

NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN THE
ARTHURIAN CYCLE OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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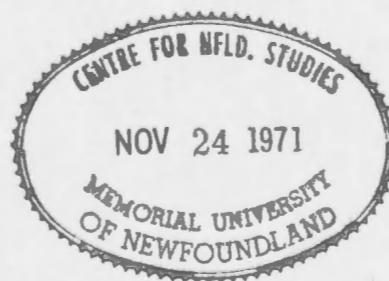
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NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN THE
ARTHURIAN CYCLE OF CHARLES WILLIAMS

by

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requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
Department of English Language and Literature,
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considered in relation to the total design of the cycle.

ABSTRACT

The study then turns to the thematic core of the work, Williams' views on and treatment of love, both temporal. By considering the narrative and thematic structure of Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars this thesis attempts to supplement the existing body of criticism of Charles Williams' work, criticism which has primarily treated the Arthurian cycle as part of a larger framework either of biography or of socio-literary developments typical of the twentieth century. After an introductory discussion of Williams' general literary and philosophical position in the field of twentieth-century letters, the study considers Williams' narrative treatment of the Arthurian material in the light of his criticisms of other literary versions of the Arthurian legend, his prose observations on the significant developments in the history of the Matter of Britain, and his own declared intention to make the Grail the centre of his myth.

Considerable discussion is devoted to Williams' creation of a cosmic setting for his recasting of the Arthurian legend, and to the themes embodied therein, particularly those which affect the symbolic significance of his organic geography as seen in his picture of the Byzantine Empire. The immediate, internal setting of Logres, and the remaining constituent elements which complete the cosmos of Williams' Arthuriad are also

considered in relation to the total design of the cycle.

The study then turns to the thematic core of the work, Williams' views on and treatment of love, both temporal and divine, individual and corporal, as manifested in his concept of the City, and in his creation of a variety of personal loves. Finally, the study considers the implications for the entire cycle of the narrative and thematic conclusions which Williams reaches and offers a tentative interpretation of the poet's view of the Achievement of the Grail as it affects his Arthuriad.

Chapter VI. Conclusion

List of Works Consulted

This thesis has been examined and approved by:

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TEXTS AND ABBREVIATIONS

The two volumes which comprise the Arthurian cycle are Taliessin through Logres, first published by the Oxford University Press in 1938, and The Region of the Summer Stars, first published by Editions Poetry (London) in 1944. The Region of the Summer Stars was reissued by the Oxford University Press in 1950, the two books being subsequently published together as one volume by the same publisher. The editions cited in the present thesis are the separate volumes which were reprinted lithographically for the Oxford University Press in 1969.

Throughout the study, shortened forms of the titles of each of the volumes are employed: Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, when indicated in parenthesis, are identified by the initials TTL., and RSS., respectively.

INTRODUCTION

From the double stance of critic and poet Charles Williams observed that

... poetry is a thing sui generis. It explains itself by existing.¹

... the chief impulse of a poet is, not to communicate a thing to others, but to shape a thing, to make an immortality for its own sake.²

The present study began with a wish to provide, by a treatment of The Region of the Summer Stars and Taliessin through Logres on Williams' own terms, a supplement to the critical approaches hitherto employed in consideration of his writing. The approaches of commentators in the past have been primarily distinguished by one of two general characteristics: one being an essentially biographical orientation of critical analysis and evaluation under the direct stimulus of personal friendship with the author; the other being devotion to consideration of Williams' work as part of the much larger framework of socio-literary developments which characterize twentieth-century letters. Of the first type of criticism, the works of A.M. Hadfield, Anne Ridler, and C.S. Lewis provide the best examples. The studies of George

¹"Preface", The English Poetic Mind, p. vii.

²Ibid., p. 5.

Every, Charles Moorman, Kathleen Morgan, Marjorie Wright and Robert J. Reilly are representative of the range of the second type of criticism.

Not all the critical work on Williams is to be subsumed under these two categories, however. Linden Huddleston's study, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams: Their Development and Background", stands apart from the others as being essentially concerned with analysis and evaluation of Williams' *Arthuriad* as an autonomous work, and is accomplished largely without reference either to Williams' life or to the broader current literary trends. As the title implies, however, the study is devoted primarily to the task of tracing Williams' growing ability to realize poetically his major themes from the early volume of the Arthurian poems, Heroes and Kings, to the mature expression of Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, and as such scarcely exhausts the possibilities of further study of the last two volumes in their own right. A series of studies by Cornelius P. Crowley which began with "A Study of the Meaning and Symbolism of the Arthurian Poetry of Charles Williams" also belongs to that category of Williams criticism which attempts to examine the poetry qua poetry. Both theses are highly successful within their own self-imposed limits and provide a valuable basis for more extensive examination of a similar kind.

It will be apparent that the present thesis profits greatly from all the above-mentioned types of critical commentary on Williams' work: either implicitly, by assuming their presence as the necessary ground for the thesis as a whole, or explicitly, by using certain specific observations as pertinent to particular arguments and interpretations.

The particular approach utilized by the present study is essentially a simple one. In that it attempts to treat the mature Arthurian cycle as a single autonomous work, "an immortality for its own sake", it seemed sensible to begin with the broadest possible aesthetic assumptions. In this respect, Northrop Frye's suggestions about the analogous modes of statement exhibited generally by all the arts proved to be of value.

Some principle of recurrence seems to be fundamental to all works of art, and this recurrence is usually spoken of as rhythm when it moves along in time, and as pattern when it is spread out in space. ... The inference is that all arts possess both a temporal and a spatial aspect, whichever takes the lead when they are presented. ... Works of literature ... move in time like music and spread out in images like painting. ... We listen to the poem as it moves from beginning to end, but as soon as the whole of it is in our minds at once we "see" what it means. More exactly, this response is not simply to the whole of it, but to a whole in it: we have a vision of meaning ... whenever any simultaneous apprehension is possible.³

³Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 77-8.

While I am far from claiming that this thesis promotes by its analysis such a "vision of meaning", Frye's perception of the dual nature of poetry does provide, in the most general way, the basis for the method of structural analysis attempted in the ensuing chapters. In that the simultaneous apprehension of two elements may contribute to comprehension of the total meaning in a work (the perception of "a whole in" a poem), the method here employed is twofold: it involves a consideration of Williams' narrative treatment and its emergence as a structural principle in his *Arthuriad*, and the exposition of his major themes, symbols and supporting imagery, which condition both the narrative structure and the total form of the poem.

Although such an approach attempts to deal with the poems as an autonomous work, it is obvious that in the case of Williams' poetry this cannot be accomplished in the strictest isolation, and that some reference must inevitably be made to the author's general system of thought and to the particular works which best exemplify this, for the theological premises of his thought pervade his mature poems. When it has been necessary to delve into Williams' expository writing, however, it has always been done with keen awareness of the author's own pronouncements on the subject of the essential autonomy of the poetic statement.

Poetry, one way or another, is 'about' human experience; there is nothing else that it can be about. But to whatever particular human experience it alludes, it is not that experience. Love poetry is poetry, not love ... religious poetry is poetry, not religion. [*Italics mine*] ⁴

This thesis attempts consistently to focus upon the poetry rather than the religion, whatever the proportionate emphasis upon the latter, and to focus upon the poem as verbal structure, exhibiting the twin aspects of temporal or linear form, and spatial or vertical form in the guise of narrative and symbolic structures, respectively.

In considering Williams narrative treatment, I am indebted to C.S. Lewis' chronological arrangement of the contents of The Region of the Summer Stars and Taliessin through Logres,⁵ which conveniently provides the narrative framework that is latent in Williams' cycle of loosely linked poems. In adopting this chronology I am aware that the author's design of two separate volumes would seem to militate against any such intermingling of their contents. Nevertheless, for purposes of explication, it is necessary to utilize the mutually illuminating effect that the contents of the two volumes have on each other, and to recognize that by choosing the Arthurian legend as his general theme, the author himself sanctions a critical approach which assumes a traditional framework.

⁴The English Poetic Mind, p. 3.

⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 96.

CHAPTER I

LITERARY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATIONS

To the casual eye the life of Charles Williams presents an uneventful surface. He was born in Islington, London, in 1886, but his childhood, from the age of eight onwards, was spent in St. Alban's where he received his early education. In 1901 he was awarded a County Council Scholarship which enabled him to attend University College, London. Although he matriculated in 1903, family financial circumstances, always somewhat precarious, forced him to withdraw in the following year. Williams then took a position as assistant in the Bookroom of the New Methodist Connexion in Holborn, commuting each day to the city and continuing his education by attending the Working Men's College until the outbreak of the war in 1914.¹

When the Bookroom was closed in 1908 as the result of a merger with another firm, Williams was offered a position with the Oxford University Press at Amen Corner

¹For this and all subsequent information of a primarily biographical nature, I am indebted to A.M. Hadfield, Introduction to Charles Williams and Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City.

upon the recommendation of Frederick Page, who was then in the process of editing the complete works of Thackeray. First engaged as assistant in the extensive proof-reading which the project entailed, Williams was to remain with the Press, in a variety of capacities, until his death, his work uninterrupted even by the two Wars since he was barred from active service by ill-health. In 1917 he married Florence Conway, whom he had met in St. Alban's ten years earlier. A son, Michael, was born in 1922, and in this same year he accepted the post of lecturer with the English Institute at the London County Council's Evening Institute. The following year saw the growth of this career as lecturer when he delivered similar talks to the L. C. C. Holloway Literary Institute, the City Institution, and New Park Road Evening Institute, Brixton. In the years which followed his reputation as a lecturer became well established and by 1939, when Amen House evacuated to Oxford, he was being invited to give public lectures and addresses not only to civic institutions but to University colleges and societies. Within three years he was appointed tutor at St. Hilda's College, and in 1942 was awarded an honorary M.A. by the University. He died in 1945 and is buried in the churchyard of St. Cross, Holywell, Oxford.

During these years Williams produced more than thirty full-length books, a body of work remarkable both in its volume and diversity of interests. In addition to his editorial work with the Press and his duties as lecturer, he also endeavoured to maintain a steady stream of periodical contributions in the form of essays and book reviews.

Detailed evaluation of this corpus obviously lies beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter. But even the briefest of preliminary surveys would be incomplete without some reference to the general character of Williams' work, and some indication of its position in twentieth-century letters.

Sheer volume of work, or diversity of interests, though perhaps impressive, can never be factors in an estimation of the quality of a literary product; and even allowing for the vagaries of critical judgement, the reception accorded Williams' work has been of a decidedly mixed character. T.S. Eliot, whose acquaintance Williams made in 1931, though full of praise for some aspects of his writing, has said that many of his books "were frankly pot-boilers" and "very little of his work is quite perfect".²

²T.S. Eliot, "The Significance of Charles Williams", The Listener, Dec. 19, 1946, p. 894.

In fact, it is a matter of record that Williams began writing novels to pay his son's school fees. It is clear also that his activities as lecturer and as employee of the Oxford University Press left little leisure in which to produce literary work of a consistently high standard. There appears to be some justice in the judgement that all of his work is to a certain extent manqué. Nor is it entirely unfair to view a great portion of it as "hack-work", for much was written hurriedly and in response to specific requests.

In addition, the early termination of a purely academic career, and his long involvement with the burgeoning adult-education movement are significant factors in an estimation of the general character and quality of Williams' writing. Biographical accounts agree that in spite of his wide and constant reading and close contact with literature, these contacts in both his professional and private life deepened a tendency towards catholic but decidedly conservative literary tastes. He was known to entertain a certain suspicion or prejudice against the narrowly academic, scholarly cast of mind on the one hand, and a reserve for the most recent contemporary developments in literary circles on the other. His own enthusiasms, reflected in the topics of his lectures and in his editorial work, are for the great traditional figures of

Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dante, and Virgil, and the well-trodden paths of seventeenth and eighteenth-century poetry, or, alternatively, the work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which he encountered as a youth, such as that of Tennyson, Coventry Patmore, Chesterton, Bridges, and later, Hopkins. These preferences and prejudices exerted their due influence so that much of his early work is to a great extent "middle-brow", and stylistically conventional. Yet paradoxically, as a result of what amounts to a self-imposed isolation from the main current of contemporary literary interests, his ideas, as will be seen, became tenaciously independent to the point of virtual obscurity.

Of the purely creative work, several of his seven novels earned a modest degree of popularity when first published and all have subsequently been reprinted several times. The fact that they are most often still described as "supernatural thrillers" is an indication of the difficulty in placing them within the confines of a genre that traditionally has been the vehicle of realism. They have been considered as belonging to an off-shoot of the gothic romance, in much the same manner as have the novels of Le Fanu, Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood;³ but

³John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams, p. 7.

even to treat them as light gothic fiction scarcely worthy of serious critical consideration is not completely satisfactory in view of their curiously hybrid nature. The earlier novels are a strange amalgam of the thriller formula, esoteric religious machinery, and frail characterization, bound up with occult trappings in a manner that is never totally convincing. The last novels, Descent into Hell and All Hallows' Eve, are certainly something more than "entertainments", but the pattern of the earlier novels is retained and the burden of serious thought and depth of intent is disproportionate to its vehicle, to the extent, indeed, that one is compelled to question whether any species of the genre could successfully convey the author's design.

In 1927 Williams produced two exercises in verse drama for performance by the staff of Amen House, The Masque of the Manuscript and The Masque of Perusal. These early Masques are of interest as giving expression to two features operative in Williams' first childhood literary activities: an intense awareness of the ceremonial and ritualistic power of the spoken word and of dramatic action, and an interest in the general area of legend, myth, and the supernatural. These attractions led Williams in his middle years habitually, almost spontaneously, to compose "myths" for performance by his friends and gave

him a facility which is certainly a factor in the character and quality of subsequent plays. His later drama includes A Myth of Shakespeare, Three Plays ("The Chaste Wanton", "The Rite of the Passion", "The Witch"), Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury, and Judgement at Chelmsford (both commissioned for church festivals), The House of the Octopus, and a collection of relatively short dramatic pieces under the title, The Seed of Adam and Other Plays. The central themes of these works vary, but, as with much verse drama of this century, most of the plays derive their raison d'être from religious performance and primarily reflect doctrinal concerns.

Williams' interest in the supernatural was undoubtedly well-established by the time he encountered the writings of A.E. Waite. Nevertheless, his admiration of these texts was sufficient to make him seek out Waite, and it was apparently through him that Williams was first introduced to the occult society, the Order of the Golden Dawn. It was this society (or rather its parent body, for the history of the Order is a tangle of schismatic activity) which had similarly attracted, earlier in the century, such figures as Yeats, Evelyn Underhill, Algernon Blackwood, and Arthur Machen, as well as two of Williams' close friends, Henry Lee and Daniel Nicholson. Williams was later to utilize the knowledge accumulated from this

period and from a life-long interest in the subject to produce, in 1941, a study entitled Witchcraft.

Both the novels and, to a lesser extent, the plays show the influence of this interest in the occult, particularly in the choice of themes in the early works of each genre. The influence remains in the more mature novels and plays but is used to more subtle advantage as a pervasive undertone of colouring of imagery and symbolism, as it was to be later employed in the mature poetry. His acquaintance with the ceremony of the Order of the Golden Dawn, as with that of Church liturgy, strengthened Williams' natural tendency to find meaning in apparently trivial incidents, words, or gestures, and heightened his appreciation of the ritualistic in life and literature.

Finally, in the body of the creative work, one turns to the poetry, for it was as a poet that Williams thought of himself, and from all accounts, it was for his poetry, particularly the later volumes, that he hoped to be remembered. In 1912 Williams was introduced by Frederick Page to Alice and Wilfred Meynell, and upon their advice and encouragement (and, one gathers, with their partial financial assistance) he published a volume of sonnets entitled The Silver Stair. Other collections followed: Poems of Conformity in 1917, Divorce in 1920, Windows of Night, (1924), Heroes and Kings, (1930), and in 1938 and 1944

Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars.

in 1944. Within this canon there is a marked division between the first four and the last two volumes. His early verse shows the influence of his traditionalist enthusiasms, and although it is by no means inexpert, it is nevertheless decidedly imitative in nature. No one influence clearly preponderates. At times the verse reverberates with echoes of Donne, Herrick and Rochester, at others it recalls the inversions and Latinate sonorities of Milton, while at other times it reflects, in pastiche, Chesterton, Lascelles Abercrombie, Kipling, and even early Yeats. With an all but fatal gift for mimicry, Williams, in these volumes, is indeed "limiting himself by attachment to false and static conceptions of the poetic tradition",⁴ for though the idiom may be outworn, the burden of thought can in no sense be called derivative or second-hand. As in the novels, there is in these early poems a disproportion between vehicle and tenor, and the seriousness and freshness of intellectual concern is often in danger of being obliterated by the ease with which one feels it is possible to skim such work.

T.S. Eliot has observed that a good many poets are judged second-rate "because they were incompetent to find

⁴Ibid.

a style of writing for themselves, suited to the matter they wanted to talk about and the way in which they apprehended this matter".⁵ It became obvious to Williams that it was necessary to forge a more personal idiom to carry effectively the thought of his poems, and it has been suggested that in this move his prejudice against modernism was partially broken down by his acquaintance with Eliot in 1931. But this is to overestimate the extent of their friendship, which seems not to have gone far beyond the occasional cordial and interested encounter, and to underestimate the influence of his professional work on Williams' private concerns. In 1930 the Press brought out The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a second edition upon which Williams had done extensive work and for which he wrote the critical introduction. In addition, the Clarendon Press published a volume of Williams' criticism, Poetry at Present, in the same year. While the treatment accorded this poetry is of the deferential variety that became increasingly unfashionable as the century progressed, the slim book is an indication that inroads of a kind were being made on the author's isolation from the main stream of literary interests.

⁵T.S. Eliot, "Introduction", London and The Vanity of Human Wishes, reprinted in T.S. Eliot: Selected Prose (1958), p. 164.

Although Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars are almost anti-poetic by Williams' earlier standards, the change, almost a transformation, is scarcely in the direction of the cultivated "low-style" heralded by Eliot and Pound. Far from embracing the colloquially-based rhythms of the new poetic diction or the practise of gathering images from the increasingly technological modern environment, Williams became more remote than ever, deliberately eschewing the pared, ascetic vocabulary and the ascendant literary preoccupation with immediate contemporary issues.

From this brief outline of the main body of the creative work, some of the obstacles to Williams' acceptance and recognition will be readily apparent. His early verse was greeted with ~~great~~ enthusiasm in certain circles, and applauded by such critical figures as Bridges, Alice Meynell, and Sir Walter Raleigh, but the approval of this appreciative audience appears to have been lost during the process of change. As he discarded the familiar poetic conventions which had influenced the poetry of his adolescence and early adult years, the difficulty of the complex, relatively obscure nature of his thought became more evident. The direction of his change, however, did little to conciliate the circle of more adventurous, rigorously modern poets. Thus the audience for his poetry

became increasingly narrow, limited to friends and students whose responses he could directly condition and prepare through his conversation and lectures, and to those readers acquainted with his other work, the novels, theological studies and literary criticism. Not only does this explain to some extent the restricted nature of Williams' reputation, it also points to a difficulty in the work itself. The mature poems are not easy reading. Often they exhibit a tendency towards, if not "privatism",⁶ at least an independence of thought which is intensely personal and complex, sometimes to the point of eccentricity. And while this intellectual concern remained unchanged in its essentials from the early poems, the adoption of a new idiom seems to have intensified its complexity a great deal.

Since his death, critical interest in Charles Williams' work has undoubtedly derived its impetus from the efforts of the residual members of the group of enthusiasts mentioned above. The insistent regularity with which such interest erupts requires that this body of criticism be commented upon, since it does something to challenge the view of Williams as an eccentric voice speaking in difficult accents about a kind of experience that has no possible relevance for contemporary society.

⁶The term is used by C.S. Lewis in a brief evaluation of the Taliessin cycle. See Arthurian Torso, pp. 188-9.

The value of C.S. Lewis' Arthurian Torso, Anne Ridler's 'Introduction' to The Image of the City, and A.M. Hadfield's Introduction to Charles Williams as bases for further study of his work is incontestable, but in benefiting from personal acquaintance with the author as they do, they must be handled with some care in disinterested discussion of Williams' work, particularly when one recognizes that Williams, literary capabilities apart, must have been a man of considerable personal magnetism. From all accounts he seems to have combined infectious enthusiasm, personal charm and intellectual vigour, to emerge as an engaging, stimulating conversationalist, lecturer, and friend. The extraordinary strength of personal influence which he appears to have exerted upon most of those whom he met has resulted in an enthusiasm which makes it difficult to evaluate his work soberly on literary merits alone.

There is also the danger that in publicizing the work of a man felt to be neglected, the idiosyncratic interests and attitudes of the apologists may be visited on their subject. Thus, certain sectors of the public may be alienated by the literary, political, social, or religious stance of the well-intentioned commentator or critic. The lack of general enthusiasm for the work of Charles Williams may well be due as much to the excesses of ideological and

personal prejudice on the part of both apologist and public,⁷ as to the "oddity" of the subject.

There has, in fact, developed around this relatively little known figure a curiously divided body of opinion which, in a limited way, amounts almost to a controversy. Both before and after his death some commentators have been moved by his work to almost rhapsodic praise, while others have been repelled to the point where language could scarcely express their aversion. He has been accused of espousing a totalitarian philosophy, of advocating fascist tactics, and of betraying sadistic tendencies.⁸ But another commentator states, "more nearly than any man I have met, Charles Williams seems to me to approximate a saint ... I think he was a man of unusual genius and I regard his work as important".⁹ F.R. Lewis, in reply to an early estimation of Williams' achievement, cites his "preoccupation with the 'horror of evil'" as evidence of an arrested development, rather than a sign of

⁷An example of this kind of criticism can be seen in Roger Sale, "England's Parnassus: C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien", Hudson Review, Summer, 1964, pp. 203-25.

⁸Robert Conquest, "The Art of the Enemy", Essays in Criticism, Jan., 1957, pp. 42-55.

⁹T.S. Eliot, "The Significance of Charles Williams", The Listener, Dec. 19, 1946, p. 894.

"spiritual maturity".¹⁰ John Press has called him "a very queer fish in a deep dark pond",¹¹ while C.S. Lewis, of course, considers his mature poems "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 this century".¹² Even in later comments the feeling continues to run high. R.T. Davies denies flatly that he has any claims to genius other than oddity, asserting that he was "a great amateur, and his work ... suffers from a lack of discipline, of perspective and of stabilizing scholarship ... [they are] frequently merely clever-clever, fantastic, indecorous and exasperating".¹³

The greatest proportion of general reserve about Williams' work is undoubtedly due to his over-riding concern with the essentially religious experience, expressed in more or less idiosyncratic, but always explicitly Christian and fundamentally orthodox terms. Overt

¹⁰F.R. Leavis, The Common Pursuit, p. 253.

¹¹John Press, The Chequer'd Shade, p. 61.

¹²C.S. Lewis, "Preface", Essays Presented to Charles Williams, pp. vi-vii.

¹³R.T. Davies, "Charles Williams and the Romantic Experience", Etudes Anglaises, Oct. - Dec., 1955, p. 291.

affiliations on the part of the artist with systems of belief, whether religious, political, philosophical, or a blend of all three, frequently encourage critical "pigeon-holing", accomplished with greater or lesser ease according to the extent to which these beliefs are articulated in the work. When a poet insists that these beliefs constitute the core of his writing, not only is the task of characterizing the work apparently much simplified, but the potential audience, general and critical, narrows considerably, ~~excluding~~ those ~~not~~ sharing similar beliefs. Often there follows a tendency for the poetry to be valued or devalued as a vehicle for ideas first, and treated as an aesthetic product only after this has been done, if at all.

The Christian character of Charles Williams' thought thus sets off a chain reaction of dubious critical attitudes. The assumption that he is a Christian Poet, even a belated and misplaced Metaphysical, is followed by an emphasis upon this Christian content. Because of the complexity of his beliefs, there ensues a concentration upon these ideas to the comparative neglect of the poetry qua poetry.

In a society in which opinion is divided upon whether the traditional claims of the Church do, or do not

possess any validity or relevance, one could do worse than remember Northrop Frye's suggestion that for the purposes of strictly literary discussion one must view God, like every other element in the poem, as the artifact of human nature.¹⁴ As a work of art, the novel, play, or poem, arises in response to an impulse conventionally called the aesthetic or creative, which for the critic and student, must be kept distinct from the religious impulse. The religious element in a poem is something which renders the work neither "sacrosanct", "more" than mere literature, nor less than intellectually respectable. It is but one of many components in a hypothetical statement anciently observed to assert nothing.

Although the limitations and imperfections of much of Williams' work have been touched upon, the eccentricity and Christian bias of his literary output should not be unduly emphasized when one considers the direction taken by much of the writing of the succeeding generation. Though literary history must always involve some oversimplification, much of the work of the 'forties exhibits a distinct departure in tone and character from that of the preceding decade. The comparative unity of outlook in

¹⁴Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 125-8.

the work of such poets as Auden, Day-Lewis, MacNeice, and Spender, their preoccupation with the promises of Marxism, their general attachment to social and political concerns, and their faith in the advances of twentieth-century technology, was short-lived. In the crises of the Spanish civil war and Munich, the rise of Hitler and the slowly crumbling hopes of "the years of uneasy truce", lie the causes of a change in attitude marked by despair and disillusionment. Alex Comfort, looking back on these years, has said,

The awareness of death, the quasi-priestly but secular attitude, are omnipresent for anyone who knows contemporary English art and letters. No artist of my generation is uninfluenced by them.¹⁵

In rejecting the tenets typical of the poets of the 'thirties, many of this period were apparently influenced also by the delayed impact of Joyce who is said to have

... opened the door of the world that Jung calls 'the collective unconscious', a world ... beyond personal identity and ... historical time ... [and] in his own personal, musical language he recovered some of the prestige that had been lost to poetic diction...¹⁶

Thus, in terms of both style and content, younger writers were provided with fresh alternatives for their poetry.

¹⁵Alex Comfort, Art and Social Responsibility, p. 15.

¹⁶George Every, Poetry and Personal Responsibility, p. 37.

Such poets as Vernon Watkins, David Gascoyne, Alex Comfort, Sidney Keyes, Kathleen Raine and John Heath-Stubbs were variously manifesting "a wish to get away from the colloquial diction and urban imagery and topical slant which Auden was felt to stand for towards something more florid, more savage, more lavishly ornate".¹⁷ In this shift, John Heath-Stubbs, Sidney Keyes and Vernon Watkins acknowledged an admiration for the work of Charles Williams, amongst others, and George Every believes that they are indebted in aspects of their thought and in the development of their imagery to Williams' influence.

In a different way, the work of Anne Ridler and Norman Nicholson also shows traces of Williams' influence.¹⁸ Both are considered to have been impressed by his attempts to give importance and religious significance to the apparently trivial details of daily life and their own poetry often uses Williams' thought as a point of departure for expression of their individual view-points. More recently, Auden in his move towards an acceptance of orthodox Christian belief has paid tribute to Williams' thought.¹⁹ Hence, while it can never be argued that

¹⁷G.S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World, p. 324.

¹⁸Kathleen Morgan, Christian Themes in Contemporary Poets, see pp. 32-6 especially.

¹⁹W.H. Auden, "Charles Williams", Christian Century, May 2, 1956, pp. 552-4.

Williams has established a "school", there does appear to exist a slight but fairly well-defined current of influence which refuses to be entirely submerged and mitigates some earlier more positive pronouncements on his limitations.

Repeated references have been made to the difficulty of Williams' thought but specific discussion of this as it appears in the creative work has been deliberately delayed since even the most general description of his thought will profit from a knowledge of the complexities of the poet's background.

It has frequently been observed that the body of Charles Williams' work is unified by the recurrence of certain themes, to the extent indeed, that a "consideration of any one form must include a knowledge of the others".²⁰ Thus, the treatment of a concept expounded in a novel, or the theme of a play may partially contribute to an idea which runs through a whole series of poems. Nor can one confine consideration to his purely creative works. The same ideas are usually the subject of his expository writing, both in the full-length publications and in periodical contributions, and it is to these that one may often turn more confidently for the most objective primary

²⁰ Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. ix.

exposition of his leading ideas. Moreover, the fact that Williams evolved a more personal and effective poetic idiom comparatively late in his career, by which time many of his ideas were fully developed and stable, allows one the more readily to divorce them temporarily from questions of style for the purposes of more orderly discussion. In fact, it has been remarked that, with the exception of the poetry (and this, of course, is a big exception),

the ideas he was expressing were always more important to Charles Williams than the medium of expression...²¹

Perhaps one reason why the late-discovered new style did so little to place Williams' poetry within the major literary trends of the time was that it was dictated by the nature of his themes which were apparently so distinctive as to demand an equally distinctive style. Yet superficially at least, the position of Williams in the twentieth-century current of thought does not appear especially unique, particularly when viewed from the perspective of several decades.

In the "Introduction" to Victorian Narrative Verse which Williams edited in 1927, he observed that some of the deficiencies of Victorian poetry are due to the fact that

²¹Ibid., p. x.

... its metaphysic could not present, nor its withdrawing poetic imagination conceive an end sufficient to the means.²²

Like the Augustans, the Victorians lived in a climate which still vibrated with the shock-waves of philosophical and scientific upheaval, and amidst the changes being wrought daily in their lives, they aimed at "establishing a sort of stability".²³ In this search, they tended to reject any common supernatural basis of belief, and to suspect any metaphysical complexity of thought. Uncertain both of the accepted rational limitations of the mind and of man's ultimate position in an alternately expanding and contracting universe, they came to settle on conduct alone as a basis for living, and as a foundation for the stability they needed. Having rejected the necessity of an adequate metaphysical and philosophical foundation, they could not, especially in their literature, suggest how this emphasis upon conduct and moral propriety might be in any way significant, and the ethical code became an end in itself.

Perhaps a direct consequence of eighteenth-century empiricism, the Romantic rebuttal notwithstanding, is a rationalist hostility to any notion of metaphysical

²²p. 2. "Victorian Narrative Verse", The Image of the City.

²³Ibid.

significance. The hostility, strengthened by the emergence of science and technology, is still a salient characteristic of the modern temperament, one manifestation of which can be seen in the decline of the Church and its relevance in personal and public affairs. Even within the Church, one may readily discern a school of thought which seeks a natural religion without any idea of;the transcendental or supernatural, without metaphysics or received revelation via traditional doctrine, and without dogma. But in asserting the necessity of a metaphysical basis for living, and in rejecting such a natural religion, Williams was not alone among twentieth-century writers. Others, such as T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and more recently, W.H. Auden, are prominent dissenters from the belief that the "modern malaise" may be cured by programmes of social, scientific, and economic reform. The awareness of the deficiencies of a standardized mass culture and a totally materialistic philosophy may be seen in the work of these, who also have attempted to recommend a return to an established system of traditional values as asserted by orthodox Christianity.

Yet the reception of Williams' work has differed radically from that accorded many others who have upheld Christian values amid an increasingly secular environment. Quite apart from considerations such as degrees of literary

merit or differences in style which must, of course, be deciding factors in a critical reception, it is still evident that Williams has been generally received primarily as a Christian apologist, to the extent that his creative work has become the subject of what F.R. Leavis has called "Christian Discrimination".²⁴ The existence of such critical reaction suggests that there are distinct points of difference between Williams' work and;thought and that of his like-minded contemporaries.

The first of these differences appears to be largely one of environment. From his earliest days, Williams' association with the established church, the Church of England, was close and deep. Both his parents were profoundly religious, and although their attitude toward their faith was free from the oppressive religiosity and piety epitomized by much Victorian behaviour, their involvement with church life was an intimate part of their daily lives and family routine. Charles Williams' sister, Edith, was later to question the relevance to modern life of the traditional teachings of the Church, but Charles, it seems, never passed through the period of disillusionment, agnosticism or atheism now commonly regarded as an almost inevitable part of the process of growing up.

²⁴F.R. Leavis, "The Logic of Christian Discrimination", The Common Pursuit, pp. 248-54.

Not only did he continue to accept the importance of the Church as a social institution during his adolescent and adult years, but as a consequence of what has been called his "double-sidedness"²⁵ of mind, he exerted continual effort to ensure that his beliefs were intellectually justified and not maintained from mere force of habit. That such efforts were not always simple may be seen in his early poetry, especially in the volume Windows of Night. Anne Ridler remarks of his writing as a whole that the "conflict between the powers of good and evil ... was always one of Williams's most intense literary enjoyments",²⁶ and others have similarly observed that the struggle constitutes one of the main themes of his novels. Yet in Windows of Night the awareness of the antagonism in mere existence and of the distresses in the human condition emerge as something deeper and more intense than simple "literary enjoyments" or themes to be manipulated for the emotional titillation of his audience.

In "Domesticity", the sense of a community of human suffering is vividly evoked.

²⁵C.S. Lewis, "Preface", Essays Presented to Charles Williams, p. xii.

²⁶Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. xiii.

... O Earth's body, what pain
Tightens the whole fine nervous web? What ache
In the torn bloody past twitches our brain?

As night falls and the city lays itself to rest, he sees
that,

All the dead life that lay through the dark at
the back of our minds
Stirs, and ghosts in the visible world have begun
Anew to occupy eyes left vacant by sleep ...

The revitalizing function of sleep, which Shakespeare
could image as knitting "up the raveled sleeve of care",
for Williams is deceptive.

Cleansed we arise - cleansed and the more defiled
By obscene currents of death no oblivion can stem
from the general river, clogged and,unclean.²⁷

The emotional apprehension of evil which this and other of
the early poems reveal seems, however, to be transmuted by
more deliberately intellectual reflection. In spite of
Leavis' charge of "arrested development", Williams did not
stop at a preoccupation with the 'horror of evil', and in
his writing the often-observed characteristic of a
"quality of disbelief", of intellectual scepticism, can be
seen at work.

In all his varied literary activities Williams was
at considerable pains to recommend the doubting capacity
of man's mind. No issues, he held, should ever be con-
sidered settled or put to one side until all one's

²⁷"Domesticity", Windows of Night, pp. 22-3.

analytic, intellectual, and imaginative powers have been brought to bear upon them in as minute and scrupulous a fashion as possible. In a series of articles entitled "Letters to Peter", he advocated the most rigorous application of scepticism. As one commentator has summarized his advice, he urged:

Be sceptical of what you have been taught. Be equally suspicious of the demand for immediate relevance and the plea to remain above the battle, of the insistence that Faith can be rationally justified and the assertion that it exhibits mysteries... Doubt your cherished convictions, and doubt ... unceasingly the validity of those misgivings that are the protection and prison of the cowardly ... 28

Thus Williams approved of the philosophical impatience of the tormented Job's angry questioning of Jehovah and saw the heresies and schisms within the history of the Church as an essential part of its development. Nor can this aspect of Williams' thought be construed as a facile recommendation of intellectual honesty or of the necessity of bringing rational powers to bear on matters of faith. In the poem, "To the Protector, or Angel of Intellectual Doubt", there is an awareness of the peril of inquiry. The line which divides "intellectual ambivalence" from emotional and spiritual disaster is fine indeed, and he speaks of the knowledge of

²⁸Mary M. Shideler, Charles Williams, p. 43.

... that lighter wraith
Which is your [i.e. Doubt's] image and your grief
Utter and intimate unbelief ...

The experience of this "unbelief" is

... that final sleep ...
Some highway, narrow, twisting deep,
Amid a silent frozen world.
... When the very heavens are curled
Frozen above us, when the earth
Is a bleak certainty of dearth,
When our homing instincts freeze
Within us, to black crevasses
... in loveless arctic prisonry ... 29

For Williams, all the emotional and intellectual difficulties of reconciling contradictions in existence never came to an inevitable end in a peaceful acceptance in the years of his maturity. The more usual pattern is perhaps one of emotional or habitual belief, gradual doubt and disillusionment, rejection, and then, for some, a gradual return to re-examination and eventual re-affirmation of the values which the Church represents. But Williams is remembered as saying in conversation that he was prepared to "accept as a revealed doctrine the proposition that existence is good: but ... it would never have occurred to him, unaided, to suspect this".³⁰ Furthermore, he suggested that one might accept immortality not as the

²⁹"To the Protector or Angel of Intellectual Doubt", Windows of Night, p. 111.

³⁰C.S. Lewis, "Preface", Essays Presented to Charles Williams, p. xii.

desired end of physical existence but as "the final act of obedience".³¹ And as late in his life as 1939 he meditated in a letter,

... it seems so odd somehow to feel as if I believed absolutely everything about death and resurrection and all that, and yet somehow not here, and (also) yet somehow not anywhere else. Do I look to another life? No; I think I am obstinately determined to believe that everything is justified here and now when it obviously isn't ...³²

Yet during this same period he was working on such books as He Came Down from Heaven and The Descent of the Dove, on the articles, "The Recovery of Spiritual Initiative", "Sensuality and Substance", and "Natural Goodness", and on a verse play for church performance, Judgement at Chelmsford. Neither the available biographical information nor the body of his writing reveals a fading of his belief or a diminishing of his preoccupation with the working out of his convictions. In place of any distinct period of doubt or retreat, there exists a relentless personal examination which extended along the entire range of his years and writing.

One of the results of this life-long programme of analysis and inquiry is that he early became more interested in the "Jesus of the Trinity" than in the

³¹Ibid.

³²In a letter to Anne Ridler which she quotes in "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. xv.

historical figure, that is, he was more completely involved in the doctrines of the Church and more attracted to the dogmatic side of belief than a less rationally disposed Christian might be. Most of his novels, plays, and poetry, as well as prose studies, reflect a preoccupation with issues of a strictly doctrinal nature. Moreover, there is in all the writing an evenness of tone as well as of conviction which further unifies his thought.

In remaining so entirely within the Church and apparently so completely at one with its aims, his framework of Christian belief seems to constitute the terms of reference for his total existence. It is thus understandable, perhaps, that some commentators should yield to the temptation to point to his case as being exemplary, in a way that the cases of others, in spite of ultimate similarities, are not.

In addition to departing from the more usual pattern of behaviour and thought seen in the examples of C.S. Lewis, W.H. Auden, and Evelyn Waugh, there exists a further difference. Not only did Williams' environment and, more particularly, his reaction to it, differ from that of many others; he is separated from most of his contemporaries by an additional aspect of temperament.

In estimating the general character of Williams' writing, especially the poetry, John Heath-Stubbs concludes

that he belongs "to the tradition of Christian transcendentalism in English poetry",³³ and in this he allies Williams with poets like "Spenser, Vaughan, the later Wordsworth, Coleridge", and perhaps Patmore. Unless the word transcendentalism is to be applied in a strictly defined sense, the use of the epithet to describe such a range of work is of doubtful value. In the above context it may perhaps be understood to denote very generally such qualities as a concern with that which is beyond the limits of ordinary experience of the senses, and a preoccupation with what is commonly termed the supernatural. ~~Unprecise~~ though it be, the word does at least have the virtue of indicating a broad distinction between Williams' thought and that of many of his contemporaries.

In a theological study, He Came Down from Heaven, Williams begins one of his chapters with a quotation from Wordsworth's Prelude which is useful in refining the notion of Williams as a transcendentalist. "There are in our existence spots of time / That with a distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue, whence ... our minds / Are nourished and visibly repaired".³⁴ Commenting upon one such "spot of time" or experience, Williams says

³³John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams, p. 15.

³⁴"The Theology of Romantic Love", He Came Down from Heaven.

... it arouses a sense of intense significance, a sense that an explanation of the whole universe is being offered, and indeed in some sense understood; only it cannot yet be defined³⁵

Partially, of course, such an attitude towards any category of experience, the belief that it has an extended meaning above and beyond itself, is a concomitant of Christian convictions. But the awareness of the possibility of some other mode of existence distinct from the one which man enjoys here and now in a "real" world of time, substance, and space, and yet somehow related to ordinary life, is developed to a marked extent in Williams' thought.

T.S. Eliot has commented upon this characteristic, observing that his writing is

based upon real experience of the supernatural world ... which is just as natural to the author as our everyday world ... ³⁶

He is careful to make it clear that the adjective "mystical" as applied to this aspect of Williams' thought would be misleading, but he enlarges upon the above observation by adding that Williams seemed to him to possess

a kind of extra perceptiveness ... an extended spiritual sense ... and was a man who was always able to live in the material and the spiritual world at once, a man to whom the two worlds were equally real because they are one ... ³⁷

³⁵Ibid., p. 68.

³⁶T.S. Eliot, "The Significance of Charles Williams" The Listener, Dec. 19, 1946, p. 894.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 894-5.

