

A Brief Further Remark on "Pynchon's Anti-Quests"

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"Pointsman has blundered. Hasn't even the Tennysonian comfort of saying 'someone' has blundered." (GR, 270)

"The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that's not what the G in Imipolex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero." (GR, 364)

Conspicuous by its absence, Tennyson's Idylls of the King has seemingly been ignored by critics concerned with the theme of quest and anti-quest in Pynchon's writing. And yet, the section of the Idylls devoted to the Holy Grail offers a supreme example of the anti-quest. Only Galahad achieves the quest, but his solipsistic vision destroys the remainder of the Round Table. The failed quest in Tennyson is intricately tied to what we would call today "the themes of entropy" which permeate the Idylls. Tennyson's famous poem not only documents the impossibility of the quest within a corrupt and decaying society; it also documents the disintegration of Victorian England's structure of moral order by the advances in nineteenth-century science and technology: as Pynchon puts it, "the fall of a crystal palace" (GR, 3). Moreover, the Idylls documents the entropy of a literary genre, one that can no longer support the fantasy of a chivalric order; Don Quixote made the same statement nearly three centuries before, but for Tennyson the stakes were much higher. Moreover, it is not inconsequential that Tennyson wrote his Idylls during the great flowering of the novel, when literature firmly committed itself to showing the dark underside of society. Pynchon follows in both of these traditions: the novelist's commitment and the decline of quest literature. It is within the dialectic between these two traditions that the meanings of Pynchon's anti-quests are to be found.

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