A PARADISE FADING

Perceptions of Wild Nature in Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Howard Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores representations of wild nature in two Arthurian texts – one British and one American – produced in an age characterised by rapid social transformation: Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) and Howard Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903). By investigation of the textual descriptions of wilderness and the portrayals of characters living there, the study aims to investigate what attitudes towards unkempt nature are displayed in the two texts. While both narratives give evidence of a powerful nostalgia for a vanishing paradise, the yearning for Eden is expressed quite differently. Pyle’s text fuses the concepts of wilderness and paradise together by depicting the unkempt landscape as a place of splendour and spiritual enjoyment. Such a celebration of nature might well be seen a reaction against the rapid loss of wild spaces across America (and Britain) during the life-time of the author. In the *Idylls*, paradise is represented in the domesticated yet green landscape of the faraway fairy island of Avilion. Wilderness, on the other hand, is depicted as a harmful disease progressively spreading across the realm, arguably bringing about a moral degeneration among the human characters. In the end, however, it is not wilderness, but the corruption of the supposedly civilised characters that causes the collapse of Arthur’s empire. On closer inspection, the real danger thus seems to come from *culture* and material conditions rather than from *nature*.

**Key words:** Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, Howard Pyle, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, Victorian literature, ecocriticism, nature, wilderness, industrialism, animalisation, nostalgia, paradise
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1 INTRODUCTION

The adventurous knights of medieval romance frequently head into the wilderness in order to prove their courage as well as their mastery of the non-human world. In other words, the principal function of the wild landscape is to serve as a foil to the human knights, allowing them to demonstrate their might, valour and, not least, their superiority. This view of green spaces as mere ‘providers of adventure’ (Rudd, *Greenery* 59) is manifest not only in medieval chivalric literature, but also in a number of nineteenth-century rewrites of the legend.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s Victorian cycle of poems *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), for example, frequently stresses the various dangers lurking in the wild; a fact that comes to surface already in the first poem of the collection. ‘The Coming of Arthur’, henceforth cited as CA¹, depicts the pre-Arthurian wilderness as a nightmarish wasteland ‘Wherein the beast was ever more and more, / But man was less and less, till Arthur came’ (11-12). Arthur is the hero who undertakes the job of transforming the chaotic wilderness into a peaceful realm of order and civility, assuring the safety and well-being of the British population in the process; at least until, in the final poem of the collection, apocalypse strikes. In the reported words of the poet himself, Arthur is thus ‘a man who spen[ds] himself in the cause of honour, duty and self-sacrifice’ (H. Tennyson, *Memoir*, vol. I, 194).

¹ In this essay, I will hereafter use the following abbreviations when citing the individual idylls of Tennyson’s collection within parentheses:

- CA – ‘The Coming of Arthur’
- GL – ‘Gareth and Lynette’
- MG – ‘The Marriage of Geraint’
- GE – ‘Geraint and Enid’
- BB – ‘Balin and Balan’
- MV – ‘Merlin and Vivien’
- LE – ‘Lancelot and Elaine’
- HG – ‘The Holy Grail’
- PE – ‘Pelleas and Ettarre’
- LT – ‘The Last Tournament’
- G – ‘Guinevere’
- PA – ‘The Passing of Arthur’
American Howard Pyle’s slightly more recent *Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903) displays a very different attitude towards wild nature. The novel, which is the first part of a four-volume cycle published between 1903 and 1909, contains some of the most famous plot details and characters associated with the myth. It recites, among other things, how Arthur pulls the sword from the anvil, how the Lady of the Lake helps him to obtain the sword Excalibur, how he marries the beautiful Lady Guinevere and establishes the Round Table. Many of the events taking place in Pyle’s story are also described in the *Idylls*; Pyle was certainly familiar with Tennyson’s poetry, having been commissioned to illustrate his ‘Lady of Shalott’ in 1881 (May and May 121). Nevertheless, Pyle’s portrayal of wild nature is very much in contrast to that of Tennyson, for rather than depicting the unkempt landscape as hostile and dangerous, the narrator frequently stresses the positive aspects of wild nature, celebrating the delight of an earth ‘long-gone-by’ (Pyle 125). In the analysis of this thesis, I will provide several examples illustrating this claim. For now, I will shortly present the main arguments of the thesis before directing the attention to my selection of primary texts; once I have briefly outlined some contextual information explaining my choice of focusing on Tennyson and Pyle, I will specify the aim and argument of the thesis in more detail.

In short, this essay, which is an ecocritical reading of the Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, examines representations of wild nature in the selected works. More precisely, the thesis argues that whereas the *Idylls* portray the wilderness as an evil that needs to be conquered and cleared, Pyle’s narrator depicts it as a source of wonder and spiritual pleasure. What the two works have in common though, is that they both display striking tendencies of nostalgia, ‘[a] sentimental longing or wistful affection

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2 As pointed out previously, Pyle produced several Arthurian narratives during the first decade of the twentieth century. It seemed natural to focus on the first part, as it is the closest in time to Tennyson’s text. Perhaps the complete collection could be taken into consideration in a future ecocritical study.
for a period in the past’ (*Oxford Living Dictionaries*). The lament over a fading paradise, for instance, is a theme present to one extent or another in both texts, bringing them closer to each other despite their apparent dissimilarities.

Formally, it is clear that the texts selected for research are very different. Tennyson’s canonical *Idylls* are obviously intended for a somewhat educated reader, while Pyle’s novel is directed to a significantly younger audience. The choice of juxtapositioning these particular authors might thus appear somewhat unexpected. However, in addition to the expression of nostalgia mentioned above, the works do display a number of similarities too. Tennyson and Pyle may have grown up on different sides of the Atlantic Ocean, yet both of them belonged to an Anglophone culture and explored medieval themes in a time of industrialisation, scientific progress, urbanisation and colonialism. The aftermath of industrialisation had already brought about the disappearance of many wild spaces across Britain and America when Tennyson and Pyle produced their respective Arthurian narratives. The question thus arose how such a dramatic transformation of the landscape might be reflected in their works.

I have already called attention to the fact that the primary texts display two very different views of nature and wilderness. Could Tennyson’s bleak vision and Pyle’s nature worship represent two different sides of the same ecological coin? Whereas Tennyson’s pessimistic attitude might simply be a reflection of his overall character, the ‘haunting shadow of melancholia’ that always lurked in the background throughout his life (Lucas 11), his *Idylls* nevertheless offer an insight to what civilisation and the conquering of nature might lead to in the end: turmoil, death and the collapse of an empire. Pyle’s celebratory accounts, on the other hand, illustrate a completely different reaction to the concept of environmental transformation; perhaps a more suitable reaction, one might argue, considering the young age of Pyle’s intended audience. In any event, the two primary texts represent two very different
yet available responses to environmental destruction; a reflection that made me realise the potential of studying them from an ecocritical point of view.

Cheryll Glotfelty observes that a unifying feature that ‘all ecological criticism shares’ is ‘the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it’ (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xix). In order to fully grasp how factors like industrialism and urbanisation may have influenced the authors’ perceptions of nature, it is thus crucial to provide a brief account of a few nineteenth-century realities experienced by the authors; realities which also played a crucial role in the emergence the particular type of medievalism that took hold in Britain and the United States during this period. While historical information will be kept to a minimum in this introduction, such details will be covered more extensively in the next chapter (2.1), in which some motivations for medievalism in an age of technological and scientific progress are discussed. For now, the method and objective of this thesis will be developed in detail.

Methodologically, this study combines close readings of the primary texts with careful reference to the wider sociohistorical context. The overall aim of the thesis, as previously stated, is to explore what attitudes towards wild nature seem to be displayed in Tennyson’s and Pyle’s Arthurian narratives. The authors’ depictions of the wilderness, including the different creatures living there, thus constitute the main focus of attention in the principal analysis of this paper. At this point, it needs to be clarified that in this particular essay, the term *wilderness* is frequently used as synonym for wild and unkempt nature. More specifically, it denotes landscapes relatively unaltered by human civilisation, including barren wastes, wetlands, forests, grassy valleys and, in Pyle’s version of the story, the Land of Faërie (also referred to as Fay).

A second area of interest is the interaction between human characters and the non-
human world.\(^3\) The domination and destruction of nature come to surface to varying degrees in both texts, although, from the perspective of the narrators, the conquering of the natural world seems to be a justified course of action. Another question I address in this thesis is whether the portrayals of characters associated with the wild landscape somehow differ from the representations of Arthur and his knights. An entire section of the analysis is thus dedicated to a discussion of characters (human and non-human) encountered deeply within the wilderness. The section sheds light on the fact that in the *Idylls*, human characters encountered in the wilderness are often likened to wild animals. Also Pyle animalises certain characters in a similar fashion, although on a less frequent basis.

The main argument of the thesis, as I mentioned earlier, is that whereas Pyle’s novel presents the unkempt landscape as a place of beauty and spiritual enjoyment, the *Idylls* depict it as an environment of evil; a serious threat to civilisation and humankind. In the end, however, it is not wilderness, but the corruption of the supposedly civilised characters that bring about the ruin of Tennyson’s Arthurian empire. The real danger thus appears to be linked to *culture* and Camelot. Finally, both texts express a powerful longing for a fading paradise. In Pyle’s novel, this paradise is presented in the nostalgic depictions of a world ‘sweet and clean and new’ (Pyle 60). In that sense, Pyle’s earthly paradise appears to signify nature as it existed before industrialism struck; still intact, unspoilt and pure. In Tennyson’s work, on the other hand, the fairy island Avilion\(^4\) acts as a model of Eden, ‘Deep-meadow’d

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\(^3\) In this essay, the term ‘non-human’ includes not only vegetation and animals, but also fay characters such as the Lady of the Lake and other supernatural creatures.

\(^4\) In the process of writing this thesis, I have encountered a number of diverse spelling variations of different Arthurian characters and sites. Avilion is the spelling used by Tennyson, whereas Pyle writes Avalon. Other examples include fairy (Tennyson) and faërie/faerie (Pyle), Gawain (Tennyson) and Gawayne (Pyle), Pelleas (Tennyson) and Pellias (Pyle). Rather than applying one single spelling throughout the essay, I have maintained the different variations as they appear in the respective sources. The spelling of names is therefore not consistent throughout the thesis, and can sometimes vary even within a single section.
happy, fair with orchard lawns’ (PA 430). But already from the beginning of the story, this wondrous paradise appears a distant and unreachable dream. Arthur’s attempts to recreate an Eden upon earth are thus doomed to failure.

So far, I have outlined the principal claims made in this paper. Now, I would like to direct the attention to what has already been written in this domain; indeed, a number of scholars have already carried out thorough ecocritical research of Arthurian literature. Corinne Saunders’ careful examination of forests as represented in medieval romance, for example, was published as early as in 1993. More recently, Michael W. Twomey and Gillian Rudd both performed green readings of the epic medieval poem ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’. Rudd also contributed with her text *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* in 2007, in which she analysed different types of landscapes as depicted in medieval romance. Yet to this day, the amount of ecocritical research of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Arthurian narratives remains practically non-existent. This critical gap is hardly surprising as it merely seems to reflect an over-all shortage of Victorian ecocriticism. Thus, ecocriticism being a burgeoning field in nineteenth-century literature studies, the ambition of this thesis is to contribute to a relatively unexplored domain.

As ecocriticism has not yet developed a widely accepted set of doctrines and procedures, I will regularly draw from other, closely related, fields and theories when I find it reasonable to do so. One such field is the more general domain of Victorian medievalism, which has been extensively covered by scholars from various different angles. Quite a few of these studies examine the different motivations for the invoking of medieval stories and

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5 In the words of Jesse Oak Taylor, ‘[t]he absence of Victorian ecocriticism is (of course) an exaggeration’ (877). For more information about the ‘perplexing’ shortage of ecocriticism in Victorian literary studies, see his essay ‘Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?’ (2015).

6 For more information about the development of the ecocritical literary movement, see chapter 2.3 of this essay.
themes in an age of scientific and technological progress. Stephanie L. Barczewski’s *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2000), for example, explores how the myths of King Arthur and Robin Hood played a key role in the developing of a unified British national identity in a time when such a thing was a complex and fragmented concept. Other studies in this domain, which I will draw on every now and then in the analysis of this thesis, include Beverly Taylor and Elizabeth Brewer’s *The Return of King Arthur* (1983), Raymond Chapman’s *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (1986), and Tison Pugh and Angela Weisl’s *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present* (2013). When it comes to sociohistorical details, I have found a great deal of fruitful information in Lee Jackson’s book *Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against the Filth* (2014) and Peter Thorsheim’s *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* (2006). As the next chapter of this thesis discusses these studies quite extensively, however, I will not comment on them any further here.

