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FROM LOGRES TO CARBONEK: THE ARTHURIAD OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

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I

Among the modern poets of today, Charles Williams (1896-1945) has yet to receive the acknowledgement which he deserves, although he is one of the major shapers and re-makers of the Arthurian legend, as C. S. Lewis and others have pointed out.¹ Of course, Lewis' *Arthurian Torso* will always remain an indispensable guide through the labyrinthine passages of the poet's work; and yet many paths remain to be explored.

In his incomplete prose work *The Figure of Arthur* Charles Williams delineates the intention of his poetic works *Taliessin Through Logres* and *Region of the Summer Stars*.² They

1. For engaging insights into the personal side of the poet, see James T. Como, ed., *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and other Reminiscences* (New York, 1979); particularly the lively accounts of Derek S. Brewer, Erik Routley, Nathan C. Starr. No less vivid is the portrait sketched by Alice Mary Hadfield in her 'The Relationship of Charles Williams' Working Life to his Fiction', in *Shadows of the Imagination: The Fantasies of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams*, ed. M. R. Hillegas (Carbondale, 1969; new ed. 1979). The Charles Williams Society of London, which was founded in 1975, issues a Newsletter with essential criticism and interpretation. Additional contributions are found in *Mythlore* (Los Angeles) which is devoted to Williams, Tolkien and Lewis. I particularly wish to express my appreciation to Martin Moynihan, Esq., who encouraged me to delve deeper into the mystic world of Charles Williams and who kindly brought me into contact with Mary Hadfield, one of the founder members of the Charles Williams Society.
2. Charles Williams, *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (London, 3rd ed. 1954). *Taliessin through Logres*,

are meant to portray the development of the legends of Arthur and the Grail, their gradual coalescence and fusion and the fate of the Grail world. Two subjects are of primary importance for Williams: the realm of King Arthur and that of the Grail. When these two focal points of Williams' *Arthuriad* are compared with medieval treatments — as for instance that of Malory, whose *Morte Darthur* can be regarded as one of Williams' main sources — the modern poet's originality becomes clear. The love story of Lancelot and Guinevere, which is perhaps the most appealing to modern audiences, is only allotted marginal treatment. The centre of the entire myth, and therewith the *raison d'être* of Williams' work, is clearly the Grail. The poet sees the union of the world of Arthur with that of the Grail less as a legendary or historical phenomenon, and far more as a complex symbol of the union of Empire and Christendom, that is to say as a symbol of the Ultimate Epiphany, the Second Advent of Christ.

Logres is the name Charles Williams gives to Arthur's realm in conformity with the Old French prose version.³ It is a part or a province of the Byzantine Empire, which for Williams represented the incarnation of Divine Order. From the point

the Region of the Summer Stars by Charles Williams and *Arthurian Torso* by Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, introd. by Mary McDermott Shideler (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974). Frequent use was made of Williams' most important work in prose on Arthurian mythology, *The Arthurian Torso*, as it was entitled by its editor, C. S. Lewis (London, 2nd ed. 1952). See also, his *The Image of the City and other Essays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London, 1958). A bibliography of secondary literature on Williams is to be found in John Heath-Stubbs, *Charles Williams. Writers and their Work*, No. 63 (London, 1955), 40-4. Additional mention must be made of Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love. A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (New York, 1968), which includes a comprehensive bibliography of Williams' writing together with the reviews it received. Rev. by William V. Spanos in *JEGP*, 67 (1968), 719-22.

3. *Logres* as a name for the image of an ideal place and the destination of life's journey is analogous to St Augustine's New Jerusalem and Tolkien's True West. Cf. Jonnie Patricia Mobley, *Towards Logres: The Operation of Efficacious Grace in Novels by C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Muriel Spark, and Gabriel Fielding* (Diss., University of Southern California, 1973).

of view of medieval Arthurian romance, the Roman Empire would have been a more appropriate choice. But for Williams, Byzantium was connected to the idea of a strictly hierarchical power with an organic structure. Divine order was for him a matter of geometrical precision, with complete harmony of all the component parts. Rivalry of the member states of the Empire, or manifestations of national thought, did not fit into his conception.

Others besides Charles Williams used Byzantium as a symbolic vehicle, for example W. B. Yeats. Both were connected with the Golden Dawn Group of Chelsea occultists. The originality of Charles Williams lies in the utter Christianisation of the image; one might even say he baptized *goetia*.

One of the mystery writers of the Golden Dawn period, Arthur Machen, may have inspired Williams to the idea of a modern *parousia* symbolised by the grail. His story 'The Great Return' (1915) is an account of the Grail and its effect on a modern Welsh parish church. The idea of *perichoresis* or interpenetration may also have been suggested by one of Machen's stories.⁴

Thus Williams gives the story of King Arthur an entirely new slant. Its meaning can only be understood through a closer look at the development of earlier treatments of the Arthurian story. The idea of order already plays a prominent role in the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth.⁵ The learned bishop of St Asaph is less interested in the heroic deeds of the historical King Arthur than in the idea of kingship, of which Arthur is a symbol. Geoffrey constructs a glorious past, in which Britain was a major power by reason of its unity and singleness of purpose, which enabled it to rival the Roman Empire. The historian's aim is the foundation of a political ideology, the creation and dissemination of the idea of an Anglo-Norman Empire. To this end he emphasises the *primordia urbis* and makes Arthur a figure

4. This I owe to a friendly communication of Martin Moynihan, Esq. Cf. *The Caerleon Edition of the Works of Arthur Machen*, 9 vols. (London, 1923), 'The Great Return', Vol. 7, 191ff.

5. Editions: *The Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. A. Griscom (London and New York, 1929); *Historia Regum Britanniae, A Variant Version*, ed. J. Hammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1951).

larger than life, greater than Hector and Aeneas, Alexander and Charlemagne, a visible symbol of a realm which far surpassed that of the Romans in brilliance and in power. The foundation of the Empire sketched by Geoffrey was meant to lie beyond the reaches of the medieval *imperium*; his Arthur is meant as a negation of the uniqueness of the imperial office.⁶

In literary works after Geoffrey nationalist tendencies become more apparent,⁷ and more emphasis is given to the conflict with Rome. The most complex Middle English treatment of the fate of King Arthur, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*,⁸ places the conflict with Rome at the focal point of the action. Even in the chronicles we can recognise a gradual shifting of interest in this direction.⁹ In Geoffrey's history Arthur is about to climb the Alpine passes when the news of Mordred's treason reaches him, forcing a quick retreat. According to Peter of Langtoft¹⁰ Arthur has already crossed the Alps and the trumpets in Pavia are announcing a feast,

6. On Geoffrey's intention, cf. W. F. Schirmer, *Die Frühen Darstellungen des Arthurstoffes* (Köln and Opladen, 1958), 19ff; further: Heinrich Pähler, *Strukturuntersuchungen zur Historia Regum Britanniae des Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Diss., Bonn, 1958), chapters 6 and 7.
7. The fact that Arthur was a mortal enemy of the Anglo-Saxons was gradually forgotten by Geoffrey's successors. Both Henry II and Edward I fought to suppress the troublesome legend of Arthur's return by having his body exhumed. A number of English kings liked to envision themselves in the rôle of *Arthurus redivivus*. The son of Henry VII was even baptized under the name of Arthur. On the legends of the Return, cf. R. S. Loomis, 'The Legend of Arthur's Survival', in *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. S. Loomis (Oxford, 1959), 64-71.
8. Valerie Krishna, ed., *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*. A Critical Edition (New York, 1976). For a re-evaluation of this unique work see *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, ed. Karl Heinz Goller (Woodbridge, 1981).
9. On the development of the figure of Arthur in historiography, cf. Herta Brandenburg, *Galfried von Monmouth und die frühmittelenglischen Chronisten* (Diss., Berlin, 1918).
10. *Chronicle of Peter of Langtoft*, 2 vols., ed. T. Wright (London, 1866-68).

when the bearer of bad tidings from Britain reaches Arthur. John Hardyng¹¹ places the final battle between Romans and Britains in the Toscana in central Italy. In the *Annals of Worcester*¹² which follow the *Liber de Compositione Castri Ambaziae*¹³ in this respect, Arthur is forced to turn back shortly before reaching the city gates of Rome, where he hears about Mordred's betrayal. And finally Jean de Preis has Arthur marching into Rome in his *Mer des Histoires*,¹⁴ and we see him crowned as Emperor. In a similar manner in the French prose version, as reflected in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*,¹⁵ Arthur is crowned as emperor in Rome after a great victory over the Empire.

Charles Williams provides us with a completely different concept of the Arthurian myth. The major innovation consists in the exclusion of an antithetical opposition of Logres and Rome. Even in Tennyson's version, Rome was only the 'slowly fading mistress of the world'; the poet devotes one meagre sentence to the battle against Rome.¹⁶ Williams saw the fight against the Roman emperor as a very unfortunate element of the Arthurian myth, and preferred to omit it. 'No national myth was ever the better for being set against a more universal authority', the poet tells us.¹⁷ The result of dropping the rivalry between Logres and Rome is a denationalisation of the Arthurian myth. Arthur's realm is now an integral part of the Byzantine Empire.

The concept of organism is meant literally by Charles Williams. His point of departure is Wordsworth's idea that the

11. John Hardyng, *The Chronicle, Together with the Continuations by R. Grafton*, ed. H. Ellis (London, 1812).
12. *Annales de Wigornia*, in *Annales Monastici IV*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series (London, 1869).
13. *Liber de Compositione Castri Ambaziae*, in *Chroniques des Comtes d'Anjou*, ed. P. Marchegay and A. Salmon (Paris, 1871).
14. *Mer des Histoires*, in *Chroniques Belges*, 6 vols., ed. A. Borgnet, S. Bormans, Belgian Royal Academy (Brussels, 1864-80).
15. *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (London, 2nd ed., 1967).
16. 'The Coming of Arthur', in A. Tennyson, *Poetical Works* (London, 1954), 295.
17. *Arthurian Torso*, 83.

human body is an index of a greater universal order — the old medieval topos of microcosm and macrocosm.¹⁸ The words which appear in an index also appear in the corresponding text, and in a similar manner the qualities and the structural features of the human body are found in counterpart in the universe. The Empire of *Logres* is conceived as an analogy to the human body. The head is *Logres*, for the historical source of the myth lies in Britain; it gains consciousness here and is given verbal form.¹⁹ The breasts are the country of France, which fed Christendom with the milk of knowledge and of faith ('the breasts of *intelligo* and *credo*').²⁰ Rome is represented through the hands of the Pope, which convey the blessing of the Church to the faithful. The navel stands for Byzantium, the organic centre and seat of the Empire; the loins are Jerusalem, where Christ was crucified and the new Adam born.²¹ Thus the Empire is seen as an organism, and the human body, in turn, as a mirror of the Empire, the Kingdom of God.²²

Beyond this Empire to the South is *P'o-l'u*, the land of the Antipodes, where order dissolves into anarchy. Octopi with giant tentacles creep over the slimy sea and stare with lidless

18. Cf. 'The Index of the Body', *The Image of the City*, 80-7.

19. Cf. J. Heath-Stubbs, *Charles Williams*, 36.

20. *Taliessin Through Logres*, 8.

21. In regard to Jerusalem as the site of Christ's crucifixion and the birth-place of the New Adam, one can ask whether Williams was familiar with the ancient Omphalos concept; cf. Arno Esch, 'Paradise and Calvary', *Anglia*, 78 (1960), 74-7.

22. *Arthurian Torso*, 107-8. As source for Williams' geographical myth, Dante, among others, must be mentioned, who saw Jerusalem as the centre of civilized earth. But even more significant is the poetic geography found in Blake, and the symbolic meaning he saw in the four directions — North, South, East and West. The various *states* correspond to parts of Williams' anatomical myth. Cf. Maung Ba-Han, *William Blake: His Mysticism* (Bordeaux, 1924), 78: 'They (the four "states") are sometimes spoken of as "the four worlds of humanity in every man" . . . and sometimes personified as the "four mighty ones . . . in every man". They are designated the four "Zoas" or "Lifes" in Eternity, and their names are Urthona (or Los), Urizen, Luvah and Tharmas. The Directions of their seats "in eternal times" were respectively North, South, East and West.'

eyes at the coast of the Empire. Images from Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Wells' *War of the Worlds* blend with the medieval concept of the Antipodes, which interestingly enough were seen as a negative counterpart of the Arthurian world in the *Draco Normannicus* of Etienne de Rouen.²³

P'o-l'u is a kind of Hell, the sphere of power of the Headless Emperor. To the West of *Logres* lies *Broceliande*,²⁴ the mysterious world of making and shaping, of the *Apeiron*. The mistress of this forest is Nimue. She appears in mortal guise, but as the 'Mother of Making' she combines earthly existence with the transcendent. Nimue's children are Merlin and Brisen, perceptible and active embodiments of time and space. In the forest of *Broceliande*, beyond the borders of the Empire, stands the castle of *Carbonek* where the Grail and the Bleeding Lance are kept. Merlin and Brisen are preparing the union of Byzantium and *Carbonek*, the welding of the worldly and religious ideals, the perfection of Christendom on earth — namely the *parousia*.

