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The Commonplace Book: Charles Williams's Early Approach to the Arthurian Poetry

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Abstract

Examines Williams's handwritten notebook, in which he jotted ideas and references for his Arthurian poetry, for clues about influences, style, themes, and characters.

Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles. Arthuriad

The Commonplace Book: Charles Williams's Early Approach to the Arthurian Poetry

Georgette Versinger

CHARLES Williams wrote his first Arthurian poems in the late twenties. But long before that he knew he wanted to tackle the subject. As early as 1912 he began taking notes with this aim in mind. He may have been spurred on by the excitement of having his first book of poetry, *The Silver Stair*, published at that date, thus giving him official status as a poet. Yet he did not start writing immediately, as if he had sensed that this was going to be his "Life Work" and wanted to be fully prepared for it.¹ So he took a binder's dummy, wrote "*The Holy Grail*" on its spine and started jotting down in it all sorts of references, quotations, complex metaphysical interpretations, reflections on the meaning of episodes, on the factual or symbolic links between the characters, and drafts of scenes.² Suggestions are plentiful: Williams gives free rein to his imagination without trying to choose between ideas or reconcile them but exploring all possibilities. We can thus follow his mind at work on the subject during eight to nine years (1912-1920) and some 180 pages,³ and it offers a rare occasion of seeing the process of artistic creation in the making.

The number and variety of authors quoted in the book is impressive. It contains not only primary sources and literary criticism, but also notes about theological, historical, geographical, and sociological studies extending far beyond the European borders and the period of the legend. Numerous references to Frazer or to Jessie Weston jostle with remarks on India, Mexico, Tibet, China and, more logically, Islam.

The Commonplace Book has not yet been exploited to the full. Anne Ridler was the first to print extracts from it and to comment on them (lviii-lx, 169-173). And she was right to say that so many things, and so diverse, went into it that might conceivably be of use that Williams could never have used them all. David Dodds, who has studied Williams's unpublished material both in his edition of the poems and in his recent essay "Continuity and Change in the Development of Charles Williams's Poetic Style,"⁴ focuses mainly on the evolution of the poetry, whether published or not. What I wish to do,

on the contrary, is to dwell on the *Commonplace Book* itself and try to analyse how it serves as a preparation for the poems. It is impossible here to cover the whole field of suggestions, so I intend to restrict myself to the most evocative points on five different subjects: first some questions of style, then the spatio-temporal background of the legend, the various plans envisaged, the major themes and, lastly, the characters.

Questions of style

There are very few lines of poetry in the book. It is clear that Williams's intention was definitely to dwell on preliminaries rather than begin the actual writing. Some among those drafts were taken up in non-Arthurian poetry; other lines do not seem to have left any trace elsewhere. For instance, the three and a half lines with which he thought of ending the poem:

and Sir Bors

Heard and beheld them, on the valley road;
Arthur with all the Table and their spears
To westward, marching under the new day. (93)

Similarly, allusions to questions of style are very scarce. Yet this is a problem which Williams definitely kept at the back of his mind at the time for he later wrote about these beginnings: "I have never known how to start. Another long, long poem on the Grail looked so depressing, and odes and things were not narrative enough."⁵ The diary of his friend John Pellow even records that he hesitated between a poem and a play.⁶ One can however gather a few indications as to Williams's preferences at the time.

From the various plans considered, Williams does seem to be thinking mainly in terms of the epic. But he alludes to Abercrombie's suggestion (in *The Epic*) of great odes, separate poems united by a common theme, to replace the long continuous epic poem. Yet in *The Advent* he will choose lyrical poems (almost all are called songs).⁷

He also wonders about the pros and cons of a 'romantic' or 'classic' style:

? the 'romantic', meaning the use of all sorts of common things and words for images and expressions,—as distinguished from the classical remoteness of, say, Milton. It would be possible to mould this to what restraint or swiftness or lucidity was desired. The very stuff of mingled light and darkness should show in the poem. ? Is this what Dante did. (95)

The idea of using “all sorts of common things and words” seems surprisingly far from Williams’s early poetic diction, and, in fact, from most of his later poetry too; on the other hand, the reference to Dante and his association with “restraint, swiftness, lucidity, light and darkness” is, I think, crucial to Williams’s future emphasis on these notions and their use in his imagery.

Some remarks show Williams conscious of a need to vary the rhythm and tone of the poetry: “? Somewhere introduce a short idyl, sufficient to itself, and breaking or at least relieving, the order and colour of the poem” (93). Or again about Palomides: “? a speech, or a song (or both), praising Islam. Rather, the song to be a love-song, early in the poem [. . .] a Mahommedan love-song. ? compare with the Christian” (116). This note, combined with Williams’s later experiments in “Euclidean” love poetry could very well be at the root of “The Coming of Palomides” (*Taliessin Through Logres*) where the Saracen knight, the inheritor of the great Arab mathematicians, “measure(s) the height of God-in-man” in the geometrical harmony of Iseult’s body (Dodds 46).

