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"Who Can Rule and Dare Not Lie"

Tennyson's Bicameral King

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1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

2. *Tennyson: The Unquiet Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 21.

Only Blake, in the nineteenth century, can equal Tennyson as a truly *inspired* poet. Both received poetry in the form of auditory hallucinations; both are part of the poetic tradition which Julian Jaynes, in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*,¹ says is a vestige of the original bicameral nature of the human mind. Most people in the world as we know it have become fully conscious and have lost the ability to hear admonitory voices; visionary poets and schizophrenics retain that ability. Even as a child Tennyson heard voices, according to Robert Bernard Martin. "'Before I could read,' he remembered in old age, 'I was in the habit on a stormy day of spreading my arms to the wind, and crying out, 'I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind,' and the words 'far, far away' had always a strange charm for me.'"² Such voices inform Tennyson's poetry until the end of his life.

Perhaps the reason that Tennyson is not usually considered a truly visionary poet is that he did not always rejoice in the voices that he heard or accept them as divine. In fact, his poetry is a record of his lifelong struggle to transform voices he feared into a voice he could believe in and could offer to his audience as worthy of their belief. Tennyson's poetic history is by no means parallel to Jaynes's version of the history of the human race, however. Born too late to be a romantic poet, he could not hear divinity in the wind, as Shelley and Coleridge did, or in the water, as Wordsworth did, or in the voices of angels and prophets, as Blake did. Tennyson begins his poetic life by describing, in poems like "The Two Voices" and "The Vision of Sin," voices which he attributes to an evil power. He begins in what Jaynes describes as the mental state of people whose cultures are breaking down and who no longer believe that their auditory hallucinations are the voices of the gods.

*As the gods recede into special people called prophets or oracles, or are reduced to darkly communicating with men in angels and omen, there whooshes into this power vacuum a belief in demons. . . . Demons stood ready to seize a man or woman in lonely places, while sleeping or eating or drinking, or particularly at childbirth. They attached themselves to men as all the illnesses of mankind. Even the gods could be attacked by demons, and this sometimes explained their absence from the control of human affairs.*³

3. Jaynes, *Origin of Consciousness*, p. 232.

Tennyson's first voices are virtually demonic; in his middle years he vacillates between poems in which he attributes auditory hallucinations to sheer madness, as most psychiatrists would today—poems like "Maud" and "Lucretius"—and those in which he attempts to develop a Christian vision. He wants to address the people of Victorian England, his community, as the religious poets of earlier times, from Homer through Milton, addressed their people. If we give credence to Jaynes's impressively documented history of auditory hallucinations, we can understand Tennyson's struggle in a new way. An educated Victorian, who considers himself a Christian, he is moving forward and backward at the same time—forward to the belief that auditory hallucinations are merely the unfortunate product of a disordered brain, and backward to the world of a religious community which can agree that the voices it hears are divine, and speak the truth.

He gets out of this bind in a remarkable way in *The Idylls of the King*. He imaginatively returns to the time when divine voices had not yet been attributed to gods, when they belonged to the leader of a tribe. Jaynes suggests that auditory hallucinations originated when men belonged to tribes:

*I have suggested that auditory hallucinations may have evolved as a side effect of language and operated to keep individuals persisting at the longer tasks of tribal life. Such hallucinations began in the individual's hearing a command from himself or from his chief. There is thus a very simple continuity between such a condition and the more complex auditory hallucinations which I suggest were the cues of social control in Eynan and which originated in the command and speech of the king. . . . Thus each worker, gathering shellfish or trapping small game or in a quarrel with a rival or planting seed where the wild grain had previously been harvested, had within him the voice of his king to assist the continuity and utility to the group of his labors.*⁴

4. Ibid., pp. 140-41.

In Arthur, Tennyson reinvents the king as the source of admonitory voices. Of course *The Idylls of the King* is replete with all the trappings of Christianity; but in fact no supernatural being is present in the poem. It is an entirely human epic, a gloomily consistent political poem, in which human beings have some of the same mental qualities as Jaynes's bicameral men.