Such a marked disposition towards the imponderables of the supernatural may well appear to be somewhat at odds with the equally marked rational disposition which Williams was held to display in conversation and writing. But his position is clearly indicated in his remarks on Pascal.

Pascal was a friend and intimate of Jansenists. He was a mathematician and knew the doctrines of chances and of infinity.... "The finite to stake ... the infinite to gain." Could anyone consent to doubt? He conceded his imagined opponent a feeble if intelligent murmur: "The true course is not to wager at all," and crushed himself with the awful answer: "Yes, but you must wager. It is not optional." He was, of course, right; it is no more optional than death.³⁸

Williams, like many before him, saw clearly that while man possesses inadequate evidence upon which to decide whether a particular experience is real or illusory, a subjective impression or an objective fact, he is nevertheless compelled to come to terms with that experience. He is in obvious agreement with Pascal's statement that "All the principles of stoics, sceptics, atheists, etc. are true. But their conclusions are false, because the opposite principles are also true".³⁹

When it is recalled that he also recommended the validity of misgivings and urged that one might doubt that

³⁸The Descent of the Dove, p. 199. 7

³⁹Ibid., p. 197.

"faith can be rationally justified", it is scarcely surprising that he apparently was prepared to reject nothing that promised to hold the slightest possibility of truth. Thus his reflections and interests did not stop at the threshold of "reality", but embraced the possibilities of various categories of thought and experience perhaps less universally respected than theology, such as mysticism, belief in the supernatural, and an interest in the occult.

Again, such an attraction to matters conventionally held to be suspect is not in itself distinctive. Many otherwise rationally-inclined writers have found themselves indisposed to reject the claims to validity of the occult sciences, as a roll-call of the membership of the Order of the Golden Dawn might testify. Few, however, propose the co-existence of the natural and the supernatural as seriously as Williams appears to do, especially in the earlier novels. In these books the action derives from the clash of values of two opposing groups of individuals, ranging freely between the two worlds in such a way as to blur the distinctions and blend the properties of one with the other. For example, War in Heaven is concerned with the efforts of persons devoted to the cause of black magic to secure possession of the Holy Grail, which has suddenly been discovered in an innocuous rural parish church in twentieth-century England. In the course of the inevitable

struggle the powers of black and white magic are drawn freely upon. At the height of the action Prester John appears, as an ordinary man in a grey business suit, to assist in the triumph of the powers of good.

A conflict between two similarly aligned groups is portrayed in Many Dimensions. The struggle is once more for an object of mythical origins, this time for what is apparently a piece of primal matter, a "stone" of magical and mystical properties, originally set in the crown of Sulemin and engraved with the Tetragrammaton, the ancient Talmudist formulation of the name of Jehovah. The Greater Trumps considers the power inherent in the Tarot cards and explores the physical manifestations of their symbolic values. Finally, the concept of the actual existence of Platonic archetypes is the basis for The Place of the Lion. Through the power of an overweening magician, the archetypes of all creation are literally turned loose upon the English countryside. When these "ideas" threaten the destruction of the world by their reabsorption of all their specific manifestations in nature, the values of another group assert themselves. Rescue comes in the form of a ritual "naming of beasts" performed in the manner of the mythical naming by Adam in the Old Testament record, and this reverses the tide of annihilation and restores natural existence to its former state.

Such a close juxtaposition of the rational and the irrational in a traditionally realistic genre may well disconcert or repel many devotees of the "serious" novel. But there is no reason to suppose that Williams worked in ignorance of the conventional traditions of the novel form. Although he often wrote hurriedly and perhaps facilely, frequently maintaining that his chief interest was in telling a good story, the peculiarly mixed character of these novels is almost certainly deliberate and springs from an essentially serious "world view". While these novels are primarily "entertainments" there is still a fundamental importance in the kind of experience they attempt to communicate. Dorothy Sayers, who continually has recourse to Williams' ideas in her studies on Dante, has compared and contrasted the attitudes of the two.

Dante is pre-occupied by the inherence of the metaphysical in the physical; Williams - in his novels especially - by the irruption of the metaphysical into the physical ... he is haunted always by the vision of trespass upon the borders of the two worlds - the breaking-up of the crust, the calling down of naked and impersonal powers out of the realm of spirit into the realm of time and space.⁴⁰

Not only do the novels discussed above generally treat the conflict between the powers of good and evil, they also deal in some fashion with the "unlawful attempt to seize

⁴⁰ Dorothy Sayers, Further Papers on Dante, p. 200.

and possess the metaphysical powers",⁴¹ and all have in common the fact that the powers of good desire victory not for their own personal ends but on behalf of the object around which the conflict centres. These centres of conflict are all envisaged as being endowed with a peculiar blend of integrity and unique power which must be allowed to function in complete autonomy. Only when the protagonist realizes this and relinquishes his individual will in order to become a mere channel for good can he effectively contribute to the desired outcome. The idea becomes very important in the mature poems of Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, and is perfected in the last two novels, Descent into Hell and All Hallows' Eve, wherein the supernatural ceases to be merely a bizarre piece of machinery and becomes a credible realm for the author's speculation, exploration and experiment.

The biographical evidence which is available does not reveal exactly when Williams came to be interested in the occult. On the basis of information from Charles Williams' wife, Anne Ridler suggests that the period of most intense interest probably began sometime after 1917 and continued until 1920 or so. Williams apparently attended the meetings of the Order of the Golden Dawn for

⁴¹Ibid.

only a short period of time. Anne Ridler says that he "quickly outgrew it",⁴² and though he never broke his oath of secrecy, he was known to pass irreverent comment upon the petty quarrels which occupied the energies of its members. The writings of A.E. Waite, who was his formal link with the society, continued to interest him, however, and The Hidden Church of the Holy Graal must have constituted one of his first sources for esoteric facets of the Matter of Britain.

Another of Waite's books, The Secret Doctrine in Israel, was perhaps even more important to Williams, for it becomes apparent on consulting this work that there exist in Williams' general system of thought many parallels with the ideas propounded therein. Waite's study is a treatise on the various branches of thought and activity incorporated in Kabbalistic and Talmudist doctrine derived from the Zohar, with a commentary on the implications of many of the teachings for the myriad hermetic and occult societies which sprang up in the centuries after the birth of Christianity. Although it is a difficult work, the style being at once contorted and pompous, and the scholarship being detailed to the point of tortuousness, it must be most stimulating for anyone already intrigued by the

⁴²Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. xxiii.

subject. For Williams it was probably especially suggestive in those areas which deal with the love relationship between the sexes and the importance of the human body.

The more sensational aspects of much occult knowledge and the many bizarre practices popularly associated with the esoteric have also tended at times to obscure the fact that the system of Jewish theosophy, the Kabbalah in particular, played an important role in the development of the Christian Church, especially during the Renaissance. Far from conflicting with the basic tenets of Christianity, the doctrines of the Kabbalah agree in several points with those of the Church. For example, the Sephirotic decade or archetypal man in Kabbalistic doctrine is considered, like Christ, to be of double nature, both finite and infinite, perfect and imperfect. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity, popularly regarded as pre-eminently Christian, has a prototype in Old Testament writings, which the Zohar has developed from the usual description of the "Three-in-One". The Kabbalah also expounds the doctrine of atonement, which was later to figure so prominently in the beliefs of certain non-conformist denominations. Thus, for anyone, like Williams, interested in the early Church and its doctrinal development, the significance in much Kabbalistic doctrine would soon become apparent.

In addition, the occult in general and the doctrines of the Kabbalah in particular, held a further attraction for Williams. Historically, it emerged in its mature form at the time when medieval mysticism was also beginning to assert itself. This wave of mysticism emphasized the importance of interior meditation and, by implication, tended to negate the value of the organized Church in the progress of the individual towards knowledge of God. From the perspective of a later century it can be seen as a protest against the excessive intellectualism and Aristotelian scholasticism which then held the Church in its sway. It held that prayer was the first requisite in a mystical progress towards God and, often, that it could only be accomplished in a state of ecstasy. In this respect, the spirit of the Kabbalah closely resembled the mystical movement, for it similarly held that the Deity could be realized by other than rational faculties and attempted to bridge the gulf between man and his creator by encouraging asceticism and emotionalism, and by urging the employment of artificial means to induce the ecstatic state. The Church, which has certainly never encouraged its eccentric visionaries, was naturally not slow in condemning the Kabbalah, and was joined in its condemnation by Jewish orthodoxy, which saw in the Kabbalah a challenge to the authority of its external law.

While certain casual remarks tend to represent Williams as a mystic, it has been repeatedly emphasized by those who knew him best that any such description would be inaccurate and misleading. Certainly the systematic fashion in which he contrived to develop his personal convictions into a complex but totally coherent scheme of thought would seem to militate against any such characterization. It has been said that, contrary to popular conceptions,

the genuine mystic is usually a surprisingly direct person, his mysticism, to himself, really a very simple (one wants to say practical) matter. Accepting the proposition that to know God is the chief end and aim of existence, he finds that such knowledge comes to him by other faculties than the rational. It is by intuition that he attains the mystic vision in which he claims to realize absolute truth and to taste absolute blessedness ... it is an endowment akin to the artistic gift... ⁴³

In all the varied categories of Williams' work there is nothing to suggest that he ever experienced anything of this sort. Rather he was one who simply made it his business to investigate and familiarize himself with records of all species of religious experience, whether they were the Confessions of Augustine, the writings of the pseudo-Dionysius, Lady Julian of Norwich, and Evelyn Underhill, or the more dubious accounts of medieval occultists and

⁴³Lizette A. Fisher, The Mystic Vision in the Grail Legend and in the Divine Comedy, p. 3.

magicians. Such a deep and protracted interest in all areas of the parapsychical provided the insight and sympathy which he displays in his treatment of the subject in both his creative and expository writing.

In concluding this discussion of Williams' interest in esoteric matters, it is useful to turn to his own observations on the subject. While he admits the tenuousness of many theories of the supernatural, he nevertheless asserts that attraction to the general area is nearly universal.

The disposition towards the idea of magic might be said to begin with a moment which seems to be of fairly common experience - the moment when it seems that anything might turn into anything else. We have grown used - and properly used - to regarding the sensation as invalid because, on the whole, things do not turn into other things... But the occasional sensation remains. A room, a street, a field, becomes unsure. The edge of a possibility of utter alteration intrudes ... One may be with a friend, and a terror will take one even while his admirable voice is speaking; one will be with a lover and the hand will become a different and terrifying thing, moving in one's own like a malicious intruder ... All this may be due to racial memories or to any other cause; the point is that it exists... There is, in our human centre, a heart-grIPPING fear of irrational change, of perilous and malevolent change.⁴⁴

Although the last sentence of the above passage may well recall the charges that Williams' work shows an immature preoccupation with the 'horror of evil', it is

⁴⁴ Withcraft, p. 77.

important to remember that he was equally preoccupied with the manifestations of Divine Love in human affairs. While his novels may provide evidence for such charges, his first volume of poems, The Silver Stair, sprang from his early recognition of the need of man to relate his physical nature to his interior spiritual state. It derives its initial inspiration from Williams' personal discovery of love, and the many individual poems which are addressed to his wife demonstrate an early insight into the possibility of a relation between eros and agape. Williams' attraction to the occult, like his interest in the mystics and his attitude towards love, is an aspect of his religious temperament which very early was coloured and affected by his rational disposition. The many-sided sensitivity to the parapsychical is based upon his conviction that the need to reconcile the interior state of existence with the exterior, the spiritual with the material, is universal. He perceived that when man has recognized that his experience of the interior world is also a part of his neighbour's experience, the spiritual realm becomes as pervasive as the physical, and the need to accord it due recognition becomes as urgent as the need to come to terms with the material world.

With characteristic common-sense, Williams was not averse to turning such insights to practical advantage.

It is evident that his novels, in spite of their many serious observations, capitalize on his intimate association with the many branches of the "hidden doctrine" in order to cater to a light-reading public's taste for the more sensational aspects of occult traditions. It is equally evident that his poetry is an outlet for his more serious thought; and the distinction between the superficial literary usefulness of the paraphysical and its fundamental value within Williams' total system of thought must be borne in mind at all times. Though there are occasional overt references to occult practices in Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, their provenance is so obvious to anyone acquainted with Williams' background as to require little or no comment, for by the time he was engaged in composition of the poems his interest in the esoteric appears to have been largely transmuted by his more central concern with the broader, more orthodox religious significance of his material.

CHAPTER II

NARRATIVE TREATMENT

The discussion which follows, especially the portion devoted to Williams' analysis and interpretation of the sources and historical background of the Grail material, is undertaken in some detail. Direct and lengthy quotation will be used rather more extensively than is usually desirable in an effort to present as undistorted a view as possible of Williams' methodology and to preserve the precision of many important attitudes.

Perhaps the sharpest impression to be gained from an initial consultation of the available portions of Williams' notebook,¹ in conjunction with the studies on the development of his Arthurian poems,² is a sense of the extremely protracted period of writing and re-writing which

¹Apparently this notebook is now in Anne Ridler's possession. For a general description of its contents and the circumstances surrounding its compilation, see Anne Ridler's "Introduction", The Image of the City, pp. lviii-lx. Small but useful portions of this notebook together with a commentary by the editor are reproduced not only in her general "Introduction", but at pp. 170-5, The Image of the City, under the title "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays".

²Linden Huddleston, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams: Their Development and Background", unpublished Master's thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 1953.

the cycle encompassed. The notebook was probably begun around 1911 and entries continued into the 1920's, by which time Williams was actively engaged in serious composition of the poems. Heroes and Kings, the first volume of the early Arthurian poems, appeared in 1930, and several more poems of this first version appeared in the following year in New Poems, an anthology edited by Lascelles Abercrombie, and in a volume of Williams', Three Plays. By 1934, however, Williams was beginning to rework his Arthurian material, and Anne Ridler, who apparently was corresponding with the author at the time, contributes some interesting though fragmentary information concerning the process of rewriting.

It may well be that the "ability to refresh and refashion poetic material so long after its first appearance is ... unusual",³ but the practice may often produce undesirable side-effects. As Anne Ridler observes, and as is evident to those readers who have found C.S. Lewis' "chronology" almost essential for an initial understanding of the poems of the final cycle, the mere sequence of events is far from clear. The author appears to assume on the reader's part as great a familiarity with the material

³Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. lxiv.

as he himself had obviously come to possess in his lengthy and intimate association with his sources. The many gaps which result in the narrative, together with a much elaborated system of symbolism present difficulties which, if not insurmountable, at least seriously detract from the success of the work.

In an introductory note drafted by the author to accompany the publication of Taliessin through Logres, he had remarked of the final poems that they

do not so much tell a story or describe a process as express states or principles of experience. The names and incidents of the Arthurian myth are taken as starting points for investigation and statement on common and profound experience.⁴

Nevertheless, there is much evidence, both within and outside the cycle, of an interest in the mechanics of "telling a story", in narrative poetry in general, and in the epic in particular. His earliest enthusiasms in literature were for poets who had produced genuine epics, work of epic scope, or protracted narrative: the Victorian figures, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne and Chesterton, and also the traditional figures, Milton, Spenser, and later, Dante. As an above-average Latin student he was thoroughly familiar with Virgil and with that epic par excellence, the Aeneid. Professionally, as a reader with the Press,

⁴Anne Ridler quotes Williams in "Introduction", The Image of the City, pp. lxiv-lxv.

these natural proclivities were consolidated, as a bibliography of his editorial work can testify. In any case, he was accustomed to read and enjoy throughout his life long poems which were commonly considered unreadable by most.

Thus it is scarcely surprising to learn that he once contemplated for his own work a vast structure involving a "vertical" division of the material into "books of Love", or a "horizontal" division into "secular" and "religious" books, or even a division "into 'branches' (after Sebastian Evans's pattern), not into books".⁵ Among the many entries in the notebook are observations on the use in epic poetry of the second-person singular, considerations of epic styles such as "the romantic" and "the classically remote" of Milton, speculation on how Dante achieves certain of his effects, and notes on some of the ideas found in Lascelles Abercrombie's The Epic. Despite the fact that his work finally emerged as a cycle of linked poems, Williams had originally contemplated an epic.

He has stated that the Taliessin cycle began with certain things in Malory. It began also, perhaps even earlier, in a vague disappointment with the way in which Tennyson treated the Hallows of the Grail in Balin and Balan ... in this particular respect his treatment of the Sacred Lance as a jumping-pole

⁵Ibid., p. lix.

left a good deal to be desired and even to be done ... It was clear that the great and awful myth of the Grail had not been treated adequately in English verse.⁶

In his initial dissatisfaction with Tenhyson's Idylls as a verse rendering of the Matter of Britain, it was characteristic of Williams that he should first isolate symbolic treatment for attack. His "Introduction" to Victorian Narrative Verse makes his objections more explicit. He finds that the "weakness ... of the Victorian age, as of the Idylls, is not in its concern with conduct but its failure artistically to suggest an adequate significance in conduct".⁷ More particularly, it was "Conduct without any adequate end, duty without interior and eternal significance, morals without metaphysics".⁸ For Williams the Victorian age lacked an adequate philosophical basis to support the metaphysic of tales from an earlier age. Adapted and reworked by the nineteenth-century poets, the material became thin, unconvincing and artistically unsound.

⁶"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, pp. 179-80.

⁷"Victorian Narrative Verse", The Image of the City, p. 3.

⁸Ibid.

The stimulus for this kind of criticism stems, in part at least, from the views of Lascelles Abercrombie, especially those contained in his short study, The Epic. The entire chapter entitled "After Milton" is relevant in considering Williams' general opinions on epic and narrative poetry, but for the present discussion one section in particular deserves close attention. At the instance of Scott, Abercrombie decries the lack of "depth", "definiteness of symbolic intention", and "epic unity"⁹ (the three terms are used synonymously) in the poetry of his age. He then goes on to comment:

If we are to have, as we must have, direct symbolism of the way man is conscious of his being nowadays, which means direct symbolism both of man's spirit and of the (philosophical) opponent of this, the universal fate of things - if we are to have all this, it is hard to see how any story can be adequate to such symbolic requirements, unless it is a story which moves in some large region of imagined supernaturalism. And it seems questionable whether we have enough formal "belief" nowadays to allow of such a story appearing as solid and as vividly credible as epic poetry needs.¹⁰

He tempers his animadversions, however, to the extent of citing favourably the examples of Goethe's Faust and Hardy's Dynasts as "invasions of epic purpose into dramatic manner"

⁹Lascelles Abercrombie, The Epic, p. 84.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 93.

which provide "immense and shapely symbols of the spirit of man".¹¹

Such a concern, not only with "immense and shapely symbols" for their own sake, but with their being set against a backdrop of a "large region of imagined supernaturalism", obviously would have appealed to Williams in any case. More particularly, when considered in conjunction with the Matter of Britain, which at that time engaged his attention, it became clear to him that the Victorians betrayed the symbolic significance of their sources by their failure to appreciate the peculiar flavour of "supernaturalism" inherent in their material, a failure that rendered their treatment of many crucial incidents and episodes vastly inadequate. Thus Williams, in common with many readers, found the confrontation of Arthur and Guinevere at Almesbury convent almost ludicrously deficient.

No great poet has ever been betrayed into a more disastrous episode than that in which Tennyson presented Arthur deploring and exhorting the prostrate form of Guinevere ... The mortal pathos, the immortal symbolism of Arthur are lost in such words as 'I am thy husband, not a smaller soul'...¹²

Many critics and readers have been amusing at Tennyson's expense, but it remains true that all too often his

¹¹Ibid., pp. 91-2

¹²"Victorian Narrative Verse", The Image of the City, p. 2.

reactions, particularly those presented in the Grail episode, are seriously askew. As Williams went on to observe,

The King does not reject the Quest of the Graal merely from an artistic necessity, but from the necessity of an inadequate metaphysic. The high Prince Galahad passes across the stage and is gone, and the poem is uneasy in his presence... It [the Quest] is merely apart from Camelot and the Table; it is merely apart from Arthur and the soul...¹³

In a much later essay, Williams remarked of the versions of Hawker, Morris, and Swinburne as well, that although they contain "a great deal of good stuff", they are unsatisfactory because "none of these poets had the full capacity of the mythical imagination".¹⁴ It would be convenient to have some explanation of just what Williams meant by the term "myth", but although the word is employed throughout his work, the numerous contexts do little to suggest a special sense of the term. As it is most generally used, it does not appear to be distinguished from the terms "legend", "tale", or even more simply, "story". Among the many consistently casual uses, however, one brief, almost parenthetical, elaboration may be borne in mind. Discussing the work of Malory, he remarks that

¹³Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴"Malory and the Grail Legend", The Image of the City, p. 187.

He fills his pages with all sorts of things which may be fascinating but are not (in our sense) mythical. But there are some which are mythical in the sense that they seem to have a profound spiritual relevance.¹⁵

If one is prepared to accept this sense of the term in his criticisms of the Victorians, the root of his reservations becomes even clearer. Knowing what we do of Williams' own background and his intense interest in Christian theology and dogma, it is difficult indeed to see how any merely literary version of the material could have satisfied his requirements for "profound spiritual relevance". As the above quotation in part implies, he found even Malory in this respect to be wanting. The ubiquitous swords-in-stones, the endless, useless, petty quarrels and multifarious tourneys, the hermit who lurks inevitably around each corner of every wood, not to mention the unnecessary multiplication of characters, many of whom fill identical roles and are thinly drawn and poorly motivated - all these features certainly distract and irritate. Williams remarks, however, that even allowing for the fact that "the main part of his novel was irrelevant to ^{the} theme", still, "the hints in those parts which dealt with the theme were of very high value".¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁶"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, p. 180.

That Malory was "full of a high suggestiveness which he never could, or never cared to, develop"¹⁷ was advantageous for Williams, for it left him free to draw almost exclusively on Malory as his primary source, developing himself those very points of "suggestiveness" by the exercise of the "mythic capacity".

In order fully to appreciate Williams' approach to his material one must examine in some detail his prose study, "The Figure of Arthur". Here he discusses not only Malory's treatment of the Arthuriad, but considers closely most of the contributions in sources ranging from the records of Gildas and Nennius to the accounts of the French poets and romancers. One should be aware from the outset, however, that engrossing and instructive as this book may be, it scarcely meets the standards of today's medieval scholarship. Nor is it probable that Williams intended that it should. Like so much of his writing, the work is a fragment, published now in conjunction with C.S. Lewis' commentary on the Taliessin poems, and is best treated as the indispensable guide to his cycle which it so patently is. Attenuated though it be, the study is crucial in demonstrating Williams in his "myth-making" capacity. Here one can observe the author's first approach to the

¹⁷"The Chances and Changes of Myth", The Image of The City, p. 184.

great mass of literature on Arthur, his tentative reactions to details he considers of importance, and ultimately his technique for fusing descriptive detail, character, and event into what he deems a coherent and mythically satisfying whole.

Thus, towards the conclusion of this work the outlines of the reshaped myth begin to emerge and, in an attempt to reconcile the conflicting elements in his sources, he begins to determine on the "centre of the myth".

The problem is simple - is the king to be there for the sake of the Grail or not? It was so the Middle Ages left it; but since then it has been taken the other way. The Grail has been an episode... If it is to be more, it must take the central place. Logres then must be meant for the Grail ... It is the central matter of the Matter of Britain. We may, if we so choose, reasonably and properly refuse it, but we can hardly doubt that if we do we shall have no doubt a consistent, but a much smaller myth.¹⁸

In a sense, the preceding chapters of the work all lead up to this statement, for in these pages Williams has consistently seized upon the religious aspects of his material, a procedure which has the effect of conditioning the reader to accept the primacy of the Grail - his major structural change.

The procedure begins almost immediately with his account of the contribution of Nennius to the Matter of

¹⁸"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 83.

Britain. The quotation which he chooses to isolate from these early records runs thus: Arthur in one of his battles

carried on his shoulders an image of St. Mary Ever-Virgin, and on that day the pagans were put to flight ... through the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the holy Mary His Maiden-Mother.¹⁹

Williams is at some pains to stress the Christian character, which scholars have always accepted as a salient feature of Arthur's court, and in example after example he instances the many links between Arthur's destiny and divine sanction and guidance. Arthur had been to Jerusalem, Williams further instructs the reader, and had made a huge cross before which he prayed and fasted,

asking that by this wood the Lord would give him victory over the pagans, which was so done, And he carried with him the image of St. Mary.²⁰

And in treating the Annales Cambriae, the same kind of detail is chosen for citation.

518: The battle of Badon in which Arthur carried the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for three days and three nights, on his shoulders, and the Britons were the victors.²¹

Then Williams strays into almost poetic comment and describes "the myth of the Grail" as

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 6-7.

²⁰Ibid., p. 7.

²¹Ibid., p. 8.

the most important account of all. No invention can come near it; no fabulous imagination excel it. All the greatest mythical details are only there to hint at the thing which happens; that which in the knowledge of Christendom is the unifying act, perilous and perpetual, universal and individual.²²

The Grail itself he describes as "that Cup which in its progress through the imagination of Europe was to absorb into itself so many cauldrons of plenty and vessels of magic".²³ Throughout the entire chapter Williams continues to provide the theological and social background for the development of the Grail concept, while at the same time conditioning his reader to acquiesce in his judgement of the main theme. It is apparent that for Williams the primacy of the Grail (and the Grail as a Christian relic), even at this comparatively early stage of discussion, can scarcely be doubted.

Some of the evidence which he assembles to support his assertions may here be sketched. The first intellectual concerns of the developing Church were, of course, with defining the nature of God and His son. The sacraments, in particular the Eucharist, did not claim attention until much later. However, even in the first centuries of

²²Ibid., p. 13.

²³Ibid.

growth, the Last Supper was "regarded as a sacrifice - by Christ and of Christ; therefore, as a sacerdotal act".²⁴

With the general social structure of these centuries, the influence of the Church in matters of state as well as faith, its role in education, and its domination in intellectual spheres, Williams suggests that the topic of the Eucharist, later to become a dogmatic issue, was a respectable, even common one in the general conversation of intellectuals. He observes, almost wistfully, that "neither was its discussion confined to a particular class of the pious, as such things usually are to-day".²⁵ As a result,

slowly perhaps but generally, among all the other affairs of secular and religious life, the image of that Act, and of the Host and Chalice which were its means, grew primary in the imagination of Europe.²⁶

In this kind of atmosphere, the myth of the Grail, from whatever source, sprang into being and flourished till it occupied the prominent position it holds in the work of Malory.

The early Middle Ages were seen by later centuries to be "founded on metaphysics",²⁷ and the twelfth century,

²⁴Ibid., pp. 13-4.

²⁵Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 24.

in particular, was "still 'rash with theories of the right That stretched but did not break its creed'",²⁸ still developing in a relatively flexible imaginative climate. And, of course, from this period of imaginative freedom emerged the work of Chrétien de Troyes, Robert de Borron, and their continuators, the great semi-mystical tales which later so greatly enlarged (but also confused) the canvas of Malory. In addition to the pervasiveness of the Grail as a focus for conversations on the Eucharist, there was another "major realistic influence": the preoccupation with Jerusalem under the direct stimulus of the Crusades helped to make the Grail a plausible symbol also for a national or imperial consciousness and sense of destiny.

As Williams points out, the exact literary source for Chrétien's use of the Grail and the Lance is unknown, but from a religious standpoint, the derivation, he would have us believe, is obvious. Alluding to folklorist theories of a Celtic origin for the Grail and Lance, he bluntly defines his position thus:

the grail in Chrétien did not produce physical food. The whole and exact point of its use was that it provided a substitute for physical food ... It served an unknown personage with a Host; if it was like anything, it was like the ciborium

²⁸Ibid., p. 25.

of the Eucharist, and contained the super-substantial food.²⁹

With the inclusion of the bleeding Lance, that spear with which the centurion Longinus had pierced the side of Christ, and the refinement of "a grail" to "le saint Graal" (in one of Chrétien's continuations), came the identification of the "Sacred Body" of Christ with the tale. At this stage, Williams observes,

It is not, at present, much more; there are hardly any theological attributions. But poetically there is now a union and a centre - not so much a Christian centre as an artistic.³⁰

The "theological attributions" in fact, were not long in coming. The Council of Lateran in 1213 had raised the doctrine of the Eucharist to a position of almost equal importance with those doctrines which defined the Nature of the Trinity and the Double Nature of Christ. Thereafter, the symbolic association of the Grail with the Eucharist in the minds of readers and future poets and romancers was assured.

The motivation for such an elaborate and thoroughgoing treatment of the background of the Grail becomes obvious when one recalls Williams' objections to the

²⁹Ibid., p. 65.

³⁰Ibid., p. 66.

inadequate metaphysical climate of the Victorians, and Abercrombie's demands for "solidity" and "credibility" in any story pretending to epic dimensions. In order to avoid the Victorian error of superimposing a contemporary scale of values on a narrative from another era, Williams scrupulously reconstructs much of that era. It may be objected that his reconstruction is distinctly idiosyncratic, but it can scarcely be argued that any of the nineteenth-century poets had undertaken as much, or indeed, were as well qualified to do so. In addition, it may be noted that though his choice of emphases may be eclectic, his selection of sources is not. Even the initial chapter of "The Figure of Arthur" exhibits his catholic consultation of texts, his attention to precise detail, his preference for direct quotation, and his broad knowledge of Church history, all of which makes him eminently well-suited to the task of reconstruction.

The reader who has acquainted himself with such information as has been outlined above may, however, be disconcerted by what he finds when he turns to the two slim volumes which comprise the final cycle of Williams' *Arthuriad*. By actual count there are only fifteen name references and direct allusions to the Grail as an object, and familiar episodes and details which one has come to associate with the Grail story seem to be virtually

ignored. In this cycle, which has adopted the myth of the Grail as its centre, there is not a single poem which takes as its subject the traditionally much-discussed Quest. The most fully related episode is to be found in the penultimate poem of Taliessin through Logres, "The Last Voyage", which describes the journey of Bors, Percivale, and Galahad in the Ship of Solomon to the holy city of Sarras. And even here the conclusion of the voyage is not described. The reader must wait until the final poem of The Region of the Summer Stars for the extremely brief allusion,

... the three
 lords of the quest landed from the vessel of the quest,
 (RSS., p. 58)

where

They lay for a year and a day imprisoned in a trance,
 (RSS., p. 58)

Other essential references to events in the Grail story are scattered throughout the first of the two volumes for the most part, but nowhere is the story itself conventionally developed in chronological fashion. Thus, "Percivale at Carbonek" describes the arrival of the three Quest lords at the gates of the Grail castle, while

In the rent saffron sun hovered the Grail.
 (TTL., p. 81)

The poem is primarily concerned with matters outside the

traditional Grail story, however, and the healing of the Wounded Keeper of the Hallows is implied rather than actually stated.

The passage through Carbonek was short to the house of the Grail;
the wounded king waited for health...

(TTL., p. 81)

... Carbonek was entered.

(TTL., p. 83)

Even more surprising are the apparent omissions in "The Coming of Galahad". Tennyson's account, like Malory's had related the knighting of Lancelot's son, his assumption of the Perilous Siege, and the appearance of the Grail in the great hall of Camelot. In both versions the episode is crucial in that it involves the knights of the Round Table, by sworn oaths, in the quest of the Grail and heralds the first external signs of disruption in Arthur's court.

Williams' poem, however, opens with the single statement,

In the hall all had what food they chose;

(TTL., p. 69)

the only reference to the Grail being the words of Gareth to Taliessin after the banquet:

Among the slaves I saw from the hall's door
over the meal a mystery sitting in the air -
a cup with a covered fitting under a saffron veil,
as of the Grail itself ...

(TTL., p. 70)

The poem then passes on to a consideration of other matters in a conversation between Taliessin, Gareth, and an anonymous servant girl.

Similarly, Williams had found no particular significance in some of Malory's subsidiary details. Galahad's pulling of the sword from the floating stone is entirely omitted; and the placing of Galahad that night in Arthur's bed, which he had originally found so attractive,³¹ is here reduced to the lines,

they led the young man Galahad to Arthur's bed.
The bishops and peers, going with the royalties, made
ceremony; they created a Rite.

(TTL., p. 69)

In the next section,

the red flare of processional torches and candles
winding to the king's bed; where instead
of Arthur Galahad that night should lie
Helayne's son instead of the king's, Lancelot's
instead of Guinevere's,

(TTL., p. 69)

are lines which serve to emphasise symbolic association rather than advance the narrative.

In fact, the dominating event of this entire episode is the phenomenon which accompanied the appearance of the Grail. In both Malory's and Tennyson's versions, the lords at dinner suddenly find before them the food

³¹"Taliessin's Song of the Setting of Galahad in the King's Bed", Three Plays, pp. 193-5.

which they love best, but in both accounts the event is a relatively minor detail. Williams, however, had remarked of the phenomenon:

I have wondered if this ... would not be more convenient if it were taken to mean that what each had actually before him was precisely to his most satisfaction ... it is what is there that is fairest.³²

This subtle adjustment, which throws the weight upon acceptance of divine intention rather than personal self-indulgence, he felt, would allow the event to follow more logically from the words of Galahad as he assumed the Perilous Siege. The words which Williams then had in mind were Tennyson's, "If I lose myself I find myself", which he was prepared to accept, at least for the limited purpose of his prose discussion.

In his own poem, however, the utterances of Galahad are unrecorded, the only reference to the assumption of the Perilous Siege being the indirect allusion to "the unknown lord who sat in the Perilous Sell". Hence, the long meditation on the nature of preference and acceptance has for the reader little logical basis in the preceding events. Its sole narrative justification is provided by the opening line "all had what food they chose", and by occasional nebulous hints in the intricate three-cornered conversation

³²"Malory and the Grail Legend", The Image of the City, pp. 191-2.

that ensues.

The poem, then, is one of those instances in which the reader must infer far more than is possible from the scanty information provided, an accident of the poet's reshaping process. It also provides a clear demonstration of how Williams' initial interest in the logical narrative arrangement breaks down and virtually disappears under the pressure of his concern with the philosophical implications of particular events. In view of his remark in discussing this episode, "it does us no harm to realize that the tale, as well as the meaning, has to be kept going",³³ it is not a little ironic that in actual practice the tale is virtually abandoned in this poem in favour of the "meaning".

The abandonment is particularly unfortunate in view of the traditionally crucial position in the narrative of Galahad's arrival at court, an importance which the reader might reasonably expect this poem also to stress. The celebration of the Feast of Pentecost signals the beginning of the Quest in Malory, as Williams was well aware, and constitutes the initial stages of an almost Aristotelian peripeteia, a watershed of action, from which point the flood-waters of Camelot's fate sweep relentlessly down. It also marks the first visible appearance of the

³³Ibid., p. 192.

Grail after its emergence from Carbonek, an event which is nowhere treated in Williams' cycle. Greater attention to coherent, even sequential, presentation of circumstantial detail would not only have saved the poem from the state of confusion created by the enigmatic metaphysical rumination,³⁴ it might also have high-lighted the first appearance of the Grail for the reader, enabling him to appreciate the significance of future Grail references without supplementing Williams' account with what he may know of Malory or Tennyson. As it now stands, "The Coming of Galahad" is not the self-sufficient account that it should be, and certain gaps may contribute substantially to the reader's subsequent uncertainty of response in the poems which follow.

Unsatisfactory though the poem may finally be, however, its example is instructive. The rejection of a straight-forward rendering of the various events in chronological sequence is typical throughout the cycle. The method adopted in its place not only utilizes backward and forward shifts in time as the author discovers the necessity of fitting in much essential narrative detail, but, as we shall see later, involves the use of a narrator

³⁴Linden Huddleston's thesis contains a lengthy Appendix devoted solely to an interpretation of certain passages of this poem, which he too finds one of the most difficult and least satisfactory in the cycle. See "Appendix C2, pp. 246-56, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams".

who is familiar with the most significant events in the history of Logres to act as a guide for the reader through the maze of varied episodes.

The approach has many advantages, of course. By avoiding a relatively unsophisticated chronological presentation of narrative elements, Williams provided himself with the scope and flexibility necessary both for the development of symbolic significance and the regular inclusion of metaphysical observations on the meanings which he increasingly came to see in his material. At the same time he could, without attracting undue attention, eliminate many of the narrative details which no longer conveniently fell into his evolving conception of the Matter of Britain. When one considers the over-riding interest in the metaphysical implication of events exhibited in his novels, in his plays, in his theological writing, and even in his literary criticism, the narrative technique which he finally adopted for Taliessin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars is undoubtedly the most suitable for his purposes, even if certain eliminations are misjudged.

From the outset of the cycle, then, Malory's chronology is ignored and the reader is provided instead with a general view of the Empire in which Logres is contained. Rejecting the detailed account of the lineage

and emergence of Arthur, Williams offers instead a brief survey of the history of the Empire in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres, and a more detailed picture of the Empire up to the emergence of Logres in the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars. It is significant that even in the earliest stages of the narrative the existence of the Grail is presaged:

Carbonek, Camelot, Caucasia,
were gates and containers, intermediations of light;
(TTL., p. 1)

... the chairs of the Table reeled.
Galahad quickened in the Mercy;
(TTL., p. 1)

the themes vibrated with duty and expectation
of the coming of the vessel ...
(RSS., p. 4)

the sickle of a golden arm
that gathered fate in the forest
in a stretched palm caught the hallows.
(TTL., p. 4)

Williams moves quickly to establish the coming of the Grail as basis and centre of the future action of the cycle. It should be noted that all these references to a proto-Grail are embedded in material that is the author's own contribution to the Arthuriad. Seizing upon a brief reference to a pagan wood in the north in Malory's account, the forest of the "Hallows" in "Taliessin's Return to Logres" becomes "the Druid wood", and the "sickle" becomes

that which the Druid priests used to sever the sacred mistletoe from the oak. The "Hallows" do not simply designate a proto-Grail. They are envisaged by the poet as "falling", and as they do, they mark the stages of Taliessin's journey to Arthur's encampment and signal the first step in the fulfilment of the court-poet's destiny.

In the same fashion, the "vessel" in the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars is referred to as "the rich container", which holds the blood of "the Deivirilis", "the blood of the golden single-personed Ambiguity". Both phrases are essential to interpretation of the remainder of the cycle (as the next chapter demonstrates in some detail) since they allude to the important accounts of the Nestorian controversy presented in the first two pages of the volume. And as the Grail allusion in "Taliessin's Return to Logres" is surrounded by Druidical associations which both heighten the contrast between the past and the future of Logres and emphasize the common heritage of Taliessin and Arthur, so the heavily doctrinal terms in which the Grail is described in the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars serve to consolidate the previous argument on a point of Christian dogma.

The same idiosyncratic colouring of the Grail can be seen in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres in his associating the regions of Camelot and Carbonek,

traditional features of the Arthuriad, with Caucasia, which, as will be seen, constitutes one of Williams' most original contributions to the Arthuriad. There are further signs of a completely individual approach to the material in the identification of the downfall of Logres with the Moslem conquests. The same new interpretation can be seen in the use of the semi-theological terms, "the double-fledged Logos" and "Deivirilis", and, in a phrase which is peculiarly Williams' own, "quickened in the Mercy" to describe divine guidance. From these brief examples it is evident that as he abandoned the traditional chronology and eliminated narrative which he considered inessential, the author found many opportunities for successfully establishing his particular interpretation of the Matter of Britain from the very beginning of the cycle.

In its broadest outlines the Matter of Britain has always been viewed as being composed of two distinct tales: that dealing with the history and quest of the Grail; and that dealing with the rise of Arthur to kingship, the establishment of his court in the splendour of Camelot, and its subsequent collapse amid civil war. Williams demonstrates his awareness of the significance of the duality when, in the manuscript which he had intended as a preface to "The Figure of Arthur", he remarks that the chief concern of his prose study was to be with

the coming of the two myths, the myth of Arthur and the myth of the Grail; of their union; and of the development of that union not only in narrative complexity but in intellectual significance.³⁵

Later, within the main body of the work, he alludes again to the common scholarly observation of the essential conflict within the Arthuriad: "The tales of Arthur and of the Grail, of Camelot and Carbonek ... [were] antagonistic in their first invention".³⁶ The conflict is not only one of mutually exclusive sets of values. The activities of each constitute twin centres of narrative which always threaten to pull the legend in opposite directions. This was so as early as the Queste, and by Malory's time it had resulted in the curious "tacked-on" character which the Grail story had come to assume and which was to become even more marked in the treatment of the Victorians. That one or the other must take precedence becomes apparent when one contemplates the entire narrative, as well as the potential thematic structure. Williams, of course, had decided that for symbolic purposes the Grail must dominate his Arthuriad. His way of accomplishing this in narrative, however, involved bringing the two centres of activity into

³⁵"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 93.