Other passages offer an acute visualization of a particular scene. For instance, after the lines just quoted for the end of the poem, Williams inserts an addition—which is much more evocative than the rather colourless poetry: “but especially the transport, and ‘the dragging oxen, the half-armoured knights, Priests plodding gowns tucked knee-high, flocks and herds, And mud-splashed waggons heaving in the mire’. On a rainy dull morning—the natural close after the radiance of the Graal” (93).

And here is another example, all the more interesting because of its fantastic nature. The scene depicts the three knights of the Grail delivered from their prison in Sarras: “they come out into a darkness so that they cannot see the sky or the streets, but it is full of a rain of light, sometimes pure dazzling white light, sometimes silver, or golden, sometimes red flame” (83). And another sentence on the same page, later crossed out, adds that when the Grail appears, Percivale sees “in an orb of light, as it were two great waves of light continually surging apart, gathering up on either side, and plunging together again.”

This intermingling of light and movement irresistibly evokes the descriptions of the Grail and Solomon’s Stone in the novels. One realizes that such images were natural to Williams’s imagination and already fruitful much earlier than the earliest novel.⁸ And they also have a progeny in the poetry as, for instance, in the picture of rushing light and colour in “The Last Voyage” (*Taliessin Through Logres*). The same quality energizes the admirable lines

describing Galahad in "Taliessin at Lancelot's Mass": "flame of anatomized fire, / the High Prince stood, gyre in burning gyre" (Dodds 91). The precise image here has its direct origin some twenty years earlier in this note: "The knights who achieve see Galahad as a crimson-pulsing pillar of fire" (65).

Space and time

The treatment of space and time is envisaged on a wide scale. Geography opens out. Towns and lands become representative of notions and experiences ranging from the historical to the supernatural and introducing the properly mythical dimension of the legend:

In the opening lament, or prelude, sketch the stage, so to speak: Rome, Europe, Gaul, Britain, Winchester. From Winchester to Glastonbury still historical; at Glastonbury legends and folk lore begin, and stretch west to Tintagel and Camelot. Beyond and north of Camelot, the region of lands and seas of mystical romance, and Sarras. Also the East: Byzantium, the Holy Land, the sacred sites, Prester John (? the Grand Llama), rumours of China, and the great Indian Emperors. ? the last also seems to have also the Holy Land and Sarras at the extreme end: the idea that the two ways of the world seem somehow to meet in Sarras. (59)

The panorama adumbrates the future 'Empire' of the Taliessin poems but the process is incomplete: the countries remain independent units, not yet coinherent provinces (or 'themes,' to use Williams's word) and their different symbolic values are still to be thought of. The Emperor is only mentioned once, incidentally, although Williams already considers that Arthur owes allegiance to him. Roman civilisation is still in the forefront.

The same extension applies to time from the earliest pages, and in a more complex way. Williams knows that historical research gives the middle of the fifth century as the probable time of Arthur, but he feels free to ignore it for thematic reasons: "? any real objection to time and distance being ignored and Mohammedan knights introduced," he asks on page 7. To justify himself, he invokes the relativity of such notions in fantastic literature⁹ and the authority of Chesterton, whom he quotes: "All that to us is Anachronism was to medievals merely Eternity" (7). He is specially motivated by this desire to introduce Mohammedans because of their thematic opposition to Christianity, so he wishes to bring Arthur "forward and parallel to Charlemagne" (three centuries later) "so as to obtain the full effect of Islam" (12).

The internal time structure of the story itself is to undergo a transmutation too, and this is a device, typical of Williams, which fuses the natural and the

supernatural. At the axis of the poem, Galahad belongs both to the 'historical' time of Arthur and to the 'mystical' one of the Grail. His arrival at the Court determines the passage to a double time reference:

When Galahad sat down in the Siege Perilous, the whole purpose of the Table was changed from battles with Saxon kings to the quest of the Graal: that is, from an external chivalry the Table changes before us into mysterious and inner qualities, moving, almost ritually, about the secret union.[. . .] It is the first turning of the soul to spiritual things. (loose leaf from the Commonplace Book)

The effect of the double chronology is to change the legend into a new version of the story of the Fall and Redemption with a double scale of reference, human time and eschatological time. Similarly Arthur will be at the same time the king who establishes his kingdom, reigns and dies in historical time and, on an atemporal scale, man wounded by Original Sin and waiting for his salvation. The complex artistic articulation of time(s) and theme is one of the most original qualities of Williams's reinterpretation of the Arthurian legend.

