darwin cautions that we should not “marvel if all the contrivances in nature be not . . . absolutely perfect . . . or if some of them be abhorrent to our ideas of fitness” (*Origin* 362). Tennyson cannot, like Darwin, gloss over this imperfection inherent to Darwin’s world; for him it is a travesty well represented by Guinevere’s failure to select the higher partner in the love triangle. When Arthur finally confronts her with his

knowledge of her adultery, he tells her, “I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine / But Lancelot’s: nay, they never were the King’s” (G 548-49). Arthur also reminds the Queen, “I was ever virgin save for thee” (G 554). This pure Arthur contrasts quite starkly with previous Arthurian material—Malory’s Arthur is much more licentious, intentionally committing adultery. Arthur tells Guinevere in their final conversation that he designed the Round Table to channel the ordering power of virginity and the restraint of sexual desire, explaining that there is “no subtler master under heaven / Than is the maiden passion for a maid, / Not only to keep down the base in man, / But teach high thought” (G 475-78). For Tennyson, one of the values in a belief system based upon a supernatural ideal is its ability to order and subdue Darwin’s fertile natural world by restraining reproductive urges. However, Tennyson suggests, such a system cannot hold back the beast in man forever.

Guinevere’s sexual choices lead to regret once she understands that Nature has led her to choose organic, fantastic beauty above cultivated, ordered beauty. She realizes her mistake too late after Arthur has departed for his final battle, mourning that she “yearn’d for warmth and colour which [she] found / In Lancelot” (G 642-43), but now recognizing that Arthur is “the highest and most human too” (G 644) and that “It was [her] duty to have loved the highest” and “would have been [her] pleasure had [she] seen” (G 652-54). Here Tennyson questions Darwin’s premise that “natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being” and will “tend to progress towards perfection” (*Origin* 373). The failure of volitional evolution, for Tennyson, lies in man’s (or woman’s) inability to reject organic beauty for the beauty of order and design: to choose the best above the most sexually desirable or to choose order over chaos. Guinevere’s romantic attraction represents the incapacity of natural selection to aid in man’s upward evolution.

Just as he used God in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson uses Arthur as Christ figure to symbolize the unity and order that constitutes his idea of true beauty. This unity is directly opposed to Darwin's "Divergence of Character," a product of evolution that creates "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful" (*Origin* 374). Arthur's function is to converge rather than to diverge, battling the fertile randomness of nature with a cultivating touch that transcends nature. Although Malory portrays Arthur as a unifier of tribes and kingdoms, Tennyson greatly emphasizes Arthur's ordering influence in the realm of nature, a theme practically absent from Tennyson's sources (Malory and the *Mabinogion*). Furthermore, whereas Malory repeatedly reminds readers of Merlin's supporting role in the establishment of Arthur's civilization, Tennyson focuses on Arthur himself as cultivator of his realm, emphasizing the unity so crucial to his concept of beauty. Describing the land before Arthur's reign, Tennyson notes that Arthur's father and the previous ruler had "fail'd to make the kingdom one" (CA 15), blaming the land's animal wildness. Tennyson's Arthur succeeds where they had failed because he united all the "petty pryncedoms . . . and made a realm, and reign'd" (CA 19). Arthur imposes order upon nature as soon as he establishes his realm: after driving out wild men and animals, he "fell'd / the forest, letting in the sun, / and made / Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight" (CA 59-61). For Malory, the forest is sometimes magical and sometimes dangerous; however, Malory simply accepts its presence as fact, whereas Tennyson sees its "lavish profusion" as a direct threat to order and beauty, blocking out the sun with its excessive fertility and hindering man in his efforts to establish order. Arthur's triumph over disorder echoes the last section of *In Memoriam*, wherein Tennyson describes man's purposeful rise from the entropic cycle of nature through his own agency.

Another image describing the land of Cameliard before Arthur's reign reinforces Tennyson's dislike of nature's randomness: since there were "none of few to scare or chase the beast," wild animals "Came night and day, and rooted in the fields, / And wallow'd in the gardens of the King" (CA 22-25). The garden has long been a symbol of nature tamed by human cultivation,³¹ and Tennyson uses the desecration of a garden as a symbol of nature's unchecked ugliness. Morton's analysis of Alfred Russell Wallace's *Darwinism*, published in 1889, reveals how it echoes Tennyson's use of garden imagery while taking a far more optimistic view of evolution. Wallace pictured man as the gardener of the earth appointed by evolution; he happily assures his readers that the "random fecundity of the 'tangled bank'" (a metaphor taken from Darwin) will inevitably be tamed by man's "ingenious regulation" (56). For Wallace, man is appointed by Nature herself as gardener; for Tennyson, man battles nature in his role as gardener. Much later in the work, when Camelot is poised to fall, Tennyson returns to garden imagery to picture the decay of Arthur's imposed order. Modred is determined to "spy some secret scandal" (G 26) whereby he can destroy Arthur's order, and thus, dressed in green, this personification of organic disorder who seems to Guinevere a "subtle beast" (G 58) literally invades Arthur's cultivated sanctuary as he "[climbs] to the top of the garden-wall" (G 25). When Lancelot apprehends Modred and temporarily overturns his plans, Tennyson compares him to "the gardener's hand" which "picks from the colewort a green caterpillar" (G 31-32); Lancelot seizes Modred "by the heel, / And [casts] him as a worm upon the way" (G 34-35). Although Lancelot's efforts at maintaining Arthur's cultivated garden by symbolically weeding it are temporarily successful, the beast and the worm eventually triumph over man's imposed order when Camelot falls, illustrating the failure of man's efforts to sequester and control parts of

³¹ See Carpenter's "Marvell's 'The Garden'" on how Andrew Marvell, in his poem "The Garden," uses the garden to symbolize the place where art and nature meet. Carpenter explains that his symbolic significance of the garden can be traced to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's cultivation of Eden.

nature while blocking out its fiercer elements. The order that constitutes Tennyson's true beauty cannot survive the disorderly forces of nature forever; its tendency to spread variety and disorder inevitably arises as an insurmountable obstacle to the creation of order which constitutes true beauty.

Whereas the gardens in "The Coming of Arthur" need rescuing from literal beasts, the garden invaded by Modred needs protection from man's animal nature—protection which Arthur tries to create by uniting his followers beneath a common ideal. For Tennyson, the vows of the Round Table serve one real purpose: to humanize his followers by uniting them under a common ideal. Arthur's knights are loyal primarily not to a moral code but to him; they promise "we will work thy will / who love thee" (CA 259-260), and Arthur binds them by "strait vows to his own self" (CA 261). The nature of these vows or of Arthur's will is of secondary importance; the vows create order simply by creating unity. Bellicent attests to their ordering influence in his description to Leodegran of Arthur's knights immediately after swearing their vows: "I beheld / From eye to eye thro' all their Order flash / A momentary likeness of the King" (CA 269-71). For Tennyson, Arthur's unifying influence is a triumph over natural variety and disorder.

This triumph of manmade unity over organic variety crumbles as the illusion of Arthur's supernatural ideal begins to fade. Percivale's conversation with the monk Ambrosius reinforces Arthur as an agent of volitional evolution, overcoming nature's course by creating order out of chaos. After describing Arthur's rescue of a maiden in distress as an effort to "smoke the scandalous hives of those wild bees / That made such honey in his realm" (HG 214-15), Percivale goes on to mourn the loss of Arthur's temporary victory over nature. Describing the "mighty hall / Which Merlin built for Arthur long ago" (HG 225-26), Percivale details the "four great zones of sculpture" (HG 232) inside 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 234-39).

This statue, a clear image of volitional evolution, represents Arthur as an ordering ideal; returning to the astronomical imagery discussed earlier, Tennyson has Percivale observe that it points to the North Star which, though unattainable, provides man with guidance and direction (HG 240). Percivale explains how the statue serves as an ordering influence for Arthur's people, who "Behold it, crying, 'We still have a king'" (HG 245). To have a king to serve as a supernatural ideal, pointing to the stars and away from earthy restraints, creates order and unity that raises man above the beast. The four pieces of sculpture point back to Tennyson's prediction in *In Memoriam* of the "crowning race" (Epilogue 128) of the future, which will be no longer "half-akin to brute" (Epilogue 133) as man currently is, but will evolve into higher and better forms. However, the work ends with the failure of this attempted rise as man, rather than progressing from the second zone of sculpture to the third, regresses back to the first as his bestial nature takes over. For Machann, this sculpture indicates not merely the cycle of Arthur's kingdom but the entire progression of human civilization: "It is as though in establishing his order, instead of building on previous orders, Arthur must begin from the beginning, and Tennyson appeals to the primal human fear of beasts that recalls a prehistoric time before mankind dominated the earth, when human beings were hunted prey as well as hunters. In this sense Tennyson implies that Arthur's order corresponds to an entire cycle of civilization The

fundamental problem for Arthur's Order of the Round Table is to provide the ritual and teach and enforce the discipline needed to control . . . (natural) male bestiality Tennyson focuses on irrational, instinctual male violence as the primary source of civilization's ills" (40-41). Thus, Machann indicates, Tennyson's tale of Arthur's temporary victory over natural disorder through an illusory supernatural ideal is a microcosm of human history, conveying a pessimistic view of the long-term success of the supernatural ideal as an ordering influence which contrasts sharply with Tennyson's pre-Darwinian optimism in *In Memoriam*. Tennyson, as the writer of *Idylls*, sees man's power to create order amidst Nature's chaos as short-lived and fragile, yet glorious while it lasts.

