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of an *Absolute Reality*
in Alfred Tennyson's
Idylls of the King

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN:

Exploring Space: Spatial Notions in Cultural, Literary and Language Studies, vol. 1:
Space in Cultural and Literary Studies, edited by A. Ciuk, K. Molek-Kozakowska.
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 257–264.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CAMELOT—

A VISION OR AN ABSOLUTE REALITY AN ALFRED TENNYSON'S *IDYLLS OF THE KING*

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Since it was first mentioned in the late 12th century by Chrétien de Troyes in his *Lancelot*, Camelot has come to be inextricably linked with the Arthurian legend. As Jenkins points out, “the idea of the [Arthurian] capital only comes into the story after the general Arthur has been mythologized into a king” (Jenkins 1990, 34). In the sixteenth century, John Leland attempted to identify the place with Cadbury Castle in Somerset. But even though his assumption was partly corroborated by the excavations carried out at the site in 1966-70, which revealed the existence of a large hill fort refortified in the Arthurian times (Lupack 2007, 438), Camelot still belongs to the realm of the legendary rather than to that of the historical. Yet, in Tennyson’s long poem, *Idylls of the King*, it seems that the city is not merely a legendary place associated with King Arthur, as its significance as the centre and symbol of the Arthurian reign has been further expanded. Tennyson’s Camelot may be perceived as reflecting the Victorian need for an idealized space beyond time, a refuge from the ugliness of the industrial revolution, the hectic pace of the scientific discoveries, and the overwhelming religious doubt. Still, what differentiates Tennyson’s depiction of Camelot from its other representations in his predecessors in Arthurian literature is the uncertainty concerning the ontological status of the city, as the Camelot of the *Idylls* seems to be suspended between vision and reality. Apparently, the true significance of the city can be better understood when analysed in the light of Eliade’s notions of sacred space and time.

This most important dilemma concerning Camelot is introduced in *Gareth and Lynette*. Gareth, the King’s nephew and a would-be Knight of

the Round Table, approaches the walls of the city together with his companions, and is subjected to an apparent fallacy of perception:

At times the summit of the high city flash'd;
 At times the spires and turrets half-way down
 Prick'd thro' the mist; at times the great gate shone
 Only, that open'd on the field below:
 Anon, the whole fair city had disappear'd. (*Gareth and Lynette*, 189-193)

To the newcomers, the city presents itself as changing and unstable, hidden in the mists and illusory. Gareth's companions are afraid that "(...) there is no such city anywhere, / But all a vision" (*Gareth and Lynette*, 203-204). As they draw closer, they are further amazed to see the carvings on the gate to the city move before their eyes:

Then those with Gareth for so long a space
 Stared at the figures, that at last it seem'd
 The dragon-boughts and elvish emblemings
 Began to move, seethe, twine and curl: they call'd
 To Gareth, 'Lord, the gateway is alive.' (*Gareth and Lynette*, 227-231)

While they try to explain the phenomenon by resorting to folk tales about the King as a fairy changeling, supported by the magic of the great Merlin, the wizard himself undermines this interpretation with his references to optical tricks, which were so popular in the Victorian age. Yet, at the same time, he warns the newcomers that at Camelot "(...) there is nothing in it as it seems / Saving the King" (260-261). Gareth, on the other hand, remains sceptical yet unconvinced by either solution. Even though Tennyson claimed to describe all seemingly supernatural phenomena in such a way as to leave a rational explanation possible, he still insisted on not giving any final answers to the symbolism in his work: "Poetry is like shot-silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet" (Tennyson 1897, 127).

It seems that this enigmatic state of the city can be explained when projected against the background of Eliade's ideas on sacred space and time. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, he discusses the way in which the religious man (*homo religiosus*) introduces order into amorphous, profane space. He craves to remain in constant contact with the only real, the absolute, the presence of which is revealed to him through *hierophany*, or the manifestation of the sacred into the profane world. As Eliade observes, this break in the homogeneity of space "reveals an absolute fixed point, a

center" (Eliade 1987, 21), and thus provides the religious man with the most important point from which to turn the surrounding chaos into a new world, his own cosmos.

While this juxtaposition of an anthropological theory concerning the archaic societies with a 19th century English poem set in legendary medieval times may seem to be somewhat far-fetched, on closer inspection it turns out that the two works display a number of important similarities. All the afore-mentioned key notions, such as chaos and cosmos, the center of the world, and especially the dichotomy between the real and unreal, find their place in Tennyson's version of the Arthurian narrative.

In the pre-Arthurian epoch the land is plunged in confusion and overwhelming chaos:

For many a petty king ere Arthur came
 Ruled in this isle, and ever waging war
 Each upon other, wasted all the land;
 And still from time to time the heathen host
 Swarmed overseas, and harried what was left.
 And so there grew great tracts of wilderness,
 Wherein the beast was ever more and more,
 But man was less and less, till Arthur came. (*The Coming of Arthur*, 5-12)

Men are degraded to the level of wild beasts and the two merge into one in what Tennyson describes as "wolf-like men" (32), which are "Worse than the wolves" (33), children stolen and raised by their surrogate wolf mothers in the wilderness. Yet, it is not only the heathen hordes and wild animals that are called "wild beasts"; the term is consistently applied to denote the petty kings fighting among themselves to gain temporary and unstable supremacy over one another. In the realm devoid of moral values brother turns against brother as King Leodegran is assailed by King Urien.