Another work I would like to bring up is Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010). As detailed earlier in this introduction, Tennyson often resorts to the use of animal imagery in his depictions of characters associated with wilderness. Therefore, I find it reasonable to occasionally draw on certain concepts and ideas related to the literary domain of animal studies; after all, the field of animal studies is ‘close kin to ecocriticism’ (Garrard 146). In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Huggan and Tiffin examine the relationships between humans, animals and nature in postcolonial literature. They also explore different representations of non-human animals in modern cultures. As my analysis will touch on such matters too, I am going to return to Huggan and Tiffin’s study in the textual analysis of this paper.

Finally, I would like to mention Edward Engelberg’s article ‘The Beast Image in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*’ (1955), and Mario Ortiz-Robles’ essay ‘Liminanimal: The
Monster in Late Victorian Gothic Fiction’ (2015), both dealing with animal imagery in Victorian literature. Engelberg maintains that the image of the beast in the *Idylls* reflects man’s progressive surrender to passions: one of the major causes of man’s fall in the *Idylls* (287-88). The present thesis, unlike the study of Engelberg, argues that Tennyson’s animalisation of certain human characters appears to be a means of highlighting their disagreeable personality traits. This observation brings us Ortiz-Robles’ ‘Liminanimal’, in which he argues that the monster as depicted in a selection of British nineteenth-century fiction occupies an indeterminate zone situated between the human and the animal (11, 21). In the main analysis of this essay, I call attention to the fact that also in the *Idylls*, many of the characters encountered in the wilderness seem to belong in this category.

This introduction will be followed by a chapter outlining my theoretical framework, organised into three sections (2.1, 2.2 and 2.3). The first one provides an account of the particular type of medievalism that took hold in Britain as well as in America in the nineteenth century. Then follows a section exploring some assumptions and associations related to the concept of *wilderness*. In short, the section sheds light on how the medieval perception of wild nature as an environment of evil gradually came to change over the centuries, until, in the Victorian age, wilderness was largely seen as an ‘antidote for industrial modernity’ (Hiltner xv). The third and final chapter of the theoretical background is devoted to a presentation of the domain of ecocriticism, in which some main concepts associated with ecocritical literary movement are discussed – concepts that later on will be applied in the principal analysis of the thesis. As for the analysis, it has been arranged into two sections (3.1 and 3.2). While the first one consists of a close reading of the textual descriptions of wild nature in the primary texts, the second one focuses exclusively on the portrayals of characters associated with this type of landscape. The observations made in chapter 3 are finally summarised and evaluated in the conclusion, the fourth and final section of the essay.
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Nineteenth-Century Medievalism in Britain and America

While the period between the late Middle Ages and the Victorian era has generally been considered an ‘Arthurian nadir’ (Lupack 340), the nineteenth century was characterised by a renewed interest in all kinds of medieval literature (Matthews 362). Pugh and Weisl reflect upon the appeal of medieval stories and themes in their book Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present. They remark that

[t]he ostensible allure and magic of the Middle Ages should implode a cultural fantasy for multiple reasons, beginning with the prosaic realization that the various wars, plagues, diseases, turmoil, and strife of the period rendered life rather miserable for much of its populace. (1)

Yet despite ‘the unpleasantness of historical reality’ (Pugh and Weisl 1), the traditions, values and ideals of this period have not ceased to fascinate, and writers and artists have continued to look back to the Middle Ages for inspiration, not least in Victorian England.

Before specifying some of the motivations behind the Victorians’ presumed fascination with the Middle Ages, it seems reasonable to start off by defining the very term medievalism. In the words of Pugh and Weisl, medievalism refers to ‘the art, literature, scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter of inspiration’ (1). British nineteenth-century medievalism, however, differs quite remarkably from the medievalism of the Renaissance; unlike sixteenth-century writers such as Shakespeare and Spenser, the Victorians tended to invoke the Middle Ages as an expression against industrial modernity. In that sense, it is a rather peculiar version of medievalism, leaning toward the Romantic values of the natural world, Celticity and anti-industrialism (Fulton, Introduction 8).
Although much of the Victorian age was characterised by a general sense of optimism and a faith in progress and technology, the end of the century witnessed a significant shift in attitude: ‘the fin de siècle’, Thorsheim writes, ‘saw the emergence of widespread anxiety about the future on many levels’ (41). As the very first example of a heavily industrialised society, Britain was particularly struck by ensuing negative consequences, arguably contributing to the Victorian anxiety. With the hurried growth of the cities, green fields were rapidly replaced by suburbia. London now faced the immense and seemingly impossible challenge to manage the sheer volume of sewage, household waste and horse dung as its population soared from around one million to six between 1801 and 1901 (Jackson 2, 28). Tennyson’s oldest son Hallam mentions that his father, who resided in London between 1851 and 1853, described the unpleasant odours of London as ‘offensive’, referring to his time as an ‘age of stinks’ (Memoir, vol. II, 75). But the ‘muck on the streets’ (Jackson 32) was not the only factor contributing to the Victorian desire to revolt, if only in the arts, against the new and highly mechanised society. Coal smoke, quite expectedly, was another major nuisance.

During the nineteenth century, the coal consumption of Britain increased from about 15 million tons to 229 million (Flinn 252, Mitchell 428, 431). Although the burning of coal played an important role in the development of Britain into a superpower, it also filled the air in cities and towns with acidic vapours and a dense black haze, seriously affecting the environment and causing harm to human health (Thorsheim 48, 193). Coal smoke was for a long time seen as harmless ‘or even beneficial’ (196), but the realisation that impure air was a consequence of industrialism rather than a product of nature gradually begun to take hold in Britain during the second half of Victoria’s reign. Among the general public, however, miasma – ‘an airborne substance thought to be produced by decomposing biological material’ – was believed to be the most serious contaminant of the air for much of the century (10).
If coal smoke and metropolitan filth were two reasons for the Victorians’ interest in the Middle Ages, an unsettling religious scepticism constituted a third. New theories in science and biology, not to mention the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, could certainly appear ‘deeply threatening’ (Levine 16). ‘In that age when religion and the threats to religion meant so much to so many people’, Chapman writes, ‘it is possible to identify a desire for a lost religious stability’ (40). Hallam Tennyson confirms that Darwin’s theory of evolution was indeed ‘prominent in men’s minds’, and not least in the mind of his father, in nineteenth-century England. Although Tennyson had ‘a profound respect for sincere religion in every shape’, he reluctantly came to admit that ‘evolution in a modified form was partially true’ (*Memoir*, vol. II, 167-9). The fact that the poet, as I illustrate in the analysis of this essay, frequently blurs the boundary between certain human characters and other, non-human, species in his *Idylls*, arguably reflects this realisation.

Thus far, this section has shed light on the fact that Victorian medievalism can be seen as a sort of escapism. It is a ‘celebration of a simpler time of simpler technologies: crafts instead of industries, artisan instead of factory workers’ (Pugh and Weisl 40). A seemingly inevitable consequence of such a celebration in a rapidly changing world is nostalgia, ‘a recurrent feature of Victorian literature’ (Chapman 4). Some people went so far as to advocate a return to a simpler lifestyle, in harmony with nature and away from the smoke of the cities (Matthews 359, Thorsheim 6-7). John Ruskin, for example, who in a conversation with Tennyson stated that ‘[e]verything bad is to be found in London and other large cities’, believed that the only way to achieve bodily and mental health was through work in the rural fields (H. Tennyson, *Memoir*, vol. II, 222). Tennyson has been described as a ‘champion of science’ (Gould 67), but his *Idylls* nonetheless suggest that the poet partly shared Ruskin’s view. At least, the text does call attention to the various dangers associated with civilised society; an argument that is developed in detail in the main analysis of this paper.
Before moving on to discussing the motivations for medievalism in nineteenth-century America – indeed, the medievalist impulse affected the arts and literature of the United States no less than it did in Britain – it should be mentioned that Victorian medievalism should not exclusively be seen as a form of criticism of industrial society. ‘[I]t is assumed too readily that medievalism was simply a conservative revolt against modernity’, Charles Dellheim remarks (41). He further points out that for the Victorians, medievalism functioned as a means of affirming as well as criticising their own times (39); an assertion supported by Chapman: ‘Opposed attitudes to the past were a part of the diverse and often mixed feelings with which the Victorians regarded their own time’, he explains (1). Quite expectedly, this sort of ‘mixed feelings’ do come to surface in much of Tennyson’s poetry. As a believer in progress, Tennyson ‘followed the march of science as eagerly as a child’ (Richardson 289). But at the same time, the poet appears to have been deeply troubled by the advances of modern society; thus, his scientific interest was a ‘slightly frightened’ one (Richardson 292). Such an observation is further reinforced by George H. R. Dabbs, Tennyson’s physician, who wrote that the poet’s scientific interest ‘was profound, but not . . . unmingled with fear of its “materialistic tendencies”’ (H. Tennyson, Memoir, vol. II, 469). As we shall see, Tennyson’s doubts and fears are indeed reflected in his Idylls.

Opposed attitudes to the present and the past were very much part of the medievalism of the United States too. According to Kim Moreland,

[t]he medievalist impulse clearly runs counter to the major American cultural tradition at every point. Medievalism is feudal and aristocratic rather than capitalistic and

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7 ‘Locksley Hall’, for example, arguably gives evidence of Tennyson’s mixed feelings about a rapidly changing England. The narrator of the poem considers returning to a ‘wondrous Mother-Age’ (277) and lead a life in harmony with nature: ‘There methinks would be enjoyment more than in this march of mind, / In the steamship, in the railway, in the thoughts that shake mankind’ (282). In the end, however, the speaker appears to have changed his mind, even embracing modernity and progress: ‘Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change’ (283).
democratic, Roman Catholic rather than Puritan, European rather than nationalist
American, and regressive rather than progressive. (12)

However, as Pugh and Weisl accurately remark, medievalism should not be seen as a synonym for the Middle Ages: ‘The Middle Ages was indeed feudal, aristocratic, Roman Catholic, European, and, one could argue, regressive; medievalism, on the other hand, need share none of these characteristics’ (Pugh and Weisl 42). American writers, they explain, re-appropriated the Middle Ages to suit contemporary American tastes, thus inventing it anew in each telling (43).

Why, then, did the European Middle Ages appeal to the nineteenth-century American imagination? Taylor and Brewer suggest that it was the ‘historical vacuum of the New World’ that made American writers turn to European and English materials (162). This view is further upheld by Moreland, who explains that because the Americans did not have a medieval past of their own, they tended to look back proprietarily on the European Middle Ages (5). As Thomas Bulfinch stated in the preface of his Medieval Mythology: ‘We are entitled to our full share in the glories and recollections of the land of our forefathers, down to the time of colonization thence’ (vii-viii). In that sense, American medievalism illustrates a desire to partake in the sophisticated heritage of Western civilisation (Taylor and Brewer 162).

Needless to say, although industrialisation occurred later in America than in Britain, the development of the United States into a highly mechanised country in the second half of the nineteenth century was an extremely rapid process, which certainly contributed to the American urge to idealise the European Middle Ages as well. ‘Within the lifetime of a single generation’, Leo Marx writes, ‘a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world’s most productive industrial machine’ (343). Of course, such a dramatic transformation brought with it the destruction of nature in various ways. Deforestation
reached unprecedented levels in America during the second half of the century as an average of thirteen square miles of forest was cut down every day for a period of 50 years (Oswalt and Smith 7). Air pollution was another growing problem, leading to the enacting of the first municipal air pollution legislation in Chicago and Cincinnati in 1881 (Stern 44). But despite this, many Americans responded to this period of transformation with a sense of optimism, embracing the changes that progress brought with it (Moreland 2). Others, as in Victorian Britain, were more pessimistic about the rapid changes; a fact that is also reflected in much of the literature produced in this time. As previously stated, Pyle’s romantic descriptions of the medieval landscape can thus be read as a reaction against the rapid changes of the American landscape taking place during his lifetime. This claim is further developed in chapter 3 of this thesis. Now, literary representations of nature in the age of Tennyson and Pyle will be discussed briefly.

2.2 From Nightmare to Idyll: Nature in Literature in an Age of Progress

While humans have been considering their connection to the world around them for thousands of years (Hiltner xiii), the literary movement of ecocriticism is still young. Yet, the relationship between man and nature has interested literary scholars for decades, and as a result, plenty of research has been carried out exploring representations of nature in literature. Different types of green spaces are generally accompanied with different sets of assumptions. However, as this thesis focuses specifically on one type of environment as depicted in the primary texts – the wild landscape – this section, accordingly, explores the literary imagination associated with this particular sort of environment.

