3-15-1980

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Additional Keywords
Taliesin; Thadara Ottobris; Annalee Peoples
...The Arthurian myths stretch over a period of about 1400 years and there is no indication of their cessation in this age. Of all the tellings and retellings of the Arthurian cycle, I am concerned particularly with the retellings of the twelfth-century English poet, author, and essayist, Charles Williams. Williams has written a series of poems dealing with various stories of the Arthurian myths but what is unique about his handling of the cycle is that it is relayed through and revolves around the character of Taliesin, the King's poet. Because Taliesin is an obscure figure in the Arthurian myths and because Williams is the first writer to invest such an obscure figure with the focus of his whole poetic cycle, the remainder of this study will fall into two general sections: the first having to do with the historicity of Taliesin, the ancient Celtic bard, seeking to find out his identity in order to discover Williams' motivations for highlighting him; and the second section will study Williams' work as it relates to the larger topic of living myth.

What is known about Taliesin is sketchy at best and sometimes is contradictory. Scholars and historians believe him to have lived sometime in the very late sixth century or very early seventh century. This date places him about 100 years later than the time of Arthur (basil Arthur's lifetime around 463-516 A.D.). Yet these dates are at best estimates and are not to be taken as conclusive. Other lesser sources suggest dates slightly different. What is more substantially known is that Taliesin served as court poet to Urien of Rheged, called by the Welsh Uryens of Gore (Gower), one of the greatest of the British chieftains of the North, in what was later the area called Northumberland. To Urien is attributed a vision of unity among the British tribes in an effort to be free of Saxon and Pict invasions and to restore a quasi Romano-British society. Urien was ambushed and assassinated before he could see his vision realized. So there is a parallel between the two British kings, Arthur and Urien, their visions for a strong British union and their downfall through treachery before their visions were fully actualized.

Taliesin wrote panegyrics commemorating Urien's many victories. He also wrote elegies and laments. When Urien was killed his son Owain ascended to the chieftain's position. Owain is Owain in Malory's La Morte d'Arthur, the good friend of Sir Galahad. Urien's son Morgan le Fay, supposedly Morgan le Fay, King Arthur's sister, but a certain Modron is sometimes also mentioned as Owain's mother.

Some time after the defeat of the British by the English in the North, Taliesin and the remainder of Owain's court made their way down into southern Wales (the Cymry). Taliesin served as the bard of the Court of Powys, a center of poetry, while Cymawr was King. A Northumbrian king attacked in the Battle of Chester.

Thus far most historians are in agreement about the historical Taliesin. After that there is a wide range of material, much of it purely legendary though some legends find more corroboration than others. In the Notes to the "Taliesin" of the Mabinogion (Everyman Edition) we learn that ancient manuscripts list Taliesin as the son of Henwg or St. Henwg, a missionary in the British Isles. One manuscript lists Taliesin as the descendent of Bran the Blessed, the Son of Llyr Lleidiath, one of the earliest of Celtic heroes. The same source goes on to report that Taliesin erected the church of Llanyhenwg at Caerleon upon Usk in honour of his father. Other sources suggest Taliesin's education took place at Llanwchtrain, in Glamorgan, in the school of Catig. The last item of probable credible information concerns his burial place which is traditionally named near Aberystwyth. He had one son, Afaon or Adon, a warrior bard.

At this point the historical documentation gives way to the legendary. The figure of Taliesin is found in many legends and tales, many of which do not support the claims made by another. Robert Graves in his White Goddess reminds us of the theory that Taliesin originally was a Celtic Apollo and he ties this theory in with an appearance of gods at Arthur's court in "Kilwch and Olwen" of the Mabinogion. In The Figure of Arthur Richard Barber says the older version of the "Spoils of Arthur" which is called "Freiddieu Annwn," a poem found in the Book of Taliesin, is the earliest link between Taliesin and Arthur. It records the exploits of Arthur going into the Celtic Otherworld in search of a cauldron held by the Irish. The cauldron is said to contain the ingredients of poets, and the poem may be a commentary on the poet.

