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A Reading of Williams' Arthurian Cycle

Abstract
Detailed analysis of the symbolism and character of Williams's Arthurian poems, which are “about the unities and disunities in human history that flow around the themes of order versus disorder and identity versus false identity or lack of identity.”

Additional Keywords
Williams, Charles. Arthuriad—Symbolism; Michael Kucharski
A Reading of Williams' Arthurian Cycle

by Stephen A. Gottlieb

Charles Williams' Arthurian Cycle is structurally complete despite its missing sections and some not fully orchestrated parts. It has unity, coherence, clarity. Above all, it has unified texture. Its imagery forms a matrix of palpable symbols in accord with the struggle feelings of characters in motion, lives in transformation.1

The cycle is about the unities and disunities in human history which flow around the themes of order versus disorder and identity versus false identity or lack of identity. Williams most often examined these issues by means of the doctrines of exchange, substitution, and largesse, "manifestations of what Williams called the "co-inherence" of all things," the interconnectedness of everything that exists. Although the symbolic structure of the cycle is religious, even sacramental, its emphasis on daily life represents a shift away from the more total stress on the mystical of his early novels, though to deny the presence of the mystical is to distort the cycle's intent and structure. Yet the cycle presents daily life in mythopoetic symbols that focus as much on human history as on sacred. The work fashions a myth which crystallizes human complexity by analogizing it to sacred history, Christographic history being the central filament of Williams' universe.3

"The Coming of Galahad" is, as Lewis suggested in his commentary, one of the more obscure poems of the cycle. But if not all its symbols are clear, their collocation is meaningful. Galahad is symbolically counterposed to Mordred. Each was sexually conceived in a mystic manner of substitution as a result of the Dolorous Blow of Balin and its consequences. The Blow, an historical variation of the Fall, continues the seeming dualities that proceed from evil or ignorant acts. The Blow itself was based on confusion, as was the double murder of Balin and Balan. Galahad's self-completeness exists on the "good" side of Williams' spectrum, Mordred's materialism and selfishness on the "evil." Note too that these are among the very few characters who relate to no women in the cycle. Their similarities are such that one is invited to seem them as antitypes, the one rooted in Sarras and Carbomek, the other in P'o-U'lu and Camelot. In the figure of Galahad, we have a delineation of unity and self-identity.

In "The Coming of Galahad," Taliesin's reflections have been sparked by a girl's questions. He is attempting to perceive the unity of all things as figured in the symbols of the stone, the shell and the pentagram:

..."Five cells the world gave me, five shots of multistone, but when I searched for the paths that joined the signs, lines of the pentagram's frame, the houses fled instead to undimensioned points...." (p. 90)

As this and other passages suggest, unity is multidimen-

1 This reading of the cycle accepts, and hopefully helps to confirm, the intelligence of Lewis' ordering of the sequence of poems in "Williams and The Arthuriad." My approach blurs the distinction between the separate sections, Taliesin Through Logres and The Region of the Summer Stars, clearly a controversial point. For another view, see Anne Ridler in Charles Williams, "The Image of the City" and Other Essays, selected by Anne Ridler (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), pp. lixiv-lixv, 169-75. All references to Taliesin and Region as well as to Williams' "The Figure of Arthur" and C. S. Lewis' "Williams and The Arthuriad" are to the non-woven edition Taliesin Through Logres: The Region of the Summer Stars; and Arthurian Torso, introd. Mary McDermott Shideler (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Bercmans, 1974). This edition reprints the Oxford University Press original editions.


3 See Moorman, pp. 97-101.

4 See Lewis' description of the levels of meaning of the stone-shell relationship in "Williams and the Arthuriad," p. 352.

sional. It has visual and geometric coherence and simplicity, like the pentagram; moreover, unity has what I would call a reverberative or resonant quality, as suggested by the "Five shells of multiple sound." The multiplicity bespeaks a quality of perception in Taliesin which sees all levels of an idea or image. Hence, the stone-shell relationship of understanding and feeling" repeats itself in the symbolism of the five Houses, as well as in the four Zones that circle Saturn. Taliesin feels these reverberations, although Galahad plays his own vision of this unity in his very being to a degree more intense, therefore holier, more luminous, than Taliesin. Hence his eyes are "Emeralds of fire" and "points of the Throne's foot that sank through Logres" (p. 92). That is, Galahad's vision and being revolved about the axis of the Acts of Identity, which in turn are symbolized by the Throne of Byzantium.