The coming of Arthur can be seen as the introduction of Eliade's *homo religiosus*. The passage that is the most important for such identification is his speech to the Knights after they have returned from the quest for the Holy Grail. The quest, which apparently reflects the Knights' need for a spiritual rebirth in the laziness and stagnation of the Arthurian realm, does not appeal to the King, who is too much concerned about his duties in the realm to "(...) follow wandering fires, / Lost in the quagmire" (*The Holy Grail*, 888-889). Instead, when the work of the day is completed, he experiences his personal glimpses into the absolute reality:

In moments when he feels he cannot die,
 And knows himself no vision to himself,

Nor the high God a vision, nor that One
Who rose again. (*The Holy Grail*, 913-916)

Apparently, in the above-quoted passage, the word “vision” takes on a pejorative meaning, and instead of being a manifestation of the sacred into reality it is used here as a synonym of “illusion”, “appearance”, which conceals the world of *sacrum* from the eyes of common men. Hence, to most of the Knights except Galahad the quest does not result in true spiritual experience, but, on the contrary, turns into a chase of projections of a feverish mind.

Thus endowed with exceptional insight, the King is the only character who is able to see through the appearances of transitory life, the only one, who, as Merlin observes, is not trying to hide his real self at Camelot. His mysterious speech has its counterpart in Tennyson’s conviction that the two notions of space and time should be annihilated as “matter is merely the shadow of something greater than itself, which we poor short-sighted creatures cannot see” (Tennyson 1908, 498).

It seems that Arthur becomes the instrument of Godly intervention on earth, as he endeavours to create his own realm. His actions in this world of wasteland and chaos are metaphorically depicted as the introduction of light:

(...) Then he drave
The heathen; after, slew the beast, and felled
The forest, *letting in the sun*, and made
Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight. (*The Coming of Arthur*, 58-61,
emphasis mine)

These images very much agree with the way in which Eliade describes the founding of the world through the repetition of the original cosmogony. He observes that

[w]hether it is a case of clearing uncultivated ground or of conquering and occupying a territory already inhabited by ‘other’ human beings, ritual taking possession must always repeat the cosmogony. For in the view of archaic societies everything that is not ‘our world’ is not yet a world. A territory can be made ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it. (Eliade 1987, 31-32)

Thus Arthur creates his own sacred space, and the purity of these “fair beginnings of a nobler time” (*The Coming of Arthur*, 456) is emphasized by the “stainless white” (455) of Arthur’s attire and the freshness of the

spring in May. At the centre of this sacred universe of Arthurian realm lies the city of Camelot.

One of the images of the Centre of the World according to Eliade is “the cosmic mountain”, which, as he comments, expresses “the connection between heaven and earth”, thus “it is believed to be at the center of the world” (Eliade 1987, 38). This idea is also present in the *Idylls*, as the location of Camelot is “the Royal mount” (*Gareth and Lynette*, 187), also called “the sacred mount of Camelot” (*The Holy Grail*, 227). Tennyson's intention to depict Camelot as a holy place situated at the top of a mountain can be still better deduced from his sketch in prose written about 1833, where he describes “the sacred Mount of Camelot”, rising from “the land of Lyonesse”. The Mount is “the most beautiful in the world, sometimes green and fresh in the beam of morning, sometimes all one splendour, folded in the golden mists of the West”, it is surrounded by “gardens and bowers and palaces”, and at its top there are “King Arthur's hall, and the holy Minster with the Cross of gold” (Tennyson 1897, 122). Eliade further observes that the sacred mount represents “an *axis mundi* connecting earth with heaven” and thus “it in a sense touches heaven and hence marks the highest point in the world” (Eliade 1987, 38). Again, such imagery can be found in the depiction of Camelot with its spires reaching out to heaven:

Camelot, a city of shadowy palaces
 And stately, rich in emblem and the work
 Of ancient kings who did their days in stone;
 Which Merlin's hand, the Mage at Arthur's court,
 Knowing all arts, had touch'd, and everywhere
 At Arthur's ordinance, tipt with lessening peak
 And pinnacle, and had made it spire to heaven. (*Gareth and Lynette*, 296-302)

Apparently, such a way of crafting the turrets is no mere coincidence; it is clearly stated that the high pinnacles were created “At Arthur's ordinance” (301), which again reveals his need to remain in contact with the absolute by means of the vertical opening upwards.