General plans

A number of general plans of the poem are scattered here and there in the Commonplace Book. The first, on page 1, focuses outright on a progression between the different varieties of love: after book I on Arthur (unspecified) come four other books, book II on Tristram ("fated love"), III on Lancelot ("sinful love"), IV on Perceval ("human love") and V on Galahad ("divine love"). Then Williams changes his mind, attributes human love to Bors, and "human love broken by death" to Perceval, or, alternately, "virginal love." Another subdivision is introduced for Tristram with the following precision: "I Iseult of Cornwall fated; II Iseult of Brittany—natural" (1).

Further on, he considers a double division, vertically into "books of Love" and horizontally into the "secular" and the "religious," i. e., the kingdom and the Quest (35). But this, he realizes, would imply a problem of balance between the two poles of interest: "the whole must either turn on the Table motive or on the Grail; and end actually either with the death of Arthur or the passing of Galahad. If the poem is to be 'more general' it will turn more on the Table, if particular (of Love) on the Grail. But it must be unified as far as possible" (45).

The unifying link must of necessity be spiritual. It could be found by giving major importance to Arthur's sin of incest with Morgause since, as he

remembers Swinburne pointing out, this “is the cause of the birth of Mordred, and hence eventually of all the disasters and the tragedy of the Table” (48). So the emphasis Williams was to put on Arthur as mainly responsible for the failure of Logres springs from Swinburne’s comments; from this he soon reaches further developments, stressing Arthur’s egotism as the point of infection which will corrupt the whole realm, causing in particular his adultery with Morgause and Guenevere’s turning to Lancelot (76).

Further on in the book, the volumes are definitively restricted to three with Tristram, Lancelot and Galahad as eponymous heroes: “the general name of each only holding them rather loosely together, and describing the circumstance of love in each—Love overpowered, Love in error, Love triumphant. Three circles having one centre, the Achievement of the Grail” (45).

In spite of the central unifying role of the Grail (which is rather affirmed here than actually effected), the general structure seems to remain very episodic. Williams attempts another to bring out better the specificity of each volume and the progression between them: the *Tristan* volume would be full of “legends, folk-lore, myths, religions (according with the little understood love there experienced)” (54); the *Lancelot* would “be concerned, chief among the three, with the secular idea, the making of a State, and the Court of Arthur”; whilst the *Galahad* would view events “transcended by the spiritual understanding” (56). This dynamic stresses the universal human scope of the legend, moving from “primitive” consciousness to organised society to the rule of spiritual alertness. It parallels the three steps of coinherence in Williams’s later theology.

Finally, the last plan given takes up the same three volumes, each subdivision being named after a heroine (97). The choice is sometimes surprising and remains unexplained. But it is symptomatic of the important role Williams assigns women in the spiritual realm.¹⁰

These successive plans organized around the theme of love will bring about changes in the characterization of the heroes and in their relative importance. But at the time of the Commonplace Book they are still very numerous to keep Williams’s attention, with the inherent risk of frittering away the weight of the argument. This problem remains a weakness of *The Advent of Galahad* where the poems are distributed among some fifteen speakers.¹¹

Since Arthur is excluded from the list of eponymous heroes, all the secular motif of the legend will presumably be integrated through Lancelot since he is “concerned, chief among the three, with the secular idea” (56). But how to

reconcile this structural deletion with Arthur's thematic importance remains an unsolved question.

Perceval's disappearance is also surprising. The paradox may be explained partly by his characterization: the first plan makes no fundamental distinction between him and Bors, both being representatives of human love. The difference would be merely on the sexual level, the "virginal passion, too great for the flesh to bear" of Perceval and Blanchefleur, "their adoration of the Grail in each" (64), contrasting with the family life of Bors who is "the especial guardian of life [. . .] 'the temple of the Holy Ghost', the holy champion of physical things" (73).

On the other hand, some traditions speak of a 'sister' of Perceval and Williams wonders whether she is not Blanchefleur, so called "only as a kind of name to describe their virginal love" (121). In *The Advent* Blanchefleur remains Perceval's beloved, but in the later poems she becomes the actual sister of Perceval and Taliessin's love. The result is that Percivale, as he is then called, is left with merely brotherly affection for her and turns into a pure symbol of spiritual love and a near replica of Galahad. Between Bors and Galahad his place is hard to define. The problem will remain with Williams throughout his life.¹²

In contrast, Tristram as the embodiment of fated/pagan love will decidedly dwindle after the *Commonplace Book* and disappear from the later poetry. "In a sense, Tristan was superfluous," Williams wrote later.¹³ This is due to Williams's analysis of his (Tristan's) love as a purely human passion with no religious overtones;¹⁴ moreover, it is also largely independent of the story of Arthur's realm and quite unconnected to that of the Grail, contrary to Lancelot's story.