Nature is undoubtedly the villain of *Idylls*, overturning man's efforts to carve order out of chaos from both without and within. Tennyson is far more concerned with natural setting than previous Arthurian writers, structuring the Arthurian legend around seasonal imagery so that spring corresponds to Arthur's ascent, summer to his reign, fall to his decay, and winter to his destruction. While this seasonal imagery is often poetic, it also implicates Nature in the fall of Camelot, connecting Arthur's failure to the inevitable triumph of winter over summer. While Tennyson's pre-Darwinian view of Nature in *In Memoriam* was far from positive, Darwin's portrayal of the justifiable "war of nature" which produces a "most exalted object" of higher life forms (*Origin* 374) does nothing to soften Tennyson's views. Despite Darwin's insistence that "There is grandeur in this view of life" in which "endless forms most beautiful . . . are being evolved" (*Origin* 374), Morton explains how post-Darwinian literary and artistic concepts of nature declined sharply from the Romantic view of nature into a mistrust and fear, citing the painter John Ruskin's philosophical dismay at his garden being consumed with weeds and mold and T. H. Huxley's deliberate attempts to "rectify the impression left by Darwinism in most

minds of nature as a wanton” (86). Morton later describes Ruskin’s “sunken and immobilized despair before a nature turned treacherous in his writings,” and Huxley’s “noble and actively stoical pessimism of a biologist with no romantic illusions of nature left to be shattered” (87). This new post-Darwinian pessimism towards nature, foreshadowed before its time in *In Memoriam*, clashed violently with the Romantic pastoralism to which the Victorian public was accustomed. *Idylls* exhibits the same anti-pastoral sentiment as *In Memoriam*. There is a sense of falsehood and illusion even to the passages describing natural beauty; they tend towards the “clutter of ominous detail upon detail” which, according to Joseph, “provides a hallucinatory intimation of a writhing, indifferently fecund universe” in much of Tennyson’s work (421).

Fertel explores this antipastoralism in *Idylls* at length, showing how Tennyson inverts Romantic pastoralism to reflect upon the true nature of nature according to Darwin. According to Fertel,

Without intending a wholly pastoral treatment in his poem, Tennyson expected his title to raise certain generic expectations. In a limited sense, his *Idylls* are 'idyllis.' They are set in the Golden Age of Britain when, compared to Victorian England, men were men and nature was uncluttered by factories and waste--and the need for a Second Reform Bill. However, the title takes on ironic resonance when we realize that in this preindustrial tale men are as likely to reel 'back into the beast' as to be simple and natural, and that in it nature is anything but benign. The title is ironic too in linking the genre of shepherds and swains with a king.” (339)

Fertel goes on to explain that Arthur, too, takes on ironic pastoral qualities, partaking through his association with Christ in the role of the Good Shepherd. However, Arthur ultimately fails as shepherd, his carefully cultivated sanctuary overrun by men compared to wild beasts. Fertel explains that Tennyson’s is a disillusioned take on the pastoral theme: "Both the title of Tennyson's poem and his central character partake of pastoral associations, but they do so only to

call into question the pastoral ideals of spontaneity, simplicity, innocence, and the benignity of nature” (337).

Throughout *Idylls*, Tennyson subverts the Romantic view of nature by revealing the Darwinian ugliness behind pastoral commonplaces. One of these subversions occurs in “Merlin and Vivien,” when Vivien attempts to besmirch the character of Arthur’s knights, including Percivale. Merlin defends Percivale from her accusations of adultery by claiming that, if Percivale ever did commit sexual sin, it was a one-time event rather than a habit for him. Merlin argues that Percivale is “sober” and pure,” “But once in life was fluster’d with new wine, / Then paced for coolness in the chapel-yard; / Where one of Satan’s shepherdesses caught” and tried to seduce him (MV 753-56). Here Tennyson mocks the pastoral theme of shepherd and shepherdess, turning from a picture of youthful, innocent love into dark seduction. The interaction between Gareth and Lynette serves as a larger example of Tennyson’s anti-pastoralism. Their adventure takes place in the Spring section of *Idylls*, among blooming flowers and singing birds. Lynette enters Arthur’s court glowing with pastoral charm; she boasts “a brow / May-blossom, and a cheek of apple-blossom” (GL 574-75) and a “slender nose / Tip-tilted like the petal of a flower” (576-77). However, Lynette’s personality is far from that of a pastoral shepherdess; she is as caustic and cruel as Nature herself in *In Memoriam*, mocking Gareth’s happy songs about Nature’s beauty with a harsh dose of realism. Gareth, trying to ignore her, sings, “O birds, that warble to the morning sky / O birds that warble as the day goes by, / Sing sweetly” (GL 1049-51). Lynette reacts sarcastically to this bit of Romantic doggerel: “What knowest thou of birds . . . ? what dream ye when they utter forth / May-music growing with the growing light, / Their sweet sun-worship? These be for the snare / (So runs thy fancy) these be for the spit, / Larding and basting” (GL 1052-57). Although the banter between Gareth and

Lynette, of which this is a small sample, is meant to be amusing, Lynette's statement here is also an indictment of the unrealistic pastoralism that attempts to sanitize and euphemize man's Darwinian place in nature. Her response to Gareth's song to the birds as if he shared some affinity with them is an insistence that Gareth (as a kitchen-boy, but also as a human being) is their natural enemy, not their spiritual friend. An attempt at some harmony with birds or other elements of nature (Gareth directs another romanticized verse at flowers and meets with similar mockery) is ridiculous, since Darwin's "war of nature" implies that we and the birds are not on the same side, but each fighting independently for his own survival.

This emphasis on the dark side of natural selection throughout *Idylls* represents one of two possible responses to evolutionary theory. Literature since Darwin has vacillated consistently between either a comic or a tragic treatment of his theory's implications. In *Darwin's Plots*, Gillian Beer describes the mix of comedy and tragedy that characterizes the *Origin* itself: "The will to believe in a happy world and the dark flood of insight into suffering which accompanies it is a frequent movement in Darwin's prose. It would be easy to make either an optimistic or a pessimistic selection from *The Origin*. This poignant tension between happiness and pain, a sense simultaneously of the natural world as exquisite and gross, rank and sensitive, constantly subverts the poise of any moralised description of it" (94-5). After the *Origin*, the idea of progress that had dominated the Victorian mindset for most of the century began to fade into the tragic view of evolution expressed in *Idylls*. Pre-Darwinian Christianity had also presented life as alternately comic and tragic; it included the tragedy of man's fall as well as the comedy of redemption and resurrection. Thus, in Beer's opinion, the transition from a Christian to a materialistic, Darwinian culture did not negate man's ability to take either the comic or the tragic view of life; it only altered the source of this tragedy or comedy. Morton

traces the Western understanding of a devolution, or progressive decline, of man based upon the biblical fall to the late Victorian idea of natural degeneration; Victorians suspected that nature's constructive efforts had already peaked and faced "the frightening prospect of degeneration in the future because we are already living in the bright noon, and not the dawn, of man's day. These fears co-existed uneasily with the progressivism inspired by another selection of evolutionary facts" (88). Tennyson's treatment of the Arthurian legend as the tragedy of Nature's victory over Order is a poignant expression of this fear, and the story provided him with excellent material with which to express it. Tennyson's take on the fall of Camelot as a war between beast and man is really a variation and expansion of Malory's version of the Arthurian tragedy. In *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Arthur dreams just before being killed that he is sitting on a chair attached to a wheel, just above "an hideous deep black water, and therein were all manner of serpents, and worms, and wild beasts, foul and horrible; and suddenly the king thought the wheel turned up-so-down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb" (918). Malory pictures the supernaturally driven wheel of fortune turning Arthur upside down against his will into a pit of beasts; Tennyson pictures man as the beast who drives the wheel of fortune upside down himself. For both, the Arthurian tragedy involves the fall of a manmade paradise into the clutches of wild animals—for Tennyson, writing after Darwin, man himself is included in the ranks of these animals. The elements of the Arthurian tragedy would be turned on their head a few decades after Tennyson, when T. H. White wrote *The Once and Future King*: a very different reaction to the implications of evolutionary theory in the form of a retelling of the Arthurian story.