Logres, which medieval authors did not localize geographically, has become a spiritual landscape in the writings of Charles Williams, one whose main characteristic is geometrical order. But order is not seen as a value in itself, rather, it stands as a sign for the sacred, directing us to God, the operation of whose Providence is revealed in the harmony of mathematical and geometrical symbols. According to Williams, religion is to be expressed in terms of mathematical clarity, whose contours are clearly visible. Sin is seen accordingly as the destruction of an ordered pattern or structure, the derangement of God's plans through man.²⁵

Logres with its hierarchical order and rationality thus refers to an ordered universe, for which it can stand as an index in the same way as the human body stands for the Empire. But *Logres* is only a passing realization of an ideal society, the creation of a happy moment in time, and thus

23. *The Draco Normannicus* of Etienne de Rouen, ed. R. Howlett, Rolls Series (London, 1885).

24. On *Broceliande*, cf. McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love*, 102ff.

25. Cf. *The Image of the City*, 145; as well as, Charles Moorman, *Arthurian Triptych, Mythic Materials in Charles Williams*, C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot (New York, 1960), 67.

vulnerable and instable. It is dependent upon human co-operation with the overall plan. When selfless love is lacking and man makes himself the centre of this world, chaos breaks in: 'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold'.²⁶

Compared with Malory's account of the dissolution of the Round Table and of the Arthurian world, that is to say the destruction of secular power, the dimensions have been expanded by Williams. They remind us of Milton and of his representation of the fall of mankind.²⁷ Heaven and earth are joined in a new mythic kingdom which is by no means unreal because it lacks historical existence, nor is it merely an archetypical description of an utopian *Phantastikón*. It is far more a representation of man's situation in this world, and therefore of universal validity even for modern man. Besides its historical applicability, the myth shaped by Williams has a life of its own, and this is what gives it meaning and depth.

In much the same way as he transforms the world of King Arthur, Williams also presents the world of the Grail in a form not previously found in English literature. Perhaps we could say that the legend of the Grail had never been given adequate poetic treatment in English literature before Charles Williams. Besides the insignificant work of Henry Lovelich,²⁸ there are five further English treatments of the early history of the Grail which must already have been known in England by 1250, as an interpolation in *De Antiquitate Glastoniensis*

26. William Butler Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *The Collected Poems* (London, 1958), 211.
27. Cf. Nathan Comfort Starr, *King Arthur Today: The Arthurian Legend in English and American Literature 1901-1953* (Gainesville, 1954), 178.
28. *The History of the Holy Grail*, by Henry Lovelich, skynner, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS ES 20/24, 28/30 (London, 1874-78); Dorothy Kempe, *The Legend of the Holy Grail, its Sources, Character and Development* ('Introduction' to, and Part V of Henry Lovelich's Verse 'History of the Holy Grail') (London, 1905). This work, which dates back to 1430, is a translation of the French *Estoire del Saint Graal* without any additions or alterations whatsoever. In fact, the language is so stiff and halting, and the treatment so little suited to the elevated nature of the topic, that we sympathize with the wry remark of the editor that Lovelich must have felt unfulfilled by his trade as a furrier.

*Ecclesiae*²⁹ shows. The oldest of the versions which have been preserved is a fragment contained in the alliterative poem *Joseph of Arimathia*.³⁰ The *Queste del Saint Graal*,³¹ however, is only found in English in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*,³² which Charles Williams evidently used as a major source.

Malory had little sympathy for the secret of the Grail and its mystic function.³³ Spiritual knighthood was far less important to him than worldly glory and honour. And yet it is not necessarily a contradiction that his entire account of the Quest follows his sources more closely than the remaining parts of his work. He adopts only the matter (*matière*), while at the same time changing the *sens* entirely. The transcendental goal of the Quest was meant to direct the knight away from his entanglement in the earthly code of honour towards the true purpose of life. Malory, however, makes the Grail an

29. *William of Malmesbury, Liber de Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae*, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. 179, cols. 1682-1734.

30. *Joseph of Arimathia*, ed. W. W. Skeat, EETS OS 44 (London, 1871).

31. On the background of the Quest of the Grail, see Loomis, *Arthurian Literature*, esp. R. S. Loomis, 'The Origin of the Grail Legends', 274-294; Jean Frappier, 'The Vulgate Cycle', 295-318; Fanni Bogdanow, 'The *Suite du Merlin* and the Post-Vulgate *Roman du Graal*', 325-335.

32. In his account of the Quest of the Grail, Malory follows the Old French prose version, which seems to have been of monastic origin, at least for this part. The hermit who interprets the hierarchy of virtues places Chastity and Virginity at the height of the scale, a surprising turn-about-face after Courtly Love has just been explained as the main inspiration and code of behaviour of knighthood and Chivalry. Virginity is followed in descending order by Humility, Patience, Righteousness, and Love. During the Vigil before Whitsunday, the tables in Arthur's hall are placed in the same position prescribed for this feast in the Rule of Cîteaux. In addition, the central problem of the nature of Grace and the repeated discussions of Trans-substantiation give rise to the idea that the author must have been a Cistercian monk. Cf. Loomis, *Arthurian Literature*, 306.

33. Cf. E. Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, I, 70ff.

integral part of his world of knighthood,³⁴ a fact which Williams seems to have overlooked. The hierarchical world of values of the French prose version culminates in Galahad, a saintly Christ-like figure, from whom even adventures retreat to allow him free passage. Although he belongs to the court of Arthur and to the Round Table, his true home and destiny is the mythic Sarras, and in place of jousting and tournaments his mission is the Grail. And yet the French author never doubts the fact that Galahad is the best knight in the world, far better than all the others. Malory, however, in sharp contrast to his sources, insists on the fact that Lancelot was a better knight than his son Galahad. In this way Malory has basically secularized his source. Through the figure of Lancelot he places spiritual knighthood on an equal footing with secular knighthood. The Quest becomes one knightly adventure among many others.³⁵

Malory's attitude towards the Quest of the Grail is by no means to be seen as the failing of an individual author who is far too earth-bound. On the contrary, such a reaction to the Quest of the Grail seems to be widespread, even today, in England and everywhere else in the world. The Grail seems to have become a stumbling stone for modern man, who is no longer capable of appreciating the ascetic ideal of life. John W. Donaldson, one of the more recent editors of Malory, has thus omitted the Quest entirely. He justifies this step by pointing out that this part of the story evidently stems from monastic interpolation and cannot be reconciled with the spirit of knighthood. In his eyes, the ideals of chastity and

34. This is particularly easy to demonstrate in the case of Lancelot, Malory's explicit favourite and, as in the French version, still 'le meilleur chevalier du monde'. Naturally as such he had to be excluded from the Quest. Malory had already portrayed his adulterous love for Guinevere, thus stamping Lancelot as sinful and unworthy of the vision of the Grail.

35. The somewhat neglected tale of the healing of Knight Urry is revealing on this point. Lancelot cures him merely by the laying on of hands and by prayer, an incident inserted by Malory without an apparent source. As in his account of the Quest, Malory has elevated the rôle of earthly knighthood here. Cf. P. E. Tucker, 'A Source for "The Healing of Sir Urry" in the "Morte Darthur"', *MLR*, 50 (1955), 490-2.

atonement are completely foreign elements, alien to the tenor of the narrative. Donaldson's conclusion is that this leads to completely false conceptions of Arthur and his knights.³⁶ In a similar manner, Tennyson had portrayed the Quest of the Grail as the adventure of the three mystics Galahad, Perceval and Bors, one which was instigated by the ecstatic visions of holy virgins. The Round Table, and with it common man, had no part in the Grail.³⁷

Charles Williams is acquainted with such ideas. He has Mordred, the traitor and cynic, say: 'My father often thought about the value of the Grail for his salvation; but I can do without such fairy mechanisms. Should something like the Grail really exist, which is hardly likely, I shall send a dozen of my knights in order to destroy it.'³⁸

For Williams, the Grail is no theatrical prop, but rather a tangible spiritual power. A large portion of his later poetry is aimed at restoring the Grail to its proper position, an undertaking which was certainly courageous, if not very promising.

Williams goes about his task as a scholar and a poet. His prose work *The Figure of Arthur* shows an astounding knowledge of the nearly overwhelming store of Arthurian secondary literature. His hypothesis on the origin of the Grail is unequivocal and, it must be admitted, reveals a certain amount of prejudice. Whether the Grail be a chalice or a bowl or some other kind of vessel, its first appearance in European literature is bound up with the Sacred Host. Chrétien's Grail has no connection with the Celtic fairy-tale vessel or Cauldron of Plenty. It provides food not for the body, but for the soul. Thus Williams regards the Grail as a ciborium containing the Holy Bread of the Eucharist.³⁹ In contrast to the versions of Malory and Tennyson, it does not serve a small elite, but is destined for all mankind.

Williams sees the wound of the Fisher-King as a physical

36. *Arthur Pendragon of Britain* (New York, 1943).

37. 'The Holy Grail', in A. Tennyson, *Poetical Works*, 401.

38. 'The Meditation of Mordred', in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 47-9, here 48.

39. According to Chrétien, however, the Grail is a vessel for food in which common salmon and lampreys are served, and thus its transformation from a profane object to a sacred one in the form of a chalice or ciborium is a phenomenon that remains to be explained.

and spiritual hurt suffered by the entire human race. Naturally he does not ignore the sexual connotations of the wound; but he places them in proper perspective by viewing them in terms of their symbolic and allegorical value. The reader acquainted with his poems is led immediately to think of Jerusalem and its significance in the myth of the organic body, an analogy which provides a deeper understanding of what happens in the Castle of the Grail.⁴⁰

Perceval's failure is attributed by Williams to an inner feeling of guilt which forbids him to approach the sanctuary. The reason first given by Chrétien — respect for the advice of Gournemant — is disregarded by Williams as being too minor. Perceval's guilt is far more to be seen in his cruel impatience towards his mother, in a natural, unreflected and unholy impulse, in short: in natural sin.

Williams goes on to treat the various continuations of Chrétien's unfinished narrative, whose main contribution to the legend of the Grail lies in the combination and sublimation of images already present. The combination of the Grail and the Bleeding Lance with Christian tradition is clearly evident in these authors, as well as the great benefit which Perceval's question might have meant for the country. A new element is to be seen in the introduction of the Waste Land motif to the myth, a concept originally pagan, according to which natural fertility is dependent upon the sexual potency of the ruler. The wound of the Fisher-King is explained by the Dolorous Blow of the sword, which gains supreme importance in Williams' new version of the myth as a symbol of original sin. Williams attributes similar importance to the visit of the entire Round Table to the Grail Castle on the occasion of Perceval's coronation. Here we see an Arthur-

40. In regard to the Grail and Bleeding Lance, Williams points out that they appear for the first time in this form in Chrétien. There were Celtic lances which blazed lightning and fire, but not one that bled. One cannot blame Williams for not finding the reason for the new image. Of course, Chrétien has a different lance in mind in the procession than the one that wounded the king. Thus the bleeding of the spear, and the healing of the wound with the blood of the spear must be explained. Williams has evidently thought of the lance of Longinus which pierced the side of Christ in this connection, in the context of his discussion of the *Conte du Graal*.

ian world given a dynamic orientation towards a new spiritual centre.

The last version of the Grail story discussed by Williams is *Perlesvaus*. It is easy to see why Williams took such an interest in this particular work. Its exposition conveys the impression that Arthur and the Grail are to be combined in a single story. In order to restore his lost reputation, Arthur rides through the land in search of adventure. In the chapel of a hermitage he experiences the mystery of the Eucharist. He has a vision of a beautiful woman on the altar with a child upon her knee. While the Hermit celebrates Mass, the child is transformed into the Man of Sorrows with a crown of thorns upon his head. Arthur sees himself in this figure, and pity draws tears to his eyes. Immediately Christ is retransformed into the child, and with the *ite missa est* the vision and the light which framed it are extinguished. Full of new resolutions, Arthur returns to Cardoil and promises Guinevere that he will do the will of God from that time onward.

