



The
**Charles
Williams**
Society



Newsletter

— No. 95 Summer 2000 —

The Charles Williams Society

The Society was founded in 1975, thirty years after Charles Williams's sudden death at the end of the Second World War. It exists to celebrate Charles Williams and to provide a forum for the exchange of views and information about his life and work.

Members of the Society receive a quarterly newsletter and may attend the Society's meetings which are held three times a year. Facilities for members also include a postal lending library and a reference library housed at King's College London.

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Reading groups

For information about the **Oxford** reading group please contact Brenda Boughton, tel: 01865 515589.



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From the (temporary) Editor

This is my last letter as Editor of the Newsletter. I am delighted that Edward Gauntlett is taking over the editorship (beginning with the next issue), including the work done until now by Andrew Williams as Production Editor. I am extremely grateful to Edward and wish him all success. He has a demanding task but I hope that he will find that it has its satisfactions.

Over the last two-and-a-half years Andrew Williams has provided us with well-designed, invitingly readable Newsletters and continued to do so despite other increasing demands on his time. This has not been easy and I know something of what this has involved for Andrew. I believe that I express the gratitude of all of us for what Andrew has done for the Society.

I spoke briefly at the AGM about the importance of increasing the Society's membership. Although our small Web site and our pages on the Web site of the Alliance of Literary Societies afford some publicity, personal recommendation possibly remains the most effective.

Brochures are available for members who want to pass them to friends. Again, some of us may know of suitable places – conference/retreat centres, specialist bookshops, etc. – where brochures can be displayed to attract potential new members.

Many of us have been enriched by reading Charles Williams: let us do what

we can share this enrichment with others.

With all good wishes,

Eileen Mable

Charles Williams Society meetings

- ◆ **Saturday 14th October 2000**
A recording of the talk on Charles Williams given by the late Anne Scott to the Oxford Branch of the University of the Third Age. The meeting will take place in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church, St. Peterborough Place, Bayswater, London, W.2. at 2.30 pm.
- ◆ **Saturday 10th February 2001**
The meeting will be held in Pusey House, Oxford at 2.30 pm. Speaker to be arranged.
- ◆ **Saturday 9th June 2001**
Annual General Meeting in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church at 12.30 pm. At 2.30 pm the Revd. Dr. Gavin Ashenden will speak on a subject to be announced.
- ◆ **Saturday 13th October 2001**
A reading of *The House by the Stable*. In the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church at 2.30 pm.

Society AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Society was held at Pusey House, Oxford, on May 6th 2000.

- ◆ The Secretary reported correspondence with Dr Trauberg, a Russian editor of Charles Williams. The grave of Charles and Michal Williams had been turfed, but the turfing had not taken properly; action would be taken about this. The Society now had a small Web site on the Internet, and improvements had been made to the Society's pages on the site of the Alliance of Literary Societies.
 - ◆ The Librarian reported that Volume 4 of Dorothy L. Sayers' Letters, David Dodds' edition of the Arthurian poems, and Gavin Ashenden's thesis were now in the Library.
 - ◆ The Treasurer presented the accounts for the past year, which were approved. The possibility of removing the deposit account from the Bristol & West Building Society to where it could earn higher interest would be explored.
 - ◆ The Chairman (in her capacity as acting Editor) paid tribute to Andrew Williams's work on the Newsletter. He had had to resign as producer (and from the Council) because of work and family obligations. Ed Gantlett had agreed to take over the editing and production of the Newsletter. Ruth and Geoffrey Tinling would continue to organise printing and despatch; they too were thanked.
 - ◆ The Membership Secretary said that there were now 117 members - 85 in the UK and 32 overseas. Newsletters would not be sent to members whose subscriptions had not been paid by September.
 - ◆ The Chairman reported on the meeting she and the Librarian had had with Bruce Hunter of David Higham Associates (C.W.'s literary agents).
-

Six books, including four of the novels, are currently in print. The Mythopoeic Society was proposing to publish all three Masques.

- ◆ She and the Librarian had said that if it were possible to reprint any others of C.W.'s works, priority should be given to *The Image of the City* and, secondly, the Taliessin poems together with *Arthurian Torso*. The meeting had been friendly and useful.
- ◆ The Chairman spoke of the importance of increasing the Society's membership. Brochures were always available to those who could use them. She paid tribute to our speakers and thanked members of the Council for their work. Dr. Horne in return thanked her for her work both as Chairman and as Acting Editor.
- ◆ Elections to the Council: The Chairman reported that under the Constitution members were elected for three years; none therefore needed re-election this year. No nominations were received for the two vacancies. Members could pass on suggestions for possible co-option during the year.

The next AGM will be held on June 9th 2001 in the Church Room of St. Matthew's Church, Bayswater.

Society news

The Newsletter

We warmly welcome Edward Gauntlett as the new Newsletter Editor.

Edward will combine the editorial and production work of the Newsletter and all material for publication should be sent to him.

Geoffrey and Ruth Tinling will continue to look after the printing of the Newsletter and despatch it to members.