The demonic voices of Tennyson's early poems are unmistakably Victorian. The wickedness of the voices in "The Two Voices" and "The Vision of Sin" is not remarkable; the intellectual content of their argument is. Tennyson's voices come from a very modern version of the demons that Jaynes tells us have been around for thousands of years. Tennyson does not call his earliest voices demons, but he stops short of dismissing them as madness and so grants them

a degree of reality. What they offer is not lust, power, or even evil; it is reason, science, skepticism, and despair. A seventeenth-century demon might have begun as the bad voice in "The Two Voices" does:

*A still small voice spake unto me,
'Thou art so full of misery,
Were it not better not to be?'*⁵

(lines 1-3)

But no earlier demon would have used the same arguments from newly discovered cosmology, biology, and even epistemology:

*'This truth within thy mind rehearse,
That in a boundless universe
Is boundless better, boundless worse.*

*'Think you this mould of hopes and fears
Could find no statelier than his peers
In yonder hundred million spheres?'*

(lines 25-30)

*'Where wert thou when thy father play'd
In his free field, and pastime made,
A merry boy in sun and shade?*

*.
'Before the little ducts began
To feed thy bones with lime, and ran
Their course, till thou wert also man.'*

(lines 319-27)

*'That men with knowledge merely play'd,
I told thee—hardly nigher made,
Tho' scaling slow from grade to grade;*

*'Much less this dreamer, deaf and blind,
Named man, may hope some truth to find,
That bears relation to the mind.'*

(lines 172-77)

The voice has both science and poetic clarity on its side; the conscious mind, attempting to answer, has to rely on faith, dreams, myths to support enlightened Christianity and a belief in social progress.

*The still voice laugh'd. 'I talk,' said he,
'Not with thy dreams. Suffice it thee
Thy pain is a reality.'*

(lines 385-87)

Without a persuasive rational argument or the support of a speaking God, Tennyson's character falls back on a mishmash of romanticism, a crude reworking of the end of "The Ancient Mariner." Rising to look out his window, he sees a family walking to church:

*I blest them, and they wander'd on;
I spoke, but answer came there none;
The dull and bitter voice was gone.*

*A second voice was at mine ear,
A little whisper silver-clear,
A murmur, 'Be of better cheer.'*

5. All quotations are from *The Poetical Works of Tennyson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

*As from some blissful neighbourhood,
A notice faintly understood,
'I see the end, and know the good.'*

*A little hint to solace woe,
A hint, a whisper breathing low,
'I may not speak of what I know.'*

(lines 424-35)

The voice is *like* an Aeolian harp, a rainbow, Nature's living motion—all the key words of romanticism; but it has nothing genuine to say. True divine voices do not play "I've got a secret"—they give admonitions. For the reader, the demon remains unconquered.

Tennyson calls the evil voices in "The Vision of Sin" vision rather than madness, once again. Sin appears first as a lustful, hellish, enticing dance to music, then as a hideously articulate old cynic who assures the listener that human beings are compounded of nothing but lust and dust and that their political dreams lead only to terror. The final demonic vision is of reverse evolution, a cosmic extension of the body's decay after death; and the supposedly divine answering voice is even weaker than the one in "The Two Voices."

*The voice grew faint; there came a further change;
Once more uprose the mystic mountain range.
Below were men and horses pierced with worms,
And slowly quickening into lower forms;
By shards and scurf of salt, and scum of dross,
Old plash of rains, and refuse patch'd with moss.
Then some one spake: 'Behold! it was a crime
Of sense avenged by sense that wore with time.'
Another said: 'The crime of sense became
The crime of malice, and is equal blame.'
And one: 'He had not wholly quench'd his power;
A little grain of conscience made him sour.'
At last I heard a voice upon the slope
Cry to the summit, 'Is there any hope?'
To which an answer peal'd from that high land,
But in a tongue no man could understand;
And on the glimmering limit far withdrawn
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn.*

(lines 207-24)

The demonic vision is truly terrifying. Only Coleridge in the nineteenth century took sin so seriously, and he abandoned both romanticism and poetry itself in favor of the orthodoxy of his ancestors and philosophical prose in order to fight it. Tennyson is in a terrifying position; assaulted by evil voices, he has no speaking God with which to fight them.