Chapter Five: Darwinian Optimism in *The Once and Future King*

Decades after Tennyson's death, T. H. White once again rebuilt the Arthurian legends. By this time, the Western world saw evolutionary science in a very different light than their Victorian counterparts; World Wars I and II had forever destroyed the idea of utopian progress through upward evolution, proving that man can be fiercer than any animal. White, who was deeply affected by the horrors of World War I, re-interprets Malory's *Morte D'arthur* as a search for an "antidote to war" (Townsend Warner 178) in *The Once and Future King* and even more explicitly in its unpublished sequel, *The Book of Merlyn*.³² White's novel is extraordinary in that it is an expression of longing for peace, transcendence, wonder, and hope told by an evolutionist—a contradiction in terms, considering the general legacy of disillusionment surrounding evolutionary theory and Darwin as its most influential theorist. *In Darwin Loves You*, George Levine points out Darwin's reputation as the "primary disenchanter of the world" (22), and natural selection seems to sanction death and violence as a necessary means to life. However, White's interpretation of Darwin is not so simplistic; it allows not only for this tragic vision, but also for a comic vision. By rebuilding the Arthurian legends upon his tragicomic version of Darwinian myth, White is able both to present an optimistic view of man's future and a vision for world peace and provide an alternate source for the human need for wonder and transcendence. Levine notes that Darwin offers, not necessarily a bleak and hopeless view of the human condition, but "a vision of abundance, possibility, and life in which, as he says, there is 'grandeur.'" (23). White found hope in Darwinism that transcendence above the ugliness of war

³² *The Book of Merlyn* was unpublished during the war in part because of paper shortages; it covers the events between the eve of Arthur's final battle, where *The Once and Future King* leaves off, and his death in the battle. In this gap of time, Arthur is transported by Merlyn to a council of animals who aim to finish the education begun in Arthur's childhood.

is possible—for in the context of evolutionary theory, anything is possible given enough time. To achieve the “radical re-enchantment of the world” (22) which, according to Levine, Darwin’s theory can offer, White insists that we abdicate our imaginary superiority in the animal kingdom and strive, like White’s Arthur, to aid the human race in its progress by mimicking other species who have already attained a peaceful way of life. White, along with Tennyson, explores the ideas which a culture must confront along with its acceptance of evolutionary theory: the absence of a supernatural ideal which, for many, the theory seems to imply, man’s relative insignificance in the grand scheme of an evolved universe, the organic, spontaneous workings of Nature which defy cultivation, and the benignity or ferocity of Nature herself. These ideas, for Tennyson, cast Nature—both within and beyond man himself—as the villain of human affairs. However, White turns Tennyson’s treatment of these themes completely on their head. White views man himself as apart from Nature—man’s central problem is his desire to transcend nature, and the only solution is for man to embrace his animal identity rather than trying to ascend from it. White’s treatment of the Arthurian legend reflects not only his personal experiences and beliefs but also the changing beliefs of his culture regarding evolutionary science and his own conclusions based upon it.³³

White’s reaction to the implications of evolutionary science is so different from Tennyson’s in part because, by the postwar era, Darwin’s theory had evolved significantly from its early days, giving rise to more complex debates even than it had in Darwin’s day. Whereas the details of Darwin’s theory had been challenged and refined,³⁴ Page explains how studies in

³³ Townsend Warner describes in her biography of White his experimentation with ants in which he tried to determine whether ants were naturally disposed to kill ants of other colonies. He found that they were not, and this reinforced his belief that man was even more animal-like than many animals, as man is naturally disposed to war against foreigners (195).

³⁴ Morton finds it unusual that Thomas Hardy took Darwinism seriously by the turn of the century, noting “the progressive decline of Darwinism as an article of serious belief among both biologists and men of letters throughout the last half of the century” (196).

genetics after the turn of the century gradually vindicated Darwin's idea of natural selection, and this idea is generally acknowledged as a universal among scientists and thinkers; in fact, twentieth-century scientific narratives consistently emphasize its unchallenged triumph (2). The original issues raised by Darwin's theory were still being addressed in twentieth century literature, just as they had in Tennyson's day. Page recognizes that "the literary encounter with science and evolution continues to thrive in the contemporary world and that many of the questions first raised at the beginning of the nineteenth century still drive contemporary discourse. The same impulses of fascination and fear of the future found in Erasmus Darwin's poetry and Mary Shelley's novels, respectively, continue to find voice in the contemporary speculative imagination" (15). However, by White's day, evolutionary theory had become inextricably associated with current issues like ecology and socialist forms of government, and thus White's literary response to it necessarily takes on another dimension that Tennyson's could not.

The Arthurian legend has long been used as a medium through which to discuss immediate problems in a distant setting. Archibald observes that even as early as the twelfth century, the legend was shaped to address contemporary issues like romance and chivalry (145). White follows this tradition by using the legend as a platform from which to discuss his Darwinist perspectives on both ecology and socialist government.

Page notes the new focus after the turn of the century on man's carelessness with the rest of the planet: "As the twentieth century developed, humanity's destruction of the planet's ecologies became increasingly obvious and seemingly unstoppable" (195). When Darwin challenged the idea of man as special creation, he also removed man's biblical mandate—and

perhaps his justification—for dominating Nature. For White, a lifelong nature lover,³⁵ man's ecological footprint serves as further evidence that his supposed progress from the animal kingdom is actually biological regress. Describing Arthur's consciously idealized Old England in which the weather is always perfect, White observes that fishing was much easier, since "the rivers were not polluted in those days" (220). White's idealized Arthurian world contrasts sharply with Tennyson's, in which Arthur established order and structure to drive out the beast. In White's Old England, human civilization has besmirched the primitive glory of nature.

White views man as not only ecologically destructive, but ecologically useless. When Arthur asks the council of animals in *The Book of Merlyn* why they do not consider man important, Merlyn replies that besides man's ethical inferiority to other animals, his contribution to the planet's ecology is insignificant: "Would neutral nature be compelled to notice him, more than the greenfly or the coral insect, because of the changes which he has effected on the surface of the earth?" (30). Merlyn goes on to argue that earthworms are of far more importance than man because of their lasting impact on soil fertility—a sentiment that Tennyson, and even Darwin, would never have dreamed of, as both viewed man as evolution's highest achievement. White's view of ecology stems from the implication of evolutionary science that man is simply one among the animals, and this idea radically alters White's view of both the Arthurian paradise and the significance of human achievements.

Besides this new concern with ecology, White's novel also addresses the social theories that grew out of evolutionary science in the early twentieth centuries, connecting them explicitly

³⁵ Townsend Warner's authoritative biography details White's lifetime pattern of escaping from human society to seek refuge in solitary, natural settings.

with Darwinian implications.³⁶ Although White displayed early interest in socialism, his biographer, Townsend Warner, concludes he “could not have been a communist. His inclination was towards a William Morris kind of socialism, where ploughmen would not have toiling faces” (77). This is the brand of socialism described at the beginning of *The Once and Future King*, where White describes Arthur’s idyllic boyhood surrounded by serfs who worked happily and willingly in the elements of nature. By the time White was considering joining the war effort in the late 1930s, he had begun to view organized socialism with distrust. Townsend Warner cites a diary entry from 1938 in which White begs both England and Russia to reject warmakers’ efforts to draw them into conflict, “refusing to identify *England* or *Russia* with Chamberlain’s policy or Stalin’s” (101). White’s vaguely defined hope for an unorganized, natural anarchy runs throughout *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn*. Whereas evolutionary theory was used by theorists like Marx and Lenin to bolster organized socialist movements (in a peculiar blend of thought which Krementsov identifies as “Marxist-Darwinism”) (216), White bases his call for a primitive anarchism upon evolutionary principles—if man is an animal, he needs no more formal government than other animals. Interpreting the Arthurian legend in this light, White casts Arthur as a visionary, as Tennyson and Malory had done—but White’s Arthur is a visionary who realizes in the end that, rather than establishing structure in an attempt to build civilization, as Tennyson’s Arthur had done, he ought to abandon the search for a workable system of government.

Viewing man scientifically as a “political animal” (qtd. in Townsend Warner’s introduction to *The Book of Merlyn* xvi), White reduces his options for a workable government based on observation of other animals to two choices: anarchism and socialism, with capitalism

³⁶ See Nikolai Krementsov’s “Darwinism, Marxism, and genetics in the Soviet Union” in *Biology and Ideology from Descartes to Dawkins* (pages 215-46) for a thorough discussion of the relationship between evolutionary theory and Russian socialism.

notably excluded. In *The Book of Merlyn*, Merlyn observes all the political systems inherent in Nature, explaining that some animals “are communists or fascists, like many of the ants; some are anarchists, like the geese” (26). However, Merlyn observes that “I find it impossible to find an example of true capitalism in nature” (27). The boy Arthur’s lessons from both the ants and the wild geese in *The Sword in the Stone* illustrate White’s hatred of organized socialism and wishful hope for natural anarchism. Whereas the ant colony, a hardly-veiled symbol of organized Communism,³⁷ is presented as frightening and dehumanizing, the wild geese roam the skies freely and peacefully, each one “an individual—not governed by laws or leaders, except when they came about spontaneously. They had no Kings like Uther, no laws like the bitter Norman ones. They did not own things in common. Any goose who found something nice to eat considered it his own” (171). At the end of Arthur’s life, he views his childhood experiences with the wild geese as a model for the perfect human society, musing that they and other birds “had lived together peacefully, preserving their own kinds of civilization without war—because they claimed no boundaries” (638). White’s call to natural anarchism is rooted firmly in the implications of evolutionary theory; Arthur’s conclusion that man ought to mimic the wild geese by removing national identities and boundaries is based upon the concept of man’s animal identity. He reflects that “Of course man was an animal—he was not a vegetable or a mineral, was he? And Merlyn had taught him about animals so that the single species might learn by looking at the problems of the thousands” (638). Arthur reflects, using biological terminology, upon the futility of not only antlike socialism but of all organized government, reasoning from the premise of man’s Darwinian animal identity. Thus, White counters socialism, which was justified using Darwinian principles, with a Darwinian response of his own: if man is only an

³⁷ White describes leftover religious songs sung by the ants’ ancestors who “had not yet settled down to communism” (129).

animal, he ought to take as his social model the happiest and most peaceful animals. This response results in a fundamental alteration to the fabric of the Arthurian legend: whereas the tragedy of Malory's and Tennyson's Arthur is that he is unable to impose lasting governmental order, the tragedy of White's Arthur is that he realizes too late that anarchist animals are happier than socialist animals; that his attempts to impose a workable government were futile all along, and that man's evolutionary goal ought merely to be adaptation, not progress beyond the level of other animals.