What about the theme of fated love, then? This will be partly the role of Palomides's love of Iseult and partly that of Lamoracke's for Morgause. Williams's development of the latter is a good artistic choice. The Tristan and Iseult story was a great favourite with nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and its particular atmosphere would therefore have weighed heavily on the general tone of the poem, pulling against its unity of theme. Insofar as Lamoracke's story is less hackneyed, it gives the author more freedom to integrate to his scheme; and again, Morgause being Arthur's sister and incestuous lover, she, and Lamoracke with her, is directly linked to the destiny of the realm and the theme of sin.

The major themes

The Commonplace Book does not mention the reason why Williams was dissatisfied with earlier treatments of the legend, but this we know from other sources. In his 1930 note to Milford, he wrote that he believed Malory's tale had "certain significances" that he had failed to grasp and that "neither Tennyson nor Morris nor Swinburne nor the rest took any notice" of them, leaving the myth in an "unfinished state."¹⁵ From the outset the Grail, the Christian Grail, not Jessie Weston's "magic cauldron," was for him the centre, both artistic and metaphysical, which gave its significance to the whole story. In his reinterpretation the legend will become the vehicle of clear metaphysical tenets.

The Grail is the visible presence of God in our world, 'really the one fixed point—the Reality. It is, in truth, other things which move and it which is still' (65). Its effect on those who seek it will be different according to their approach: "The Graal [. . .] is to some a test, to some fruition, to some union, to some torment" (168). Galahad himself receives from the Grail his particular character (102). It can be "seen anywhere" because it is "the inner light: but to be achieved only in Sarras" (3).

The Grail conveys the presence of God, and God is Love. Love defines both the nature of God and the way to him: Love, as God, and as the Way, to dominate the poem: all the persons are tried, purged, and conquered by Him (29).

Each man's vocation is determined by his duty to play his part in the designs of Love. The theme of vocation will become central in *Taliessin*, in particular through Arthur's failure to realize that the king is there for the kingdom and not vice-versa (Cf. the epigraph of *Taliessin*). But it concerns all the characters and it is their willingness to be moulded by it which determines their entrance, or not, on the Quest:

Love creates (or was intended to) in a man a sense of exaltation of spirit and sense which enable and excite him to labour and delight in his particular 'vocation'—the poet, soldier, statesman, mystic, etc. His love is himself interiorly, his vocation himself exteriorly—love his attitude towards the microcosm, vocation his attitude towards the macrocosm. (133)

But sin works against the aims of Love. From the outset the Dolorous Blow is conceived as an image of Original Sin. Therefore it will have to be struck at the very beginning of Arthur's reign, so as "to make it more primeval, clouded, and general" (145), and Balen's adventure will be told by Dubric in

order to underline its metaphysical meaning (166). In *The Advent*, it is finally Taliessin who tells the story in his "Letter to a Princess of Byzantium."

Garlon also intervenes here. The significance of the invisible knight will haunt Williams till the end of his life. Here a remark outlines the original interpretation after which Williams is groping: "Garlon, invisible, = the unseen attempts on Man (= Balen). Qy: must he be the enemy of Arthur and the Table just as the spiritual is always the enemy of the material; although the material always regards it as far more inimical than it is" (166).

This conception of Garlon as a fearful representative of spirituality heralds Williams's most cherished doctrine of a "dreadful goodness." In the notes that Williams took about the cycle at the time of *The Advent*, the positive eschatological overtone becomes clearer still: he speaks of Garlon as being "Satan to us but the Holy Ghost to the supernatural powers."¹⁶ *The Advent* witnesses to this evolution: at Lancelot's Mass "the unseen knight of terror / stood there for a close friend" (Dodds 247); the line is taken up almost *verbatim* in *Taliessin*.

Original Sin is continued in individual and social sin, for the soul is wounded and spiritual eyesight blinded: "This not only blinds men to God (...) but also to their own brotherhood and even to decent social relations" (151). To anticipate on Williams's vocabulary, co-inherence is lost. Seen from this angle, everything in the legend becomes interiorized: the waste land is not only Pelles' realm devastated as a consequence of the Dolorous Blow, it spreads over all Logres (148). The devastation becomes a spiritual rather than a material state: "The 'wilderness' is in the consciousness only [. . .] the withdrawal of light and comfort from Nature as e.g. from the faces of the lovers" (156).¹⁷

The coming of Galahad is the turning-point when Providence intervenes in human affairs and gives their true significance to worldly adventures.¹⁸ For all the knights it heralds the beginning of the Quest. The intervention of Providence is seen also in the birth of Galahad himself. Lancelot had to be his father because he was "the greatest lover and the greatest knight" (75), but Galahad could not be born of adultery or wilful unfaithfulness. Hence the reason of his birth from Lancelot and Helayne. What happens is "an example of destiny and the free will of men: Lancelot's devotion to the queen, etc. all 'working with God' to produce Galahad" (102).