At this point, according to Williams, Arthur has come as close to the mystery as he ever will. In no other version is the king accorded such measure of grace, with the exception perhaps of Galahad's appearance at the royal court in Malory. A fusion of the two worlds, however, does not take place. The world of the Grail and the Arthurian world hardly come in contact in *Perlesvaus*. Williams, however, saw the combination of these two subjects as his major task.

II

The poem on the calling of Taliessin to his vocation is contained in the volume of poetry entitled *The Region of the Summer Stars*, which for the most part was composed later than the poems in the previous volume *Taliessin Through Logres*. Both taken together compose the Arthuriad of Williams: '... in general the argument of the series is the expectation of the return of Our Lord by means of the Grail and the establishment of the kingdom of Logres (or Britain) to this end by the powers of the Empire and Broceliande.'⁴¹

41. *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 'Preface', vii.

According to the chronology of the Arthurian kingdom, the 'Calling of Taliessin' forms the beginning of the cycle. Here the poet and seer Taliessin⁴² learns in a dream vision of the establishment of the Kingdom of Logres in which he is to play a part. It is true that he cannot understand the full connotations of his task because he is still too much involved in the druidism and magic lore of his native land; and yet he is faintly aware of the greatness of his mission, the enormous appeal of the ideas of Byzantium and of the Grail. On the other hand, he also sees the possibility of the fall of Logres, even if it is only a vague premonition. Thus at the very beginning of Taliessin's way to Byzantium, the fate of Arthur's realm is foreshadowed.

The poem *The Calling of Taliessin* begins in the style of the *Mabinogion* with the description of the origin of Taliessin. No one knows from whom the poet and seer is descended. The beginnings of poetry and prophecy are veiled in clouded darkness. But already the discovery of the infant Taliessin in a weir of the River Wye is a kind of sign for everything that is to follow. Subtle associations and the use of anticipation and innuendo recall biblical parallels, many of them barely noticeable for the reader at first and only fully understandable after the whole has been read. Taliessin is carried down

42. The historical Taliessin lived in the sixth century, and the poetry attributed to him has been preserved in the *Book of Taliessin* (c.1275). Twelve historical poems from this collection date back to the sixth century and are regarded by Celtic scholars as 'the genuine work of Taliessin'. Cf. A. L. Owen, *The Famous Druids* (Oxford, 1962), 201ff. Lady Charlotte Guest translated the story of Taliessin in her *Mabinogion*. The following passage quoted from the translation ('Taliessin', in *The Mabinogion*, transl. by Lady Charlotte Guest (London, 1877), 471-94) casts helpful light on our poem:

And my original country is the region of the summer stars; . . .
 I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,
 On the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell:
 I have borne a banner before Alexander; . . .
 I have been loquacious prior to being gifted with speech; . . .
 I am able to instruct the whole universe.
 I shall be until the day of doom on the face of the earth;
 And it is not known whether my body is flesh or fish.

(pp.482-3)

the river in a willow basket covered with leather, and is brought to land by King Elphin. He is thus comparable to the Hebrew *Mosheh*, for this name means: one drawn out of the water. What Moses was for the people of the Jews, Taliessin is to become for Logres and for Britain.

King Elphin is rooted in paganism and the bloody handiwork of war; his connection with poetry is limited to a hearty song after the feast. And nevertheless he accepts the gift of the river, and the child has already begun to sing: on the druidic lore of reincarnation, on the preordained law of transformation whose circle begins with fish and ends again with fish, namely: '... from shapes that eat / to shapes that are eaten, and then to the fish split / to be at once on the dish and again in the sea'.⁴³

This law of Karma rules Taliessin, and with him the entire pagan world; for God has not yet led them into the land of the Trinity and set them free. And yet as much as this senseless movement back to the point of departure might seem a closed circle, it is rather a sign of something new and final, the perfection of the cycle of destiny and therewith the liberation and emancipation of the individual. Bread and fish recall the mystery of the Eucharist of which Williams says: '... they were eaten, yet they themselves received the eater into themselves; they were separate, yet they were one.'⁴⁴ This is almost certainly the antitype of the 'shapes that eat / to shapes that are eaten'. The metamorphosis which takes place under the law of Karma as a historical or mythical reality serves at the same time as a prototype, which is later fulfilled in the Christian Empire of Byzantium. The mystic sense of the pagan world is to be seen in such prototypes, which foreshadow the Empire to come, even if it is only in the unconscious song of a poet who has not yet attained maturity as a prophet.

The account of Taliessin's childhood and youth is likewise full of allusion, anticipation and connotation. It is Williams'

43. *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 6; cf. on Celtic concepts of reincarnation: Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1961), 252.

44. *Arthurian Torso*, 22; on the earlier tradition of Taliessin, cf. Owen, *Famous Druids*, 213.

myth of the rise of poetic genius.⁴⁵ Again we have an interlacing of various threads, motifs and types of the poetic message; the individual tones of the son echo in a chord of exotic harmony. The point of departure is the Celtic image of the Cauldron of Ceridwen, from which the art of poetry spills forth. Superimposed upon this, however, is a kind of cosmic story of the Muse whose origins are unknown. Taliessin was already at the Throne of God when the world was created. His spirit moved over the waters during the flood, and it ascended into the third heaven, his true home, where the summer stars shine – symbols of the eternal ideas. Here we hear an echo of William Blake's *Songs of Experience*: 'Hear the voice of the bard, who Present, Past and Future sees', and yet there is a clearly Christian accent. Although he has not yet found the formula of the Empire, the pillar of Christianity, Taliessin has a premonition of the coming liberation from the cycle of destiny, although, for the time being, merely in the form of vague correspondences and similarities.

Taliessin lives not only on a physical plane, but also in the poetic breath of the spirit, and life and knowledge coalesce in the trinity of verse, again a typological image which creates anticipation in the poem and sets a new pole, a new focal centre for the action and for the thoughts of the reader: 'I was thrall to Ceridwen and free in the manger of an ass'⁴⁶ – mysterious connotations of Bethlehem and the salvation and rebirth of mankind. Thus the personality of the poet comes into focus as the individual vessel of the Muse who transforms man, makes him a tool and thereby raises him above his kind. At the same time, however, she makes the poet a chimera, neither fish nor fowl, so terribly divided from other men that no woman can love him, a man still heard by scholars but no longer heeded, a man closer to the dead than to the living.

The Empire (and here this means Christendom) is at first unknown to Taliessin, save in the form of mysterious and vague allusions. Minor external objects are explained to him, the pantry of the monks, the bread and beans of the hermits,

45. In what follows, Williams, in my opinion, failed to distinguish clearly enough between bards, *vates*, and Druids. The Celtic priesthood fulfilled several functions which can no longer be clearly separated today. Cf. Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion*, 216-7.

46. *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 7.

the outer shells of symbols whose significance Taliessin senses because he knows the laws of correspondence. But one day he learns of the Kingdom of God and of its history on earth, of the original sin of Adam and the salvation of mankind through Christ, whose unbelievable, all-comprehending love transformed the tree of Adam into the cross of crucifixion. According to an early Christian legend, Paradise and Mount Calvary were both located in the same place, called *medium terrae*.⁴⁷ This is where creation began, and here Adam was born and reborn. And the wood of the cross, according to the same legend, was that of the tree of Adam. The message which reaches Taliessin is only fragmentary and vague, but nevertheless it suffices to make everything he has heard so far appear black and white magic (*goety*, black magic and *theurgy*, white magic). Even the poetry of the pagan world appears shabby in comparison with the shadowy dream of the Empire, whose component parts materialize from the imagination of the poet, take on the semblance of a human body, a microcosm which mirrors in itself all aspects of the Empire. The seed has been sown in Taliessin's heart. His thirst has been awakened for the metaphysics of salvation. He wants to learn more about it than he can gather on the River Wye. For this reason he departs for Byzantium, the image of the City of God.

Taliessin's way leads him along the western coast of England towards the Channel. On his left lies the waste land that is one day to become Logres, and on his right the wood and the sea of Broceliande, the mysterious realm of making, the *Apeiron*, home of Nimue who shapes all earthly things according to their celestial ideas. Beyond Broceliande lies the castle of the Grail, and beyond that the holy land of Sarras. Broceliande is borderland, the realm between the here and the beyond, and thus known only to the elect. No one returns unchanged from this land — some come again as saints, others as empty-headed prattlers who unashamedly preach their metaphysics as if it were gospel. Taliessin only passes through the outer fringes of the wood, and yet his soul is seized by fear and doubt. In the face of the monumental

47. *The Book of the Cave of Treasures*, transl. from the Syriac Text of the British Museum MS. Add. 25875 by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge (London, 1927), 63; cf. also n.21, Esch.

task which lies before him he very nearly despairs: 'dividing word from thing and uniting thing to word', that is the separation of the word or concept from the archetypes of celestial truths, and the fusion of these words with their natural objects on Earth in poetic images and symbols.

While he waits, trying to gather himself, he is approached by a shining form which divides into two parts, and becomes a man and a woman — Merlin and Brisen, 'time and space, duration and extension'. They come from Broceliande and intend to establish a kingdom in Logres in which Byzantium and Broceliande will be united. We hear about the kingdom for the first time in this passage, and we know no more than Taliessin what it is all about. But like the poet we sense that in Logres the divine mystery will take form, that the creation of the perfect man is to take place. Taliessin is not granted more knowledge than that. He must be happy if his spirit can comprehend the space which divides him from Carbonek. He is not allowed to enquire after Sarras, for he has not yet been to Byzantium and is thus still in the stage of the Druid poet who can sense parallels and analogies but is earth-bound by nature and cannot yet participate in the *Feeling Intellect*.

With a cosmic image of sublime beauty, Williams introduces the mysterious magic of Merlin and Brisen. The day draws to a close, the sun sinks to the Antipodes, and the Earth casts its conic shadow into space.⁴⁸

This image is taken from the *Divine Comedy, Paradiso IX*. 118.⁴⁹ According to Dante's view (indeed according to medieval astronomy in general), the universe is entirely lighted by the sun. Night is caused by the cone-shaped shadow cast by the Earth. Because the Earth stands at the centre of the universe and the sun revolves around it, we must imagine Earth's shadow moving like the rotating hand of a clock.⁵⁰ It reaches no further than the sphere of Venus, thus darkening only the inner planetary heavens, whose spheres according to

48. On the imagery of the shadow, cf. Carl Dee Dockery, *The Myth of the Shadow in the Fantasies of Williams, Lewis and Tolkien* (Diss., Auburn University, 1975).

49. Cf. the useful commentary on Dante's concept of the universe in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, introd. by C. H. Grandgent, trans. by J. A. Carlyle and P. H. Wicksteed (New York, 1944).

50. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964), 111-2.

Dante symbolize the lower levels of imperfect holiness still tinged with earthliness. Williams likewise allows the point of the cone to reach the sphere of Venus, but at this point the image loses its concrete form and dissolves into an abstract concept. The third heaven, as Williams emphasises, is non-spatial: this must definitely be seen as a conscious device of the poet, who always takes the material world as his point of departure, only to pass over to the abstract ideal. In the case in question, the reader is additionally struck by the suspicion that the medieval model of the universe composed of spheres with the Earth at its centre must, for obvious reasons, be disguised. For naturally Williams knew that Earth's shadow could not fall in the sphere of Venus, which is nearer to the sun than the Earth.

The transformation of the image into an abstract one distracts from the geocentric orientation of the model which forms the basis for Williams' thought and poetry. This becomes particularly clear in *The Coming of Galahad*. In *The Calling of Taliessin*, Williams was less concerned with the idea of an ordered universe, than with the opposition between idea and reality. For him the third heaven is the non-spatial home of likewise non-spatial ideas, according to whose archetypes Nimue creates objects and living beings on Earth. The sphere of Venus is transformed into a Platonic realm of celestial love and beauty, and the light of the ideas which have their home here is seen when the sun sinks, and all earthly things, the images of the ideas, are cast into invisibility. This is when Merlin and Brisen are able to hear the activity of the *Feeling Intellect* as a faint humming at the point of the conic shadow, a sign of the coming establishment of Logres and the advent of Sarras.

Taliessin does not understand the magic formula itself, and he experiences it only half-consciously as within a dream. Fate is determined by space and time (Brisen and Merlin), and the seer can only perceive it and portray it. Merlin marks the magic pentagram on the floor, the Druidic sign which was regarded as a symbol of perfection by the Platonists, Pythagoreans and Gnostics. Under Merlin's hands the flames of potential intellect rise up, and much in the same way as the shadow of Earth falls into space, reaching the third heaven, and darkness renders the ideas visible, so the shadow of Brisen falls upon Logres, which is still waste land waiting

for the advent of Sarras. The images of celestial ideas are not yet evident.