The Library

The Society gratefully thanks three of its members for recent gifts to the reference library:

- ◆ Georgette Versinger for her article: *The Commonplace Book: Charles Williams's Early Approach to Arthurian Poetry*. Originally printed in *Mythlore*; Volume 22.3; Winter 1999.
- ◆ Gavin Ashenden for his PhD thesis: *The Influence of Hermeticism on Myth and Metaphysics in the Life and Work of Charles Wil-*

liams (1886 – 1945).

- ◆ Edward Gauntlett for his MA thesis: *Frater Qui Sittit Veniat: Charles Williams and the Secret Tradition*.

Charles Williams's Imagination of the Fall and Redemption in *The Advent of Galahad*.

The following paper was delivered by Madame Georgette Versinger at a meeting of the Charles Williams Society on 5th February 1999.

The Advent of Galahad is the cycle of some 45 poems which Charles Williams wrote in the late twenties. They were collected by his friend Margaret Douglas when he was in Oxford during the war. The title for the cycle was then chosen by Williams himself¹. Only fourteen of the poems were published during his lifetime². Those are reprinted in David L. Dodds's edition of Williams's poetry with an additional ten.³ Most of the poems were written by February 1930, as we know from a note to Humphrey Milford, entitled "King Arthur" and dated 28 Feb /30 where he speaks of having written "nearly forty" poems, and suggests that the O.U.P. might wish to publish them when "another twenty or thirty" had been added.

The cycle builds upon Williams's obstinate, long-drawn reflection on the Arthurian legend to which his commonplace book, entitled *The Holy Grail* and kept during eight years, from 1912 to 1920, testifies. It may be that the accumulated documentation and the overnumerous paths of interpretation and development he had considered in it deterred him from making a start. But a more crucial dilemma lay in how to tackle the subject: in a traditional unified epic poem? or perhaps separate odes, according to Abercrombie's suggestion in *The Epic (Holy Grail, 95)*? But, he wrote in his note to Humphrey Milford, neither notion really satisfied him. He even envisaged a play⁴. Anyhow, a number of years still

1 Letter of Margaret Douglas to Raymond Hunt, 20 July 1940

2 Seven in *Heroes and Kings (1930)*, four in *Three Plays (1931)*, two in Abercrombie's *New English Poems (1931)* and one in *Time and Tide (March 1941)*.

3 I shall quote from this edition (hereafter *Dodds*) whenever possible. David Dodds has very informative introductions to his selection. The unpublished *Advent* poems are housed in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, Illinois.

elapsed without any outcome (and he turned instead to writing a novel... on the Grail, *War in Heaven*).

The note to Milford tells how it was Phyllis Jones who was responsible for freeing the springs of creation, by asking for a few notes on the Arthurian legend; instead, he wrote the first poems, "Percivale's Song to Blanchfleur" and "Tristram's Song of Iseult".⁵ Considering the circumstances of his relation with Phyllis and his long established preoccupation with the validity of human love as a way to God, it is natural that Williams should have started with the love interest of the story; and indeed a good number of the poems deal with it, its sensual and spiritual manifestations, and its implications in sin and Salvation. What I wish to concentrate upon, however, is on a more general level, the metaphysical twist he gives to the legend, the overall pattern of interpretation which integrates the lives of the individual heroes and gives meaning to them.

From the outset of his earliest reflection Williams had considered that the Grail should be the vital centre and the ultimate significance of the story. This is the reason why he was dissatisfied with earlier versions, Malory, Tennyson, Morris and Swinburne having all, according to him, failed to grasp the importance of the characters and episodes concerned with the Quest. He wanted "to provide the Perilous Sell with an intellectual back" (note to Milford). I would rather say a metaphysical back; for Williams will view the story of King Arthur as a new myth of the Fall and Redemption of man.

The first poems of the cycle start right from the mythic beginnings of humanity. After the general introduction of the *Prelude*, "Taliessin's Song of

4 Cf. Dodds, p.4, quoting from John Pellow's diary for 15 September 1923. Plays on Arthurian subjects were greatly in vogue since the late nineteenth century and one must remember that Williams himself had already shown his interest in the genre by writing *The Chapel of the Thorn* in 1912.

5 A letter to Phyllis, quoted by Alice M. Hadfield, is more explicit still: "though the poems are not what I could have wished, still Tristram does derive from your Circassian and inscribed hands, and Lamoracke from a not unworthy fantasy of you, and the first Palomides is a lament for you, and the Percivale was written at your request, and the Taliessin is an aspiration for you". (A.M. Hadfield, *Charles Williams. An Exploration of His Life and Work*, p.82.)

Logres”, paints a country ravaged after the death of Uther Pendragon,

to the wolves, the pagans, the pirates given,
to the hordes and the galleys of heathendom.
(*Dodds*, 167)

This could merely refer to the historical situation. But the picture is also given apocalyptic dimensions:

Loosed are the powers of earth and air,
fire and water in combat leap;
space is now but a broken stair,
and the great sun runs on the edge of a steep
dizzy with terror (*Dodds*, 168).