From the old Iolo manuscripts several traditions of Taliesin's life are given. While much is probably legendary there are still enough similarities to make a somewhat cogent account. The first one, the Llyweddith Manuscript, translated by Anthony Powell, has Taliesin and Elfyn, the son of Urien Rheged, abducted by Irish pirates as the two youths were fishing in a skin coracle. Taking advantage of his captor's drunkenness one night, Taliesin managed to escape in his coracle using a shield as an oar. The violent waves took his shield away and he was left to drift until he became fixed on a pole of the weir of Gwyddno, a local lord. Discovered there by Gwyddno's fishermen, it was soon realized that Taliesin was the important bard of Urien and had been the tutor of Elfyn. Gwyddno too had a son named Elfyn and Taliesin was invited to take up the same position in this new court. Eventually the land was overcome by the sea and it is at this time in the legend that Arthur invited Taliesin to the court at Caerleon upon Usk. There, it is said, he was "highly celebrated for his poetic genius and useful, meritorious services." When Arthur died, Taliesin retired with Elfyn to an estate of Gwyddno. This particular manuscript claims to be the source for the most important legend of Taliesin, found in the Mabinogion.

Another of these old Iolo manuscripts details a little more of the same story with a few alterations. The important point here is that Elfyn is not really a son of Gwyddno but actually a lost son of Urien Rheged, King of Gower. At Caerleon upon Usk Taliesin's"feats, learning, and endowments were found to be so superior that he was created a golden-tongued Knight of the Round Table."

The Iolo manuscript by Llywelyn Siôn records Taliesin presiding in three chairs, one of which
was Caerleon upon Usk. Afterwards he was invited to the lands of Gwyddnyw. He was highly honoured until Maelgwn Gwynedd came and dispossessed him. Taliesin put the curse of the Wren upon Elen, a woman who looked upon it. Taliesin returned to the son of Urian and died in high honour. It is said, "Taliesin, Chief of the Bard, was the highest of the most exalted class, either in literature, wisdom, the science of vocal song, or any other attainment, whether sacred or profane."

In the manuscript called Triads of the Round Table in the Iolo group Taliesin as chair-president is designated Chief Bard of the West. The institution was also called the Chair of the Round Table and it was responsible for Gildas' retaining his prophetic reputation.

"The Tale of Taliesin" in the Mabinogion is the most significant of the legendary sources. It is a collection of prose and poetry compiled in the eighteenth century from two manuscripts, one of which interestingly belonged to a Mr. Taliesin Williams. However, the poems date back much earlier and it is thought they were merely collected in the first half of the fourteenth century, having been written long before, and a part of the oral tradition preceding that. Like so much of Celtic literature, the only sure thing about this portion of the Mabinogion is that it is a mysterious work which comes to us over a period of 1000 - 1300 years.

The Tale begins with Caridwen, a woman whose son promised to be a failure. To alleviate this bad state of affairs she resorted to the magical books of the Fferyllt. Caridwen went to a cauldron of Inspiration and Science for one year and one day until three 'blessed' drops of Inspiration were obtained. This cauldron has peculiar associations with the one Arthur quested after in the "Freiddu Annwn". Caridwen asked Gwion Bach, from Powys, to stir the cauldron and tend to it. By chance one day three drops flew out of it and landed on the finger of Gwion Bach. Because of their great heat he immediately put his finger in his mouth. Instantly he was given full prophetic vision and knowledge of things unknown. Out of fear of Caridwen's power he fled in the shape of a hare. Caridwen, angered because he had let the cauldron burst after he had been burned, gave pursuit to Gwion Bach in the shape of a grey hound. He became a fish in the water and then he became an otter-bitch. Gwion Bach turned himself into a bird in the sky and she became a pursuing hawk. In desperation Gwion Bach became a grain of wheat and Caridwen a black hen who scratched around until she found Gwion's grain and swallowed him. She then washed him with milk and upon birth, finding him so beautiful, she resisted killing him but instead cast him into the sea in a leathern bag "on the twenty-ninth day of April."

In his book The Thumb of Knowledge Robert Scott has an exhaustive study showing the interesting associations of the Irish hero Finn mac Cumaill the Cymric Taliesin, and the Norse Sigurd. What is common to all three is that if a proper cauldron or cauldron of Inspiration was placed on the fire or thumb under the 'knowledge tooth' (déft fis) and immediately receiving knowledge of the future or the unknown. Scott substantiates his claim of a single tradition among these three. He also looks at the use of the shape-shifting devices used by Gwion Bach to escape Caridwen. He says shape-shifting or 'transformation combat' is a very old device common to many folk tales and is usually prefixed to a rebirth incident. The escape of biomythus from the Titans is a shape-shifting example. Scott doubts that the transformation combat stories preceded the fourteenth-century Hanes Taliesin account or that the Hanes Taliesin Caridwen is the same figure of Caridwen (Carladwen) who is the goddess or personification of nature in Welsh myth.