³⁶Ibid., p. 88.

closer association rather than lessening the importance of the position of Arthur and Camelot within the whole legend.

The process is evident even in the earliest poems of each volume, which were discussed above, wherein Williams makes the Grail an integral part of the historical background of Logres. Further movement towards a union of the episodes can be seen in subsequent poems of each of the two volumes. In "The Vision of the Empire", the supernatural foresight of Merlin ranges,

over near Camelot and far Carbonek,
over the Perilous Sell, the See of union,
(TTL., p. 8)

and he observes that already in Camelot

the Table stands rigid in the king's hall,
and over their seats the plotted arms of the soul
(TTL., p. 8)

In "The Calling of Taliessin" Merlin reveals that he is sent

to build, as is willed, Logres, and in Logres a throne
like that other of Carbonek, of King Pelles in Broceliande,
the holder of the Hallows;

(RSS., p. 12)

and "to prepare Logres for the sea-coming / from Sarras",³⁷

the wizard performs a series of magical rites,

adjuring all the primal atoms of earth
to shape the borders of Logres, to the dispensation
of Carbonek to Caerleon, of Caerleon to Camelot, to
the union
of King Pelles and King Arthur

(RSS., p. 14-5)

³⁷The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 12.

It may be noted in passing that in all these examples the constant figure is Merlin. Williams has stated that he is to be regarded as "time",³⁸ a symbolic identity which is appropriate to his function within this cycle, for when Williams requires a voice within the narrative to convey visions of the past or future, it is almost invariably that of Merlin which the reader hears. Only Merlin, with his traditional supernatural gifts of prophecy, can credibly perform the leaps into the world of future events, into the world of the significant past, or indeed, into worlds beyond the realm of earthbound Logres, which Williams' treatment of narrative necessitates.

Primarily, however, it should be observed that Merlin "calls" Arthur to the kingship of Logres in order to further much larger plans than the mere rescue of Logres from the threat of pagan invasion. Arthur and Camelot are to serve the Grail rather than simply rise to the pinnacle of medieval courtly splendour which Malory had envisaged. This alteration of the nature of Arthur and Camelot need not entail any diminishing of Arthur's importance, for it is possible to visualize as splendid and glorious a court as Malory had ever conceived in the dedication of Camelot's total existence to the task of

³⁸"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, p. 182.

realizing the mystical fulfilment of the Grail on earth. It is obvious that such a change in the role of Arthur and Camelot would successfully throw the Grail into the prominent position which Williams desired.

By far the most ambitious attempt to bring the worlds of Camelot and Carbonek into closer harmony, however, was by way of his planned treatment of "the central catastrophe", the Dolorous Blow. According to Anne Ridler,³⁹ had he lived, Williams would certainly have included in his cycle a poem dealing with this incident, and in his prose records, he himself continually reverted to consideration of how it might be done. One of his most important statements is a meditation on the result of the blow struck by Balin the Savage, by which

the royalty of Pelleas [sic] is divided - he is, as it were, himself divided. That of him which is still the Sacred Keeper lies wounded but living in Carbonek; that of him which has to take action is transfused into Arthur, but there it hardly knows itself. I am aware that this is difficult, because of the time-scheme. Balin rides from Arthur's court - from Camelot, and yet Arthur does not begin to be until Pelleas is wounded.⁴⁰

The technical difficulty with "time" in his projected treatment of the Dolorous Blow continued to preoccupy him. As he notes in some exasperation,

³⁹ Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. lxv.

⁴⁰ "Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 175.

If Arthur is a reflection of the Maimed King, this must happen before his birth...? then Balin at Uther's court. Or, to make everything happen at once (if it were possible in poetry!)⁴¹

In the cycle as it now stands, there is no reason why Arthur in terms of symbolic function should not be regarded as a reflection of the Grail Keeper, for in "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", as well as in "The Calling of Taliessin", there are several allusions to the "union of Arthur and Pelles". Nevertheless, how best to arrange the various narrative elements, how to "treat time" in order to achieve the particular symbolic effects which he had in mind, was indeed a problem.

His remark in a typescript on the general meaning of the poems, that "the Fall ... was once, and yet is repeated in each of us",⁴² suggests that there may possibly be a philosophical basis in his theological speculation for his technical treatment of time. He had observed in The Descent of the Dove that for the Church in its first centuries of development,

Time existed, and time itself had, as it were, to be converted, to be rededicated towards the thing out of time ... [and also] in the case of every individual Christian.⁴³

⁴¹Anne Ridler quotes Williams in "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays", The Image of the City, p. 171.

⁴²"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 175.

⁴³The Descent of the Dove, p. 14.

The immediate problem was, of course, that the Second Coming, imminently expected by the early Christians, failed to materialize. Even in the first century, time "was already becoming the bane of the church", constituting the first division between the "Kingdom" and the Church.

Time has been said to be the great problem for philosophers; nor is it otherwise with the believers. How, and with what, do we fill time? How, and how far do we pass out of time? [*italics mine*]⁴⁴

A possible answer to this last question is contained in one of his novels, Descent into Hell, which brilliantly utilizes an ingenious technical treatment of time in conjunction with Williams' personal theories of exchange and substitution. (See Chapter V for a fuller discussion of these ideas.) At its climax, the heroine, Pauline, takes upon herself the terror of her ancestor during his martyrdom in the Marian persecutions in sixteenth-century England. Her assumption through the barriers of time of his fear and anguish not only assists his "holy dying", but, in turn, makes it easier for Pauline to relinquish her own burden of fear caused by the appearance of her doppel-ganger to her friend and confidant, Peter Stanhope. At precisely the same moment in time, her grandmother, the spiritual exemplar of the novel, voluntarily reaches out, from her

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 15.

peaceful acquiescence in dying, to a young suicide of recent years, who himself eternally reflects the suffering of the unquiet dead of Battle Hill. The author remarks of the entire area,

Time there had disappeared, and the dead man had been contemporaneous with the living. As if simultaneity approached the Hill, the experiences of its inhabitants had there become co-eval; propinquity no longer depended upon sequence.⁴⁵

Throughout the cycle of Taliessin poems, one hears echoes of a similar phenomenon. "Taliessin on the Death of Virgil", for example, clearly demonstrates the attempt to "lift the idea of redemption out of all temporal limitations".⁴⁶ The poem takes as its point of departure the incident in Dante's Commedia in which the poet's guide must be excluded from Paradise. As Williams had sensibly observed, the poem cannot artistically afford to keep Virgil,⁴⁷ quite apart from any violation of Christian dogma which would be entailed. And yet, from another point of view, there was still a sense in which Virgil might be saved. His death is seen by Williams as a fall, "from the edge of the world", and "through his moment's infinity", "others came, none to save" - an ironic reflection on

⁴⁵Descent into Hell, p. 76.

⁴⁶Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. xlix.

⁴⁷Religion and Love in Dante, p. 18.

Virgil's own description in the Aeneid of the lost souls on the near side of the Styx who vainly await their passage across to rest.

Perpetual falling, perpetual burying,
this was the truth of his Charon's ferrying
(TTL., p. 31)

but in this eternal dying,

Unborn pieties lived.
Out of the infinity of time to that moment's infinity
they lived, they rushed, they dived below him, they rose
to close with his fall ...

(TTL., p. 31)

All who had found inspiration and guidance from Virgil's work in the centuries after his death, "In that hour ... came", offering what salvation, respectful love, and goodwill they might, and,

Virgil was fathered on his friends.
He lived in their ends.
He was set on the marble of exchange.

(TTL., p. 32)

The desire to communicate such experiences necessarily imposes restrictions on sequential representation, ultimately affecting the technical handling of time within any given narrative framework. So in his notebook, the speculations in this area continue:

? any real objection to time and distance being ignored, and Mohammedan knights introduced. But see dates of Mohammedans in Spain - the Caliphate of Cordova: which would (or might) almost reconcile the two.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Anne Ridler quotes Williams in "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays", The Image of the City, p. 171.

In fact, the final version contains only one Mohammedan, Palomides, the Saracen knight, and for his presence, of course, there is the well-defined precedent in Malory. But then, as Williams once remarked, "time is not in Malory very strictly attended to".⁴⁹ Williams, for his part, continued to explore the possibilities of an altered time scheme in a variety of narrative situations. Thus, he toys with the notion of achieving "the full effect of Islam, in Africa, in Spain", by treating Arthur's court (A.D. 500) as contemporaneous with that of Charlemagne (A.D. 800).⁵⁰ A juxtaposition of eras nearly as extreme is accomplished in the final treatment in, for example, "The Son of Lancelot", in which,

Caucasia was lost, Gaul was ravaged, Jerusalem threatened; the crescent cut the Narrow Seas, while from Cordovan pulpits the iconoclastic heretical licentiates of Manes denounced union

(TTL., p. 57)

This kind of compression of centuries, here ranging over approximately two hundred years, is more than a deliberate and intellectualized attempt to imitate what Malory had unconsciously or unheedingly done in the Morte. It is an approach to time and sequence which later allows

⁴⁹"Malory and the Grail Legend", The Image of the City, p. 190.

⁵⁰Anne Ridler quotes Williams in "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays", The Image of the City, p. 171.

him to present such a scene as the following, from "The Departure of Merlin":

Joseph of Nazareth, Joseph of Arimathea,
came dancing through the coeval-rooted world's idea.
They saw Merlin descending: they met him in the wood,
foster-fathers of beatitude to the foster-father of Galahad;
twin suns of womb and tomb;

(TTL., p. 75)

According to the legendary account of its origins, however, the Grail, as a sacred relic of the Passion, antedates Arthur's kingdom by some five centuries. The "Prelude" in each of Williams' final volumes quite naturally preserves this gap, "The Calling of Taliessin" confirms it, and the above reference further substantiates the impression.

Thus, in this particular respect a simple compression of time cannot be the solution to bringing the two worlds of Carbonek and Camelot into closer harmony in a way which would ensure the primacy of the Grail which Williams desired. The visualisation of Arthur as a "reflection" of Pelles was a stroke of considerable symbolic originality and ingenuity, but in terms of narrative presentation, the invention continued to present almost insuperable difficulties. Despite his lengthy speculation on various methods of coping with time, and despite his effective use of what has been called "anachronism"⁵¹ in various places

⁵¹Linden Huddleston, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams", p. 53.

in the cycle, Williams never solved the problem of how best to present the Dolorous Blow in terms of chronology.

We are told in "The Last Voyage" that symbolically,

At the hour of the healing of Pelles
the two kings were one, by exchange of death and healing.
Logres was withdrawn to Carbonek;

(TTL., p. 88)

and in the final poem of the volume that

... the wounded and dead king
entered into salvation to serve the holy Thing;
singly seen in the Mass, owning the double Crown,
going to the altar Pelles, and Arthur moving down.

(TTL., p. 89)

The full effect of these lines, however, is diminished by the absence of any thorough account of exactly how in narrative terms the division in royalty originally had come about.

We learn early in the cycle that the union of Arthur and Pelles in "the new-designed house/of the Hallows in the Empire",⁵² is planned by the divine Emperor and the mystical/supernatural figure of Nimue. But Williams errs in this particular presentation of essential narrative detail. Exercising his authorial power, via the figure of Merlin, to disclose future events, he permits Merlin to "see" almost too far into the future. Even as he goes about his magical preparation of Logres, he voices the suspicion that the divinely-ordered scheme may founder:

⁵²The Calling of Taliessin", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 19.

If in the end anything fail...
 ... if the term
 be held less firm in Camelot than in Carbonek,

 ... if cease the coming from the seas
 at the evil luck of a blow dolorously struck,
 (RSS., p. 19)

"In the end", something does "fail". There is within Camelot a sufficiency of minor flaws to destroy the fellowship of the Round Table, and of these there is no lack of narrative evidence. What is lacking is some account of the stroke which split the royalty, and more important, some indication of the exact point in the narrative at which such an event might occur. For within the passage referred to above a contradiction appears to exist. If the union for which Merlin prepares is planned as the divine destiny of Logres, some causal necessity must exist, some act of separation must have occurred already. Yet, the Dolorous Blow is clearly implied as being a possibility in the future of Logres.⁵³ The cure, as it were, is begun before the disease has been contracted, a confusion which the allusions throughout the cycle maintain rather than disentangle.⁵⁴

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴For example, the presence of Balin the Savage at Arthur's court, "The Star of Percivale", Taliessin through Logres, p. 47.

The absence of any treatment of the catastrophic stroke is the more lamentable as it becomes clear to the reader progressing through the cycle that Williams chose to see the Dolorous Blow as the first cause of the ensuing failures in Logres as well as the motivation behind Merlin's "calling" of Arthur. In "The Crowning of Arthur", amidst all the triumphant celebrations of coronation, Merlin foresees doom for the emergent Camelot, as "in beleaguered Sophia they sang of the Dolorous Blow".⁵⁵ This particular sequence of events Williams had in mind when he was writing "The Figure of Arthur". There he argues that

the fate of the Round Table comes into the world almost before the Table has been established; say, at the very feast of the crowning of Arthur and the founding of the Table.⁵⁶

The instrument of fate, however, is not here envisaged as Balin the Savage, but Mordred, the child of the incestuous union between Arthur and his sister, by whose treachery Logres will be torn in civil war. But Williams regarded the first act of Balin as the direct cause, as his prose discussion makes clear.

⁵⁵In this poem the Dolorous Blow is symbolically identified with the wounding of Christ during the Crucifixion, celebrated in the solemn Lenten rites of the Greek Orthodox Church.

⁵⁶"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 86.

One incident is directly the consequence of the Dolorous Blow; and there is another like it which should be. The first is that Balin the Savage in ignorance kills his own brother Balan, and Balan he. The natural pieties begin to be lost, and there is incivility in the blood. It is in fact the farther externalization of the Wounded King. But the disorder spreads farther.⁵⁷

One of the first definite signs encountered by the reader of the disorder which is the consequence of the Blow in the cycle is the incest of Arthur and Morgause. From Merlin's speech in "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney" the chain of events which Williams had envisaged is made vividly apparent. Alluding to the twinship of Balin and Balan, and that of Arthur and Morgause, Merlin says,

'Balin had Balan's face, and Morgause her brother's.
Did you not know the blow that darkened each from other's?

'Balin and Balan fell by mistaken impious hate.
Arthur tossed loves with a woman and split his fate.
Did you not see, by the dolorous blow's might,
the contingent knowledge of the Emperor floating into sight?

(TTL., p. 40)

As in the previously discussed poem, "The Coming of Galahad", there is again a lack of circumstantial detail; this time in the presentation of the inter-related nature of the constituent events of Logres' fate. The first intimations of the downfall of Logres come, as Williams had

⁵⁷Ibid.

intended, in "The Crowning of Arthur". Although Merlin's forebodings are linked with his supernatural foreknowledge of the Dolorous Blow, there is nothing in the narrative of this poem, however, to suggest to the unprepared reader that Morgause, who is present at the ceremonies, also carries within her, even then, the seed of Logres' ultimate destruction. Williams is apparently not interested in making clear the association of the themes of incest and the Dolorous Blow at this early stage in the narrative.

Unfortunately, as the contents of Taliessin through Logres are arranged, four poems, themselves packed with much diverse material, are allowed to intervene between Merlin's forebodings and the actual association of the Dolorous Blow with the sin of incest in "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney". As a result, the reader is unable to appreciate fully just how "new darkness and sterility begin to creep through the land from which the pagans have been expelled",⁵⁸ and again much of the symbolic inventiveness may be lost.

With another of his devices for bringing the two narrative centres into closer harmony Williams had more success. Following both Malory's example and the novelist's instinct for sound characterization, he very firmly

⁵⁸Ibid.

attached the major characters of the Grail story to the court of Arthur. The origins, antecedents, and relationships of Bors, Galahad, and Percivale reach outside the framework of the immediate Grail narrative - their sworn oaths, subsequent Quest, healing of the wounded king, and ultimate voyage to Sarras - to impinge upon many of the activities of Camelot, until the climax of both tales can be seen to merge in the final poems of the cycle.

All three of the Quest lords ride from Arthur's court, and one, Bors, actually returns to Logres after the Achievement of the Grail. Not only did Williams retain his traditional return from Sarras, he also enlarged the portrait of Bors from his source in Malory by making him one of Arthur's trusted lieutenants, actively concerned with the problem of restoring order and civilization to the southern shore which the king has reclaimed from the pagan invasions. Furthermore, Bors is a married man (a minor adjustment to Malory, who says nothing of his marriage) and the father of two children. In these roles Bors represents the ordinary individual possessed of practical day-to-day needs and duties as well as more spiritual aspirations. As Williams puts it, through Bors the quest for the Grail symbolically becomes,

also ... the tale of the universal way. It is not, as in Tennyson, only for the elect; it is for all ... Bors is in the chapel at Sarras as well as Galahad and Percivale. This is what relates the Achievement to every man.⁵⁹

In view of Williams' preference for concentrating on traditionally underdeveloped figures, it is perhaps not surprising that the figure of Percivale receives considerably less attention than that of Bors in Williams' cycle. Presumably, as in Malory's account, he remains in Sarras after the voyage in the ship of Solomon, and apart from occasional references, his presence throughout the cycle is scarcely invoked. Of Percivale's symbolic function as "the spiritual intellect concerned with the significance of things and with the Quest"⁶⁰ (with which one might compare Bors' significance as "the spiritual intellect concerned ... with earthly things"⁶¹), there is, in fact, little supporting narrative evidence in the cycle.

In the brother-sister relationship between Percivale and Dindrane (later somewhat confusingly called Blanchefleur), also preserved from Malory, there is, however, another important link between the two worlds.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁰"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 177.

⁶¹Ibid.

Symbolically, Percivale was also seen by Williams as "Taliessin in his highest degree",⁶² and this close relationship is expressed in the narrative by his friendship with the court-poet, his "verse-brother".⁶³

It is through his offices as brother and friend that Dindrane and Taliessin are brought together. From his first glimpse of Percivale's sister, Taliessin falls in love with her, and their love is given a comparatively elaborate treatment in the cycle - to a much greater extent, indeed, than is the love between Lancelot and Guinevere. Taliessin, by his continuing presence in Camelot, even to the celebration of the last Mass after the final débauche, remains deeply committed to the affairs of the world of Arthur and the court. On the other hand, Dindrane's ultimate retreat to the convent of White Nuns at Almesbury (and, in keeping with her traditional image, her subsequent martyr's death and burial in Sarras), commit her to the world of Carbonek and the Grail. The physical separation of Taliessin and Dindrane is, however, transcended by the peculiar nature of the love which each continues to bear for the other. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V, Williams regarded the

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³"The Sister of Percivale", Taliessin through Logres, p. 53.

experience of personal, romantic love to be an intimation of and often a prelude to the experience of an impersonal, Divine love. Their recognition of this in "The Departure of Dindrane"⁶⁴ unites Taliessin and Dindrane even in their physical separation, thus throwing into prominence still another link between the two centres of activity.

It is in creating Galahad, however, who might appear to have little concern with the affairs of Camelot, that Williams uses the technique of characterization to forge the strongest link between the two tales. His remarks on Galahad's first appearance in the traditional sources clearly exhibit his interest.

There are, in the history of the European imagination, a few moments when a superb invention of the very first importance takes place. I doubt whether there has ever been one of more real power than that of the invention of Galahad ... [his invention] as the son of Lancelot might easily not have happened. Someone - M. Vinaver says a Cistercian - at some time in some place thought of it; it was a moment as near to divine inspiration as any not technically so called can be.⁶⁵

As in Malory's version, the Galahad of the Taliessin cycle springs from the union of Elayne, the daughter of Pelles (for "He must be of the blood of Pelleas" [sic])⁶⁶

⁶⁴The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 32.

⁶⁵"Malory and the Grail Legend", The Image of the City, p. 187.

⁶⁶"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 176.

and Lancelot. And it was in Malory's presentation of Lancelot as the chief exponent of all earthly chivalric virtues that Williams saw useful possibilities for his conception of Galahad's character and role. In his discussion of the role and character of Galahad's father in Malory he remarked,

Lancelot, for all the errands upon which he rides, is never merely a knight-errant. He affirms friendship, courtesy, justice, and nobility - in all the references allowed them. He is almost the active centre of that kingdom of which Arthur is, in a sense, the passive. Arthur, of course, is no such poor thing, but it is true he does not seem to act.⁶⁷

Galahad, then, is born of a knight whose qualifications far outstrip those of any other of the Round Table. Lancelot is not only "eighth in succession from Christ (8 is the number of the Christhood)", and "the strongest and greatest knight alive",⁶⁸ "the chief figure of the Way of Affirmations",⁶⁹ he is also distinguished by his action in the narrative. It is Lancelot who stands at the right hand of the king from the earliest days of

⁶⁷"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 87.

⁶⁸"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 176.

⁶⁹"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 87.

Camelot,⁷⁰ who forgives and rescues Palomides,⁷¹ and who alone accords devotion to the Queen's person as well as her office. And it is through his love for Guinevere, adulterous and forbidden though it be, that he is "illuminated" and so brought to the daughter of Pelles.⁷² By virtue of this great love he is also, however, debarred from the Achievement of the Grail, brought to madness till the birth of his son, and so irretrievably kept in Camelot. Thus in the narrative role of Galahad's father are sown the seeds of the symbolic intention which Williams saw in the tale as a whole.

The great Arthuriad is no longer a division between this and its opposite and complementary companion - the Way of Rejections... There is, no doubt, a separation, but the separation is the union.⁷³

Although it is certainly true that Galahad, from a narrative point of view, is "only aware of the End",⁷⁴ Williams continues to remind his readers, through Galahad's words and actions, of his origins and hence of the "union"

⁷⁰See "The Calling of Arthur", "Mount Badon", and "The Crowning of Arthur", Taliessin through Logres.

⁷¹"Palomides Before his Christening", Taliessin through Logres, p. 64.

⁷²"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 177.

⁷³"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 88.

⁷⁴"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 177.

of the two worlds. Before he embarks upon the task of healing the wounded king, the episode which immediately precedes the voyage to Sarras, Galahad kneels at the gates of Carbonek to pray for forgiveness from his father.

Joy remembered joylessness; joy kneeled
under the arch where Lancelot ran in frenzy.

(TTL., p. 81)

For, of course, it matters not to Lancelot that in fathering Galahad he

... was betrayed there by Merlin and Brisen
to truth; he saw not; he was false to Guinevere.

(TTL., p. 81)

And ultimately, the pardon which Galahad seeks is borne by Bors, the cousin of Lancelot,

to the house of Carbonek from the fallen house of Camelot.

(TTL., p. 82)

The poem which immediately follows is "The Last Voyage", which describes Logres in civil war. The fellowship in Camelot has in fact been crumbling, at first almost imperceptibly and then more obviously, even as the lords in their quest of the Grail swing into the ascendant, the rise of one group paralleling the fall of the other. The very existence of the chief of the Quest lords, Galahad, has been the cause of yet one more grief in the rapidly accumulating miseries of Logres. Thus, Galahad prays that Lancelot will

'Forgive Us ... for Our existence;
forgive the means of grace and the hope of glory.

(TTL., p. 82)

By the inclusion of this plea by Galahad, Williams emphasizes the parallels between the two centres of activity, diminishing the original conflict by stressing the concern of one for the other.

A similar reminder occurs when Galahad makes his salutation to his father on his departure to Sarras.

'Fair lord, salute me to my lord Sir Lancelot my father,
and bid him remember of this unstable world.'
The grand Rejection sang to the grand Affirmation;

(RSS., p. 33)

Through Galahad's words, the reader is brought again to the centre and source from which have sprung the activities of both worlds. For it is in Camelot, imperfect realization of its potential though it finally be, that the impulse to grace and the will to act have originated.

It is appropriate that Taliessin through Logres (and according to the chronology of C.S. Lewis, the entire cycle) should close with the celebration of Mass, in Logres rather than Sarras, by the restored and chastened Lancelot, who, "not sworn of the priesthood",⁷⁵ is still "of this unstable world". The immediate setting is in itself

⁷⁵"Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", Taliessin through Logres, p. 89.

significant. Symbolically emphasizing the fact that now "the separation is a union", while maintaining the grounding of the narrative in Camelot, the Host is elevated over an altar which

. . . was an ancient stone laid upon stones;
Carbonek's arch, Camelot's wall, frame of Bors' bones.
(TTL., p. 89)

Little discussion has so far been devoted to the importance of the figure of Taliessin in the narrative structure of the cycle, apart from the brief allusions to his role as the court-poet of Camelot, friend of Percivale and lover of Dindrane. As might be inferred both from the title of one of the volumes of the cycle and from critical comment which habitually refers to the poems as "the Taliessin cycle", Taliessin serves to unify the diverse episodes which constitute the *Arthuriad*. He does so primarily, however, not in the role of protagonist but in that of narrator.

In raising him from a position of relative obscurity in Tennyson's account, Williams may at first have envisaged him in a more entirely central and active role, to the extent of his actually displacing Galahad as "the focal point".⁷⁶ In the first year of the rewriting process, the poems, with only one exception, utilize the figure of

⁷⁶Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, p. lxiii.

Taliessin extensively. When one comes to examine these early poems, however, one can detect signs of a slight shift in emphasis. "Taliessin's Return to Logres" (September 1934) involves Taliessin as an active character, but the next poem to which Williams turned his attention, "The Vision of the Empire" (October 1934), presents Taliessin essentially in the role of narrator, as does "Taliessin in the School of the Poets" (November 1934). "The Crowning of Arthur" (April 1935) utilizes Taliessin as a supplementary narrator, his descriptions being added to those of the author, while "The Star of Percivale" (July 1935)⁷⁷ reverts to the earlier practice of using Taliessin as an active character. As the cycle progresses it becomes increasingly evident that Taliessin's vital importance to the narrative structure of Williams' *Arthuriad* is focused in those poems in which he functions as a narrator, rather than in those which involve his activities as a fully developed character in his own right.

It is indeed true that Taliessin has many functions within the work. His relationship with Dindrane helps to link the two narrative centres. He is present at the rites which supernaturally prepare Logres for its destiny and is present also at the crucial battle of Mount Badon. In

⁷⁷Ibid.

addition, he is active as the "lieutenant" of an esoteric company of believers and influential in the lives of many minor characters. Williams, however, is essentially committed to the traditional narrative of Malory's Morte and makes no changes in the roles traditionally assigned to the major figures of the Arthuriad. Hence, in his "invention" of Taliessin he provides him with no actions of fundamental importance. All the court-poet's actions are basically ad hoc functions which could just as easily have been given to another figure rather than functions rising inevitably from his particular role and characterization. He is indispensable to Williams' cycle only in his capacity as all-seeing narrator.

"Druid-born and Byzantium-trained", Taliessin "... saw how the City / was based ...",⁷⁸ and saw that the Empire was truly composed of twelve "Acts of Identity", twelve images which are also the twelve houses of the Zodiac.

Aquarius for me opened the principle of eyes
in the clearness above the firmament; I saw below

(RSS., p. 24)

The court-poet possesses heightened insight and perception (though naturally acquired whereas Merlin's was a supernatural gift), and the faculty is emphasized repeatedly.

⁷⁸"Taliessin in the Rose-Garden", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 23.

"To visionary eyes ...",⁷⁹ "I followed the way / from the eyes",⁸⁰ "This I saw in a chamber of Byzantium; the princess / Dindrane again opened my eyes in Aquarius."⁸¹

In addition, Williams regarded Taliessin as a personification of one type of chastity. Even as he is called to his active part in the destiny of Logres, the young Taliessin recognizes his fate.

It is a doubt if my body is flesh or fish,
therefore no woman will ever wish to bed me
and no man make true love without me.
All the doctors come to stand about me,
yet I shall never have any near me to need me.

(RSS., p. 7)

And in "Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn", the poet is seen as possessing the same kind of remoteness and purity as the unicorn. With only an "alien love" to extend, and "no voice / to explain"⁸² it, "intellectual nuptials"⁸³ are the only kind he can offer to a maid.

Thus endowed with both visionary power and remote aloofness, separated from the rest of humanity, Taliessin can lay claim to the role of narrator as perhaps no other

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 24.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 27.

⁸²Taliessin through Logres, p. 22.

⁸³Ibid., p. 23.

figure in the cycle could. Through him, the reader can not only "see" the true significance of the Empire, or the beauty and holiness of the body, or the actual import of such qualities as justice, humility, and chastity, but can also follow events which are essential to a complete understanding of the narrative.

Using as the basis for selection the conventional principle that the narrator is generally to be distinguished by the extended use of the first-person singular (even if only by implication), one can isolate five poems which either contribute information available nowhere else, or offer a more clear-cut presentation of events elsewhere only sketched or alluded to. In "The Vision of the Empire",⁸⁴ we witness the emergence and development of the themes in harmonious accord with the design of the Emperor, and, we are given a retrospective view of the Fall and its inevitable consequences from generation to generation. The arrival of Taliessin at the camp of Arthur immediately prior to Arthur's assumption of the kingship of Logres is described in "Taliessin's Return to Logres"⁸⁵ as being in conformity with the intention of the Emperor and the activities of Merlin ("The Vision of the Empire"). "The

⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 7-9.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 3-5.

Departure of Merlin"⁸⁶ not only recounts Merlin's withdrawal into the wood of Broceliande on the completion of his work, but also gives a convenient résumé of Galahad's birth, convent upbringing, and assumption of the Perilous Siege. And, most important for the symbolic design as well as the narrative structure of the cycle, the wounded condition of Pelles (though not, of course, the actual event) and the forebodings of new war are linked in "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden"⁸⁷ with Guinevere's failure to fulfil her sacred trust and calling as the Queen of Logres because of her relentless pursuit of unsanctioned love.

From this point of view, the positioning of "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass"⁸⁸ as the final poem in the volume, Taliessin through Logres, is most appropriate. In this poem Taliessin, endowed in his capacity as narrator and seer with the ability to perceive the shape of things to come, is able to show the reader something of the total design of the chronicle through which Taliessin has taken him. Now it is possible to see the lords of the Table once more united in their presence at the Mass, and to see that, despite the destruction of the fellowship of the Table, of

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 75-7.

⁸⁷The Region of the Summer Stars, pp. 21-8.

⁸⁸Taliessin through Logres, pp. 89-91.

the city, and of the Empire, there still remains the possibility of reclamation from the wreckage of internal strife:

... the festival of flames
fell from new sky to new earth; the light in bands
of bitter glory renewed the imperial lands.

(TTL., p. 90)

We exposed, We exalted the Unity ...
... as it was done
the antipodean zones were retrieved round a white rushing
deck,
and the Acts of the Emperor took zenith from Caucasia to
Carbonek.

(TTL., p. 90)

Not only is a mystical union between the quick and the dead thus described, a greater unity of purpose is also discerned by Taliessin in the presence of Garlon at the Mass. It may be recalled that the Dolorous Blow was provoked by Garlon (elsewhere called the Invisible Knight) in Malory's account. In this poem, Williams invokes his presence in the following way:

... light-traced on high,
the unseen knight of terror stood as a friend;

(TTL., p. 90)

In addition, the references to "a white rushing deck" (of the ship of Solomon) should not be missed since Galahad is also present in a mystical sense.

Over the altar, flame of anatomized fire,
the High Prince stood, gyre in burning gyre;

(TTL., p. 91)

The final poem of Taliessin through Logres attempts, then, to resolve not only the conflicts implicit in the narrative development of the cycle, but also, through Taliessin's observations, effects a philosophical resolution of the basic paradoxes in both thematic and narrative structure. Just as the union of Pelles and Arthur is achieved by the presence of both at the Mass and the recognition of Garlon's being in some sense a "friend", so the possibility is left open that the destruction of the Empire has not been total and irrevocable. In this poem it becomes evident that the journey of the Quest lords to Sarras has not been merely a retreat for the elect but an experience which substantially affects the future of the Empire.

Only after communicating this final vision is the narrator withdrawn.

That which had been Taliessin rose in the rood;
in the house of Galahad over the altar he stood,
manacled by the web, in the web made free;
there was no capable song for the joy in me:

and finally,

that which was once Taliessin rides to the barrows of
Wales.

(TTL., p. 91)

Although no other character is given the consistently prominent treatment accorded Taliessin, it is nonetheless true that it falls to several other characters in the cycle

to present some very important information in the temporary role of narrator. For example, Lamorack, in the poem which in monologue form describes his obsession with the Queen Morgause,⁸⁹ provides the important background to the incest of Arthur and Morgause, the mutual slaying of Balin and Balan, which resulted from the wounding of Pelles.

Another voice, perhaps even more important than that of Lamorack, is Mordred's. Although Williams only required one poem⁹⁰ to disembarass him of his information, one cannot imagine such views coming as convincingly from any other figure, as perhaps one could in the case of Lamorack. Through the "nephew" of Arthur we learn not only of his treacherous plans to seize the kingdom, but also of the feud between Lancelot and Arthur and its cause in Lancelot's and Guinevere's mutual love. We are told how Guinevere has fled to the convent at Almesbury, and how Arthur, in defiance of the Pope's injunction, has gone to Gaul to pursue his personal quarrel, leaving Logres to the less-than-tender mercies of Mordred.

Likewise, the statements of Bors do not merely convey his own personal love for Elayne. In "Bors to

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 39-41.

⁹⁰"The Meditation of Mordred", The Region of the Summer Stars, pp. 47-9.

Elayne: on the King's Coins",⁹¹ a poem which occurs relatively early in the cycle's chronological arrangement of events,⁹² we find small but unmistakable signs of the perversion of the divine purpose of Logres, as the lords mistakenly make the medium of "exchange" Arthur's newly minted coins.

From these examples, it is apparent that whatever his general design, Williams did not consistently limit himself to a single figure to fill the role of narrator. In all probability he was striving in this for the broader scope (perhaps in unconscious conformity with the original epic plan of the cycle) which might result from such a multiplicity of viewpoints. In addition, it is not without relevance that many readers have noted the autobiographical aspect of the invention of the poet, Taliessin. Possibly Williams desired to offset the personal note by occasionally creating narrators who obviously differ from the persona of the author.

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it should be evident that the external structure of Williams' Arthuriad is extensively affected by his dilatory method

⁹¹Taliessin through Logres, pp. 42-5.

⁹²In C.S. Lewis' chronology the poem is thirteenth, falling somewhat short of the mid-point of the narrative.

of composition. Spanning some thirty-three years in all, the lengthy reworking and reconsideration of the material is reflected in apparent shifts in design and intention. The protracted period of composition throws into relief many flaws in the final product, but, as is made clear by occasional discussion in this chapter of his symbolic design, it also provided the author with the necessary leisure to develop the work thematically. Whatever the deficiencies of the resulting external structure, the work exhibits thoroughly competent handling of the internal or thematic structure, to which the discussion now turns.

CHAPTER III

THE CREATION OF A COSMOS

"Logres is Britain regarded as a province of the Empire with its centre at Byzantium".¹ Thus Williams anticipates for the reader the broad canvas which he provides as the setting for his Arthurian cycle. The provision of such a geographical and metaphysical framework rescues the poems from existence in vacuo by establishing "an historical basis, a resting place in fact".² It becomes clear from a reading of the poems, however, that the nature of the setting also brings crucial ideas and attitudes from well outside the immediate scope of the Matter of Britain to bear upon the subject matter of the cycle. As will be seen, many of these concepts are certainly pervasive and important enough to be regarded as the very conditions for the subsequent narrative development of Williams' *Arthuriad*.

Before beginning any discussion of these themes, or of the symbols to which the themes often give rise, it is necessary to observe a distinction in critical terminology.

¹The Region of the Summer Stars, p. vii.

²Charles Moorman, Arthurian Triptych, p. 45.

The dividing line between the terms image, metaphor, and symbol is fine indeed. "Semantically, the terms overlap; they clearly point to the same area of interest".³ For the purposes of this study it is proposed to use the term symbol to refer to those objects which, constituting one element of the metaphoric process, are employed regularly and extensively throughout the cycle in a consistent referential sense, and which have enough individual importance to merit attention in their own right.

Williams himself, in at least one instance, appears to see the problem in using such terminology as being one of indistinguishable similarity between the terms symbol and image rather than one of "overlap". He maintains with Coleridge that a symbol should have three characteristics:

(i) it must exist in itself, (ii) it must derive from something greater than itself, (iii) it must represent in itself that greatness from which it derives.⁴

But he then proceeds to assert his preference for the term image, "because it seems to me doubtful if the word symbol nowadays sufficiently expresses the vivid individual existence of the lesser thing".⁵ In much of his own

³Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, p. 186.

⁴The Figure of Beatrice, p. 7.

⁵Ibid.

critical work the word image is employed where another writer might just as validly have used the term symbol; and, indeed, for general purposes Williams appears not to distinguish between the two.

In certain specific cases, however, he uses image to indicate, either singly or collectively, an allusion or metaphor of several lines in length. Thus he can observe, "The image of a wood has appeared often",⁶ or remark that the "image of the City" in English verse is "built up by many descriptions, similes, metaphors, and maxims. These images, making altogether one greater image".⁷ The word as used in instances such as these merely serves to indicate general passages of description rather than, say, the closer identification of two objects sharing certain attributes and yet retaining independent existence. It may be observed that often it is Williams himself who is creating an image out of the assorted allusions or descriptions which he has assembled. In such cases his use of the term is casual indeed, though it may have the useful effect of imparting the impression of some precision, insight, and weight to his pronouncements.

⁶Ibid., p. 107.

⁷The Image of the City, p. 92.

A third sense in which he employs the term image returns us to the attributes which he chose to attach to the term symbol. An individual, he asserts, may be seen as "an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life".⁸ That is, in some respects, the individual derives from something greater than himself, partakes of that greatness, and still has existence in his own right. It is possible that in such contexts the term symbol is unsatisfactory for Williams because of what has been called its "long history in the worlds of theology".⁹ It has been observed that a religious symbol is usually based upon an "intrinsic relation between 'sign' and thing 'signified'",¹⁰ and often in a naively self-evident fashion to the frequent debasement of the symbol and deprivation of its individuality. The use of the Cross, for example, in a poem may require great effort on the part of reader and author alike if it is to retain any vestige of meaning beyond signifying the Passion of Christ. Although such symbols have accumulated through the centuries a wealth of associations, they are distinctly limited in range. By

⁸The Figure of Beatrice, p. 8.

⁹Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature, p. 188.

¹⁰Ibid.

consistently using the term image in theological contexts, Williams perhaps hoped to circumvent the restricted referential capacity of most religious symbolism and at the same time to renovate for his own use the fund of traditional Christian symbols by simply relabeling them images.

Williams' concept of symbol and his various uses of the term image have been treated in some detail in order to avoid possible confusion in future discussion both in this and in subsequent chapters. As Williams remarked in defining for his own purposes another literary term, his usage "should not be too narrowly confined to a literary manner",¹¹ and it is as well to be aware of this in advance when one is confronted with certain passages from his works. As will become increasingly evident, the theological studies, literary criticism, and in particular, the poetry, all make frequent use of the term, and in all of the varying senses outlined here. There is, indeed, a great deal to be said for the argument which would attempt to make his concept of image the centre of Williams' entire system of thought.

Northrop Frye has remarked that in "studying poems of immense scope, such as the Commedia or Paradise Lost,

¹¹The Figure of Beatrice, p. 14.

we find that we have to learn a good deal of cosmology".¹² Though Williams' Arthurian cycle is scarcely to be compared with the works which Frye instances, in view of its scope, it also may profit from consideration of its cosmological principles. Moreover, it is not slight in physical proportions. The two volumes of the cycle, together occupying some 150 pages and comprising thirty-two poems, are only two of a projected trilogy, the third of which was tentatively planned under the title of "Jupiter over Carbonek".¹³ Thus the work is scarcely negligible in bulk and, unified as it is by the use of Arthurian subject matter with its rich traditional background and complex associations, the poems commend themselves to some such scrutiny as Frye suggests.

In addition to indicating the vast imperial setting, Williams' Preface to The Region of the Summer Stars forestalls the reader's discovery of a corresponding but antipodean zone called P'o-l'u, an "opposite and infernal state"¹⁴ which is the underworld of the Empire. In effect, what is being arranged in these statements is an independent universe within an eschatological framework.

¹²Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 160.

¹³Anne Ridler, "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays", The Image of the City, p. 174.

¹⁴The Region of the Summer Stars, p. vii.

Nor is this universe yet complete. As we shall see, there is also a region beyond Logres called Broceliande and then, more remote, the holy city of Sarras. The action embodied in the Arthurian material and the achievement of the Grail is contained within these areas. Collectively, they constitute a complex cosmos which is virtually self-sufficient.