The term wilderness stems from the words wild, which ‘ultimately shares a root with willed and wilful’ (Carroll 77), and déor, meaning beast or animal in Old English (Old English Translator). Etymologically, then, the meaning of wild-déor-ness is ‘the place of wild
or wilful] beasts’ (Nash 2). Today, *Oxford Living Dictionaries* define the word simply as ‘[an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region’. The term conjures up images of boundless lands – either barren or overgrown with a tangle of vegetation (Rudd, *Greenery* 91) – populated with wild animals, or worse, swarming with supernatural forces; an idea generally accepted in early European folk-belief and later passed on to the American pioneers (Nash 3, 8, 11).

The perception of the wilderness as a hostile, even ‘nightmarish’ realm, was, in part, upheld by Christianity and the fall of man (Nash xvi, 13). When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, they had to face a ‘cursed’ ground, full of thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:17-18): ‘If paradise was early man’s greatest good’, then ‘wilderness, as its antipode, was his greatest evil’ (Nash 9). As we shall see, the idea of wilderness as a cursed land certainly comes to surface in Tennyson’s *Idylls*.

But the wild landscape has not exclusively been seen as a hostile. Simon Schama points out that perceptions of the natural world are rarely one-sided: ‘There have always been two kinds of arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic’ (517). If the medieval imagination associated savage nature with ‘primitive panic’, then the conception of nature as a place of ‘bucolic leisure’ grew increasingly dominant between the Renaissance and the end of the nineteenth century. This revaluation of savage nature was certainly linked to the rise of forest management in the Age of Enlightenment, when, due to the emergence of a new ‘forest mathematics’, forests were increasingly valued merely based on their ‘volume of disposable woods’. In this manner, forests were reduced to their most ‘objective’ status – timber (Harrison 108, 120). While this conception of the forest as a sheer material resource is still central in Western culture, it nonetheless brought with it a new appreciation of nature. Industrialisation and urbanisation
were other factors contributing to this shift in attitude, for as Nash points out, ‘[a]ppreciation of wilderness began in the cities’ (44).

With a shared enthusiasm for the remote and mysterious, romanticists rejected the symmetrically ordered gardens at Versailles and turned their attention towards the savage. (Nash 44-7). Rather than seeing mountains and forests as foreboding and dangerous, some started to view such sceneries as inviting and refreshing (Hiltner xv). With the flowering of romanticism in the first half of the nineteenth century, the idea that remote and uncivilised territories bespoke the influence of God rather than of Satan emerged. Hence, wilderness lost much of its previous repulsiveness (Nash 44-7). Notwithstanding, the view of nature as being ‘red in tooth and claw’ (Tennyson, ‘In Memoriam A. H. H.’ 119) still persisted among many Victorians. In the words of Jesse Oak Taylor, nature appeared ‘far stranger and more frightening than self-consciously nostalgic accounts [of the period] let on’ (882).

The influences of romanticism were felt not only in Europe; also in America, an appreciation for the wild emerged among those who did not face the landscape from the perspective of the pioneer (Nash 51). In 1833, a contribution from an anonymous writer titled ‘Rural Enjoyment’ emphasised the benefits of the natural environment in the American Monthly Magazine. The author viewed nature – wilderness in particular – as an escape from ‘the turmoil, the anxieties, and the hollowness of society’ and ‘the busy haunts of sordid, money-making business’ (399). By the 1840s, appreciation for the savage had turned into a literary genre in America. Writers would frequently head out into the wilds on periodic expeditions in order to collect impressions. Back in the cities, these impressions were written down in the form of descriptive essays ‘in the grand Romantic manner’, expressing the love for the sceneries and solitude of remote nature (Nash 60).

According to Nash, the ability to appreciate wilderness actually came to be seen as ‘one of the qualities of a gentleman’ in nineteenth-century America (60). In an account of an
1833 excursion to the wilds of New Hampshire, Nathan Hale, or a ‘gentleman of Boston’ as he called himself, remarked that ‘if parents desire to expand the minds of their children beyond the wires of the city-age, let them look at, and become familiar with the woods, the wilds, and the mountains’ (54). Nash’s observation is an interesting aspect to consider in relation to Pyle’s Arthurian narrative; Pyle’s celebratory descriptions of pastoral Britain might be seen as having a didactic purpose, teaching his young readers to value the beauty of nature and shaping them into full-fledged gentlemen in the process. The didactic motives of Pyle’s text, however, are beyond the scope of this study and will thus not be covered in the paper. Rather, the analysis will shed light on the fact that while Pyle’s descriptions of the wilds seem to reflect the general appreciation of nature characteristic of the age, Tennyson’s work depicts wilderness much in accordance with the medieval imagination. But before that, the movement of ecocriticism will be outlined and discussed in the following and final section of this chapter.

2.3 Ecocriticism: History and Characteristics of the Movement

The ecocritical movement emerged in the United States in the mid 1980s, although it did not crystalize into a distinct, unified doctrine until in the early 1990s (Glotfelty, The Ecocritical Reader xvii-xviii). By now, ecocritical theory has dramatically changed the landscape of literary criticism, ‘moving from the margins into the mainstream’ (Glotfelty, The Oxford Handbook xii). The journey towards mainstream, however, was long and challenging – a fact that Cheryll Glotfelty called attention to in The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology in 1996. She remarked that the institution of literary studies had, to that point, failed to respond to the environmental crisis, clarifying that whereas other social movements, like the women’s liberation and the civil rights movements, dramatically transformed the domain
of literary theory in the sixties and seventies, the environmental movement had been generally overlooked by the institution of literary studies (xvi-xvii).

One reason for this neglect was that environmental literary critics had not organised themselves into a distinguishable group under a unifying name (Glotfelty, *The Ecocriticism Reader* xvi-xvii). Laurence Coupe reflects upon the usage of the term *ecocriticism* in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000): ‘While I prefer the more inclusive term, “green studies”, the more specific term, “ecocriticism”, has the advantage of reminding us to register the “critical” quality of these times’, he observes (4). Yet to this day, the term *Green Studies* is frequently used in the United Kingdom, while *Ecocriticism* is the preferred name in the United States.

A second reason for the relatively slow development of ecocriticism is detected by Jonathan Bate. In his book *The Song of the Earth* (2000), he points out that the ecocritical movement, unlike its disciplinary cousins mentioned before, has a *voiceless* subject. In, for example, feminist and postcolonial theory, much of the completed work has been carried out by the beneficiaries of these particular revolutions; that is, ‘women and people of colour’ (Bate 72). Thus, the advancement of these theoretical schools has to a great deal been due to the fact that the critics of these movements are able to speak on behalf of *themselves*. Nature, on the other hand, can never speak for itself. The ecocritical scholar has no choice but to speak *for* its subject – the land, the trees, the polluted air, the endangered species, and so forth – rather than *as* the subject. ‘[A] critic may speak as a woman or as a person of colour, but cannot speak as a tree’, Bate explains (72).

What *is* ecocriticism, then? As one of the youngest literary schools, the movement has not yet adopted a universally accepted set of doctrines and procedures. It is therefore not surprising that ecocritical work displays a wide range of diversity. There exist, however, a number of characteristics which have come to be associated with the movement. Glotfelty
provides one of the, to this day, most frequently cited definitions of the genre in The Ecocriticism Reader:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xviii)

Ecocritical work, then, investigates the notion of place in literature, arguing that the physical environment, much like gender and class, should be treated as a distinctive category. More specifically, ecocritics study how nature is represented in literature and what role the physical setting plays in the interpretation of the text. They also explore how the environmental crisis is ‘seeping into contemporary literature’ (Glotfelty, The Ecocriticism Reader xix).

However, as Glotfelty points out in the preface of the more recent Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism, the reach of the movement has been largely extended over the years. Ecocritical work has now come to include titles on animal studies and postcolonial theory, for example (x). As previously stated, this thesis will touch upon such matters as well: the second part of the analysis explores the animalisation of certain human characters in Tennyson’s and Pyle’s works, and Arthur’s efforts to unite and civilise Britain certainly mirror the colonial mission.

Another topic of relevance for ecocritics is the relationship between the human (culture) and the non-human (nature) as well as the very term human itself (Garrard 5). Raymond Williams famously pointed out that ‘[n]ature is perhaps the most complex word in the language’ (164), giving a hint of the contradictory relationship between concepts of nature and human that many ecocritics have detected. Oxford Living Dictionaries define nature as ‘[t]he phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape,
and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations’. This definition displays a paradoxical distinction between nature and humans: on the one hand, nature is seen as the phenomena of the entire physical world, which logically would include the human species as a product of the earth. On the other hand, nature is set in contrast with the human species, meaning that nature is, in fact, the very opposite of humankind.

The paradoxical relationship between nature and humanity is further discussed in *The Song of the Earth*: ‘We are both part of and apart from nature’, Bate observes (33). The nature-culture distinction leads him to a discussion of what he terms the ‘dilemma of environmentalism’: as soon as you have invented the category ‘human’, he explains, ‘nature’ is automatically made its Other, and once nature is the Other, humankind can advance with little regard for it (35). This is exactly what happens in the *Idylls*, in which the otherness of nature, it seems, serves as a justification for Arthur’s dominance over it.

A final unifying feature that most ecocritical work shares is what Glotfelty refers to as a ‘troubling awareness’ of the fact that we have reached an ‘age of environmental limits’ (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xx). This awareness certainly comes to surface in Bate’s aforementioned *The Song of the Earth*. In an era of impending climatic doom – glaciers melting, sea levels rising, forests shrinking and so forth – Bate reflects upon the objective of an eco-centred literary criticism (24). He also makes a distinction between what he terms *light Greens* and *dark Greens*. *Light Greens*, he explains, are ‘environmentalists’ believing that we may reverse the destruction of nature by means of more responsible production and consumption patterns. *Dark Greens*, or ‘deep ecologists’, have a more radical view on the matter: they argue that technology can never be the solution since it is what caused the problem in the first place. Instead, they are advocating cultural primitivism beliefs, meaning, in short, that ‘the “savage” life is superior to the civilized’ (Boas and Lovejoy 19). In other words, they maintain that a ‘return to the state of nature’ is the only salvation for the planet and the human species (Bate
Such a view, as pointed out in the previous chapter of this essay, was indeed commonplace in Tennyson’s England, where many people thought that it was still possible to save England, wasted by industrialisation and urbanisation, by a ‘return to medieval values’ (Chapman 57).

Bate makes clear that his aim is not ‘to propose that we should renounce our metropolitan modernity’. Instead, he believes that the solution lies in a fundamental change in human consciousness. ‘The business of literature’, he concludes, ‘is to work upon [that] consciousness’ (23). Focusing our attention once again on the primary texts of this study, it would be possible to read Tennyson and Pyle in the light of Bate’s observation about consciousness raising; that is, the primary texts could be seen as interventions in the contemporary consciousness of their time about environmental matters. I do not claim, however, that consciousness raising about the dangers associated with the destruction of the environment is what Tennyson and Pyle had in mind writing their respective Arthurian narratives. Nonetheless, both authors lived and worked in a time where the industrial revolution and its consequences had already brought about a radical transformation of the landscape. It thus seems plausible that the negative impacts of industrialism, to one extent or another, would be reflected in their works. This idea will be further developed in the next chapter of this thesis: the close reading of the primary texts.

3 WILD NATURE IN THE PRIMARY WORKS

3.1 The Unkempt Landscape

As specified in the introduction of this thesis, depictions of wild nature in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights* differ from each other quite remarkably. While the celebratory descriptions in Pyle’s text very much reflect the
nineteenth-century view of nature as appealing and inviting, Tennyson’s poems convey more of a negative attitude towards the wild; a fact that comes to surface already in the first poem. The narrator of ‘The Coming of Arthur’ describes the pre-Arthurian land as a ‘dead world’ (93), wasted by countless wars fought between the petty kings of the land. Nature has been left to grow unchecked while the rulers have been occupied waging war against each other. Thus, when Arthur is crowned, Britain is largely overgrown with ‘great tracts of wilderness’ (10). The following passage describes Cameliard, the homeland of Lady Guinevere, before the arrival of Arthur:

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 wallowed in the gardens of the King. (CA 20-25)

The extract depicts Cameliard as a land completely subjected to the powers of nature: covered in vast forests populated with savage creatures, the portrayal of the landscape can certainly be said to embody the very definition of the term wilderness in its etymological sense, ‘the place of wild beasts’ (Nash 2). The mentioning of wild animals roaming about the fields and gardens of King Leodogram further sheds light on the conflict between nature and culture which frequently comes to surface in the Idylls. In this universe, animals are not merely seen as unwelcome guests intruding on human territory. Rather, the narrator transforms these animals into horrid monsters posing a potent threat to humanity; ‘ever and anon the wolf would steal / The children and devour’ (CA 26-7).

