



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 40
Number 2

Article 4

4-2022

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Joseph (2022) "Who is Merlin? A Closer Look at the Character in Charles Williams' *Taliessin* Poetry," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/4>

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Who is Merlin? A Closer Look at the Character in Charles Williams' *Taliessin* Poetry

Abstract

By understanding how Merlin and Brisen manifest the influence of archaic ideas concerning time and the esoteric teachings of the Zohar in Williams's *Taliessin* cycle, we are able to account for their roles in the story, and to understand more clearly Williams's eschatological vision of unity to which all events in the cycle are either directed or opposed. This vision incorporates both Platonic (or Neoplatonic) and Kabbalistic elements in harmony with one another, adapted through the filter of Williams's own esoteric ideas and Christian beliefs.

Additional Keywords

Williams, Charles. *Taliessin Through Logres*; Williams, Charles—Characters—Merlin (new); Williams, Charles—Relation to The Fellowship of the Rosy Cross; Waite, A.E.—Influence on Charles Williams; Neoplatonism; Kabbalah; Arthurian myth in Charles Williams's works



WHO IS MERLIN? A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CHARACTER IN CHARLES WILLIAMS'S *TALIessin* POETRY

Joseph Thompson

IN CHARLES WILLIAMS'S *TALIessin* POETRY, Merlin is frequently identified with 'time.' What are we to make of this? If we take it too literally, the appellation will be of no help in understanding the core of his character. For, as modern people, we are used to thinking of time in quantitative, scientific terms; as a measurable and uniform medium. This is emphatically not the way in which time was understood in pre-modern cultures. Above all, it had a *qualitative* dimension which it has largely lost for us. We can all appreciate the phrase "time flies when you're having fun," and see the measure of truth behind it. If we were to take it seriously, we might call this a phenomenological view—based on our subjective experience, in contrast to the objective, scientific view (by which metric I can know, say, that I will be late for an appointment at 3 o'clock). Williams does not wish to privilege one view over the other. Indeed, these two aspects of time are not mutually exclusive, but find equal expression in Merlin, as I hope to demonstrate in this essay.

There is a simple reality that faces us, however, in that we live in a culture that is scientifically minded, and thus out of touch with the qualitative side of time. What form does it take? The "shape" of time for pre-modern people was the cycle. This is of great significance for Merlin, because a cycle is continuous, not discrete, and has neither beginning nor end. All that unfolds within a cycle may, in its course, become its own opposite. Day follows night, death follows birth, and joys follow griefs. With this in mind, we can understand that Merlin, as time, is an agent of change, and of revolution.

We would have to qualify this, however, and state that Merlin is not simply an agent of chaos—of "eternal return"—but plays a role in bringing things to their fulfilment. There is, for Williams, a definite end or goal of history, in Greek: a *telos*. In the *Taliessin* poems, this is the *Parousia*—the Second Coming of Christ, which is both a restoration of perfect order and a judgment (the two are understood to be one and the same). It is the expectation of this second coming that gives meaning and direction to the flux of time and the changes it brings about.

Before tackling the direct appearance of Merlin in the poems, I want to take a look at what I consider an oblique reference to him in the poem "Taliessin's Return to Logres." I call it oblique, because I am inferring a connection between the druids referenced in the poem with the magician Merlin, who shares much of their magical nature. In this part of the narrative, the Celtic poet Taliessin journeys past the enchanted forest of Broceliande, seeing:

Beyond the farms and the fallows
the sickle of a golden arm
that gathered fate in the forest
in a stretched palm caught the hallows.
(*Taliessin through Logres* [TL] 22)

The significance of this image, which eluded C.S. Lewis in his excellent commentary on the poems, perhaps requires some unpacking (*Arthurian Torso* 111).

The golden sickle—archetypal symbol of the druids—has a deep significance related to time.¹ The rituals of the druids described by Pliny the Elder show them to be devotions to the Lunar god/goddess; fertility rites which are bound up with the seasonal cycle (*Naturalis Historia*, XVI, 95). Specifically, the shape of the sickle forms a cycle which culminates in a point—a potent image of time bringing things to their fulfilment, so to speak. The use of gold also recalls archaic beliefs concerning metallurgy. Metals were understood in many diverse cultures to mature in the "womb" of the earth, and it was supposed that gold was the most mature and perfect form to which all metals were progressing, albeit very gradually.² Even up to the early modern period, alchemists believed that their arts were capable of accelerating this purely natural process of maturation, and thus produce gold from common lead or iron. There is perhaps no clearer example of the *qualitative* dimension of time and the impacts it had than this belief and practice of alchemy.

The druids were the spiritual guides and leaders of their community, and in their symbolism they may be said to perform a role of cultivating spiritual growth—turning base metal into gold. But how does this connect them to Merlin? It should be observed that Merlin takes a role in raising up and cultivating two of the cycle's heroes—Arthur himself, in his development as a king; and Galahad, the redemptive hero who most closely imitates Christ in these poems. Galahad, curiously, is described variously as "the alchemical

¹ Outside of Druid lore, the sickle is the primary attribute of "Father Time," who is associated with Saturn or Kronos.