The ambivalence of the picture establishes the double scale of reference, historical/metaphysical, of the cycle. In some notes he wrote at the time, Williams explains:

Britain is in a state of chaos as was the world before it was cooled and made tolerable for man.⁶

As a consequence of this interpretation, the crowning of Arthur signifies the imposition of the rule of man over the Creation after the original chaos. This is made clear in another series of notes⁷:

Logres is the world before it is in order, and Arthur is man coming in it. The establishment of the Kingdom is the estab-

6 Two pages of typescript notes planning the development of the whole *Advent* cycle, beginning with the words “The Sacred Grail” (Hereafter “Sacred Grail” notes).

7 Published by Anne Ridler (ed.) in Charles Williams, *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, (hereafter *City*) under the title “Notes on the Arthurian Myth”, pp.175-179. The quotation is on p.175.

lishment of man, and the Table is-or-are the qualities and capacities of man.

The divine plan for Logres is that it should develop into the perfect repository for the Grail, which is the presence of Christ among men, “*obviously communion with God*” as Williams put it in the first article he ever published.⁸ At that particular moment (and only then), Arthur is at one and the same time a figure of Adam and a figure of Christ, the second Adam, reigning in glory. Hence the Biblical echo at the end of “Taliessin’s Song of the King’s Crowning”: “*Et homo rex factus est.*” (Dodds, 178)

The Dolorous Blow

The divine plan is however thwarted by the Dolorous Blow, when Balin wounds Pelles, using, says Williams, “a sacred Relic or Hallow for his own purpose and protection” (*City*, 175). The Dolorous Blow is the image of the Fall. This interpretation goes back to *The Holy Grail*. There Williams thought of having the story of Balin “dated back into Arthur’s earlier years of rule to make it more primeval, clouded and general.” (*Holy Grail*, 145) Dubric, as an archbishop, seemed the appropriate character to tell the story at the time. In *The Advent of Galahad*, he is replaced by Taliessin whose stature has increased in the meantime.

Balin’s action has a very radical consequence upon the legend as interpreted by Williams. Here intervenes one of his most daring and original inventions: the assimilation between Pelles and Arthur and the significance given to it: Pelles becomes man as willed by God, the ideal figure of Arthur; Arthur is man wounded by the Fall. This relationship forced itself upon Williams’s mind very early, again as early as *The Holy Grail* where he reflected: “Arthur is Pelles after the Dolorous Stroke, engaged in labour for transitory things.” (*Holy Grail*, 148). In his later notes he clarified the point:

The royalty of Pelleas is divided – he is, as it were, himself

8 “The Hero in English Verse”. *The Contemporary Review*, vol. 118, No. 660, Dec. 8, 1920, p.835.

divided. That of him which is still the Sacred Keeper lies wounded but living in Carbonek; that of him which has to take action is transfused into Arthur, but there it hardly knows itself. (*City*, 175)

To anticipate, then, on the time of Salvation: the healing of Pelles by Galahad will mean “the restoration of man to a proper state of health and peace” (*City*, 177) and therefore a return to the fullness of original unity. The healing is Redemption visible in its effects, the obliteration of the consequence of the Dolorous Stroke. This, of course, since it takes place on the eschatological plane, cannot be manifested on the historical one; so Arthur has to be “reassumed into Pelles” (*ibid.*) at the exact moment of his death. One turns to “Nimue’s Song of the Dolorous Blow” for the poetic rendering of the idea:

But when the holy childe shall lay
 his sword at peace in Pelles’ hall
 and Sarras keep its festival,
 then shall King Arthur cast away
 Excalibur, and he shall be
 restored into his proper soul;
 thereon shall Pelles stand up whole
 and the King Arthur pass to me. (*Dodds*, 195)

In other words, Arthur both as archetypal and individual man is made whole (saved) at the time of his death and Pelles’ healing, while the other heroes, to whom the way of salvation is now open, still have to work out their own destinies in history. The double chronology is a neat parallel to the Christian doctrine of individual and general judgment.

A number of poems elaborate on the duality of Pelles and Arthur. “Percivale’s Song of the Terre Foreign” tells how Arthur does indeed derive his royalty from Pelles, but only with bedimmed glory. “Nimue’s Song of the Dolorous Blow” brings a further complexity to the Pelles-Arthur pattern by having

Morgause and Morgan also generated by Pelles at that fatal moment:

on one side he,
on one side those wondrous children three,
Arthur, Morgause, Morgan Le Fay. (*Dodds*, 194)

One is his mistress, the other his enemy. For Williams, Arthur's relation to them is emblematic of the human condition after the Fall:

The fatality, the curse, the result of the Dolorous Blow, has to work itself out through the King. He and his two sisters – Morgause and Morgan – are man loving himself and hating himself. (*City*, 176)

or, as he also writes in the "Sacred Grail" notes, the one is "*disordered love*", the other "*disordered war*". The symmetry is justified by the legend and artistically satisfying, as is the symbolism of the trio. There is a suggestion, in "Taliessin's Song of Morgan Le Fay", that Williams might be considering her as an arthurian counterpart of Lilith (again a suggestion of the *Commonplace Book*), moving around invisibly, just on the edge of people's consciousness. However Williams later chose to drop Morgan in order to concentrate on the implications of the incest with Morgause, which he judged central to the theme of the cycle.