Thus, the Center proper, defined by Eliade as “precisely the place where a break in plane occurs, where space becomes sacred, hence pre-eminently *real*” (Eliade 1987, 45), in the case of the Arthurian realm appears to be the city itself, and, on a smaller scale, Arthur's hall. It seems that already the gate to Camelot, “the weird white gate” (*Gareth and Lynette*, 648), the like of which has never been seen under heaven (209), is crucial for the significance of the city. With the central image of the Lady of the Lake, her arms stretched in the shape of the cross and a sacred fish

floating over her breast, and “Arthur’s wars in weird devices done, / New things and old co-twisted, as if Time / Were nothing” (221-223) carved to both her sides, the whole topped with the representation of the mysterious three Queens, the gate both displays the spiritual guardians of the city and introduces the important concept of the suspension of time. It seems that the images on the gate commemorate the coronation scene and place it on the same temporal level with Arthur’s victorious battles, thus annihilating the passing of time.

This idea of the sacred time, which is not progressive but cyclical, will be also important in the portrayal of the hall of King Arthur, which can be interpreted as an equivalent of Eliade’s temple. It seems to be the centre within the centre, a replica of the cosmic mountain, and hence to “constitute the pre-eminent ‘link’ between earth and heaven” (Eliade 1987, 39). According to Eliade, the temple is both an *imago mundi*, in which the four parts of the interior represent the four cardinal directions (62), as well as “the earthly reproduction of a transcendent model” (58), which thus participates in the sacred space and time.

While in Tennyson’s sketch from 1833, upon the mountain there were situated both King Arthur’s hall and the minster, it seems that in the *Idylls* the role of the latter has been taken over by the former. This can be especially visible in the coronation scene, in which the hall is transformed into a sanctuary. The Lady of the Lake, who is also present at the coronation “[c]lothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful” (*The Coming of Arthur*, 284), may represent the living Church, as she appears in “a mist of incense” curling about her (286-287), with her face “hidden in the minster gloom” (288), accompanied by the holy hymns, or even stand for the Lord Himself, since she “Hath power to walk the waters like our Lord” (*The Coming of Arthur*, 293). She bestows upon the King the renowned Excalibur, which becomes the central object in this ritual. It is also the space in which takes place the central hierophany of the whole *Idylls*:

From eye to eye thro’ all their Order flash
 A momentary likeness of the King:
 And ere it left their faces, thro’ the cross
 And those around it and the Crucified,
 Down from the casement over Arthur, smote
 Flame-colour, vert and azure, in three rays,
 One falling upon each of three fair queens,
 Who stood in silence near his throne, the friends
 Of Arthur, gazing on him, tall, with bright
 Sweet faces, who will help him at his need. (*The Coming of Arthur*, 269-278)

The colourful light, “flame colour, vert, and azure” (274), which descends from the cross upon Arthur and the three Queens as he binds his Knights with the vows, may be indicative of the stained glass in the windows.

A fuller description of the hall can be found in *The Holy Grail*, in which Percivale, the narrator, portrays it as “the mighty hall that Merlin built” (231). He begins with the exterior and the “four great zones of sculpture” (232), a symbolic representation of the hierarchy in the universe consisting of beasts, men, warriors, and angels, topped with the crowned and winged statue of Arthur facing the east, “whence have sprung all the great religions of the world” (Tennyson 1908, 509). The importance of the directions is also visible in the description of the interior of the hall:

'And, brother, had you known our hall within,
 Broader and higher than any in all the lands!
 Where twelve great windows blazon Arthur's wars,
 And all the light that falls upon the board
 Streams thro' the twelve great battles of our King.
 Nay, one there is, and at the eastern end,
 Wealthy with wandering lines of mount and mere,
 Where Arthur finds the brand Excalibur.
 And also one to the west, and counter to it,
 And blank: and who shall blazon it? when and how?—
 O there, perchance, when all our wars are done,
 The brand Excalibur will be cast away. (*The Holy Grail*, 246-257)

The eastern and the western end mark the dawn and the decline of the Arthurian reign, the latter foreshadowing the “last, dim, weird, battle of the west” (94) of *The Passing of Arthur*. This may be reminiscent of the significance of the directions in the Christian cathedral, where, as Eliade points out, the East symbolizes paradise, thus marking the beginnings of humanity, while the West stands for the realm of darkness, and is associated with grief, death and the Last Judgement. (Eliade 1987, 61-62). Moreover, such a depiction of all the great battles seems to repeat the motif of the annihilation of time, already present in the images on the gate. Apparently, the hall constitutes an *imago mundi* of the Arthurian world, the centre, from which the main directions of the world can be assigned through the most significant events in the Arthurian legend.

It may be posited that the space of Camelot in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* can be read as Eliade's irruption of the absolute into the transitory world. To the knights, to whom the world of appearances is the only real one, as they are limited in their perception by their senses, Camelot seems unreal, flickering, unstable, illusory, a shadow. To Arthur, on the other hand, who has managed to transcend the boundaries of human perception

in his glimpses into the absolute, Camelot represents the only sacred reality, the centre of his realm, surrounded by constantly threatening literal and metaphoric chaos. This epistemological uncertainty concerning the real state of Camelot is apparently inscribed in “the unending war of humanity in all ages—the worldwide war of Sense and Soul” (Tennyson 1897, 130), which becomes one of the most important themes of the whole *Idylls*. Moreover, such a presentation of Camelot as the manifestation of the absolute reflects the Victorian longing for spirituality, for the safety in unwavering faith in the modern world dominated by rationalism and science.

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