Only the accidentals of the magic act sink into Taliessin's heart. He does not yet understand the substance of the magic. And yet its connotations suffice to give him an idea of the sequence of coming events and his own mission. At first he only sees Brisen's back: she stares into the fire as if in a hypnotic trance. The flames throw red signs on her back, which for Taliessin is slowly transformed into snow-covered mountains — as can only happen in a dream. At first he sees the mountains in the ruby light of the fire, then the dreamer sees green meadows and steep mountain passes, and he sees himself as a wanderer in this landscape. He crosses the Apennine Mountains, and sails across the Caspian Sea in a storm. Brisen's back thus becomes a landscape in the dream of the poet, a world which as a macrocosm contains all the counterparts of the qualities and features of the human body, which can serve as an index for it. Each part of the land must be sought out by Taliessin in his search for wisdom.

Suddenly and unexpectedly a city is seen on the coast, bright and lovely beyond words, illuminated by rays of a mystic sun. Both city and light lie beyond the reach of Taliessin's dream. Poetry cannot reach that far, not even in a dream. Shortly before the final goal, the shining ray of glory is hidden from the poet by a cloud and becomes again the back of Brisen, which Williams calls 'recapitulatory'. Again the focus shifts from Brisen's back to the shadows that fall on Logres, and now Taliessin sees the stones in the waste land burst into light and shine like the summer stars — hope and anticipation of the fruitful union of Carbonek and Caerleon.

Taliessin, entangled in the pagan codex of the purely factual, can only take part in Merlin's magic through the medium of a dream vision. And yet from accidental details the seer and the reader are able to gain a glimpse of the Empire. The metamorphosis of the images takes place with dreamlike ease, and transitions, as in dreams, are often motivated by a single feature, such as the ruby colour of the fire as a *tertium comparationis* to completely unrelated and unvisualised objects, which develop according to a law of their own from images already present. Brisen's back becomes a snow-covered mountain, the Apennines, the Caspian Sea at the foot of the Caucasus, and once again the body of Brisen. The

light of the magic flame in the pentagram is transformed to firelight on the snow-covered mountains, to the light of Sarra which originates from suns beyond the sun, then becomes the shining glory of deepest truth, and once again is transformed back to the gentle flickering fire of Merlin.

And yet we never have the impression that metaphors are manipulated at will; indeed there is never the slightest suspicion of intentional vagueness and mysteriousness on the side of the poet. The key image, that of the 'recapitulatory body', acts as an aid towards easy comprehension of the poetic message, which does not attempt more clarity for the simple reason that it is not based on facts or logical concepts, but rather on visionary premonitions.

Although the summer stars disappear the next morning with the dawning of light, the world (Logres) has changed. Dawn is seen in the rosy hue of porphyry, like the imperial stairway, the womb of woman, or the *largesse* of the emperor. And yet, for a short while, there is a new focal point in Logres, the eye of the storm which has devoured all the summer stars, as tiny as can be, but lit from within like the egg of a glow-worm. It is the light of the three-fold Trinity, the symbol of the task now given to Taliessin by Merlin: go to Byzantium! Taliessin hears and understands Merlin. His eyes fall on Brisen, and again her shadow is transformed, this time to an immense monumental stairway which leads from the brain (Logres) down to the base (Broceliande). The way from the Forest of Making and Shaping to Camelot is free. Above all, however, Carbonek can now be brought to Logres, and thus the king awaits the advent of the Trinity on the top-most peak of the stairway.

The idea that the salvation and perfection of mankind should take place in Britain is not a private mythology of Williams, but has a long history of development.⁵¹ In the words of William Blake, who is spiritually very much akin to Charles Williams, we read in *Jerusalem* (pl.27): 'All things Begin and End in Albions Ancient Druid Rocky Shore . . . You have a tradition, that Man anciently containd in his mighty limbs all things in Heaven and Earth: this you received (*sic*) from the Druids. But now the Starry Heavens

51. Cf. C. C. Dobson, *Did Our Lord Visit Britain?* (Glastonbury, 7th ed., 1958).

are fled from the mighty limbs of Albion'.⁵² According to Blake, Jerusalem is the emanation of the giant Albion, and Britain the first home of patriarchal religion, and therefore the original Holy Land.

Taliessin sees himself as a poet and singer at the foot of the throne of the Dragon. The entire court stares out upon the sea and sees a ship, apparently from Sarras, carrying the Grail which rests in the hands of Helayne, the daughter of the Grail king. In order not to divulge the secret, Williams uses the device of a dream within a dream: Taliessin finds himself suddenly aboard ship; and there, in a state of ecstasy, he senses the nature of the object concealed under the saffron-yellow cloth. Shortly after this, however, his limbs lose their stiffness, and still caught up in the dream he sees himself in the magic pentagram. The stairway gradually disappears from sight, and those that stood at its top fly into empty space together with the throne of the Dragon – a psychologically subtle, even superb account of gradual awakening from a deep dream.

Taliessin appears to be unable to detach himself from the vision. He is still caught up in it, but his intellect cannot encompass its imaginative world. He dozes in half-consciousness, and again he receives Merlin's command: son of the bard, go to Byzantium! He and Brisen have already taken the possible failure of the Empire into account, and have consequently kept their rite ambivalent. Already there is a gentle undertone of approaching catastrophe, the first signs of disaster, namely the downfall of Logres, which cannot come up to the demanding task. And yet Merlin has taken precautions against even this eventuality. Taliessin will lead his followers in Logres along the same spiritual paths marked by Galahad, the chosen one of the Grail. This concludes the poem, and each one goes his way: Brisen to Carbonek, Merlin to Camelot and Taliessin to Byzantium.

The spiritual tension of the poem is marked by the poles of light and darkness. But they do not form a simple symbolic equation: light for truth and wisdom, and darkness for falsehood and ignorance. On the contrary, the light of the idea can only shine when it has become dark on Earth, when the

52. G. E. Bentley, ed., *William Blake's Writings*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1978), I, 470.

hard and sober light of the sun, which Williams (like Wordsworth) associates with the negative connotations of human *ratio*, has been extinguished, when a shadow is cast on the object of perception, thus enabling it to shine of its own accord. Paradoxically, it is Earth itself which casts its shadow upon things and into space, thus enabling the summer stars of the ideas to shine. The concrete image of Earth and its spatial extension is Brisen. Her shadow falls upon Logres, and the land which is at first dark begins to shine in a reflection of the stars mirrored again in the waste land — an earthly equivalent of the cosmic darkening of space through the conic shadow of Earth, and of the shining of the summer stars which is thereby made possible.

Alongside this polarity, and at the same time interpenetration of light and darkness, we find the image of the waste land, a key symbol for both Charles Williams and T.S. Eliot. Logres has not yet achieved the state of perfect order. It is not lack of water which makes the land a waste land, nor sterility and infertility, but rather the anarchy of civil war, the lack of law and order. Logres is still wilderness, it has not yet taken on the form of *res publica*, for its members are still in a state of strife. Automatically the reader thinks of: 'Omne regnum in se ipsum divisum desolabitur'.⁵³ Waste land for Williams means egotism, isolation and autonomy expressed through the image of barter or communication made impossible. The opposite pole is represented by the harmonious integration of the individual in the greater organic whole. Such an integration is only possible by means of *largesse* and exchange, concretely symbolised by the wagon and the ship at the Golden Horn, by human interaction and exchange. The individual states and kingdoms are not autonomous; they belong together in the same way that the limbs and organs of the body do, and what connects them with one another is *largesse* and exchange. But this is not presented to us as a general principle; it is demonstrated in an exemplary way by Taliessin, who, before he can learn to think in Merlin's style, must first travel many miles through the Empire. Only 'ranging the themes', that is to say, travelling through the provinces of the Empire, will lead him to comprehend the organic unity of the world, and enable him to fulfil his rôle in it.

53. Luke 11.17.

The image of the waste land is connected with the idea of Advent. Logres and the world await salvation on the border of Broceliande and Sarras, whence the Trinity is to come. The Grail carried by Helayne is a symbol of Divine Love, which is to bring about the birth of perfect man on earth. It is the symbol of *parousia*, the Second Advent of Christ, and therewith of God's Kingdom on earth.

Taliessin appears to us as a visible embodiment of the metaphysical drive of man, which Williams has portrayed in a way far more subtle, complex and many-sided than other modern poets. Taliessin's function as a servant of both the Empire and the advent of Sarras causes his own development and significance to recede into the background. He may be a pagan, but at the same time he is *anima naturaliter christiana*, a man in quest of truth, relentless and uncompromising to the point of total self-annihilation. In addition, however, Taliessin is a poet who knows the images and the facts behind them, and who with the help of the law of correspondences senses the spiritual connections. His true home is the realm of ideas, the third heaven of the summer stars where 'unriven truths' dwell. As poet and *vates* he has known the world from the beginning and has a right to be heard, not because of his greater knowledge, but because he has literally experienced the doctrine of *largesse* and because he knows the theory of exchange, according to which each of us can and must bear the burden of others.⁵⁴

Taliessin's followers are enslaved of their own free will: they enter the obligation on the basis of a decision of conscience and a vow, and thus their position is higher than that of the poet of the king, who has received his faith through grace.

Taliessin can preserve the image of Divine Love in his heart, even if Logres should fall. He will continue to have his following in the land, which will then be called Britain, and all those who live in love will belong to his following. And

54. On the nature and function of the poet, see William Matthew Roulet, *The Figure of the Poet in the Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams* (Diss., St John's University, 1965). The figure of the artist has a similar function in Charles Williams' novels, see Robert C. Holder, 'Art and Artist in the Fiction of Charles Williams', *Renascence*, 27 (1975), 81-7.

thus the poem of the Calling of Taliessin concludes on an almost hesitant note of resignation. Mankind 'shall follow in Logres and Britain the spiritual roads'. What binds these men together, however, and what remains after the fall of Logres, is only love, that is to say *largesse* or *caritas*.

III

The manner in which a call to the royal court or to the service of the Queen is issued is shown in *The Queen's Servant*, a difficult poem, but one of poignant beauty. Its appeal and charm lie in its conceptual terseness, its delight in magic ritual and metamorphosis. The poem sparkles with hidden energy and dynamism, and yet at the same time it relays an impression of static, almost liturgical ceremoniousness. Its beauty and charm appear to be closely akin to the baroque pomp of a high feast — they are like the scent of incense and the sound of organ music for the senses of those readers who cannot grasp the rational meaning of such intricate complexity, but who are nevertheless moved by sensual impressions, and have much the same effect as that of murmured Latin psalms, only half-understood, in a Church service.

The poem's point of departure is a letter of the seneschal Kay to Taliessin with the request to send an intelligent girl to court to serve the Queen. She must be equal to high demands: to be able to read and translate Greek, as well as to plant a rose garden, to know court ceremonial, and to understand the great art of imaginative poetry as well. The reader may be troubled in so far as he is accustomed to associating Guinevere and her sinful love with the Queen — an association which does not correspond to the intention of the poet.⁵⁵ There is still a hope of *parousia* in which the Arthurian Empire and the royal court are to play a rôle. This is the task for which the servant of the Queen is called from Taliessin's household to court. She is to provide a connection to the emperor in Byzantium, that is to the *civitas*, to serve Order on the

55. Cf. Veronica L. Skinner, 'Guinevere's role in the Arthurian poetry of Charles Williams', *Mythlore*, 4 (1977), 9-11.

spiritual plane. She is to care for it and cultivate it in the analogy of the rose garden. This double task demands a 'grand art' from her in the same manner as that possessed by the poet Taliessin. Above all it is a task which could not be entrusted to a slave. Whoever is to fulfill such an important function at court must possess the complete freedom of the Children of God. In *The Queen's Servant* we learn of the emancipation of the individual from the chains of natural concupiscence, and of the vocation and preparation for a spiritual task.

Taliessin has one of his trusted servants who is still a slave come to him, and he sets her free with a laconic word: 'Now be free'. The slave's reaction is all but enthusiastic. Rather sarcastically she answers: 'So! Freedom, I see, is the final task of servitude.' Which is as much to say, unasked for, undesired freedom is just as repressive, perhaps even more of a burden, than the service of a bondsman. One freed in this manner has to pay the ransom of her own liberation, though it is with a golden coin she has received from Taliessin. The slave knows that her liberation is not a matter of social status, but that Taliessin has signed the warrant which frees her from the entanglement of the senses and the body, thus discarding the old Adam. From this it follows that Taliessin acts as a type of Christ in these poems. The slave is commissioned to put on the new Adam, and thereby to leave behind her the barbaric status of servitude in favour of human perfection in a Christian sense and service in freedom.