To rephrase, the world's structure repeats itself at various times, or at the same time in various places. Williams refers to this effect as things happening "in simultaneity":

Time's president and precedent, grace ungrieved, floating through gold-leaved lime or banked behind beech to opaque green, through each membraned and tissue-dimmed frame smites in simultaneity to times variously veined. (p. 94)

Galahad, as child of the world (Lancelot) and foster child of time (Merlin), will comprehend and enact this unity. The phrase, "Time's president and precedent," suggests threads of continuity and leadership that survive through history as well as synchronically. Key structural events—those that are grace—have presence, precedence, a presiding quality that reverberates throughout time. Williams stresses in bestowing a special delicacy and subtlety on the resonant structure of reality. All this bespeaks Williams' belief in objective values and the union of human and cosmological structures. Hence the spiritual identity of Merlin and the two Tomahs in stanza five of "The Departure of Merlin." Likewise Nimue, the geographic goddess, existing on the natural end of the spectrum, "brings all natural becoming to her shape of immortal being" (p. 95).

Whereas structure is one thing, however, the perception of structure, call it consciousness, is quite another. Note, for instance, Palomides' distinction between mere "paths" and "stations," as of the Cross ("The Death of Palomides," p. 97). Palomides grasps some of the issues but never rises to full consciousness of symbolic connections. Whereas Taliesin "...searched for the paths that joined the signs, lines of the pentagram's frame.." (p. 90), Palomides sees merely "about me a scintillation of points" (p. 97). When he sees a symbol, it is an "unbelived symbol." He could not link such symbolic images as Galahad's phosphorescent water with the "dropping light" of Blanchefleur, each a type of sanctity parallel to Christ and Beatrice/Nimue respectively. The cycle's "reality," and from his various essays and notes Williams' reality, is its matrix of paths that are stations, symbols that are repeated acts verging closer and closer to the Acts of Identity. One's self identity proceeds from a perception of the symbolic form of human action.

Palomides is a rich and intense figure, who, because of his lack of consciousness, lacks the texture of ambiguity and absurdity woven around Galahad and native to Taliesin's actions. Whereas Palomides tries to arrive at a uniform field of vision, so to speak, of the universe in stiff formula and blessings ("The Death or Palomides"), Galahad's "joy remembered joylessness" ("Percivale at Carbomek," p. 99) is
by contrast a joy aware of a tension of opposites—not a manicheanism, but a sense of "subdued glory" and "double misery," a sense, in short, of human destiny and the ambiguous complexity of symbols. Hence in "Percivale at Carbonen," Galahad observes that "In the rent saffron sun hovered the Grail" (p. 99). The verb "rent" suggests the cleavages and divisions throughout the cycle: between Lancelot and Galahad, between Taliesin and fleshly marriage, and the various "falls" dealt with in the cycle. The hovering of the Grail suggests its evanesence, and, behind this, historical transience and the general difficulty of cosmological vision, vision beyond the ordinary paths of life.

In other words, the poetic texture recalls Galahad's implication in creation and destruction as, in Moorman's words, "a synthesis of all the contending forces within the kingdom." Moreover, Galahad is conscious of this "excellent absurdity" of the universe, the "twy-nature" of all actions but especially of sacred quests. This is why he asks forgiveness of Lancelot for his own sacred role.

It also is significant that Galahad "stood in the arch of Carbonen" ("Percivale at Carbonen," p. 99), such as to suggest a rite of passage, but also his temporary distancing from fuller participation in the Grail. Taliesin too is a creature existing between levels of being and often hovering between perception and action. It is said in "The Coming of Galahad" that Taliesin "took the canals of the place" (p. 87); he does not participate in Galahad's processional to Arthur's bed, where in sleeping Galahad will enact the rite of love in the absence of a lover yet preceding the Grail, symbol of highest love.