Destiny, God, Love, are interchangeable words. Destiny is the source of everything that happens in the story, from Balen's sinful use of the spear to Galahad's birth, the doom of the Table and the achievement of the Grail by

the chosen knights (162). Meditating on the seeming opposition between destiny and free will, Williams quotes Abercrombie, who considers (in *The Epic*) that *Paradise Lost* is inspired by this conflict, who asks "And, after Milton, what is to happen?" The answer Williams gives is typical of his theology: "What might happen is the adumbration of *some reconciliation between the two* as Milton (in God and Satan) adumbrated their division" (109a; my emphasis).

Those are the great lines of development. But even what might seem accessory questions are indicative of Williams's wide-ranging reflection, and material for later poems. Thus, Williams's preoccupation with the common people brings him to imagine the various guilds as having the knights "for their champions, orators, and almost embodiments: so that a session of the Table is almost a gathering of the State" (165): this is the origin of "The Ceremony of the King's Homage" in *The Advent* (in *Taliessin*, this representative function will lie mostly with the slaves). Another note reads: "But filth and so forth—their place in the universe? The action of Love in them? Love in the bodily functions?" (50). This problem is taken up in a poem of *The Advent* ("Gareth's Song of His Service") and, less crudely, in parts of "The Coming of Galahad" in *Taliessin*.

The characters

Williams thought of having two categories of characters, those who act and those who comment upon the action: "The discussion and intellectual relations of one idea with the other to be in the hands of the non-knightly characters—Dubric, Merlin, Fabio—the knights to be these ideas, and the visible results of them in action: i.e., Tristan does not dispute about love, he is love; Galahad does not discuss religion, he is religion" (54).

The Fabio mentioned here is an invention of Williams. He was to be an agnostic and a philosopher bringing a vision of the world different from that of Christians or Moslems. He occupies much room in the notes, and yet he is eliminated before the first poems. It may well be, as Anne Ridler suggests, that the development of Taliessin as a commentator on the action made him (Fabio) superfluous, in the same way as Archbishop Dubric will be superseded by the Emperor as the representative of spiritual power (Ridler 173).¹⁹

Still with the idea of getting a multiple light on events, Williams saw three important characters at Arthur's court: Dubric, "the ecclesiastic and priest"; Merlin, "the wizard and the 'scientist'"; and Taliessin, "the artist, poet singer." He wondered about adding a mystic to get "a sort of four choruses commenting

variously on the world" but wisely reflected it might be better to have "no more mystics besides Galahad" (63). In other notes belonging to the period when *The Advent* was being written he only mentioned Dubric and Lancelot.²⁰ The inclusion of Lancelot is logical in view of his political and thematic importance. The omission of Taliessin is only temporary and due to his now being sent to Byzantium before joining the group of counsellors. As for Merlin, he has by then distanced himself from the Court by becoming attached to Nimue's following, which magnifies his symbolic role.

The central characters are the objects of complex analyses in the *Commonplace Book*. The omnipresent question mark introduces quick notes, frustrating in their brevity, or more explicit developments, and always Williams seizes the symbol, the moral or metaphysical implications behind the fact or the person: for example, Galahad will be "first heard of and seen riding alone through the forest, as the thought of God first appears, without cause, in a man's heart" (4).

A favourite device of Williams is to put in parallel two or more heroes in order to bring out a contrast or shades in their similarities. Thus Merlin is most often coupled with Dubric, the first being "natural man ('heathen') conscious of the quest, planning it and working for it, but ignorant of its full meanings" (124), whereas the second embodies the spiritual lucidity brought by the Christian Revelation. Merlin is "the nature-seer" (137) and one of "the high masters of magic" (21). This magic is "natural magic," and Williams wonders whether it could be druidical in kind as in the *Mabinogion*, or comparable to the magic which was attributed to Virgil in the Middle Ages (23); the connexion with Virgil will later be allotted to Taliessin and the 'magic' concerned will become that of poetry.