Taliessin himself bought the slave in a district of Caucasia. In the anatomic myth of Williams, Caucasia means chastity and fertility of the human body, youthful freshness and the virginal unapproachability of the young girl, physical animality which forms the basis of human life; it is at the same time the location of Prometheus' martyrdom. Caucasia is therefore less a specific part of the body than the entire human body in all its naturalness: joy, energy, beauty, health, in short: the old Adam, though for the present only nature, and thus still egocentric and not yet capable of taking on the transcendental. In the organic harmony of the human limbs and their spotless beauty, Caucasia mirrors the ideal order of Byzantium as well as all that is natural. To the natives of Caucasia, however, this transcendental beauty is hidden; they do not perceive the symbolism of their country's miracles,

the lambs in the rose gardens, the shining snow flakes on the golden fleece of the landscape.

A prerequisite for this is an overview of the provinces of the Empire, but above all the knowledge of Byzantium and of the Imperial Palace whose throne room symbolises the omnipresence of God. All creation and therewith all themes of the realm are ultimately an expression and reflection of this central unity. The direct vision of the idea, however, is reserved for the visitor to Byzantium. Outside of the throne room there are images and symbols whose significance is only clear to those who know the idea. Only through the transcendental can the natural be understood; only intellect knows that it knows.

The slave has never been in Byzantium and will probably never reach it. But she is capable of grasping the referential character of her body intellectually – through the study of metaphysical books or through Merlin's maps, or even through the mysterious little book from the library of the emperor. But there is an easier and quicker approach: man becomes capable of receiving the transcendental when he puts off the old Adam. 'Unclothe' is the command which Taliessin gives to the slave, and therewith she stands before him in the immaculate beauty of her shining nakedness. Taliessin gazes at the organic unity of beauteous soul in beauteous body, and in it he sees a premonition of the prayer of the nun Dindrane and the benediction of Galahad.

As in *The Calling of Taliessin*, the body of the woman is transformed under the meditative stare of Taliessin into the world. A few hints lead us to conclude that Taliessin's eyes rest on the back of the maiden, and that this in turn becomes identical with the shadow of Caucasia, in which the tiny but clearly visible shadow of Byzantium blossoms, and even the meadows of Sarras beyond the sea. This second metamorphosis of the human back excludes the possibility of a coincidental play on images, and this applies to *The Calling of Taliessin* as well. In my opinion, this is Williams' central metaphor. The human body is in itself a microcosm, which is simultaneously a reflection of the greater world and a world in itself. The term alone implies the existence of a macrocosm with similar features and qualities. Williams expresses the universe in terms of the image of the human body, which not only serves as a major symbol of the poet's concept of

life and the world, but also as the focus of his poetic vision.

The origin of the image is possibly to be seen in Exodus XXXIII. 23 which states that Moses may only see the back of God: '... and [I] will cover thee with my hand until I have passed by: and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back: but my face shall not be seen'. The back of God is usually interpreted as the material world. Thus Moses experiences in his vision the entirety of the world in an image similar to that seen by his successor Taliessin who reveals parallels to his great predecessor in more than this point. But even the Bible is not alone in this image. We find similar forms in many myths of creation, for instance in the Nordic Song of Ymir, according to which the sea was made from the blood of the arch-giant Ymir, the mountains from his bones, the land from his flesh, the stones from his teeth and the trees from his hair.

The most striking parallel to Williams is to be found in Blake whose giant Albion contained everything in himself before his fall: sun, moon, stars, and sea.⁵⁶ Only the imagination is capable of uniting the interior with the exterior in a manner which may even approach the mystical, so that in human society we catch a glimpse of the true presence of the divine body of Christ.⁵⁷

Williams is also concerned with the relation of nature and the transcendental, but they do not represent separate units

56. According to Blake, the main characteristic of John Locke's philosophy is the externalisation of the existence of material objects.

57. Cf. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry. A Study of William Blake* (Boston, 3rd ed., 1967), 349ff. A comparison of the stars in heaven with the body of Christ is to be found in Richard Rolle. It is an interesting fact that he writes: 'Also, swet Jhesu, þe sterres ben cause of euche þynge þat is grene, or groweth, or bereth fruyt ... Also sterris ben cause of mynys, metaill, and of precious stonys ...' *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. H. E. Allen (Oxford, 1963), 35. The Metaphysical poets often compare the human body to the universe (e.g. George Herbert, in 'Man'), as does mystical poetry in general. Cf. John Charles Earle, 'Bodily Extension': '... Thus every man / Wears as his robe the garment of the sky - / So close his union with the cosmic plan, / So perfectly he pierces low and high - / Reaching as far in space as creature can, / And co-extending with immensity.' *Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* (Oxford, 1962), 510.

for him; they are intermingled. Caucasia has cast its shadow on Sarras, and thus rendered it visible like an image or a metaphor which contains its object of reference in a figurative sense in itself. Only when the body of the slave is naked and humbled, is it prepared for the glorious robe of an all-encompassing reality which is given to man with his freedom. In place of her old garb, the girl is given a robe of roses and wool. Only the old girdle is to be retained as a reminder of her former servitude, and as a warning to remain true to her new obligation.⁵⁸

The central image of the poem is the exchange of clothes. It derives from Paul's *Epistle to the Corinthians*, V.4ff.: 'For verily in this we groan, longing to be clothed upon with our habitation which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For indeed we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened; not for that we would be unclothed, but that we would be clothed upon, that what is mortal may be swallowed up of life . . . Wherefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new.' The apostle compares man's earthly body with a temporary tent, the heavenly body with a permanent house. But he wishes to put on the heavenly body in this life, without having to first cross the threshold of death.

The exchange of clothes in Charles Williams can only be understood in the context of the *Epistle to the Corinthians*. It stands for a spiritual metamorphosis, the transition from the status of natural corporality to a new life in the spirit. The poetic metaphor which symbolises this is the cloak of golden lambs' wool and red roses; nor are these just any roses, but rather Caucasian centifoliae. The characteristic of this species is their scarlet colour and the heart-shaped centre of their petals. This is a good example of the way Charles Williams uses metaphors: they glow from within with rich sensuality and yet at the same time they are transformed into an abstract concept which can only be derived from the original image through abstraction and thoughtful reflection. It is much the same as the manner in which the poet Taliessin

58. Gawain's reason for wearing the green girdle was a similar one. In general, this item of clothing appears to have borne a corresponding function in courtly poetry.

plucks the string of his harp and immediately grasps it with two fingers to prevent it from resonating further. The scarlet colour of the rose and the shape of the heart, the wool of the symbolic animal, the lamb, all signal the meaning of the clothes and at the same time the metamorphosis of the slave.

The way to sanctification leads through nature, that is through the works of Nimue, who continually shapes the things of this world according to their archetypes in the third heaven. The transformation requires the 'rhythms of ceremony', the 'grand art', but also grace. By grand art Williams apparently means a sacramental, liturgical art, and by grace the divine power from which art stems. Both are necessary for the sanctification of flesh and blood.

The liberation of the slave ends with an act of exchange, *largesse*. Taliessin imbues her with his entire power and energy, and there is a genuine exchange of qualities and features. Williams believed quite literally in the possibility of such a substitution. He not only rediscovered the doctrine of the Atonement and reinterpreted it back into art and experience; he was also convinced that each of us could take upon himself the burden of another, and, in turn, share his energy and power with his neighbour.⁵⁹ 'Substitutionary love transcends the "fallacy of rational virtue" which says we are judged by our own works — *only*.'⁶⁰ The power of Taliessin pours into the slave in a blast of union. This blast means both a union of nature and spirit, as well as the descent of the Spirit, the experience of the Divine. Through this the slave has become an equal of Taliessin, she henceforth belongs to Taliessin's Society. 'Be as Ourselves in Logres.' This command is valid to death, even beyond death, for afterwards there can be no fear of death but only yearning for the beyond, as we read in St Paul.

The ceremonial conclusion of the act of liberation is thus to be seen as a kind of confirmation (*confirmatio*) which finds expression in the blow to the cheek. This detail originates from the Roman ceremony of the freeing of

59. On the problem of 'exchange' and Williams' doctrine of substitution and its psychological and existential foundation, see J. J. Boies, 'Existential Exchange in the Novels of Charles Williams', *Renascence*, 26 (1974), 219-229.

60. Martin J. Moynihan, in a private communication to the author.

prisoners, but here it carries the additional sense of making one strong for the battle of life, but last not least also the kind of salvation 'after the kind of Christ and the order of Logres'. The central idea of the poem is God:

'Depart, with God,' She said: 'Remain, in God.'

IV

The girl from Caucasia is called to the royal court. Although she is liberated and belongs to Taliessin's following, she is still a child in a spiritual sense and thus in constant danger of a relapse. With *The Coming of Galahad*, however, the new Adam comes to Arthur's court. Mysterious things happen which cause everyone to recognise that the prophecies of the arrival of the Chosen One are about to be fulfilled: Galahad takes his seat at the Round Table, the famous *Siège Périlleux*, without being swallowed up by the earth, as his unworthy predecessors had been. The knights receive from the Grail everything they wish in the way of food and drink, and the water Galahad washes his hands with glitters and sparkles like a thousand stars. At the close of the evening the knight of the Grail is led to Arthur's bed in a ceremonial procession. He takes possession of it after a mysterious rite: the New Adam takes the place of the Old.⁶¹

We view all this with Taliessin as outsiders from the perspective of servants and kitchen-boys. The king's poet has not joined the procession. He passes through offices and kitchens to the exterior courtyard, from where he views the torch-lit procession to the king's bed seen through the windows of towers and halls: 'He stood looking up among the jakes and latrines', and even the nursery rhyme which he sings to his own accompaniment on the harp contains the descending motion which we have just passed through with the poet:

Down the porphyry stair the queen's child ran,
There he played with his father's crown . . .

61. Cf. Charles Moorman, *Arthurian Triptych*, 72.

We have already reached the lowest point of descent, for we stand in the outer courtyard before the latrines and therewith at the outer point of Williams' organic and physiological symbolism. This is where the discussion between Taliessin, Gareth and a slave takes place, and its topic is 'preference', the hierarchy of Logres and the significance of Galahad, the keeper of the Grail: 'Lord, tell me of the new knight!' 'What man is this for whom the emperor lifts the Great Ban?' For Williams the answer to this question was particularly important, since it was decisive for the values and meanings of his own philosophy of life. Religion, philosophy, poetry, love: each of these represented a closed, autonomous world for him, one which resisted integration into an overall structure.

Taliessin sings the Song of Songs for Galahad. He has no doubt that this knight stands at the top of the world hierarchy and that he is justified in taking his place in Arthur's bed. But Taliessin sings among the jakes and latrines, he stands at the other end of the scale, among human excrement which reminds him and others of the fact that the flight to the mysterious heights of the Grail must start from the basis of human nature, and that all paths to the realm must lead through the door of man's animality. I would see the jakes as a first hint of man's feet of clay — his weakness and proneness to error, and thus a premonition of the eventual failure of a union of Camelot and Carbonek.

The poem of *The Coming of Galahad* is dominated by the symbolism of stone and shell which Williams has taken from Wordsworth's *Prehude*. The fifth book of this work begins with a dream of the poet. In the midst of a desert, a mounted Bedouin appears bearing a stone in one hand, in the other a shell of exquisite beauty. The stone stands for the doctrine of Euclid, geometry, and the shell for poetical song, poetry. The stone and shell become the poles of Williams' thought, and symbolise for him order and life, Byzantium and Broceliande, Nimue and the third heaven. Stone and shell are fused, and become one in the person of Galahad. He is the image of the new Adam and an example of the necessary union of the realms of Arthur and the Grail in Logres.

Taliessin believes that he has seen the union in five different houses: in poetry; in the life of the senses and of the body; in the intellect; in religion; and in the imaginative vision (Byzantium), and even in double form in each house. Intel-

lectual Gaul requires the shell in order to reach perfection; corporeal Caucasia requires the stone. All the houses are intimately connected with each other, each is autonomous, but requires the other to give and receive validity and permanence. It seems to me that Taliessin speaks a clear and understandable language at this point. He sees the five houses transformed into the triangle of the pentagram which before had played such a great rôle in Merlin's magic as a symbol of perfection.