Pelles' lineage is further expanded with Garlon. In Malory, Garlon is Pelles' brother. In his notes, Williams makes him the son of the king. Anne Ridler supposed it was a *lapsus calami* (*City*, 175). But it is not so, for the same qualification is found also in the "Sacred Grail" notes and is repeated in *The Advent of Galahad*. In "Percivale's Song of the Terre Foreign" he even becomes the twin of Helayne. Is this because of the wish to draw another symmetry, between one symbol of violence and death and another of purity and life? Possibly, but I don't believe it to be the main reason, since Williams is already at work altering this negative nature of Garlon, as we shall see. More than his being the brother of Helayne, what counts here, I think, is his being the *son* of Pelles. He is thus con-

ceived in a relation of subordination and obedience to him more essential than as a brother; the important point is that his acts are no longer gratuitous evil: he is obeying the king's orders and his violence, although incomprehensible to us, is yet subservient to Providential designs:

But he afar, in mischief and in might,
 does *at his father's will*
 ride out through Logres – an invisible knight
 making his choice to kill
according to some potent mystery
 Wherein we have no skill. (my emphasis)

The next step is taken in “Taliessin’s Song of Lancelot’s Mass” where “The unseen knight of terror / stood there for a close friend” (*Dodds*, 247), two lines which will be taken up almost *verbatim* in the parallel poem of *Taliessin Through Logres*. In his notes, Williams goes even further and declares that he is “Satan to us but the Holy Ghost to the supernatural powers” (*City*, 178).⁹

The chronological problem posed by the relationship between Arthur and Pelles and the interpretation of the Dolorous Blow as the Fall did not escape Williams:

I am aware that this is difficult, because of the time-scheme. Balin rides from Arthur’s court – from Camelot, and yet Arthur does not begin to be till Pelleas is wounded. But perhaps if you consider that the Fall (or what not) *was* once, and yet is repeated in each of us, this is not so inappropriate. (*City*, 175)

The way out of this difficulty is another brilliant idea, typical of Williams’s turn

⁹ In *Taliessin*, Garlon has become Pelles’ brother again (*Dodds*, 93). Perhaps Williams judged that as an image of the Holy Ghost (or at least some providential power) he could not be the son of the king; or perhaps he merely returned to the traditional relation until he saw his way out of his dilemma. We know that the precise interpretation of Garlon eluded Williams’s grasp until the end.

of mind: since time and eternity co-exist, one need only find a point of junction, of passage from natural to supernatural time. The solution is given in “Taliessin’s letter to a Princess of Byzantium”, a key poem for the comprehension of Williams’s myth.

Williams imagined that Arthur’s hall, built by Merlin, had a “Magians’ door”, or rather doorway, opening on to some awful darkness. This was “the centre whence the hall was raised / outward expanding” and it entertained a fundamental, though obscure, relation to space and time, since it was “material of *time*, / a point enlarged to involuting *space*.” (*Dodds*, 186, my emphasis) It opened in the west wall, the direction of Broceliande, Carbonek and Sarras, that is, “the Mystical Land” (“Sacred Grail” notes). None would dare pass it, but Du-brid had prophesied that the Merciful Child would come through it with the Grail. So it was manifestly in intimate connection with the spiritual realm.

Now Balin, in a moment of frenzy, leapt through it and disappeared from sight¹⁰. Three days later, an agonised cry was heard and an earthquake shook the hall while Arthur swooned: “This is the Stroke”, commented Merlin (*Dodds*, 188) who undertook magically to close the door and raise the Perilous Chair in its stead.

The Biblical echoes cannot be missed: the closing of the doorway parallels the access to Eden forbidden by angels after the Fall; the earthquake and cry, the death of Christ. The eschatological stake is also strikingly underlined by a breath-taking clash of opposites: “This is the Stroke: begins salvation”, Merlin continues; similarly, in her “Song of the Dolorous Stroke” Nimue says “as the king fell, mercy came” (*Dodds*, 194). God never tarries but prepares Redemption as soon

10 Williams takes up here the technique he uses in the novels of making material things instruments of entry into the natural world for the supernatural or, as it has more rarely been noted, vice versa. I am thinking in particular of the house of Berringer in *The Place of the Lion* (written at the period and published in 1931): through it the elements invade the world but through it also Richardson seeks the end of his desire. Another such place is the field where the Lamb of God appears in order to protect Lionel and where later Anthony, carried back to the context of Eden, names the beasts and closes the breach opened between the two worlds.

as man sins.

There is a certain contradiction at this point between this speed of God's intervention and the attitude of the Emperor. This character is far here from having achieved the importance and meaning he has in *Taliessin Through Logres*. In the "Sacred Grail" notes he is only mentioned in connection with Taliessin's riding to seek his help; he does not even appear in the notes published in *The Image of the City*. In *The Advent of Galahad*, he begins to assume his providential stature: "Taliessin's Song of Byzantion" speaks of "God's Byzantion" and of "the Godlike Emperor". However, he seems unconcerned, in his far away glory, by the plight of Logres:

no word from Byzantion is come
 where the Emperor sitteth blind and dumb (...)
 ("Taliessin's Song of Logres", *Dodds*, 168)

and "Taliessin's Song of Byzantion" compares him to a distant indifferent deity:

but high and very terrible the godlike Emperor sat,
 to hear the tale of sorrow, nor his face was changed thereat
 as the skies change not above us for the breaking of our hearts
 (*Dodds*, 171).