Galahad also "kneel silent among the circles of the wolf," symbolizing Lancelot's presence, even as "The Host in the Lateran lay in a hiz sepulchre" (Percivale at Carbonen," p. 100), the sepulchre of human history and symbol of latent salvation. Galahad's action, like Christ's actions, proceeds outward from within a circle of human restrictions. Galahad feels tied to these restrictions even though he perfects the heavenly yearning of human history. This poem is completed with Galahad following Bors' footprints "into the sun" (p. 101) as though the achiever of the vision of the Grail nonetheless is tied to human rites and patterns. Williams here and throughout the cycle accepts the irresolvable contradictions that provide the hard, objective conditions of life. Human failure is not dualistically separate from success and opposite to it. Life is a unified whole and entirely blessed.

If Taliesin exists in a somewhat nebulous space, he is at least conscious of his position. Palomides—who understands that formlessness breeds failure, and that "to be someone," to have identity, he might

...trap the questing beast
that slid into Logres out of Broceliande
through the blank between the queen's meaning
and the queen ("Palomides Before His Christening," p. 82)

—remains by his own estimate "Dull, undimensioned" (p. 86). Herein he is akin to Dinadan, who is "the only lord without a lady" and exists outside the traps, "the honour and the irony of the court of culture" (p. 86). Dinadan "fights and is not enclosed in fight." Palomides seeks a breakthrough to freedom but cannot find the appropriate form. When he commits himself to conversion, he yet never gains the consciousness that to accept the forms and rites of Christianity is hardly to negate the need to participate in the fullness and complications of all one's ties. He is too much the Euclidean. Galahad knows that to achieve perfection necessitates a fuller, better quality involvement in the nittyness which is not susceptible to perfection.

Palomides' life represents, in short, a tragic misalliance. His 'grail' is "the questing beast, where it scratched itself in the blank between/ the queen's substance and the queen" ("The Coming of Palomides," p. 55). The beast is the void that represents lack of achieved or perceived unification of self with world destiny, of flesh with spirit. The beast—which according to R. J. Reilly represents "sexual jealousy," a false way of seeing the world, a truncation of the Affirmative Way of love—exists in the same horizon land as Lancelot, and moves in a perpetual and chaotic quest for what does not exist as pattern or order.

On this score, it is crucial to note, as Reilly did, "that the love experience is not merely "a personal possession of the lovers." It is a mode of being in an interconnected universe and, as with all viable modes of being, must be directed towards the wholeness of existence—not merely towards the lover and the self. Williams rejects erotic experience only to the extent that one treats it as self-sufficient and self-glorifying. Relaxation in the self-sufficiency or in the perfection of any historical moment, or in an image (Virgil's luaestra, or self-surrender) bespeaks a lack of perspective. This narrowness of vision, as Shidelers noted, is well illustrated in Palomides' failure to relate the image of Isiwit to greater patterns. For Shidelers, the quest of the beast represents "the breaking of relationships.""

The counteretypes to such frustrations as those of Pala-

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7 Reilly, p. 174.
mides are all the gregarious and intertwined human relations that conjoin lives into a comprehensible entity, as is true of the figure of Dindrake in "The Sister of Percival," where, in reference to her Presence, which suggests "the grace of the Back in the Mount," patterns are brought to completion:

 horizon had no lack of horizon; the circle closed (p. 70)
 Blessed was the eye axis of both horizons... (p. 71)

The second line actually identifies vision with perception. Blanchecluer (Dindrake) also records the infinite in the individual:

Proportion of circle to diameter, and the near asymptote Blanchecluer's smile; there in the throat her greeting sprang, and sang in one note the infinite deci-

mal. (p. 71)

Palomides' world is one of unreality akin to the world of the "cleft" in Morgause's eyes, where identity is confounded and lost: "Balin had Balan's face, and Morgause her brother's." (p. 58) "Hers is a world of cleavages in which Arthur and the world of our primary Lograni reality participate: "Arthur tossed loves with a woman and split his fate." (p. 58) "Voils, clefts, blindness, darkness and inscrutability, amorphous shapes predominate the imagery throughout "Lamorack and the Queen Morgause of Orkney," a woven matrix of imagery in counterpoint to the rose-colored, ascending, growthful symbols surrounding Galahad and always a part of Dindrake's presence or Merlin's vision.