Tennyson wanted to hear a divine voice for more than his individual salvation. As a good Victorian, he took his social role more seriously than romantic poets did. When poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley felt temporarily estranged from divinity, they did not connect their despair with a failure of social responsibility; the divinity that they sometimes heard in the wind and the water could be shared through poetry, but the voices themselves were essentially individual rather than communal. Tennyson not only aban-

doned the individualism of romanticism after his earliest poetry; in "The Palace of Art" he repudiated it, along with his own visual, fanciful, nonmoral poems like "The Lady of Shalott" and "Mariana" and "The Kraken." After luring the reader into the soul's "lordly pleasure house" (line 1) Tennyson lulls him into the memory of a state the romantics considered exalted:

*No nightingale delighteth to prolong
Her low preamble all alone,
More than my soul to hear her echo'd song
Throb thro' the ribbed stone;*

*Singing and murmuring in her feastful mirth,
Joying to feel herself alive,
Lord over Nature, lord of the visible earth,
Lord of the senses five.*

(lines 173-80)

This passage is almost a paraphrase of the end of *The Prelude*, perhaps the central poem of English romanticism. (Though it was not yet officially published when Tennyson wrote "The Palace of Art," he had seen enough of Wordsworth by that time that he may well have known the passage.) Wordsworth tries to have his revolutionary cake and eat it too; he wants to escape from the inevitably sullied world of political action while preserving the ideals of the ruined French Revolution in the individual soul. When Milton internalizes Eden in *Paradise Lost* he at least admits that he is giving up the possibility of salvation in historical time; his salvation can be earned on earth but must be received in heaven. Without a sure heaven, Wordsworth is pulling a poetic fast one. Though the idea that revolution will spread from saved soul to saved soul is attractive, and though Wordsworth and Shelley make it overwhelmingly beautiful, Tennyson suggests, with horror, that it may not be true.

In fact, it may be damnably false, a mere hypocritical mask to cover selfishness and social snobbery. The self-satisfied soul thinks:

*'O Godlike isolation which art mine,
I can but count thee perfect gain,
What time I watch the darkening droves of swine
That range on yonder plain.*

*'In filthy sloughs they roll a prurient skin,
They graze and wallow, breed and sleep;
And oft some brainless devil enters in,
And drives them to the deep.'*

(lines 197-204)

Tennyson is unsparing as he damns this soul for choosing isolation and silence rather than action in the world. She falls "like Herod . . . struck through with pangs of hell" (lines 219-20) and goes through a period of torment even more horrible than the sufferings of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. Assaulted by "white-eyed phantasms weeping tears of blood" (line 239), "hollow shades enclosing hearts of flame" (line 241), "corpses three months old" (line 243), she recognizes that her sin has been silence.

*Back on herself her serpent pride had curl'd.
'No voice,' she shriek'd in that lone hall,*

*'No voice breaks thro' the stillness of this world;
One deep, deep silence all!'*

(lines 257-60)

It is not enough to be free from the evil voices of demons. The soul needs to hear a true voice from outside itself; and the poet must speak to his fellow human beings.

Tennyson certainly tried to speak as a Christian poet. He is probably best known (and by many people, is most admired) for his poems of faith. Anthologies are much more likely to contain "In Memoriam" and "The Higher Pantheism" than "The Vision of Sin" or "Maud." Just as "The Two Voices" is an unmistakably Victorian form of demonic temptation, "In Memoriam" is a quintessentially Victorian statement of religious faith. Though some Victorians, like Browning, still believed simply that Christianity is the revealed truth, unassailable by argument, many others—Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, to name a few—had to modify their Christianity in accordance with what they considered intellectual advancement. "In Memoriam" is for everyone who needed to be a Christian but could not dismiss the growing evidence for evolution or believe in a personal, speaking God. No respectable nineteenth-century Anglican would have dreamed of claiming to hear the voice of God: that was for nuts like Blake or the adherents of disreputable evangelical sects. If ever a religion had deprived its members of access to admonitory voices, it was Victorian Anglicanism.

Though evil voices like those of "The Vision of Sin" and "The Two Voices" still hover around Tennyson's unhappy soul in "In Memoriam," they are less clearly *heard*, more clearly imagined. He imagines the cruelly careless voice of evolutionary nature crying "A thousand types are gone; / I care for nothing, all shall go" (LVI) without believing that he actually hears it. And he also recognizes that the answering voice comes from himself.

*If e'er when faith had fallen asleep,
I heard a voice, 'believe no more,'
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep,*

*A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart,
Stood up and answer'd 'I have felt.'*

(CXXIV)

You do not have to read Bentham and Mill on the fallacies of intuitionist philosophy to recognize that the messages of the heart are a very weak reed for the tottering soul to lean on. Even Tennyson's heart, however, will not permit him to believe in his original desire, personal reunion with Hallam in an old-fashioned heaven. By the end of the poem he can believe only in a remote God, who has sent Hallam to earth as a precursor of man's evolutionary future. Tennyson has forged a new faith by combining elements of Christianity, bits of new evolutionary science, and an English version of Hegel's belief in the ultimate spiritual progress of the human race.