In his remarks about Dante and Milton, Frye was, of course, alluding to those established systems of cosmological thought, Ptolemaic and later Copernican, which in the past have been used to explain the existence and working of the universe. Nevertheless, his observation suggests a useful approach to Williams' cycle, since Logres is placed within the larger context of the Byzantine Empire, and the attitudes and thought which went into Williams' concept of the Empire very profoundly modify the traditional notions of the Matter of Britain.

The principles employed by Williams to describe and explain the working and events of his cosmos are culled from various schools of thought. The Ptolemaic theory contributes to his cosmology by implication when he embodies in his poems aspects of medieval life and thought, as, indeed, it does by his very use of the Arthurian material as a whole. In addition, Williams has recourse

to a variety of occult beliefs and Kabbalistic teachings in working out a coherent governing philosophy; but most important to his cosmology are the orthodox doctrines of Christianity, which are filtered through his method of personal interpretation.

The years from 1938, the date of the publication of Taliessin through Logres, to 1944, when The Region of the Summer Stars was published also saw the publication of several important theological and literary works by Williams. In 1938, He Came Down from Heaven, in the next year, The Descent of the Dove, in 1941, two pamphlets, The Way of Exchange and Religion and Love in Dante, in 1942, The Forgiveness of Sins, and finally, in 1943, The Figure of Beatrice. There is evidence that "The Figure of Arthur" was also in preparation at this time, though it was not published until 1948. Together with certain periodical essays and reviews these constitute the core of Williams' non-creative exposition of his main themes, themes which are the burden of concern in the Taliessin cycle.

Besides presenting a more objective, if more prosaic outline of his thought, these works are also interesting because they display something of the idiosyncratic treatment which certain doctrines and dogmas of the Church received at his hands, a process which is important in explaining the character of certain of the

themes in his Arthurian cycle. The Descent of the Dove, for example, is subtitled "A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church". It presents an outline of the Church's doctrinal growth from its first years after the Ascension of Christ up to the present day. In the emphasis which certain points of dogma receive in comparison with others and in the weight of importance attached to particular figures or periods in the Church's development, the highly personal nature of the author's interpretation begins to emerge. Although he has said elsewhere, "I follow everywhere the most common-place interpretation",¹⁵ as one reads through the above-mentioned works it becomes apparent that orthodoxy in the strictest sense is endangered by ubiquitous personal speculation.

A clear instance of the tendency is to be seen in the first chapter of The Descent of the Dove. In discussing the gradual fading of the sense of direct inspiration which Christians experienced in the first generations after the death of Christ, he remarks that there was

another method, also to fade, and yet of high interest and perhaps still of concern ... There grew up, it seems, in that young and ardent body an effort towards a particular spiritual experiment of, say, the polarization of the senses.¹⁶

¹⁵He Came Down From Heaven, p. 17.

¹⁶The Descent of the Dove, p. 11.

Such are the very circumspect terms in which he introduces this delicate topic. He ventures to be more explicit in the following pages. There was "an attempt, encouraged by the Apostles, to 'sublimate' ... The women - sub-introductae as they were called - apparently slept with their companions without intercourse",¹⁷ that is, men and women of these early centuries attempted through the emotions aroused by intimate physical proximity to realize and achieve knowledge of the Deity as revealed by Christ. By utilizing the force and spontaneity of mutual physical attraction, followers of the Christ were encouraged to believe that they could arrive at first-hand awareness of the Godhead.

Such a practice could scarcely hope to escape the notice of Church authorities for long, and it was first discouraged, and then formally forbidden by the Council of Nicaea in 325. Williams' account of this episode, which may strike modern readers as at best psychologically dangerous, deserves to be quoted at length.

In some cases it failed. But we know nothing - most unfortunately - of the cases in which it did not fail ... The great experiment had to be abandoned because of the "scandal" ... It was one of the earliest triumphs of "the weaker brethren", those innocent sheep who by mere volume of imbecility have trampled over many delicate and attractive flowers in Christendom. It is the loss,

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 12-3.

so early, of a tradition whose departure left the Church rather over-aware of sex, when it might have been creating a polarity with which sex is only partly coincident.¹⁸

In spite of the deft and witty phraseology, to deplore so readily the decision of the Church Fathers to discourage a practice which obviously would have lent itself to abuses of the worst kind is irresponsible to say the least. The necessity of his condemning the Church's ruling, however, will be obvious to those readers already acquainted with some of the author's other studies.

The edict of the Church conflicts with the very basis of Williams' beliefs. The "doctrine" of "Romantic Theology" is discussed at greater length in Chapter V of this thesis. For the present, it is sufficient to note that the conviction that the personal experience of love between two individuals should be a preliminary to the experience of Divine love is the foundation of much of his writing, particularly his studies on Dante. In both Religion and Love in Dante and The Figure of Beatrice he begins with Dante's experience and assessment of the effects of personal love. The intention of Williams' argument in these works becomes obvious when he alludes to the friend of Beatrice, Giovanna as the "Precedent Lady".¹⁹ On the

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹The Figure of Beatrice, p. 28.

basis of the resemblance in name (Joan - John) and function (Primavera, Spring - the Precursor), he proceeds to heighten the parallel which Dante drew between the friend who preceded Beatrice in her salutation of the poet and John (the Baptist) who "preceded the true light",²⁰ Christ. As Christ was held to show the way to Divine love, so Beatrice assumes a Christ-like function in demonstrating to Dante the relation between eros and agape.

Williams' mental habits of thorough analysis and scrupulous re-examination, to which Chapter I made reference, assert themselves in the themes of his mature prose works to render their content far removed from the more conventional paths of Christian belief. Because of the uniformly idiosyncratic nature of much of his thought, it will be found that the prose works composed between 1938 and 1943 will occasionally be useful in illuminating central themes of the Arthurian cycle.

C.S. Lewis' commentary on the Arthurian poems suggests for the novice approaching the cycle a chronology which blends the poems of the two books, presenting the cycle primarily in terms of narrative; but he offers no suggestion for the position of the "Prelude" of each volume, beyond observing that they "stand outside the time-scheme and ... will be readily understood when the cycle

²⁰Ibid., p. 29.

has been mastered as a whole".²¹ The character of these two poems is both historical and recapitulatory. In that they occasionally anticipate, by allusion, the events in later narrative, it is true that they can probably best be interpreted or comprehended in retrospect. However, in their historical capacity they provide basic information and insights essential for interpretation of the poems which follow. Moreover, when they do allude to events which are elaborated elsewhere, it is frequently from a different perspective, and they then provide sidelights and information which the reader will find it useful to recall in later poems. Hence, this study begins where the cycle formally begins, with the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres.

The volume is dedicated to Humphrey Milford, his superior at Oxford University Press, "under whom we observed an appearance of Byzantium". A.M. Hadfield, who first met Williams at Amen House and recalls many memories of him as a friend and co-worker, says of the relationship:

The Press worked a normal hierarchical system which gave Charles philosophical delight, but the most important fact in the whole organization was its head, the Publisher.... [He] became the keystone of Charles's working life ... He could administer a large business, and he could be the centre of a large system of life.²²

²¹C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad", Arthurian Torso, p. 95.

²²A.M. Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams, p. 39.

She recalls, also, an unpublished poem by Williams (written in 1931) dedicated to Sir Humphrey, the 'Caesar' of those early Masques which were performed in the Library of Amen House. The poem reads in part:

... still the latest [verse] holds
the Emperor's image, the Emperor in Byzantium
and the Lateran Church upon the Caelian hill:
the Emperor who is not Justinian or God Almighty
or you or Shakespeare, but is all at once and each;
and had not been - how could he? - had you not ruled.²³

Thus, in the pattern of Williams' daily life may well lie the seeds of his concept of the Empire as a vast working hierarchical system under benevolent imperial protection and encouragement.

The vastness of this Empire is invoked in the first stanza of the "Prelude": "the glory of the Emperor stretched to the ends of the world"; and the phrase "the glory ... the power and the kingdom",²⁴ echoing the final lines of the Lord's Prayer, further imparts a sense of cosmic scope.

The Emperor is "the lord of charity", but his benevolence is of a remote kind: "starlight" is a "flash of the Emperor's glory", and his method of bringing Logres into the Empire is equally distanced: "the word of the

²³Ibid., p. 125.

²⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

Emperor established a kingdom in Britain".²⁵

The "Prelude" from The Region of the Summer Stars enlarges upon these features of the Emperor and his Empire (as the poems of that volume often do for many of those in Taliessin through Logres). "The Empire, in the peace of the Emperor, / expected perfection; it awaited the Second Coming".²⁶ The peace, as we are told in the previous stanza, has come because the Empire "seized on the Roman polity" as one of its terms of existence. The move had the desired result:

the Acts of the Throne were borne by speeding logothetes,
and the earth flourished, hazel, corn, and vine.

(RSS., p. 2)

The picture of the Empire as a vast web of efficiently functioning humanity under the splendid but remote and impersonal figure of "the only sublime Emperor"²⁷ is further extended in the following lines,

The Empire lay in the imposed order; around
the Throne the visionary zone of clear light
hummed with celestial action; there the forms
of chamberlains, logothetes, nuncios, went and came,

(RSS., p. 3)

and,

. . . all
the themes vibrated with duty and expectation

(RSS., p. 4)

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 2.

²⁷Ibid.

Some question may naturally arise as to the source of the particularity in this portrait of the Empire and its ruler. Gervase Mathew, who held the chair of Byzantine Studies when he knew Williams in Oxford, has said of Williams' concept of Byzantine civilization:

By 1938 Charles Williams' Byzantium already corresponded with those hesitant conclusions of modern scientific research of which he only learnt in 1940, and possessed a reality that Gibbon completely lacked.²⁸

There has been much speculation as to the works that Williams may possibly have consulted in the formulation of his concept of Byzantium. The notebook which he kept till perhaps the early twenties makes only one reference to a Byzantine Emperor. Linden Huddleston, who was fortunate enough to have access to many of Williams' private papers, lists no source readings in Byzantine history in his thesis, though he does mention many well-known texts in connection with other aspects of the cycle as evidence that Williams was in the habit of going to scholarly works as a preliminary to the formulation of certain themes.

From the many possibilities, George Every has suggested Robert Byron's The Byzantine Achievement as a probable source,²⁹ but as Huddleston has observed, its

²⁸Gervase Mathew, "Williams and the Arthuriad", Time and Tide, Jan. 1949, p. 14.

²⁹George Every, Poetry and Responsibility, p. 47.

publication in 1928 was probably too late substantially to have influenced Williams' ideas. His early Arthurian poems in Heroes and Kings were published in 1930-31 and in these,

the complexity of the image enters the ... poems in a very matter-of-fact way, as the provenance of the movement in Logres whereby the kingdom of Arthur was established.³⁰

Nevertheless, Byron's account is useful to the student of Williams' late cycle as it provides objective statement of certain historical details incorporated in Williams' poems. It will be recalled, for example, that Williams attributes to the Empire the feature of Roman traditions in civil government. The emphasis may well strike one as undue unless one reviews the facts surrounding this feature.

A useful gloss on the characteristic of "Roman polity" is provided by Byron:

Above, however, the mere sequence of edicts ... there stands that salient gift to posterity, the Roman law ... Though not finally perfected till between the years 450 and 564, this supreme outcome of the practical Roman mind was destined to prove the one continuous link between the ancient world and the modern ... its scope had expanded with the Empire ... In conjunction with the bureaucracy, it constituted the whole keystone of Byzantine political stability.³¹

The actual codification of Roman law by Justinian occurred

³⁰Linden Huddleston, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams", p. 55.

³¹Robert Byron, The Byzantine Achievement, pp. 50-1.

after the riots and insurgences of 532, and of this formal step Byron says:

In the volumes that he planned and caused to be compiled, the primary rules of social existence, redistributed in accordance with the Christian ethic were registered in perpetuity for the benefit of a Byzantine, a European, and a world-wide posterity. For the moment, abridged editions diffused from Beyrut to Rome, opened the knowledge of justice to all the officials and subjects of the Empire.³²

The historical existence of the Pandects and Codes of Justinian, as we have seen, emerges in Williams' cycle as "The Acts of the Throne", which, "borne by the speeding logothetes", are carried throughout the Empire.

In many passages in the two "Preludes" one becomes aware of semi-mystical echoes, for behind the figure of the Emperor,

Beyond the ancient line of imperial shapes
it saw the Throne of primal order, the zone
of visionary powers, and almost (in a cloud) the face
of the only sublime Emperor; as John once
in Patmos, so then all the Empire in Byzantium:

(RSS., p. 2)

As Williams had remarked in prose, in his concept of Byzantium, the Emperor was first interpreted as "a kind of sacerdotal royalty",³³ for when considered from the perspective of the twentieth century, "about ... his figure

³²Ibid., pp. 82-3.

³³"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, p. 181.

... there lay something of a supernatural light - at best mystical, at worst magical".³⁴ There is, in fact, in the figure of the Byzantine Emperor much that is no longer inherent in our general concepts of kingship. Mathew, for example, has observed that,

Byzantine civilization had always been a corporate whole centered not so much on the person as on the mind of the Emperor conceived as a ray of Divine Wisdom.³⁵

Byzantium was primarily useful to Williams as the centre of his imperial setting by virtue of the unprecedentedly close identification of Church and State. From the very year of its foundation, 324 A.D., Constantine, as sole Emperor, had established its state religion as Christianity. Of Constantine's role, Williams has given the following prose account:

Constantine was master of the Empire; he looked to be more. "I am appointed," he said, "to be bishop of the relations of the Church to the world at large." ... He saw himself already in the most difficult of all offices, the crowned point of union between the supernatural and the natural. He summoned the first General Council ... The adorned figure of the Emperor, throned among the thirty score of prelates ... signifies many things ... there a new basis - a metaphysical basis - was ordained for society.³⁶

³⁴"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 80.

³⁵Gervase Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics, p. 160.

³⁶The Descent of the Dove, p. 48.

In the course of the years over which the composition of the Arthurian cycle was spread, his original conception of the Emperor enlarged and for Williams:

... gradually he became - I would not say God but at least God as active, God as known in Church and State, God as ruling men ... Byzantium then was the place of the centre, the providence of the actual world.³⁷

In his role as vice-regent of God and self-styled defender of Christendom, it is important to remember that Constantine, like later Emperors, presided over a series of Ecumenical Councils. By a politically astute stratagem, "the popular vice, argument, was diverted to the less destructive province of theology".³⁸ An account of the decisions of many of these councils together with discussion of the implications of the various debates and of dogmas which were finally adopted may be found in The Descent of the Dove.

For Williams' systematic cosmology as it emerged in the late poetry, undoubtedly the most important of these theological disputes was that provoked by the teaching of Nestorius (ca. 428). He proposed to the Church at Byzantium that they accept as doctrine the "preponderating divinity [of Christ] to the discount of his humanity".³⁹

³⁷"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, p. 181.

³⁸Robert Byron, The Byzantine Achievement, p. 15.

³⁹Ibid., p. 79.

Thus, in the "Prelude" to The Region of the Summer Stars,

... the careful Nestorius, coming to befriend peace, preached in Byzantium. Before the sermon was at end the metaphysicians, sitting to note him, heard from the City the roar of burning and bundled torches rise through the fixed stars:

(RSS., p. 2)

Something of the finer distinctions involved in the Nestorian controversy may be gathered from Williams' prose account.

[He asserted] that there were in Christ two beings united by a moral union and not one divine Person ... It was this that caused Nestorius to deny that the Blessed Virgin was theotokos, the mother of God. But he denied also, inevitably, that she was anthropotokos, the mother of Man. The opposite school maintained that she was both, for both the Fall and the Redemption were in soul and body. The mystery was in Flesh and Blood.⁴⁰

Historically, the proposal of Nestorius was quashed at the Council of Ephesus.

Deep interest in doctrinal distinctions was, of course, an important characteristic of Williams' belief, but the implications of the Nestorian heresy are especially central to his interpretation of Christian principles. In a periodical contribution written in 1939 he asserted:

... the Church ... ever since it had rejected the Nestorian idea of a merely moral union of the two natures in Christ, had been committed to a realistic sense of the importance of matter:⁴¹

⁴⁰The Descent of the Dove, p. 70.

⁴¹"Sensuality and Substance", The Image of the City, p. 68.

Hence, the decision of the Church over the controversy, epitomized in the phrase, "Theotokos, Anthropolokos",⁴² appears as the "orthodox wisdom" of the Emperor. Christ is "the double-fledged Logos", and the "glory of the Emperor" is the "glory of substantial being".⁴³

Concerning Paul's evangelizing activities, another of Williams' prose accounts supplies a useful gloss.

In order to understand and to explain the convert produced practically a new vocabulary. To call him a poet would be perhaps improper ... But he used words as poets do; he regenerated them. And by St. Paul's regeneration of words he gave theology first to the Christian Church.⁴⁴

In the "Prelude" to The Region of the Summer Stars, the "road from the universe into dematerialized spirit" of ancient Greek thought is seen to have been replaced in the teachings of Paul by his invention of "the vocabulary of faith", in which "he defined in speech the physiological glory", the Incarnation of Christ, and "named in its twyfold Nature the golden Ambiguity".⁴⁵ This dual nature of Christ is reasserted by the Church in its rejection of Nestorianism. The "new-spread bounty" of Paul's teaching

⁴²"Prelude", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 2.

⁴³"Prelude", Taliessin through Logres, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴The Descent of the Dove, p. 8.

⁴⁵The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 1.

becomes "the sustenance of Empire ... the ground of faith and earth",⁴⁶ and the "golden and rose-creamed flesh of the grand Ambiguity",⁴⁷ which is Christ, becomes for all time the identifying mark of the Empire.

The outlines of Williams' cosmology now begin to emerge more clearly, as a summary of his conclusions in "The Figure of Arthur" demonstrates.

At that time [i.e., Arthur's] the centre of the Roman imperium lay in Byzantium. The Empire was Christian, and not only Christian but orthodox and Trinitarian. The Arian heresies had been defeated. Christ was adored as God and not as a created being. The variations of this which were called Nestorianism had also been overcome. It had been determined that the mystery of the redemption lay not only in the operation of true God but by that operation in flesh and blood.⁴⁸

Within the account of the Nestorian controversy, moreover, lie the seeds of an identification which is essential to both later poems and to the general concept of the Empire. Williams believed that

The operations of matter are a means of the operation of Christ, and the body has not, in fact, as some pious people suggest, fallen a good deal farther than the soul.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Arthurian Torso, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁹"Sensuality and Substance", The Image of the City, p. 68.

Though the Church formally rejected the dichotomy between body and soul, allowing it as no part of its official doctrine, it "has continually returned in its unofficial language".⁵⁰ The result of this "unofficial Manichaeism"⁵¹ is that:

The great world and energy of the body have been either deprecated or devotionalized; and by devotionalized I mean turned into a pale imitation of 'substance', of spirit; thus losing their own powers and privileges without, in general, gaining any other. There has been a wide feeling that the more like an indeterminate soul the body can be made the better. But ... the body is not 'like' the soul; it is like nothing but itself. The principle of sensuality is unique and divine. ... soul ought not to be allowed to reduce the body to its own shadow - at any rate, [not] in the Christian Church.⁵²

Williams concludes his plea for due recognition of the body with a statement alluding to the Ascension of Christ:

it was a real body ... which there withdrew through all the dimensions. 'Handle me and see-.' Repulsive materialism! But that was how the Divine Word talked.⁵³

Certainly he was not unaware of the common revulsion of some especially ardent sectors of the Church from an

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 69.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 75.

emphasis on the integrity of flesh and matter, and he was equally quick to detect this reaction even at stages in early Church history. Some of the rationalizations of factions of the Church he views, however, as particularly "deadly",⁵⁴ especially those of Gnosticism. Stemming from "the contact of the Faith with the less reputable Greek metaphysics and the wilder Near-Eastern inventions",⁵⁵ this outgrowth of Christianity is unerringly dissected in Williams' most scathing prose.

They accepted the idea of Salvation; they accepted heavenly beings in operation; they accepted supreme and passionless Deity. They then proceeded to purify these ideas from the low and crude interpretations which a materialistic Christianity had somehow introduced into them.⁵⁶

In the "Prelude" to The Region of the Summer Stars, the line, "the liminary heresiarchs feared the indiscretions of matter",⁵⁷ is, of course, an allusion in similar terms to Gnostic tendencies in the early Church. They denied that supreme Deity had been involved in any way in the Creation of matter, a concept that they regarded as "indecent".⁵⁸

⁵⁴The Descent of the Dove, p. 22.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁷The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 2.

⁵⁸The Descent of the Dove, p. 23.

Undoubtedly, many still, consciously or unconsciously, see the concept of a God's involvement with created matter as indecent, and it is this attitude that Williams was concerned to oppose in the most basic tenets of his religious conviction.

In his view, there is for the Christian the clear-cut duty to realism, the duty to take account of the flesh, for by the Incarnation it was determined that "Our flesh was to hold, to its degree, the secrets of His own". In the teaching of Christ,⁵⁹

'A new earth' was promised as well as 'a new heaven'. Whatever the promise means, that earth is presumably in some relation to this earth.⁶⁰

In 1942, in the Dublin Review, there appeared an article by Williams entitled "The Index of the Body", which must have interested many readers of Taliessin through Logres. It opens with a quotation from Wordsworth's Prelude:

... the human form
To me became an index of delight,
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.⁶¹

⁵⁹"Natural Goodness", The Image of the City, p. 77.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 76.

⁶¹William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Book viii, 11. 279-81.

As Williams observed, "There are moments in all poetry when the reader has to ask himself whether a word used by the poet is accurate not only for the poet's universe but for the reader's own....it is sometimes important."⁶² In this particular instance, the word index is of central importance to Williams' own cosmology. In his own words,

Some such idea, Wordsworth's lines suggest, the body and even the members of the body may give of the delight, grace, honour, power, and worthiness of man's structure. The structure of the body is an index to the structure of a greater whole.⁶³

This, as Williams was quick to realize, was virtually the equivalent of the ancient concept that man bears in himself the microcosmic representation of a macrocosm, and in this article, he attempts to renovate the idea in Christian terms once more. Referring to its historical associations in pre-Christian times, its position in the traditions of Jewish theosophy, and even Islamic belief, as well as its affiliation with the less reputable but equally pervasive schools of occult knowledge, he maintains that "The visionary forms of the occult schools are but dreams of the Divine Body".⁶⁴ The relationship which he proposes, however, is one between

⁶²"The Index of the Body", The Image of the City, p. 80.

⁶³Ibid., p. 81.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 84.

man and Christ, "the Sacred Body", rather than the more traditional one of relationship between man and the universe at large:

it is clear that the Sacred Body was itself virtue. The same qualities that made His adorable soul made His adorable flesh. ... The virtues are both spiritual and physical - or rather they are expressed in those two categories.⁶⁵

Thus, if the human body is considered as being an Index, that which it indexes is virtuous quality discerned in the Incarnate God. The traditional attribution of 'noble' qualities to certain members of the body, the eyes and the heart, for example, are common recognitions of this idea.

But it is not so often recognized as a truth underlying all members - the stomach, the buttocks ... Eyes then are compacted power; they are an index of vision; they see and refer us to greater seeing. Nor has the stomach a less noble office. It digests food; that is, in its own particular method, it deals with the nourishment offered by the universe... So even with those poor despised things, the buttocks. There is no seated figure, no image of any seated figure, which does not rely on them for its strength and balance. They are at the bottom of the sober dignity of judges; the grace of a throned woman; the hierarchical session of the Pope himself reposes on them.⁶⁶

As Williams remarks, this vision "is a point not so much of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 84-5.

doctrine as of imagination",⁶⁷ but he also asserts that "Christians ... may be permitted to press the significance"⁶⁸ of such associations, for

The Sacred Body is the plan upon which physical creation was built...⁶⁹

We experience, physically, in its proper mode, the Kingdom of God: the imperial structure of the body carries its own high doctrines - of vision, of digestion of mysteries, of balance, of movement, of operation.⁷⁰

A good index can indeed be studied in itself. To study the body so is to increase our preparation for the whole great text. ⁷¹

In the cycle, the identity of mortal man and his divine creator can be seen in its initial stages in the introductory lines, which describe the relationship between Christ, the double-natured Incarnation of God, and man:

the flesh and blood, the golden cream and the rose tinctures; these dwelled in Byzantium; they were held in men and women, or even (as named qualities) in the golden day and the rose-gardens of Caucasia.

(RSS., p. 3)

In this respect, the first edition of Taliessin through Logres contains in its end-leaf design a useful adjunct to interpretation of the poems. The drawing was

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 85.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 86.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 87.

⁷¹Ibid.

made by Lynton Lamb, a fellow employee with the Press, under Williams' entire direction. It is recorded that the poet was completely satisfied with the result, so accurately did it represent the contents of the book.⁷²

Both leaves, front and back, show a map of Europe. Lightly superimposed upon the map is the figure of a reclining woman, so arranged that the head is positioned over Britain, the breasts over France, the hands over Italy, the navel in Byzantium, the buttocks over the province of Caucasia, and the genitals in the general region of Jerusalem, while the legs and feet are moving off the map. Williams' identification of the whole body with the Empire can thus be clearly seen from the outset and much of the subsequent symbolism readily assimilated by the reader.

The fact that the map is an extra-literary aid to the reader, and further, one not available to those with later editions, constitutes perhaps both a flaw in the total design of the publication and a barrier to full understanding of the implications of certain allusions in the opening poems. For example, "the light on the hills of Caucasia"⁷³ of the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres,

⁷²A.M. Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams, p. 146.

⁷³Taliessin through Logres, p. 2.

is not merely a description of the natural beauty of environment made manifest in some way by knowledge of Christian doctrine. It is also a reference to the quality inherent in that member of the body, the buttocks, for which Caucasia stands (and which in turn symbolizes that province in later references). As Williams had observed, anatomically, they provide balance to the seated figure; in their use as symbol for the province of Caucasia, they should convey something of the balance of the "orthodox wisdom" of the Empire.

A later poem in the volume does make the identification more explicit. In "The Vision of the Empire", the abstract generalizations of the "Prelude" are replaced by the detailed scene in which

The Empire's sun shone on each round mound,
double fortalices defending dales of fertility.

(TTL., p. 7)

And the women of the theme rejoice,

bearing in themselves the shape of the province
founded in the base of space,
in the rounded bottom of the Emperor's glory.

.....

.....

the lost name, the fool's shame,
fame and frame of lovers in lowlands of Caucasia,
rang round snowy Elburz.

The organic body sang together.

(TTL., p. 7)

Thus far, the symbolism which begins to emerge is virtually self-explanatory. The basis of symbolic identification can readily be seen to have its roots in Williams' conviction that the figure of Christ is "the Mystery in flesh and blood", "the Deivirilis",⁷⁴ whose nature is reflected in that of all mankind, individually in the body of man, mystically in the figure of the Emperor, and, by extension, collectively in the concept of an organic Empire. Though systematic development is virtually impossible to trace on the basis of available material, something of the general processes by which these themes and identities developed should now be clear.

By way of further example, one may notice the manner of the emergence as a poetic device of the province in which Byzantium is contained. The term Caucasia originally appeared as Circassia (from the Arabian Nights) in the earliest volume of Arthurian poems, Heroes and Kings, where it was used "lightly in certain allusions to frank non-significant sex affairs".⁷⁵ Williams says that the word later became unable "to bear the weight with which I wished to charge it",⁷⁶ presumably because of its

⁷⁴"Prelude", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 3.

⁷⁵"The Making of Taliessin", The Image of the City, p. 181.

⁷⁶Ibid.

associations with popularized oriental literature. He altered the name to Caucasia because

It was more historic, it had larger scope, it (like Byzantium) was capable of meaning more. That it referred (anatomically) more particularly to the buttocks was a late development. I can never see why the buttocks are funnier than any other part of the body; they support us when we sit, they are balance and (in that sense) justice. They are erotic, it is true, and that was an advantage for the poem; but they are plainly and naturally so; they are not mixed up, as eyes and hands may be, with the active moral question.⁷⁷

The identities propounded in these introductory passages are not simply a series of one-to-one correspondences, and to attempt to read them as such does serious violence to the intention of the cycle. As Williams had remarked, Byzantium was attractive because "it was capable of meaning more". The complexity of the symbolism contained in the setting is not merely a literary virtue or problem. It is a complete statement of the complexity inherent in the very principles and doctrines of the Church as Williams saw them.


In his evolving treatment of Byzantium, he was attempting a rebuttal of the more stale and simplistic approaches to Christianity. Life, in his view, is lived under a hierarchical order, inevitably under the authority of another; properly seen, it can also be republican in many respects, as created things of all orders reflect the

⁷⁷Ibid.

unique integrity with which they are endowed by their Creator and which is made manifest through the Redemption of an Incarnate God.

Thus, geographically, Byzantium was located within Caucasia, as the navel is within the general area of the buttocks; but further, it is traditionally regarded as the centre of the body, and in certain medieval schools of thought, the stomach was believed to be the seat of the soul. Hence the importance of the authority of the Emperor. But though the other members of the body or themes of the Empire may be conceived of as being under the direction of a ruling centre, they nevertheless contribute uniquely to the well-being of the whole. In ways which will later be seen more clearly, each theme, like each individual, has a function in the working of the organism, a function which can be fulfilled by no other, not even by the source of directing authority.

Conversely, the symbol for the body is the Empire, that for, say, the hands is Italy, and Logres represents the head, so that the practical virtues and qualities which the poet holds to reside in these countries are also capable of being visited upon the member with which they are linked in the system of symbolism. In these ways a working agreement for the basic symbolic structure is established early in the cycle, as an essential condition for the interpretation of the Arthurian material.



The author himself has isolated this symbolic structure as "one of the most important" of the "Images"⁷⁸ for an understanding of his cycle, and in the absence of textual proof of the development of certain additional refinements in its significance, his statement may be quoted here as summary.

The Empire then is (a) all Creation-with logothetes and what not as angels and such- (b) Unfallen Man; (c) a proper social order; (d) the true physical body. I left it female in appearance because the Emperor must be masculine, but this is accidental... The Emperor is [(i)] God-in-operation or God-as-known-by-man; (ii) Fate; (iii) operative force-as and according to the person concerned, but mostly here the God relation....Caucasia is the physical fundamental (a) the buttocks; (b) basic senses; (c) direct sex; (d) village society. Gaul is 'fruitfulness' (a) the breasts; (b) traditional organization; (c) scholastic debates and doctrines; (d) theology. Byzantium is rather the whole concentration of body and soul than any special member.⁷⁹

This commentary was originally made available in a note for C.S. Lewis, but was also issued at the same time (ca. 1940) to several other friends who were interested in the (then) recently published Taliessin through Logres. When one recalls that it was this volume which contained the map depicting so graphically the symbolic geography, and that this first of the two volumes contains the more essential references to the cosmic setting which Williams

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 178.

had created, it seems perhaps odd that such detailed explanation should be required. Moreover, at least two of his theological works, The Descent of the Dove and He Came Down from Heaven, were then readily available for extra-literary amplification. Nevertheless, as if in response to the mystification of this sector of his audience, the second volume, The Region of the Summer Stars, provides internal elaboration, one might even say meditation, on the themes introduced in the first.

The feature may easily be seen in a comparison of the treatment of those aspects of the "Prelude" of each volume which have already been discussed. The "orthodox wisdom"⁸⁰ alluded to in Taliessin through Logres receives amplification in the account of the Nestorian controversy in The Region of the Summer Stars. The "glory of the Emperor, glory of substantial being",⁸¹ of the first volume is seen in the second book individually in men and women of Byzantium, and as qualities in the natural environment. From the remote figure reflected in the beauty of starlight, who creates by a word, the Emperor becomes in the later volume the benevolent authority under whose guidance the Empire "hummed with celestial action"⁸²

⁸⁰Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 2.

⁸²The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 3.

and "vibrated with duty".⁸³

But the amplifying nature of the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars can probably be demonstrated best by consideration of the treatment of a feature of the Empire hitherto untouched in previous discussion, the introduction of the Grail theme. In the "Prelude" of the first volume we are told that, "Carbonek, Camelot, Caucasia, were gates and containers, intermediations of light".⁸⁴ The preceding stanza states that "the Emperor established a kingdom in Logres", but the description of Carbonek and Camelot as "gates and containers" would seem to imply rather more than that they simply partake in some fashion of the glory of the Empire. It is, in fact, an allusion to the anticipated passage of the Grail through the Empire; but the following section of this "Prelude" does little to clarify the reference, since it passes quickly on, in almost glancing summary, to outline the 'history' of the province of Logres. Its rulers are "blind", nourishing their country by recourse to principles of "rational virtue",⁸⁵ which are inevitably fallacious in that they exclude reference to a supra-rational power. Hence, the fellowship of the "Table" is broken, and even the advent of

⁸³Ibid., p. 4.

⁸⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

⁸⁵Ibid.

Galahad cannot save the kingdom. The "Prelude" makes no further reference to the Grail motif, but passes on to a consideration of the total destruction of the Empire as a whole.

As Williams had indicated in the Preface to The Region of the Summer Stars, the Empire, like the first generations after the Ascension, still lived in active expectation of the Return of Christ. In the "Prelude" of this volume, therefore,

The Empire, in the peace of the Emperor,
expected perfection; it awaited the Second Coming
of the Union, of the twy-natured single Person,
centuries belated, now to be;

(RSS., pp. 2-3)

and,

Hope ...

.....
in them looked on the sea, and across the sea
saw coming, from the world of the Three-in-One,
in a rich container, the Blood of the Deivirilis,
communicated everywhere, but there singly borne,

(RSS., p. 3)

This is the first reference in the "Prelude" and, indeed, in the cycle taken as a whole, to the Grail as a means of the Second Coming. Although it is here somewhat oblique, the next stanza is more explicit. The Grail is named, and in the final stanza something of its history is indicated.

all the peoples awaited the Parousia, all
the themes vibrated with duty and expectation
of the coming of the vessel where, are the Deposition,
the blood of the golden single-personed Ambiguity

fulfilled its commission and was caught; then for
 was hidden in its own place, till at last (bidden ^{a season}
 by ultimate Reason) it deigned at last emerge
 out of the extreme verge of the west and the east;

(RSS., p. 4)

These lines present in capsule form the lineage of the Grail as the vessel in which was caught the blood of Christ shed during the Crucifixion. Lost or hidden, it was nevertheless popularly believed still to exist, and its anticipated reappearance assumed mythic proportions in the popular imagination. This aspect of the Grail is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, but for the present it will be recalled that the end-paper map of Taliessin through Logres contains no mention of the name Sarras. Its putative position may be inferred as lying west from Britain, at a spot where, according to the above lines, east and west theoretically meet. This is the land of the Three-in-One, the Trinity, the country of the Holy city.⁸⁶ Its closest neighbour is the most westerly theme, Britain, and within Britain lies Carbonek, the Grail Castle of Arthurian traditions. Therefore, first Carbonek, later Camelot, and finally Caucasia are anticipated as "gates and

⁸⁶Not to be confused with Jerusalem. Although Williams was aware that Sarras was traditionally situated in the general region of Jerusalem, he nevertheless felt obliged to relocate it in an extreme westerly direction, apparently feeling the incongruity of the Quest lords journeying back over an area that was, by his own making, associated with temporal values.

containers" in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres, avenues of approach through which the Grail in its passage will herald the Second Coming. Thus, here, in this "Prelude", is confirmed the motivation for the action embodied in the Arthurian material, the first seeds of which are sown in these lines of the "Prelude" to Taliessin through Logres.

The remaining aspect of the Empire's historical background is to be gathered from lines in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres:

... history began; the Moslem stormed Byzantium;
lost was the glory, lost the power and the kingdom.

(TTL., p. 1)

By denying the Divinity of Christ, Islam also, of course, denies the Incarnation as a union of the two divine natures. Thus, although the invading Moslems had helpfully destroyed the "dualism of Persia",⁸⁷ that is, they suppressed the belief in a polarity of forces, a belief which came perilously close to being a species of Manichaeism, they also destroyed the essential quality of the Empire.

Caucasia fell to the Moslem;
the mamelukes seized the ancient cornland of Empire.
Union is breached; the imams stand in Sophia.

Good is God, the muezzin
calls, but lost is the light on the hills of Caucasia,
glory of the Emperor, glory of substantial being.

(TTL., p. 2)

⁸⁷Taliessin through Logres, p. 2.

The notebook which Williams kept during the years when he first planned the cycle contains several references to the possibility of using Islam as a feature of the setting and illustrates something of the problems involved in the composition.

? Bring Arthur and his surroundings in England, about A.D. 500, forward and parallel to Charlemagne and his surroundings in France, A.D. 800: so as to obtain the full effect of Islam, in Africa, in Spain.⁸⁸

The effect on Spain or Africa is scarcely mentioned in the final cycle (the Caliphate of Cordova has only a passing allusion), but the assault on Constantinople by the Mohammedan forces, which actually took place some four centuries after its founding, constitutes the most serious physical and metaphysical threat to all that the Empire, in Williams' view, symbolizes.

It will have become apparent from the above outline of Islam versus Christianity that in this instance, the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars departs from its usual role of filling out the details of issues introduced in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres. In fact, the later "Prelude" contains no reference whatsoever to the threat which Islam poses to the Empire. Instead, the Empire in this "Prelude" is seen as opposed to another, radically different state.

⁸⁸ Anne Ridler quotes Williams in "Introductory Note to the Arthurian Essays", The Image of the City, p. 171.

This is the remaining constituent of the cosmos, and like Sarras, it is omitted from the end-paper map, its location being indicated by an arrow. To the extreme south-east and in the opposite direction to Sarras, both geographically and spiritually, lies P'o-l'u. However, since Sarras is never evoked in any detail as the scene for events in the cycle, the region of P'o-l'u is conceived of as being in opposition to the Empire as a whole. It, too, is an empire, but one of "vile marshes"⁸⁹ and "tangled sea",⁹⁰ inhabited by octopods, and presided over by "a headless Emperor", whose cope is a "foul indecent crimson",⁹¹ in contrast with the hieratic crimson of the sacred blood of the Union. In its geographical position, it constitutes the physical equivalent of the classical underworld and rounds off the cosmos of the Arthurian cycle.

Once again, Huddleston's observations on the source of Williams' concepts are helpful. He states that Williams had read The Creed of Half Japan by Arthur Lloyd and had learned from it that "Druidism traced itself vaguely to Taprobane (the old name for Ceylon)".⁹² The practices of

⁸⁹"Prelude", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 3.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 4.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Linden Huddleston, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams", pp. 95-6.

the Druids were regarded by Williams as similar to those later instances of maleficium denounced by the Church in the Middle Ages. Druid teaching also, of course, occupied in pre-Arthurian Logres the same position which Christianity assumed in later centuries. Thus, Taprobane became associated in Williams' thought with the very source of abused principles and perverted practices which might be conceived of as being embodied in the rites and sacrifices of Druidism, a religion opposed to Christianity's emphasis on the right use of power and respect for the integrity of the body. Williams came to feel, however, that Taprobane was "too equatorial",⁹³ and in consulting ancient Chinese maps of Java, he noted the name of a harbour, P'o-l'u, which he substituted for Taprobane.

The source for the figure of the headless Emperor Huddleston traced back to Williams' reading of Gibbon's Decline and Fall. In a footnote, Gibbon quotes two passages from the Sacred History of Procopius which relate the experience of a monk who saw in a terrified vision a headless Satan sitting on the throne of Justinian.⁹⁴ The Emperor of P'o-l'u is headless because he represents the complete opposition to all that the Emperor of Byzantium

⁹³Ibid., p. 96.

⁹⁴Ibid.

represents. Behind the actual Emperor and his traditions, "beyond the ancient line of imperial shapes", there is "the Throne of primal order", and "the face/of the only sublime Emperor",⁹⁵ God. But the Emperor of P'o-l'u has no head, no face, no faculty of creation or capacity for "orthodox imagination" and wisdom. He is the Emperor, not of men and women, but of octopods, things of non-human shape with tentacles instead of hands, lacking the coordination of divinely patterned members which reflect the attribute of divine harmony.

In his portrait of the infernal Emperor and the state over which he presides, Williams is not merely concerned to symbolize the phenomenal existence of pure evil. The evil which they represent is rather to be attributed to what he calls "the Myth of the Alteration in Knowledge". In The Forgiveness of Sins, he argues in reference to the newly created universe:

The possibility of alteration had been created as an element in the whole. That web of diagramatized glory [i.e., creation] ... depended for its perfection on two things - the will of God to sustain its being and its own will to be so sustained. He made...the delight of a perfect response to his initiative a part of the working of the web.⁹⁶

⁹⁵"Prelude", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 2.

⁹⁶The Forgiveness of Sins, p. 121.