From the incident of the leathern bag the Mabinogion account leaves off with Caridwen's story and picks up with Elphin, Gwydno, and Taliesin. The leathern bag was filled by Elphin's father's heir and when he opened it, seeing the boy's forehead, Elphin exclaimed, "Behold a Radiant Brow" which is the meaning of the name Taliesin. Elphin took him home with him. The remainder of the narrative tells how Elphin was imprisoned by Maelgwn for claiming to have the supernatural beauty and grace to Maelgwn's and a bard more wise and skilled than any of Maelgwn's. In a battle of the bards Taliesin vindicated his master's claim by out-'barding' the king's twenty-four bards and using his magic to Indeed make Elphin's wife superior to Maelgwn's. As punishment for his master's imprisonment Taliesin predicted a curse on the king in the form of a violent storm. His prophecies were all fulfilled. He was clearly established as Chief Bard.

For the purposes of this study however, especially in view of the Williams' retellings to be discussed later, the poems found in the "Tale of Taliesin" are probably more significant than the narrative. The first poem is a Consolation poem sung by Taliesin to his new master, Elphin. He assures the unfortunate Elphin that though he went out to seek a fortune in fish and found Taliesin instead, "in the day of trouble I shall be / Of more service to thee than three hundred salmon." He finishes this song saying:

Although reduced thus weak in my bag,
There lies a virtue in my tongue,
While I continue thy protector
Thou hast not much to fear;
Remembering the names of the Trinity,
None shall be able to harm thee.

Throughout this consolation poem there is a sense of recompense and reward if Elphin will have faith in the power of the poet.

When Taliesin was asked whether he was man or spirit he replied in a poem he began as an insignificant "comely person as is now a liberated man... great on the floor of the place to where I was led." Taliesin cited a transformation series which included fifteen different shapes—-from a frog to a chain, a stag's antler to a glowing iron, a squirrel to the pure white grain of wheat.

Taliesin left his listeners little room to question the nature of his source of inspiration. He took a definitive stance, claiming God as that source in the third poem:

I will supplicate my Lord that I get refuge in him,
A regard I may obtain in his grace;
The Son of Mary is my trust, great in him is my delight,
For in him is the world continually upheld,
God has been to instruct me and to raise my expectation.

One of the most interesting and enigmatic of all the poems is found appended to this study. It is from this poem that Williams took his title for the second series of his cycle, The Region of the Summer Stars. This poem seems to speak of the immortal, if not eternal, nature of the poet. The first and last four lines of the poem recount what we already know of Taliesin's origins from the legends. It is interesting to note his identity with Herodith, whom most believe to be the Kymric name for the prophet-magician Merlin of Arthur's court.

The extended middle section of the poem makes an association of the poet with the Holy Spirit, though not exclusively so. There is no doubt of the divine nature of the speaker as he claims to have been present in Heaven with his Lord before Lucifer was expelled. Further, the voice speaks of being present at the Nativity, and the Crucifixion...
of the Christ. Granting the voice to be that of the Holy Spirit, the whole Trinity is represented in the poem with these other allusions.

Attributed to the speaker is wisdom (he is “teacher to all intelligences” and can “instruct the whole universe”) and power (bearing Alexander's banner, strengthening Moses). Further allusions to the Holy Spirit may be found if we remember the crozier is the symbol of the shepherd, its genius being Christ, "the Good Shepherd"; and Christ 'winged' refers to the Trinity in the form of the Dove. The next line augments this with its allusions to speech; it was the Holy Spirit which gave the power of tongues to the new believers.

Of additional interest is the specific mention of Mary Magdalene for she was the one who celebrated the Incarnation of Christ with perfume. Williams' emphasis on the Incarnation gives Mary Magdalene an almost patron-saint status to his Taliesin. "Fostered in the land of the Deity" whose "origin is not known", this mystery is not sure whether his body is flesh or fish. The symbol of the fish was well known to the early Christians for it among other things indicated the physical reality of the resurrected Christ. It was also the symbol of the young church after the Epiphany of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Reference to the building of Rome readily conjures the name Virgil and his poetry which has been the inspiration of poets all along, including Williams. The muse of Caridwens's has already been identified with Inspiration and Prophecy. C. E. Lewis takes Williams' handling of this poem to be the 'birth of poetic genius' and 'the cosmic history of the Heavenly Muse' who has shared 'in the travail of the Redemption'.