And his fellow Victorians loved it. As much as its content, its form

must have appealed to them; "In Memoriam" is Tennyson's least *poetic* poem—least imagistic, least musical, least magical, least inspired. The absence of a divine voice speaking to the poet is reflected in the flatness of the verse; the poem addresses exactly the same faculties in the reader that the poet uses in solving his religious dilemma—the aching heart and the fearful mind. A curious phrase early in the poem is the key to the poetic method:

*I held it truth, with him who sings
To one clear harp in divers tones,
That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.*

(I)

What exactly are stepping-stones of dead selves? Of course Tennyson means to indicate ascension through a painful process of personal growth—but why stepping-stones? Stepping-stones, placed in a field or stream, are both an aid to progress and a protection against dirty or wet feet. The phrases of "In Memoriam" are poetic stepping-stones, self-contained little groups that almost forbid the reader to become either intellectually active or imaginatively engaged. Reading "In Memoriam" does not *feel* like reading other poems of doubt and eventual faith, loss and steadfast love—"Lycidas," "Adonais," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Tennyson's reader is always safe, just barely clinging to one little conventional phrase after another. On one side lies the Scylla of atheism, on the other the Charybdis of inspired religion.

The weakness of this kind of patched-together, progressive Victorian Christianity is evident in the subsequent poems of faith—"The Higher Pantheism," "The Voice and the Peak," "Flower in the Crannied Wall." They are all based on merely negative reasoning:

*Law is God, say some; no God at all, says the fool,
For all we have power to see is a straight staff bent in a pool;*

*And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of man cannot see;
But if we could see and hear, this Vision—were it not He?*

("The Higher Pantheism," lines 15–18)

All three of these poems say that since human faculties are limited and cannot definitively disprove the existence of God, we had better conclude that he exists. Once he wrote "In Memoriam," Tennyson never again admits in his poetry that he, the most popular poet in England—the Poet Laureate, in fact—heard demonic voices or felt religious doubt.

But in "Lucretius," where he allows himself to speak as a mad poet on the verge of suicide, he exposes the fragility of his new faith and the depth of his need for a speaking god. Both Tennyson's *Lucretius* and Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles* express the forbidden feelings of the poets themselves: All four are caught between religious epochs, unable to disavow the old religions which had speaking gods or truly accede to a new religion of rational ethics. The shaky compromise of "In Memoriam" blows up here, barely disguised as a crisis in Roman religion. Although the most obvious way of reading the poem is through Freud, since the cool philosopher's lust is activated by his unwitting wife's love potion, in fact Jaynes is more illuminating, for lust is only a small part of what torments Lucretius. The real terror

comes from his realization that his enlightened religion is neither logically consistent nor spiritually satisfying. His Epicurean atomic theory, like Tennyson's evolutionary theory, really makes it impossible for him to believe in the old gods, even in their new form as coolly unconcerned beings.

*'The Gods! and if I go my work is left
Unfinish'd—if I go. The Gods, who haunt
The lucid interspace of world and world,
Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,
Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
Their sacred everlasting calm! and such,
Not all so fine, nor so divine a calm,
Not such, nor all unlike it, man may gain
Letting his own life go. The Gods, the Gods!
If all be atoms, how then should the Gods
Being atomic not be dissoluble,
Not follow the great law? My master held
That Gods there are, for all men so believe.'*

(lines 103-17)

Though atheism is terrifying, it is at least sensible as the ultimate extension of atomic theory.

Even worse than the possibility of atheism, however, is the compulsion to pray to gods in whom Lucretius does not consciously believe. He is just as horrified to discover that he *must* pray as Shakespeare's Claudius is to discover that he cannot. The most beautiful passages in the poem are those in which Lucretius temporarily allows himself to speak to a goddess as if she might answer:

*'Nay, if thou canst, O Goddess, like ourselves
Touch, and be touch'd, then would I cry to thee
To kiss thy Mavors, roll thy tender arms
Round him, and keep him from the lust of blood
That makes a steaming slaughter-house of Rome.*

*'Ay, but I meant not thee; I meant not her
Whom all the pines of Ida shook to see
Slide from that quiet heaven of hers, and tempt
The Trojan, while his neatherds were abroad;
Nor her that o'er her wounded hunter wept
Her deity false in human-amorous tears;
Nor her whom her beardless apple-arbiter
Decided fairest.'*

(lines 80-92)

He becomes calmer when he speaks to the gods, but he is nevertheless ashamed of his impulse.