The so-called 'natural' humanity of Merlin brings about another comparison, with Arthur this time: "Merlin the self-consciousness of Arthur [. . .] ? His assumption into nature and circumstance" (124). This last sentence seems to be the adumbration of a later major development: Merlin would thus represent consciousness of the environment ("nature") and of events ("circumstance"), in other words of space and time. In the later "Notes" Williams privileges time ("Merlin is in some sense Time, and also Wisdom," Ridler 176), probably because of Merlin's gift as a seer, and because of Swinburne's treatment of him.²¹ This explains why he will retrieve Brisen

from the background of the story in order to make her the sister of Merlin and the embodiment of Space.

Merlin is also defined tentatively as “? sacramental science” and in this office is connected with Nimue who becomes “? beneficent Nature” and his “patroness” (136). Williams deplored Nimue’s legendary role as treacherous seducer of Merlin; here the roles are redistributed in a quite different relationship. Both characters now approximate natural powers more than human beings and cooperate in their domain.²² By the time of *The Advent* Nimue has definitely acquired her superhuman stature, and the providential role of Merlin and Brisen as her children is established.²³

If this triangular relationship is far from being achieved in the *Commonplace Book*, another vital one, that between Arthur, Pelles, and Galahad, is already at the heart of Williams’s metaphysical interpretation. It is striking how early this extremely original concept forced itself upon his mind. A first connexion is established between Arthur and Galahad: Arthur, Williams writes, symbolizes “Man’s external working, as distinguished from Galahad, the inner” (76). Then he wonders whether Pelles might be “a parallel and, as it were, repetition of Arthur” (148). There follows the correction, crucial for the later poetry: “*Arthur is Pelles after the ‘Dolorous Stroke’*, engaged in labour for transitory things. Pelles a ‘song of innocence’. Arthur ‘a song of experience’, Galahad again a ‘song of innocence’” (148 *my emphasis*).

So Pelles is to be the ideal Arthur, i.e., man as willed by God. Arthur is man after the Fall. In the interval between the *Commonplace Book* and *The Advent* Williams clarifies the point in his “Notes”: “The royalty of Pelleas 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” (Ridler 175).

Arthur must work actively (“take action”) towards the establishment of the Kingdom, but, being fallen, he cannot achieve it by himself. That is why “the heavenly rulers [. . .] are to direct the coming of the redeemer, i.e. Galahad (who is not exactly Christ, but rather man’s capacity for Christ)” (Ridler 175-176).

When Redemption is achieved, that is when Pelles is healed by Galahad, the fullness of his nature is restored by reunion with Arthur: in the historical time of the legend, this is the moment of Arthur’s death (Ridler 177). This

complex articulation of the three characters is worked out in *The Advent* (particularly in "Taliessin's Letter to a Princess of Byzantium" and "Nimue's Song of the Dolorous Stroke") and implicitly carried over into *Taliessin*. Unluckily, Williams did not realise that, with the earlier poems remaining unpublished, pointers to his symbolism were sadly missing for the reader.²⁴

Galahad is of course omnipresent in the *Commonplace Book*. Williams, following J. S. Green in *Irish Nationality*, thinks of having him born in Ireland, "the land of saints and mystics" (126). He is the meeting point of historical and eschatological time, the mystic of the Grail, "the manhood of our race without the Divinity as in Our Lord" (62). Several levels of interpretation can also be applied to him as romantic hero, as mystic, as "the final self in each man" and as "a type of Our Lady" (102). Rather than dwelling on the more obvious role of Galahad as a figure of Christ, Williams comes back more than once on this comparison with the Virgin Mary. Both are similar in their total love for God and the virginity which is a witness to it. It may be that Williams reached his definition of Galahad as "man's capacity for Christ" through his meditation on this parallel. But this, he insists, must not make Galahad a disincarnate character: he is a human being whose passion, quite as real as any other knight's, is purely and simply turned to God: "Galahad's passion for the Grail: otherwise he will fizzle out as a sort of 'unsexed' abstraction" (102).

There are a number of notes on the Quest itself and on the three knights who achieve the Grail. From Williams's own avowal, one of his main motivations was the conviction that it could not "be by accident that the three Lords of the Quest were distinguished as they were along the line of mortal love." ("Charles Williams on *Taliessin Through Logres*," Ridler 180) So he wonders: "? Would the three knights, the 3 stages, and the 3 volumes correspond (roughly) with the body, the mind, and the soul" (54). Later on he moves to a less abrupt differentiation: for instance, the symbolic hierarchy between the three knights is visualized in the episode of the Child beckoning them on towards the end of the Quest: "To Bors it seems almost one of his own children at home (now a boy, now a girl) as he has seen them playing. Percivale sees at [*sic*] it were the Child in a moving and flickering flame, whose voice is like a silver trumpet. Galahad sees the Christ-Child Himself, and rides faster than ever upon his track" (70).