Robert Graves makes a study of this poem in The White Goddess and draws very interesting conclusions from it. He treats it as a conundrum whose varied answers shed light on the secret religious meanings of an ancient (pre-creek?) Godelic alphabet. Graves makes the point that Gwion adopted the name Taliesin after he stumbled on the real mystical power and meaning behind all poetry. No wonder that Taliesin's genius is the one who cannot understand the intrinsic nature of their craft.

Such a cursory glance at this exceedingly rich poem admittedly does not account for all the allusions. I think a good case may be made that this poem depicts the Holy Spirit in its role as Inspiration, Power, and Wisdom. Hopefully such a glance fulfills its intentions in pointing out some of the more obvious connections between Taliesin's genius and the Holy Spirit. The arguments may not be flawless but neither may their validity be ignored.

The remaining poems in the "Tale of Taliesin" are part of the battle of the bards and some are the later prophecies of vengeance against Maeldwyn. One of note, entitled "The Spite of the Bards," is a rebuke against minstrels who cheapen the poetic profession; strongly berating them for their various vices and irreverences. It ends with these words:

I deride neither song nor minstrelsy
For they are given by God to lighten thought;
But him who abuses them,
For blaspheming Jesus and his service.

The hidden power of a poet which is not given proper reverence is considered blasphemy.

The other sources of Taliesin's poetry are the Black Book of Carmarthen which contains the ancient poem "Dialogue Between Myrddin and Taliesin"; The Book of Taliesin compiled in the middle thirteenth century and made up of poems generally considered authentically composed by Taliesin; and the Red Book of Hergest which has many of Taliesin's poems written while he was in Urien's service. That fourteenth-century manuscript is now in Jesus College, Oxford.

Although much has been written about the status and function of the Celtic bard it needs some mentioning here for a full perspective. One point commonly emphasized by many writers is that the earliest written Welsh (Cymric) literature is not nearly as old as the oral traditions and is consequently only partially representative of all that actually existed. Celtic poetry, especially that of the Cymry, was meant to be heard, usually sung by a singer. It is an oral tradition and the earliest written literature was not recorded until perhaps the tenth century with the Black Book of Carmarthen being the earliest extant manuscript entirely in Welsh. Rachel Bromwich points out in The Celtic Literatures that the verse dialogue and prose reflective monologue is the most primitive of heroic narrative in Indo-European prose compiled in the middle European pre-Christian age. John Morris in The Age of Arthur makes the claim that the earliest Welsh poems are the earliest literature of a living European language excepting Greek. How then do we know of the poems of the very earliest poets in the fifth and sixth centuries?
Hengedrdd is given attention in J. Morris Jones's major essay "Taliesin." Hengedrdd was the stock of ancient poetry in any bard's repertoire. It was the major part of the bard's training to memorize the work of the ancients. An old Triad posits this: "three things that cause a minstrel to be abundant (i.e. well-equipped): love of stories, and [the art of] poetry, and ancient verse." Clearly then this job was for a man of select capabilities. Jones adds that Bardism was one of three professions for which no serf could be trained without his lord's permission, the other two being smithcraft and scholarship.

Because of its oral/aural nature, Welsh (Cymric) poetry is characterized by its use of repetition, recurrences, and echoing devices which help the listener to keep his mind focussed. There was no chance of backing up and rereading lines as we do. Also highly characteristic of the earliest Welsh (Cymric) poetry is its lack of narrative, giving instead impressions of the event, often of a reflective quality, assuming the listener to be contemporary with the event and knowing already the details. There is no single focus or fulcrum as in the Classical tradition but a fluidity and multi-centered balance. Similar to the later Anglo-Saxon literature there seems to be a tight tension between a heavy fatalism and buoyant celebration.

But of the bards themselves. In the hierarchy of the Celtic learned men there were the Druids, the Bards, and the Vates. The Vates were visionaries or seers and are closely associated with the Irish Filid (sing. Fill— one who sees). On the other end of the scale were the Druids. They served the function of keeping the society together and in order. They were the educators, the magistrates, the priests, passing on and preserving their heritage orally.