*'O ye Gods,
I know you careless, yet, behold, to you
From childly wont and ancient use I call—'*

(lines 207-9)

Jaynes would attribute his prayers to something deeper than old habits; he would say that Lucretius prays because of the ineradicable vestiges

of the bicameral mind. We were all able, once, to hear divine voices, and once all relied on them in times of stress. Prayer is part of our human nature, whether we believe in speaking gods or not. Over a hundred years before Jaynes suggested the theory of the bicameral mind, Tennyson exemplified it perfectly in his mad, rational poet who cannot help praying.

Tennyson's Lucretius also demonstrates another facet of Jaynes's theory—that in spite of the ideals of the Enlightenment, religion and politics are hard to separate. Lucretius wants to pray to Venus because the state of Rome is degenerating, becoming a "steaming slaughterhouse" (line 84), defiled by "the mulberry-faced Dictator's orgies" (line 54), where

'. . . crowds . . . bear
The keepers down, and throng, their rags and they
The basest, far into that council-hall
Where sit the best and stateliest of the land . . .'

(lines 168–72)

Lucretius's prayers at least suggest that he connects political decay with the loss of the old gods, who spoke to men. Jaynes and Tennyson implicitly agree that a group of people is most cohesive when they believe in the same gods, who tell them what to do.

As Poet Laureate, Tennyson never attacked Victorian society as Lucretius attacks imperial Rome. But in the voice of another madman, the speaker of "Maud," he exposes some of the most terrible evils of nineteenth-century England. It is impossible to reconstruct what went on in Tennyson's mind when he wrote poems like "Maud" and "Lucretius" in the voices of madmen; his speakers seem closer to himself than Browning's madmen do, or even Shakespeare's. Browning chooses his mad speakers—Porphyria's psychopathic lover, the dying Bishop ordering his tomb—to expose some particular psychological characteristic or some cultural folly; they do not grip us, engage us, make us share their madness as Tennyson's speakers do. Tennyson's characters are different too from Lear on the heath, or Cassandra of Greek myth because they are not tragically transfigured by their madness. Lear and Cassandra accept their mental state and the vision that it brings in a way that no one in nineteenth-century England—and very possibly, no one in imperial Rome—could. Tennyson's madmen are pathetic, anxious, self-destructive, uncomfortable; and they make readers uncomfortable. They can say brilliantly insightful things about the evils in the world around them, but they never cease to be disconcertingly crazy. They are part of the nineteenth century, when both madness and prophecy have been expelled from socially acceptable religion. They are also Tennyson's means of expressing his own prophetic voice, the voice of earlier bicameral poets.

The prophecies in "Maud" are astonishing—searing, shocking combinations of the Biblical language and values with which a Jeremiah could call to a fallen Israel and the specific horrors of Victorian laissez-faire capitalism, images as vivid as any in Dickens.

I, 1, vi

*Why do they prate of the blessings of peace? we have made
them a curse,
Pickpockets, each hand lusting for all that is not its own;*

*And lust of gain, in the spirit of Cain, is it better or worse
Than the heart of the citizen hissing in war on his own
hearthstone?*

vii

*But these are the days of advance, the works of the men of
mind,
When who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman's ware or
his word?
Is it peace or war? Civil war, as I think, and that of a kind
The viler, as underhand, not openly bearing the sword.*

viii

*Sooner or later I too may passively take the print
Of the golden age—why not? I have neither hope nor trust;
May make my heart as a millstone, set my face as a flint,
Cheat and be cheated, and die—who knows? we are ashes and
dust.*

ix

*Peace sitting under her olive, and slurring the days gone by,
When the poor are hovell'd and hustled together, each sex, like
swine,
When only the ledger lives, and when only not all men lie;
Peace in her vineyard—yes!—but a company forges the wine.*

x

*And the vitriol madness flushes up in the ruffian's head,
Till the filthy by-lane rings to the yell of the trampled wife,
And chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread,
And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life,*

xi

*And Sleep must lie down arm'd, for the villainous centre-bits
Grind on the wakeful ear in the hush of the moonless nights,
While another is cheating the sick of a few last gasps, as he sits
To pestle a poison'd poison behind his crimson lights.*

xii

*When a Mammonite mother kills her babe for a burial fee,
And Timour-Mammon grins on a pile of children's bones,
Is it peace or war? better, war! loud war by land and by sea,
War with a thousand battles, and shaking a hundred thrones!*

Tennyson did not give a hint that he knew such horrors in "In Memoriam"; nor does any other Victorian poet. These details even go beyond Dickens's depictions of London; the poem surpasses mere secular political protest because the underlying value is Biblical—the desire for a just and holy state.