Part of the reason White favors anarchism is that he does not espouse any supernaturally based moral code. White's novel is full of vitriol towards war and violence; his Arthur's central struggle is against man's warlike impulse. Notably, this impulse is almost never described as beastlike or primitive as it was in Tennyson; White constantly reminds his readers that senseless killing beyond the need for survival and food is a uniquely human trait. Townsend Warner in her introduction to *The Book of Merlyn* notes that "White's thinking was typical of the postwar epoch. War was a ruinous dementia. It silenced law, it killed poets . . . No one wanted it" (xii). White's sensitivity towards the world wars and his firm belief in evolutionary principles helped to form his morality, based not upon the supernatural or the ideal but upon altruism. White's morality is best summarized by Arthur's revelation in *The Book of Merlyn*, as he muses on what he has learned from the animals before his final battle. Arthur suddenly recognizes that altruism is the key to upward evolution; he concludes, "That was it, to mean well! He caught a glimpse of that extraordinary faculty in man, that strange, altruistic, obstinate decency" (112). This quality is seen, for example, in millions of people everywhere: "learned men who had starved for truth . . . parents who had swallowed their own love in order to let their children live, doctors and holy

men who had died to help” (112). Altruism, for White, is the antithesis to natural selection, the struggle between the fit and the unfit which the world wars so aptly demonstrated.

White’s characterization of Arthur in *The Once and Future King*, while radically different from previous Arthurs, is consistent with White’s secular morality of altruism. Arthur is far from transcendent; “not a hero of romance, but a plain man who had done his best” (554-55). Tennyson’s Arthur was a hero for his ability to temporarily order and perfect mankind; White’s Arthur is heroic simply in his altruism. The solution to Darwin’s “war of nature,” for White, is not to cling to a supernatural ideal, but rather to protect the spark of altruism in man naturally present at birth, or what Darwin calls man’s “moral sense” (*Descent of Man* 471). White’s Arthur has been educated by Merlyn among the animals “as the child is educated in the womb, where it lives the history of man from fish to mammal—and, like the child in the womb, [Arthur] had been protected by love meanwhile. The effect of such an education was that he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments for living—without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness” (388-89). Just as to “mean well” is White’s antidote to war, altruism is his antidote to the ruthless selfishness seemingly inherent in the theory of natural selection. Like many of his post-World War I contemporaries, White had rejected the Victorian idea of moral progress through ascent from nature; for White, civilization itself is the root cause behind Darwin’s great struggle. Arthur realizes at the novel’s end that if only nations and boundaries were done away with, wars could not be fought over these manmade institutions, and man could live in peace just like the animals; society is the enemy of man’s natural altruism, and, having forgotten his place as an animal, man has developed into a monster.

White references God quite frequently throughout *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn*. However, White’s characters’ references to God do not imply that White

himself acknowledges God's existence. Townsend Warner describes White's unsuccessful attempt, in the middle of his writing of *The Once and Future King*, to convert to Christianity (171).³⁸ Although God is invoked in generic prayers and featured in several parables (particularly in *The Sword in the Stone*), numerous passages such as the one in which White's omniscient narrator explains that Lancelot's "trouble from his childhood—which he never completely grew out of—was that for him God was a real person . . . and he was somehow in love with this Person" (483) illustrate White's attitude towards devout belief. Lancelot's belief in God is touching though ultimately destructive to his happiness; it brings him not peace or hope but merely guilt, and thus it is part of the problem and not part of the answer. White's view of human evolutionary progress does not include a supernatural but a natural solution; White sees no need to look beyond nature for the key to progress when it can be found in the animal kingdom. This call to natural transcendence is a post-war, post-Darwinian modification of Romanticism in which the spiritual component is removed; man is called to commune with nature by mimicry in a materialistic sense, to improve his life in an equally materialistic sense. White's ethics are intensely Darwinian and secular.

In fact, as an evolutionist, White treats Christian ethics satirically, depicting them as a cause of violence and misery rather than as a solution. The adherence of Arthurian characters to a supernatural ideal consistently results in pain, death, and loss, illustrating their evolutionary infancy. For instance, the Grail quest becomes not a spiritual victory but a futile suicide mission; Galahad is not White's hero but a self-centered, effeminate man whom "everybody dislikes" (460) except his father Lancelot. Even as a child, Galahad is a "priggish, mute little boy" (413), and his completing the Grail quest is essentially a dead end: "[t]here had been nothing left for

³⁸ According to White's letter, he was dissuaded from conversion by the Pope's lack of empathy for those slain in the war (171).

Galahad to ask of God, except death” (477). For White, holiness is not worth obtaining even if it can be found; there is no earthly good in trying to transcend one’s humanity. Lancelot describes his son Galahad as unpopular because he is “far away in his spirit, living on desert islands, in silence, with eternity” (461). For White, this spirituality results in social harm, not only alienating Galahad from others but also hastening the fall of Camelot; after the Grail quest led by Galahad, “[t]he best knights had gone to perfection, leaving the worst” to corrupt the kingdom (477). Archibald notes that this skepticism towards the value in the Grail legend originated as long ago as the thirteenth century; Arthur is never depicted by Chretien and other writers after him as going on the Grail quest or wanting to go, and he is depicted as perceiving that it will end in failure and loss of many knights (146). White capitalizes on this hint of doubt in previous Arthurian material to illustrate the futility of a moral code which does not value the preservation and continuation of life as the highest good.

White’s Darwinist morality does not hold perfection, but rather life, as the ultimate value: White observes that “What Arthur had feared from the start of the Grail Quest had come to pass. If you achieve perfection, you die” (477). This sacrifice of life for something beyond nature is, for White, a tragic waste. At the end of Arthur’s life, he reflects that “God had said . . . He that would save his life was asked to lose it,” but that Arthur rejects this “godly view” because for Arthur, and for White, life’s continuation is of more value than moral perfection. Arthur recognizes that “Obviously you might cure a cancer of the womb by not having a womb in the first place. Sweeping and drastic remedies could cut out anything—and life with the cut” (633). The Christian morality which motivates the Grail quests demands that man resign his biological drive to life fully and create life abundantly, and for White, this sacrifice is not worthwhile. To keep one’s womb and perform one’s biological function of creating new life is far preferable

than to destroy natural fertility in order to preserve the individual. For White, as for Darwin, the continuation of physical life is the highest good.

White is not alone in his satirical treatment of Arthurian ethics to make ethical commentary. In her essay “Arthurian Ethics” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, Gilbert discusses the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a postmodern spoof on the Arthurian legend, which, while it mocks both the outdated and idealistic Arthurian vision, also mocks modern ethics, ultimately portraying the Arthurian world, based in part upon traditional ethics which are “factually and morally wrong” as infinitely more desirable than the modern world in which “the fantastical is inadmissible” (168). White, too, shows how, though an ethical system based on supernatural ideals is destructive, a view of life with no room for transcendence is equally frightening. White calls neither for Christian ethics nor for materialistic amorality, but for an enlightened morality based upon natural transcendence (which is actually a return to animal simplicity). An artificially imposed ethical system, even if it is well-intentioned, cannot help man transcend above his violent nature. White presents Arthur’s and Merlyn’s attempts at this solution sympathetically; they “had worked out their theory that killing people, and being a tyrant over them, was wrong. To stop this sort of thing, they had invented the idea of the Table—a vague idea like democracy, or sportsmanship, or morals—and now, in the effort to impose a world of peace, he found himself up to the elbows in blood” (364). What Arthur failed to realize—and just begins to realize before his death—is that man, as an animal, has no need of artificial transcendence like the ideals of the Table when natural transcendence is within his grasp—his life can be as idyllic as that of the wild geese of Arthur’s boyhood if he will only embrace his animal identity rather than trying to transcend it.

The idea of the Table, for White, is not a glorious (if illusory) ideal as it is for Tennyson, but a sadly misplaced effort to control the problem of human violence. Tennyson may question the Table's veracity, but never its magnificence. White, in contrast, scientifically and meticulously details the idea from the moment it was conceived by Arthur with Merlyn's help to Arthur's plotting its implementation and mourning its demise. This step-by-step documentation has the effect of portraying the Table and its ideals not as lofty and mysterious but rather flawed and human. White follows a long tradition of undermining the idealization of Arthur and his kingdom. Archibald notes that as early as the twelfth century, "the Arthurian court is not always presented as glamorized or united, nor is Arthur always a dynamic, astute or effective monarch. From its beginnings, Arthurian romance shows itself to be far from monolithic, far from uncritical" (139). This cynicism has marked retellings of the legend through the ages; "[f]rom the twelfth century on, the idealization of the Arthurian world was questioned in both Latin and vernacular texts; and this questioning has continued up to the present day" (Archibald 139). Like White's treatment of the Arthurian world, this cynicism does not preclude admiration for the ideals implicit in the legend, such as chivalry: "both medieval and modern writers of fiction celebrate Arthurian ideals but simultaneously challenge them by means of comedy, irony, parody, satire, and sometimes outright criticism" (Archibald 139). White recognizes something attractive in the old ideals, but follows Tennyson in rejecting them as a permanent solution to man's problems.