The original race of men, however, declined this invitation to the "perfect response", declined to be so sustained by God. Seduced by their pride and its "intoxication with its own powers",⁹⁷ they destroyed the web of creation.

The Adam had been created and were existing in a state of knowledge of good and nothing but good. They knew that there was some kind of an alternative, and they knew that the rejection of the alternative was part of their relation to the Omnipotence that created them.⁹⁸

Williams held that evil can only be known in terms of good, for God's knowledge differs in kind from man's knowledge. What God envisions as possibility or alternative, man, as material creation, can only know by experiencing. Working within the inherent limitations of flesh, time and space, he is denied Divine pure awareness.

They knew good; they wished to know good and evil. Since there was not - since there never has been and never will be - anything else than the good to know, they knew good as antagonism. All⁹⁹ difference consists in the mode of knowledge.

Here, then, is the Fall of Man, the acquisition of the knowledge of evil, traditionally explained by reference to the account in Genesis of the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. From this act stems the existence of evil, antagonism and friction, in other words, sin in human

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 122.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 124.

experience. From Williams' perspective, man's perception of himself, his fellow beings, the universe, and ultimately, God, becomes warped and distorted. ~~Fallen~~ man is no longer able to discern in existence the "pattern of glory", the divinity of Images. The friction and hostility of life itself, the wasteful and unremitting effort demanded by the mere act of maintaining existence renders evil for him as phenomenally existential as good.

As Williams elsewhere remarked, "the Fall ... was once, and yet is repeated in each of us".¹⁰⁰ In this way it is apparent that

The contradiction in the nature of man is thus completely established. He knows good, and he knows good as evil. These two capacities will always be present in him; his love will always be twisted with anti-love, with anger, with spite, with jealousy, with alien desires.¹⁰¹

P'o-l'u is the opposite of civilized delight as seen in the Empire. As the joy in creation, order, beauty of work and hierarchy derives from man's capacity to know good, so the antagonistic undertow of the antipodean zone derives from man's capacity to know good as evil. Both Empires are to be seen as states of mind as well as geographical regions of the cycle's cosmos.

¹⁰⁰"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 175.

¹⁰¹He Came Down from Heaven, p. 22.

In the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars, the knowledge of the Empire of P'o-l'u is confined to the Emperor and his most trusted admirals. His subjects know it only as a "tale",¹⁰² uncertain whether it is "fable or truth".¹⁰³

In "The Vision of the Empire" of Taliessin through Logres, the concept of the antipodes is greatly amplified to include the description of its genesis. In the sixth section of this poem the poet introduces the hint that something has gone seriously wrong in the hitherto harmonious growth of the Empire. "The crossing of the will of the Emperor"¹⁰⁴ is here related to the account of the Fall. The Adam conceive of themselves as "too long meanly retired / in the poor space of joy's single dimension".¹⁰⁵ Ambition asserts itself.

Let us grow to the height of God and the Emperor:
Let us gaze, son of man, on the Acts in contention.

(TTL., p. 10)

And so, as "the good lusted against the good", they saw
"the secluded vision of battle in the law; / they found the

¹⁰²The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 3.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 9.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 10.

and the "phosphorescent" sheen of decaying matter covers
the "stagnant level"¹⁰⁸ of "the sinking floor of antipodean
Byzantium"¹⁰⁹ as,

Inarticulate always on an inarticulate sea
beyond P'o-l'u the headless Emperor moves,

(TTL., p. 12)

All this provides the sharpest possible contrast
with the picture of the Empire, which is drawn in the
opening lines of the same poem. Here, an audience with the
Emperor is an "exposition of grace", grace subsequently to
be seen in the immediate environment of Byzantium, "the
place of images".¹¹⁰ From the Golden Horn one can see the
galleys departing:

... the nuntii loosened on the currents
over the sea, in the mechanism of motion,
rowers' arms jointed to the imperial oars.

(TTL., p. 6)

And reflected in the "mirror of the Horn" are the "light-
sprinkling, flaked-snow-sparkling, / chastities of ranged
peaks of Caucasus".¹¹¹ Beyond Caucasia, the themes
harmoniously emerge in accordance with the Emperor's
design.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 7.

Down the imperial highroad the white nuntius rides
to heighten the hearts of Lateran, Gaul, and Logres.

(TTL., p. 8)

Strength articulated itself in morals
of arms, joints, wrists, hands;
the planes of palms, the mid-points of hid cones,
opened in Lombardy, the cone's point in Rome,
seminal of knowledge ...

(TTL., p. 9)

hands of incantation changed to hands of adoration,
the quintuple psalm ...

(TTL., p. 9)

The emphasis on the members of the body, especially the
hands, should be noted.

In P'o-l'u, the Emperor walks with,
... indecent hands hidden under the cope,
dishallowing in that crimson the flush on the mounds of
Caucasia.

(TTL., p. 12)

This is possibly a veiled reference to onanism, the turning
inward of one of man's energies; also perhaps an allusion to
the historical fact that incest on the part of one of the
Emperors once provoked one of the many breaches between
east and west. Primarily, however, it is an emphasis upon
the right use of the capacities of the body. Treated as an
end in themselves they become,

rudiments or relics, disappearing, appearing,
live in the forlorn focus of the intellect,
eyes and ears, the turmoil of the mind of sensation.

(TTL., p. 12)

From warped vision grows the abuse of creation at large. From the individual's mental and physical self-abuse arises abuse of his fellow beings. Thus, "lost are the Roman hands",¹¹² the hands which in the Eucharist at Lateran, celebrate and reveal to all the "sudden flash of identity",¹¹³ and "lost are the substantial instruments of being".¹¹⁴

"The Vision of the Empire" closes, however, with a litany of the body.

The organic body sang together;
the Acts of identity adored their Lord;
the song sprang and rang in Byzantium.

(TTL., p. 12)

All the members of the body, and all the themes of the Empire, unite to "bless him, praise him, magnify him for ever".¹¹⁵ Appropriately the reader is returned to a vision of a unified Empire, which exists to praise and reflect the glory of its creator, for it is under this aspect of the cosmic setting rather than that of P'o-l'u that the narrative unfolds.

Thus far, attention has been focused upon only three poems, the "Prelude" from each of the two volumes and

¹¹²Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 13.

"The Vision of the Empire" from Taliessin through Logres, as being those best suited for an introductory exposition of Williams' thought and symbolism, while at the same time containing virtually all the information necessary to a fuller contemplation of the symbolic design of the whole cycle.

This chapter, as the title and opening passages indicate, has been concerned to expound only that material which constitutes the general setting of the Arthurian cycle. It has not attempted to outline all the themes which the author has introduced into the poems here discussed. Many of the themes are better left till the poems of the cycle themselves demand further elucidation. On the other hand, major themes which are basic to interpretation have been dwelt upon at considerable length in the hope that as complete a treatment as possible at this stage will obviate the necessity for further discussion at inconvenient junctures. Obviously, in dealing with a work of any complexity, this hope can only partially be fulfilled. The later poems incorporate themes and symbols which have merely been touched on here and which will demand further explanation in terms of the perspectives of particular poems.

CHAPTER IV

"THE EXTREME THEME": INTERNAL SETTING

In those poems which have been considered thus far, the references to the traditional site of the Arthurian tales are brief. In the first volume, Taliessin through Logres, the reader is told that "the word of the Emperor established a kingdom in Britain",¹ and something of the sweep of chronological events is sketched in the lines:

The blind rulers of Logres
nourished the land on a fallacy of rational virtue;
the seals of the saints were broken; the chairs of the Table
reeled.

Galahad quickened in the Mercy;
but history began ...
lost was the glory, lost the power and kingdom.

(TTL., p. 1)

The character of such descriptions is, of course, recapitulatory and hence highly condensed and allusive.

A slightly more detailed and orderly picture of the growth and development of Britain as a new province of the Empire under Arthur is found in "The Vision of the Empire" of the same volume.

¹Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

Merlin defines, in blazons of the brain,
 shield upon shield, station upon station;
 and the roads resound with the galloping lords.
 The swords flash; the pirates fly;
 The Table stands rigid in the king's hall,
 and over their seats the plotted arms of the soul,
 which are their feats and the whole history of Logres.
 Down the imperial highroad the white nuntius rides
 to heighten the hearts of Lateran, Gaul, and Logres.

(TTL., p. 8)

And ultimately,

the dialect of Logres was an aspect of Byzantium;
 the grand art was taught in the heart of the harbours
 of Arthur.

(TTL., p. 9)

The degree to which Arthurian Britain is successfully
 incorporated within the Empire is indicated by its
 inclusion in the litany of the organic geography at the
 end of the poem:

bless him in Caucasia, bless him in Lateran,
 bless him in the blazons of London-in-Logres,
 if there be worlds of language beyond Logres,
 bless him, praise him, magnify him for ever;

(TTL., p. 13)

The "Prelude" of the second volume makes no reference
 whatsoever to the region, or to its purported history.

Readers of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in the
 Tolkien and Gordon edition will doubtless recall that the
 word Logres is glossed as the name of that part of Britain
 which lies roughly to the south of the Humber.² The word

²Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien
 and E.V. Gordon, second edition, revised by Norman Davis,
 p. 98.

was used as early as the Historia Regum Britanniae of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who asserted that it was derived from the name of the eldest son of Brutus, who ruled the middle portion of Britain after his father's death.³

Noting that the word was first used to designate Arthur's territorial holdings in the Lancelot of Chretien de Troyes, Williams observes that it is derived from the Welsh Lloegr, which indicated "a land of faerie which was also Britain or within Britain".⁴ In Williams' cycle it presumably encompasses all Britain, for nowhere does he precisely define the borders, deliberately perhaps, in order to preserve the associations of "faerie" by leaving the region, like its name, as nebulous and suggestive as possible.

Its general position within the total geography of the Empire is, however, most significant. On the end-paper map the new province lies in the very north-east corner, just below Thule, which is first mentioned in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres as one of the two extremes of the Empire. Thule is the legendary land or island which typified the unknown and represented a kind of proto-paradise in classical literature and Williams places it at the very edge of the known world. From the disposition of

³Ibid.

⁴"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 53.

the woman whose figure is superimposed over the chart, it is clear that Logres, as a constituent of the symbolic geography, bears some relation to the head and hence to the intellect and the capacity to know. It lies:

South from the sea-bone, Thule, the skull-stone,
herbage of lone rock,
the scheme of Logres, the theme of the design of the Empire,
(TTL., p. 7)

Protected by Thule, the skull, Logres is thus the symbolic rendering of the faculty which is potentially able to unify the experience of the body and the imagination into some sort of significant whole.

Before the design of the Emperor becomes known or is made manifest, Logres exists in a state of constant tribal warfare, continually the prey of invading barbarian hordes. The forces of the Roman occupation have long withdrawn, leaving only the Roman roads as mute testimony to their former presence in the land.

... Logres lay
without the form of a Republic, without letters or law,
a storm of violent kings at war - smoke
poured from a burning village in the mid-east;
transport had ceased, and all exchange stilled.

(RSS., pp. 8-9)

From "the anarchy of yet unmade Logres"⁵ the reader progresses to the more tightly organized and concentrated

⁵The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 9.

picture of the sombre situation within Logres as depicted in "The Calling of Arthur" of the first volume.

The waste of snow covers the waste of thorn;
on the waste of hovels snow falls from a dreary sky;
mallet and scythe are silent; the children die.

(TTL., p. 14)

under the snow that falls over brick and prickle,
the people ebb ...

(TTL., p. 15)

For the purposes of this poem, the "storm of violent kings" is reduced to one tyrant, Cradlemas (the name of one of the many contending kings in Malory), who manifests all the trappings of oppressive despotism. Callous and degenerate, living in "the comfort builded / in London's ruins",⁶ the aged king has even assumed the practice of wearing a gilded mask and, like Nero, an emerald monocle. Against this king, under Merlin and Arthur, "the people marched" and "in the snow / King Cradlemas died in his litter."⁷ Though victory is by no means complete, a move towards union has begun, under the direction of Merlin and according to the design of the Emperor.

Quite apart from the obvious appeal which Logres might have held for any ruler with benevolent, civilizing instincts, or an appetite for creating an empire on a

⁶Taliessin through Logres, p. 15.

⁷Ibid.

hitherto unprecedented scale, this wilderness of warring tribes exerted a still more important attraction for the Emperor. It will be recalled that in "The Figure of Arthur" Williams characterized Lloegr as a "faerie" land. Later, in the same study, he resumes discussion, expanding on the rather ambiguous character of the region.

Logres, which is Britain in an enlarging world - [is] Britain and more than Britain. It is more like that mysterious Albion of which Blake wrote in another geography.⁸

He does not elaborate on the similarity between his concept of Logres and Blake's Albion, but goes on to explain the manner in which the area is something "more than Britain". As the character of the Empire eastward from Logres is a Christian one, which may be verified by reference to historical fact, to what Williams calls its "historic relation",⁹ so in the opposite direction there exists a state which he opposes to this: "westward from Logres - there is the mythical"¹⁰ relation. Beyond asserting that its only requirement is "interior consistency",¹¹ Williams does not refine this idea of the

⁸"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 80.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

mythical. In that he so patently opposes the term to "historical", however, it may be inferred that he is using "mythical" in a very general sense as indicating the realm of shadowy, legendary events and people, which has not yielded any evidence of historical existence in spite of thorough, systematic investigation.

This entire passage is useful in isolating an important aspect of Williams' general interpretation of the Matter of Britain. If the "historical relation" is conceived as lying to the east, and the "mythical" relation to the west, then Logres itself lies at the junction of the two categories, in part to be identified with one, and in part with the other. Consequently, it not only partakes of both modes of existence, but may perhaps be said to represent the meeting point between the actual and the potential in human experience. The latter category, though never manifested in actual event, nevertheless partakes of human affairs as the product of man's dreams, desires, and aspirations. The events of Logres thus occur under the conditions dictated by historical circumstance while still retaining their own inherent mythic character.

Such a view of the setting of the cycle may usefully clarify thinking about the general intention of the two volumes of poems. Some readers have attempted to read the Arthurian poems as a kind of tract for the times;

others have seen them as another in a long series of re-workings of the medieval romance, a poetic exercise with little or no reference to contemporary affairs. The truth probably lies between these two extremes. Certainly, general social situations typical of the '30s and the '40s may be deduced from passages in the cycle, but to interpret the work as a thorough-going allegory on modern life gains little support from what we know of the author's declared intention. Probably Williams had in mind, in conformity with his personal interpretations of Christian teaching, an evocation of an ideal society as it is generally depicted in the myth. Certainly this is confirmed by his first formal statement of intent: that the poems "express states or principles of experience", both "common and profound".¹² The statement is confirmed by his poetic presentation of Logres as the meeting-point of history and myth, a land both shadowy and dim, yet with certain definite and historically verifiable characteristics imposed upon its form. Thus realized, Logres is a most appropriate setting for the paradigm of events which myth constantly expresses for men of all ages.

In discussing in "The Figure of Arthur" the location of features of his internal setting, Williams is careful

¹²Quoted by Anne Ridler in "Introduction", The Image of the City, pp. lxiv-lxv.

to preserve the distinction between the two modes of experience.

There lie ... near Logres - and they must lie to the west, for to the east we come into history and doctrine and Europe - other places of the myth. There is the mysterious forest of Broceliande: there are the seas on which the ship of Solomon is to sail; beyond them is Sarras.¹³

As one commentator of the Queste del Saint Graal has observed, the Grail story, "despite its Arthurian setting, is not a romance, it is a spiritual fable".¹⁴ In Chapter II of this thesis it was suggested that Williams was most emphatically at pains to make this distinction in his treatment of the Matter of Britain and its narrative components. Furthermore, in his use of an external setting in the shape of an Empire which awaits the Second Coming, he contrived to have its inhabitants look for the fulfilment of their hope "across the sea",¹⁵ anticipating the arrival of the Grail as a prelude to the event. The progress of the vessel, moreover, was to commence at "the extreme verge of the west and the east".¹⁶ Sarras, of course, in Williams' scheme of things, lies in this general direction; but between Sarras and the main body of the Empire is Logres, the meeting-place of myth and history.

¹³"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, pp. 80-1.

¹⁴P.M. Montarasso, "Introduction", The Quest of the Holy Grail, p. 9.

¹⁵"Prelude", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 3.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 4.

The notion of Logres as the mid-point between two somewhat abstract concepts is rendered more concrete by the description in "The Calling of Taliessin" in which a road is visualized as separating the wilderness that is "unmade" Logres and the wilderness that is the forest of Broceliande. Broceliande is first mentioned in the fifteenth-century account of Robert de Borron; and a modern gloss which is generally representative of subsequent interpretation reads thus:

A magic forest in Brittany, which figures in the Arthurian legend ... in this place ... Merlin was enchanted by Nimue or Viviana ... The name ... is often employed as symbolic of the dim unreality of legendary scenery.¹⁷

Ignoring the division of opinion as to whether Brittany refers to the modern region in France of the same name or to the general south-west portion of Britain, Williams sets the forest in Logres, between the sea and that part of the land which is inhabited. Indeed, by virtue of this position he further conceives of it

both as a forest and as a sea - a sea-wood; in this sense it joins the sea of the antipodes which lies among its roots.¹⁸

Williams had devoted some thought to what he calls "the image of a wood" in its various literary contexts, and

¹⁷ Lewis Spence, An Encyclopaedia of Occultism, p. 80.

¹⁸ "Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 179.

one of his most comprehensive statements on the subject serves as a useful general introduction to discussion of the concept as it appears in his own cycle.

The forest itself has different names in different tongues - Westermain, Arden, Birnam, Broceliande; and in places there are separate trees named, such as that on the outskirts against which a young Northern poet saw a spectral wanderer leaning, or, in the unexplored centre of which only rumours reach even poetry, Igdrasil of one myth, or the Trees of Knowledge and Life of another. So that indeed the whole earth seems to become this one enormous forest, and our longest and most stable civilizations are only clearings in the midst of it.¹⁹

Williams considers that, of all the forests named, Broceliande is the greatest, "because of its hidden mysteries".²⁰ Again, there is an aura of nebulousness about his commentary, but this time for the reason that Broceliande, of all the woods mentioned, is perhaps the least accessible in literature for the ordinary reader; if one will, the most "mysterious". Moreover, as Williams chose to reconstruct it for his cycle, the various attributes may initially seem confusing and even difficult to reconcile with one another, as may be seen when Williams mentions that the wood of Milton's Comus may profitably be compared with his own conception of Broceliande, since Milton's wood is

¹⁹The Figure of Beatrice, p. 107.

²⁰"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 81.

... poetically a part of it, except that it is a holy place and uninhabited by such sorcerers. But some part of the outlying parts might be given up to him ... 21

It is this hasty qualification, almost self-correction, which contributes to the general impression of indecisiveness and makes precise description of Williams' idea of the wood occasionally difficult. The idea of holiness, almost a sense of the numinous, is not fully explored in his prose, but is realized most vividly in his poetry in the associations of the wood with Druid activities.

Before Logres has formally become a theme of the Empire, Broceliande is the scene of certain sacred rites.

... while the great oaks stood,
straining, creaking, around,
seven times the golden sickle
flashed in the Druid wood.

(TTL., p. 3)

As I came by Broceliande
a diagram played in the night,
where either the golden sickle
flashed, or a signalling hand.

(TTL., p. 4)

In practice the more sinister overtones of Comus are also incorporated in Williams' idea of the wood, becoming, with the Druid associations, a part of the heritage of Broceliande, where "Circe's son / sings to the truants of towns".²²

²¹Ibid.

²²Taliessin through Logres, p. 3.

The somewhat ambiguous character of Broceliande is both tempered and intensified by Williams' desire to derive a part of its nature from Dante's wood in the Commedia.

A nobler comparison is with that forest which Dante found at the foot of the Mount of Purgatory and where ~~he~~ came again to himself, or that other on the height of the Mount where Beatrice came again to him.²³

Thus it becomes a wood in which man can either lose himself and suffer untold anguish, or find himself to go on to undreamed-of bliss and revelation.

The best general introduction to Broceliande is provided by the poem "Taliessin's Return to Logres", which demonstrates his expert creation and enrichment of symbol by cumulative allusion. Here, Broceliande is partially penetrated by "the blindfold track, / the road that runs from tales",²⁴ that is, the road leading away from the body of literary and legendary associations, and towards a different kind of tale, a tale of fact and doctrine, and ultimately, Christian dogma.

The passage through these tales takes the traveller past that portion where the Miltonic "shape-changing Comus"²⁵ sings seductively, past the Keatsian forest of the nightingale,

²³"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, pp. 81-2.

²⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 3.

²⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 159.

and past the Wordsworthian "spectral shapes ... / propped against trees"²⁶ and the "light of flooding seas".²⁷ Although the road will lead the traveller from all these threats, its passage is "harder than death", for it contains, above all, "the beast ... / that had lost the man's mind",²⁸ an allusion simultaneously to the Beast of Revelations, to the Great Beast of Satanic traditions, and to the three beasts which Dante encountered in his dark wood. The note of positive menace is also apparent in one of Williams' prose comments.

There is, in that forest, as deep as any poet has yet penetrated towards the centre, one especially wild part; worse than anything known in verse even by Spenser or Milton. There is a valley ... where no path can be kept; the true path ... does not lead through it, but side paths do, less and less easy, more and more dark. A man on his journey through the strange growths of the forest, may inattentively turn aside down these paths; perhaps many men do, and perhaps some die there, for the sense of the valley is like death itself.²⁹

The symbolic meaning of the forest or wood in the general body of literature, myth, and legend is very complex. It is obviously the place where man's control is

²⁶Taliessin through Logres, p. 4.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹The Figure of Beatrice, p. 108.

minimal, where vegetable life thrives unfettered by the trappings of civilization. The luxuriating vegetation renders the atmosphere of the forest dim and shadowy, a state which man has symbolically opposed to the radiance of the sun, since the dense growths blot out the diffused solar rays. This contrast of physical states, which became in symbolic terms a spiritual polarity, was intensified quite naturally by many ancient systems of belief. One scholarly work on symbolism traces the development; thus:

In Druid mythology, the forest was given to the sun in marriage. Since the female principle is identified with the unconscious in Man, it follows that the forest is also a symbol of the unconscious. It is for this reason that Jung maintains that the sylvan terrors that figure so prominently in children's tales symbolize the perilous aspects of the unconscious, that is, the tendency to devour or obscure the reason.³⁰

Williams appears to hint at some such identification of the wood with the power of the unconscious when he mentions the "valley ... where no path can be kept" and the "centre" from which men may stray by inattention into labyrinthine side-paths. Thus, in "The Calling of Taliessin" there is this description:

Dangerous to men is the wood of Broceliande.
Hardly the Druid, hardly a Christian priest,
pierced it ever; it was held ...
by those few who in Britain study the matter of the marches
.....

³⁰ J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, p. 107.

... [who] know
 their correspondence, and live in a new style -

 but those fewer, now as then, who enter
 come rarely again with brain unravished
 by the power of the place ...

(RSS., p. 9)

Even the traveller along the road which runs away from
 these menacing aspects of the wood may experience something
 of the dangers of the whole area and

... feel before him the road threaten ravage
 and the power of universal spirit rise
 against him to be wild and savage on his lonely spirit;

(RSS., p. 10)

The note of menace is struck again in still more
 vivid terms in "The Departure of Merlin". By virtue of its
 coastal location, Broceliande can be observed, one might
 even say experienced, from the distance of the decks of
 passing Byzantine galleys, but even this remove is not
 necessarily a safe one. In a stanza which is strongly
 reminiscent of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, it is related
 how, at the sight of Broceliande,

The sailors stared at the wood; one,
 ghastly and gaping, despaired of joy; he yelled
 for horror and leapt from the deck of the phosphorescence,
 to the wreck of wisdom, the drowned last of love.

(TTL., p. 76)

The incident is recounted without any apparent relation to
 the main concerns of the poem and without any further
 comment. The sailor has acted, or rather reacted, according

to his particular interior state. But it is clear from this incident that the terrors, which in pre-Jungian times embedded themselves in ideas of the valley of death or the Dantean wood at the foot of the Mount, hold positive dangers for the ill-equipped or unwary traveller. The sinister character of the wood is further intensified by its proximity to the octopods of P'o-l'u as well as the sea of the general region of the antipodes, and it should be noted that the waters of the forest share with the waters of P'o-l'u the quality of phosphorescence. The changed mode of perception which was initiated by the Fall, when deliberately embraced, leads the individual to P'o-l'u, but it may reassert itself equally in the experience of others, rendering the perception of Broceliande mind-searing.

It should be remarked, however, that the dangers of Broceliande are not so much manifestations of inherent evil as reflections of the beholder's fallen state, as is indicated in "The Departure of Merlin":

... there no strife
is except growth from the roots, nor reaction but repose;
vigours of joy drive up; rich-ringed moments
thick in their trunks thrive, young-leaved their voices.

(TTL., p. 75)

In the wood only dispassionate sounds are to be heard as "rich-ringed, young-leaved, monstrous trunks rejoice",³¹

³¹Taliessin through Logres, p. 76.

and here

Time's president and precedent, grace ungrieved,
floating through gold-leaved lime or banked behind beech
to opaque green, through each membraned and tissued ex-
perience
smites in simultaneity to times variously veined.

(TTL., p. 76)

For there is no time in Broceliande, just as there is no
essential evil.

Moons and suns that rose in rites and runes
are come away from sequence, from rules of magic;
here all is cause and all effect ...

(TTL., p. 76)

Symbolically, Broceliande is neither in opposition
to the state of P'o-l'u (for it lies too close to that
region and shares the same seas), nor an aspect of the
infernal zone (for geographically it lies on the same plane
as the Empire and Logres), but is rather the totally neutral
and impersonal source of "all natural becoming",³² the
subsequent development of which proceeds according to the
state of affairs beyond the boundaries of the wood. As
Lewis remarks, its closest parallel might well be "what
the Greeks called the Apeiron - the unlimited, the formless
origin of forms."³³

Quite apart from the wood's function in other
areas of the cycle, its significance as a place of

³²Ibid., p. 77.

³³C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 101.

emanations is important to Williams' conception of the Grail story, for Broceliande contains within its borders the Castle of the Hallows, Carbonek, with its keeper, King Pelles, the Fisher King of certain versions of the Grail episode. In this castle is celebrated the strange rite of the procession of the Hallows. A train of the castle's retainers moves through the great hall bearing the seven-branched candelabrum, the spear which bleeds continually from the tip, and a vessel to which the lines of the "Prelude" in The Region of the Summer Stars made reference. Because the House of the Grail lies within the wood,

... it is ordered that soon
the Empire and Broceliande shall meet in Logres,
and the Hallows be borne from Carbonek into the sun.

(RSS., p. 12)

Such is the design of the Emperor and the reason for the ultimate incorporation of Logres within the protective boundaries of the Empire. Hence the Emperor wills the creation "in Logres of a throne / like that other of Carbonek, of King Pelles in Broceliande".³⁴

The creation of the Empire as the external setting for the narrative, and the provision of the Emperor as external ruling and designing force can now be more fully appreciated as providing a fitting context for and plausible

³⁴The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 12.

explanation of the emergence of the Grail. When one recalls that the Byzantine Empire was chosen because of its capacity to embody certain Christian doctrines in which Williams was interested, it will be appreciated how central these doctrines are to a coherent interpretation of the Grail episode in his treatment of the Matter of Britain. The significance with which he chose to invest his symbols of the wood, Logres, and the Empire is fully in accord with his convictions regarding basic Christian doctrines. This is not merely achieved by setting the whole in the era of general expectation of the Parousia, but also by keeping the Nestorian controversy about the two natures of Christ in the forefront of the action and meaning of the poem.

In older versions of the Arthurian material, not only was there little or no reason for the Grail's emergence in Arthur's court and the involvement of his knights in its Quest; there was also, at the heart of the Grail itself, a deep mystery as to its precise meaning. This is doubtless a concomitant of the mystical associations of the vessel, but there is also a failure or disinclination on the part of the first authors and their anonymous continuators to indicate, beyond the usual accounts of its lineage, its exact nature in any consistent manner.

In Williams' scheme, the Grail functions as a prelude to the Second Coming, an event which in some sense

will fulfil the expectations and beliefs previously defined in the Church's decision on the two natures of Christ. Thus, the Grail, both in its lineage as that vessel which held the blood of Christ shed during His Passion (the relic which more than any other stresses the physical nature of Christ's sacrifice), and also in its role as precursor, is doubly a symbol of the divine "twy-natured"³⁵ Christ. It will emerge from the Castle of the Hallows in Broceliande, the place of "the formless origin of forms", into the kingdom of Logres, whose borders have been "shaped"³⁶ by the design of the Emperor and by the magical powers of Merlin. The result will be the symbolic union of Pelles and Arthur, which will be the realization of the ideal of Kingship on earth, and also the reunion of the spiritual and the material aspects of human affairs.

In the activities which initiate the actual incorporation of Logres as a theme of the Empire, the reader encounters another symbolic figure whose identity, in spite of not infrequent allusions throughout the cycle, remains almost as enigmatic as that of the Emperor. It was suggested that Williams' concept of Broceliande embodies connotations of the unconscious and also something

³⁵Ibid., p. 3.

³⁶Ibid., p. 14.

of the female principle from traditional forest symbolism. Appropriately, his wood is ruled by Nimue, "lady of lakes and seas",³⁷ but unlike Malory's character of the same name, Williams' Nimue is not the seductress of Merlin but rather the mother of this creature of supernatural origins. She is also the mother of Brisen, another supernatural being who shares in her twin-brother's magical abilities. Both of Nimue's offspring function as full-blooded characters in the cycle, but also, according to Williams, represent abstract qualities, Merlin being Time and Brisen Space.³⁸ Their roles in the narrative are directly related to their symbolic meanings.

Nimue herself, as their mother, is not so much a flesh and blood personage as the manifestation of the various processes of "becoming"³⁹ in Broceliande. And while Nimue cannot be said to participate directly in the affairs of Logres, she exerts influence on others, particularly her children. As Merlin explains,

... we are free
of the forest, parthenogenetical in Broceliande
from the Nature, from Nimue our mother; sent are we
to build, as is willed, Logres, and in Logres a throne
like that other of Carbonek, of King Pelles in Broceliande,

³⁷Taliessin through Logres, p. 77.

³⁸"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 179.

³⁹Taliessin through Logres, p. 77.

the holder of the Hallows; 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;

(RSS., p. 12)

and again,

... Nimue our mother directs in Carbonek
the maidenhood of Pelles' daughter Helayne, and I
go to prepare Logres for the sea-coming
from Sarraas ...

(RSS., p. 12)

As C.S. Lewis has suggested, Nimue may be equated symbolically with Nature, but to apply this identification rigidly is to ignore other aspects of the character. A broader idea of her identity is perhaps better acquired by consulting the various poems in which her presence is invoked. Thus, in "The Departure of Merlin", it is she who receives Merlin again when his work has been done in Logres. As other commentators have observed, Williams was influenced by Swinburne's conception of the relationship of Merlin and Nimue and considered that the nineteenth-century poet had "saved" Merlin "from the weakness of the older tales" by investing this relationship with "a new force".⁴⁰ In withdrawing to Broceliande, Merlin

... knows the soul that was his soul at one
With the ardent world's, and in the spirit of earth
His spirit of life reborn to mightier birth⁴¹
And mixed with things of elder life than ours;

⁴⁰"The Making of Taliessin", Image of the City, p. 182

⁴¹A.C. Swinburne, "Tristram of Lyonesse", Collected Poetical Works, II, 98.

As he "takes his strange rest"⁴² in Broceliande,

He hears in spirit a song that none but he
Hears from the mystic mouth of Nimue
Shed like a consecration; and his heart,
Hearing, is made for love's sake as a part
Of that far singing, and the life thereof
Part of that life that feeds the world with love:⁴³

Mystical mistress, as Swinburne chose to view her, or
mystical mother, as Williams recast her, the feminine
aspect of her identity predominates, as is illustrated by
the description of one of her functions in the cycle. Nimue

brings all natural becoming to her shape of immortal being,
as to a flash of seeing the women in the world's base.

(TTL., p. 77)

The last line is repeated in "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden"
during Taliessin's meditation on the meaning of queenship
at the instance of Guinevere:

Let the queen's majesty, the feminine headship of Logres,
deign to exhibit the glory to the women of Logres;
.....
Bring to a flash of seeing the women in the world's base.

(RSS., pp. 27-8)

It may be remembered that according to the end-
paper map, the Empire as a whole is feminine in form.
Williams states, "I left it female in appearance because
the Emperor must be masculine, but this is accidental".⁴⁴

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 98-9.

⁴⁴"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the
City, p. 178.

Although it may require no little temerity to disagree with such authorial pronouncement, one might well question whether the feminine form of the Empire is, in fact, entirely accidental. In view of the obvious weight of Taliessin's words in the passage quoted above, the importance of the female principle in the universe which the Empire constitutes cannot be lightly discounted. This is especially so when one examines the role to which Williams would assign women in this poem. Here he is most explicit:

... as I looked on the stretched Empire
 I heard, as in a throb of stretched verse,
 the women everywhere throughout it sob with the curse
 and the altars of Christ everywhere offer the grails.
 Well are women warned from serving the altar
 who, by the nature of their creature, from Caucasia to
 share with the Sacrifice the victimization of blood.
 Carbonek,

(RSS., p. 26)

and

women's flesh lives in the quest of the Grail

(RSS., p. 26)

and

Blessed is she who gives herself to the journey.

(RSS., p. 27)

By way of this rather bizarre physiological parallel Williams makes the assertion that women, in their moments of fullest realization, partake of the Christ-like sacrifice. C.S. Lewis' comments on this poem are most perceptive and stimulating.

Whether consciously or not Williams is here recalling the Greek doctrine that Form is masculine and Matter feminine ... The earth is full of potential life ... The whole City, the Divine Order, is a marriage between the will of the Emperor and the response to that will in His creatures. Caucasia itself, the body, the world of the senses, is feminine in relation to Carbonek, the Spirit ... Nimue, terrestrial Nature ... in obedience to her lord the Third Heaven, brings the potentialities of Earth to perfection; just as she also ... makes suddenly visible to our senses - the ultimate femininity of the created universe ...[and]sets before us ... the unfathomable feminine principle which would otherwise lie invisible at the very roots of Broceliande.⁴⁵

For the sake of discussion, Nimue may thus be labelled Nature, though with the understanding that she embodies much more than the vulgar connotations of Mother Nature. For even in his first contact with Merlin, Taliessin experiences her power as "the mother of all operation".⁴⁶ It should be noted, however, that Nimue is not herself the energy or the source of that operation. As Lewis remarks, she is obedient to the Third Heaven.

In spite of Lewis's personification, the Third Heaven is not, of course, a character but rather the final constituent of the cosmos which was discussed in the previous chapter. In that it corresponds to our haziest

⁴⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, pp. 147-9.

⁴⁶The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 18.

notions of a heaven, a something above and beyond all terrestrial concerns, it may be provisionally interpreted as being opposed to the antipodean zone of P'o-l'u in the total universe which Williams created for his *Arthuriad*. But the more closely one examines the Third Heaven the more one comes to realize that it is the most remote of all those of his cosmos, and that while its aims may impinge upon the affairs of Logres and the Empire, its concerns are essentially other, even incomprehensible to the earth-bound inhabitant. Dorothy Sayers has held that Williams and Dante are mutually illuminating in many areas,⁴⁷ and it is true that the Third Heaven of Williams' cosmos derives even more directly from Dante than does his concept of Broceliande. The derivation is apparent in the very first reference to the sphere, when Taliessin in delivering his riddling explanation of his origins says, "I rose to the third heaven with her of the penitence".⁴⁸

It was mentioned in Chapter III that when Williams assumed the Ptolemaic cosmography for his own cycle he brought with it many of the principles governing that vision of the universe. Hence, when he describes the evening on which Merlin begins his magical invocation to form Logres:

⁴⁷Dorothy Sayers, Further Papers on Dante, p. 190.

⁴⁸"The Calling of Taliessin", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 7.

Done was the day; the antipodean sun
cast earth's coned shadow into space;
it exposed the summer stars ...

(RSS., p. 13)

and again,

The cone's shadow of earth fell into space,
and into (other than space) the third heaven.

(RSS., p. 13)

Williams is not simply alluding to the physical phenomenon of the planet earth casting its shadow in the shape of a cone into outer space, but is referring also to the belief of medieval cosmologists that "the conical shadow cast ... reached as far as the sphere of Venus".⁴⁹ The reference can, in fact, be traced directly to Canto IX of the Paradiso:

By this heaven, - touched by the shadow's point
which your world casteth ... 50

The Third Heaven was sometimes termed the last sphere of the Active Life (the first two being those of the Moon and Mercury respectively) and passage through it leads directly to the first sphere of the Contemplative Life (held by some to be actually the highest form of activity), that of the Sun. Like the spheres directly below it, the Third Heaven is governed by an intelligence which bears some likeness to its earthly counterpart.

⁴⁹H. Oelsner and P.H. Wicksteed, "Notes on Dante's Paradise", The Divine Comedy, p. 401.

⁵⁰The Divine Comedy, Canto IX.

Collectively, the three heavens, sometimes called the infra-solar spheres, may be said to preserve the last vestiges of earthly modes of experience, manifesting the souls of those "whom some earthly weakness or strain has so far shorn of what once were their spiritual possibilities".⁵¹

The Third Heaven is the sphere of those who partially substituted earthly for heavenly love, and although "the quality of their joy is entirely pure and unalloyed, it is of lesser intensity than it might have been had they been altogether true".⁵² It is thus appropriately named Venus, although as Dante observed, the name was first derived through the error of ancient idolatry, and the Third Heaven is actually ruled by Divine Love, a truth which is made manifest to him when he sees Beatrice (who symbolizes Revelation rather than Earthly Love) grow even more beautiful once they enter this sphere.

Williams obviously embraced these attributes in large part, but to these he brought still another set of ideas.

In the third heaven are the living unriven truths,
climax tranquil in Venus.

(RSS., p. 14)

⁵¹H. Oelsner and P.H. Wicksteed, "Notes on Dante's Paradise", The Divine Comedy, p. 401.

⁵²Ibid.

For an explanation of this poetic statement C.S. Lewis directs the reader to Spenser rather than to Dante, pointing to the lines from the Faerie Queene (III. vi. 12) which describe Venus as "The house of goodly formes and faire aspect Whence all the world derives the glorious Features of Beautie".⁵³ For Williams, the sphere of Venus represents the heaven within which the pattern of archetype of the material universe resides. Like Spenser's Venus, Williams' is one of inherent beauty in spite of the manner in which Fallen Man on earth may perceive it.

In the initial stages of their ceremonial magic to prepare Logres,

... Merlin and Brisen
heard, as in faint bee-like humming
round the cone's point, the feeling intellect hasten
to fasten on the earth's image; in the third heaven
the stones of the waste glimmered like summer stars.
Between the wood and waste the yoked children of Nimue
opened the rite; they invoked the third heaven,
heard in the far humming of the spiritual intellect,

(RSS., p. 14)

The faint humming is, in the first instance, an allusion to the music of the spheres which Dante was able to hear after he had ascended with Beatrice to the sphere of fire between the Earth and the sphere of the Moon. But it is also equated with another concept in the work of another poet, Wordsworth. In book XIV of the Prelude he

⁵³C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 102.

relates how he made the ascent of Mount Snowdon by night, and describes the vision which was dramatically revealed to him by the abrupt clearing of the ground mist and the rising of the moon. Of the sight below him Wordsworth declares:

... in calm thought
Reflected, it appeared to me the type
Of a majestic intellect ... 54

More exactly, he says:

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light⁵⁵

Later, still dilating upon this experience, he refers to the individual acts and experiences of several varieties of love, subsuming them under one category:

This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist
Without Imagination, which, in truth,
Is but another name for absolute power,
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
And Reason in her most exalted mood.⁵⁶

Towards the conclusion of the poem he begins his summary of the meaning of his vision, of the revelation of the powers of the mind in terms of his experience of love.

⁵⁴William Wordsworth, The Prelude, XIV, 65-7.

⁵⁵Ibid., XIV, 70-3.

⁵⁶Ibid., XIV, 188-91.