The direct source of Williams and thus the key to a better understanding of his imagery may well be seen in the Middle English romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which Gawain carries the pentagram as a heraldic symbol on his shield. The allegorical meaning of this symbol rests in the idea of the 'endless knot', so named because the star is composed of an unbroken connection of five lines which, when traced, lead right back to the point of departure. Taliessin traces the lines of the pentagram with his finger, and the individual significance of the houses is lost from sight. One dissolves into another. Taliessin's skill fails him, for it is only adequate for the single categories. In the pentagram, however, they are submerged in a single identity.

The recognition of identity is made possible by the fusion of shell and stone, the creation of a new quality. Logres likewise can only gain its identity from a similar synthesis. At first, the dual character of truly fulfilled existence is to be observed in each individual house. Lewis describes the first and foremost tasks of life as: 'to "fit" the stone and the shell in whatever House you occupy, to retain poetic vision in the midst of hard thinking, to study "precision" in your highest poetry, to offer even to the *body* of the beloved a "Euclidean love"'.⁶²

But the balance achieved in this way is only valid in the individual house, and this is not the end of the task. The category province remains an organic part of the Empire, that is to say of the higher order. True identity can only be achieved by a fusion of the categories with one another: 'The clerks of the Emperor's house study the redaction of categories into identity: so we'.⁶³ In the person of Galahad, a

62. *Arthurian Torso*, 168.

63. 'The Coming of Galahad', in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 69-77, here 73.

shoot of the third heaven has taken root in Logres; the symbol of the pentagram is tailored to fit him. It stands for the fusion of categories to a single identity and therewith transcends Taliessin's comprehension: 'What then . . . when the cut hazel has nothing to measure?'⁶⁴ The poet is forced to retreat, modest and humble. A new measure must be applied in the future:

. . . The eyes of my lord are the measure of intensity
and his arms of action; the hazel, Blanchefleur, he.⁶⁵

The Coming of Galahad concludes with Taliessin's vision of the ascent of the soul to the innermost heaven. Similar to Dante who had seen the planetary spheres in analogy to the different grades of holiness, Williams draws an analogy between the planets and their zones and the spiritual and mental development of man. Four zones divide the Empire from the throne of God and are to be passed through in the development of man and therewith of the City. In the face of a geocentric structure of the universe in *The Calling of Taliessin*, this centripetal movement appears contradictory and illogical.⁶⁶ But we must recall that according to Dante and to other medieval authorities spatial order mirrors the spiritual one. According to this view, the earth is located at the outermost fringe of the universe, that is to say before the walls of the City. Man was once the centre of the universe and now stands on its fringes.

The last part of the poem is difficult because the basic concept of the interior part of the courtyard of the palace is meant to stand as a kind of base for the planetarium. Williams says that four zones separate the Empire from the throne of God, and these zones are 'slanted to each cleft in each wall, with planets planted.' In this we hear an echo of the beginning of the poem: 'till he came by a door cleft in a smooth wall'. Thus Taliessin stands in the interior courtyard and views the spheres of the planets slanted towards the sight-holes in the wall, on the one side Mercury and Venus, on the other Jupiter and Saturn. He himself stands upon the Earth,

64. 'The Coming of Galahad', 72.

65. 'The Coming of Galahad', 73.

66. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 58.

'seen and strewn by the four'. To the careful reader, this passage reveals a correction of the medieval planetarium: Mercury and Venus circulate beneath the Earth around the sun, Jupiter and Saturn are planets with larger orbits. It is possible that Williams superimposed this modern view of the planetary system intentionally upon the original model, not to mystify the reader, but in order to demonstrate that the poetic mode is not tied to the 'Discarded Image', but is an appropriate and valid vehicle of the twentieth century and its view of the world. The basis of the poem at any rate is a geo-centrality of the universe. Earth is symbolised by the courtyard, on which the spheres of the individual planets are slanted like the props of a baldachin which rise up to the firmament and direct the meditative gaze of the *Vates* towards the throne of God.

The first step of the ascent is marked by the planet Mercury; it corresponds to the God of Conflict and Change, the as yet undecided state of rivalry among the houses. Venus represents the sphere of the focussing of human thought on a certain goal ('Venus preference'), an interior turning towards a loved one. Jupiter with its moons indicates irony and irony vanquished, which no longer bruises itself on the unavoidable, but accepts the wonderful absurdity of it all and laughs about it. And finally Saturn is the star of loneliness and meditation,⁶⁷ of the promise and image of Golden Age.⁶⁸ Logres, as Taliessin sees, has only reached the sphere of Jupiter. Here Galahad and Lancelot still live with one another, unrest of the heart and earthliness. Future developments are already anticipated: the huge powers of Broceliande have created Galahad but have exhausted themselves in the act. Logres bows down to Britannia; Carbonek and Camelot are by no means one, but are farther apart than ever before.

67. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, Paradiso, Canto XXI, 532-537.

68. Cf. Ferdinand Piper, *Mythologie der christlichen Kunst von der ältesten Zeit bis in's [sic] sechzehnte Jahrhundert* (Weimar, 1851), 215.

The poem *The Meditation of Mordred* is far clearer and simpler than the preceding ones. We hear no more of mystic Sarras and of the perfection of man on earth. The subject is now Logres, which is to develop into historical Britain. The aureole of the transcendental gradually recedes, giving way to the naked reality of things which are only reflections and which have lost their tie with the third heaven. Mordred himself is a totally down-to-earth type, one no longer ambivalent but completely autonomous, evil, perverted, and cynical. He is the incestuous son of Arthur, and thus the symbol of destructive egotism which Williams calls Gomorrha.

The reader is not led to judge Mordred on the basis of his deeds, but rather on his state of inner consciousness. The entire poem consists of an interior monologue which makes a brutally open description of the happenings in Logres possible. Mordred is not subject to any restrictions or inhibitions. His thoughts are disjointed and only connected by association. The single law of his psychology is a perverted yearning for recognition, aimed at a paradise in the style of the cruel dictators of the Antipodes.

The names and events are taken from Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which is to be seen as a background for the entire cycle. The date of the events can be fixed through the name of Pope Deodatus, who succeeded Boniface IV and was head of the church from 615 to 618. The introduction of this historical personage into the world of cryptic mythology can be seen as a confirmation of the tendency towards reality. The clouds of phantasy begin to recede, the transcendently beautiful figures of a long-awaited, imaginatively anticipated *parousia* disappear like swirls of mist before the noon-day sun. The world shows her true face.

The first lines of the poem contain a play on the various meanings of *wood* and *elm*. Usually, the elm is connected with pleasurable associations in poetry. It represents the human qualities of beauty, charm, graciousness and stateliness.⁶⁹ But Arthur has all the elms of his country torne down to make poles and oars, to carry his knights across the

69. Gertraud Jobes, ed., *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York, 1961).

Channel: 'The king has poled his horsemen across the Channel.' And once they are on the other side of the Channel, the poles of elm become human-like beings which stand motionless about Lancelot's castle.

In Mordred's eyes, the reason for this campaign is miserable, unworthy and banal. In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the underlying law of war was determined by the tragic inevitability of a world approaching its downfall, one which sucked Arthur into its vortex. According to Williams' Mordred, the only reason for the siege is: 'lest . . . the king should be cheated with another by his wife the queen.' Disinterested and completely detached, the traitor sees, in his imagination, the besieging troops from the roof of the palace. In his vivid fantasy the knights of King Arthur are transformed into spears of elmwood. But these elms break into bud, 'the elms bud in steel points', and these are directed against the walls of Benwick, behind which Lancelot rests secure and safe from danger.

From Arthur and Lancelot, the traitor's thoughts turn to Guinevere who has evidently hidden herself in the Convent of Almesbury out of fear and disdain for Mordred. According to a number of other versions, Guinevere plots with Mordred, thereby sinking to his moral level. Williams sees her in the image of 'stone fitting itself to its echo',⁷⁰ entangled in her own circle of life like sound and echo, infertile and pale, basically unworthy of her great lover Lancelot. In Mordred's eyes, Guinevere is a whore, and Arthur correspondingly an old cuckold. In this respect his cynicism is unparalleled: 'It is laidly alike to be a wittol and a whore.'⁷¹

Mordred's opinion of the inhabitants of London is no higher. In his eyes they are capable of stoning Guinevere in a sudden attack of fanatic righteousness, should he decide to drag the Queen out of the Convent by force and lead her

70. 'The Coming of Galahad', 74.

71. 'The Meditation of Mordred', in *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 47-9, here 47. The word 'laidly' presents difficulties in the interpretation. In my opinion, it is to be seen both as a pun on 'ladylike' and on the verb 'to lay', to which it could be considered an adverb; the passage clearly contains a sexual innuendo, and the Scottish 'laidly' in the sense of 'repulsive', 'hideous', 'offensive', appears a less likely probability. 'Wittol' is an old word for cuckold.

through the streets of London. This is evidently a thought with which Mordred has played for a long time – a result of his disappointment in Guinevere. All Londoners are self-righteous and have thus forfeited the grace of coinherence. Catholic morals and catholic mockery are counterpoised. Catholic, in the first word-pair, is capitalized and means Catholic in the ecclesiastical sense. In contrast, the ‘catholic’ paired with mockery is not capitalized and carries the meaning ‘universal’, widespread. But this play on the meaning of words is more than a simple pun, for the term catholic mockery designates at the same time the degeneration of catholic morality to a self-righteous, loveless condemnation of the sins of one’s neighbour: exchange and *largesse* are dead in the land, London has regressed from the City to the wood: ‘London is become a forest . . . bare grinning leaves, a whole wood of moral wantons, whose spines are tree-stretched up towards me, their hope.’ For Williams the forest represents the primeval and the wild, as yet unformed chaos, lacking definition and horizon.⁷² The principle of order has been lost. Camelot is no longer the head of the realm which is to see the birth of the new Adam. It has made itself independent, in rebellion against its Byzantine centre.

The unity symbolized by an organic body has been destroyed. The old tribute is abolished. The gold coins with the sign of the dragon will remain in the country: London has declared its autonomy. But the symbol of the dragon is not only found on the coins; it is also Mordred’s coat of arms, so that he is entitled to say: ‘Kin to kin presently, children; I too am a dragon.’ Like many other symbols in the poem, the dragon which was once the heraldic cognizance of Uther and Arthur has taken on an ominous connotation and appearance, and thus carries a different meaning to that in previous treatments of the Arthurian material.⁷³ With right, Taliessin says in a previous conversation with Kay:

Sir, if you made verse you would doubt symbols.

I am afraid of the little loosed dragons.

When the means are autonomous, they are deadly; . . .⁷⁴

72. *The Image of the City*, ‘Introduction’, lii.

73. Cf. the author’s treatment in ‘Die Wappen König Arthurs in der Hs. Lansdowne 882’, *Anglia*, 79 (1961), 253-266, here 253.

74. ‘Bors to Elayne: On the King’s Coins’, in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 42-5, here 44.

The loosed dragons which are directed against their own country remind the reader of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*⁷⁵ in which Arthur dreams of a dragon which will one day destroy his land. The philosophers and interpreters of the dream assure the king that he himself is symbolized by the dragon. His own *hubris* will cause the downfall of his realm. But also his son Mordred (Welsh *mordraig* = sea dragon) plays an important part in this. In Charles Williams, this same Mordred is practically the incarnation of the sinful egotism of his father. Thus we should not reproach the son when he says: 'Like son, like father'.

Mordred regards the holy vessel of the Grail in a very similar way. Even here, we see an all-pervading degeneration of values. In *The Calling of Taliessin* Ceridwen's cauldron was a typological anticipation of the Grail. But Mordred does not believe in such a Grail. He recalls that his father often pondered the importance of this holy vessel for his salvation. But he will and can do without such a fairy mechanism. If there were something like the Grail, he says, he would have it carried off by a dozen knights. His cooks would be pleased to possess such a magic cauldron.

The Grail seen as a cooking pot in Mordred's kitchen — this represents the absolute depth of degradation of the mystical and the sacred. All associations with the Eucharist and the creation of a new Adam have been abandoned. For Mordred the Grail is no more than a magic device to be handled with care, because a fairy might be summoned to the room at a rubbing as with Aladdin's lamp.

The idea of Aladdin's lamp leads Mordred's thoughts to exotic climes. All the themes and provinces of the Byzantine Empire have been destroyed, for they have lost their coherence. And now Mordred dreams of a kingdom of his own, a kind of Anti-Empire, 'beyond miles of bamboo' (12.1), one which has a number of similarities to P'o-l'u, which lies even beyond this terrible country: 'beyond P'o-l'u / he told of another Empire . . . where a small Emperor sits' (13.2-4). This emperor becomes a model for Mordred, who is evidently impressed most by his relationship to his small, slant-eyed wives: once or twice every seven years he has one brought into his bed or thrown into a swamp in a bamboo cage. This

75. Ed. Krishna (New York, 1976).

is the type of tyrant Mordred wants to be. He intends to establish an Empire in London, as soon as his father is fallen in the wood of elms. His paradise is to be like that of the tyrant of the Antipodes, and he wants to live there by himself and to be admired by all other men.