It will be worthwhile to quote at length from Levine's *Darwin Loves You* for an explanation of how White reconciles a belief in transcendent values like altruism and love with a materialistic worldview in which man is no more than an animal. Levine argues that although the implications of Darwin's science preclude a belief in supernatural ideals or absolute moral codes,

Darwin allows for a new form of transcendence that acknowledges the terrible and magnificent beauty of nature, as unable to probe its mysteries as we are unable to probe God's. Levine acknowledges that

“some alternative to traditional reliance on the transcendent and the teleological to sustain value and give meaning to life is a genuine human need. My object . . . is to propose an alternative Darwinian world: a world ‘bereft’ of transcendental spirit that is yet laden with value and entails a deeply emotional, a ‘visceral,’ response to the workings of nature. As he tried to wrest the world from theological to scientific explanation, Darwin did not, I want to argue, wrest it away from value or from the kinds of consolations that religion has for the most part been called upon to provide. The very act of trying to understand the world materially and naturalistically entailed right from the outset of his career the attitude of wonder that is so central, on all accounts, to the experience of enchantment.” (24)

White's Darwinian worldview allows for love, altruism, and the hope for a better future through a return to nature rather than a return to God; like Darwin, White does not dismiss transcendence but simply redefines it.

White's devaluation of traditional values is based on the premise of man's animal identity, which makes violence in the name of intangible ideals ridiculous. When a young Arthur goes to visit the Badger, under Merlyn's direction, to complete his education, he rambles excitedly about his hopes for future greatness (which he believes to have been dashed by Kaye's promotion to knighthood): “I should have liked to go to war, if I could have been made a knight. . . . I should have liked to do great deeds, and be brave, and conquer my fears. Don't you have courage in warfare, Badger, and endurance, and comrades whom you love?” (194). These ideals, so central to Malory's idea of greatness, have no value when man is considered as an animal--the effect on his survival and quality of life determine the value of his beliefs. The Badger's response, “Which did you like best . . . the ants or the wild geese?” (194) questions the idea that intangible concepts are worth the sacrifice of life. The implication is that the geese are superior

to the ants, and to man in his current state, because they do not cling to ideals which cause death and division. Man, just like all other animals, ought to discard any value system not conducive to the quality and continuation of life, White's highest good.

The fact that White rejects value systems based upon supernatural ideals does not imply that he rejects values altogether. When young Wart, turned into a fish by Merlyn, is introduced to the Tench, an old and powerful fish, he encounters the extreme Darwinian ethics that he himself would entertain towards the novel's end and ultimately reject. The Tench, bitter and disillusioned, tells the boy, "Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power" (52). After making this statement, he attempts to eat Wart, the smaller fish, serving as a "predatory" (52) microcosm of the war of nature so vital to the Darwinian worldview. By the novel's end, White has established that love is not simply a trick and that not all values are illusory. He presents instead Levine's "alternative to the sense of the bleak, rationalist world . . . 'nontheistic enchantment'" (*Darwin Loves You* 22). Guenever's love for both Lancelot and Arthur illustrates the fact that transcendence can still exist beyond the bounds of Christianity. White describes Guenever as "not cut out for religion," (473) and her adulterous relationship with Lancelot certainly violates Christian ethics. However, Guenever's love for both men is sincere, moving, and transcendent. White challenges the Tench's claim that love is an illusion and power is the only reality in his description of Guenevere's mixed loyalties to Arthur and Lancelot: "You could pretend that Guenever was a sort of man-eating lioncelle herself . . . she had all the proper qualities" (471). However, the beauty of Guenever's and Lancelot's relationship as White portrays it is transcendent in a non-spiritual way; to "pretend" that Guenever was wicked and selfish would be to overlook the beauty of her relationship with Lancelot. White describes a scene between the two illicit lovers in

old age thus: “The touching thing was that the two were singing. Their voices [were] no longer full in tone,” and yet “If they were thin, they were pure. They supported one another” (540). Their relationship, full of petty squabbles, is far from perfect but beautiful nonetheless. Her love for Arthur, too, is genuine; White attributes her double love to her “sincerity of heart” and guesses that “she loved Arthur as a father, and Lancelot because of the son she could not have” (472). White’s view of a godless universe still allows for the transcendent beauty of altruism and human love, although White acknowledges that sometimes this beauty seems illusory. At the novel’s end, Arthur briefly reflects that “Perhaps man was neither good nor bad, was only a machine in an insensate universe, . . . a mechanical donkey led on by the iron carrot of love, through the pointless treadmill of reproduction. Perhaps Might was a law of Nature, needed to keep survivors fit” (630). However, White does not end the novel on this pessimistic note; although Arthur has not yet managed to answer all of life’s questions satisfactorily, his final thoughts look forward to the time when he will “come back to Gramarye with a new Round Table which had no corners, just as the world had none—a table without boundaries between the nations who would sit to feast there” (639). Arthur—and White—emerge from this dark night of the soul, not through religious consolation, but through the hope that transcendence can and will happen in a world where natural selection seems bent on [keeping] survivors fit” and man is only an animal.

Just as White does not wholly reject transcendence, but merely redefines it, he does not reject the notion of Arthur as an ideal for future generations. However, White’s Arthur is not a supernatural ideal but merely a human one. Although Arthur is inherently a tragic figure, White treats him half as a comic hero, as Arthur is often found asking foolish questions and bumbling through his reign with lovable ineptitude. In fact, his most endearing qualities are simplicity and

artlessness; White's Arthur knows that Lancelot and Guenever are betraying him, but loves them both too much to say anything. White describes him as "so plainly dressed, so gentle and patient of his simple things" and tells us that during many of Guenever's lavish parties, Arthur had been "sitting by himself in a small room, mending stockings" (544). Even Guenever views Arthur as a comic figure, "thinking of him as a faithful old thing—her friendly bear" (545). This comic treatment of a figure depicted by previous writers as solemn and tragic points to White's efforts to find transcendence in a naturalistic worldview: his hero is neither more perfect nor more spiritual than other men, but a simple, almost foolish man, who perceives a problem with his society's valuing Might above Right and tries unsuccessfully to fix it. Near the novel's end, Gareth looks at Arthur and sees "not a leader of chivalry, but the pupil who had tried to be faithful to his curious master, the magician, by thinking all the time—not Arthur of England, but a lonely old gentleman who had worn his crown for half a lifetime in the teeth of fate" (554-55). It is Arthur's willingness to think and to try—not the depth of his thought or the success of his attempts—that make him an ideal.

Cox, discussing the comic element in both Christianity and literature, sees comedy as an expression of hope in man's imperfection: "Comedy disports in the mud and gumminess of life. It has no pretensions. It saves us from trying to be angels, and allows us to say with no apology, 'I'm only human.' The clown refuses to live inside this present reality. He senses another one. . . . Through him we catch a glimpse of another world impinging on this one, upsetting its rules and practices. . . . The comic figure may be neither dignified nor manly. Few of us are. But he reveals the clay feet of the monolith. He makes us glad. In tragedy we weep and are purged. In comedy we laugh and hope" (150). White's use of the comic in his characterization of Arthur turns Arthur into just such a natural ideal: he does not transcend his subjects in an

otherworldly, ethereal way, like Tennyson's Arthur appeared to; he is only a simple man who glimpses a hope of something beyond his world and challenges the monolith in its name.

According to Archibald, the story of Arthur is built upon the idea of failure, and the "flawed idealism and heroism of the Arthurian world are surely responsible . . . for [its] enduring appeal" (150). White capitalizes on Arthur's failure inherent in the story to show that Arthur is neither spiritual nor superhuman—he is an ideal simply because he has displayed love and altruism. In fact, White consistently undermines traditional ideals throughout the novel; in addition to humanizing Arthur, Lancelot, and Guenever, White even undermines the lofty ideal of royalty, describing Lancelot's lover Elaine as "plump and dumpy . . . like Queen Victoria" (489). White consistently portrays Arthur as ordinary and even simple-minded, probing his inner confusions and conflicts where previous Arthurian writers had not dared to enter, and thus rendering the king a sympathetic peer rather than a distant hero. White follows previous Arthurian writers in questioning Arthur's credibility as a superhuman ideal. Archibald cites the anonymous romance *Rise of Gawain* composed around the 12th century as an example of a writer "deliberately mixing exciting adventure with criticism of Arthur-worship" (141). In this tale Gawain is trying to prove himself to Arthur, but ends up defeating a pagan king where Arthur could not. This incident illustrates the inherent danger in hero-worship which led to the downfall of Tennyson's Camelot: hero-worship collapses when heroes are revealed to be just as human as the rest of us. White takes care to repeatedly describe both Lancelot and Arthur as hero-worshippers; Lancelot worships Arthur while Arthur worships Kaye. Neither worship is well-founded, since both Arthur and Kaye are revealed to have feet of clay. Lancelot, like Arthur, is sympathetic yet imperfect; White observes that "Lancelot was not romantic and debonair. Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites would have found it difficult to recognize this rather

sullen and unsatisfactory child” (320). Although Arthur and Lancelot are imperfect, naïve, and misled, they can still be considered ideals in the sense that they have made their best human efforts to do the right thing.