Huggan and Tiffin insist that in Western culture, animals have largely come to exist in representation rather than in ‘the real’ (139). The further away people move from the animal
world, they argue, the more difficult it becomes for animals to escape anthropocentrism. Focusing our attention on the *Idylls* again, the narrator’s way of demonising wild animals indicates that also in Tennyson’s universe, animals take on more of a symbolic significance. I hasten to add that I am aware that certain animals, like the wolf, for example, have carried a great deal of symbolic significance previously in Western history, although that significance may have shifted through the centuries. However, this does not change the fact that the rapid transformation of the landscape and the loss of wild spaces experienced by the Victorians plausibly brought about an increased sense of alienation from nature in ‘the real’, arguably contributing to the demonization of wild animals in Tennyson’s narrative.

Paul Waldau, too, reflects upon the representations of animals in creative arts and media. He observes that the habit of portraying non-human creatures in a negative light has been (and still is) a frequently occurring ingredient in various human societies. ‘In the “carpentered world,”’ he writes, ‘many other-than-human communities and individuals have been viewed as pests or worse... and [have] thus [been] controlled or exterminated so as to make this “our world”’ (33). Controlling the spreading of wild vegetation and exterminating the unwanted non-human creatures therein is exactly what Arthur helps Leodogram to achieve when arriving in Cameliard: he ‘slew the beast, and fell’d / The forest, letting in the sun’ (CA 59-60). At this point in the story, the question arises whether King Arthur should really be regarded as a hero. While the narrator, in portraying the wilderness as a hostile landscape populated with horrid beasts, certainly convinces his reader that Arthur is the champion Cameliard and Britain needs, the text only considers the situation from the perspective of the human characters, giving evidence of a strikingly anthropocentric worldview. In other words,

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8 Waldau uses the term *carpentered* to signify the constructed environment specific for industrial societies.
the text does not reflect upon the rights of the non-human beings to move about in the land, but simply takes for granted that the needs of human civilisation are superior.

From a Victorian point of view, however, Arthur’s domination of the natural world is arguably justified. Miasma theory, which according to Thorsheim dominated in Britain for much of the nineteenth century (2), provided a convenient justification for the domestication of the landscape. In chapter 2.1, I mentioned that miasma was thought to be given off by decomposing biological matter (Thorsheim 10). Quite naturally, it was therefore believed that large quantities of the substance were formed in inhospitable wastelands such as marshes, swamps and jungles (2, 16). James Lane Notter warned as late as in 1880 that vegetation would have a favourable effect on human health only if ‘carefully attended to and kept within certain limits’. He further stressed that ‘[i]n any climate and under any circumstances the exuberant growth of plants and trees is bad’ (qtd. in Thorsheim 11). According to this logic, then, Arthur’s actions are necessary for the well-being of the citizens of Britain.

In The Passing of Arthur, the motivations behind Arthur’s deeds are quite clearly expressed in Arthur’s account of the fairy island of Avilion. At least, his description of this wondrous place seems to serve as an illustration of the kind of landscape Arthur is striving to create upon earth while on his mission to domesticate the wilderness. ‘I am going a long way’, he states,

To the island-valley of Avilion;
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadow’d, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crown’d with summer sea,
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound. (PA 424-32)
With its mild climate, leafy valleys and orchard lawns, the Avilion Arthur describes appears the very image of paradise. Like the Garden of Eden portrayed in the Bible, Avilion emerges as a well-watered oasis filled with fruit trees that are ‘pleasant to the sight, and good for food’ (Genesis 2:9). No monstrous beasts are to be seen, for it seems that everything wild, including unpleasant weather and savage vegetation, has been banned from this place. Avilion, then, seems to be a distilled version of nature; a sort of antidote to the evil pre-Arthurian landscape. Yet, even if ‘The Coming of Arthur’ ends in an optimistic spirit, Arthur having ‘made a [united] realm’ (518) in which the vast forests have largely been replaced by ‘Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight’ (61), the dream of Eden remains a distant and unreachable fantasy throughout the Idylls. In any event, nature and wilderness continue to constitute an overarching threat to Arthur’s empire. The treacherous aspects of nature come to surface to one extent or another in all of the poems, but is particularly prominent in the two poems reciting the adventures of Geraint and Enid.

Randy J. Fertel observes that the Geraint idylls present ‘the first serious stages’ in the decay of Arthur’s realm, for ‘the natural forces that will eventually overwhelm the kingdom begin to manifest themselves’ (342). It is true that these particular poems repeatedly emphasise the destructiveness of nature. The hero of ‘The Mariage of Geraint’, the first of the Geraint idylls, heads out on a quest somewhere in the wilderness of Usk.9 Having passed through ‘many a grassy glade / And valley’ (236-7), Geraint arrives at Yniol’s castle. He then discerns that

... all [i]s ruinous.

Here stood a shatter’d archway plumed with fern;

And here had fallen a great part of a tower,

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9 The narrator mentions that King Arthur held court at Caerleon upon Usk at this time (MG 146), meaning that the forestland around Usk is, at the very least, the starting point of Geraint’s adventure.
And high above a piece of turret stair,
Worn by the feet that now were silent, wound
Bare to the sun, and monstrous ivy-stems
Claspt the gray walls with hairy-fibred arms,
And suck’d the joining of the stones, and look’d
A knot, beneath, of snakes, aloft, a grove. (315-25)

As Fertel accurately notices, the malignant natural details in the description of Yniol’s castle undermine nature’s benign aspects (342). In likening the ivy stems to ‘monstrous’ arms ‘sucking’ the joining from between the castle stones, the narrator stresses not only the parasitic aspects of wild nature, but also its beastlike qualities. The snake metaphor in the final line of the quotation reinforces this impression, as does the image of the archway ‘plumed’ with fern. Altogether, the description recalls the image of the beast-ridden land depicted in ‘The Coming of Arthur’, but now, it is the wild vegetation – the fern and the ivy-stems – instead of the forest animals that are being demonised by the narrator. The passage also makes the reader aware of the impermanence of civilisation and of the very existence of humanity, for whereas the feet that used to walk on the time-worn stones are ‘now . . . silent’, the greenery is still thriving at this place. It is as if nature has reconquered its territory.

In ‘Balin and Balan’, similar images are evoked when Balin stumbles across the forest castle of King Pellam. This castle, much like the one of Yniol, seems to be losing the battle against nature. The battlement is ‘overtoppt with ivy-tods’, and the ‘ruinous’ donjon, now a home of bats and owls (31), resembles a ‘knoll of moss’ more than a man-made architectural construction (329-30). Eventually, the menace of nature has spread to the extent that it affects even Camelot, the very symbol of culture and of Arthur’s civilised empire.

. . . when we reach’d
The city, our horses stumbling as they trode
On heaps of ruin, hornless unicorns,
Crack’d basilisks, and splinter’d cockatrices,
And shatter’d talbots, which had left the stones
Raw, that they fell from, brought us to the hall. (Tennyson, HG 712-17)

When the falling sculptures ornamenting Camelot once more reveal the bare stones underneath, the reader is again reminded that whereas nature seems indifferent to the passing of time, everything achieved or constructed by humans is temporary. Another significant detail about the description is the fact that the fallen sculptures all represent fantastic creatures, seemingly belonging in fairyland, rather than animals of our world as we know it.

As previously mentioned, the image of the fairy island Avilion appears more and more distant as the *Idylls* proceed; in fact, by the final poem, Arthur even doubts the very existence of this place (PA 426). Thus, if locations like Avilion, situated in the fairy world, are progressively disappearing into the mists, it seems logical that supernatural creatures like unicorns and basilisks, too, are vanishing from Arthur’s realm, as symbolised in the dying sculptures at Camelot.

So far, this section has illustrated the threatening aspects of savage nature in Tennyson’s *Idylls*; like an invasive species or a contagious disease, wilderness progressively infects Arthur’s kingdom. But the wild terrain also poses more of an immediate danger to the individual characters on their various pursuits. In ‘Geraint and Enid’, the treacherous qualities of the landscape are emphasized in phrases like, ‘The pain [Enid] had / To keep them in the wild ways of the wood’ (186-87). Such a statement makes it quite clear that the wilderness is not a place for humans, for the unwary traveller might easily lose himself there; perhaps on the ‘perilous paths’ Geraint and Enid ride on, or maybe somewhere in the ‘trackless realm of Lyonesse’ (GE 32, LE 35). Other dangers include the ‘[g]ray swamps and pools’ mentioned
in ‘Geraint and Enid’ (31) and the haunted mere in ‘Gareth and Lynette’, where decaying corpses of drowned thieves rise to the surface of the water at night to dance (804-7). To varying degrees, the different representations of the wilds seem to echo the very image of the cursed, thistle-infested land Adam and Eve had to face after to their expulsion from paradise. Such an impression is certainly added to in phrases like, ‘[Geraint’s] charger tramp[ed] many a prickly star / Of sprouted thistle on the broken stones’ (MG 313-14). The demonization of wild animals and unchecked vegetation discussed previously, rhetorically articulated by the employment of beast imagery, further reinforces such an argument. The same can be said about the nature of certain adjectives used to describe wild spaces: black, dark, rough and savage (GL 782, MV 888, LT 659, BB 479). A description of the forest of Dean in ‘Pelleas and Ettarre’, even conjures up images of Hell:

Thro’ that green-glooming twilight of the grove,

It seem’d to Pelleas that the fern without

Burnt as a living fire of emeralds,

So that his eyes were dazzled looking at it. (32-5)

Although the passage depicts a deceptively beautiful landscape, the way the narrator likens the forest vegetation to ‘a living fire’ transforms it into some sort of woodland inferno where the heat of the sun ‘Beat[s] like a strong knight on [Pelleas’] helm’ (22). Satan arrives, it could be argued, in the form of Ettarre, who makes Pelleas experience temptation a bit like Christ during his forty days in the desert. Unlike Christ, however, Pelleas proves unable to resist temptation, for ‘The beauty of [Ettarre’s] flesh abash’d the boy’ (74) to the extent that he neglects his knightly duties.

The forestland is depicted in a similar diabolic manner in ‘Balin and Balan’, where . . . a woodman . . .

Report[s] of some demon in the woods
Was once a man, who . . .

. . . came

To learn black magic, and to hate his kind

With such a hate that when he died his soul

Became a Fiend . . . (120-26)

Although the ‘wood-devil’ (539) is never found, the accounts of the woodsman nonetheless add to the negative perception of this landscape. Before shifting our focus of attention to Pyle’s text, it can be concluded that wilderness as depicted in Tennyson’s Arthurian universe appears to mirror the medieval imagination of such environments as ‘a source of great anxiety’; it really is, in Nash’s terms, ‘a kind of hell’ (15).

In contrast to the foreboding representations of wild nature observed in Tennyson’s work, Pyle’s Story of King Arthur and His Knights portrays such landscapes as wonderful indeed. Descriptions of wild environments are detailed and numerous, a majority of them stressing the delight of nature in various ways. The following extract describes how King Arthur sets out on an adventure to find the Sable Knight. His quest takes place in the same wilderness that Geraint travels through in Tennyson’s version of the story; that is, somewhere in the forestland of Usk.

And, indeed it is a very pleasant thing for to ride forth in the dawning of a Springtime day. For then the little birds do sing their sweetest song, all joining in one joyous medley, whereof one may scarce tell one note from another, so multitudinous is that pretty roundelay; then do the growing things of the earth smell the sweetest in the freshness of the early daytime—the fair flowers, the shrubs, and the blossoms upon the trees; then doth the dew bespangle all the sward as with an incredible multitude of jewels of various colors; then is all the world sweet and clean and new . . . (Pyle 60)
Pyle might not have been a Victorian in a strict sense, but nonetheless, accounts like the one above clearly demonstrate his very Victorian tendency to view the Middle Ages through a sort of nostalgic ‘golden haze’ (Chapman 39). The excessive utilisation of positive adjectives (pleasant, joyous, pretty, fair, sweet, incredible and clean) clearly communicates the delight of Pyle’s Arthurian woodlands. This beautiful landscape, showered with wild flowers and the colourful ‘jewels’ of the morning dew, is not merely a delight for the eye, but stimulates several human senses; while any person riding through the woodlands in the early morning may enjoy the fresh fragrance of the earth, the song of the forest birds offers sweet music to the ear.