The visionary speaker is also, however, paranoid, drifting toward schizophrenia. We cannot see him as a prophet when he projects his

fear of women onto nature:

I, 1, i

*I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood;
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb'd ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever is ask'd her, answers 'Death.'*

Our sympathies are also limited when he broods obsessively on suicide, or imagines himself wildly in love with a woman who has barely spoken to him, or believes that he is receiving admonitory voices from flowers, or perceives himself as an entirely passive agent in a malign world—or, finally, thinks that he is actually dead.

II, 5, i

*To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go;
And then to hear a dead man chatter
Is enough to drive one mad.*

His madness, though it varies in severity, is a permanent way of seeing the world, not a temporary episode.

The connection between the speaker's particular form of madness and his particular form of vision is not immediately obvious, and yet the two seem clearly linked. Perhaps the mere alienation from bourgeois respectability, the fact that he is an outcast from existing society, enables him to see the horrors of laissez-faire capitalism as they are; perhaps his passivity and paranoia are simply an extreme version of the helplessness of every individual in the imperial state. I think, finally, that the most important connection between the speaker's madness and his prophetic vision is that he knows he cannot function without a true community with a trustworthy leader. His psychological weakness is a severe form of the weakness in all civilized, fully conscious men. Just as our backs often give us trouble because we are not fully adapted to walking upright, so our minds may give way because we evolved as a tribe and are not really equipped to be self-sufficient individuals. We are all still partly bicameral men.

The abuses of nineteenth-century capitalism are the ultimate individualism, the ultimate disrespect for community. And Tennyson's poor weak character (the speaker of "Maud" is less prepared than others to fight his neighbors) can see capitalism for what it is and so longs for a world where men acted as a group. He loves Maud less for herself than for the world she casually sings about:

I, 5, i

*A voice by the cedar tree
In the meadow under the Hall!
She is singing an air that is known to me,
A passionate ballad gallant and gay,
A martial song like a trumpet's call!
Singing alone in the morning of life,
In the happy morning of life and of May,
Singing of men that in battle array,
Ready in heart and ready in hand,
March with banner and bugle and fife
To the death, for their native land.*

Maud comes to the speaker as a voice—the divine voice that something in us all still longs to hear. The speaker understands perfectly well that he needs another kind of culture, one with a true leader, to escape his own psychological problems:

I, 10, iv

*I wish I could hear again
The chivalrous battle-song
That she warbled alone in her joy!
I might persuade myself then
She would not do herself this great wrong,
To take a wanton dissolute boy
For a man and leader of men.*

v

*Ah God, for a man with heart, head, hand,
Like some of the simple great ones gone
For ever and ever by,
One still strong man in a blatant land,
Whatever they call him—what care I?—
Aristocrat, democrat, autocrat—one
Who can rule and dare not lie!*

vi

*And ah for a man to arise in me,
That the man I am may cease to be!*

He does not want to cultivate an unusual and exciting individual personality, as people in the nineteenth century were exhorted to do by Mill and Carlyle and Emerson; he wants to be part of an earlier, non-individualistic culture. He actually believes that a leader could also be a trustworthy and moral person, a longing that few people in Tennyson's century or ours will acknowledge. Like Ophelia, he is the victim of a political atmosphere where it is assumed that politicians and all public figures lie. He knows that he can survive only in a world where he can trust what he hears.

Lying is at the heart of both Jaynes's theory and *The Idylls of the King*, as well as "Maud." Jaynes says that the ability to deceive is an essential part of the breakdown of the bicameral mind.

Deceit may also be a cause of consciousness. . . . It is impossible for an animal or for a bicameral man. Long-term deceit requires the invention of an analog self that can 'do' or 'be' something quite different from what the person actually does or is, as seen by his associates. It is an easy matter to imagine how important for survival during these centuries such an ability would be. . . . In the . . . situation of being commanded by invading strangers, perhaps in a strange language, the person who could obey superficially and have 'within him' another self with 'thoughts' contrary to his disloyal actions, who could loathe the man he smiled at, would be much more successful in perpetuating himself and his family in the new millennium.⁶

The speaker of "Maud" is not capable of individualism and consciousness and so eventually reclaims a kind of sanity through the artificial national unity of war; national—or even tribal—unity of a world without deceit is also what Arthur attempts to create in *The Idylls of the King*.