In the Cymry, the clear distinctions between the three classes were not as evident. The bard or bard was usually connected with a court and had a patron. Their main work was usually singing panegyrics to their patron or leader—hence the name praise poets. Nora Chadwick lists the keeping of genealogies as part of their duties as well as acting as a sort of 'press agent' and legal secretary to their superior. Some bards may have been multilingual and others local historians.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Cynfeirdd (earliest Cymric poets) is the prophetic and occult power believed to be invested in them. Charles Williams says the word occult devoid of moral overtones means to "deal with hidden things, and their investigation." There is always some connection to the supernatural, having mystical power, delving into magical secrets, and being a maker or a creator. The Welsh word Awen, which means poetic inspiration, is said to relate semantically to the Welsh word Awel, which means wind. Perhaps the crux of these connections between the poet and the mystical lies here because 'wind' is semantically related to 'spirit' in Hebrew and Greek. The word is the same for breath or life, that which animates the body. Might not this spirit/wind/poet connection be what the poet was getting at in the poem in the Mabinogion? The Greek word for poet is translated 'maker' and is related to the Greek word for create or make in reference to God's creative acts in certain passages of the Septuagint and the New Testament. I state most emphatically that no conclusive proofs are meant to be drawn and that my knowledge of Greek and etymology is minimal. These ideas are included however more for the suggestive nature of their association, forming a sort of cluster which is seemingly open to more research and imaginative interpretation. Suffice it to say that the bards were closely in touch with supernatural and occultic power in superstition and tradition if not in actual fact.

What has been said heretofore then may be viewed as the necessary backdrop and preparation for an understanding of Williams' retellings. The main body of Williams' Arthurian work is found in his two poem cycles, Taliesin through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, and his prose history of the myth cycle, The Arthurian Jerus. But the real work, i.e. his ideas, is not limited only to one genre but is found in all his writings—criticism, novels, essays, etc. The Arthurian poems are one outcropping, as it were, of the same rock which is the foundation of all the other terrain. Williams himself said, "The poems 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."
The poem "The Calling of Taliesin" serves as an introduction to the story but, more importantly, to the major themes which run through most all the poems. Williams draws on both the historical and legendary traditions in naming Taliesin's origins, including the shapeshifting device of the earlier sources. As a young boy Taliesin 'practised verse' having seen 'the cauldron of poetry and plenty.' He refined his skill, working towards an understanding of the natural world, trying to interpret the talk of the birds and animals. Yet his verse was lacking because he himself was unredeemed: he had not yet been to Byzantium and received the vision.

Interesting as his poetical training and heritage is, there comes to the young Taliesin a tale of even more intrigue and mystery. It is the tale of an Empire founded on the blood-death sacrifice of an Origin for Its derivatives. Having heard of this wonderful tale Taliesin determined to go to the City of the Empire and learn about it what he could. Thus he sets out for Byzantium, Williams' City of God, the place of splendor and order.

As C. S. Lewis has explained in The Jorso, the city of Williams meant the highest expression of order and civility, of hierarchy and discipline. These terms are used in their most positive sense and combine to celebrate a place of great beauty and freedom, the antithesis to which is Hell with its markess and dull imprecision. And the City means more. Two essays by Williams entitled "The Image of the City in English Verse" and "The Redeemed City" elaborate his meaning of the City and its use in his work. The City is different from the state in that the former connotes a sense of choice whereas the latter usually does not. The City is a place of many relationships between and within the two sexes which are woven into a unity. This unity operates on courtesy which in turn rises from humility. Crimes against the City would consist of discourtesy caused by a loss of humility.

The City exists to give glory to God. In doing this it affirms the freedom of the flesh of all its citizens. The work of Christ was carried out in the body and the Holy Spirit continues that work in the bodies that make up the body. The City nourishes the Body by nourishing all bodies.

The City is called Union and the process of union is free willing exchange. Exchange is a very important word in the Williams vocabulary, loaded with great significance. It will be dealt with more fully later but let it suffice to say that exchange means the living of one life in another's life and bearing the other's burdens in a sense more than figurative. So the City comes to mean vicarious living and becomes the symbol for lives lived for others and lives lived from others. Independence is not the case here, but gives the coinherence of the City which makes it the place of unity, order, and beauty it is.

Such is Byzantium, the destination of the young Taliesin. On his journey he passes through a narrow way between the Forest of Broceliande and the as yet unfomed site of Logres. Lewis says the Forest of Broceliande is the outer reaches of our existence. Others may call it the unconscious or the onscious. The Forest is a place of mysterious power. John T. McNeill says in Celtic Church that the Forest was in upland North Brittany. Sparsely populated, the Forest had in its center an abbey, and a fountain known for its healing qualities found by St. Mahan, a Welshman. In The Development of Arthurian Romance Roger Sherman Loomis remarks that even into the nineteenth century, peasants still took water from the fount and poured it on an enchanted stone to induce rainfall. And around this fountain generous fairies are said to show kindness to children in Brittany that Merlin was overcome by the wiles of Vivien in Tennyson's Idylls of the King. So whatever else it was or is, Broceliande is a place of a universal spirit. Williams says in the Jorso that it is a place of making, the home of the personification of Nature. Out of this place emerges the matter which encases the form of Byzantium. But not always. The danger of this Forest lies in the fact that the matter which emerges may lead to Byzantium or it may lead to Hell as well. The one who enters may go either way.