Williams declares further that the three knights are not the only ones to achieve the Grail: Blanchfleur does, who comes dead to Sarras (in the later

poetry Williams has her carried in the same ship as the knights to enhance the similitude) and the achievement “takes place in Helayne’s heart also (or could)—she is not on a lower level than the knights and Blanchfleur” (121). This one detail brings out Williams’s preoccupation with heightening the part of women in the story.

Another fascinating character is Palomides. From the first Williams bestows upon him an importance much greater than what he is generally given as the lover of Iseult. His main function will be first to embody Islam. Then, after a slow and painful process, to pass beyond his theology to reach baptism and peace. This evolution is felt as inseparable from his love for Iseult, which reveals to him the sacramental value of human love: “The Christening of Palomides.—? he has followed love religiously without knowing that he was religious: at his christening he understands, and is greater even than Tristram. Cf. ‘baptism by desire’” (74).

Another note reads, “His career = the learning of humility” (119), which reminds the reader of Palomides’s self-mockery in “Palomides before his Christening”: “It was true I should look a fool before everyone; / why not look a fool before everyone?” (Dodds 73) and his final glorification of God at the time of death: “The Lord created all things by means of his Blessing” (83). But at the time of the *Commonplace Book* he has not yet achieved the stature he reaches in *The Advent*. Other developments take place in between, such as the interpretation of the Questing Beast (defined as possessive sexual love in the “Notes”) or the conception of Palomides as “an image and shadow of Galahad” (Ridler 177), a most surprising—and transitory—evolution.²⁵

As for Taliessin, surprisingly to the reader of the later poetry, he only appears here and there in the *Commonplace Book*. Williams considers making him the spokesman of a Gaelic idea of the State, a kind of federation based on a spiritual rather than material union (128). He sings at Arthur’s feasts (115). From Matthew Arnold’s *Celtic Literature* Williams picks up the meaning of Taliessin’s name, ‘bright forehead,’ and the bard’s pretention to reincarnations (154): the idea will be at the origin of a poem in *The Advent* (“Taliessin’s Song of the Myths”) before being taken up again much later in “The Calling of Taliessin.” But references to him remain scarce and there is no hint of the central position he is to occupy later. Looking back on his early gropings Williams remembered his very progressive realisation of the use to which

Taliessin could be put: "I certainly felt dimly the bringing of him in, but not for a good while" ("Taliessin" 1).

The Commonplace Book gives an idea of how Williams's interpretation of the Arthurian legend evolved and what priorities were being worked out. Up to a certain point only, for this process will continue between the last notes in the book and the first poems written, and, of course, beyond. Leaving aside the problems of form which are hardly approached at all, one can see that the main themes are clearly defined already. On the other hand Williams has not yet made his choice between the numerous characters and their roles in the story. Some grow in importance, then recede, and vice-versa; others appear and disappear, like Fabio, leaving no other trace in Williams's work apart from these notes. Others again, like the Princess of Byzantium, who is so important at the time of *The Advent of Galahad*, have still to be conceived (and later discarded in their turn). The swarming of tantalizing suggestions enriches our grasp of Williams's approach, but on the whole the impression remains of an overabundance of material which will have to be trimmed down and more clearly focalized on the central tenets of Williams's interpretation of the legend.

Notes

¹As he says of the Taliessin poems in a note to Humphrey Milford on 14 October 1935.

²A binder's dummy is a volume made to the exact requirements of the future book in binding, quality of paper, number of pages, etc., except that its leaves remain blank.

³Cf. *The Image of the City* (hereafter cited as Ridler), lviii. David Dodds mentions in his edition of the Arthurian poems—*Arthurian Poets: Charles Williams* (hereafter cited as Dodds; quotations of the poems are taken from this edition)—that 1920 is the year of publication of the most recent works mentioned (4).

⁴Cf. *The Rhetoric of Vision* 192-214. David Dodds is currently preparing an edition of the Commonplace Book. Linden Huddleston refers to the Commonplace Book in his unpublished M. A. thesis *The Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams* (London, 1952).

⁵Note to Humphrey Milford offering him the *Advent* poems for publication (entitled "King Arthur" and dated 28 February 1930). The same points are taken up again in lecture notes entitled "Taliessin," undated but posterior to *Taliessin Through Logres*. The unpublished papers of Williams are housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the Wade Center, Wheaton University, Wheaton, Illinois.

⁶Cf. Dodds 4. This, after all, would not have been surprising, for the vogue of plays with Arthurian subjects, begun in the late nineteenth century, was still in full swing in the twenties: Cf. Thomas Hardy's *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (1923), Laurence Binyon's

Arthur: A Tragedy (1923) and John Masefield's *Tristan and Isolt* (1927). And one must remember that Williams had already written a play, *The Chapel of the Thorn*, by 1912.