The Idylls of the King is not Tennyson's vision of a primal world;

6. Jaynes, *Origin of Consciousness*, pp. 219-20.

through Arthur he imagines political and moral redemption in a politically degenerate world. If tribal unity ever existed, it is long gone. Pagan Britain has been invaded by Roman conquerors, who have in turn degenerated and left behind them a Hobbesian world where even brothers are feuding. Arthur has to create a state with citizens who have lost their original social ties. *The Idylls of the King* can be seen as a fictive version of Plato's *Republic* or Rousseau's *Social Contract*, which are both about the reconstruction of a community in a corrupt social world. The theory of history in *The Idylls of the King* is much closer to those of Plato and Rousseau than to the typically Victorian theory of "In Memoriam": Once a good state has been established, it can only get worse. Decay is inevitable, progress unlikely. This is also the unspoken theory in the Anglo-Saxon poetry Tennyson read in preparation for writing his poem. In *Beowulf* too, as soon as a monster has been killed, or a hall has been built, or a feud has been mended, we can be sure that another monster will appear, a hall will burn, a feud will be rekindled.

Arthur himself knows that he is trying to instill a sense of unity in men who have already developed the inclination to be hostile and individualistic. And he identifies this individualism with the loss of access to the divine voices which once governed men, when men could live together. He tells his knights that they are not early men and cannot expect to receive divine guidance; only harm comes to the community when many of the knights leave the Round Table to seek a vision of the Holy Grail. The Grail offers direct contact with divinity, though in a late, weak, attenuated form since it is silent, without the power to give advice. Arthur does not dismiss this visionary experience as worthless but views it historically—just as Jaynes would:

*But if indeed there came a sign from heaven,
Blessed are Bors, Lancelot, and Percivale,
For these have seen according to their sight.
For every fiery prophet in old times,
And all the sacred madness of the bard,
When God made music thro' them, could but speak
His music by the framework and the chord.*

("The Holy Grail," lines 869-75)

Arthur thinks of his times as new times, not old times. Divine voices may once have kept the community together, but now they are gone.

Arthur himself is the admonitory voice in *The Idylls of the King*. He binds his knights to him by a series of vows:

*I made them lay their hands in mine and swear
To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honor his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her.*

("Guinevere," lines 464-74)

These commands are simple, straightforward, unintellectual—the kind of auditory admonition which might come to a bicameral man. Though the knights of the Round Table are certainly not bicameral, they are not exactly intelligent and reflective, either. Tennyson has a despairing view of human intellectual capabilities—as Pope and the Milton of *Paradise Lost* did before him—and believes that people have to rely on something other than their own minds. They need an admonitory voice, an external law. The knights are not the kind of human beings in whom Jefferson and Wordsworth and John Stuart Mill believed. They are not rational or original or joyfully imaginative; they do not have complex, unique individual souls which need cultivation. The best they can be is faithful, loving, loyal knights—Gareths and Geraints.

The Idylls of the King is sadly, pessimistically, convincingly coherent, from beginning to end. The predominantly Anglo-Saxon vocabulary attunes us to a vision of a bleak and unhappy world; the absence of metaphor discourages romantic imagination; the key thematic words (linked by assonance)—white, knight, light, Christ, right—all wean us away from the pleasures of the earth, the world of color and variety. Tennyson makes the human world of the poem so cruel that we are convinced that upright citizens must spend virtually all their time righting wrong, as Arthur commands his knights to do. Tennyson keeps showing us the human victims of the people outside the Round Table—the tongueless old man who serves Elaine of Astolat, the churl who comes to tell Arthur that his enemies have gathered,

*his visage ribb'd
From ear to ear with dogwhip-weals, his nose
Bridge-broken, one eye out, and one hand off,
And one with shatter'd fingers dangling lame.*
(“The Last Tournament,” lines 57–60)

The men who inflict such pain are not psychopaths or what we now call “career criminals.” They are just unkind animals, as are the people of Doorm’s kingdom who will not stop to help Enid, crying over the wounded Geraint.