While redefining Arthur’s and Lancelot’s roles in the Arthurian legends as distant ideals, White also redefines Guenever’s role, which in previous Arthurian material was largely defined by her adherence to or deviance from Christian morality. White’s Guenever cannot be so easily categorized; she is neither a heroine nor a villain but simply a lovable and flawed human being. White describes her as a “real person” who is difficult to write about because of her complexity; “Sometimes she was loyal and sometimes she was disloyal. She behaved like herself” (472). White’s humanizing the central characters of the Arthurian legend not only allows him to achieve psychological realism but also gently introduces a new concept of transcendence to the legend in which, as Levine explained, spirit is gone but transcendent values such as love and altruism remain.

White develops this idea of natural transcendence in multiple ways. One of these ways is the strategic use of the old language of chivalry. Arthur’s association with this archaic language carried cultural significance during White’s world war era. Simpson explains how the “language of chivalry” (68) that was vital to British national propaganda during World War II drew heavily on the Arthurian tradition; the RAF was repeatedly likened to Arthur’s knights in the British media; Churchill quoted from Tennyson’s *Idylls* comparing the British military to Arthur’s knights, and C. S. Lewis quotes Malory in his eulogy to those who fell in the Battle of Britain (68-69). The language of chivalry was invoked to lend an air of transcendence to ideals such as courage, patriotism, and freedom. However, unlike the Arthur of war propaganda, White’s Arthur speaks simply and directly; the moments of transcendence which White chooses to

elevate linguistically are not spiritual but natural. Characters revert to the “Old Language” seemingly randomly throughout the novel, and, while pivotal plot points such as Arthur’s conception of the Table are discussed in colloquial language, White uses archaic poetry to lend transcendence not to battle scenes or jousts, but to scenes such as Robin Wood’s and Maid Marian’s simple romantic duet in the woods and Lancelot and Guenever’s illicit love affair. Lancelot and Guenever sing together in their old age:

When that the moneth of May . . .
Comes and the day
In beames gives light,
I fear no more the fight. (540)

The archaic spelling and language and the quaint poetry lend a dignity and a beauty to the two lovers’ rendezvous on the balcony; their relationship is not spiritually or morally transcendent, and yet White chooses to elevate it linguistically above the colloquial, modern speech of most of the book’s dialogue.

White also develops this idea of natural transcendence by deliberately blurring the lines between nature and the fantastic to show that they are one. The Arthurian legends have a long history of supernatural plot devices; Darrah states that the Arthurian romances were influenced considerably by pagan religions, citing incidents like “the sword drawn from a stone; Lancelot’s upbringing at the bottom of a lake; Gawain’s increase in strength with the waxing of the sun,” as instances in which “the laws of nature seem to be disregarded” in the early Celtic tales (vii). However, White discards almost all supernatural elements of previous Arthurian stories; his only substantial use of magic involves Merlyn, who is both a magician and a scientist, turning Arthur into animals. Even the supernatural element in this is questionable; when Merlyn asks an adult

Arthur if he remembers being turned into animals, Arthur replies, “No. Did I have some magic? I can remember that I was interested in birds and beasts” (285). Merlyn remarks, “People don’t remember” (286). Whether Arthur’s being turned into animals was literal or figurative (the scientific instruments in Merlyn’s home suggest a keen observation of animals without the use of magic), White’s point is that the facts of nature which Arthur observed as an animal—the complex migration patterns of wild geese, the amazing ability of birds to fly and fish to swim, for instance, are full of wonder and transcendence without being supernatural.

The scene in which young Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone while hearing (or remembering) the advice of the animals he met as a child is a perfect example of how White exchanges supernatural transcendence for natural transcendence.³⁹ As Arthur struggles with the sword, he is told by a wild goose, “if you were once able to fly the great North Sea [as a goose], surely you can co-ordinate a few little wing muscles here and there? . . . Come along, Homo sapiens, for all we humble friends of yours are waiting to cheer” (205). Arthur’s pulling the sword out of the stone is a wonderful and transcendent moment; yet White reminds us that this kind of transcendence is just as easily found in nature—the power of geese to fly across oceans is no less remarkable than the power of a boy to pull an unmovable sword from a stone.

Arthur’s childhood encounter with the griffin on his adventure with Robin Wood also exemplifies White’s blurring the lines between the natural and transcendent. The party sees “something which they never would have believed possible. It was a young male griffin in its first plumage” (109). This beast, whom White calls “*Falco leonis serpentis*,” has “the leonine body and the hind legs of the beast of Africa, and after that a snake’s tail” (109). This “authentic griffin,” which rises “twenty-four feet high in the mysterious night-light of the moon” (109-110)

³⁹ White’s optimistic view of the animal kingdom as a source of learning is not universal to evolutionists’ thought. Dawkins calls the idea of “taking animals to be role models, as in the bestiaries” a “piece of bad poetic science. Animals are not there to be role models, they are there to survive and reproduce” (211).

is a “majestic vision of terror” which the boys never forget (110). White’s description of the griffin mixes the language of fantasy with the language of science—the griffin is both an observable product of nature and a transcendent being, and White sees no contradiction between the two.

White not only follows the tendency of many of his contemporaries to emphasize the wonder inherent in nature itself,⁴⁰ but he also consistently reminds his readers that nature is more wonderful and transcendent than man himself. The wonder and beauty of nature are frequently contrasted with the folly of humanity, as in the scene in which the young Arthur wanders into a forest at night in which the moonlight and the trees are “all silver, too beautiful to describe” (21) until he encounters a man in armor who turns out to be King Pellinore; immediately the scene of transcendent beauty deflates as Pellinore begins acting like a fool, constantly dropping his spectacles and babbling like a child. Scenes like this throughout the book consistently remind White’s readers that for him, man is simple and insignificant compared with the wonderful beauty of nature.

Whereas, for Tennyson, the insignificance of the individual is one of the central tragedies inherent in Darwin’s theory, it serves, for White, as one of the central consolations for the implications of evolutionary science. White calls this Tennysonian sorrow that man, who ought to be the pinnacle of creation, is biologically dispensable the Great Victorian Hubris through his authoritative council of animals (*The Book of Merlyn* 23). For White, the insignificance of the individual implicit in evolutionary theory is far from negative; it is beautiful in allowing man to be part of something so vastly greater than himself. It also serves as a consolation for the post-war realization that modern man has not yet progressed beyond animal violence. For White, the

⁴⁰ See Lightman’s “The Story of Nature: Victorian Popularizers and Scientific Narrative” for a discussion of how late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers sought to present science as a source of wonder and story.

vast timeline of evolutionary theory means that man is far from the pinnacle of his evolutionary journey; in fact, in comparison to other animals, he has just begun. For White's Arthur, this knowledge serves as a source of comfort as he prepares to die. In *The Book of Merlyn*, as Arthur and Merlyn reflect before the last battle, Arthur tells Merlyn that their efforts were futile, that "Nothing was worth doing. You and I will be forgotten, like people who never were" (4). This Tennysonian expression of sorrow at man's insignificance is countered throughout the book by White's assertions that for man to expect some sort of significance in the grand scheme of the universe is nothing more than pride, and that the very fact that man has just arrived on the timeline of evolution means there is still hope for him to grow and change into something better. Later in the book, Merlyn offers self-referential criticism of White's readers: "Our readers of that time . . . have exactly three ideas in their magnificent noddles. The first is that the human species is superior to others. The second, that the twentieth century is superior to other centuries. And the third, that human adults of the twentieth century are superior to their young. The whole illusion may be labelled Progress" (13). Through the mouths of Merlyn and the animals, White repeatedly insists that this imagined superiority must be discarded; a chart in the animals' council room, showing "the rise and fall of various animal races for the last thousand million years," (23) highlights man's relatively tiny role in the grand story of evolution. Compared to other species, Merlyn tells Arthur, man is "an upstart whose eyes, speaking from the point of view of nature, are scarcely open further than the puppy's. . . . There he is, dubbing himself *Homo sapiens* . . . proclaiming himself the lord of creation It is the Great Victorian Hubris, the amazing, ineffable presumption of the nineteenth century Man, proud man, stands there in the twentieth century, complacently believing that the race has 'advanced' in the course of a thousand miserable years When will they learn that it takes a million years for a bird to

modify a single one of its primary feathers? There he stands, ever since Darwin, because he has heard that there is such a thing as evolution” (29). The idea that man has been on the planet long enough to expect to have progressed as a species seems ludicrous to White in the light of the evolutionary timeline. By lowering expectations for the speed of human progress, White offers hope in a seemingly hopeless situation: if man has not progressed in a few thousand years, he may still improve given a million years.