Rudd views birdsong in the romanticised medieval landscape as ‘an indication of how things stand in the world at large’ (‘Being Green’ 27). Whereas the presence of birdsong implies that everything is well with the world, she explains, the absence of it signals the exact opposite: that something is badly amiss. In Pyle’s text, the melody of the birds, stressed not only in the passage above but repeatedly throughout the text, can thus be seen as a confirmation of the healthy state of Pyle’s Arthurian universe.

The passage from page 60 of Pyle’s text (cited above) is not the only striking example of nature worship. As previously stated, celebratory descriptions of this type are frequent in Pyle’s novel. In an account of the Valley of Delight, for instance, a wonderfully fair place hidden within the depths of the wilderness, the narrator notices that the small stream running through the glen is ‘as bright as silver’, and that the earth is ‘strewn all over with an infinite multitude of fair and fragrant flowers of divers sorts’ (60). Similarly, in the ‘very wonderful’ Land of Faërie, ‘all the air appeared as it were to be as of gold—so bright was it and so singularly radiant’ (84). A final example reads: ‘the woodlands decked themselves in their best apparel of clear, bright green. Each bosky dell and dingle was full of the perfume of the thickets, and in every tangled depth the small bird sang with all his might and main’ (91).
In all of the examples cited above, the tone of the narrator is strikingly cheerful. The excessive employment of positive adjectives (bright, fair, fragrant, wonderful, radiant and clear) and the insistence of the benign aspects of nature (‘it is a very pleasant thing’ to ride through this landscape) make the obvious danger of Arthur’s quest appear secondary. Of course, the fact that Pyle wrote for a significantly younger audience than Tennyson is arguably a contributing factor to the optimistic tone of the narrator. Pugh and Weisl observe that several chivalric stories written for younger audiences, such as Pyle’s *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883) and Sidney Lanier’s *The Boy’s King Arthur* (1880), ‘tell medieval stories but remove the darker, more troubling elements from them, creating a somewhat cartoonish world’ (47). In that sense, this type of narrative ‘testifies to both a fascination with and a misunderstanding of the period as an innocent and magical time’ (Pugh and Weisl 49). The cheerfulness of Pyle’s narrator, then, might simply be a strategy adopted in order to make a story for adults more suitable for children. Reading between the lines, however, Pyle’s narrative nonetheless gives evidence of an underlying lament or, at the very least, an overarching feeling of nostalgia.

Chapman points out that ‘[t]he sense of naturalism in the Middle Ages . . . made it possible [for the nineteenth-century writer] to idealise the past in contrast with the abuses of the present’ (34). To the attentive reader, then, the spring morning when ‘all the world [is] sweet and clean and new’ (Pyle 60, cited on page 29 of this essay), may represent an era before industrialisation and urbanisation, in which the landscape was still comparatively unaltered and, above all, clean from pollution. Such an interpretation is further added to in a later description of the autumn: ‘a bird might sing here and another there, a short song in memory of spring-time’ (169). Here, the birdsong is no longer cheerful, but filled with a sense of regret and longing. Although the passing of seasons may reflect a cyclical view of history or ‘symbolize life’s passage’ (Buell 221), Otis Winchester notices that in a great deal of
Victorian poetry, the autumnal landscape mirrors the sad nostalgia of the period: ‘Like a green leaf blanched by the frost, the pastoral world and its idyllic associations were fast fading—and the Victorian more than the Romantics seemed regretfully aware of it’ (184). Focusing our attention again on Pyle’s work, the sorrowful song of the autumn birds can thus be said to echo the nostalgia of the age. The narrator, it seems, is singing the very same melody as the birds: one in memory of a wonderful time when paradise existed upon earth, now ‘long-gone-by’ (Pyle 125). Bearing in mind that deforestation reached unprecedented levels in the United States during Pyle’s life-time (Oswalt and Smith 7), the author’s celebration of the forested landscape might very well be an immediate reaction to this. After all, Victorian writers often contained their criticism of their present in an admiration for a golden age of the past (Chapman 4).

Although not as clearly articulated as in the *Idylls*, Pyle’s story contains a few scenarios demonstrating man’s conquering of nature as well. In ‘The Winning of Kinghood’, it is described how Arthur’s foster father ‘took up his inn in a certain field where many other noble knights and puissant lords had already established themselves’ (Pyle 12). The narrator observes that ‘because of the multitude of . . . pennants and banners the sky was at places well-nigh hidden with the gaudy colors of the fluttering flags’ (12-13). This description is not in any way reproaching; indeed, the narrator repeatedly stresses the excellence of the lords and knights occupying the field. Nevertheless, the very presence of the men, the pennants and banners – so numerous that the sky is hardly visible any longer – do illustrate man’s mastery of nature.

Another event calling attention to man’s domination of the non-human world is depicted in ‘The Winning of a Sword’: ‘King Arthur . . . came . . . to a certain place where charcoal burners plied their trade. For here were many mounds of earth, all a-smoke with the smouldering logs within, whilst all the air was filled with the smell of the dampened fires’
Although, as I have mentioned earlier, the landscape Pyle presents is largely unspoilt, the cited passage nonetheless reveals that the destruction of nature is, in fact, an ongoing process even in this pastoral universe. What is more, when Arthur arrives in this place, he perceives that ‘something was toward that was sadly amiss. For . . . he beheld three sooty fellows with long knives in their hands, who pursued one old man’ (63). The fact that the ‘sooty fellows’ are harassing an old man is quite an interesting detail, especially as the old man turns out to be Merlin. If the sooty villains, presumably charcoal burners, are associated with industry and modernity, Merlin could be seen as a representation of the magic and superstition of the Middle Ages. The scenario, then, illustrates not only the devastation of the landscape, but could also symbolise the emergence of new theories, discoveries and technologies which threatened to replace the old traditions in the nineteenth-century.

It has been illustrated that Pyle’s novel generally presents wild nature as a source of marvel and delight. Nonetheless, I would like to stress that there are exceptions to this claim. Forests, in particular, are to a certain degree perceived as dangerous and foreboding, reflecting a statement by Andrew V. Ettin that ‘[d]eath too is in Arcadia’ (126). The forest is the location where Merlin faces his doom (Pyle 213-17), for example, where Sir Myles is fatally wounded (58), and where Arthur, much like Gawain in the medieval poem ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, is on the verge of having his head cut off (Pyle 367). Quite expectedly, the threatening aspects of nature are also reflected in some descriptions of the landscape. If the wilds were not occasionally portrayed as dangerous, the knights would not

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10 To be precise, in Pyle’s version of the story, Vivien’s beguilement of Merlin takes place in the Valley of Delight, which lies deeply embedded within the depths of the forest.

11 The forest Merlin rides through prior to his downfall, for example, is described as ‘a very dark and dismal forest’ with trees so ‘thickly interwoven together’ that their roots and branches ‘appeared like serpents all twisted together’ (Pyle 209). Similarly, the narrator conveys a rather threatening image of the wilds when Arthur approaches the dwelling place of the Sable Knight. Here, the selection of adjectives used to describe the place – forbidding, violent, dismal and dark (Pyle 65-7) – aids in communicating the danger of this part of the forest.
be able to demonstrate their might, courage and heroicness there. To a certain extent, negative depictions of wild nature are thus necessary in the story.

Another important aspect to consider in a discussion of wilderness is the type of emotion the terrain produces within the observer (Nash 3). In Pyle’s text, wild nature is most likely to produce feelings of bliss and enjoyment, although there are some exceptions to this claim. At numerous instances, the narrator voices the delightful sensations of Arthur when travelling through wild environments. Riding through the forest of Usk, for example, Arthur’s ‘heart expand[s] with great joy’, and he cannot help but joining in with the cheerful melody of the forest birds (60). In a similar fashion, when Arthur remembers the beautiful Land of Faërie, ‘his heart would become so greatly elated with pure joyousness that he hardly knew how to contain himself because of the great delight that filled his entire bosom’ (92). A final example is from page 92 of Pyle’s novel, where the narrator voices his hopes that his reader at some point in his life will be able to experience the joy of Arthur riding through the woodlands:

I would wish that you . . . might ride homeward in such a triumph and joyousness as filled him that day, and that the sunlight might shine around you as it shone around him, . . . and that all the little birds might sing with might and main as they sang for him, and that your heart also might sing its song of rejoicing in the pleasantness of the world in which you live.

12 When Arthur makes a visit to the Land of Faërie for the first time, the landscape produces feelings of fear rather than of joy: ‘although this place was so exceedingly fair . . . it appeared altogether as lonely as the hollow sky upon a day of summer. So, because of all the marvellous beauty of this place, and because of its strangeness and its entire solitude, King Arthur perceived that he must have come into a land of powerful enchantment . . . wherefore his spirit was enwrapped in a manner of fear’ (Pyle 84). Likewise, when Sir Gawaine arrives in this mysterious place, the narrator recites that he ‘rode . . . in a sort of fear, for he wist not what was to befall him’ (339).
The passage above is interesting as it illustrates not only the positive effects of the landscape on Arthur’s spirit, the direct address to the reader further suggests a didactic purpose. Bearing in mind Nash’s observation that the ability to appreciate wild nature was deemed ‘one of the qualities of a gentleman’ in nineteenth-century America (60), it seems likely that Pyle, through his celebratory accounts of such landscapes, intended to teach his young readers to appreciate nature, shaping them into gentlemen in the process. The narrator’s wish that his reader will one day be able to experience the pleasure of riding through the forest further suggests that such a thing is perhaps no longer to be taken for granted in the world of the reader; again, the accounts of the narrator seem to be imbued with a nostalgic yearning for the medieval past as an age in which nature was still unspoilt and wild environments existed in abundance.

Directing the attention to Tennyson’s text again, the *Idylls*, too, contain a number of examples illustrating how wild terrains give rise to certain emotions. But in Tennyson’s Arthurian universe, feelings of joy and pleasure are rarely associated with this type of landscape. Rather, wild nature seems to evoke melancholy and nostalgia. In ‘The Last Tournament’, the narrator describes how Tristan’s ride through the densely forested Lyonnesse ‘made dull his inner’ (366). Here, the environment reminds him of a happier time in the past, when he and Isolt used to live together in that ‘woodland paradise’ (720):

And now that desert lodge to Tristram looke

So sweet that, halting, in he past and sank

Down on a drift of foliage random-blown

...  

... then he laid

His brows upon the drifted leaf and dream’d. (LT 386-405)

In a similar fashion, Elaine remembers when she, as a young girl, used to dwell happily in the woods together with her father and brother in ‘Lancelot and Elaine’ (1028-29). The most
striking example illustrating how the natural scenery gives rise to certain emotions, however, occurs in ‘The Passing of Arthur’, when, on the day of Arthur’s last battle, an impenetrable fog settles over the land.

A death-white mist slept over sand and sea,
Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew . . . (93-101)

The mysterious mist clearly has a mortal impact on the knights’ morale as it fills their hearts with fear and transforms the battlefield to a nightmare of confusion. It is not clear, however, what the mist might actually signify. One possibility is to view it as a representation of miasma. As previously stated, miasma was believed to be the most serious contaminant of the environment for much of the Victorian age (Thorsheim 10). Many Victorians actually believed that fog was formed in the same kinds of places that produced miasma. In other words, fog was understood as miasma made visible (15-16).