This could be justified by God's measure of time being different from ours; this explains why Taliessin has to wait "till the patience of the Emperor should draw into a deed" (*Dodds*, 172). But the unhappy impression of indifference it gives, and the discrepancy with the earlier assertion of the speed of God's action remain; Williams was right in toning this down in his later verse. In fact, as he acknowledged in his "Taliessin" notes, he was not at the time fully aware of the possibilities of the images of Byzantium and the Emperor.

Logres in the fallen state

God, then, prepares Redemption. "But because this is all interior, the other time-

scheme of the Table has to run its course”, Williams wrote in his notes (*City*, 178). While Galahad was conceived, was born, grew, went on his Quest with his two companions and achieved the Grail, the consequences of the Dolorous Blow developed in the lives of all in Logres and steadily undermined the realm:

darkness fell on the earth
and mischief drew upon Camelot,
then all fair things that had one birth
their amity and love forgot
(“Lamoracke’s Song to Morgause”, *Dodds*, 202).

Henceforth all human relations are warped and passions grow disordered. Even *originally innocent* natural desires, now thwarted, turn sour and clash with those of others. “Taliessin’s Song of the King’s Justice” is devoted to the general problem raised by what, in theological terms, is called Original Sin. Taliessin can but record man’s frustrations, more complex than mere right and wrong:

Ah, ah, the tyrant and the traitor run
from the King’s judgement, being all undone;

and then in the tyrant’s or the traitor’s heart
a thing cries that hath none to take its part,

the innocence of all desire, whose skill
stumbles and strives to have its ignorant will,

the innocent silly need within his blood
which other need had innocently withstood. (my emphasis)

This is the predicament of man, a state of antagonism to things, to others, and even to himself, which is *innate* to him¹¹ and which no human king, not even Arthur, can deal with, for “how should he or any king on earth / deal justly with *the injustice of man’s birth?*” (my emphasis). This predicament needs “a justice more

than man's". Taliessin only feels an adumbration of what it may be when he looks at the Byzantine Princess, or listens to Percivale's music, that is, in an intuition of the supernatural. This pregnant meditation on "the injustice of man's birth" is not carried into later poems. It is taken up rather in the theological books, in particular when Williams develops the concept of God submitting himself, in Christ, to the suffering of his creatures.

The varieties of individual sin are depicted in the knights and ladies of the Court. So are their sufferings and each one's dealing with his personal destiny. Since I wish to remain on the more general plane, I do not intend to enter into the details of their plights. But I have already quoted Williams's words that "the curse, the result of the Dolorous Blow, has to work itself out through the King." (*City*, 176). Arthur's sin is individual, but it also serves as an archetype of human sin. Mostly, the legend furnishes us with instances of "disordered" erotic love, as in the cases of Lancelot and Guinevere, Lamoracke and Morgause, Tristram and Iseult, Palomides and Iseult; or disordered love of self, as in the cases of Gawaine or Mordred. Now Arthur is guilty of both and, because he is the king, the evil fostered by his indulging them will have all the more disastrous effects on the personal and social levels.

Contrary to Tennyson who painted Arthur as the ideal king, Williams saw him as fundamentally responsible for the failure of Logres, because his primary motivation is always himself, the satisfaction of his desires, and his glory. This Williams had already underlined in *The Holy Grail*.

Arthur does not love Guinevere for herself, she is merely his most beautiful ornament, "a part / of the carving of his seat" (*Dodds*, 239), as Mordred ironically comments in "Mordred's Song of the Kingdom". *The Holy Grail* also pointed out that the king's lack of love explained Guinevere's turning to Lancelot¹², and also why Arthur indulged so easily in an adventure with a woman who turned out to be his sister Morgause (*ibid.*). Williams agreed with Swinburne's remark that this

11 The only exception being the Virgin Mary, who was "(r)edeemed from all division in herself, whole and identical in body and soul", Williams would write later (*All Hal-lows' Eve*, Faber and Faber, London, 1945, p.59.)

incest was the primary cause of the wreck of the kingdom, through the birth of Mordred (*Holy Grail*, 48); but he went further than Swinburne in the analysis of Arthur's egotism.