Merlin is a figure encomised in images of geometrical order generally having to do with the dimension of time. In "The Vision of Empire," he is "time's metre" and "climbs through prisms and lines" (p. 26). He is the master of "the five times cross-incised rod" ("The Calling of Taliesin," p. 132). Under his attention, "the elemental became the magical continuous power." (p. 26) Unlike Taliesin's, his works "grow mature with pure fact." But like Tolkien's Gandalf, he is not merely an abstract figure. He participates in the installation of Arthur and in Galahad's rescue among the Almsbury nuns, and he plays a central role in the lycanthropic progression of Lancelot, where his geometric perfection materializes in action at a climactic point in the cycle.

Merlin's appearance at this point is appropriate, perhaps brilliant. As Lewis noted, the wolf symbol is a counterpoint symbol to the sword and an agent of fertility. Merlin, Lewis noted further, represents the "onward pressure" of destiny ("Williams and the Arthuriad," p. 344). His passage is clear and straight, his action universal: "The driving shoulder of Merlin struck him in mid-air/and full the force of his arms flung him" (p. 79). In contrast with the clarity and simplicity of Merlin's geometry, Lancelot is "lined in the lupine shape,/dimly, half-man, half-beast." (p. 79) Lancelot is humanity at the dim horizon between worlds, trapped there in a contradiction between the feudal and courtly codes and between the human and the bestial. But the human contradiction is resolvable, perhaps, through the operation of "exchange" and "substitution." In defeating Lancelot, Merlin symbolically fuses with Lancelot's woful energy by bestowing the white wolf on him as a refined, universal, and manifold version of human energy:

Suddenly, as far off as Blanchecluer deep in exchange with the world, love's means to love,
 she saw on the clear horizon an atom, moving, waving, white in white, speed in snow, a silver shape in the moonlight changing to crimson, a line of launched glory. (p. 80)

The wolf image has been transformed to the symbolic straightforwardness of salvation's form—as Lancelot's error becomes Galahad's victory later on, as all error is tied to goodness and progress in a dialectic abstracted. Here, as elsewhere in this remarkable cycle, human failure is accepted and transcended, both actions necessary to the fulfillment of destiny, somewhat in the manner in which Aeneas defeats yet incorporates the power of Turnus in The Aeneid. Only by accepting the limitations of human nature and historical conditions can progress and perfection occur or be imagined.

Merlin's transformation of destructive energy to creative is similar to the ambiguous "golden sickle" symbol, mentioned above in "Taliesin's Return to Logain" and with an echo in "The Son of Lancelot": "...the reach / of an arm to a..." (p. 73). By its operation the sickle is an engine of destruction reminiscent of the mower poems of Marvell or of Milton's "two-handed engine" in Lycidas. However, the sickle is "golden" and is conjoined with "the signalling hand" (p. 22), the mystic hand of Christ, and the "seven golden stars" (p. 21) of the Region of the Summer Stars, symbols of transcendent and natural order. The image also connects with "the signal word" of Taliesin (p. 23), his poetically keeping watch and spelling out the song of human transformation throughout the cycle, in which Taliesin represents culture versus anarchy, the design possibilities of humankind.

Unlike Palomides, Galahad, and Taliesin, Mordred's is a frozen, isolated identity. His perspective is materialistic and strategic as to appear banal. Praise, for instance, becomes merely a bodily function as he remembers the Emperor of P'o-1u, who "deigns/a rare cares to any [wife] he cares to praise" ("The Meditation of Mordred," (p. 167). Mordred, as antitype to Galahad and Taliesin, demonstrates several negative qualities. First he rejects the world of language and verbal exchange. Second, he exerts bodily and physical power at the expense of spiritual power and grace. The sexual and the spiritual need not be con-
joined, but they must not, in Williams' cosmos, negate each other.

It is also the case that for Mordred choice becomes simply a function of power. In his reign, adoration becomes compulsory: "I will have my choice, and be adored for the having" (p. 167). The first line of "The Meditation" seems an ironic reversal of God's absolute identity: "I will sit here alone in a kingdom of Paradise" (p. 167). Mordred's identity and self-identification leads geographically and psychologically inward to a regressively locked-up person. Such personal implosion is the result of negating the various forms of exchange on which the positive relations in the cycle are based. Perhaps, incidently, the most beautiful poetic example of such an exchange is the central episode of "The Queen's Servant," in which the color symbols "gold" and "rose" bathe the ritual undressing of the slave-girl in a tinctured power that sustains the dialectic of opposites in an externally dancing suspension: order and innovation, culture and anarchy, clothing and nudity, the collective ritual act and the individual act, spontaneity and fantasy.