As fog was suspected to be a carrier of miasma, its fatal impact on Arthur’s knights is not particularly surprising. According to Thorsheim, the risks associated with the inhaling of as little as a single breath of the substance were considered as deadly (10). The fact that Arthur’s final battle takes place in the wild Lyonesse, ‘On the waste sand by the waste sea’ (PA 92), further supports the interpretation of the mist as miasma made visible since large quantities of miasma were supposed to be produced in barren and inhospitable areas (Thorsheim 16). In such an interpretation of the text, the fog thus becomes the final, deadly strike of nature in her attempt to reclaim the land.
Another possibility is to view the mist as a symbolic image of the coal smoke filling the streets of Victorian London. Although commonly described as black, brown, or yellow in colour, the sooty London-fog did, in fact, share a number of characteristics with the white mist described in ‘The Passing of Arthur’. Max Schlesinger wrote in 1853 that

[the winter-fogs of London are, indeed, awful. They surpass all imagining; he who never saw them, can form no idea of what they are. He who knows how powerfully they affect the minds and tempers of men, can understand the prevalence of that national disease—the spleen. In a fog, the air is hardly fit for breathing; it is grey-yellow, of a deep orange, and even black at the same time, it is moist, thick, full of bad smells, and choking. (84)

As the passage elucidates, the population of London witnessed the worst episodes of fog in the winter. It is also winter when the ghostly haze settles over Lyonesse in time for Arthur’s battle. More importantly, Schlesinger emphasizes the powerful impact of the London-fog on the ‘minds and tempers of men’, likening its effect to a national disease. Likewise, the mist depicted in the *Idylls* strongly influences the minds of Arthur’s knights, entirely depriving them of courage. Schlesinger further stresses the density of the London-fog, describing it as ‘thick’ and ‘choking’ (84). Indeed, so dense was the London-fog that, ‘[t]ourists marvelled at a population that could accustom itself to days spent in complete darkness’ (Jackson 4). Also in Tennyson’s poem, the mist, although not black in itself, is impenetrable enough to shut out the light from the sun. ‘In that close mist’, Tennyson writes, wounded men ‘cried for the light’ to reappear, but ‘those who . . . Look’d up for heaven . . . only saw the mist’ (PA 116, 112).

13 Charles Dickens, for example, described the London fog as ‘dark yellow’ at the edge of the city, ‘and a little within it brown, and then browner, and then browner, until at the heart of the City . . . it was rusty-black’ (420).
In December 1873, a fog so impenetrable that it paralysed the entire city settled over London for five days. As a consequence, the number of deaths due to respiratory problems rose from 520 cases to 1112 during this week (Jackson 230-31). Rather than blaming the cold temperatures accompanying the fog for the increasing fatality rates, the Lancet held the fog accountable; or rather, chemicals contained within it (Thorsheim 28).

‘The Passing of Arthur’ was published in 1869, \(^{14}\) that is, a few years before the Lancet report. The fog of 1873, however, was not the first one of its kind. Occurrences of ‘impenetrable fog’ had become increasingly frequent in the capital since the dawning of the century, and the insights expressed in the Lancet were by no means pioneer. As early as in 1819, coal smoke was damned in the House of Commons as ‘prejudicial to public health and public comfort’ (Jackson 3). A few decades later, in 1842, the Metropolitan Improvement Society was formed. Bypassing the government, the Society wrote directly to London manufacturers and engineering works, threatening to prosecute ‘anyone with a smoking chimney’ (225). Interestingly, Tennyson appears to have had connections with the Society; in a letter to Richard Henry Horne, he mentions Southwood Smith (Lang and Shannon 220), who, according to Jackson, was one of the members of the Society (225). Such a connection suggests that Tennyson would have followed the actions of the Society carefully; arguably, the smoke abatement debate had such an influence on the poet that he ended up altering the setting of his principal source, Sir Thomas Malory, \(^{15}\) in order to have Arthur’s final battle take place in a blind haze like the ones haunting London.

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\(^{14}\) I am aware that ‘The Passing of Arthur’ contains Tennyson’s 1842 poem ‘Morte d’Arthur’. The earlier poem, however, makes no mention of the mist; this is a detail Tennyson added to his 1869 version of it.

\(^{15}\) Tennyson’s adaption of the myth is based on a very wide range of medieval material (Staines, preface xv), but Malory was his chief source of inspiration: ‘The vision of Arthur as I have drawn him came upon me when, little more than a boy, I first lighted upon Malory’ (qtd. in H. Tennyson, Memoir, vol. I, 194).
Although, at a first glance, the narrator of the *Idylls* seems to embrace civilisation and the conquering of the natural world (see my previous discussion on page 24 of this essay), the interpretation of the fog as a representation of industrial coal smoke would suggest that the poet was perhaps not so optimistic about technology after all. Interestingly, the *Idylls* do contain some hints indicating exactly this. In ‘Gareth and Lynette’, an old seer outside the gates of Camelot advises the young Gareth not to ‘Pass . . . beneath this gateway, but abide / Without, among the cattle of the field’ (269-70), suggesting a preference for a rural life in harmony with nature. A more striking example occurs in ‘Pelleas and Etтарre’, when a devastated Pelleas looks up at the majestic structure of Camelot and groans: ‘ye build too high’ (544). Pelleas’ words ultimately turn him into a critic of modern society, urbanisation and technology, for the reader discerns in his words the Victorian anxiety about the future. The poet himself actually displays a similar preference for country life in a letter to his aunt, written when he had moved to Cambridge to start his university studies:

> I am sitting owl-like and solitary in my rooms . . . The hoof of the steed, the roll of the wheel, the shouts of drunken Gown, and drunken Town come up from below with a sea-like murmur. I wish to Heaven I had Prince Hussain’s fairy carpet to transport me along the deeps of the air to your coterie. . . . What a pity it is that the golden days of Faerie are over! . . . I feel isolated here in the midst of society. The country is so disgusting level, the revelry of the place so monotonous . . .

(H. Tennyson, *Memoir*, vol. I, 34)

The letter reveals a man overwhelmed with the crowds and noises of the city. The nostalgic lament that ‘the golden days of Faerie’ are no more further suggests a desire to escape industrial modernity and lead a simpler life closer to nature. Thus, Pelleas’ statement, ‘ye build too high’ (PE 544), seems to echo Tennyson’s own fears and doubts; his mixed feelings regarding his rapidly changing England. In that sense, Pelleas’ lamentation serves as a
warning of what modernity might lead to in the end. This question is answered when
apocalypse strikes: Arthur’s Order of Knighthood is entirely wiped out on the day of his last
battle. Fatally wounded, Arthur mourns that he is now ‘king among the dead’ (PA 146), and
that ‘all [his] realm / Reels back into the beast’ (25-6). Interestingly, the destruction of
Arthur’s empire is followed by the disappearance of the mist; an event supporting the reading
of the mist as a symbolic representation of industrial coal smoke. The battle is also followed
by a rising tide which will eventually come to swallow the whole land of Lyonnesse.16
Naturally, such a dramatic ending makes the reader wonder whether the poet predicted a
similar apocalyptic ending of his modern world. This, however, is a question that will remain
open for discussion.

3.2 Dwellers of the Wild

In his book Landscape and Memory (1995), Schama uses the phrase ‘the mythic memory of
greenwood freedom’ (140) in order to describe how the idea of the medieval forest entered
the popular imagination in nineteenth-century novels like Sir Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe. In these
stories, the English greenwood was depicted as a realm of anarchic justice where ‘the true law
[was] executed by the out-laws’ (141). This perception of the medieval wild landscape as the
realm of the lawless is very prominent also in the Idylls. But unlike in stories like Ivanhoe and
Robin Hood, Tennyson’s outlaws are certainly not executing the ‘true law’, for only the ‘the
justice of the King’ makes the hearts of the people ‘applaud’ (GE 955-57). In Tennyson’s
Arthurian universe, the realm of the lawless is above all the locus of chaos and turbulence.17

16 The narrator describes Lyonnesse as ‘A land of old upheaven from the abyss / By fire, to sink into
the abyss again’ (PA 82-3).
17 Needless to say, Tennyson’s text also describes a few positive encounters taking place in the wilds.
Prince Geraint meets the lovely Enid, later his wife, for the first time at Yniol’s ruined castle in the
wilderness of Usk (MG 326-68), and a holy forest hermit tends to Lancelot’s wounds in ‘Lancelot and
Elaine’ (517-19). Nonetheless, a majority of encounters occurring in the wilds are essentially negative.
A wild territory bordering to Devon, for example, is described as the ‘common sewer of all
[the] realm’, swarming with ‘bandit earls, and caitiff knights, / Assassins, and all flyers from
the hand / Of Justice’ (MG 35-9). In ‘Gareth and Lynette’, too, the wilderness is presented as
the realm of criminals. The imprisonment of Lynette’s family by three lawless forest-knights
is, after all, the reason why Lynette turns to Arthur for aid in the first place.

But lawless criminals are not the only figures terrorising Tennyson’s wilderness. This
type of landscape is above all the territory of beasts. These creatures include the ‘wild dog,
and wolf and boar and bear’ plaguing Cameliard in ‘The coming of Arthur’ (23). Other beasts
appear less earthly. In ‘Balin and Balan’, as mentioned previously, the forest is believed to be
haunted by some sort of ‘wood-devil’ (539), and in ‘The Coming of Arthur’, the reader learns
that Britain is also populated by ‘wolf-like men’ (32). These monstrous creatures, ‘Worse
than the wolves’ (33), have been suckled and raised by a she-wolf in her lair, an account
reflecting a general ‘fascination with hybrids and cross-breeding among the Victorians’ which
‘unsettled the ostensible species barrier’ (Ortiz-Robles 12). Tennyson’s experimentation with
the boundary separating the human species from other, non-human animals will be
extensively covered in this section of the thesis. But before that, I would like to direct the
attention to some encounters taking place in Pyle’s wilderness.

As in Tennyson’s version of the story, Pyle’s text describes a number of unpleasant
confrontations taking place in the wilds. But the text is also rich in positive encounters. In the
Valley of Delight, for example, Arthur is offered food and refreshment by ‘the most beautiful
damoiselles that he had ever beheld in all of his life’ (61). Another friendly encounter takes
place deeply within a forest bordering to the Fäerie world, where Arthur is served
refreshments by two fay pages (83). The wild landscape is also the dwelling place of the
wonderfully fair Nymue, ‘the chiepest of [the] Ladies of the Lake’ (86). This immortal fay
woman appears for the first time in the Land of Fäerie and later every now and then in the
Forest of Arroy (259, 306). Encounters with Nymue are always positive, for she ‘ha[s] a greater friendliness for [Arthur] and those noble knights of [his] court than [he] canst easily wot of’ (86). Pyle’s woodlands are also inhabited by a friendly hermit who tends to the knights on various occasions (75, 333) and, quite naturally, by various types of animals. But unlike in Tennyson’s poems, the majority of wild creatures encountered in Pyle’s story are marvellously beautiful and pose no harm to humans. On multiple occasions, they even assist the knights in finding their way through the forestland. ‘[A] white doe with a golden collar about its neck’ guides Arthur and Merlin through the woodlands of Arroy on their quest for Excalibur, for instance (82), and in a similar fashion, ‘a fawn as white as milk’ leads Sir Ewaine and Sir Gawaine through the same forest in ‘The Story of Sir Pellias’ (306).

Shifting our focus back to the *Idylls*, it should not be left unsaid that wonderful creatures appear to have existed in Tennyson’s Arthurian woodlands as well. Merlin sadly looks back on a time when ‘the hart with the golden horns’ was still current in the wild woods of Broceliande (MV 406-7). But as suggested by the falling sculptures of Camelot mentioned earlier – the ones representing the fantastic creatures vanishing from Arthur’s realm – the magnificent hart is no longer to be seen. It ‘vanish’d by the fairy well’, Merlin states, suggesting its permanent retreat to the fairy world (MV 426). Merlin’s nostalgic accounts reveal that, unlike in Pyle’s novel, ‘the golden days of Faerie’ (Tennyson, qtd. in *Memoir*, vol. I, 34) are already over at this point in the *Idylls*.

If ‘beauteous beast[s]’ (MV 419) like the one with the golden horns have become extinct in Tennyson’s Arthurian universe, there is certainly no shortage of other types of animals. I have already discussed the horrid creatures terrorising Arthur’s realm in poems like ‘The Coming of Arthur’. The worst kind of beasts populating Tennyson’s wilderness, however, are actually human. As previously mentioned, the border separating humans from animals was certainly under discussion throughout the Victoria era, and, quite expectedly, an
experimentation of the human/animal divide also comes to surface in a great deal of literature produced in Britain during this age. Ortiz-Robles discusses the animalistic traits of the monster as represented in a selection of late Victorian Gothic fiction in his aforementioned essay ‘Liminanimal’. As previously stated, he argues that the Victorian monster, often referred to as a ‘creature’, occupies an indeterminate zone situated between the human and the animal. The ‘liminality’ of the monster, he explains, is rhetorically articulated by the employment of animal imagery (11, 21). Ortiz-Robles reflections, as we shall see, are applicable not only to gothic fiction, but also to Tennyson’s Idylls and, to a certain extent, even to Pyle’s novel.