Although the scene in which Arthur meets the council of animals in *The Book of Merlyn* digresses from previous Arthurian material, the views which White expresses there affect his interpretation of Camelot’s fall in *The Once and Future King*. White sees the failure of Arthur’s attempt to make a better civilization as a natural result of man’s infancy as a product of evolution; this view contains the seeds of hope in that it implies that man is at the beginning, rather than at the peak, of his evolutionary development. As Arthur is about to die in his final battle, he realizes that “The fate of this man or that man was less than a drop, although it was a sparkling one, in the great blue motions of the sunlit sea. The cannons of his adversary were thundering . . . when the Majesty of England drew himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart” (639). Arthur finds peace in the knowledge that his lifetime is not the climax of man’s evolution; that a day would come when his dream of a peaceful civilization would come true, but “it was too late for another effort then” (639). Arthur’s own insignificance becomes freeing and reassuring; the knowledge that his failed attempt to rescue civilization is not the crux on which human development depends allows him to meet the future and his own death without regrets.

Man’s insignificance from an evolutionary perspective also influences White’s view of the remote past in which the Arthurian legend takes place. Whereas Malory and even Tennyson idealize the Arthurian world as a temporary but fleeting paradise, White observes that human

civilization has not been around long enough for any substantial development to occur between our time and Arthur's. In *The Once and Future King*, he observes that Englishmen in Arthur's time were neither inferior nor superior to modern man: "Do you think that they, with their Battles, Famine, Black Death, and Serfdom were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription? Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the centre of the universe, do not we ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation? If it takes a million years for a fish to become a reptile, has Man, in our few hundred, altered out of recognition?" (539). Whereas, for Malory and even for Tennyson, the Arthurian world (or, for Tennyson, the illusion of it) with its heroic knights, lofty ideals, and glorious quests seem larger than life, White insists that the past must neither be idealized nor condescended to; we cannot expect evolution—or devolution—to occur within the space of remembered history. The psychological realism which White employs in his characterization of Arthurian characters supports his stated claim that humanity has not had time to noticeably evolve since he arrived on the planet, and the "Victorian Hubris" which expected man's upward development to be swift and drastic was sadly misplaced. However, there is hope even in this realization; the world wars do not necessarily disprove Arthur's hope that man can someday evolve into a peaceful creature, given the imperceptible rate of man's evolution.

White sees the hope of this progress not in order or structure, as Tennyson saw it, but in the organic spontaneity so fundamental to evolutionary theory and so repulsive to the anti-Romantic Tennyson. In fact, White returns to a form of naturalistic Romanticism and, like many modern writers, embraces organic randomness and rejects artificial order.⁴¹ Whereas for

⁴¹ Lightman observes that this fascination with randomness is unique to the modern age: "Only since the twentieth century have we been trying hard to produce randomness, be it in mathematics or in art. This seems to indicate that we need, for whatever reasons, access to randomness as a position from which we want to see order" (289).

Tennyson, wild animals had represented destruction and decay, for White, the freedom enjoyed by wild animals seems idyllic compared to the confines of human institutions. Arthur's pastoral childhood is one of many elements of *The Once and Future King* which showcase White's love for organic spontaneity above imposed order. The young Arthur does "not know how to bear himself indoors," (73) and his learning takes place almost exclusively in his wanderings through nature. He finds Pellinore and Merlyn while lost or wandering through the forest, and he learns life lessons not from books but from being turned into animals by Merlyn. These transformations are done according to the boy's whims; he is often spontaneously struck by the impulse to be a fish or a bird, and Merlyn quickly complies. Arthur also learns from his encounter with the primitive Robin Wood (White's version of Robin Hood). Little John explains to Arthur that the woods governed by Robin are "free pleaces, the 'oods, and fine pleaces . . . for a free man of hands and heart" (97). By randomly happening upon Robin Wood, Arthur embarks upon a significant quest in which he learns the lesson of humility; White observes that as the boys grow older, they "[run] like wild colts . . . and [go] to see Robin when they [have] a mind to" (178). This sort of childhood is White's ideal; Townsend Warner cites White's description of *The Sword in the Stone* in a letter to a friend as "a kind of wish-fulfilment of the things I should like to have happened to me when I was a boy" (98). The wild geese, whom Arthur later takes as a model for human civilization, also exemplify the organic spontaneity so dear to White's heart. When Arthur is turned into a goose, he finds intense delight in joining the geese on their flights; he loves their "free discipline" (166) and the overflowing fertility of their community. White's description of a tiny island on which "the birds [are] packed so close" and "jammed so tight that their heads were interlaced" (175) embodies the lively, fertile disorder of natural life so repulsive to Tennyson. To White, this is a scene of beauty; the birds are "in good humour, so cheerful" and

enjoying one another's company (175). Just before his death, Arthur recognizes that this community of random variety and spontaneous life is an ideal for human civilization: "He remembered . . . the island which [he] had seen on their migration, where all those puffins, razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes had lived together peacefully" (638) and decides that mankind must mimic them. The lack of unity and order inherent in the natural world does not pose a threat for White as it did for Tennyson; he does not value unity and order, but the joy of variety and disorder, and his utopia is not orderly but organically chaotic.

While preparing to write *The Once and Future King* and debating whether to join the war effort or withdraw from society, White rejected withdrawal because his "nature [was] not monastic; it may be non-cooperative, but it is free. It is a raptorial nature. Hawks neither band themselves together in war, nor yet retire from the world of air" (Townsend Warner 122). The spontaneous, directionless freedom inherent in a Darwinian view of nature with no external guiding force, which was for Tennyson so terrifying, is for White a thing of beauty. Though it is not supernatural, it is as distant and difficult to obtain as the Holy Grail in White's—and our--modern world.

For White, Nature is not the villain she was in Tennyson's version of the Arthurian legend. Nature, and the characters who represent it, is benign and beautiful, and White consistently contrasts it with the violence and ugliness of mankind. White was closely involved with British World War poets,⁴² and he echoes their view of nature as a fragile and beautiful victim of man's careless violence. When the young Arthur wanders into the woods, he discovers not the frighteningly uncultivated forest of Tennyson's Arthurian world, but an inviting tree

⁴² In her introduction to *The Book of Merlyn*, Townsend Warner cites White's relationship with Siegfried Sassoon, a renowned World War Two poet who wrote poetry like that discussed in chapter 2. According to her, White wrote to Sassoon hoping that Sassoon would help White enlist in the war (White's offer of military service was rejected) (xii). In her biography of White, she also observes that he taught the poetry of Wilfred Owen to his students (66).

under which to safely sleep. As he drifts off, he “[swims] down deeper and deeper, nuzzling into the scented turf, into the warm ground, into the unending waters under the earth” (27). White’s forest is a refuge where the boy can enter the earth’s womb.⁴³

White, like Tennyson, presents a feminine embodiment of nature; however, White’s is not a *femme fatale* but a nurturing matron. The most positive female influence upon young Arthur is a wild goose who maternally leads the boy (as a transformed goose) on an educational journey on which he learns the virtues of peaceful co-existence. As she leads Arthur on his migration with the geese, she educates him with “gentle kindness, and the more he [learns], the he [comes] to love her” and the other geese (171). This anthropomorphic character seems the embodiment of Mother Nature—back to her maternal self after being portrayed by Tennyson as a monster.

Robin Wood’s lover, Marian, another female character who teaches and nurtures the boy, is human but animal-like; “she could move on all fours or even wiggle like a snake almost as quickly as they could walk” (107). Arthur decides that if he must marry when he grows up, he will marry someone like Marian, “a golden vixen” (107). White’s animal or animal-like female characters represent nature as maternal and nurturing—man himself, and not nature, is the snake in the grass of White’s Arthurian world.

White not only softens the harshness of a Darwinian view of nature by associating it with matronly characters; he also associates natural selection with beauty rather than with violence.⁴⁴

⁴³ According to Jackson, Tennyson’s mythological depiction of old England as a pastoral utopia is, in part, a reaction to the human violence of World War I: “Contrasting sharply with the dark events of 1914–18, the invocation of the myth at this time thus represents the buttressing of nostalgia against the contemporary reality of a beleaguered Britain” (51).

⁴⁴ White apparently distinguished between the natural cycle of life and death and the unique viciousness of human beings. In her introduction to *The Book of Merlyn*, Townsend Warner cites a journal entry of White’s from 1939: After calling death a “noble mystery” and “a natural thing,” White comments that “what is happening over the wireless [war reports] is unnatural. The timbre of the voices which sing about Hitler and death is a sneering, nasal mock-timbre. Devils in hell must sing like this” (xiv).

The Forest Sauvage in which Arthur wanders as a child is “an enormous barrier of eternal trees, the dead ones fallen against the live and held to them by ivy, the living struggling up in competition with each other toward the sun which gave them life” (94). Although Arthur is afraid of the forest at first, it is an entirely benign setting in which Arthur encounters the romantic Robin Wood and his lifelong friends Merlyn and Pellinore. Moreover, the forest is “cool and lovely” (21) despite being a microcosm of the survival of the fittest; for White, the competition for life in nature does not represent violence or injustice.