Taliesin does not fall into the holds of the Forest. Instead he meets the children of Nimue (Natur). Merlin assigns him, who are we to build, as is willed, Logres, and in Logres a throne / like that other of Carbonek. Their mission is further defined thus,

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

It is this joining of the Hallows to Logres which is the distinctive essence of the Williams' tellings. For Williams the Forest is Forro, the outer circle of the world. These terms are used in their most positive sense and combine to celebrate a place of great beauty and freedom, the antithesis to which is Hell with its markess and dull imprecision. And the City means more. Two essays by Williams entitled "The Image of the City in English Verse" and "The Redeemed City" elaborate his meaning of the City and its use in his work. The City is different from the state in that the former connotes a sense of choice whereas the latter usually does not. The City is a place of many relationships between and within the two sexes which are woven into a unity. This unity operates on courtesy which in turn rises from humility. Crimes against the City would consist of discourtesy caused by a loss of humility.

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It is also important to note that Merlin was commanded by the Emperor to begin this marriage of the two; it was not initiated by any one of the court. Williams says of this:

It was our Lord who had first acted and who continued the act...The whole Act is Christ's and is imparted to those who are also His. (Arthurian Torsa)

If all else were taken away but this, Williams would remain infinitely important for what he has done with the Myth. This is the core of the whole cycle, the bringing of the Halloys to Logres.

Taliessin watched Merlin set about the establishment of Logres but "The weight of poetry could not then sink / into the full depth of the weight of glory." Of course it could not. Taliessin had yet to go to Byzantium and be filled. But he does in due time. He has his beatific vision and in "Taliessin's Return to Logres" we learn he comes back to Logres "under a roaring wind." He, like Gwion Bach before him, has been transformed into the Poet of the King. He is now a maker, one open to the new creation of the Holy Spirit in the power of the word. His mission will be to "buy souls in many markets" and to establish a household which shall follow Galahad, the son of Helayne, to the place of the Halloys.

We have already discussed something of what exchange means. The poems "Bors to Elayne: On the King's Coins" and "The Founding of the Company" are the best examples of exchange as it is worked out in daily life. The first of these is both a celebration of exchange and a lamentation for its demise. Bors praises Elayne for the work of her hands which makes the bread which feeds the men who cultivate the wheat which goes back to the bread-making. Bors says, "I have come now to kiss each magnanimous thumb, / muscles of the brain, functions of the City." The Archbishop explains exchange this way:

...the everlasting house the soul discovers is always another's; we must lose our own ends; we must always live in the habitation of our lovers, my friend's shelter for me, mine for him...dying each other's life, living each other's death.

The life of exchange necessitates the recognition of other people and it further necessitates the recognition of the interdependence of all people. There is no 'choosing' by whom we may be nourished or whose burdens may be borne. That leads to exclusion. The point of exchange is that it is inclusive of all because all are derived from all. It is the essential relation among people. It is demonstrated in the mutual bearing of burdens. Christ took on the burden of condemnation for the world. He substituted His self for our self. He made the deepest kind of exchange, that of Pardon. Pardon is the choice of inclusion over exclusion. While it may never by its nature be taken for granted, it always a part of exchange and when given is hardly conscious of the transaction, so freely is it given. Because of this precedent the Church demands of its members the same exchange. It is made possible according to the power of the Holy Spirit who mediates between members of the body. Through this mediation, any person may lift any burden off another, asking in faith the Holy Spirit to put on the one asking the load s/he wishes taken off the other person. The only way to relieve someone's burden is actually to lift it for the other person. This constant but shifting exchange or burden-bearing results in the humility of the 'republican hierarchy.' That is to say, everyone serves and is in turn served; some are at the top only to move down to a position of service to others now at the top. The Body is unified in service and humility. Exchange keeps the Body alive.

The lamentation in "Bors to Elayne: On the King's Coins" has to do with the introduction of money, coins, to take the place of personal exchange among people. Money becomes (potentially at least) the end in itself and the focus is moved from service to expeditious practicality. The real danger of the coins is the increased chance of autonomy and independence among the Body which spells its certain death.