It has already been observed that the beast image sometimes appears in Tennyson’s descriptions of the wild natural scenery (see my previous discussion on page 26 of this essay). Interestingly, such images are the more abundant in his depictions of certain human characters, and they especially occur in portrayals of people encountered in the wilderness. Tennyson’s animalisation of such characters is essentially negative, reflecting Waldau’s comment that ‘it is rarely a compliment to be told, “You acted like an animal.”’ (33) Likening a human character to an animal thus appears to be a means of highlighting a person’s disagreeable personality traits.18 Unsurprisingly, some of the most striking cases of animalisation are found in various portrayals of villains. Courtesy and reason are characteristics linked to Camelot and culture, it seems, whereas cruelty and recklessness are associated with nature. In his study ‘The Beast Image in Tennyson’s Idylls of the King’, Engelberg notices that ‘[t]he deeper Geraint penetrates the wasteland, the less do the persons he encounters resemble men’ (288). The beast images do grow in intensity as the events of the

18 While most cases of animalisation are essentially negative in the Idylls, there are, however, a few instances when animalisation occurs as a means of highlighting certain positive characteristics (see for example MG 326-44 and G 106).
poems unfold, so Engelberg’s observation is accurate. A former suitor of Enid’s, the ‘false’
earl Limours (Tennyson, GE 437), is one of the characters encountered by the couple on their
wasteland-journey. This ‘wild’ lord, dwelling ‘in the heart of waste and wilderness’ (277, 313), certainly exemplifies the savageness and immorality of characters associated with this
type of landscape. While welcoming Geraint with fabricated courtliness, the narrator observes
how Limours, ‘stealthily . . . Found Enid with the corner of his eye’ (279-81), shedding light
on his dishonest intentions. Quite predictably, the earl attempts to snatch Enid from her
husband the very next morning. Like a savage and callous beast, he attacks Geraint ‘all in
passion uttering a dry shriek’ (461). Yet, Limours claims to still ‘keep a touch of sweet
civility’ (312), which can indeed not be said about the ‘Bull’ of Doorm, the ruler of this
lawless land (439).

Described as ‘huge’ of frame and with ‘rolling eyes of prey’ (GE 536-8), the ‘brute
earl’ of Doorm, as Engelberg remarks, is ‘complete animal’ (289). He angrily ‘gnaw[s] his . . .
lip[s]’ and ‘t[akes] his russet beard between his teeth’ (668, 712) when Enid ceaselessly
refuses his commands, bringing to the reader’s mind the image of an aggressive animal. The
earl explains to Enid that he compels all creatures of the wilderness to his will (628). When he
proves unable to control Enid, however, his discourteous character is manifest as he, all
‘unknightly . . . sm[i]tes her on the cheek’ (716-17), severely breaking the code of chivalry.
The fact that he spends his days raiding the land further illustrates the immorality of the earl,
and also of his army of supporters.

Directing the attention to the followers of the earl, the degree to which the narrator
animalises these people is quite astonishing. The reader learns that, rather than speaking to
each other, some of them are ‘hiss[ing] . . . What shall not be recorded’ (GE 633-34). Others,
like the two ‘lusty’ spearmen appearing in the same poem, are ‘growling like . . . dog[s]’ (592, 558). Even more important, however, is the mention that some of these man-dogs have since
long lost their souls to ‘the old serpent . . . [who] had drawn [it] / Down, as the worm draws in the withered leaf / And makes it earth’ (631-33). At this moment, the animality of these characters is indisputable; in denying them a soul, they are essentially deprived of their humanity in the process.

If there is one villain more monstrous that the others, who, like the earl of Doorm and his followers, appears utterly devoid of heart and soul, then it is undoubtedly Vivien. Ruthless, vicious, and dangerously seductive, it seems logical that Vivien resides in the nightmarish wilderness as depicted by Tennyson: ‘She dwells among the woods’, Balan tells his brother, ‘and meets / And dallies with him in the Mouth of Hell’ (BB 603-4). As in the depictions of Limours and the earl of Doorm, the narrator’s accounts of Vivien are rich in beast analogy, placing her character alongside them in Ortiz-Robles’ indeterminate zone of the Victorian monster; that is, somewhere between human and beast (11). Edward Burne-Jones’ renowned painting *The Beguiling of Merlin* depicts Lady Nimue with living snakes entwined in her hair, obviously bearing resemblance to the dreadful Medusa in Greek mythology. It is not Nimue, but Vivien who beguiles Merlin in the two primary texts of this thesis. Nevertheless, as Burne-Jones’ painting implies, the portrayal of Merlin’s undoer frequently conjures up the image of a serpent.

Engelberg sheds light on the fact that Vivien’s talk throughout ‘Merlin and Vivien’ is full of images of a predator’s hunt, mirroring her own hunt for the wizard’s soul. He also remarks that she ‘strangles her victim in the image of the serpent’ (290): ‘She … made her lithe arm round his neck / Tighten’ (Tennyson, MV 612-13). Engelberg’s reflections are to the point; although it might not be obvious at a first glance, Vivien seems the very personification of the deceitful, yet alluring, serpent of the Genesis. Snake imagery is introduced early on in ‘Merlin and Vivien’; in contrast to Sir Tristram, who ‘warrior-wise . . . stridest thro’ [King Mark’s] halls’ (LT 515), the ‘wily’ Vivien ‘creep[s]’ through ‘the peaceful court’ of Camelot,
‘sowing one ill hint from ear to ear’ (MV 5, 137-41). As the poem continues, the images grow increasingly blatant. The reader learns, for example, that Vivian’s dress has the ‘color [of] the satin-shining palm / On sallows (222-23). In her shimmering green dress, laying ‘all her length’ at Merlin’s feet (217), Vivien does not merely resemble a snake; it becomes increasingly evident she is the deceitful serpent tempting man to his fall in the Bible. ‘[M]ore subtil than any beast’ (Genesis 3:1), Vivien cunningly uses her sexual allure to tempt Merlin to his fall:

And lissome Vivien, holding by his heel,

Writhed toward him, slid up his knee and sat,

Behind his ankle twined her hollow feet

Together, curved an arm about his neck,

Clung like a snake . . . (MV 236-40)

When Merlin, too late, sees Vivien for what she really is, Rebecca Cochran observes how she transforms in his eyes from ‘a brilliantly agile and beautiful, but dangerous, snake to one who is ‘Stiff as a viper [frozen,\(^{19}\)] loathsome sight’ (89). Despite Merlin’s insight, Vivian’s persuasion bears fruit, for Merlin, ‘overtalk’d and overworn’ (MV 963) yields and tells Vivien how to cast the charm which she later uses to destroy him.

Although the serpent appears mostly in relation to Vivien’s character, it should not be left unsaid that, sometimes, the serpent materialises in Guinevere as well. Believing that she has been betrayed by her lover Lancelot, the Queen, ‘writhe[s] upon’ Arthur’s couch in ‘Lancelot and Elaine’ (606). The images grow more powerful in ‘Guinevere’, where the fallen Queen ‘grovel[s] with her face against the floor’, inch by inch ‘creep[ing]’ closer to her husband’s feet (412, 524-25). As the biblical serpent persuaded Eve to eat from the forbidden

\(^{19}\) Tennyson’s ‘Merlin and Vivien’ reads ‘Stiff as a viper frozen; loathsome sight’ (843). Cochran must have left out the word ‘frozen’ by accident.
fruit, in turn causing the fall of man and the curse of the ground, so does Guinevere’s betrayal bring about a ‘kingdom’s curse’, for the narrator ultimately blames her for the dissolution of the Order of Knighthood and, consequently, for Arthur’s downfall: ‘this all is woman’s grief’. . . whose disloyal life / Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round (G 547, 216-18). Whether or not Guinevere really is to blame for the apocalyptic outcome of the Idylls is beyond the scope of this paper. It is a topic that has already been covered by a vast number of scholars, besides. However, on the topic of female characters like Guinevere and Vivien, I would nonetheless like to mention that, even though Tennyson frequently associates both male and female characters with wilderness and the animalesque, I have observed a gender hierarchy in the poet’s employment of animal imagery: while male characters are likened to dogs, wolves and bulls, or, in Tennyson’s reported words, ‘some of the higher mammalia’ (H. Tennyson, Memoir, vol. I, 170), women are above all associated with serpents and vipers; perhaps not an unexpected pattern considering the abundance of biblical references in the work. A considerable difference between Vivien and Guinevere, however, is that Guinevere, unlike Vivien, is associated with civilisation and Camelot rather than with nature and wilderness. Interestingly, the Queen is not the only civilised character being animalised; as the events of the Idylls progress, the bestial images rapidly spread until, finally, they are found in descriptions of Arthur’s knights as well as in portrayals of characters associated with wilderness. This observation will be developed in detail shortly, but first, I will explore the topic of beast imagery in relation to some of Pyle’s characters.

In Pyle’s work, as in the Idylls, the act of comparing a human character to a wild animal can be a means of highlighting certain undesirable personality traits. Pyle’s representation of Vivien surely illustrates this fact, for his portrayal of the enchantress is very similar to that of Tennyson. In the introduction of this thesis, I mentioned that Pyle was very familiar with Tennyson’s poetry. John F. Plummer further points out that the author also came
in contact with the artwork of the pre-Raphaelites through his mother’s offices (388-89), which suggests that he was also aware of Burne-Jones’ painting depicting *The Beguiling of Merlin*. It is hardly surprising then, that Pyle’s portrayal of Vivien, like that of Tennyson, frequently evokes images of snakes, although, as we shall see, the image of the spider is even more prominent. Vivien’s connection to the wild landscape, however, is not evident in Pyle’s text. Vivien actually resides at the court of Morgana le Fay on the ‘magic Island of Avalon’ (200) in his version of the story. As the beguiling of Merlin takes places in the wilderness, however, and since the animal images are so powerful in relation to her character, I have nonetheless chosen to include a discussion of Vivien below.

As in Tennyson’s *Idylls*, Pyle’s narrator frequently associates Vivien with a predator using her sexuality in order to lure Merlin into her trap. The author’s own illustration of ‘The Enchantress Vivien’ depicts her in a revealing ensemble with a hint of a smirk on her lips. She is wearing a diadem in the shape of a cobra and holding a slender wand, also ornamented with a curling snake, in her hand (198). Unlike in the *Idylls*, however, the textual descriptions of Pyle’s Vivien conjure up images of a spider rather than of a serpent. On page 206, for example, the reader learns that Merlin is so enchanted by Vivien that ‘he could in no wise disentangle himself from Vivien’s witchery’ (Pyle 206). At a later instance, Merlin describes Vivien’s magic as ‘such potent . . . that [she] mayst entangle any living soul into the meshes thereof’ (Pyle 214). Such descriptions transform Vivien into a dangerous, yet beautiful, spider, and the spells she cast become a web woven in order to trap her prey.

When, at last, Merlin has taught Vivien every magical spell he knows, Vivien lures the wizard to drink a sleeping potion and, too late, he realises that he has been betrayed. At this point, the image of a deadly spider, injecting its paralysing venom into its helpless prey, is particularly prominent. Merlin fails in his attempts to stand up, eventually ceasing his struggle
and falls into a sleep ‘so deep that it was almost as though he had gone dead’ (215). Next, it is described how Vivien

. . . stretched out her forefinger and wove an enchantment all about him so that it was as though he was entirely encompassed with a silver web of enchantment. And when she had ended, Merlin could move neither hand nor foot nor even so much as a fingertip, but was altogether like some great insect that a cunning and beautiful spider had enmeshed in a net-work of fine, strong web. (Pyle 215)

In the passage above, the narrator explicitly likens Vivien to a crafty spider for the first (and only) time in the novel. At this point in the story, her animality is thus manifest.

In contrast to Vivien and the savage man-beasts residing in Tennyson’s Arthurian wilderness, Pyle’s forest knights are only very rarely compared to animals. When such a juxtaposition occurs, its purpose, it appears, is not to shed light on the disagreeable characteristics of these particular characters. Rather, it seems to be a means of illustrating an intense emotion experienced at a particular moment. During the first battle between Arthur and the Sable Knight – who later turns out to be King Pellinore – the narrator recites that ‘Pellinore was [so] exceedingly mad with the fury of the sore battle he had fought . . . that his eyes were all beshot with blood like those of a wild boar, and a froth, like the champings of a wild boar, stood in the beard about his lips’ (74). In comparing Pellinore to a wild boar, the narrator clearly displays his rage at the moment of battle. The anger of Pellinore at this particular instant, however, does not say anything about his personality in general, for the reader learns that Pellinore is in fact ‘exceedingly gentle of demeanor’ (177). He is also honourable; when challenged by the young Sir Griflet, Pellinore cries out ‘with a great deal of nobleness’ that Griflet is ‘too young and too untried in arms to have to do with a seasoned knight’, and advises him to withdraw from the battle (59). A final interesting aspect regarding Pellinore’s character is the fact that Arthur ultimately succeeds in taming him. In the end,
Pellinore becomes one of Arthur most honoured and distinguished advisors, further illustrating the nobility of his character. In Pyle’s version of the story, then, the rebellious forest knight is ultimately transformed into a gentleman.