One poem widens the scope of reflection from the relation between Arthur and Guinevere to the nature and laws of love in general. "The Letter of Deodatus the Pope to Arthur King of Britain" develops the arguments of the Pope enjoining Arthur to give up the siege of Lancelot's castle Joyous Gard and take Guinevere back to himself. Arthur's own particular case is referred to universal principles. Love, in this world, is often eroded by time or crucified by our violence, but should still be honoured wherever it makes itself manifest. Arthur, the Pope says, reproaches Guinevere with having given Lancelot what he wanted restricted to himself alone. But who is he to wish to limit God in his manifestations? "wilt thou bid him limit his own accord?" True, Lancelot and Guinevere should have preserved a chastity which would have brought them "the crimson glory of their loss". But Arthur's anger is nonetheless due to pride and selfishness. Now love is *not* possessive and the Bible says *whoever* looks upon a woman with desire commits adultery. Isn't Arthur guilty too, then? and even more than they, the Pope accuses:

how small thing was this,
gone in their great estate of Love amiss (...)
when thou art willing to put all to shame (...)
thou who wouldst bid them (...)
be angels for thy sake? thou whose desire
hath lit through Britain for thy sake this fire?
thou whose desire hath shown thee here to be
partaker also of adultery?

12 In *The Advent*, Williams paints Guinevere as a very young woman, just out of childhood when she marries Arthur, anxious to please the saviour of her country but unconscious of the stakes, thus toning down her responsibility: "In true desire for his true delight/I gave myself to the great King's might (...) could I swear the unborn joy? / could I pledge the childling heart in me?" ("Guinevere's Song")

The complexities of human love and the difficult balance which has to be kept by all true lovers are at the heart of this analysis. Williams deals with this in his typical way, going to the logical end of his argumentation, however shocking at first sight. And in fact, Arthur's perversion of love will determine Logres' failure, whereas it is the truth of Lancelot's love, in spite of the adultery, that makes him worthy to be Galahad's father: "It is through his illumination by Guinevere that he is brought to Helayne" (*City*, 177).

By the time he wrote *The Advent of Galahad*, Williams had clearly extended Arthur's egotism to his conception of his kingship and of the Grail's destination:

Arthur, moved by a *personal royalty*, determines to marry –
Guinevere, the most beautiful of women, and to make Camelot into a dwelling-place for the Grail, the greatest hallow *for the greatest King*.

("Sacred Grail" notes, my emphasis)

This theme of Arthur's egocentric obsession is developed with great thrust in "Taliessin's Song of Camelot Made at the Command of King Arthur". Obeying the king, the bard sings the beauty and wealth of the town, the invincible strength of Arthur who is worthy to succeed to the throne of the Roman Emperor. The 11-line stanzas add up detail upon detail denoting the inordinate pride of Arthur: he "hath made the world his faldstool", he considers himself "the proper guardian" of the Grail which will be "the fairest *hoard* in Camelot's treasury"; as for Galahad he will be given a high place, but only "*near as high* as the King's Majesty" (my emphasis). Each of these stanzas is followed by a shorter 4-line one which voices crescendo the reticence of the poet embodied in the "revolt" of his harp: "the strings rebel (...) the harp's note cries me down (...) wretched and

wild the harp-strings cry". What, Taliessin asks, is the relationship between the king, his kingdom and the Grail? and is it the right relationship?

Can the rule of the years to the King belong? (...)
 shall the high prince come at the King's good time (...)
 Can the great king summon the lordlier Grail (...)?

The king to serve the Grail, or the Grail to serve the king? Obviously, although perhaps unconsciously, Arthur has made the wrong choice. Mordred will take his lesson from his father, for his eye has shrewdly seen the hypocrisy under the noble appearance, noting

how his image grew (...)
 how the Grail was for Camelot,
 and Camelot for the King.
 This was the secret thing
 that grew into strong desire;
 this did Arthur require.
 The King for the kingdom? nay,
 I know a truer thing;

I triumph while I say,
 the kingdom for the King.

("Mordred's Song of the Kingdom", *Dodds*, 238)

As in the case of the nature of love, the lesson of Arthur's failure has a general scope, which will be put into prominence in the Dantean epigraph of *Taliessin Through Logres*: a man must serve his function, not vice versa. The other way round is noxious both for the man and for his function.

The coming of Galahad

Since, on the one hand, the fallen state of man cannot be erased by his own pow-

ers, try as he may, and, on the other hand, salvation must take place in the material of his life, Providence will have to accommodate history for the coming of a redeemer: this implies time and space, that is (in our context), the reign of Arthur and the land of Logres, into which Galahad will be born.

Henceforward the pattern of the myth in *The Advent of Galahad* is the one which is taken over in *Taliessin Through Logres*. Nimue, who had already shed most of her human characteristics in *The Holy Grail* and has become “holy undefiled nature” by now (*City*, 176), entrusts Merlin and Brisen with preparing Galahad’s birth. Merlin (who is Time) is sent to Camelot

to quell
the evil working of the earth
and be a watcher by the king
and prophesy the vanquishing
of tumult and Dom Galahad’s birth.

(“Nimue’s Song of the Dolorous Stroke”, *Dodds*, 193)

while Brisen (who is not yet Space) is sent to Carbonek in order that, through her spells,

Lancelot may come in to Helayne
and yet may not forget his vows. (*Dodds*, 195)

“The Merciful Child”, the notes say, “is born of pure passion and pure law.” (*City*, 177) Lancelot is pure passion, he “has his heart mostly on pure love.” (*ibid.*); Helayne embodies law because she is predestined to be Galahad’s mother and totally obedient to this calling. The two parents also realise the conjunction of the two ways of images, and each in its thwarting, for “if she rejects images, she has yet to submit to them; and if Lancelot has accepted them, he is yet cheated of them.” (“Taliessin” notes) Galahad himself is usually seen as the exemplary follower of the way of rejection, but he witnesses to the validity of

images in his own quest of the Grail, even if that is the most spiritual image of God.