These are the contradictions a serious and reflective person needs to work through, perhaps they cannot be resolved. By contrast, Palomides' quest of the blatan beast is an image of frustration, Mordred's values a refusal to face the ambiguities and compromises of human behavior. In the later poem of the cycle, "The Prayers of the Pope," it is said that Mordred begot "by the succubus of his longing, in a world / of pagans, / the falsity of all images and their incompleteness" (p. 173). Self-love is the love of a phantom because however or whatever one loves is then seen as an projection of self, sometimes as an intensification of self or parts of the self. In Mordred we have a perversion by inversion of the doctrine of Exchange. Such perversion contrasts sharply with Galahad's subtle sense of the ironic pain of his own substituting success for Lancelot's failure. Self-love breeds intensity without progress, and is a typical romantic trap. Again we face the irony that Mordred's conception proceeds from Arthur's incest with himself vis-à-vis his identically-faced sister, an act of self-love unlike those of Morgause and Lamorack or Mordred and his Taliesin. Much of the cycle grapples with the extent to which resolution of the chief contradictions is possible. Consider the following passage:

...the knotted web of [Solomon's] empire, multiple without dimension, indivisible without uniformity. ("The Last Voyage," p. 103)

I think this passage suggests that the order of destiny and empire is a symbol of cultural life need not be flatly uniform. Furthermore, a dimensionality that denies the multiple patterns of the quest—the cycle deals with various
kinds of voyagings—is a false dimensionality. These warnings come just prior to the transformational symbols of the "trine" description of Galahad, Percivale, and Bors, a fine passage:

Fierce in the prow the alchemical Infant burned, red by celerity now conceiving the white; behind him the folded silver column of Percivale, hands on the royal shoulders, closed wings of flight, inhaled the fine air of philosophical amusement; Bors, mailed in black, completing the trine... (p. 103)

Here is a geometric web of vertical and horizontal columns and lines composed of physical arms and spiritual wings. As for transformations we find "alchemical infant," "red" becoming "white," "closed wings" of inner voyaging. The word "conceiving" suggests both thought and sexuality. These symbols of personal transformation moving towards the ultimate experience of transfiguration represent the central focus of the cycle. The remainder of "The Last Voyage" explicates this focus. The ship bearing Galahad's company to Sarras symbolizes the proportion and orderedness of a holy life; "the helm fastening/the whole ship to the right balance of the stresses" (p. 104) bespeaks a perfect ratio of form to power. A simile expands the reference of the description:

as the arm of the queen, finger-latched to Solomon's, matched power to purpose and passion to peace. (p. 104)

This poem is complex. Imagery of "burning" proceeds from the "alchemical Infant" symbol and governs the structure of the poem. From "the last candles of Logres" (p. 104), replicated in the cheeks of the woman stained with the blood of Dinadane, we can find an echo in "the heart of the dead Dinadan burned on the sun," an image that reverberates literally as it "flew and flamed and flushed the argenteum column" that is Percivale (p. 105). This "burning," the ongoing creative/destructive pattern, is followed by a color key leading to Galahad's purity: "He glowed white." Following an ingathering or intensifying of the red and burning imagery, we move to the yet more intense self-unification and dedication of Galahad. Galahad participates in—alchemically proceeds from—the burning reds, the tensions of transformation. Finally, the sacramental voyage of reds "In the monstros of triangular speed" (p. 106) as destiny moves toward fulfillment, characters toward their perfected missions. The process of death and healing continues, perhaps nowhere so powerfully caught-in-motion as in this poem image progresses. A simple line denoting, in Lewis' words, "universal reconciliation," follows the description of the sunken empire of P'o-I'lu, "unreal" yet participating in the rose color and phosphorescent glow of destiny: "The roses of the world were plucked from Sarras to Logres." ("The Preyers of the Pope," p. 178). As in all dialectical visions, only future local history can fulfill the symbols of destiny and reconciliation, both conceived as ongoing process.