Just as White portrays natural selection as an expected reality of life rather than a shocking tragedy, he is not troubled, like Tennyson, by man’s animal identity. White consistently emphasizes man’s animal identity throughout both *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn* using zoological imagery that contrasts sharply with Tennyson’s; it is used not to emphasize man’s ferocity but simply to describe him accurately. The young Arthur scurries around the castle “like a rabbit” and a “cat,” (42) and enjoys the “glee of the porpoise” (44) when listening to adult conversation; and the young Lancelot is as “ugly as an African ape” (317). Later in the novel, an aged Lancelot is said to have a trustworthy face like a “bulldog” (540), and the aging Arthur, cuckolded and disempowered, “[moves] about his own palace like a mouse” (389). This imagery serves as a constant reminder that the comparison between man and animal is entirely natural.

Man’s animal identity is woven through *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn*, but White sees the latter as “the marvelous opportunity of bringing the wheel full circle, and ending on an animal note like the one I began on. This will turn my completed epic into a perfect fruit, ‘rounded off and bright and done’” (Townsend Warner’s introduction to *The Book of Merlyn* xvii). This animal note to which White refers is *The Sword in the Stone*, the first

section of *The Once and Future King*. It is in a sense a boys' book, as it was first published separately for children, and it reflects the naturalistic trend in British boys' books before and during White's era. Sly notes that beginning in the late nineteenth-century, boys' literature began to champion a "contemplative and compassionate interest in wildlife" as boys were encouraged to study and appreciate animals and not merely to hunt them, and that this shift reflects "the growing influence of Darwinism on humanity's interpretation of its relationship to the rest of the animal world" (154-5).

However, White's novel takes this sympathetic interest in wildlife to the next logical step, affirming the young Arthur as neither a master of creation nor a benevolent scientist, but as a pupil of nature; he not only belongs to the animal kingdom, but he also does not occupy the top rung of the evolutionary chain of being. Young Arthur's education follows the evolutionary model of fish to bird to mammal, but as Arthur passes through these stages of transformation, he finds that these lower forms of life are in many ways superior to humans. The badger whom he visits explains that man's place in the evolutionary sequence does not imply superiority: "It is true that man . . . is the mightiest of the animals—if you mean the most terrible one—but I have sometimes doubted lately whether he is the most blessed" (193). Here, White not only establishes man as an animal but an inferior animal.

For Tennyson, still recovering from the shock of Darwinian science, man's animal identity posed an unsolvable obstacle to his hope for human progress; for White writing in the midst of world war, man's animal identity is the key to his progress. In a letter explaining his decision to write *The Book of Merlyn*, White remarks that "the best way to examine the politics of man is to observe him, with Aristotle, as a political animal" (qtd. in Warner 178). He explains that the novel will "[step] . . . back into the real world, in which man is only one of the

innumerable animals” (179). According to Townsend Warner’s introduction to *The Book of Merlyn*, White wrote of his book in 1940 to L. J. Potts: I have been thinking a great deal, in a Sam Butlerish sort of way, about man as an animal among animals” (xvi). The preface to both the last book of *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlyn* is a quotation from Butler’s *The Way of all Flesh*: “He thought a little and said: ‘I have found the Zoological Gardens of service to many of my patients. I should prescribe for Mr. Pontifex a course of the larger mammals. Don’t let him think he is taking them medicinally’” (n. pag.). This quote accurately reflects the theme of both books: if mankind is to progress, he must humble himself to take animals medicinally, learning a better way of life from them rather than clinging to illusory superiority.

Although White’s Darwinian view of man as an inferior animal appears degrading, it is nonetheless essential to his optimistic vision of man’s future. Sly calls *The Once and Future King* an “attempt to visualize a ‘reality’ in which humans recognise their participation as just another species of political animal” (160), and, for White, this visualization is utopian. According to the badger whom Arthur visits to complete his animal education, man is behind the other animals in his progress towards enlightenment: he is not “the most blessed” (193) of the animals. This is because of man’s violent nature; the badger remarks to young Wart that “Homo sapiens is almost the only animal which wages war” (193). When, at the novel’s end, Arthur imagines a peaceful future without wars or boundaries, he envisions an enlightened breed of man who, as a “single species,” has “[learned] by looking at the problems of the thousands” and who, rather than evolving upwards and away from his resemblance to other animals, has grown to resemble the peaceful species of animals even more than he currently does: Arthur longs for a human society resembling the peaceful community of wild geese (638). For White, true

Darwinian progress is not vertical but horizontal; man's animal nature is not to be discarded, but refined.

White applies his idea of man's animal identity by using his own novel as a sort of scientific experiment to try to solve the problem of man's violent nature. Whereas Tennyson's Arthurian tale is an expression of grim resignation to the implications of evolutionary theory, White's is an honest, and quite modern, search for truth through a literary thought experiment, not unlike the experiments White performed on ants to determine the reason human beings go to war. Arthur himself is described as "like a scientist who had pursued the root of cancer all his life," (628) and although he fails, he has made scientific progress for another to carry on. When Arthur asks Merlyn if his efforts were wasted, Merlyn replies, "They were ideas . . . rudimentary ideas. . . . It was an experiment. Experiments lead to new ones" (*The Book of Merlyn* 11).

White's chosen medium for such experimentation is fantastic literature, which, as discussed in chapter one, can serve as a laboratory for experimentation with human nature. LaJeunesse defines *The Once and Future King* as a triumph of the scientific method in literature:

The scientific process begins by asking a question. White's question is simple: what place does violence have in the human world, and is there a way to stop human beings from making war on each other? The next step is to make observations of the natural world. To accomplish this, White writes . . . about Arthur's education in the ways of animals. . . . Merlyn asks no questions of him, gives no tests, and . . . draws no conclusions for the boy. This is exactly what the observational step of the scientific process should be. If his experiment is to work, White must present his observations of the natural world in an unbiased way. Ignoring contradictory information can be tempting for the writer but devastating for the scientist. Therefore, White presents information that both supports and critiques his personal desires for Peace. (24)

It is this hope that man, through studying himself scientifically as an animal, can achieve a brighter future that lends White's novel its comic vision. Fichte observes that "White's Arthur can take recourse to literature. He can imagine a better world and bequeath this dream to the next

generation” (163). For Tennyson, science presented an ideological threat; for White, science itself holds the key to man’s evolutionary progress.

Conclusion

Both Tennyson and White reinterpreted the Arthurian legend upon philosophical frameworks heavily shaped by evolution, yet their two retellings of the Arthurian story present very different applications of the Darwinian worldview to previously existing literature. Tennyson's work reflects Victorian anxiety toward the grim implications of evolutionary science. For Tennyson, man's animal nature holds back progress and civilization, sentencing man to an eternal struggle to beat down the beast within himself. For White, writing well after Darwin, man's animal nature may be the only key to his salvation. Gillian Beer writes that "[Darwin] offers a new creation myth which challenges the idea of the fall" and that his "representation of natural order sways between an optimistic and a pessimistic interpretation: it gives room to both comic and tragic vision" (107). White's novel, while full of the tragic evolutionary vision that controls Tennyson's work, holds something also of the Darwinian comic vision. It is neither the glib evolutionary meliorism of the Victorian era nor bleak materialism. White views nature not with fear but with awe and reverence; not as man's enemy but as a friend with which he must commune and reconcile. In this way, White mirrors twentieth-century man's growing comfort with evolutionary science and the idea of his animal identity—and his growing discomfort with the idea of himself as a special or higher creation. He also foreshadows the back-to-nature movements following close on the heels of World War Two in both Britain and America. An understanding of how first Tennyson and then White rebuilt the Arthurian story after the cultural cataclysm surrounding Darwin and evolutionary theory both illuminates and complicates our understanding of the relationship between science and literature today.

Perhaps the most significant application of this understanding to Christian scholarship is the realization that the tale's morality has been affected by the scientific view of origins taken by

its teller. The idea that one might write as a Christian while holding an unbiblical view of human origins appears far less credible in the light of this study, for, as we have seen, Tennyson's and White's views of human origin defined the meaning of the tale for them. From an evolutionary perspective, the Arthurian story could no longer function in its original form as a tale of a human fall resulting from sin and its consequences. For Tennyson, man cannot be truly held responsible for his fall, since he lacks the potential to be raised above the level of beasts. White further redefines the story's meaning in the light of evolution: since man is only an animal, the fall of Camelot only illustrates the folly of any attempt to rise above the beast. Perhaps the most essential element of Christianity is the message of redemption: that man has fallen due to his own choices, and yet, through Christ, can be raised up again. The potential for redemption, while present in Malory's Arthurian world,⁴⁵ is absent from both Tennyson's and White's.

For the Christian scholar, the significance of this relationship between an author's beliefs about origins and his interpretation of a pre-existing story is clear. Our scientific view of the world is inextricably connected to our answer to the basic philosophical question of where we came from; it will likely define our approach to literature as profoundly as it defined Tennyson's and White's approach to the Arthurian story.

⁴⁵ Malory's Launcelot "endures . . . penance, in prayers, and fastings" (932) and dies at peace with God. The Bishop witnessing his death attests that he "saw the angels heave up Sir Launcelot unto heaven," and Launcelot dies with a smile on his face and "the sweetest savour about him" (935).

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