Mordred is not Satan; he is probably not even the incarnation of evil. Williams sees him as a man of flesh and blood, the product of criminal incest and the expression of Arthur's egotistic love of self: 'her arm was stretched to embrace his own stretched arm; she had his own face'.⁷⁶ Thus Mordred is exclusively self-directed in all his thoughts and intentions. He rejects the attempt at integration into a larger society and draws his standard of value for his action solely from his own impulses. '... Mordred is entire egotism, Arthur's self-attention carried to the final degree. This is why it is he who wrecks the Table.'⁷⁷

The difference between father and son rests in the fact that Arthur desires the good but is too weak to achieve it, in spite of others and himself. Mordred, however, embodies the diabolic aspect of the dragon. Of course, he is also an exemplary embodiment of original sin and man's need for salvation. But in addition he is an individual, and as such he has freedom of choice and can decide for himself. There were a number of other possibilities open to him — Charles Williams has shown them clearly enough. But Mordred's decision is a selfish one — against *largesse*, exchange and coherence. And thus it appears to me that we have more than just the archetype of evil in a mythological poem and more than a fascinating, clearly visualized figure in a lyric cycle. Here we have the prototype of modern man, who is incapable of loving his neighbour unless he needs him for his own purposes, who takes the salvation of the soul into his own hands and prunes morality as the situation demands, who holds the spiritual world for no more than fairy magic and superstition.

We recognise him: he is the autonomous man cut off from all attachments; he is the succubus in love with his own image, the narcissist who transforms coinherence into in-

76. 'Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney', in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 38-41, here 40.

77. *The Image of the City*, 176.

coherence and will nevertheless be respected, admired and honoured. Not until the concluding poem, *The Prayers of the Pope*, does it become clear where these developments lead.

VI

The Prayers of the Pope represents a turbulent, eventful crescendo of historical events and developments which lead to the final catastrophe – the downfall of the realm and the dissolution of Taliessin's fellowship. The event is not described in an epic way by the poet, but rather as the reflection of the young Pope Deodatus, as he prepares himself for the Eucharistic service of Christmas by a meditation in the Lateran Church: 'slender, white-haired, incandescent, seeming in his trance of prayer a third twin of Merlin and Brisen, . . .'⁷⁸ The white hair of the young man is a sign of premature aging under the burden of an office of great responsibility. We know that the historical Deodatus II once invested his entire strength in the attempt to bring Rome and Byzantium together. But for Williams the symbol of white hair means a great deal more: 'And do you think the Pope, who is young, with white hair, brilliant, the image of Merlin (only M[erlin] has black hair), might be Merlin + [sic] loss? If you get me. The Pope (let us say) is time losing its beauties (by deprivation or will, not by mere passing change) but affirmatively. O I write it badly . . .'⁷⁹

As welcome and interesting this foot-note of Williams may be, it does not seem to me as necessary for the understanding of the poem as Anne Ridler maintains: 'I could not see how any reader would be able to guess the significance of the Pope's white hair or understand why he is said to be *rich* in loss without such a hint.'⁸⁰ My own impression is that the poet is meditating upon his own poem, and that the results of his reflection are just as unique and unusual as his use of metaphor and symbolism in the poem. The only prerequisite

78. 'Prayers of the Pope', in *The Regions of the Summer Stars*, 50-61, here 50.

79. *The Image of the City*, Introduction, lxv.

80. *The Image of the City*, Introduction, lxv.

actually necessary for an understanding of the poem is the basic structure of the Byzantine Empire, and even that could be interpolated from a close reading of the poems themselves.

The individual images, concepts and thoughts behind the poem gain a general imaginative relevance through a continual transposition of levels and perspectives. They are not restricted to a single case or historical fact, as for instance the invasion of the Huns, the break between Papacy and Patriarchy (1054), the World War; rather they represent a kind of law of history in a metaphorical manner. Every Logres has become Britannia in the course of its historical development. Grail, Christ and the Eucharist are manifested on earth, but men do not live on earth untouched by history. The call goes unheeded, the image recedes and is lost for ever. There is no consolation in the fact that after all it is only an image that has been lost, that is to say something transitory and unstable. Williams objects:

But each loss of each image
is single and full, a thing unrequited,
plighted in presence to no recompense, . . .⁸¹

To live in and with images belongs to the nature of man, who is met half-way by God in that he relinquished his own essence and became man.⁸² Therewith God reaffirms the justification of the images through and in himself. Thus the Pope prays: ' . . . confirm / nor thee in thine images only but thine images in thee.'⁸³

With particular clarity and audibility, connotations of the last World War are felt. Williams, with his poet's sensibility, experienced and suffered its ordeal to a degree hardly rivalled by another Englishman. In London and Paris, the poet says, the peace talks were silenced, the cities of Logres 'felt the sliding planes of the raiders' sails'. Very gradually this vision of the Second World War is replaced by images of the

81. 'Prayers of the Pope', 50.

82. On the Neoplatonic character of Williams' imagery, and his theological basis in Thomas Aquinas' *analogia entis*, see Sape Anne Zylstra, *Charles Williams: An Analysis and Appraisal of his Major Work* (Diss., Emory University, 1969).

83. 'Prayers of the Pope', 55.

invasion of the Huns, who cross the Weichsel, Danube and Rhine and flood Europe: 'the land shook / as band after band stamped into darkness cities / whose burning had lamped their path.' Finally these cruel images of war are matched by implications of the Japanese invasion of India, a case of uncanny foresight, since this part of the poem was first written before the war.⁸⁴ At the same time, however, it is also strongly reminiscent of the octopus-like menace described in Wells' *War of the Worlds*. But perhaps one should not interpret the image of the octopi who creep from coast to coast with their giant tentacles, 'feeling along Burma, nearing India' too concretely. The basic conception is the extension of the headless Emperor's power and that of his realm (P'o-l'u) through the destruction of the Empire.

Hardly a word is wasted at this point on the realm of Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. We learn of the complex events which lead to downfall, not through the poet's direct account, but through rumours which reach the ears of the Pope via various indirect channels. At first we hear only of Arthur's war against Lancelot, of Gawain's irreconcilability and his preference for private vengeance, but most of all of Mordred, the incarnation of treachery and discord. The letters of the Pope have achieved nothing at all, the disease of chaos has spread in the whole country, and mobs storm through the streets of London — a symbol for interior rebellion, the dissolution of the City. Mordred takes possession of the Round Table and fills it with pagan chieftains. With the demon of his own desire, he fashions a world of false images without any mutual relationship or coherence: 'Logres was void of Grail and Crown.'

From Taliessin's mouth we hear the account of the end of Arthur's realm. In terse words the poet and seer informs his followers that Arthur and all the lords of the Round Table are dead: 'the Table may end to-morrow'. This example makes it particularly evident that Williams' intention differs from that of Malory. The core of the matter is no longer the ascent and the downfall of the realm of Arthur, but the destruction of the Empire, that is of order and unity, of organic coherence and *largesse* among men, of the ceasing of exchange, and the loss of coinherence.

84. *Arthurian Torso*, 185.

And thus it is the downfall of the kingdom that forms the subject of the poem. The inhabitants live in a constant state of fear of others; they become isolated and strive for complete autonomy and self-justification. They exist solely in the aura of their own glory, and as a necessary consequence, view their fellow man as a natural enemy. This is true of groups, as well as of individuals. Those who reject the society of the city and would place the nation, race, or people in its stead require a counterbalance against which they can clarify and consolidate their own goals. Nationalism, racism and class conflict all entail enmity against someone — foreigners, Jews or capitalists:⁸⁵ ‘forsaking the Emperor, they chose among themselves, / here one and there one, foes / among themselves, puppets of reputation, / void of communicated generation of glory.’⁸⁶

Even the form in which the message of the poem is couched is indicative of the collapse of order and coherence. Interjected parenthetical remarks break sentence periods into small groups, independent both in rhythm and content and loosely joined by apposition. The resultant impression is one of incoherence and dissolution. The identity of the kingdom as an organic whole dissolves, the categories become autonomous, and there is no longer a Merlin to unite them in the pentagram. At the same time, the disintegration of the provinces also means the dissolution of the organic body — that is to say, death: ‘all gave their choice to the primal curse and the grave, . . .’⁸⁷ Each is prepared to consign his neighbour to eternal damnation; each becomes a Mordred, or a Khan of the Huns, or the Calif of Asia in his heart. The city gives way to autonomous sects, and the poets are replaced by men who either cannot speak at all, or are only capable of spouting empty rhetoric. Magicians conjure up the ghosts of the past, which rise from Hell and from their graves to form a macabre procession — an army of mindless bodies in mechanical motion at the fore of the pagan hordes. This part of the poem, with its terrible visions, reveals the depth of

85. Cf. *Arthurian Torso*, 182.

86. ‘The Prayers of the Pope’, 51.

87. ‘The Prayers of the Pope’, 51.

Williams' 'knowledge of darkness',⁸⁸ his painful, nightmare-like certainty of the true existence of evil as the result of original sin.

But for Williams there are no clear-cut lines between Good and Evil. He refuses to join in the biased, one-sided condemnation of the enemy and the self-justification of 'Our Side' and its motivation. 'Where is the difference between us?' asks the Pope. 'Causes and catapults they have and we have.' He refuses to sit in judgment, 'alive are they in us and we in them. / We know how we have sinned; we know not how they.'⁸⁹ The only difference lies in the fact that the Pope's side acknowledges *coinherence*, whereas the other side denies it. Herein lies the true task of the Church in Williams' eyes: to realize its Catholicity and its universality. In all things Williams preferred the whole to the parts; he rejected the Roman Catholic Church for denying true Catholicism when it proclaimed itself the sole guardian of Christian truth, thereby creating a schism with the universal church. But this did not mean that he rejected Rome or the Papacy. For Williams, Byzantium, Canterbury, Jerusalem and Rome represented provinces of a single Christian church.⁹⁰

Williams has Pope Deodatus sense the schism in his own heart, the collapse of order and the return of chaos. All the prayers of the Pope close with the same repeated lines, which echo like a refrain: 'Send not, send not the rich empty away!' Pope Deodatus feels the disintegration and spiritual death in his soul — the downward progress of the Kingdom has reached its lowest point. Charles Williams leaves us in a world similar to that of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, where the Fisher-King's question is answered by a nursery rhyme: 'London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down . . .' There is no reprieve from the curse of sterility.

But Williams also leaves us a small gleam of hope: Taliessin's household will survive. Although the poet relinquishes his task to God and formally dissolves the existing bonds, the ideal society will live on, and all will belong who

88. Cf. the chapter of the same name in A. M. Hadfield, *An Introduction to Charles Williams* (London, 1959).

89. 'The Prayers of the Pope', 53.

90. Cf. Hadfield, *Introduction*, 131.

are united by love. Secretly, unbeknownst to each other, and completely on their own, men will continue to love their neighbour and to serve their fellow man. They will continue to do good, for good in this world can no more be stamped out than can evil.

And Taliessin gives the reader a further hope: Broceliande will live forever. Even though the tentacles of P'o-l'u approach the coast of India, they encounter resistance: they are held fast and prevented from further progress by something similar to them and yet completely alien — the roots of the magic forest of Broceliande. They twine themselves firmly about the powerful arms of P'o-l'u; the powers of death and the Underworld are held in check by the Mother of Making.

Thus hope for mankind lies in the fact that evil can never gain total ascendancy. Broceliande and P'o-l'u merge, and there is continual encounter between the outgrowth of Evil and the seedling-like growth of Good, which may at times be forced to retreat, but can never be fully overcome. This is the hope which lives on in mankind and inspires the lords and consuls whose hearts preserve the dream of the Empire and who continue to hope for the advent of Sarras in spite of all darkness and despair.