*And many past, but none regarded her,
For in that realm of lawless turbulence
A woman weeping for her murder'd mate
Was cared as much for as a summer shower.*
(“Geraint and Enid,” lines 520–23)

The *nature* of men in the *Idylls of the King* is like that of the wolf and the cur, the two animals Tennyson mentions most often, and which he thinks are entirely, cruelly selfish. He was surely wrong, as we know now from animal ethnologists, about wolves; they are in fact very well socialized, tribal animals. But to me, at least, Tennyson looks more and more right about people—at least about people in a corrupt, advanced state of civilization. They are not born vicious, but as soon as they lose their social instincts and the voices of the gods which Arthur says came to them in old times, they become vicious. They are less like the men imagined by Hobbes than like those imagined by Rousseau and Kropotkin, for they have an inborn capacity for brotherhood, but that capacity dies easily in an individualistic culture and is replaced by wanton selfishness.

As king, Arthur addresses the best self—the social self—in his people, rather than imposing order as a Hobbesian ruler would. *The Idylls of the King* is part of the nineteenth-century dialogue on heroes and citizens; it repudiates Carlyle as clearly as anything Mill or Emerson ever wrote. Arthur does not command by charisma or individual strength; his knights are not his slaves or conscript soldiers who live by party discipline. Arthur is not radically different from his knights, as Carlyle's heroes are different from the poor herds they lead. He is simply the best and bravest knight, the ideal social self. He can give the commands which bind the knights into something like a tribe because of the deep similarities in their best natures, what Milton called "conformitie[s] divine." For Tennyson, Arthur offers the truest hope for humanity, what the poor speaker of "Maud" wanted, a leader who dare not lie.

Lies are the essence of the evil that destroys the Round Table. Even at the beginning, the white lie of Gareth's disguise wears away a bit of Arthur's strength. And the adultery on which Tennyson concentrates is a sin of deceit more than one of sex per se. Tennyson does not attribute evil to sex, as Tolstoy does in his late work; women like Enid love their men as passionately as women like Isolt and Guinevere do. Sex is dangerous because it is a tool by which bad people gain power over others, as it is in *King Lear* and *Mansfield Park*. Adulterous sex is harmful not because it is inherently different from lawful sex, but because it necessitates lies and deception and because it provides an opportunity for the unsocialized people of the world—the Vivians and Marks and Garlons and Modreds—to gossip and slander and blackmail. Instead of showing us steamy sex between Lancelot and Guinevere, Tennyson shows us the harm that they cause. We see Geraint tormented by doubts of Enid, Merlin despairing, assaulted by Vivien's slanders, Balin and Balan driven mad when they hear about the faithlessness of their beloved queen and their king's greatest knight. Like the speaker of "Maud," Balin and Balan cannot remain sane in a world of lies.

Even those whom we see as entirely bad—Tristram, Ettarre, the final rebellious hordes—might have been different if no example of deceit had been offered to them. Tristram claims this; he says that once, inspired by Arthur, he was a true knight.

But then their vows—

First mainly through that sullyng of our Queen—

Began to gall the knighthood, asking whence

Had Arthur right to bind them to himself?

("The Last Tournament," lines 676–79)

He may be telling the truth, for he is not one of the instigators of evil, like Mark. He is just one of the majority of men who are too weak to be social and moral without an unspoken, total trust in the unit of the tribe and the truthfulness of the leader. Men like Tristram decay easily, for once their social bonds break, they can be restored only by a new Arthur.

The Idylls of the King is a tragedy of irreversible decay, different from most of the other tragedies in our literature. Even in *King Lear* evil begets both greater evil and greater good; good people can heroically obliterate evil ones. Who could be efficaciously killed in *The Idylls of the King*? Mark? Vivien? They merely traffic in sin. Tennyson shows us a passive evil. Violence is easier to fight than slow moral degrada-

tion: Even Nazi Germany created heroes. What heroes were created by Watergate, the single most extraordinary example in our time of lies by a leader? None. It did to our political life what adultery did to the Round Table, for it broke the belief in the possibility of a political community.

Arthur is doomed to fail because his knights are not truly bicameral men. They are capable of consciousness and individuality, and so he can hold them only briefly in a state of loyalty to him and obedience to his simple vows. I believe that *The Idylls of the King* has been underrated as a poem because we do not want to think in Tennyson's terms, in spite of the growing evidence that individualistic societies are breaking down, becoming subject simultaneously to criminality and cults. Every charismatic cult leader offers more evidence that men need to trust leaders, that Julian Jaynes is right to believe that we have evolved with both the capacity and the need to hear commanding voices. Driven by the unwanted voices that pursued him from his childhood, Tennyson imagined a leader who dare not lie, a human voice that could give people a social identity in a world without speaking gods. He convinces me, at least, that cultures cannot survive without trustworthy admonitory voices; sadly, he admits that he has only the vaguest hope that an Arthur will ever return.