By the time of "The Founding of the Company" the Kingdom of Arthur is far along the process of dis-integration. So much so in fact that the arrival of the Halloys in Logres is indeed doubtful. Yet all is not completely lost. Among the household and associates of Taliessin a company has sprung up, made up of people whose...cult was the Trinity and the Flesh-taking, and its rule as the making of man in the doctrine of largesse, and its vow as the telling, the singular and mutual confession of the indwelling, the mansion and session of each in each. Their modes of exchange range from the usual everyday business exchange which is...the measurement and notion of process—the seed of all civil polity...sweetly feed or freed by the willing proffer of itself to another; through the substitution of souls exchanging...the proper self and wherever need was drew breath daily in another's place, according to the grace of the Spirit; to the final state of exchange...where the full salvation of all souls is seen, and their coinhering as the Mother bore the Son and the Son bore the Mother, or as the Trinity engages in a three-way sharing of itself. Within the Company perfect republicanism-hierarchy was established, each served and was served, and there was order, beauty, and good joy.

Williams celebrates the Body of Christ as the
Body of the Church and as the actual incarnation of Jesus, the Man of Flesh. In the "Prelude to The Region of the Summer Star" the Apostle Paul preaches to the men of Athens and Rome the "twofold Nature of the golden ambiguity." Paul "defined in speech the physiological glory / and began to teach the terms of the work of glory." That the Son of God took on a physical body - "an ancient intellect" could not comprehend. Finding...

...the completeness of belief costly, and flesh too scanty to bear the main of spirit... they feared the indiscretions of matter.

Yet the Incarnation is 'the sustenance of the Empire.' The Empire in the poem cycle is laid out as a human body whose various member organs are placed in different sections of Europe and Palestine. In "The Way of Akania" Akania says that the Church is definitely related to the world because it is very definitely made up of physical people. Both the soul and the flesh are capable of redemption. The moral virtues of the universe were in the incarnated body of Christ. His was the Archtypal body. In the Eucharist the Archtype is received into the types, both soul and body joined. Williams concludes his essay "The Index of the Body" saying,

For if the body of our neighbour is compact of these heavenly qualities, incarnated influences, then we are indeed neglecting the actual Kingdom of God in neglecting it. It is the living type of the Archtypal.

This is a part of the message of the HalloWS which was to come to Logres.

While at Byzantium Taliessin sees "The Vision of the Empire" as it forms the image of the body. The poem begins "The organic body sang together," and this sums up what Byzantium means. It is the body, an organic entity celebrating the acts which "issue from the throne." The poem closes with a magnificent hymn of praise exhorting all members of the body to give praise and blessing to the Creator, the Body Incarnate.

Exchange and incarnation are certainly major themes in all of Williams' works. But the poem cycles continue the story. Logres enjoys a short golden age of splendor and order but mainly because of selfishness it soon begins dis-integrating. Arthur seeks the Hallows for his own glory, Culenverse and Lancelot break themselves off from the rest of the body, betraying the trust and interdependence. Arthur and Morgause commit incest which is a further act of incoherence rather than being the act of coherence the allegory meant to be. The offspring of that union, Noldred, has private aspirations of succession to the throne for reasons of self-glory. Merlin has departed and Taliessin's little band must be the only remnant of the Empire extant in Logres. But in the midst of this bleak picture the son of Lancelot and Helayne is born. He is Galahad, the High Prince, who is the only knight worthy to sit in the "Perilous Seat, the Sis of union." Precisely at the moment of the High Prince's birth, the Emperor gives the order for the army to embark and disembark in Asia; "the City on the March to Renew the Allegiance of Causasia." This allegiance had been perverted by the Manichean and the Islamic doctrine of separation of the body from its soul; of the immaterial nature of Christ separated from his incarnated body. The birth of Galahad begins the process of reunion bringing the body together to its pre-fallen state of co-inherence and interdependence.

The vessel which caught "the blood of the golden single-personed Ambiguity" is described as both 'priest and victim.' Galahad is likewise a figure of paradox. He is not Christ per se but a sort of operative Christ exalted in the"Exchangelike" Christ's inoperative God. "The Son of Lancelot" describes Galahad as the "truth and taunt inward and outward" because he is both the figure of mercy and of judgment if that mercy is refused. The "Coming of Galahad" describes the High Prince as the fitting of the stone to the shell. This, says Lewis, is the same as joining Byzantium and Broceliande, or the feeling and the intellect, or Nimue (Nature) and the Third Heaven. Galahad is what Logres should have become but which in fact only a new Old--Taliessin in his company. So Galahad stands both as truth and taunt depending on one's relation to the body.