Imagination having been our theme,
 So also hath that intellectual Love,
 For they are each in each, and cannot stand
 Dividually ... 57

Then follows the famous pronouncement on the distribution
 of such power: "... 'tis thine, / The prime and vital
 principle is thine / In the recesses of thy nature ...".⁵⁸
 For the individual who will pursue its development in the
 face of discouragements and setbacks,

All shall be his: and he whose soul hath risen
 Up to the height of the feeling intellect
 Shall want no humbler tenderness ... 59

The concepts of two poets so widely separated by
 centuries of cultural difference are not felt by Williams
 to be as disparate as at first they might be supposed. He
 seized upon Wordsworth's equation of "the feeling intellect"
 with the "absolute power" of spiritual or intellectual love.
 It is this love that Williams held to reside in the Third
 Heaven of Venus, and it is the unique blend of emotion and
 intellect emanating from this sphere which generates the
 energy and the pattern of all earthly creation.

This reading is confirmed by another allusion to
 the two concepts in "The Son of Lancelot", when Merlin

⁵⁷Ibid., XIV, 206-9.

⁵⁸Ibid., XIV, 214-6.

⁵⁹Ibid., XIV, 225-7.

... sent his hearing into the third sphere -
 once by a northern poet beyond Snowdon
 seen at the rising of the moon, the mens sensitiva,
 the feeling intellect, the prime and vital principle,
 the pattern in heaven of Nimue, time's mother on earth,
 Broceliande. Convection's tides cease
 there, temperature is steady to all tenderness

(TTL., p. 55-6)

And when the Empire is most threatened, its danger is described in analogous terms as "the red / carnivorous violation of intellectual love",⁶⁰ the violation of what both Wordsworth and Dante in their respective visions had discovered, and which, in Williams' cycle, is the formative and governing principle of life in Logres and the Empire.

The total Ptolemaic cosmography depicting the ten heavens, from the sphere of the Moon to the Empyrean, is not utilized by Williams, but in "The Coming of Galahad" other spheres in addition to that of Venus are invoked. In the very difficult speech of Taliessin on the ultimate meaning of the relationship between the Empire and its Creator, he describes how the planetary heavens impinge upon the Empire's development.

Mercury, thinning and thickening, thirsting to theft;
 Venus preference - though of the greatest, preference;
 O Earth between, O seen and strewn by the four!
 Jupiter with a moon of irony and of defeated irony,
 and Saturn circled, girdled by turned space.

(TTL., p. 74)

⁶⁰Taliessin through Logres, p. 59.

Logres is come into Jupiter; all the zones
 circle Saturn, spinning against the glory,
 (TTL., p. 74)

Although the rendering of the traditional arrangement of the spheres is, in this poem, incomplete (there is no mention of the first heaven of the Moon, nor of the intervening fourth heaven of the Sun), some knowledge of the governing intelligences traditionally ascribed to those planetary heavens which are named may be helpful in interpreting this passage, which has posed problems for most readers.

C.S. Lewis has volunteered that Mercury was the god of theft, and he submits that its use here refers to the stage of development in which "the Houses are in crude competition, each anxious to steal the whole glory".⁶¹ In the Paradiso the sphere of Mercury also symbolizes ambition, and it is there that the souls of those whose spiritual capacities were tainted by desire for personal recognition and gain on earth are made manifest to Dante.

Of the sphere of Venus little more need be said, except to note that in this poem Williams brings to his concept of intellectual love the notion of "preference". That is, to love involves a choice of persons, however involuntary the choice may seem to be. This idea of choice

⁶¹C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 171.

or preference, has, of course, been dwelt upon by the poet at some length in an earlier section of the same poem, and Chapter II of this thesis discusses certain aspects of his treatment.

Jupiter, in Dantean terms, is the planet of kingship and justice, and in Canto XVIII of the Paradiso the qualities are epitomized in the motto "Love righteousness ye that be judges of the earth",⁶² and embodied in the form of an eagle, the earthly symbol of Roman law and justice, which demonstrates to Dante that "our justice is the effect of the heaven thou dost engem".⁶³ In the following Canto, Dante hears also the long denunciation by the just kings who collectively make up the eagle of Jupiter of those contemporary Christian monarchs who violate the heavenly concept of justice. Thus, when Williams says "Logres is come into Jupiter" he is plainly indicating that the new theme now has access to that heavenly Justice which emanates from this sphere, and which is manifested on earth in the throne of the Empire and in the potential of the kingship of Arthur. This may also serve to explain the concern with justice in the poem "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden". Taliessin says:

⁶²H. Oelsner and P.H. Wicksteed, "Introductory Note to Canto XVIII", The Divine Comedy, p. 515.

⁶³The Divine Comedy, Canto XVIII.

Libra in the category of flesh is the theme of Caucasia,
 the mesh of the net of the imperially bottomed glory;
 and the frame of justice and balance set in the body,
 the balance and poise needful to all joys
 and all peace.

(RSS., p. 25)

Similarly, when Taliessin refers in this poem to the fact that "Pelles bleeds / below Jupiter's red-pierced planet",⁶⁴ Williams is equating the wounding of the Fisher King with the perversion of justice which has come about in spite of Arthur's assumption of the throne in Logres, since Pelles will bleed from the Dolorous Blow until Galahad comes to heal him.

The moons of irony and defeated irony which circle the planet of Justice are Williams' own invention. They refer to the manner in which man interprets his experiences in Logres and the Empire. The moon of irony, which shines on Lancelot, is an allusion to his apparently ironical overthrow at the hands of Merlin and Brisen. His whole being had been directed towards the honouring of Guinevere, and in spite of the adulterous nature of their love, it had the great virtue of total loyalty, even, in its own way, chastity. Yet it is precisely this great virtue which is lost when the otherwise perfect knight lies with Helayne, the daughter of Pelles, after being deceived by a potion

⁶⁴The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 27.

prepared by Brisen. From this union springs Galahad, the most perfect of all the knights of Logres, and the achiever of the Grail. But he is also the son of one who first loved adulterously, and then, according to his own code, was unfaithful even to that love.

The moon of defeated irony, on the other hand, symbolizes something more complex, the final turn of the wheel of fate which reverses that which was previously experienced as irony. Blanchefleur, who had rejected personal fulfilment to enter a convent, accepts the "taunt" to Lancelot, his son Galahad, into the convent at Almesbury and carefully rears him till he is the perfection of man who enters the court of Arthur. There his presence must be acknowledged for its worth, and merely personal suffering and humiliation, "taunts", must be forgotten or abandoned in the greater Quest. With these twin aspects of fate before one, the extent to which Logres is indeed "come into Jupiter" may be more fully appreciated, for in these events lies one of the most supreme demonstrations of Divine Justice: that through his son Lancelot, despite his adulterous love, attains a measure of sanctity by sharing in the Achievement of the Grail.

The ruling intelligence which was traditionally ascribed to Saturn was Temperance. This last of the seven planetary heavens is also the last sphere of the

Contemplative Life, and in this sphere are made manifest to Dante the souls of those saints who spent their days on earth in that highest form of activity. Named after the Roman god under whose rule Rome, in its legendary history, prospered in the age of gold and splendour, the seventh heaven contains the ladder on which the souls of the blessed constantly ascend and descend in the shape of myriad lights. It is by way of this ladder, the archetype of the ladder of Jacob, that those who practised abstinence and contemplation rise to the Stellar Heaven, that of the Fixed Stars. Taliessin's observation that Saturn is "circled, girdled by turned space"⁶⁵ is a reference to the much slower movement of the Fixed Stars in relation to the daily revolution of the planetary heavens.

Huddleston suggests, however, that "turned space" is a reference to Galahad: "Galahad himself is 'turned space' ".⁶⁶ Although the evidence which he offers in support of this assertion is not particularly convincing, the interpretation of Galahad as being representative of that sphere in which all the souls were traditionally assembled would seem to gain some support from certain isolated prose statements of the author. In discussing

⁶⁵Taliessin through Logres, p. 74.

⁶⁶Linden Huddleston, "The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams", p. 250.

Galahad's lineage, Williams observed that his father, Lancelot, was "eighth in succession from Christ" and that "8 is the number of the Christhood".⁶⁷ Thus, the eighth heaven, that of the Fixed Stars or "turned space", may be seen as the appropriate heaven for Galahad's final manifestation before he ascends to that ultimate Heaven of light and love which is beyond space and time. The interpretation of the single phrase "turned space" aids in the general interpretation of the entire passage in which it occurs.

As "Logres is come into Jupiter", so Galahad, who represents "that in the human soul which finds Christ",⁶⁸ represents also the potential era or zone into which Logres and the whole Empire may pass. Such an interpretation is further supported by a line in "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", in which Taliessin sees, at the elevation of the Host at Eucharist, that "the ruddy pillar of the Infant was the passage of the porphyry stair".⁶⁹ The stair is, of course, generally understood to be that which descends from the Throne of the Emperor to the city of Byzantium.

⁶⁷"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 176.

⁶⁸"Malory and the Grail Legend", The Image of the City, p. 190.

⁶⁹Taliessin through Logres, p. 91.

the logothetes run down the porphyry stair
bearing the missives through the area of empire.

(TTL., p. 6)

The stair, though an actuality, does bear a likeness to that ladder which runs from Saturn to the Fixed Stars, just as the Throne of Byzantium is like the entire realm of the Fixed Stars, and the Emperor is like the Creator in his character of Operative Providence. In the light of Taliessin's assertion that "all the zones / circle Saturn",⁷⁰ it may be inferred by the reader that up to this point in Logres' growth all the zones or stages of development in Logres and the Empire, from that of which Mercury is ruler to that which is governed by Jupiter, culminate in that of Saturn, which first symbolized Rome's golden age. When this era has been;fully realized all men will perceive clearly that Galahad's function is to lead them on to the heaven of the Fixed Stars, that sphere which is one level beyond the furthest reach of the Contemplative Life and the one in which the full community of souls is manifested.

The interpretation seems to conform generally to Williams' note on this section of the poem: "Taliessin sees the process and triumph of the soul's fruition".⁷¹ The

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 74.

⁷¹C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 171.

authorial comment may also confirm a broad parallel with the intention of the Paradiso as a whole, for as Dante had reached the heaven of Saturn and perceived that he had arrived at the culmination of all other planetary heavens, beyond which intimations of the triumph of Christ would be granted him, so also may revelation come to the Empire and Logres when it finally passes through Saturn.

The poem concludes with the lines:

Emeralds of fire, blank to both, his eyes
were points of the Throne's foot that sank through Logres.

(TTL., p. 74)

They are often interpreted as an expression of Taliessin's ultimate inability to probe further into the mysteries of divine purpose; but if one pursues the logic of the reading suggested above, these lines may be seen as the turning inward of Taliessin's vision to the sight which will be revealed to him. At the conclusion of his meditation, Taliessin falls silent (as the music of the spheres was silenced for Dante when he entered Saturn) and his eyes (like the smile of Beatrice) become ostensibly voided of any ability to communicate further with his two companions. In the intensity of inner vision, they are turned inwards to become like "points of the Throne's foot", brilliant, jewel-like, still probing for the sight which will relate the fate of Logres to the designs of heaven. For when he

asserted that "Four / zones divide the empire from the Throne's firmament",⁷² he demonstrated his awareness of the fact that although the Empire is separated from the heavens which contain the ruling intelligences, there exists a correspondence between the two planes. The firmament where the archetype of the Throne resides, where the Throne of the Divine Creator is the pattern for that on earth, is linked to the Empire by the seven planetary heavens through which all earth must pass to achieve the vision of beatitude. In this perception of the ultimate correspondence between the patterns of heaven and earth, Taliessin's vision is not unlike that of Dante as he ascended, sphere by sphere, to the Empyrean.

⁷²Taliessin through Logres, p. 74.

CHAPTER V

THE CITY AND LOVE: TWIN INTELLIGENCES OF LOGRES

Both Preludes of the cycle contain, in apparent allusion to Byzantium, references to "the City".

the metaphysicians, sitting to note him, heard
from the City, the roar of burning and bundled torches
rise through the fixed stars ...

(RSS., p. 2)

Call on the hills to hide us
lest, men said in the City, the lord of charity
ride in the starlight ...

(TTL., p. 1)

The capitalization indicates that the word for Williams has a significance beyond its conventional connotations. In fact, the word embodies several themes which are central to the whole system of his thought and to which he returns again and again, in both his expository and creative writing, and in both discursive and symbolic modes.

It is scarcely unusual that a poet of the twentieth century should manifest such a preoccupation with the idea of the city, of course, and many major poets of the present century have chosen that "the image of a City" shall dominate their work. This feature of modern poetry is concisely treated in the following critical comment:

The importance of urban and mechanical imagery in forming the sensibility of the modern writer, and the modern reader, has often been stressed, if not over-stressed. But we limit the imaginative scope of our criticism if we interpret these tendencies solely in historical and sociological terms. The significance of the image of the City is rather as an organic symbol of the pattern of relationships imposed, for good or ill, on the life of men once they have left the state of innocence. The City is thus organically conceived, above all in the work of Joyce ... and, in the same way, the City of London, with all other historical cities seen in and through it, dominates T.S. Eliot's Waste Land.¹

Thus is the City manifested in Williams' Arthurian poems: as an "organic symbol" of the web of inter-relations of Lapsarian Man. It should be observed at the outset, however, that Williams' symbol of the City differs both from that of most contemporary poets, and also from his own symbolic practice as established in the creation of a cosmic setting for the cycle, in that it refers the reader to no specific geographical location. Although many attributes of the City may be inferred from descriptions of particular cities, especially Byzantium, no one city completely fulfils all the necessary requirements to the extent that it can be considered as the pattern for all others. Williams' City is wholly symbolic of an abstract set of values not yet realized within his Empire and is, in this sense, at one remove from his symbolic geography, which is

¹John Heath-Stubbs, "Introduction", The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse, p. 30.

capable of indicating simultaneously both a specific location and a mode of experience.

Generally, Williams characterized the City as "the sense of many relationships between men and women woven into a unity".² No reader who has some knowledge of Williams' theological principles will fail to realize that it is the last phrase, "women into a unity", which is the indication of the distinctive nature of his concept of the City. Initially, however, he appears to experience some difficulty in further explaining what he means by the phrase. Although in "The Image of the City" he begins an exposition of his ideas in an ambitious and confident manner, he soon feels compelled to remark that the City "is not a thing that can be easily defined".³ And in spite of a wide-ranging analysis of allusions in English verse, he appears to sense defeat when he nears the conclusion and says, a trifle defensively, "all that this paper has attempted to do has been to indicate a few points in the mass of English poetry where there have appeared hints of that great and very moving image of the City".⁴ In this essay

²"The Image of the City in English Verse", The Image of the City, p. 92.

³Ibid., p. 100.

⁴Ibid.

the difficulties he experiences are largely those imposed by his chosen method of exposition; that of culling great literature for references to a concept which is peculiarly his own, and which he has not satisfactorily outlined in his own terms.

Nevertheless, he successfully makes several important points in this essay. Predictably, he finds in the lines from the Apocalypse, "I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God", the greatest image of the heavenly City, and it is this image that apparently shapes his concept of all great earthly cities. Thus he discerns aspects of the New Jerusalem in a variety of literary passages. Civil justice as seen in Measure for Measure is the "order which holds and is a necessity of the City in this world".⁵ The "perfection of earthly labour"⁶ is conveyed for him in the line "the singing masons building roofs of gold" from Henry V, while the figure of Caesar in Anthony and Cleopatra is himself a symbol of "the peace and union of man which he represents and sustains",⁷ by virtue of his belief that the "time of universal peace is near./ Prove this a prosperous day, the three-nooked world / Shall wear the olive freely". Even in Milton

⁵Ibid., p. 96.

⁶Ibid., p. 92.

⁷Ibid., p. 95.

Williams finds a kind of "'civic' relationship" in "the courtesy which the figures of the poem display towards each other; a kind of divine charity moves in them".⁸ Of T.S. Eliot's The Family Reunion, the very title of which has for him "a profound meaning", he says, "I do not recollect any other modern work which throws so strange a light on the true relationship of the generations, and therefore on the great principles of the City".⁹ In this play he finds "poetic hints of the civil union of the living and the dead"¹⁰ and "the continual interchange of courtesies of the spirit"¹¹ which distinguish Eliot's treatment of the City from that of other modern poets, who have generally treated it "inadequately", even though they have been sincere and serious. Finally, in this analysis, Williams returns to Wordsworth's description of the "feeling intellect", which he submits as "the expression of the state of mind which ... he [i.e., Wordsworth] saw as the best nature of men. It is also the best maxim of the desired City".¹²

⁸Ibid., pp. 99-100.

⁹Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 101.

However readers may judge this essay as a whole, when Williams abandons his favoured method of literary analysis in favour of comparatively straight-forward theological exposition, his line of argument becomes much more lucid. In "The Redeemed City", published a year later, he provides in theological terms as concise a description of the City as will be found anywhere in his prose, at the same time relating the idea to certain of his other themes.

The Holy Ghost moves us to be, by every means to which we are called, the Images of Christ, the types of that Original, in or out of the flesh. It is the intercourse of those free Images which is the union of the City. The name of the City is Union ... The process of that union is by the method of free exchange. The methods of that exchange range from childbirth to the Eucharist - the two primal activities of the earth and the Church.¹³

In this essay he also resumes the general description with which he had begun his previous essay, and explicitly defines "unity": Christ in his Resurrection and Incarnation was a restoration of the union of the two natures of man, flesh and spirit, and

the Holy Ghost ... drives us towards a union with the Union. What he created, we must choose - accepting in Re-creation the original creation.¹⁴

¹³"The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, p. 103.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 104.

Thus Williams isolates the chief characteristic of the City, its "name", as being the acceptance, reassertion, and daily living expression of the most basic of Christian articles of faith. When men acknowledge the existence of the union within their individual natures, and within their social structure in their relations with each other, the cornerstone of the City will have been laid. This fundamental principle of unity will colour all the other attributes of the City, such as justice, peace, courtesy, the exchange of duties and labours.

Before turning to the Arthurian cycle in order to see how such prose explanations are helpful to an interpretation of the poetry, it is worthwhile to consider briefly the source of Williams' notion of the City, which Lewis avers haunted the poet all his life.¹⁵ The symbol obviously has its roots in Williams' well-known personal attachment to the city of London. By middle-age the attachment was so deep that he regarded himself exiled by the move to Oxford which the war necessitated, and he returned to London as often as conditions would permit. As this attachment intensified throughout his life, he sought and found a deeper significance in that city, and the many references to it in his novels testify to the importance which it came to assume in his thought and creative work.

¹⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 104.

It is by now nearly a commonplace of Williams' criticism that the City is an image or symbol of Order. Lewis, who probably first made the observation, maintains:

On many of us the prevailing impression made by the London streets is one of chaos; but Williams looking on the same spectacle, saw chiefly an image - an imperfect, pathetic, heroic, and majestic image - of Order.¹⁶

Lewis goes further and relates this philosophical approach to Williams' concept of Byzantium.

Such is Byzantium - Order, envisaged not as restraint nor even as a convenience but as a beauty and splendour.¹⁷

In support of these opinions he quotes the well-known passages from two of Williams' novels, War in Heaven and The Greater Trumps.¹⁸ In her "Introduction" Anne Ridler refers to Lewis' views on the subject and expands his ideas by bringing additional observations to bear on the matter:

... as there is relationship within the Deity, that 'primary act of Love' which is the Trinity, man must reflect this order in his fellowship with other men ... Augustine saw an ideal Rome as the likeness of the heavenly City: Virgil had seen it as the pattern of earthly order. The conception of the Roman order meant much to Charles Williams ... Byzantium, Rome, Christendom, London, Amen House ... these were all aspects of the City: and it was an order at once hierarchic and republican.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸War in Heaven, p. 66, and The Greater Trumps, pp. 55-6.

¹⁹Anne Ridler, "Introduction", The Image of the City, pp. xlv-xlvi.

Finally, Charles Moorman, probably using the observations of both Mrs. Ridler and Lewis as convenient points of departure, enlarges the concept of Order until it dominates the entire cycle.

Perhaps the greatest single image that Williams develops in remaking the Arthurian legend is that of organic unity and order ... The Arthurian world is ... marked by order at every phase of its existence ... its presence in Williams nearly always denotes the sacred, the holy ... Order, in Williams' terms, is always the mode of God's existence and its manifestations in the world are His handiwork.²⁰

The value of such critical pronouncements is scarcely contestable. They provide essential guidelines for the reader who first approaches Williams' cycle, and they also successfully isolate what may well be Williams' most unique poetic invention. Nevertheless, once this debt has been acknowledged, it seems desirable to take the analysis one step further, re-examining the material with a view to unearthing other aspects of the symbol and the concepts which underlie it.

Of all the novels in which Williams either utilizes a city as setting or invokes the City as symbol, All Hallows' Eve stands pre-eminent, for in this work is to be observed the progression from concrete locality to symbolic state of that city in which Williams first saw significance. On one

²⁰Charles Moorman, Arthurian Triptych, pp. 67-8.

level, its setting is contemporary London. The novel opens with the heroine, Lester Furnival, standing on Westminster Bridge, looking out over the city. The time is the evening of the day on which peace with Germany has been concluded. But although she does not immediately realize it, Lester is dead. Recently the victim of a freak plane crash over the Embankment, it is her spiritualized body, which is rapidly relinquishing its material nature, that stands gazing out over the City ~~of~~ Westminster. This actual city, full of light, activity, and all the sounds of human commerce, is for Lester strangely dim and silent, empty of people and devoid even of the sensation of passing time.

It lay there, as it always does - itself offering no barriers, open to be trodden, ghostly to this world and to heaven, and in its upper reaches ghostly also to those in its lower reaches where (if at all) hell lies ... mostly those streets are only for the passing through of the newly dead ... One day perhaps it will indeed break through; it will undo our solidity, which belongs to earth and heaven, and all of us who are then alive will find ourselves in it and alone till we win through it to our own place.²¹

There exist, then, two separate levels of action: the City of Westminster (which by convention is always capitalized, of course) and its environs, and the City which Lester now inhabits. Were Williams Roman Catholic rather than Anglican, one might unhesitatingly characterize the latter City as Purgatory. Indeed, when one recalls the

²¹All Hallows' Eve, pp. 72-3.

various correspondences between Williams' thought and the work of Dante, the possibility that it does bear some resemblance to the Purgatory of the Commedia becomes less remote. A note on the background to Dante's Purgatorio may throw some further correspondences into relief:

... the life of Eden, had man persevered, was to have been an earthly life, including what may be thought of as natural religion, - a consciousness of the love and nearness of God, a perfect spontaneity of human joy and goodness, and a knowledge of all earthly wisdom. But the higher revelations which would complete the life of man, not as an earthly but as a heavenly being, were to have been subsequently added. Therefore, when man fell he forfeited immediately the perfect earthly life, and ultimately the perfect heavenly life. His first task, then, must be to recover the life of the Earthly Paradise ... the type of the "blessedness of this life..."²²

The resemblances between Dante's Purgatory and Williams' City in All Hallows' Eve are scarcely as marked as those other parallels discussed in the previous chapter. There is no mention of any mountain in Williams, nor any allusion, however veiled, to an Earthly Paradise like that of the Garden of Eden. Nonetheless, there are in this novel brief glimpses of a state that is not unlike that state which the soul seeks in its ascent of the mount of Purgatory, glimpses that convince one that whatever the differences in details of locale, the spirit of Dante's Purgatory lies behind Williams' concept of the City in this work.

²²H. Oelsner, "Note on Dante's Purgatory", The Divine Comedy, pp. 189-90.

As another character of All Hallows' Eve, Betty Wallingford, goes forth into the City,

She went lightly and gaily; these times were always happy and fortunate ... All but these joyous hours were secluded from her. Ignorant of what she obeyed, but in perfect volition of obedience, she went along.²³

The lines recall the "perfect spontaneity of human joy and goodness" typical of the perfect earthly life mentioned above. She further experiences, as she makes her way through the spectral streets, the "cleared and fresh"²⁴ sensations of sight and smell so that the City, even in its most ordinary activities, appears as "the ground-base of the whole absorbed music with which the lighter sun and sky mingled".²⁵ A station-porter going about his tasks seems endowed with heightened powers, for "Golden-thighed Endurance, sun-shrouded Justice, were in him, and his face was the deep confluence of the City".²⁶ And when she must leave the City and resume once more her earthly body and existence, quitting the "precincts of felicity",²⁷ she looks back.

²³All Hallows' Eve, p. 72.

²⁴Ibid., p. 74.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., p. 76.

²⁷Ibid., p. 77.

She was already on the edge of the shadow over the Hill's height, and all before her the sunset, over the City - another sunset, another sun - glowed not as if the light were going but as if the night were coming, a holier beauty, a richer mystery.²⁸

Yet, in spite of these intimations of a paradisaal life, this City is after all the City of the newly dead; and while it contains many hints of the Earthly Paradise which man forfeited by the Fall, it still remains essentially a part of the life of the soul after it has left its earthly limitations behind. By entering the City those few privileged living persons like Betty Wallingford at least are afforded a glimpse of an alternative to the life they actually experience on earth, and an intimation of how it still may be.

All Hallows' Eve provides still another such insight, this time through the medium of art and the inspiration of an earth-bound artist, who though incapable of explaining the source or cause of his vision, nevertheless stands by it, affirming its validity.

It was a part of London after a raid - he thought, of the City proper, for a shape on the right reminded him dimly of St. Paul's. At the back were a few houses, but the rest of the painting was a wide stretch of desolation. The time was late dawn; the sky was clear; the light came, it seemed at first, from the yet unrisen sun behind the single group of houses. The light ... seemed to stand out from the painting, and almost to dominate the room itself.... it so governed the painting that all other details and elements were contained within

²⁸Ibid., p. 79.

it. They floated in that imaginary light as the earth does in the sun's.... It was everywhere in the painting - concealed in houses and in their projected shadows, lying in ambush in the cathedral, opening in the rubble, vivid in the vividness of the sky. It would everywhere have burst through, had it not chosen rather to be shaped into forms, and to restrain and change its greatness in the colours of those lesser limits. It was universal, and lived.²⁹

One viewer, Richard, comments that it is "like a modern Creation of the World, or at least a Creation of London",³⁰ and, indeed, in the last lines quoted above the light functions virtually as a creator. It is interesting to note further that in this role, the light conforms to the Christian idea of the Creator who deliberately chose to "restrain and change its greatness" by bringing mankind into existence and His Son to Incarnacy. Moreover, this same creative light still reposes within the confines of the Fallen world, still waits to be discovered by the perceptive and enlightened. When Williams had defined the City as Union, and had asserted that Fallen man, by virtue of Christ's Incarnacy and Resurrection, is directed by the Holy Ghost to seek and establish it within himself and between his fellows, he was proposing nothing less than the recovery of the pre-Lapsarian state of true vision and bliss. "What He created, we must choose - accepting in the

²⁹Ibid., pp. 29-30.

³⁰Ibid., p. 30.

Re-creation the original creation."³¹ The light in the passage above is unmistakably symbolic of the Divine nature which still resides in creation, the revealed divinity of the universe as it was in primeval times and as it still may appear.

When one turns from the prose expositions to the cycle, the first references to the City do not appear to offer substantial support for the ideas outlined above. On the contrary, they apparently confirm Lewis' opinion that the City simply symbolizes Order and that its significance is totally encompassed by Byzantium. There is the rather ambiguous reference in the "Prelude" of Taliessin through Logres to "the lord of charity"³² from whose sight men in "the City" hide themselves. And in the "Prelude" of The Region of the Summer Stars there occurs the historical allusion in "the roar of burning and bundled torches"³³ to the iconoclastic activities and the Nestorian controversy in "the City"; all of which appears to point to the actual city of Byzantium as the type of the City. Lewis is further supported in his contention that the City symbolizes Order by the fact that "the ancient line of

³¹"The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, p. 104.

³²Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

³³The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 2.

imperial shapes"³⁴ derives its authority from "the Throne of primal order"³⁵ and that in consequence the Empire lies "in the imposed order"³⁶ thus reflected in Byzantium.

It must be admitted that it is tempting to interpret such allusions literally and concretely, as Lewis has done. Simply to assume from the beginning that the City consistently refers to Byzantium, that Byzantium actually contains the "Throne of primal order" and that it is literally surrounded by "the visionary zone of clear light",³⁷ would certainly eliminate the necessity for constant vigilance in a large and by no means clearly defined area of interpretation. Unfortunately, this is not possible. The City embraces something more than the qualities of Byzantium, impressive though they be. The City is more than any particular locality yet realized in the Empire, and even Byzantium is not the perfection which Williams envisaged as the City. The City is perfection, but Byzantium "expected perfection; it awaited the Second Coming / of the Union".³⁸ And it is, of course, in expectation of the fulfilment of this event that Logres is reclaimed from wilderness to become a theme of the Empire.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 3.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 2-3.

Hence, when Taliessin determines to go to Byzantium after hearing of both the Empire and the "myth" of Christianity which is its foundation, and when he seeks "the sea and the City",³⁹ he goes in search of that place where he believes he will learn about "the City", that is, the City via the city of Byzantium. The desire to learn more about the "rumour" is so intense, moreover, that when he dreams of Byzantium he dreams also of the City, visualized, like the painting in All Hallows' Eve, in terms of all-pervading light:

... a clear city on a sea-site
in a light that shone from behind the sun; the sun
was not so fierce as to pierce where the light could
through every waste and wood; the city and the light
lay beyond the sun and beyond his dream,

(RSS., p. 15)

Further descriptions of the City utilize similar imagery. Later, when he recalls his experiences at Byzantium, Taliessin speaks of "light / compact in each fitting act of justice in the City";⁴⁰ individual cities such as "Carbonek, Camelot, ... were gates and containers, intermediations of light";⁴¹ and the account of Arthur's last battle to establish his supremacy, "Mount Badon",

³⁹"The Calling of Taliessin", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 8.

⁴⁰"Taliessin in the Rose-Garden", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 25.

⁴¹"Prelude", Taliessin through Logres, p. 1.

vibrates with light as the poem hurtles towards its
conclusion in a rush of apocalyptic imagery. At the height
of the battle are invoked the

hierarchs of freedom, golden candles of the solstice
that flared round the golden-girdled Logos, snowy-haired
brazen-footed, starry-handed, the thigh banded with the
Name.

The trumpets of the City blared through the feet of brass;
the candles flared among the pirates; their mass broke;
.....
.....
the paps of the day were golden-girdled;
hair, bleached white by the mere stress of the glory,
drew the battle through the air up threads of light.

(TTL., p. 18)

And the poem closes on the line, "the candles of new
Camelot shone through the fought field".⁴²

The light which was first an attribute solely of
Byzantium is now to be associated with Camelot. So, at
the coronation of Arthur, which immediately follows his
victory, the spectacle is conveyed chiefly in imagery of
light.

The king stood crowned ...
midnight striking, torches and fires
massing the colour ...

(TTL., p. 19)

and

... thick-tossed torches,
tall candles flared ...
.....
flaring over all the king's dragon ramped.

(TTL., p. 19)

⁴²Taliessin through Logres, p. 18.

As Merlin witnessed the scene,

He turned where the fires, amid burning mail,
poured, tributaried by torches and candles,
to a point in a massive of colour, one
aureole flame ...

(TTL., p. 19)

Even his foreboding of failure is expressed in terms of
light:

Doom in shocks sprinkled the burning gloom,
molten metals and kindling colours pouring
into the pyre ...

(TTL., p. 21)

And the final stanza clearly exhibits part of the
significances of the light imagery, as the reader realizes
that the fate of Logres is by no means secure, but hangs
in very delicate balance.

At the door of the gloom sparks die and revive;
the spark of Logres fades, glows, fades.

(TTL., p. 21)

The climax of the Quest of the Grail is also couched
in this kind of imagery. "The Last Voyage" describes
Galahad in the following terms:

Fierce in the prow the alchemical Infant burned,
red by celerity now conceiving the white;

(TTL., p. 85)

As the three Quest lords in the ship of Solomon "sped to
the City",⁴³ Galahad offers himself in prayer to ease the
death of Dinadan, who is dying martyr-like in Logres "on a

⁴³Ibid., p. 85.

bed of coals".⁴⁴ As he does so, the veil over the martyred
Blanchefleur's bier glows with the light of divine
recognition:

... a low light
covered with flame the spread saffron veil;
the heart of the dead Dinadan burned on the sun,
and gathered and fled through the air to the head of
Percivale,
flew and flamed and flushed the argentine column.

(TTL., p. 87)

It is, however, in the final poem of the cycle,
"Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass", that the light imagery,
though perhaps less striking, yet achieves its full
cumulative effect. During the Mass,

... the festival of flames
fell from new sky to new earth; the light in bands
of bitter glory renewed the imperial lands.

(TTL., p. 90)

At the elevation of the Host, when the assembled company
"exalted the Unity; prised shone / web, paths, points",⁴⁵
they see suddenly

Over the altar, flame of anatomized fire,
the High Prince stood, gyre in burning gyre;

(TTL., p. 91)

and in Taliessin's words,

the ruddy pillar of the Infant was the passage of the
porphyry stair.

(TTL., p. 91)

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 90.

In Taliessin's description is an almost literal restatement of the traditional association of light with spiritual revelation, which for the Christian has its background in the scriptures, from the first recorded divine utterance, "Fiat lux", to John's characterization of Christ as "the true Light", and the flames of Pentecost, culminating in the vision of the Apocalyptic City. In the prominence which Williams gives to the general symbolism of light and its supporting imagery his poetry may be considered to be very much in the mainstream of Christian literature, both doctrinal and mystical. The same characteristic of his City is reminiscent not only of the vision of the New Jerusalem of Revelation, or of Dante's Purgatorio and Paradiso, but also of the many utterances of the seventeenth-century English metaphysicals, especially those of Traherne. In Centuries of Meditations, recalling his childish impression of God's immanence, he wrote:

The men! O what Venerable and Reverend Creatures did the Aged seem! Immortal Cherubins! And young Men Glittering and Sparkling Angels and Maids strange Seraphick Pieces of Life and Beauty! ... I knew not that they were Born or should Die. But all things abided Eternally as they were in their Proper Places. Eternity was Manifest in the Light of the Day, and somthing infinit Behind evry thing appeared: which talked with my Expectation and moved my Desire. The Citie seemed to stand in Eden, or to be Built in Heaven.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Thomas Traherne, Centuries of Meditation, Cent. iii, 3, 8-18.

Even more striking parallels with Williams' imagery may be found in poems of Henry Vaughan which reveal what amounts to a virtual obsession with light as an image of eternity, revelation, and the state of spiritual ecstasy: "I saw eternity the other night / Like a great ring of pure and endless light, / All calm as it was bright",⁴⁷ "The whole creation shakes off night, / And for thy shadow looks the light",⁴⁸ and, of course, "They are all gone out into the world of light",⁴⁹ to quote only a few of the most obvious. The same strain may be discerned even in certain of Giles Fletcher's poems, notably the stanzas from "Christ's Triumph After Death" which describe the vision of the Holy City.⁵⁰ While Williams' presentation of the City as a symbol of Order may constitute his most original contribution, the City as a revelation of the "blessedness of this life", with its echoes of the heavenly City of the Apocalypse, Dante, the mystics and the English metaphysicals, shows him to be well within the traditions of the greatest Christian poetry.

⁴⁷Henry Vaughan, "The World", 1-3.

⁴⁸Henry Vaughan, "The Dawning", 16-7.

⁴⁹Henry Vaughan, (poem titled after the first line),
1.

⁵⁰Giles Fletcher, "Christ's Triumph After Death",
Stanzas 15, 38, 39, 47.

This City for Williams lies behind all the various earthly manifestations of civic relationship, but its character implies still other qualities. As Williams observed in his remarks on The Family Reunion, it also implies a union of the living and the dead, and he means this in a very specialized and literal sense. In prose he asserted:

... Re-creation was presented to us, in the Apocalypse, under the image of a City ... The feast of Christ the King is also the feast of Christ the City. The principle of that City, and the gates of it, are the nature of Christ as the Holy Ghost exhibits it and inducts us into it; it is the doctrine that no man lives to himself or indeed, from himself.⁵¹

The last statement recalls Williams' earlier assertion that the "process of that union is by the method of free exchange",⁵² and, indeed, the word "exchange" is to be found again and again throughout the cycle:

for the hall is raised to the power of exchange of all by the small spread organisms of your hands ... there are the altars of Christ the City extended.

(TTL., p. 43)

Many a mile of distance in the Empire was to go to the learning, many a turn of exchange in the need of himself or others or the Empire...

(RSS., p. 15)

... the taking of another to itself in degree, the making of a mutual beauty in exchange,

(RSS., p. 38)

⁵¹"The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, p. 104.

⁵²Ibid., p. 103.

Passing references are even more frequent: "Blanchefleur, /mother of the nature of lovers, creature of exchange",⁵³ "the two kings were one, by exchange of death and healing",⁵⁴ "He was set on the marble of exchange",⁵⁵ "Money is the medium of exchange",⁵⁶ "a frankness of honourable exchange".⁵⁷

As the range of quotation demonstrates, the term means various things depending upon its context. Basically, however, Williams intended to convey by his use of the word (or the word "substitution", which he used synonymously) the time-proven principle that no man is self-sufficient. As he wrote in "The Redeemed City":

It was by an act of substitution that He renewed the City ... this is the inscape of the Divine City. It is elementary enough, in our simple natural lives - from childbirth everyone who is not 'a god or a beast' lives by that; there is no other way to live. We are, simply, utterly dependent on others ... 58

The Biblical injunction that we should bear one another's

⁵³"The Last Voyage", Taliessin through Logres, p. 86.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 88.

⁵⁵"Taliessin on the Death of Virgil", Taliessin through Logres, p. 32.

⁵⁶"Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coffins", Taliessin through Logres, p. 44.

⁵⁷"The Founding of the Company", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 37.

⁵⁸"The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, p. 105.

burdens is not delivered merely as a guide to civil courtesy, although because of "the universal nature of the application"⁵⁹ it does become this; it is also made in recognition of "the supernatural nature of the principle".⁶⁰ Man is a Divine image and bears in his relations with others, as well as in his individual nature, an analogy to the Trinity, which Itself exists in a harmonious state of interdependence of the Three Persons. Interdependence between man and his Creator was substantiated even in the vulgar irony of the taunt flung at Christ during His Passion, "He saved others; himself he cannot save".⁶¹ The basic unity of the material and the divine which Williams saw in the figure of Christ is thus visited, in ever-widening circles, upon all aspects of creation in his cycle.

The "methods of that exchange", Williams submitted, "range from childbirth to the Eucharist";⁶² not, it will be noted, to death, for he was at some pains to demonstrate that physical exposition of the principle is not to be confined to earth, just as spiritual exposition is not to

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Mark, 15: 31

⁶²"The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, p. 103.

be confined to heaven. In fact, even on earth the boundaries between the living and the dead may be obliterated by the workings of divine purpose and the application of aspects of Exchange. The clearest demonstration of what Williams intends by all this may be seen in "The Founding of the Company". In obedience to Merlin's command Taliessin has gone to Byzantium, where he is indoctrinated in many principles of the City. Years later, in fulfilment of Merlin's prophecy, he finds that members of his household exhibit and practise so devotedly the principles of which he learned in Byzantium that almost by accident they form a microcosmic version of the City. Though this group of believers is known as "the Company", it does not possess the formality of a religious order.

Grounded in the Acts of the Throne and the pacts of the themes,
 it lived only by conceded recollection,
 having no decision, no vote or admission,
 but for the single note that any soul
 took of its own election of the Way; the whole
 shaped no frame nor titular claim to place.

(RSS., p. 36)

The "single note" is, of course, the consciousness on the part of the individual of what he does, the exercise of choice and "decision"⁶³ which is a mark of the City ("decision ... was the mind's election, / the arbitration

⁶³"The Coming of Galahad", Taliessin through Logres, p. 71.

of faith, the erection of the City").⁶⁴ Having no vote of admission, the Company is open to members of both the secular and religious community, and its only rule is "the making of man in the doctrine of largesse",⁶⁵ "the indwelling, of the mansion and session of each in each".⁶⁶ The methods of exchange are practised on many levels, but in this poem they are separated "for convenience of naming"⁶⁷ into three categories or degrees.

... So, at the first station,
were those who lived by a frankness of honourable exchange,
labour in the kingdom, devotion in the Church, the need
each had of other; this was the measurement and motion
of process - the seed of all civil polity

(RSS., p. 37)

At this level of spiritual progress is to be witnessed the most literal interpretation of the command that man should bear his brother's burden. In the resultant exchange of labours, such as Williams had detected in the image from Henry V, there is the spontaneity and perfect volition of obedience to the needs of others which would have distinguished the Earthly Paradise.

⁶⁴"The Calling of Taliessin", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 5.

⁶⁵"The Founding of the Company", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 37.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

... servitude itself
was sweetly fee'd or offered by the willing proffer
of itself to another, the taking of another to itself
in degree, the making of a mutual beauty in exchange,

(RSS., pp. 37-8)

On the second level the "labour and fruition"⁶⁸ of
the first level is carried further.