⁷Abercrombie was still thinking in terms of relatively long poems but during the first decades of the twentieth century poets tended on the whole to choose shorter lyrics or cycles of poems like Ernest Rhys's *Lays of the Round Table* in 1905 or John Masefield's *Midsummer Night* in 1928. Williams, of course, knew of those too. (Cf. N. J. Lacy, *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*).

⁸On the symbolism of colours in alchemy, see Dodds 60. There are also interesting remarks on colours in Roma King's *The Pattern in the Web*, *passim*.

⁹The reference is to E. Nesbit's *Amulet* and the Chesterton quotation which follows is from *A Miscellany of Men*.

¹⁰The heroines are Iseult of Ireland, Elaine, and Morgan le Fay for the *Tristram* volume; Iseult of the White Hands, Morgause of Orkney, and Nimue for the *Lancelot*; and Blanchefleur, Guinevere, and the Mother of God for the *Galahad*. Elsewhere Williams thought of singing the "praise of woman, as the equal comrade and lover of man" (84).

¹¹However, Taliessin is given fourteen of the forty-five songs, thus beginning to realise the unifying centrality he will have in *Taliessin Through Logres*.

¹²Percivale is only indirectly involved in the poems as they stand, yet as late as 1944 Williams was thinking of replacing Taliessin by "the loftier & more remote figure of Percivale." (Letter to Michal, 27 April 1943, repr. in Dodds 159)

¹³"The Chances and Changes of Myth," a review of *La Grant Ystoire de Monsignor Tristan Li Bret* in *Time and Tide*, XXIII, n°29, 18 July 1942, reprinted in Ridler 183.

¹⁴Williams started exploring the possibility of linking the love-potion to the Grail. He asks: "can the Cup which contains the potion be, or typify, the Grail. All depends on the attitude in which the recipient (Tristan = all young and fleshly—? therefore the Grail-Wine has the effect of a potion) is" (65); and again: "The potion = the Grail-Wine in Nature, distilled by Iseult's mother. The natural powers of earth" (79). This direction, however, was abandoned.

¹⁵Williams returns to this analysis in the "Taliessin" notes, and again in the April 1941 issue of *Poetry Review* ("Charles Williams on *Taliessin Through Logres*," reprinted in Ridler 179-183).

¹⁶"Notes on the Arthurian Myth," *Ridler* 178; *my emphasis*. Critics have recognized that Garlon is a figure of the same family as the Skeleton in *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*.

¹⁷Cf. Guinevere's vision of Lancelot as "a grotesque back, the opposite of a face / looking backward" (Dodds 67).

¹⁸In *The Advent* the significant moment becomes his birth. Cf. "The Music at the Birth of Galahad," an unpublished Advent poem.

¹⁹And by Taliessin as the leader of a social entity, the Company, to which he is the exponent of 'applied' doctrine.

²⁰Two pages of notes, beginning "The Sacred Grail..."

²¹"Merlin had been saved by Swinburne, in the new force with which in *Tristram of Lyonesse* he charged the Merlin-Nimue relationship, from the weakness of the older tales, and when the prophetic wizard of Malory was considered free from this, he took on all the qualities of Time" ("The Making of Taliessin," *Poetry Review*, April 1941, reprinted in Ridler 182).

²²The final episode between them also takes on a different meaning: “? Her enchantment of Merlin = his old age and death—Nature destroying her love, in ordinary process” (136). *The Advent* goes a step further with Merlin’s assimilation to Time. His final departure then becomes the logical consequence of Galahad’s arrival: “Time governed heretofore [. . .] thereafter must Time his end await” (Dodds 219).

²³In the “Notes” Nimue is “holy undefiled nature [. . .] she sends her two children and servants, Briseis and Merlin, the one to Carbonek to attend on Helayne the destined mother, the other to Logres to help establish the Kingdom, build Camelot, and bring Lancelot to Carbonek” (Ridler 176). The text in Ridler reads “servants,” but the Bodleian typescript reads “children and servants”; the first words must have dropped at the printing.

²⁴*Cf.* for instance, Merlin’s magical rites to prepare “the union / of King Pelles and King Arthur” in “The Calling of Taliessin” (Dodds 109).

²⁵In *The Advent*, the assimilation goes so far that Williams has Palomides sit in the Siege Perilous (Dodds 250). This extremely bold transformation, later abandoned, would be worth a detailed analysis. I do not quite agree with Roma King’s analysis in *The Pattern in the Web* (91). If Galahad is “recognized” in Palomides, it is because the latter has achieved the perfection of his own “human capacity for Christ” which Galahad embodies.

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