Galahad has a special association with the Third Heaven. His baby wall is a song there. He is raised by Blanchefleur who ends her life in the supreme act of exchange. Galahad sleeps in King Arthur's bed, a picture of the New Man taking the place of the old. The three Knights of the HalloWS, Galahad, Percevale, and Bors, sail on to the land of the Grail led by "an infinite flight of doves" lifting the boat to a "new-ghosted power." The three knights spend their voyage in prayer, acts of substitution.

"The three ways of exchange, the City spied, is no metry." And finally the High Prince is elevated to his rightful position while "the necessity of being was communicated to the Son of Lancelot."

Although Logres is a failure and turns into Britain, its mission remaining unfulfilled, and the Company has no longer a group identity (it does continue in individuals still committed to the Way of Exchange), Williams ends his cycle with a picture of the final reconciliation perhaps taking place in the land of Sarra, the resting place of the HalloWS. All the themes of Byzantium, exchange, the unity of the Body, the republican-hierarchy, are amply demonstrated among the members who exult the Unity, the glories intertwined. Taliessin exclaims of this fabulous occasion,

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;

joy to new joy piercing from paths foregone;
that which had been Taliessin made joy to a

Joy unknown;
manifest Joy speeding in a Joy unmanifest.

In his Preface to Reason and Beauty Charles Williams said of poetry,

It is not a spiritual guide, yet it possesses a reality which continually persuades us to repose upon it in even the practical things of every day. We have only to enjoy it, but only in proportion as we enjoy it with our whole being can it be said of us that no man shall take its joy from us.

It is not enough for Romance and Myth to speak of or about the need of realizing our existence; they must somehow embody that realization within their form. Of maturing poetry Williams says,

It desires something more actual to existence as we know it. But the Grail contained the very Act which was related to all that existence.

Regardless at this point of the success or obscurity of Williams' poetic technique, I believe his poetry is the embodiment of living myth. For his poems speak of the one myth which is capable of continually fitting the continuing need for realizing our existence to the fullest extent. The meaning behind and in the HalloWS is constantly made anew in every act of exchange and substitution. It is done so because of the living Holy Spirit who is continually incarnated in these acts and is itself the living continuation of the Christ's Act of exchange.
Living myth is more than a possibility. It is the highest reality we may know or need to know. Myth will always exist as long as man's existence is a contingent one and the myth will always remain alive as long as the Holy Spirit continues the incarnation of the Act.

This article is derived from a longer essay entitled "Toward Living Myth," submitted several years ago. We were unable to contact Mr. Bowdy to gain his consent for shortening and retitling it.

APPENDIX

Primary chief bard am I to Elphin,
And my original country is the region of the summer stars;
Idno and Heinn called me Merddin,
At length every king will call me Taliesin.

I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,
On the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell
I have borne a banner before Alexander;
I know the names of the stars from north to south;
I have been on the galaxy at the throne of the Distributor;
I was in Canaan when Absalom was slain;
I conveyed the Divine Spirit to the level of the vale of Hebron;
I was in the court of Don before the birth of Gwion;
I was instructor to Eli and Enoc;
I have been winged by the genius of the splendid crozier;
I have been loquacious prior to being gifted with speech;
I was at the place of the crucifixion of the merciful Son of God;
I have been three periods in the prison of Arational;
I have been chief director of the work of the tower of Nimrod;
I am a wonder whose origin is not known.
I have been in Asia with Noah in the ark,
I have seen the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra;
I have been in India when Roma was built,
I am now come here to the remnant of Trolta.

I have been with my Lord in the manger of the ass;
I strengthened Moses through the water of Jordan;
I have been in the firmament with Mary Magdalene;
I have obtained the muse from the cauldron of Carilwen;
I have been bard of the harp to Leon of Lochlin;
I have been on the White Hill, in the court of Cynvelyn,
For a day and a year in stocks and fetters,
I have suffered hunger for the Son of the Virgin,
I have been fostered in the land of the Deity,
I have been teacher to all intelligences,
I am able to instruct the whole universe,
I shall be until the day of doom on the face of the earth;
And it is not known whether my body is flesh or fish.

Then I was for nine months
In the womb of the hag Carilwen;
I was originally little Gwion,
And at length I am Taliesin.

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