... it exchanged the proper self
and wherever need was drew breath daily
in another's place ...
'dying each other's life, living each other's death'.

(RSS., p. 38)

The implications of this second mode of exchange arise out
of Williams' idea of the union of the generations, living
and dead, which he perceived, for example, in Eliot's
Family Reunion.

The best prose exposition of this idea, which is a
difficult one for most readers to grasp, is to be found in
his novel, Descent into Hell. This work takes as one of
its themes the release of redemption from all temporal
restrictions, and describes the way in which exchange may
be effected not only between living persons but also between
those separated by vast periods of time, both past and
future. Pauline Anstruther has finally brought herself to
confide in Peter Stanhope her fear of her doppelgänger.

His reply is

... I don't quite understand... You have friends;
haven't you asked one of them to carry your fear?⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

⁶⁹ Descent into Hell, p. 96.

And in answer to her obvious perplexity at this suggestion, he elaborates on the meaning of the Biblical injunction to bear one another's burdens, concluding:

It's a fact of experience. If you give a weight to me, you can't be carrying it yourself; all I'm asking you to do is to notice that blazing truth.⁷⁰

In practice, the utilization of this "fact of experience" is subtle and not without its difficulties. To assume Pauline's burden of terror and dread Stanhope must "recollect" the impression of the girl, imaginatively experiencing the appearance of her doppelgänger, together with all her accompanying emotions.

... he summoned through all his sensations an approaching fear. Deliberately he opened himself to that fear, laying aside for awhile every thought of why he was doing it, forgetting every principle and law, absorbing only the strangeness and the terror of that separate identity ... it was necessary first intensely to receive all her spirit's conflict... His own eyes began to seek and strain and shrink, his own feet, quiet though they actually were, began to weaken with the necessity of advance upon the road down which the girl was passing. The body of his flesh received her alien terror, his mind carried the burden of her world. The burden was inevitably lighter for him than for her, for the rage of a personal resentment was lacking. He endured her sensitiveness, but not her sin ... His goodwill went to its utmost, and utmost goodwill can go very far. It went to all but actual vision ...⁷¹

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 98.

⁷¹Ibid., pp. 100-1.

In the midst of his concentration he is interrupted; and though he would return to the contemplation and reception of Pauline's burden, in fact,

the act of substitution was fully made; and if it had been necessarily delayed for years ... but not by his fault, still its result would have preceded it. In the place of the Omnipotence there is neither before nor after; there is only act.⁷²

Elsewhere in Descent into Hell the same act, made after the example of Christ's Passion, takes place between the dying Margaret Anstruther and a suicide of some generations earlier and between Pauline and her martyred ancestor of the sixteenth century.

It is in just this manner that those members of the Company who are at the second station practise exchange.

Terrible and lovely is the general substitution of souls the Flesh-taking ordained for its mortal images in its first creation, and now in Its sublime self shows, since It deigned to be dead in the stead of each man.

(RSS., p. 38)

Within the cycle there is the example of the salvation of Virgil by exchange which was discussed in Chapter II, but there is also the more extreme instance in Blanchefleur's spontaneous gift of her very life blood to save the life of another, which stands as a literal and physical expression of the act of substitution.

⁷²Ibid., p. 102.

The third station of spiritual development is achieved by those who are granted the vision

... where the full salvation of all souls is seen, and their co-inhering, as when the Trinity first made man in Their image, and now restored by the one adored substitution ...

(RSS., p. 39)

Here is the vision which man lost in the Fall, and which the Incarnation and Passion of Christ restored to him. Obviously the most difficult of the three degrees to attain, it is experienced, without regard to function or civil status, only by a select few; Dindrane (Blanchefleur), a serving girl, the Archbishop, Percivale, a mechanic, Dinadan. Taliessin himself perceives the state only occasionally, and then indirectly; when he achieves in verse the successful imaging of Camelot as the potential City, or when he sees the true meaning in Broceliande. At such times the state appears as

a deep, strange island of granite growth,
thrice charged with massive light in change,
clear and golden-cream and rose tintured,

(RSS., p. 39)

Again, imagery of light predominates, and is the more effective as it heralds the riddle of divinity, which states the paradoxes of the vision as it must appear for mortals, in a dense, almost tortured structure of semi-theological terms.

in the land of the Trinity, the land of the perichoresis, of separateness without separation, reality without rift, where the Basis is in the Image, and the Image in the Gift, the Gift is in the Image and the Image in the Basis, and Basis and Gift alike in Gift and Basis.

(RSS., p. 39)

Such a vision of the Trinity is vouchsafed only to those souls who have ascended through the degrees of the doctrine of largesse, whose sight has been renovated from the warped state imposed by the Fall. This clear, undeviating perception of the nature of man, society, and the Godhead is dependent upon the free and conscious acceptance of all aspects of the created universe. The opposite state of affairs is symbolized by Williams in Descent into Hell as that other City of the plain, Gomorrah.

We know all about Sodom nowadays, but perhaps we know the other even better. Men can be in love with men, and women with women, and still be in love and make sounds and speeches, but don't you know how quiet the streets of Gomorrah are? Haven't you seen the pools that everlastingly reflect the faces of those who walk with their own phantasms, but the phantasms aren't reflected, and can't be ... There's no distinction between lover and beloved; they beget themselves on their adoration of themselves, and by themselves too, for creation ... is the mercy of God, and they won't have the facts of creation.⁷³

Though Gomorrah is not invoked in the Arthurian cycle, the state it represents clearly exists in the spirit of certain individuals, and the chilling monologue of Mordred best conveys it. The parallel between his fantasies

⁷³Ibid., p. 174.

and those of Lawrence Wentworth of Descent into Hell is in some respects almost exact. Both reject the external world, preferring to live in their own self-made worlds. Both populate their creations with products of their perverted desires; phantasms who will conform to their every desire (for they are the very shape of these desires), never offering any threat of individuality nor the resistance of external authority. But Mordred, unlike Wentworth, who merely sinks deeper and deeper into Gomorrah, is eventually deluded into attempting to bring his world of fantasy into actual existence.

He sought his vision by mere derision of the vision.
 He drew into the ordained place of the Table
 the unstable pagan chiefs ...

 ... he assuaged his own image
 with the image of the Throne, setting both against the
 and begetting by the succubus of its longing, in a world^{Empire,}
 of pagans,
 the falsity of all images and their incoherence.

(RSS., p. 55)

When Mordred denies the authority of Arthur as king of Logres, he has set his foot on the path which will shortly lead him to reject the separate identity and integrity of any created thing which thwarts his personal desire. The city of Gomorrah is perhaps the surest route to Hell, if not Hell itself, for it has as its principle the deliberate and conscious reassertion by the individual

of preference for the Fallen state, a denial of the union effected by the Incarnation, a denial of the mutual indwelling of the Trinity and the co-inherence of all men in this Deity. Such a denial works, after its own fashion, for if a man prefers no external authority, if he withdraws spiritually into his own autonomous world to exclude all the other irritating divine images, he will be alone in the fullest sense that he could possibly desire. And by so shutting himself off and denying the existence of others, he has closed the avenue of assistance by which others might have entered to help.

In the course of the centuries since the establishment of the Church there has emerged a substantial body of literature dealing with the personal religious experience. Part of this vast corpus treats the ways by which the human soul, in the absence of the Second Coming, but under the direction of the Holy Ghost, may come to knowledge of and communion with the Godhead. One of the earliest literary formulations of these ways is to be found in the writings of the "Pseudo-Dionysius" or, as he was once known, Dionysius the Areopagite. From his work, which outlines two separate methods of approach to God, are derived the terms Via Negativa and Via Positiva. Both ways begin by acknowledging the existence of the universe as a divine image of the Creator; but the Way of Negation has been the

more fully documented in literature, and certainly the more emphasized by the Church, since this is the way of denial, both of the self and the pleasures of this world, and as such constitutes an aspect of monasticism. It is also the way of the ascetic individual, who would deny to all phenomena of this existence the ability adequately to express the glory and nature of God, and as such claims amongst its chief exponents such prominent figures in the tradition of Christian mysticism as St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila, and St. Hugh of Victor. In their own manner, all these saints pursued the method which Dionysius himself had preferred. In the pursuit of the Via Negativa,

... the mind begins by denying of God those things which are farthest removed from Him ... and proceeds upwards progressively denying of God the attributes and qualities of creatures, until it reaches 'the super-essential Darkness' ... When the mind has stripped away from its idea of God the human modes of thought and inadequate conceptions of the Deity, it enters upon the 'Darkness of Unknowing', wherein it 'renounces all the apprehension of the understanding and is wrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible ... united ... to Him that is wholly unknowable...'74

This same Dionysius not only named but also explored the possibilities of the Affirmative Way or the Via Positiva, and at least one work, the Divine Names, is given over to its exposition. To follow this Way

⁷⁴Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy, II, 95.

... means ascribing to God the perfections found in creatures, that is, the perfections which are compatible with the spiritual Nature of God, though not existing in Him in the same manner as they exist in creatures, since in God they exist without imperfection ...⁷⁵

Dionysius pursues the Affirmative Way by

... showing how names such as Goodness, Life, Wisdom, Power, are applicable to God in a transcendental manner and how they apply to creatures only in virtue of their derivation from God...⁷⁶

Dorothy Sayers, who has commented upon Charles Williams' place in the mystical tradition, has remarked of these approaches to God,

... the followers of the two ways are not nearly so sharply and antagonistically divided as the philosophers. Nearly all of them tend, at some point in this journey, to use the language belonging to the other way - sometimes using both simultaneously with a strong effect of paradox, as in that phrase which Charles Williams thought he quoted, but perhaps invented: "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou."⁷⁷

In his own treatment of the two ways, Williams had suggested that man may follow the example of Christ, who in his own life had recourse to both methods. "The tangle of affirmation and rejection which is in each of us has to

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 94.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 93.

⁷⁷Dorothy Sayers, Further Papers on Dante, pp. 185-6.

be drawn into some kind of a pattern".⁷⁸ While he certainly accorded a place to the Way of Negation, he especially wished to recommend the other to his readers, because he was convinced that the doctrines of the Church, particularly those of the Resurrection and life-everlasting, sanction and support use of the Affirmative Way. Possibly in allusion to death, he said, "After the affirmations we may have to discover the rejections, but we must still believe that after the rejections the greater affirmations are to return".⁷⁹ In this belief Williams again looked to Dante, who was in his opinion the greatest exponent of the Affirmative Way. He found support for the above remark, for example, in the medieval poet's experience as he ascends to the Beatific Vision. As Dante passes through the many spheres of heaven, the image of Beatrice is always kept firmly in sight except when he moves from the heaven of Jupiter, the last heaven of the Active Life, to that of Saturn, the first heaven of the Contemplative Life. Then all sensory manifestations, even the image of Beatrice, fade and disappear; but when he leaves the last heaven of the Contemplative Life and ascends to the true heaven, the Empyrean, all the images return "complete in bodily form

⁷⁸The Figure of Beatrice, p. 10.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 10-1.

and substance".⁸⁰ This may well be what Williams saw as the last discovery of the rejections and the final recovery of the images which were first affirmed.

It has been suggested that the Way of Affirmation is "the more characteristically Christian"⁸¹ of the two ways, since the other has also been utilized by religious systems of all ages. Certainly, it is the way which most encourages man to recapture his heritage of exact vision, which was lost in the Fall, and to experience correctly the created universe, rediscovering the "blessedness of this life" by perceiving that it is a vast interlocking "web" of glory that includes the co-inherence of all creatures. Dorothy Sayers has summarized the importance of the Affirmative Way in the following statement.

It lays down with no uncertain voice that for those who live in matter and space and time, the right way, and the only safe way, to approach the Powers is by means of the images. It distrusts, in every context, the "Flight of the alone to the Alone", for it is not good for Man to be alone; his way lies through the streets of the City, through Florence or through London, through the Republic or through the Empire, to⁸² that one City of which we are all citizens ...

"The Departure of Bindrane" contains the most elaborate exposition of the concepts inherent in the two ways and

⁸⁰ Dorothy Sayers, Further Papers on Dante, p. 186.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 188.

⁸² Ibid., p. 203.

also explores their possible inter-relationship. For those like Dindrane, who are about to enter the seclusion of religious orders, their choice brings them to "the court of separation, affirmation into rejection";⁸³ but in Williams' opinion both ways have the same end in view, both are "Ways upon the Way".⁸⁴ Thus the avenue of approach to God can be seen to run

between city and convent, the two great vocations,
the Rejection of all images before the unimaged,
the Affirmation of all images before the all-imaged,
the Rejection affirming, the Affirmation rejecting...

.....
... either no less than the other the doctrine of largesse;

(RSS., p. 32)

At their parting, Taliessin wishes Dindrane "a safe passage through all the impersonalities",⁸⁵ but she in her turn, in spite of her chosen vocation, wishes "the return of the personalities, beyond / the bond and blessing of departure of personality",⁸⁶ which restates Williams' conviction that ultimately "the greater Affirmations are to return". A servant-girl, who learns lessons about the true nature of servitude and freedom from witnessing their parting, sees

⁸³The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 30.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 32.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 34.

⁸⁶Ibid.

the two cloaked and mounted figures riding along the Roman road as centaurs. The mythological beast thought to possess two natures becomes for her a symbol of those whose natures are united in Christ and who can thus reconcile the apparently disparate ways to a basic unity.

The Affirmative Way may be the most characteristically Christian; in Williams' opinion it was also the way best suited to the situation of the average individual. In his Arthurian cycle he attempts to demonstrate how this way may be applied to virtually every aspect of one's daily life by creating in widening circles a whole range of relationships between men; in the Company, in the cities of Byzantium, Rome, and Camelot, and in the Empire as a whole. But the basic unit of this structure is the one-to-one relationship between individuals. In assessing and paying tribute to the work of Dante as the greatest record of the practice of the Affirmative Way, Williams remarks:

The ... point about the work of this great poet is that it refers us not to a rare human experience but to a common; or rather it begins with one that is common and continues on a way which might be more common than it is.⁸⁷

The particular common experience under discussion is that of falling in love, which Williams sees as the root

⁸⁷The Figure of Beatrice, p. 11.

cause of all Dante's writing from the Convivio to the Commedia. The act of falling in love, to which we shall turn presently, involves, of course, choosing one image rather than the universal affirmation of all divine images. Perhaps this must always be so. Certainly, it is not the only kind of choice that is open to the individual, nor the only method of the way. Other images, other types of experience are equally worthy of affirmation. In a public lecture the author once indicated at least five varieties of such experience: the religious experience itself, the image of women (the experience of romantic love), the image of nature (as, for example, revealed in the poetry of Wordsworth), the experience of great art (upon which he does not elaborate, unless one is inclined to include here his observations on the nature and creation of poetry), and, of course, the image of the City.⁸⁸ It may be objected that his separation of experience into such categories is an arbitrary one, but such a list at least serves to indicate the many areas of human affairs to which he felt the Way of Affirmation was applicable. Primarily, however, Williams' views on the importance of the Affirmative Way are expressed in terms of the experience of individual, personal, sexual love, the basic unit of the City, and, in his opinion, the most common of images.

⁸⁸John Heath-Stubbs, Charles Williams, pp. 18-9.

Because he asserted so strongly the basic integrity of the body, the importance in its own right of the material, substantial nature of man as well as of his spiritual nature, and because he was equally convinced of the divine imagery of all creatures, Williams' instincts again led him to the work of Dante. Historically,

... Dante came at the close of that century which, speaking loudly and clearly through the lips of the Provencal poets, had discovered the image of the Lady ... [which] was already charged with the values of honour and courtesy and gentlehood, obedience and faith, solace and joy and devotion, when Dante, walking along a street in Florence and receiving the salutation of Beatrice, felt himself consumed with such a flame of charity that he forgave all who had ever injured him ...⁸⁹

For one of the chief implications of the Incarnation is that it relates the experience of love in mortal terms to the experience of Divine Love. By virtue of the Incarnation, Christ became man and

In that flesh His Glory dwelt, and was seen so ... [by the apostles] at the Transfiguration, when their eyes were opened to behold it. It was always there - it was not really He that was changed, but their sight. From the Incarnation springs the whole doctrine of sacraments - the indwelling of the mortal by the immortal, of the material by the spiritual, the phenomenal by the real ... It is this that lies at the bottom of Dante's whole Beatricean Vision: because he loved the mortal Florentine girl, it was given to him to behold her, as it were, walking the earth in her body of glory ... this is why, in the Commedia, a stress so disconcerting to the minds of those

⁸⁹Dorothy Sayers, Further Papers on Dante, p. 189.

who like their religion to be very "spiritual" is laid continually upon her bodily beauty ... the "holy and glorious flesh" ... and indeed ... all material things ... are sacraments and symbols of the Divine glory.⁹⁰

It is worthwhile to note that, as Williams interpreted it, the Via Positiva, as applied to any of the categories of images, is not merely a sanguine solution to the difficulties presented by the existence of evil and death. Indeed, he asserted:

It is not to be rashly assumed that the Way of Affirmation is much easier than the Way of Rejection. To affirm the validity of an image one does not at the moment happen to like or want - such as that of one's next door neighbour - is as harsh as to reject an image - such as oneself as successful - which one does happen to like and want. 'To fashion this ability' is a personal, secret, and arduous business.⁹¹

Once accomplished, the affirmation must nevertheless be held to, even though the image may change or emerge as somewhat less than one might prefer; even, in fact, if that image seems, to all intents and purposes, to have withdrawn from the immediate scope of the vision of the affirmer.

In itself, the Beatrician Vision may not be lasting, In fact, Williams believed that it was normally transitory, but that the validity of the initial response must nevertheless still be affirmed. It did once happen; it still

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 187.

⁹¹The Figure of Beatrice, p. 13.

exists as an intimation of the way, despite its apparent withdrawal. Only if acted on in a particular way, however, is the original vision of beatitude (which is often intense enough to arouse the state of caritas that Dante experienced towards all things) capable of leading to the final Paradiso of permanent vision. The experience can be the invitation to what Dante called "the new life", but the progress towards that final goal has its own difficulties, even perils. The individual who has discovered such love must guard not only against the assumption that it will be everlasting, but must also beware of the assumption that it is the personal possession of the lover alone, or that it is, in itself, sufficient.

Again, Williams found the pattern for these beliefs in Dante. Beatrice was seen, loved, and then, for the poet, was no more. Her withdrawal did not ultimately impair the authority of that vision, the consequent state of caritas, or the awareness of the Divine behind the woman. Furthermore, once the "authority of the glory has been admitted",⁹² one can no longer lay claim to possession of the original experience. As Williams was fond of remarking, "love does

⁹²He Came Down from Heaven, p. 80.

not belong to lovers, but they to it".⁹³ The greater divine love lies behind each individual Beatrician Vision; the lover only possesses his identity as lover by virtue of his participation in, and recognition of that greater fund of love. The lover who is egocentric manifests "a desire to retain the glory for oneself, which means that one is not adoring the glory but only one's own relation to the glory".⁹⁴

The quotation which Williams used as an epigraph to the whole of Taliessin through Logres is a general application of this belief. It is taken from Dante's De Monarchia, I, iii, and may be translated as follows:

Hence it is that the proper operation does not exist for the sake of the essence, but the essence has its being for the sake of the operation.⁹⁵

Experience which has been affirmed as a divine image, from personal love between individuals to the office of kingship, should not be viewed as one's personal achievement, but as a means to appreciation of the totally inter-related character of the universe as divine creation, and as a method of bringing about the Union which is the proper endeavour of all men.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 112.

Hence, in "The Crowning of Arthur", the new king, "who stood to look on his city",⁹⁶ though unaware of the question which even then looms large ("the king made for the kingdom, or the kingdom made for the king?"),⁹⁷ will find that he is at cross purposes with those larger intentions of which Merlin is the chief executor ("Thwart drove his current against the current of Merlin").⁹⁸ Later, when the Grail has entered the picture to become to those practitioners of the Way of Affirmation the instrument of the salvation of Logres, Arthur's distorted view of the nature of his office becomes more marked. At the celebration of the Eucharist, in which the ambassador of Byzantium sees a vision of "a new direct earth ... / and its fusion with a new heaven",⁹⁹ ironically, "the king in the elevation beheld and loved himself crowned".¹⁰⁰ Thus, when Merlin is later enmeshed in the business of the birth of Galahad, and sees with supernatural vision

⁹⁶Taliessin through Logres, p. 21.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

... the king
 dreaming of a red Grail in an ivory Logres
 set for wonder, and himself Byzantium's rival
 for men's thuribled and throated worship...

(TTL., p. 55)

he goes on his way

past the royal doors of dream, where Arthur, pleased
 with the Grail cooped for gustation and God for his glory,
 the aesthetic climax of Logres, softly slept;

(TTL., p. 58)

For personal ambition and perverted aesthetics have no
 place in the ultimate destiny of Logres.

What most decidedly does have a place, what in
 fact constitutes the whole pattern of the development and
 fulfilment of Logres, is the ruling intelligence of the
 Third Heaven, Love. In this sphere exists the pattern for
 creation on earth, here is the "climax tranquil" of all
 that Logres should become. Of the danger of regarding the
 personal experience of this love as an end in itself Williams
 had remarked:

We love - what more? This love, each for all,
 has everywhere due proportion and intensity.
 Knowledge increases ... this, with other
 incidents, leads on to the eventual knowing, in
 a flash, of the last great riddle.¹⁰¹

The sentiment is echoed in the line from "The Departure of
 Merlin" (and used again in "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden"),
 "a flash of seeing the women in the world's base",¹⁰² which

~~mentates~~

¹⁰¹ Religion and Love in Dante, pp. 34-5.

¹⁰² Taliessin through Logres, p. 77.

restates in a different context the conviction that personal love is the pattern for all other relations, the Beatrician Vision which reveals the first glory of the universe.

While the influence of Dante upon Williams' theme is obviously the dominant one, there is also the influence of Coventry Patmore to be considered. It will be recalled that one of Williams' first acquaintances in the Press was Frederick Page, and Page had always had a great interest in Patmore's work. Williams was indisputably familiar with Patmore's writings, perhaps first through the influence of Page, and The Rod, the Root, and the Flower contains many sentiments which, if not the direct source of his inspiration, he must have found most congenial. For example, Patmore remarks:

Men and Women ... in conjunction ... are the modes and means of God's fruition of Himself in Nature, and the more they confess to discern their own nullity, the greater will be their share in His power of felicity.¹⁰³

An even more striking correspondence is evident in the following pronouncement:

... the weakest purpose of mutual love, in married partners, is enough to make them effectual ministers to each other of that 'great sacrament', which represents and is in little the union of Christ with the Church.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Coventry Patmore, The Rod, the Root, and the Flower, p. 116.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 115.

And Williams would doubtless have been in general agreement with Patmore's conviction of the unique nature of Christian belief.

There is one secret, the greatest of all ... which no previous religion dared, even in enigma, to allege fully ... the doctrine of the Incarnation, regarded not as an historical event which occurred two thousand years ago, but as an event which is renewed in the body of every one who is in the way to the fulfilment of his original destiny.¹⁰⁵

Patmore was, of course, pre-eminently the celebrant of married love. Williams would not confine such experiences of love between the sexes to the married state, although he had remarked that

It may be said perhaps of marriage ... that its lights of nature and faith are subordinate John Baptists to bring us to Christ the City.¹⁰⁶

It will have been observed that thus far the discussion has avoided use of the descriptive phrase which Williams adopted to cover his views on love. This is because; the term "Romantic Theology" (or "the Theology of Romantic Love") does not seem, in spite of his explanation of his usage, to be particularly felicitous or helpful for the average reader. It is true that it is a label which within certain limits will cover adequately the concepts involved, and in this sense its use is apparently well

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁰⁶ "The Redeemed City", The Image of the City, pp. 107-8.

justified. He says in his explanation of the phrase that interpretation of the word 'Romantic' should "not be too narrowly confined to a literary manner".¹⁰⁷ But although he goes on to cite as his sanction and precedent C.S. Lewis' use of the word in the phrase "that Romantic species of passion" from The Allegory of Love, his own use of the word gives greater prominence to a vulgarization which, even in the first instance, was not particularly desirable, prominence which perpetuates an abuse of scholarly terminology which seems at best ill-judged. To assert, as he does, that Dante is a Romantic, or to denounce a certain departure from his own concept of love as "false Romanticism"¹⁰⁸ is to create at one stroke a neologistic anachronism which must inevitably distract the reader from the ultimate seriousness of his particular concerns.

Williams must have been aware that many readers would, in fact, take issue with his wilful perversion of the term, for he goes to some lengths to eliminate any misunderstanding about his usage. He states in his defence that the word 'Romanticism' "defines an attitude, a manner of receiving experience".¹⁰⁹ With this no one would quarrel.

¹⁰⁷The Figure of Beatrice, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

But to continue his argument with the statement, "I do not see any grounds on which, if we are to call the young Wordsworth a Romantic, we can deny the term to the young Dante",¹¹⁰ is to adopt an irritatingly simplistic pose which is almost calculated to alienate the more scholarly sector of his audience. His use of the term amounts to irresponsibility and simply runs counter to all rules of accepted usage and common courtesy. The concluding remark in his necessarily elaborate defense of his usage is not, therefore, without its ironic twist:

... the false does not abolish the true or the value of the true, any more than the cheap use of the word Romantic spoils the intellectual honour which properly accompanies it.¹¹¹

Nor does the choice of the word 'Theology' seem a particularly happy one, though its use is acceptable enough if the word 'lay' is understood to stand before and qualify it. As Williams observed in expounding his ideas on the relation between eros and agape, the Church has never officially condemned equation of the two. On the other hand, it has never officially endorsed the equation to which, Williams held, it was committed by the very nature of its essential doctrines. Apart from such considerations of

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

orthodoxy in the strictest sense, however, the word has the effect of imparting to his ideas a dogmatism and a deep philosophical grounding of which they are entirely innocent.

It may be thought that in registering these objections the present writer holds Williams in some contempt. It is sincerely hoped that this is not the consensus of judgement. The objections are offered merely in the interests of balanced criticism, for it must be apparent to many readers that the quality of Williams' work is uneven, and evident to others that he possessed a talent for irritating many scholars in the field of Arthurian studies by his idiosyncratic approach to his material. To ignore this or gloss over the reasons for it is ultimately to do a disservice to the seriousness and originality of his remarkably thorough system of thought.

Williams' *Arthuriad* has been well described as "a vision of the life of love",¹¹² for, as the City is pre-eminently the pattern for all cities in the Empire, so the love epitomized in the Beatrician Vision is the archetype of the many loves described in these two volumes. Under the general theme of courtly love, the early versions of the Matter of Britain had subsumed several pairs of lovers;

¹¹² A.M. Hadfield, An Introduction to Charles Williams, p. 146.

Arthur and Guinevere perhaps, more certainly Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Iseult, Merlin and Vivien, Lamorack and Morgause, and a whole host of less important lovers. Williams' account introduces, in addition to a new concept of love, at least one completely new relationship, that of Taliessin and Dindrane (Blanchefleur), and one that is much expanded and changed, that of Bors and Elayne. The relationship between Merlin and Vivien is eliminated entirely, and Vivien's place is assumed by Nimue (who also appears in later versions), who in Williams' hands becomes the mystical ruler of Broceliande and the mother of Merlin. The affair between Tristram and Iseult he once described as superfluous, but, on the other hand, Palomides' hopeless passion for Iseult is given unusually full treatment, as is the doomed love of Lamorack for Morgause. The fabled love of Lancelot for Guinevere stands, of course, as the backdrop to the whole rise and collapse of Logres, as it did in Malory, but direct treatment is eschewed in favour of frequent allusions to the affair. In the varying treatment accorded this wide range of loves can be seen the many variations to which the Beatrician Vision is subject in human experience, ranging from that which is truly fulfilled to that which is aborted and twisted from its very inception.

Of all these, the love between Bors and Elayne emerges, if not as the portrait of the ideal Beatrician

Vision, at least as the one which, within its limits, is most happily realized. In a somewhat ambiguous comment upon the nature of the enchanted forest Williams remarked:

The huge shapes emerge from B(roceliande), and
the whole matter of the form of the Empire, and
all this is felt in the beloved.¹¹³

Thus, for Bors, the song of Taliessin celebrating Broceliande "meant all things to all men, and you [i.e., Elayne] to me."¹¹⁴

With this statement Bors begins the equation of an indefinable quality which he perceives in love with the feeling of vast potential which men sense emanates from Broceliande. For the purposes of the poem it is premised that a creature from the "sea-rooted western wood",¹¹⁵ a fish, may represent this aspect of his love for Elayne. For one moment, the fish completely symbolizes that part of Bors' feeling which he cannot otherwise isolate or define. Then, elusive as is that spark of identity, it becomes a part of her own nature and is reabsorbed into the greater pools and streams which are mysteriously a part of Elayne's being. Dropped by her lover as a gift into her "hand's pool", it flicks "up the channel"¹¹⁶ of her arm,

¹¹³"Notes on the Arthurian Myth", The Image of the City, p. 179.

¹¹⁴"Bors to Elayne: The Fish of Broceliande", Taliessin through Logres, p. 24.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

... the piercing entry to a land
 where, no matter how lordly at home is set the dish,
 no net can catch it, nor hook nor gaff harm?

(TTL., p. 24)

In these lines may be seen the same approach to the body which led Williams to the poetic invention of his organic geography, and appropriately so, since he had remarked that "the whole matter of the form of the Empire" is also sensed in the one who is loved,. Thus the fish

... darts up the muscles of the arm, to swim
 round the clear boulder of the shoulder, stung with spray,
 and down the cataract of the backed spine leaps

into bottomed waters at once clear and dim,

 yet it slides through the mesh of the mind and sweeps
 back to its haunt in a fathomless bottomless pool;

(TTL., p. 25)

The fish, of course, is also a traditional Christian symbol for Christ, an identification which is made in the poem, especially in the following stanza, in which is described the visual symbol of the Greek alpha incorporated in the figure of the fish found on the walls of the catacombs:

... where the Catacomb's stone
 holds its diagram over the happy dead
 who flashed in living will through the liquid wish.

(TTL., p. 25)

The link between the two concepts embodied in the fish symbolism is forged in Bors' inquiry into the identity of the creature:

is there a name then, an anagram of spirit and sense,
that Nimue the mistress of the wood would call it by?

(TTL., p. 25)

He is forced to the conclusion that it has no name and must forever defy all attempts at definition and defeat any effort to evoke at will this union of "spirit and sense". What he does realize, however, is that it is composed of two parts:

... one, where the forked dominant tail
flicks, beats, reddens the smooth plane

of the happy flesh; one, where the Catacomb's stone
holds its diagram ...

(TTL., p. 25)

Here, once more, is the statement of Williams' conviction of the unity in love of the two ways: the world of sacrifice of the community of saints and martyrs, and the world of frank and innocent sexual delight, which duly acknowledges the integrity of the body and its needs, and which, no less than Dante's experience, is an affirmation of a divine image. These are the "double tracks"¹¹⁷ or "the Ways upon the Way"¹¹⁸ that lead to the realization of the Union that is Christ the City; and in due proportion this condition may be seen by the lover in all things:

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹⁸"The Departure of Dindrane", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 32.

... the wood in the wild west of the shapes and names
 probes everywhere through the frontier of head and hand;
 everywhere the light through the great leaves is blown
 on your substantial flesh, and everywhere your glory flames.
 (TTL., p. 26)

Moreover, as Williams had asserted it must be, the vision is drawn into a pattern. The affirmation, indeed, the celebration of the physical nature of Elayne, as well as the intimations of the metaphysical union to be achieved in such a love, has begun: it is one of the first steps in a series which will involve expanded awareness of all qualities in the beloved, culminating in Bors' vision of her as "the sole figure of the organic salvation of our good".¹¹⁹ Returning from a journey to London, where he has been involved in matters of state, Bors describes his impressions of homecoming.

I came in; I saw you stand,
 in your hand the bread of love, in your head lightness
 of law.
 The uprightness of the multitude stood in your figure;
 (TTL., p. 42)

It will be remembered that Williams intended that Bors, in his participation in the Grail Quest, should represent Everyman, and it is in terms of the basic necessities of everyday life that Bors' sees the goodness of Elayne manifested. "I am come again / to live from the

¹¹⁹"Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins", Taliessin through Logres, p. 43.

founts and fields of your hands".¹²⁰

corn comes to the mill and the flour to the house,
bread of love for your women and my men;
.....

.....
for the hall is raised to the power of exchange of all
by the small spread organisms of your hands; O Fair,
there are the altars of Christ the City extended.

(TTL., pp. 42-3)

His vision is the more poignant because he has just come from "ration and rule, and the fault in ration and rule"¹²¹ of government in London. There he had been deeply disturbed by a plan to mint coins for which the kingdom had not previously felt any need. In spite of the Archbishop's correction that "money is a medium of exchange",¹²² not "the medium of exchange",¹²³ Bors is still full of reservations and forebodings for the scheme.

I have come now to kiss each magnanimous thumb,
muscles of the brain, functions of the City.
I was afraid the Council had turned you into gold,

(TTL., p. 45)

Against the apparent riddle of how to maintain the delicate balance between bureaucracy and exchange he can only set
t
the figure of Elayne.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹²² Ibid., p. 45.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 44.

What without coinage or with coinage can be saved?
 O lady, your hand held the bread
 and Christ the City spread in the extensor muscles of
 your thumbs.

(TTL., p. 45)

"The Coming of Palomides" describes another variety of the Beatrician experience, probably the most vividly communicated, in spite of the fact that it is also one which is doomed to frustration. The Saracen knight, journeying to Logres, stops on the way at Cornwall, and there sees at a banquet the Queen Iseult. Her image immediately "fired the tinder"¹²⁴ of his brain "to measure the shape of man again".¹²⁵ A Moslem by birth and upbringing, he has been taught "the measurement of man"¹²⁶ of the Prophet's doctrine. Williams, of course, saw Islam as opposed to Christianity since it denies the Incarnation and hence the divinity of Christ's humanity. Like the blade of Moslem conquest, this doctrine "cuts the Obedience from the Obeyed",¹²⁷ that is, it removes from the believer any inclination to relate his own nature to that of his Creator. At the sight of Iseult, Palomides must reassess the implications of his native religion in the light of "this

¹²⁴"The Coming of Palomides", Taliessin through Logres, p. 34.

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 33.

¹²⁷Ibid.

new-awakened sense"¹²⁸ of "unions metaphysical".¹²⁹

The imagery in which this reaction to Iseult is couched makes it without doubt the most striking of all the descriptions of the Beatrician Vision. Utilizing the mathematical basis of the philosophy of the Pythagoreans, Williams endows Palomides with the habit of seeing and formulating intense experiences in mathematical terms.

... till to-day no eyes have seen
how curves of golden life define
the straightness of a perfect line,
till the queen's blessed arm became
a rigid bar of golden flame
where well might Archimedes prove
the doctrine of Euclidean love,
and draw his demonstrations right
against the unmathematic night
of ignorance and indolence!

(TTL., pp. 34-5)

Williams had written at some length on the ability, or rather the inability of the conventional mind to visualize as well as conceptualize particularly intense moments of spiritual revelation.

The word glory, to English ears, usually means no more than a kind of mazy bright blur. But the maze should be, thought it generally is not, exact, and the brightness should be that of a geometrical pattern.¹³⁰

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰He Came Down from Heaven, p. 33.

In the Old Testament, he continues, the descriptions of heaven and of human commerce with the Deity gradually developed from "a rift of light" to "a prism of the colours of divine goodwill" to "a light of metaphysical existence".¹³¹ The visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel were in more complex terms: wheels within wheels, many-winged and multi-eyed creatures which were the "living complexes of radiancy".¹³²

... they are a myth of a vital pattern of organisms. 'God always geometrizes', said Plato, and the Hebrew prophets thought no less ... The prophets are sent out from the visible mathematics of the glory to proclaim the moral mathematics of the glory.¹³³

It is in the New Testament, however, that the significance of these descriptions is fully expounded.

... the word that defines the yonder side of the demanded caritas, is glory. It is a glory which in the Old Testament from a general brightness becomes a mathematical splendour; it is a glory which ... accompanies the City that slides from the utmost heavens into the sight of Patmos.¹³⁴

For Palomides, this sense of a discovery of glory is conveyed in mathematical terms which are compatible with his native religion and training, but it is also the

¹³¹Ibid., p. 34.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Ibid., pp. 34-5

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 96.

presentiment of something new.

Did, to this new-awakened sense,
he or some greater Master sweep
his compass?

(TTL., p. 35)

Thus, he sees the natural, sensual beauty of Iseult in a
blaze of geometrical images:

... fiery circles leap
round finger-point and shoulder; arc
with arc encountering strikes a spark
wherefrom the dropping chords of fire
fashion the diagram of desire.
There flames my heart, there flames my thought,
either to double points is caught;
lo, on the arm's base for a sign,
the single equilateral trine!

(TTL., p. 35)

The significance of the triangle should not, however, be overlooked. This graphic symbol admits of many interpretations, but the most obvious, that of the Trinity, is certainly the most important in this instance. In the lines which follow, one can scarcely overlook the repeated emphasis upon the equality of its three constituent sides, for it is an equilateral triangle which leads to the intimation of "unions metaphysical".

... the intellectual power
saw triple angles, triple sides,
and that proceed which naught divides
through their great centre, by the stress
of the queen's arm's blissful nakedness,
to unions metaphysical;

(TTL., p. 35)

The sensation of both feelings and intellect being kindled simultaneously is analytically arranged in a manner which is typical of Palomides.

blessed the unity of all
authorities of blood and brain,
triply obedient, each to twain,
obedience in the mind, subdued
to fire of fact and fire of blood;
obedience in the blood, exact
to fire of mind and fire of fact;

(TTL., pp. 35-6)

But scarcely is the vision captured when it is withdrawn. Necessary demands of the ego dominate the still "uncrossed" Saracen, and even as he gazes and mentally analyzes his sensations, the geometrical pattern alters slightly. The equilateral triangle shifts stress and balance to become a "long isoscles / from finger-point and shoulder",¹³⁵ almost seeming to stretch itself forth in appeal to him. In that split second he abandons the objective, impersonal sight and yearns for even the briefest of signs of recognition from Iseult.

let the queen's grace but yield her hand
to be by such strong measure spanned -

(TTL., p. 36)

This, of course, is not to be permitted him, for the queen's place in both the traditional accounts and Williams' cycle

¹³⁵"The Coming of Palomides", Taliessin through Logres, p. 36.

is between Mark, her husband, and Tristram, her lover.

Williams held that after the fading of the vision, the lover must strive to become, "by his own will, the caritas which was, by God's will, awakened in him by the smile of Beatrice".¹³⁶ This Palomides cannot do. So, when "the sign withdrew"¹³⁷ and when the sudden awareness of the complete impossibility of such a love breaks on him, he sees only that

... division stretched between
the queen's identity and the queen.
Relation vanished, though beauty stayed;
.....
.....
the queen's arm lay there destitute,
empty of glory;

(TTL., p. 36)

The poem concludes with an allusion to Malory's questing beast. Palomides' "new-awakened sense" is replaced by the experience of what C.S. Lewis has called sexual jealousy,¹³⁸ and by the emotions of anger and disappointment, all of which are radically opposed to caritas.

... aloof in the roof, beyond the feast,
I heard the squeak of the questing beast,
where it scratched itself in the blank between
the queen's substance and the queen.

(TTL., p. 37)

¹³⁶Religion and Love in Dante, p. 13.

¹³⁷Taliessin through Logres, p. 36.

¹³⁸C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 126.

The union he once perceived in Iseult has fled. The vision of the co-equal, co-inherent Trinity also disappears.

three lines in a golden distance shone,
three points pricked golden and were gone.

(TTL., p. 37)

Immediately there follows another monologue on love, which serves as the strongest possible contrast with both the description of Bors' happy achievement and Palomides' vivid experience. C.S. Lewis characterizes the love described in "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney" as the "heavy fetters of an obsession",¹³⁹ holding that, unlike even the love of Palomides, it does not begin with the Beatrician Vision at all.¹⁴⁰ Without doubt the poem conveys nothing of the sheer beauty of first passion which both the third Quest Lord and the Saracen felt. Instead of conveying the sense of "unions metaphysical", Lamorack says of Morgause;

Her hand discharged catastrophe; I was thrown
before it; I saw the source of all stone,
the rigid tornado, the schism and first strife
of primeval rock with itself ...

(TTL., p. 38)

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 128.