The poem entitled “The Music at the Birth of Galahad” builds on a suggested parallel with the birth at Bethlehem. It also offers, once again, both an actual and an anticipatory statement of the reconciliation and harmony which Galahad brings into the world: on the one hand, the ache of Pelles’ wound is lulled and Lancelot is healed of his madness; on the other, the renewal of friendship between Guinevere, Arthur and Lancelot is prophesied, and the figures of Balin, Balan and all the knights of the Round Table are seen shining around the bed, the angels of this nativity, “in their proper shapes and aureoles.” This is a vision of their souls *sub specie aeternitatis*, as God sees them and wills them and, in the end, redeems them. Galahad bridges the gap between natural and supernatural time, and a vision of eschatological bliss is conferred on this occasion.

This vision around the cradle, at the very beginning of Galahad’s life, has its pendant in the very last of his appearances, at Lancelot’s Mass. The poem of *The Advent of Galahad* has less power and beauty than the corresponding one in *Taliessin Through Logres*, but the meaning and the universality of the vision is already there complete with the reconciliation of all, living and dead, around Galahad.

Another poem, “The Song of the Coming of Galahad” brings out, through its repetitions, the total newness and transcendence which the high prince represents: “this is a new thing (...) a thing untold (...) a thing beyond / the heart of Lancelot (...) a thing beyond / the marriage of Percivale (...) a new path”. Similarly, the ritual of his setting in the king’s bed makes manifest the preeminence of him who is called by Williams, in the inverted Biblical formula “the Youngest of Days” (*Dodds*, 223)¹³ In his capacity as a Christ-figure, he brings salvation to all. In “Galahad’s Farewell to Queen Guinevere” he addresses her in words which could apply more generally to all sinners:

Let the night receive the light:

I will yet redeem it (...)
 Dark is Love our Master, dark is heavenly Love,
 dark is all his hunting and the ways thereof. (...)
 By the beauty found in thee at the will of Fate,
 by the heart enraptured and laid desolate,
 by the light of heaven mixed with fire of hell,
 by the free epiphany
 thou hast striven to deny, bless me, and farewell.

I will be thy vigil, I thy foster-child, (...)
 I Love's dangerous innocence, I the fiery-fell
 whiteness in (l)ove's darkest sin¹⁴.

With Galahad's birth, the new alliance replaces the old. Camelot has entered the time of Salvation, even if much evil is still to come. Henceforth, "because Love still is one with Love / even now all things are well." (*Dodds*, 244) The fundamental turning is taken and later ages will only bring its revelation and actualisation to their fulfilment. In this context, the departure of Merlin, who is Time, is the logical consequence of the coming of Galahad; it shows also the wizard giving way to the Knight of the Grail, as natural religion to Christianity. "Taliessin's Song of the Passing of Merlin" harps on this theme of the end of time / the end of times:

Time is now no more,
 time is vanished away (...)

13 A word can be said here of the Princess of Byzantium. Only one aspect of her character concerns us now. In the headnote to "Taliessin's Song of a Princess of Byzantium" she is offered as a kind of female counterpart of Galahad. The perfect union of flesh and spirit that she embodies makes her a "(h)ierophant of wisdom" (*Dodds*, 190), a source of personal and prophetic illumination to Taliessin: he is thus enabled to interpret the story of Arthur and his knights in the perspective of Providence because she is "potent by mere corporeal sanctity/to show the spiritual intellect/working in all degrees, pulse, mind, and soul" (*Dodds*, 184, my emphasis).

14 The last 'love, shows with a capital L in the typescript, but that must be a typing error.

now is Merlin no more in hall,
 having brought to an end his art. (...)
 He goes when the prince must come,
 he fades for our lord's increase (...)
 Time governed heretofore (...)
 thereafter must time his end await –

(*Dodds*, 218-219).

Similarly, “Percivale’s last Song”, which tells of the mass in Sarras, ends with the expectation of the Apocalypse:

A little while, a little,
 ere all things come to pass,
 and in perfect union
 Love closes his mother’s Mass. (*Dodds*, 245)

“Galahad”, Williams wrote, “is not exactly Christ, but rather man’s capacity for Christ” (*City*, 176) and he also calls him “the image of a man’s final thought” (*Grail*, 20). There, to my mind, lies the explanation of some obscure lines in *The Advent of Galahad*. The “Colophon Made by the Copyist in a Monastery of Benwick” tells how Palomides, having tamed the Blatant Beast, comes back to Arthur’s hall and is greeted by all the knights. The poem goes on:

in (him) was the high prince recognized
 by the knights and champions all (...)
 in the Saracen prince Sir Galahad
 Taliessin the king’s poet sealed (...)
 and the hurt of the Wounded King was healed.