In this vein, the final vision of the cycle, "Taliesin at Lancelot's Mass," is so close to pure eternity itself as to be disembodied; it is not yet actualized as history. Yet, the symbols find reverberation in human practice within historical confines. This "reverberative" texture of William's symbols can be seen at the beginning of this final poem of the cycle (final according to Lewis' ordering). At Lancelot's Mass,

The altar was an ancient stone laid upon stones; Carbonek's arch, Camelot's wall, frame of Bors' bones. (p. 107)

The template overlay of symbols suggests many of the issues presented in the cycle: passages, boundaries, disciplined containment, the partial identity of Camelot and Carbonek. Just as Taliesin trusted to the spontaneity of informed human action—witness the slave-girl episode of "The Queen's Servant"—so the cycle does not treat human history as merely a shadow of the heavenly. History is informed by symbols and rites, but it is not compelled by them. In the Byzantine ritual, the Epiclesis, referred to in this final poem, we find a presentation of order:

We exposed, We exalted the Unity; prismed shone web, paths, points; (p. 108)

Such radiance elicits a responsive geometry in human actions, an apothecary:

Over the altar, flame of atomized fire, the High Prince stood, gyre in burning gyre; day level before him, night massed behind; the Table ascended; the glories interwined. (p. 109)

That there is an ordered pattern is clear. What, to summarize, does order and the quest for order mean? Perhaps the question is most directly answered by looking at Galahad's achievement. The personal conduct. Galahad, like Virgil's Aeneas, is a figure constructing and reconstructing itself along the curves of destiny. For them, identity is gained principally through alliance with the world spirit. They are human figures, but sparingly, heroically so. Their solitude and dedication are functions of a visionary perspective from which all their human relations devolve. They address life's primary contradictions. Galahad, Aeneas, Taliesin—unlike Palomides, Lancelot, Virgil's Turnus—move towards a perilous balancing of destiny (the pattern of the world) and haphazard historical events, of selfless agency and personal response (witness Galahad's apology for his ordained role).

But salvation is hardly achieved in the abstract pattern of the quest. The quest pattern must take on the flesh of ongoing human history. Despite the accomplishment of Galahad's mission, in the poem and in the right, the web of joy is fulfilled (see above quotation), the "skill" of creating a unified life must be restated constantly:

...if skill be of work or of will
in the dispersed houses of the household, let the Company pray for it still. (p. 109)

This celebration of the Grail's achievement is as a pattern and a compact but not as an assurance of identity and joy. These final words of the cycle preserve the gap between human potential and human frailty in an ongoing dialectic that records the human condition as tied to the ongoing quality with which life is lived. The spiritual quest leads back always to the living of life on all levels.

Discipline becomes a way of reorganizing personality on the basis of destiny. Arthur's personal heresy was to see destiny in terms of his own image, the potentate only of God, whose personality is a great absolutely identical with his creations. Arthur's personalism proceeds from a failure to see unity and results in a fragmentation of reality. That all patterns are ultimately related is expressed in Taliesin's explication of the design on the Byzantine floor in "Taliesin in the School of the Poets":

patterns of multilinear red
sprinkled and spreading everywhere,
and spaced to one design. (p. 47)

Taliesin sees it as his task to "let the hazel / of verse measure the multifold levels of unity" ("Taliesin in the Rose Garden," p. 143). He "measures," specifies the dimensions of and brings into order—like Milton's use of the term 'justify' at the beginning of Paradise Lost—the changes and transformations of life as figured in the governing "roseal pattern" of that poem: rose, ruby, blood in various forms ("rose-veins," menstruation, "blood of the king Pelles"). Taliesin's measuring is merely one way of drawing into human measure, into mental and physical compass, the unruled dimensionality that is life. And each human problem must be brought anew into its unique pattern. It remains for each phase of history to trace out a vision beyond itself.

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10 In a very fine article written twenty years ago, C. P. Culley pointed out that history, in Williams' analysis, is largely the sum product of who people are. This article provides a fine introduction to the major patterns in the cycle: "The Grail Poetry of Charles Williams," Univ. of Toronto Quarterly XXV (July, 1956), 484-93.