Interpretation of this poem is, however, a more difficult task than might at first be supposed, for the emphases which the reader chooses to place upon the characters and their actions may raise problems concerning a basic philosophical element in Williams' beliefs. The "first strife / of primeval rock with itself" recalls the line, "the good lusted against the good", and Williams' explanation of the loss of innocence. C.S. Lewis explains the line in question by saying that Lamorack's experience of Morgause "was like a second Fall of Man",¹⁴¹ and there is much in the poem to support his view. For example, Lamorack, in his exploration of the islands to the north, describes how

... the extreme theme
of Logres rose in harsh cries and hungry storms,
and there, hewn in a cleft, were hideous huge forms.

(TTL,, p. 38)

These are the same forms which the contingent knowledge of the Emperor holds, and the same forms whose experience had been denied man before the Fall. When Lamorack returns to Morgause he sees "in her long eyes the humanized shapes of the cleft",¹⁴² and

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁴²"Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney", Taliessin through Logres, p. 39.

Hued from the livid everlasting stone
 the queen's hewn eyelids bruised my bone;
 my eyes splintered, as our father Adam's when the first
 exorbitant flying nature round creation's flank burst.

(TTL., p. 38)

The shortcoming of Lewis' commentary on this poem is that it offers no exact formulation of what Morgause represents. Obviously, she is on one level simply the object of Lamorack's helpless devotion, a woman like others, who has made no effort to claim his love, and gives, it seems, very little encouragement subsequently. Yet, if the experience of her is to be taken as a kind of second Fall, she might reasonably be expected to represent some aspect of that mythical wrong turning; perhaps that knowledge or experience which properly is the prerogative of no man, or perhaps the division itself which results from the Fall.

Whatever her precise characterization or symbolic value, if she is to be equated with a re-experience of the Fall, the burden of guilt must fall on the shoulders of Lamorack, the new Adam of the poem, for it is he who has made the choice, however slight a part his will may have played in it. Williams makes no reference to guilt, however, and conveys not the slightest hint of censure of his act. Indeed, it is apparent that Morgause, who is also party to the incest which creates Logres' traitor, Mordred, is the more blameworthy. Lamorack's love at least has the virtue

of complete devotion and loyalty. And while it may be argued that, in any case, the monologue form does not easily tolerate such authorial comment, there is nothing in Lamorack's words to indicate feelings of guilt, no indication that, like the Adam of the first Fall, he is aware of having done evil.

The matter of the precise rendering of Morgause's symbolic value in the poem and the nature of Lamorack's reaction to her in this symbolic capacity also raises the rather awkward issue of the exact nature of Williams' concept of evil. According to Williams' equating the Fall with an Alteration of Knowledge, Lamorack should logically be cursed with the distorted vision that is the heritage of all the children of Adam. If this is so, then the vision of Morgause which he records in the poem may be simply inaccurate: her value and true nature may be unintelligible to the fallen observer. This, of course, does not square with the facts given to the reader concerning Morgause's character and her role in the future of Logres. The part in the total fate of Logres which she plays is clearly a destructive one, as also is her influence over Lamorack, for he is later slain by her son, Gawaine, to avenge his father's honour. Such considerations must inevitably lead readers of this poem to wish that Williams had clarified his position.

Is the evil which man may experience latterly, willingly and with full consent, or unwillingly and in apparent ignorance, merely a product of his inability as Fallen Man fully to comprehend the total pattern? Such appears to be the general burden of argument of the cycle as a whole (as is indicated in the discussion in Chapter II of the purpose of Garlon, the Invisible Knight, who provokes the last battle). Or is there a case for arguing the phenomenal existence of evil? This would justify Williams' treatment of Morgause (and later, her son, Mordred) as the very epitome of the wrong which man committed in the Fall, as she clearly is intended to be seen in this poem.

Before Lamorack perceives the "carved contingent shapes"¹⁴³ of the Emperor's knowledge, they were experienced only by "Coelius Vibenna and his loathly few".¹⁴⁴ Now Lamorack sees them reflected in the eyes of Morgause, and she is, in this way, "schism and the first strife". If she is not the very incarnation of evil, she is at least one of the most awesome manifestations of it this side of the pit. The opposite of Elayne and Iseult, who were for

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

their lovers the means of perceiving union, Morgause is the means whereby Lamorack perceives division. There is no hint that her evil is only apparent, or that she serves an obscure purpose which will only become clear at the end; and it is perhaps significant that she is not mentioned as being present at the last Mass in Logres.

This apparent ambiguity in Williams' formulation of his philosophy of evil and the Fall, which the character of Morgause throws into prominence, only slightly flaws the poem as an individual work, for the inconsistency becomes evident only when one contemplates the relative symbolic positions of Lamorack and Morgause within the total framework of the cycle. And then the confusion is, at worst, a small discrepancy in a remarkably complete and thorough systematization of Christian doctrine. It does nothing to detract from the vivid contrast which Williams intended that this poem should make with those variations of love which begin with the Beatrician Vision, those of Bors and Palomides. This contrast is the more ironic in that Palomides, in spite of his vision and temporary insight, is ready to deny its validity and go in pursuit of the "questing beast", while Lamorack, with no vision, perseveres, affirming at the conclusion of his monologue, "I am the queen's servant", even though "while I live / down my eyes the cliff, the

carving, the winged things drive".¹⁴⁵

It may be noted before leaving this poem that the manner in which Williams derives its imagery from the subject, undoubtedly one of the dominant factors in its effective contrasting of the two types of love, owes something to the influence of Swinburne which is so evident in the treatment of Morgause. Swinburne had described her thus:

Her face, a spell that knows nor age nor youth,

 With lips that mock the doom her eyes presage,
 Hath on it such a light of cloud and fire,

 And over all a fearless look of fear
 Hung like a veil across its changing cheer,
 Made up of fierce foreknowledge and sharp scorn,
 That it were better she had not been born.
 For not love's self can help a face which hath
 Such insubmissive anguish of wan wrath,
 Blind prescience and self-contemptuous hate
 Of her own soul and heavy-fated fate,
 Writ broad upon its beauty:¹⁴⁶

And later he makes the cause of her forebodings more explicit, deriving the imagery surrounding the appearance of Morgause directly from her fatal role in the downfall of Logres:

... she, that splendour girdled round with gloom,
 Crowned as with iron darkness of the tomb,
 And clothed with clouding conscience of a monstrous doom,
 Whose blind incestuous love brought forth a fire ¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁴⁶A.C. Swinburne, "Tristram of Lyonesse", Collected Poetical Works, p. 22.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., p. 102.

The correspondences between Williams' poem and Swinburne's are numerous and striking, especially those between Swinburne's description of her tragic act as "The sin born blind, the sightless sin unknown"¹⁴⁸ and "Blind to him blind his sister brought forth seed",¹⁴⁹ and Williams' description of "an eyeless woman",¹⁵⁰ and "The shape of a blind woman under the shape of a blind man".¹⁵¹ The imagery of Swinburne's version stems in large part from the antithesis of knowledge and ignorance which he sees at the centre of the sin of incest. Williams borrows much of this, but he also brings to his poem a quality that is totally new, though it still derives from the incestuous act which had provided Swinburne with most of his imagery.

Lewis has suggested that there is "a mineral quality in Morgause",¹⁵² observing at the same time her resemblance to the wife of the Biblical Lot, who was turned into a pillar of salt. Throughout the poem her affinity with stone is repeatedly emphasized. The traditional symbolic

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁵⁰Taliessin through Logres, p. 40.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 129.

values attached to rock and stone are those of permanence, integrity and solidity, but "when shattered it signifies dismemberment, psychic disintegration, infirmity, death and annihilation".¹⁵³ In her characterization as "the schism and first strife / of primeval rock with itself", Morgause partakes of this inverted symbolism of rocks. Her eyelids are "hued" from the lividness of "everlasting stone", and also "hewn",¹⁵⁴ severed from the bedrock of the very earth. Lamorack's sight of her is heralded by a storm in which the violence "over us obliquely split rock from rock".¹⁵⁵ Her destructive role in the affairs of Logres and in the life of Lamorack is thus clearly reinforced in terms of traditional symbolism and its related imagery.

Still another aspect of the many facets of love in Williams' cycle is to be seen in his treatment of Taliessin's love for Dindrane. Certain elements of this episode have already been discussed in Chapter II from the point of view of their narrative function. In that context it was necessary to give some indication of Taliessin's symbolic value as well as his function within the narrative

¹⁵³J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, p. 299.

¹⁵⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 38.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., p. 39.

scheme, and it was observed, without undue elaboration, that the court poet's position was opposed to that of Dindrane. Taliessin's role as the prime exponent of the Way of Affirmation can perhaps now be better appreciated in the light of what has already been said in this chapter about the two traditional ways. Little, however, has been said about the exact nature of the love between these two figures, which is best approached in a somewhat oblique fashion.

It will be recalled that Williams indicated five categories of experience to which the Way of Affirmation might be applied, including the experience of great art. Nowhere, however, does he methodically expound his views on the latter. Biographical accounts assure the reader that he possessed little or no musical sense, several anecdotes attesting to the fact that he was virtually "tone-deaf". Nor, in these sources, is there any evidence of a particular appreciation of the visual arts. His enthusiasms are almost exclusively literary, and his most important observations on art are limited to poetry, its uses, its nature, and the office of the poet.¹⁵⁶ Through the figure of Taliessin, the court poet of King Arthur, Williams presents a remarkably coherent poetic exposition of certain

¹⁵⁶For a study of Williams' poetic theory as seen in his literary criticism, theological works, and creative writing, see John Gigrich, "An Immortality for its Own Sake".

of his views. Though Taliessin functions to a large degree as narrator, taking the reader "through" Logres, he is also the subject of much authorial comment, and there are several instances in which Taliessin is treated with the same objectivity accorded any other character in the cycle.

His origins are sketched in "The Calling of Taliessin". As a foundling whose first song comes through "river-mated rhythms"¹⁵⁷ (for he was first discovered "coracle-cradled" at the river weir), he already shows signs of instinctive knowledge of the "correspondence and the law of similitudes",¹⁵⁸ which the Druid religious rites presumably articulated. He "had seen the cauldron / of poetry and plenty",¹⁵⁹ and already he is

8 striving in his young body with the double living
of the breath in the lung and the sung breath in the brain,
the growing and knowing and the union of both in the showing,
the triune union in each line of verse,

(RSS., p. 6)

Yet Taliessin is aware of the fate of the poet as well as his heritage. Though poetry exhibits an aspect of divine identity (the "triune union"), its office apparently

¹⁵⁷The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

excludes him from the personal and mutual experience of love enjoyed by other men.

It is a doubt if my body is flesh or fish,
therefore no woman will ever wish to bed me
and no man make true love without me.
All the doctors come to stand about me,
yet I shall never have any near me to need me.
Every king shall call me Taliessin,
and till the doom I am handfast with all the dead.

(RSS., p. 7)

"Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn" amplifies both characteristics of "the grand art".¹⁶⁰ The poet is symbolized by the unicorn, which in fable can only be caught by the chastity which a virgin possesses. Once the unicorn is captured, however, the maid turns to the "true man",¹⁶¹ and the much-prized horned head of the beast is hung in trophy fashion over their couch:

... the spoiled head displayed -
as Lesbia tied horned Catullus - of the cuckold of the wood;

(TTL., p. 22)

For the poet's craft provides, for most people, the point of departure, the impetus to emotion which is directed towards other ends. The virgin is obeying her truest instincts when she turns away from the unicorn, which is "to her no good".¹⁶² As C.S. Lewis comments, "the fatal

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶¹Taliessin through Logres, p. 22.

¹⁶²Ibid.

defect of the genius as lover" is that he "is apt to make of the flesh-and-blood woman a mere starting point for his own visions".¹⁶³ The maid who attracts the unicorn can derive no fulfilment from the love of the creature but needs a relationship with one of her own kind.

Williams observed in prose that

... the women who have seriously affected great art have been few and fewer those who have affected great theology in great art - happy if ... they know of what they were the cause, happier if they take an active part in the result.¹⁶⁴

Thus, in this poem, though the maid in the normal course of events will reject the unicorn ("such, west from Caucasia, is the will of every maid"),¹⁶⁵ there is also the description of the hypothetical situation in which the virgin does not ultimately flee. If she "should dare set palms on the point",¹⁶⁶ though she perhaps would suffer and sacrifice much,

... she to a background of dark bark, where the wood becomes one giant tree, were pinned, and plied through hands to heart by the horn's longing ...

(TTL., p. 23)

¹⁶³C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 114.

¹⁶⁴Religion and Love in Dante, p. 12.

¹⁶⁵Taliessin through Logres, p. 22.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

Finally she may emerge, changed, and in another light, part of something much larger than her own personal desires or sensual needs.

... O she
translucent, planted with virtues, lit by throes,
should be called the Mother of the Unicorn's Voice, men see
her with awe, her son the new sound that goes
surrounding the City's reach,

(TTL, p. 23)

In these lines the latent Christian associations in the traditional symbol of the unicorn are made more explicit. Poetry exhibits a distinctly divine aspect, as was intimated in "The Calling of Taliessin", and the poet as unicorn is a reflection of the chastity of Christ. Behind the Marian echoes of "the Mother of the Unicorn's Voice"¹⁶⁷ lies the phrase "the Mother of God"; and, of course, "the Voice" may be equated with "the Word" or "Logos", the theological terms for the second person of the Trinity, the Son.

Should the maid initially consent to become the source of the poet's inspiration, it will certainly be at the cost of her mere personal happiness ("the thrust to stun / her arteries into channels of tears beyond blood"),¹⁶⁸ but her sacrifice will become analogous to the Passion of Christ: "O twy-fount, crystal in crimson, of the Word's

¹⁶⁷Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., p. 22.

side".¹⁶⁹ In this venture, there will be "no way to rejoice / in released satiation".¹⁷⁰ Rather, "the new sound", "the sound of enskied / shouldering shapes"¹⁷¹ will be the product of union which is "by intellectual nuptials unclosed".¹⁷² This, then, is the portrait of the woman who, like Beatrice, "affected great theology in great art", but who, unlike the mortal Beatrice, accomplishes it in full awareness of and with willing participation in what she does. It is a most curious poem. The obvious overtones of sadism, which Anne Ridler has observed on occasion in Williams' work, might greatly interest the psychoanalytically oriented critic, though that need not detain us here. The slight ambivalence of tone is, however, of some interest.

C.S. Lewis has commented on the poem's conclusion, "It is usually better that these nuptials should remain intellectual. Would Beatrice have borne The Divine Comedy to Dante if they had been married?"¹⁷³ Probably not, but

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Ibid.

¹⁷¹Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁷²Ibid.

¹⁷³C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 114.

the observation scarcely provides an adequate gloss on the conclusion of the poem, and intentionally or not, Lewis has skirted the main issue, which is certainly not a matter of marriage. Rather, it is the choice between immediate and personal fulfilment in a full-blooded, sensual relationship, and the opportunity of a much greater, even undreamed-of fulfilment, after the sacrifice of identity and personality, in an impersonal role.

The terms in which the entire speculative passage (beginning with the words "yet if any ..." ¹⁷⁴ to the end of the poem) is expressed are a mixture of overt sexuality and equally overt religiosity, of which, despite the unmistakable nature of the doctrinal allusions, the sexual images constitute the greater part. Certainly the sacrificial references, "she to a background of dark bark ... were pinned" ¹⁷⁵ and "palms on the point, twisting from the least / to feel the sharper impress, for the thrust to stun", ¹⁷⁶ express the "intellectual nuptials" in physical terms which seem curiously at odds with the presumed goal. Such a juxtaposition may strike the reader as incongruous, but one must recall that Williams, far from negating the demands of the flesh, accorded full recognition to man's material nature.

¹⁷⁴Taliessin through Logres, p. 22.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., p. 22.

Eros need not forever be on his knees to Agape; he has a right to his delights; they are a part of the Way. The division is not between Eros of the flesh and the Agape of the soul; it is between the moment of love which sinks into hell and the moment which rises to the in-Godding.¹⁷⁷

Williams' concern with the bodily nature of man can, of course, be seen at virtually every stage of his thought, in his concepts of the City, and of exchange and substitution, in his interpretation of the doctrines of the Incarnation and Resurrection, and in his views on the true nature of love. It is one of the most distinctive features of his system of belief.

Although it is doubtless a highly presumptuous view, it is nevertheless easy for modern man to react to the testament of the mystics and the recommendations of the Church's ascetics with a large measure of scepticism, and to persist in the belief that neither is truly aware of what they would renounce. As the above quotation demonstrates, such a response to Williams' convictions is not possible. It is scarcely surprising, then, that he should choose to convey the sacrifice of direct and undoubted physical pleasure in strong physical terms. Although the end in sight is "intellectual", non-material, and spiritual, the cost will be felt by such a woman in terms of her flesh, and in spite of her consciousness of

¹⁷⁷Religion and Love in Dante, p. 40.

and full participation in her act, the loss will be experienced in her body.

Such, however, is merely the burden of Taliessin's song. His actual experience of love is contained principally in "The Sister of Percivale", the poem which describes his first encounter with Blanchefleur "the Beatrice, par excellence of his whole life",¹⁷⁸ of whom Taliessin had dim intimations in "The Calling of Taliessin":

she who was called Blanchfleur [sic] in religion, and to be farther from and closer to the king's poet than any, the eidolon of his beatitude, his blood's bounty;

(RSS., p. 18)

"The Sister of Percivale" is a difficult poem, not merely because of the imagery, which in itself presents problems which this discussion does not pretend to solve, but also because it explores the first moment of love between two celibates, between, in Lewis' words, "two unicorns ... between whom nothing but 'intellectual nuptials' are at any stage in question".¹⁷⁹ As a result, the terms in which this love is expressed are scarcely those of the conventional romantic experience.

Taliessin is lying on the wall of the castle courtyard watching the routine activities in the yard below and

¹⁷⁸C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 137.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., p. 138.

at the same time musing over the difficulties a new poem has presented. Specifically, what he sees below is a slave drawing water from the well. A scar on her back, livid white, flicks like the dry summer lightning in the morning sky. As he had shown in his interior monologue in the Rose-Garden, Taliessin is well aware of the correspondence between the shape and nature of the female form and the Empire, and here he sees again in the form of the slave, the shape of the Empire.

As she toils over the well, Taliessin also begins to see her in terms not unlike those in which Palomides had first perceived Iseult: the filled bucket brought to the surface is "a round plane of water",¹⁸⁰ her outstretched arm "balanced the line of the spine".¹⁸¹ These perceptions of geometrical order recall to him the definition of God formulated by St. Bonaventura, "The centre is everywhere and the circumference nowhere", and part of his poem begins to take shape.

... O
Logres centre, can we know what proportion
bear the radii so to the full circumference everywhere?
(TTL., p. 52)

¹⁸⁰"The Sister of Percivale", Taliessin through Logres, p. 52.

¹⁸¹Ibid.

The note on this page which Williams left C.S. Lewis, "The perfect union of sensuality and substance is seen for a moment",¹⁸² goes some way towards explaining the line which immediately follows those quoted above. For at the precise second when this thought has formed itself, simultaneous with the act of the slave reaching for the filled bucket, "A trumpet's sound from the gate leapt level with the arm",¹⁸³ and "In her other outflung arm the sound doubled".¹⁸⁴ The sound of the trumpet announces the arrival of the brothers Percivale and Lamorack and with them their sister Blanchefleur. With her arrival "a new fate had ridden from the hidden horizon".¹⁸⁵ There has already been much talk of horizons in the poem: "The horizon of sensation ran north",¹⁸⁶ "The scar lightened over a curved horizon",¹⁸⁷ "The horizon in her eyes was breaking with distant Byzantium".¹⁸⁸ Now, with the appearance of Blanchefleur,

¹⁸²C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 140.

¹⁸³Taliessin through Logres, p. 52.

¹⁸⁴Ibid.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

"horizon had no lack of horizon; the circle closed".¹⁸⁹
 For at the call of the trumpet, Taliessin had shifted his
 gaze from the slave-girl and "hemispheres altered place".¹⁹⁰
 The meaning which he had been striving to capture in verse,
 and which had ended as a question, is suddenly revealed to
 him.

Williams has said of this poem, "Blanchefleur
 cannot be perfect to understanding without the slave",¹⁹¹
 but with the slave as prelude Taliessin sees that the
 "face of Blanchefleur"¹⁹² is the full, unrestricted view of
 what he had only seen in the "back" of the slave as she
 bent over the well: "the red track of the back was shown in
 a front of glory".¹⁹³ The revelation is sudden and very
 clear.

Taliessin leapt from the wall to greet the princess,
 saying: 'Bless me, transit of Venus!'
 The stress of the scar ran level with the star of Percivale.

(TTL., p. 53)

The three stanzas which conclude the poem are such
 a dense, knotted web of geometrical images that initially

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹⁰Ibid.

¹⁹¹C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 138.

¹⁹²Taliessin through Logres, p. 52.

¹⁹³Ibid.

they seem to defy all attempts at explication. The "Scars and Lightnings"¹⁹⁴ refer to the equation which Taliessin made before the arrival of Blanchefleur: they are "the edge of the spun wheel",¹⁹⁵ that is, "the full circumference" which he had seen "everywhere".¹⁹⁶ But at the call of the trumpet, "the peal breaks from the bone",¹⁹⁷ that is, the precursory sound seems to issue from the very physical form of the slave's outstretched arm, and at the appearance of the face of Blanchefleur, "the way of union speaks"¹⁹⁸ and "illumination ... waxes in the full revolution".¹⁹⁹ The circle sensed by Taliessin has been closed. But the meaning of the final stanza can only be guessed at:

Proportion of circle to diameter, and the near asymptote
Blanchefleur's smile; there in the throat her greeting
sprang, and sang in one note the infinite decimal.

(TTL., p. 53)

Lewis has said that the imagery of the poem "suggests that we are between two worlds",²⁰⁰ but the physical world of

¹⁹⁴Ibid., p. 53

¹⁹⁵Ibid.

¹⁹⁶Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹⁷Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹⁹Ibid.

²⁰⁰C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 141.

Blanchefleur's smile and greeting does little to clarify the problems of such abstract concepts as "the near asymptote" or "the infinite decimal".

Additional information that may usefully be brought to bear on interpretation of this stanza comes from the poem "Taliessin in the School of the Poets", wherein Taliessin again expresses the glory of the revealed universe in the same combination of organic and geometrical images:

... the radial arms' point-to-point;
reckoned the rondures of the base
by the straight absolute spine.

(TTL., p. 28)

and

all measures, to infinite strength,
from sapphire-laced distances drawn,
fill the jewel-joint-justiced throne;
adored be God and the Emperor
for the gathering of the nth.

(TTL., p. 28)

Lewis has recorded Williams' note on this poem also: "the body, of which the centre line is given, obviously, and yet never quite given",²⁰¹ and he comments that the body is "an ideal geometry mediated through an actual arrangement of living curves".²⁰² In the moment of revelation, "at

²⁰¹Ibid., p. 119.

²⁰²Ibid.

the Centre, all things that are ... remote and diverse ... come together ... and each is itself to the nth when they meet".²⁰³ In the light of this information it may at least be suggested that, in very general terms, the perfection of the beauty of Blanchefleur, in both her function as woman "in the world's base"²⁰⁴ and in her own individual right, is expressed in the full perfection of her voice ("in one note the infinite decimal") and smile ("the near asymptote", a figure which Williams sometimes employed to symbolize the ultimate union of spirit and flesh).

The difficult nature of the imagery of "The Sister of Percivale" points to a difficulty that is generally typical of the cycle as a whole. When the deficiencies of the narrative structure of Williams' *Arthurian* were discussed in Chapter II, it was suggested that they were partially a result of the protracted period over which the cycle's composition was spread. The problems of arriving at a fully satisfying reading of such poems as "The Sister of Percivale", "Taliessin in the School of the Poets", and "The Coming of Galahad" similarly arise from the author's extreme familiarity with his subject matter. When, as in the case of the most recently discussed poem, the thematic structure of the cycle is adversely affected, the essential

²⁰³Ibid., p. 120.

²⁰⁴"The Departure of Merlin", Taliessin through Logres, p. 77.

problem seems to be one of overcompression of meaning, rather than the definite omission of crucial information which disturbs the narrative structure.

The tendency towards overcompression of meaning is to be seen in Williams' occasional abuse of the possibilities of English sentence construction. C.S. Lewis maintains that the "mere slovenliness of syntax"²⁰⁵ would have been eliminated by rewriting had the author lived. This may well be so. The condition, however, is symptomatic of the general tendency to overload statements, events, and characters. Williams began his cycle with the intention of developing the symbolically suggestive details which Malory and his descendents had overlooked; and out of the wealth of authorial comment which remains to the student of Williams' Arthurian cycle, it becomes apparent that his first interest in exposing the latent meaning and significance of his material soon became a virtual obsession. The proportion of exegesis to actual text which must characterize any study of the cycle is a partial indication of the failing in Williams' poetry. Williams' system of thought is expounded at length in the expository writings and then condensed for use in his poetry. For a coherent exposition of the cycle his thought must be expanded all

²⁰⁵C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 187.

over again, and the extreme syntactical compression and symbolic density in each instance must be opened into some sort of prose equivalent in order to extract the meaning which the poet has assigned his material. While compression and highly charged statement are automatic functions of poetry, it may be justly charged that in Williams' poetry they are carried to extremes which may ultimately defeat the poet's primary purpose, and that often the reader's comprehension of the exact symbolic intention of the poet is replaced by the vague sensation of having encountered something that is somehow "significant" without having the least idea of precisely how or why this should be so.

It should be emphasized, however, that this is not the case in the majority of the individual poems of the cycle. Often Williams successfully demonstrates that what he has to say is entirely comprehensible in the terms in which he chooses to say it. The extreme compression of meaning which recurs at intervals frequent enough to go some way towards supporting charges of obscurity in Williams' poetry regrettably contaminates the real successes of the cycle.

The problems presented by the overcompressed imagery of "The Sister of Percivale" are in themselves scarcely sufficient to affect the total thematic structure of the cycle. In spite of the internal difficulties in interpretation, the poem in its general outlines still makes a

valuable contribution to the form which the cycle has begun to assume. The description of Taliessin's love, taken in conjunction with "Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn", which forecasts the nature that the love is to assume, and "The Departure of Dindrane", which carries the implications of that kind of love to its logical conclusion, forms one more link in the chain of loves which might be said to have begun in the earliest versions of the Matter of Britain with Arthur's love for Guinevere. In Williams' version, however, the loves are after a new style: they begin with the experience of the Beatrician Vision and reach their culmination in an expanded awareness of and love for the divine in all material creation. They begin, therefore, not with Arthur and Guinevere (for by Malory's time that was already an unprofitable area), nor even with Lancelot and Guinevere, but with Williams' heightening of the loves of relatively minor or entirely new characters. As the narrative unfolds, these loves may be seen to exist in every area of life in Logres, and as they develop, they may be seen to broaden out into increasingly wider units, if one will, circles, till the whole kingdom lives under the aspect of the Third Heaven, whose governing intelligence is love, and whose chief manifestation is the City.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In Chapter II it was observed that, in spite of his desire to make the Grail the centre of his myth, Williams eliminated from his cycle virtually all the traditional events of the Quest of the Grail. The sole survivor of his ruthless pruning of inessential narrative is that incident which deals with the healing of the Wounded King. After Pellès is healed, the three lords, Bors, Percivale, and Galahad, depart on the ship of Solomon for Sarras, leaving behind them "the storming sky / of Logres".¹ In thus allowing the Quest lords apparently to abandon Logres to its fate, and without even giving prominence to those Quest incidents which older versions had chronicled in detail as the prelude to the actual Achievement, it may well appear that Williams has failed in his attempt effectively to move the two major constituents of the Matter of Britain, the tale of Arthur and the tale of the Grail, into closer, more significant proximity. Such is not entirely the case, however, as certain narrative and thematic details demonstrate.

¹"The Last Voyage", Taliessin through Logres, p. 85.

The only account of a Quest in the cycle is that of Palomides' quest for the Blatant Beast, of whose existence the Saracen becomes aware in his frustrated love for Iseult. "Palomides Before his Christening"² presents his quest, however, not as a search for an external reality, a mythical beast, but as a struggle within himself. It is experienced in total isolation as Palomides withdraws in anger, jealousy, and injured pride from the society of the Round Table and Camelot to nurse in private his raging resentment. The end of the quest may be said to come when he emerges from his cave, not in a blaze of illumination, but in the chastened realization that withdrawal from the City is not an effective solution to his problems. As C.S. Lewis has commented, his conversion is typical of those

... in which the slow, aching ebb of the old life and the dryness which it leaves as it ebbs are deeply felt, and the new life comes with no 'sensible consolation'.³

Nevertheless, the way that he must take is clear to him, and he turns his steps toward Caerleon to be christened at last.

The position of "Palomides Before his Christening" in the volume Taliessin through Logres is significant. By placing the poem immediately before "The Coming of Galahad",

²Taliessin through Logres, pp. 64-8.

³C.S. Lewis, Arthurian Torso, p. 163.

Williams clearly intended that it be read as a prelude to the arrival of the lord who will achieve the Grail, Palomides being a type of the questing knight of whom Galahad is the traditional epitome. According to such an interpretation, the result of Palomides' inner quest, his recognition and acceptance of the Union that is both Christ and the City, becomes itself a type of the Achievement of the Grail.

Towards the close of "The Figure of Arthur" Williams asked rhetorically, "What then is the Achievement of the Grail?"⁴ In the absence of any explicit poetic answer to the question, his prose answer may be quoted in full at this juncture.

Dante, in a later century, was to put the height of human beatitude in the understanding of the Incarnation; in a lesser, but related, method Angela of Foligno was to speak of knowing 'how God comes into the Sacrament'. To know these things is to be native to them; to live in the world where the Incarnation and the Sacrament (single or multiple) happen. It is more: it is, in some sense, to live beyond them, or rather (since that might sound profane) to be conscious of them as one is conscious of oneself, Christ-conscious instead of self-conscious. The achievement of the Grail is the perfect fulfilment of this, the thing happening.⁵

⁴"The Figure of Arthur", Arthurian Torso, p. 78.

⁵Ibid., pp. 78-9.

Palomides' achievement is obviously not of this order. His struggle and final victory are on a lower rung of the spiritual ladder than those of Galahad or the mystics, but while his particular nature makes both more difficult, his achievement is by no means untypical of members of a kingdom which owes its very existence to divine ordination. Lancelot is ultimately compelled to pass through a similar period amid the 'dry rocks' before he finally achieves the spiritual illumination necessary to celebration of the last Mass in Logres. In all probability most of Arthur's knights are to be understood as having had similar experiences at some point in their lives.

It is for this reason, perhaps, that Williams chose to ignore the myriad adventures which traditionally had befallen so many members of the Round Table after they had vowed to go in search of the Grail. The various individual quests experienced by such knights as Palomides, though never explicitly delineated, are clearly implied throughout the cycle and may be regarded as replacing the formal vows and traditional quests of Arthur's knights. From such a point of view, the Arthurian component of the Matter of Britain remains as prominent in Williams' cycle as it was in Malory's account, while the Grail is kept as the symbolic centre of his Arthuriad, functioning both directly and indirectly as an influence upon the quality of the lives of the inhabitants of Logres.

Moreover, although the lords of the Quest leave Logres in a state of intense civil war to go their own way in pursuit of the Grail, those powers which had initially been responsible for the emergence of the Grail from Carbonek do not withdraw themselves utterly from the Empire, so that the internal strife of Logres is not permitted completely to destroy the kingdom. The way in which Williams accomplishes this is of some interest, especially as it involves further radical departures from the older versions.

"The Last Voyage" provides an outline of the "deep schismatic war"⁶ within Logres as a background to the journey of Bors, Percivale, and Galahad to Sarras. Gawaine supports Arthur and makes war on the king's behalf against the supporters of Lancelot. His brother, Agravaine, kills Lamorack, after he and his brothers have killed their mother, Morgause, "to clean their honour's claws in the earth of her body".⁷ Even Dinadan, who espoused no faction and presents no threat, is slain. Although Williams does not include any reference to the last terrible war between Arthur and the treacherous Mordred, the briefly sketched picture of the divided state of Logres is sufficient to

⁶Taliessin through Logres, p. 87.

⁷Ibid.

demonstrate how its inhabitants have indeed "hewed the Table in twain".⁸ While the destruction moves relentlessly on towards its inevitable conclusion, the ship of Solomon makes its way along its own "path of lineal necessity".⁹

"The Prayers of the Pope" of The Region of the Summer Stars presents the war in Logres in a slightly different perspective. The "bleak wars between Arthur and Lancelot"¹⁰ are seen to infect the other themes of the Empire, so that they

... rejected the City; they made substitutes for the City; mutes or rhetoricians instead of the sacred poets, cheating for charity, exposition for experience, braggadocio or burlesque for faith and hope.

(RSS., pp. 51-2)

At the same time the Empire is suffering another assault from outside as waves of Northern barbarians move southward, even towards Rome itself:

... the land shook
as band after band stamped into darkness cities
whose burning had lamped their path; their wrath grew
with vengeance and victory; they looked to no returning.

(RSS., p. 52)

Utilizing the fable, which he mentions in Witchcraft,¹¹ that Attila the Hun came in the company of his sorcerers,

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 88

¹⁰The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 51.

¹¹Witchcraft, p. 67.

Williams attributes to the invaders the ability to call upon the powers of P'o-l'u itself to achieve their desired ends. Aided by the "rituals of necromancy",¹² they call up the dead to swell their ranks.

those mechanized bodies stalked across the fords,
and the hordes of the heathen followed the corpses to battle.

(RSS., p. 54)

The effect of the internal division of the Empire is, of course, entirely predictable.

Against the rule of the Emperor the indivisible Empire was divided; therefore the Parousia suspended its coming, and abode still in the land of the Trinity. Logres was void of Grail and Crown ...

(RSS., p. 55)

In the presence of such carnage the Pope can only offer his prayer, but it is prayer with a difference. In an ultimate instance of the practice of exchange, the Pope takes upon himself the divided state of the Empire.

... fire in his body,
chill in his mind, and everywhere in mind and body
the terrible schism of identity into the categories
and the miserable conquest of the categories over identity
split all, and fatally separated the themes
which in the beginning were mated with identical glory.
Such is death's outrage; so the Pope
died in a foretasting ...

(RSS., pp. 54-5)

As he experiences within his own being all the agony of the warring Empire, the destruction continues, but the voyage to

¹²"The Prayers of the Pope", The Region of the Summer Stars, p. 53.

Sarras draws to its end.

beyond the summer stars, deep heaven
centrally opened within the land of the Trinity;
planetary light was absorbed there, and emerged
again in its blissful journeys; there the three
lords of the quest landed ...

(RSS., p. 58)

Their arrival, however, has no perceptible effect upon the situation in the Empire, for Williams portrays them as being "imprisoned in a trance" "for a year and a day".¹³ The time of their complete achievement has not yet come and they lie awaiting "the dawn-hour of the trine-toned light".¹⁴ Even as they lie thus waiting, the situation within the Empire becomes more acute and the very borders of the Empire seem to crumble as the ultimate horror emerges. From P'o-l'u the octopods begin moving,

... their tentacles
waving, stretching, stealing souls from the shores,
.....
appearing above ocean, or sinking and slinking
and spreading everywhere along the bottom of ocean,
and heading inward....

(RSS., p. 59)

The menace which was always potential now emerges and the contingent evil becomes actual as the powers of P'o-l'u are felt tangibly by the inhabitants of the Empire.

¹³Ibid., p. 58

¹⁴Ibid.

It is at this critical stage that Broceliande's ambiguous nature and its proximity to the seas of P'o-l'u become again important factors in the narrative of the cycle. At the moment when the octopods of the antipodes are making inroads into the very heart of the Empire, they encounter the roots of the sea-wood, and

... the tentacles were touched and clutched,
flung and were clung to, clung and were not flung off,
brainlessly hastened and brainfully were hastened to.

(RSS., p. 59)

The lines do not perhaps demonstrate Williams at his most felicitous; nonetheless, the words "brainlessly" and "brainfully" are significant. It will be recalled that P'o-l'u is reputedly ruled by a headless emperor whose mental powers are those merely of the "turmoil of the mind of sensation".¹⁵ But the emperor of the infernal regions is not only opposed to the divinely ordered intelligence seen in the ruler of the Byzantine Empire, he is also opposed to the intelligence which emanates from the Third Heaven, Love manifested in "the feeling intellect". As Bors had learned, that love is also latent in Broceliande and "probes everywhere through the frontier of head and hand".¹⁶ Thus the roots of Broceliande are empowered to halt the progress of P'o-l'u.

¹⁵"The Vision of the Empire", Taliessin through Logres, p. 12.

¹⁶"Bors to Elayne: The Fish of Broceliande", Taliessin through Logres, p. 26.

the hollow suckers of the vast slimy tentacles
 were tautened to Nimue's trees ...
 and fixed to a regimen; held so for ever
 to know for ever nothing but their own hypnotic
 sucking at the harsh roots; the giant octopods
 hung helpless ...

(RSS., p. 59)

With this encounter the situation in the Empire is
 slowly reversed and the various evils which have threatened
 its unity find themselves impotent and helpless. At the
 same time, in Sarras,

... The lords stirred
 as the triple-toned light broke upon them
 and they heard in their mode the primal canon of the Grail.

(RSS., p. 60)

When Williams described his understanding of the
 Achievement of the Grail, the general tone of his remarks
 on the necessity of being "native" to knowledge of such
 metaphysical concepts as the Incarnation and the Sacrament
 recalls his own reputation for being able to live in both
 the natural and supernatural worlds. He himself felt it
 to be "a little unfortunate that in ordinary English talk
 the words 'natural' and 'supernatural' have come to be
 considered as opposed rather than as complementary ...
 [which] implies rather a division between their meanings
 than a union".¹⁷ The union between the two worlds of
 experience might be said to be achieved by the discovery of

¹⁷"Natural Goodness", The Image of the City, p. 75.

that faculty which Wordsworth had called "the feeling intellect". In concluding the present study of Williams' Arthurian cycle, it is worthwhile to pause to consider the implication of certain of his observations on this faculty, which he saw as "the best maxim of the desired City".¹⁸

It is a state of unity, in which the intellect no longer 'meddles' but knows and feels at once in rational proportion.... It is this which is to aid in the deliverance not only of individuals but of nations, even those that have sunk to servitude, ignominy, and shame.... But it can only be achieved by the intense and individual working.¹⁹

Although Williams does not mention "the feeling intellect" in "The Prayers of the Pope", it is quite probable that it is this state that the Pope has achieved in his act of exchange. It may further be suggested that by taking upon himself the suffering of the divided Empire he releases the latent powers of Broceliande, enabling the forces of Nimue, Nature, to act against the powers of P'o-l'u and ultimately to "aid in the deliverance" of the whole Empire. Only when this has been done, only when the afflicted state has taken steps to save itself, can the ultimate power of the Grail be realized by the Quest lords. Hence it can be seen that the Grail and its Achievement are

¹⁸"The Image of the City in English Verse", The Image of the City, p. 101.

¹⁹"Blake and Wordsworth", The Image of the City, p. 64.

not remote concepts that have no relation to the fate of the Empire, are not the manifestations of an independent divinity which would leave "this unstable world" to its own fate, but rather symbols of the state of interdependence and co-inherence that Williams held existed between the created universe and its creator. When this relation has been perceived by individuals and nations alike, the world at large as well as favoured individuals will be able to achieve the Grail.

Williams eliminated the description of the Mass in Sarras from his cycle, replacing it by the description of the Christmas Eucharist celebrated by the Pope and the description of the last Mass in Logres celebrated by Lancelot. By omitting the Grail celebration in other-worldly Sarras and emphasizing the sacraments in Logres and Rome, Williams focuses attention on the crucial necessity of the Achievement of the Grail in "this unstable world" and on the Empire and the kingdom as exemplars of both the instability and the potential inherent therein. Grail and kingdom are thus inextricably fused, so that although the Round Table is destroyed and Camelot falls into ruins, the Company remains as a remnant and a promise of love and the "feeling intellect" for which the Pope's act of exchange in the final poem of The Region of the Summer Stars has paved

the way:

... consuls and lords within the Empire,
for all the darkening of the Empire and the loss of Logres
and the hiding of the High Prince, felt the Empire
revive in a live hope of the Sacred City.

(RSS., p. 61)

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This list makes no attempt to provide a comprehensive bibliography of Charles Williams' work. Readers interested in obtaining fuller information may consult the bibliographies of Anne Ridler, The Image of the City and Other Essays and Mary M. Shideler, The Theology of Romantic Love (see "Secondary Material" of this list).

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