Palomides sat in the Perilous Chair

(*Dodds*, 250).

Williams here differs widely from tradition since he attributes to Palomides both

the healing of Pelles and the right to seat in the Perilous Chair. In his notes, Williams had thought of making Palomides “an image and shadow of Galahad, for it is significant that he is baptized (after his conquest) on the day when Galahad comes to the King’s hall” (*City*, 177). But here, he seems to *take up the role* of Galahad. In *The Pattern in the Web*, Roma King comments on the headnote to the *Heroes and Kings* version:

Williams speaks of the coming of Galahad as an apparition, suggesting that Palomides is the physical manifestation of the spirit that is Galahad. This represents an early stage in the development of the myth, leaving open the possibility that Galahad is the spirit of Christ and that Palomides is his embodiment. Williams came to reject that version.¹⁵

This interpretation creates a tension, even a contradiction, with the note just quoted and with the whole drift of Williams’s conception of Galahad. From the earliest time, ever since *The Holy Grail*, he had been convinced that Galahad should have a real personality, the only difference with the other knights being that his passionate nature was entirely turned to God: he would not have him “fizzle out as a sort of ‘unsexed’ abstraction.” (*The Holy Grail*, 102). So it is very surprising that he should become disincarnate here. Moreover, it could only apply to this one poem. Another interpretation appears possible.

In his 1941 *Poetry Review* comments on the making of *Taliessin Through Logres*, Williams writes that, of the three knights who reach Sarras, Galahad only is granted the supreme revelation of the mysteries of the Grail but he adds: “yet it might be held that *the Galahad-in-Bors* achieved as much as did the individual High Prince” (*City*, 180, my emphasis). The whole being of Galahad is, by definition, “capacity for Christ”, but others only have a partial capacity, and this is conceived as the part of Galahad present in them. Now Palomides has achieved his own variant of the Quest, since he has tamed the Blatant Beast.¹⁶ So Galahad being recognised in him precisely implies that he has reached the perfection of

15 Roma A. King, Jr., *The Pattern in the Web, The Mythical Poetry of Charles Williams*, p. 91.

his own “capacity for Christ”.

This interpretation is corroborated by other similar instances in the cycle: thus, when Percivale says to Blanchfleur “(with) the prince Dom Galahad (...) thy holy heart of inquest is made one” (Dodds, 207); or more clearly when Gawaine makes his peace with Lancelot before he dies, “sweetly within his face was Galahad known” (“Taliessin’s Lament for Gawaine”). This confirms that it is Galahad-in-Palomides, Galahad-in-Gawaine that is seen in moments of intense spirituality, although the High Prince, at the same time, remains his own individual self.¹⁷

Another example runs contrariwise: when the Grail appears to all the Round Table, on the day of his arrival at Arthur’s Court, Galahad says “each who looked to see / *saw his own face in me.*” (Dodds, 233, my emphasis). Galahad then reveals to them the truth of their own natures: he is “the achievement of desire”¹⁸ (Dodds, 248); at the same time, he is the locus where they are all gathered, united in their common “capacity for Christ”. Galahad-in-Palomides, Galahad-in-Gawaine become then Palomides-in-Galahad, Gawaine-in-Galahad: in him they achieve what I would call the Communion of Saints and Charles Williams co-inherence in its fullest acceptance.

As David Dodds noted in his edition,

(v)ery few of the *Advent* poems seem to be anything like earlier versions of single later poems. (...) More common than direct reworkings of single poems are new poems on the same subject, or having a similar function within the cycle.” (Dodds, 153-54)

16 There will be an important change in Williams’s interpretation of the character when he decides that Palomides comes to his baptism *without* having defeated the Beast. He will then embody the achievement of humility rather than victory over the self (the Blatant Beast symbolising sexual jealousy). This orientation had, however been anticipated in *The Holy Grail* where Williams noted: “*His career = the learning of humility.*” (p.119)

17 However, the fact that here Palomides seems *materially* to take the place and role of Galahad creates real difficulties and distortions, which explain Roma King’s hypothe-

The abyss gaping at the time between the maturity of Williams's ideas and his poetic technique is indeed staggering. There are some very beautiful lines in *The Advent of Galahad*, some very powerful ones too, but for the most part the poems are diffuse and mannered in their archaism. On the contrary, the main directions of Williams's reinterpretation of the Arthurian legend (a number of which were already present in *The Holy Grail*) are clearly determined and have now entered the poetic dimension. Charles Williams will effect radical changes in his prosody, in his choice of heroes and supporting episodes, but the fundamental metaphysical tenets and the very personal inventions imagined to carry them into the legend are all there; he will only bring clarifications and developments.

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sis, and which appear totally unjustified. Williams seems to have hesitated on another point also at the time: in the *Prelude*, he suggests that Galahad might share his revelatory capacity with his two companions of the Quest in a kind of hierarchical descent: "Galahad to Percivale/ and Percivale to Bors, / issued each as the living Grail/ in the heart of Arthur's wars. (Dodds, 165)

18 The formula reminds one of "the end of desire" which recurs again and again in *Many Dimensions*, which was written during the same period (published in 1931).

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