VII

The question which must be raised in conclusion is whether or not Charles Williams can be regarded as a modern poet. Where are we to place him, and what position does his thought represent? The *avant garde* of today would hardly accept him as one of their own, for their categorical demand on 'modern poetry' is that it translate the individual view of life from the plane of purely personal emotion, experience, and knowledge to the open and unlimited reaches of potential experience. Modern lyric poetry is expected to be negative, rejecting idealistic concepts of life in favour of the open-endedness of human existence. According to this school, modern lyric poetry tends to veil its subject in enigma and intentional ambiguity, rather than to reveal it in the light of the easily understood. Thus images are reduced to abstract stimuli divorced from reality, meant to cancel out still other

images in the dynamics of dialectical motion. Charles Williams can hardly be called 'modern' in this sense. On the other hand, a number of his qualities have gained the approval of the strictly *avant garde* – his effective use of hyperbole and over-kill, of enigma and evocation, of the cipher and the shock of 'revelation'.⁹¹

The fact that Charles Williams edited the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins tells us a great deal.⁹² The poems were first published by Bridges in 1918, and they left a deep impression on Williams as a young man: 'The poems were a literary sensation. All the papers reviewed them; everyone who was anyone talked of them.'⁹³ And yet it was not until 1929 (eleven years after the first appearance of the poems in an edition of 750 copies) that a new edition was called for. Bridges was occupied with work on his *Testament of Beauty* and thus entrusted Williams with the task. After extensive research, the young poet wrote an introduction to the second edition and added further unpublished poems of Hopkins' in an appendix.

Like many of his contemporaries, Williams read the poems of this unvictorian Victorian with admiration, but without losing his critical detachment: 'We could even smile while we admired.'⁹⁴ Williams must suddenly have realized that certain of the techniques used by Hopkins were better suited for his own needs than the complex verse forms and somewhat colourless blank verse used until that time.⁹⁵

Above all, Hopkins' device of 'sprung rhythm' was to

91. Gustav René Hocke, *Manierismus in der Literatur* (Hamburg, 1961), 301; on the following see: *Poems of G. M. Hopkins*, ed. A. W. Gardner (London, 3rd edn. 1949); D. Morris, *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins and T. S. Eliot in the Light of the Donne Tradition* (Diss., Bern, 1951); R. Haas, *Wege zur englischen Lyrik* (Heidelberg, 1962), 135-8.
92. Concerning the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins on Williams' 'new style', see Vernon-Leland Ingraham, *The Verse Drama of Charles Williams* (Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1965).
93. 'Gerard Hopkins. Time and Tide review of Dr Gardner's study, 1945', in *The Image of the City*, 48-51, here 49.
94. 'Gerard Hopkins. Time and Tide review . . .', 48.
95. On the following, cf. *The Image of the City*, 'Introduction', lxi ff.

prove fruitful and inspiring for the *Arthuriad*. Williams has made various comments on the fact that this metre originally derived from Germanic alliterative poetry, rather than being invented by Hopkins. Even if this view were justified, Hopkins must be given credit for having re-discovered the technique of stressed alliterative verse and rendering it a suitable medium for expressing the essence of things in a form (*in-shape*) which appealed to the senses. Williams adopted 'sprung rhythm' from Hopkins, and yet he was not content to merely imitate his predecessor: '... let us do everything but be Influenced'.⁹⁶ *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* offer ample evidence of the original style in which Williams applied the new technique, dividing whole-lines into small closed rhythmical units connected with one another by rhyme, alliteration, or assonance, by *cynghanedds*, or by other intricate figures of sound.⁹⁷

Williams' tendency to use colloquial figures of speech is also traceable to Hopkins' influence.⁹⁸ The frequent use of ellipse and the extensive use of free word order tend to obscure easy comprehension of individual passages, and may even convey an initial impression of enigmatic crypticism. Only a close study of such passages can reveal the wealth of ideas and the musicality of language which lie behind the poetic art of Charles Williams: '... vainly Taliessin's first song / through river-mated rhythms while he smiled at the sky / pulsed; ...'⁹⁹ Seen rhetorically, the above passage

96. *The Image of the City*, lxiii.

97. '... this, below them both, the shape of the blatant beast matched; ...' ('Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney', in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 38-41, here 40).

'... his voice / rove and drove words to the troth of ambiguous verse.' ('The Sister of Percivale', in *Taliessin Through Logres*, 51-3, here 51).

'... to a plan / blown as that bone-patterned, bound each to a point. ... its luck struck as her shoulders took the weight of the water.' ('The Sister of Percivale', 52).

98. Although Anne Ridler claims to have influenced the poet in this direction again and again.

99. 'The Calling of Taliessin', *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 5-20, here 5.

uses *hyperbaton*, that is to say a phrase alien to the original construction has been embedded in the matrix sentence, as a kind of parenthesis. But the figure is more than a mere mannerist device – it begins to echo of its own accord. The individual rhythmical units follow each other like the waves on a river, the accoustic form imitating the object represented. They cease ('song', 'rhythms') and begin anew ('through', 'while') and create the sense impression of pulsation, of recurrent natural movement. The reader is given the feeling that the song of Taliessin pulses like the waves of the river; it adjusts to the play of ripples on the water, gaining life and rising up from that same element, just as did Taliessin himself. Thus *hyperbaton* is revealed as a functional stylistic device used to underline the meaning of the poem.

Another characteristic of Williams' writing is his use of assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme. There are good reasons to doubt that such features could be explained without Hopkins, even though their use is totally Williams' own. This type of poetic diction does not appeal to everyone, many may even find it pretentious or artificial, and feel that the form distracts from the content:

. . . my sister shall stand in his house
to tend his daughter in the day of her destiny, but I
make haste to Logres, to call and install King Arthur;¹⁰⁰

Alliteration, internal rhyme, and assonance are all combined in this example. The use of internal rhyme corresponds to Williams' theoretical scheme of providing the non-strophic poems with two rhymes per line-pair, 'but these may be arranged as one wishes, . . .'¹⁰¹ To my taste, Williams has overworked the device, above all in *Taliessin Through Logres*. Evidently the poet himself tired of such blatant pyrotechnics, for in 1941 he wrote:

I do not find I altogether wish to continue using them,
the verse of future poems may, I hope, be more sparing,
...¹⁰²

100. 'The Calling of Taliessin', 12.

101. *The Image of the City*, 183.

102. *The Image of the City*, 183.

The frequent use of compounded epithets is also reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, e.g. 'light-sprinkling', 'tiny-footed', 'bone-patterned'. There is a noticeable tendency towards parallelism and chiasm, paraphrase, leporism and oxymora, characteristics that point either directly to Hopkins, or, at the least, to a foible for 'Parnassian' language, as Hopkins liked to term his mannerisms. Anne Ridler is probably right in saying that 'Hopkins gave him a key to unlock resources which he already had'.¹⁰³ In any case, the new style introduced by Williams represented a valuable contribution to poetry. Hopkins gave Williams as an individual that which he had given the epoch as a whole: a healthy corrective against the over-moderation and self-complacency of Victorian poetic diction.

As significant as the use and development of such stylistic devices may be, it is Williams' unusual and unmistakable employment of metaphor that most reveals his personal signature. For Williams, metaphor was not merely one technique among others; it was the very soul of poetry, perhaps even its main determining characteristic. The poet would have concurred with every detail of what C. Day Lewis said on poetic imagery in the *Clark Lectures* (Cambridge, 1946):

... every image re-creates not merely an object but an object in the context of an experience, and thus an object as part of a relationship. Relationship being in the very nature of metaphor, if we believe that the universe is a body wherein all men and all things are 'members one of another', we must allow metaphor to give a 'partial intuition of the whole world'. Every poetic image, I would affirm, by clearly revealing a tiny portion of this body, suggests its infinite extension.¹⁰⁴

Lewis refers not only to the relationship between *tenor* and *vehicle*, that is the technique of poetic imagery, but also to the object of poetry, the world of the poet and seer (*vates*).

103. *The Image of the City*, 'Introduction', lxii.

104. C. Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image*. The Clark Lectures Given at Cambridge, 1946 (London, 1947), cited in Clifford Dyment, *C. Day Lewis, Writers and their Work*, No.62 (London, 1969), 30.

The passage quoted calls up the figure of Taliessin to our mind's eye, and we see the organic body of the universe, the image which predominated in the thought and writing of Charles Williams. The image of the organic body provided him with a key to the nature of creation, and, at the same time, to the first and foremost task of poetry – to reveal the order of what appears to be chaos.

Thus the individual metaphor is to be interpreted as a cipher for a larger whole. It is meant to serve as a key to the illumination of truths beyond itself and beyond the natural, material world – to render them perceptible to the senses and comprehensible to the mind. Often these two steps follow so closely one upon the other that the actual metaphorical element gives way to the Platonic idea behind it; the pleasure in the musicality of the metaphor and its sensual appeal are transformed into a spiritual *analogia entis*.

In this characteristic focus on a transcendental *corpus* and on a supra-natural organic body lies the uniqueness of Williams' art of the metaphor. As a poet, he is neither a *homo faber* nor an *artifex* of daedalic art; instead, he is a seer and a prophet of hidden truths – a Platonic poet whose need of material for images which appeal to the senses exceeds the bounds of this earth.

The present-day reader will find Williams 'modern' where features of his style lead to esoteric ambiguity and to indirection in respect to the poetic meaning: the manneristic interlacing of convoluted thought patterns, the juxtaposition of disparate metaphors. But in contrast to other modern poets, the enigmatization of the message is oriented towards the topic, and upon closer study cryptic obscurity gives way to the sharp contours of objective clarity.

Nevertheless Williams is by no means a traditionalist, selecting earlier literary forms and materials for their usefulness, only to render them into the idiom of the contemporary. For this poet, the world of the Grail is not merely part of an ancient and venerable myth; it is an intellectual challenge, and a catalyst for concentration and reflection. Thus the Grail remains a symbol of the transcendental mystery, but the message Williams imbues it with has nothing to do with the a-logical fascination of modern lyric poetry. Even those who do not respond to the message, who find it

old-fashioned,¹⁰⁵ unrealistic, and without appeal, cannot but admit that the poetic world created by Williams is coherent, comprehensible, and consistent.

It has often been noted that appreciation of the Arthurian works of Charles Williams depends on his world view and on his notion of man and his place in the universe. It is, of course, not very difficult to imagine where the negative critics of Williams are to be found. The anticipation of an atheistic, secular rejection of such a Christian work by sceptics sometimes leads to an apologetic, almost polemic stance on the part of sympathetic critics – one that Williams hardly requires.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, the world of Williams is modern, vibrant with dynamic motion and spiritual anxiety. It is a portrait of mankind threatened by the forces and powers of destruction. In spite of the poet's adherence to Malory and his other medieval sources, the material has become a vehicle for a message of the twentieth century. This may well be due to the fact that Charles Williams has gained a deeper understanding of

105. The fact that Williams was accused of obscenity is a curiosity to be noted in passing. R. T. Davies voiced his reaction to reading Williams as follows: '... one would, if one had it at all, prefer one's pornography honest' ('Charles Williams and Romantic Experience', *Études Anglaises*, 8 (1955), 289-298, here 298). Such an accusation can hardly be taken seriously. At the same time, however, I would concede that the physiological symbolism in the *Arthuriad* does go a bit far. For instance, the idea that women offer a blood-sacrifice during menstruation and thus have a share in the sacrifice of Christ is, admittedly, ingenious, but hardly in good taste (cf. 'Prelude', *The Region of the Summer Stars*, 4). It appears to me that in this respect Williams belongs in the tradition of D. H. Lawrence and certain other English writers during the beginning of our century, who were resolved to combat the stigma of *prudery* through their explicit frankness.
106. For a particularly winning partisan defence of Williams, see Mary McDermott Shideler, *Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1966). For a more detached view of Williams' relevance, see Barbara McMichael, 'Hell is Oneself: An Examination of the Concept of Damnation in Charles Williams' *Descent into Hell*', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 1 (Oct. 1968), 59-71. A particularly well-balanced and comprehensive account of Williams' philosophy and theology is to be found in Georgette Versinger's 'Charles Williams', *Études Anglaises*, 18 (July 1965), 285-295.

Arthurian mythology than any of his predecessors, and because he has given poetic voice to truths of which they were only subconsciously aware.

Williams, as a poet, has yet to come into his own. Some of the best minds of this century – among them fellow writers and friends, such as T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, Anne Ridler and John Heath-Stubbs – have recognized the profundity and the enormous scope of his vision. The scholar and friend who was closest to him in spirit – C. S. Lewis – has told us how to gauge the poetic achievement of *Taliessin Through Logres* and *Region of the Summer Stars*:

They seem to me, both for the soaring and gorgeous novelty of their technique and for their profound wisdom, to be among the two or three most valuable books of verse produced in the century.¹⁰⁷

107. C. S. Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London, 1947), Preface, vi-vii.

William V. Spanos comes to the conclusion that Charles Williams deserves a better fate than to be dismissed as quaint or eccentric, see 'Charles Williams' *Seed of Adam*: The Existential Flight from Death', *Christian Scholar*, 49 (1966), 105-118.