Sir Pellias’ battle with a knight of the forest – Adresack, also known as the Red Knight – ends in a similar manner as Arthur’s encounter with the Sable Knight: having been defeated, Adresack promises to beg King Arthur’s pardon, and the wild knight has thus been civilised. Unlike in the case of King Pellinore, however, Adresack is not being animalised by the narrator, shedding light on the fact that Pyle, in contrast to Tennyson, does not appear to categorise characters of the wild together with animals. The beast image does occur in relation to Arthur though, ‘the most honorable, gentle Knight who ever lived in all the world’ (Pyle, Foreword v). The first time Arthur battles King Pellinore, the narrator informs that ‘each knight was entirely furious at the other, wherefore, [they] . . . rushed together like two wild bulls in battle’ (Pyle 71). The narrator’s accounts clearly illustrate my claim that Pyle’s usage of animal imagery is above all a means of illustrating powerful emotions rather than negative personality traits. In Pyle’s version of the story, the bull could even be seen as a symbol representing a range of positive values like bravery, power, and manliness. When Pyle’s characters (with the exception of Vivien) act like animals, their actions are thus easier to redeem than in Tennyson’s work, in which animalisation is most often a sign of immorality and corruption.

So far, this section has shed light on the fact that whereas Tennyson frequently categorises characters associated with the wild landscape together with animals, Pyle’s employment of animal imagery is not consistent; both civilised and wild characters are occasionally likened to animals. As Tennyson’s story proceeds, however, the animal images progressively seep into depictions of characters associated with Camelot too, ultimately blurring the distinction between savage and civilised.
In ‘The Holy Grail’, a description of four sculpture zones decorating the hall of Camelot may be seen as a sort of prophecy predicting the fate of Arthur’s kingdom:

[I]n 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 . . . (Tennyson 234-37)

Hallam Tennyson confirmed that the statues at Camelot represent four stages of human progress: ‘the savage state of society; the state where man lords it over the beast; the full development of man’ and ‘the progress toward spiritual ideas’ (qtd. in Ricks 883). The first of these stages is arguably represented in the beast-ridden pre-Arthurian land depicted in ‘The Coming of Arthur’. The second one occurs when Arthur slays the beast and conquers the land, while the third seems to be embodied in Arthur’s civilising mission. Now, focusing the attention on the fourth scene, the one representing spiritual progress, the events of the poem ultimately fail to realise this final step of the prophecy; rather than continuing to evolve upward, Arthur’s knights actually appear to devolve as they transform into the very beasts they were slaying in the second scene.

As previously stated, evolutionary thoughts were discussed in Britain throughout the Victorian Age, although perhaps not always blatantly. Well before Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck proposed his hypothesis on transmutation, ‘the evolution of one species into another’ (Secord 165), in his Philosophie Zoologique (1809). Lamarck’s book was not translated to English until 1914, but by refuting the theory of Lamarck in his second volume of the Principles of Geology, Charles Lyell made his observations accessible to the English-speaking world (Secord 166) – observations which came to pose a serious threat to theology and the status of mankind. Lyell’s private notebook entries reveal ‘an author appalled by the religious, political, and ethical consequences of transmutation’. If Lamarck proved accurate,
Lyell observed, human beings would be nothing more than an ameliorated form of the apes (Secord 169-70). Some people believed that the British population were actually the subject of ongoing transmutation. City-dwellers, in particular, were diagnosed with a range of health conditions including ‘racial degeneration’. Many blamed the surging health impairments on ‘environmental degradation’, arguing that the urban environment was causing a physical and moral degeneration of the British people (Thorsheim 2, 7). If the degeneration would merely weaken the urban poor or actually turn them into ‘something that was no longer truly human’, however, remained unclear (77). Whether Tennyson accepted this ‘dark parody of Darwinian evolution’ (Jackson 234) is also uncertain. What is certain though, is that Tennyson’s knights seem to go through a process of transmutation as the events in the *Idylls* continue to unfold, arguably reflecting the nineteenth-century debate on the topic.

The fifth poem of Tennyson’s collection, ‘Balin and Balan’, could be read as a grim warning about the impending transformation of the knights. Balin ‘the Savage’ (51), returns to Arthur’s court in order to prove his worth after three years of exile. When he happens to witness a secret rendezvous between Lancelot and Guinevere, his faith in Arthur’s ideal is instantaneously shattered. When Vivien later feeds him with lies about Arthur’s Order, the narrator recites how his ‘evil spirit’ seizes him: ‘he ground his teeth together, sprang with a yell . . . Unearthlier than all shriek of bird or beast’ (529-36). At this moment, Balin transforms before the eyes of the reader into a man-dog like the ones following the earl of Doorm in ‘Geraint and Enid’. What is more, Balin’s transmutation brings with it devastating consequences: Balan, having heard the ‘unearthly shriek’ of his brother, accidentally takes Balin for the previously mentioned demon haunting the forest. The tragic finale of the poem – accidental mutual fratricide – is later on repeated in the Arthur’s last battle, although here, the role of the brothers is played by Arthur’s knights.
After the foreboding ‘Balin and Balan’ idyll, Arthur’s knights are one by one infected with the same symptoms as Balin and start to display increasingly barbaric behaviours. In the ninth poem of the collection, Sir Pelleas laments that man is nothing but a ‘simple race of brutes’ (PE 544, 471). Later on, in ‘The Last Tournament’, Sir Tristram’s rude bluntness causes people wonder whether ‘[a]ll courtesy is dead’ (211). Queen Isolt later remarks that her lover has ‘grown wild beast’ (632); a statement summarising the development of Arthur’s Order in a more general sense.

The brutality of the knights is manifest in the passage reciting the defeat of the Red Knight:

[T]he knights . . . roar’d
And shouted and leapt down upon the fallen,
There trampled out his face from being known,
And sank his head in mire, and slimed themselves;
Nor heard the King for their own cries, but sprang
Thro’ open doors, and swording right and left
. . .
Till all the rafters rang with woman-yells,
And all the pavement stream’d with massacre. (LT 467-76)

Engelberg remarks that the behaviour displayed by Arthur’s knights at this particular moment resembles ‘nothing short of a pack of wolves’ (291), an observation that is hard to disagree with. Their pitiless massacre of the inhabitants of the castle testifies that they are no better than the caitiff knights and false earls encountered in ‘Enid and Geraint’. At this point, they have become monsters. The image of the knights ‘slim[ing] themselves’ in the dirt evokes further associations. In my previous discussion of the overgrown pre-Arthurian Cameliard, it is described how the beasts plaguing the land ‘Came night and day . . . And wallowed in the
gardens of the King’ (CA 24-5). The fact that it is now the knights who are wallowing in the mud speaks for itself – they are no longer human, but have transformed into the ‘wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear’ (23) harassing the earth in ‘The Coming of Arthur’. The transmutation of the knights is thus complete. Not only has the boundary between human and non-human been erased, so has the one separating civilised from savage and hero from villain.

In this final section of this analysis, I have shed light on the fact that in Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, encounters taking place in the wilds are mainly positive. Furthermore, it has been observed that although Pyle’s narrator occasionally animalises human characters, such a treatment is a means of displaying powerful emotions – often fury – rather than a sign of bad character. In Tennyson’s *Idylls*, on the other hand, the narrator resorts to animal imagery in order to emphasise a range of undesirable personality traits, and as a result, animalisation frequently occurs in depictions of villains, often encountered in the wilds. In the beginning of the story, cruelty and immorality are characteristics associated quite exclusively with characters associated with unkempt nature, but as wilderness gains ground, Arthur’s knights progressively start to display such behaviours as well. For that reason, it could be argued that it is the unchecked spreading of nature that awakens the knights’ dormant bestial instincts, ultimately transforming them into monsters.

Another, more convincing, interpretation is that it is not nature in ‘the real’ (Huggan and Tiffin 139) – wilderness and the beasts populating it – that poses the gravest threat to mankind, although Arthur appears to have made the mistake of assuming that. In such a reading of the text, the actual danger comes from *culture* and material conditions. On closer inspection, wilderness does not actually seem to be what triggers the barbarity of Arthur’s knights, for characters like Geraint, Balin and Pelleas head into the wilds when they have already reached a state of fury, grief, even madness. Indeed, Geraint ‘fe[els] that tempest brooding round his heart’ (MG 11) already before heading out on his waste-land quest, and
Balin goes ‘mad for strange adventure’ (BB 284) while at Arthur’s court. The transmutation of the knights, then, seems to be linked to civilisation and culture. In the end, the ruin of the realm is, in fact, brought about by factors like the ruthlessness of Arthur’s knights, Guinevere’s love affair with Lancelot and Mordred’s conspiracy to seize the throne (G 51-4), supporting the argument that danger comes from Camelot. Pelleas seems to have comprehended this when he likens Camelot to a ‘Black nest of rats’ in ‘Pelleas and Ettarre’ (544). Thus, even though Tennyson was not an advocator of primitivism – he stated himself that he ‘believe[d] in progress’ (Richardson 285) – the events of the poems and the transformation of his noble knights into violent and impulsive brutes nonetheless seem to reflect his inner doubts and fears about the future and of the ‘materialistic tendencies’ of science (H. Tennyson, *Memoir*, vol. II, 469).

4 CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined representations of wild nature in two Arthurian narratives written in an age of rapid social change: Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885) and Howard Pyle’s *Story of King Arthur and His Knights* (1903). By investigation of the textual descriptions of wilderness and the creatures living there, the study has aimed to explore what attitudes towards wild nature are displayed in the primary texts.

I have observed that whereas Pyle generally depicts the wild landscape as a delightful paradise upon earth, Tennyson presents it as potent threat to the entire kingdom. But in the *Idylls*, nature does not appear to be the gravest danger to Arthur’s civilisation. *Culture* poses another, even more serious danger, for it is not wilderness or the horrid beast living there that bring about the collapse of civilisation. Rather, it is the immorality of characters associated with Camelot that causes Arthur’s downfall. Tennyson’s nostalgic lines in a letter to his aunt that ‘the golden days of Faerie are over’ (H. Tennyson, *Memoir*, vol. I, 34) support such an
interpretation of the text; at least, the words of the poet imply a desire to escape industrial modernity and lead a life closer to nature. Certain details I have observed in the *Idylls* indicate a similar preference for a simpler lifestyle, such as Pelleas’ reproach that ‘Ye build too high’ (PE 544), and the old seer’s advice to Gareth to ‘abide / Without [the gates of Camelot], among the cattle of the field’ (GL 269-70). Altogether, the various events described the *Idylls* illustrate that the poet, despite his enthusiastic interest in science, was nevertheless deeply troubled by the rapid transformation of his England.

In contrast to Tennyson, Pyle’s narrator adopts a cheerful tone in his descriptions of nature; as previously stated, Pyle frequently celebrates the wild landscape as an environment of beauty and spiritual enjoyment, indeed a sort of paradise. Furthermore, I have observed that it is often possible to discern an underlying nostalgia in the narrator’s nature worship. Thus, the numerous passages stressing the exquisite qualities of wild nature might well be seen a reaction against the rapid loss of wild spaces across the United States during the lifetime of the author. Tennyson expresses a similar nostalgic yearning for a rapidly fading paradise, but in his gloomy Arthurian universe, paradise no longer exists in the mortal world. Rather, Eden seems to be represented in the faraway fairy island of Avilion. The fact that the *Idylls*, unlike Pyle’s text, already from the beginning present paradise as a distant fantasy might be connected to the fact Tennyson wrote for a different type of audience than Pyle’s significantly younger reader. But in any event, both narratives represent two very different reactions to the concept of environmental destruction.

In the introduction of this thesis, I raised the question whether Tennyson’s bleak vision and Pyle’s nature worship could be said to represent two different sides of the same ecological coin. It is my hope that I, with this thesis, have demonstrated that this indeed seems to be the case. Finally, regarding Pyle’s text, I would like to once more call attention to the fact that this study has focused exclusively on the first part of Pyle’s Arthurian cycle. Perhaps
in a future ecocritical study, his entire collection could be taken into consideration; it would be very interesting to see whether the nostalgic yearning for the unspoilt medieval landscape is a prominent feature also in the other parts of the cycle.
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