² For a detailed discussion of this widespread idea, see Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*.

Infant" ("The Last Voyage," *TL* 103), and "time's foster-child" ("The Departure of Merlin," *TL* 95), reinforcing the associations between Merlin, time, and the progressive, spiritual maturation symbolized by the alchemical process.

There is, in addition to these links, a clear Biblical parallel concerning the last judgment, imagined as a harvest—with God's angels separating the weeds from the good crops (Matthew, 13:30), and the wheat from the chaff (Luke, 3:17). The "fullness of time" in a Christian, scriptural sense allows things to reach their fulfilment and realize their potential on a universal scale.³ When we recall that Merlin is an agent of time, and that all the "good" characters of the cycle are living in expectation of Christ's return, we can appreciate how Williams weaves together this complex web of symbolism.

MERLIN AND BRISEN: TIME AND SPACE

The first journey undertaken by Taliessin (chronologically) introduces us properly to Merlin and, crucially, to his sister Brisen. When Taliessin passes the ancient forest of Broceliande, a site of mystery and magic in the Arthurian legends, he sees before him "a double shape, / gently-shining," which reveals itself to be a "man and a woman,"

pricking his eyes with the quiet shining of their skin,
tall, slender, black-haired ("The Calling of Taliessin," *TL* 129)

These twins declare themselves to be Merlin and Brisen, "of the forest, parthenogenetical in Broceliande / from the Nature, from Nimue our mother; sent are we / to build, as is willed, Logres" (130).

They spring from a virgin birth (parthenogenesis), as something more like the manifestations of the spiritual and ethereal Nimue than her biological children. Indeed, Williams invites us to regard them less as distinct characters than as two complementary facets of a nature that is beyond all oppositions, and thus beyond representation.

The relationship between the two twins, Merlin and Brisen, is expressed in terms of the relationship between time and space. This relationship has traditionally been conceived as one of opposition—with time corresponding to the processes of 'becoming,' whereas space in its stability corresponds more closely to the Platonic idea of 'being.' It is worthwhile fixing in our minds the image of a wheel, with the still center representing space, and the circumference time. This has been a potent symbol for philosophers and theologians from Aristotle to Boethius and beyond, and greatly informs Williams's conceptions of time in relation to eternity.

³ Augustine alludes to Saturn with his attribute the sickle as signifying precisely "the fullness of time" (*City of God*, 147).

We can see how the revolutionary forces of time may be held in check by the stabilizing powers of space—embodied by Brisen—and likewise, how the potentially deadening effects of static space are balanced and harmonized by the changes of time. Having described these two children of Nimue ambiguously as a “twinned form,” Williams makes reference to the esoteric concept of the “androgynne”—that is, a primordial unity of male and female, represented in the Kabbalah as “Adam Kadmon.” The separation of the two is regarded in certain traditions as an evil, at the very root of the fall from Eden (Abrams, 155-6). It is very much a fall into duality; into a kind of time that we experience as pointless flux and meaningless change—alternating between opposites, as we have seen. It is into this state of affairs that Merlin and Brisen appear to shine a guiding light—to offer a *telos* and a pattern to the people of Britain. Hence their role is “to build, as is willed, Logres” (“The Calling of Taliessin,” *TL* 130).

Logres represents within the *Taliessin* poems what Williams called ‘the City,’ a kind of earthly prefigurement of the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven in the book of Revelation. It also deliberately recalls St. Augustine’s antithesis of the ‘city of God’ versus ‘the city of man,’ which expresses a certain reality according to whether a society is directed towards the transcendent and the godly or towards selfishness and materialism. This same contrast applies to Logres in its relation to the historical Britain, for the former embodies an eternal, spiritual design—it is Britain as it ought to be, as it conforms to God’s will.

Brisen and Merlin, in meeting Taliessin, thus perform a rite that reveals something of the design and destiny of Logres. Coming, as they do, from a more spiritual realm, they plant a kind of seed which Merlin will ideally tend and bring to its maturity, guiding the King and his subjects towards the perfection and harmony of their entire nation.

In performing this rite, Brisen is called “the impassioned diagram of space,” whereas Merlin is said to have “overlooked / his sister, as time space” (132). It appears as though:

The shadow of Brisen lay on the whole of Logres,
but the shadow was a flight of dark stairs, from the brain
to the base; the pavement of the base, below all,
lay in the trees and seas of Broceliande.

(“The Calling of Taliessin,” *TL* 135)

Her female form corresponds to the plan of Logres, enough to reveal its image in a literal “foreshadowing” of things to come. More so than her brother, Brisen reflects the “gynecomorphical” scheme of the world as Williams envisioned it. Yet, being associated with static space, she takes on a more passive role when it comes to implementing the designs of Nimue. Merlin takes the active role of going “to prepare Logres for the sea-coming / from Sarras” (*TL*

130) whereas Brisen goes to Carbonek, to await the coming of Galahad. This separation of the two is not to be taken too literally, however, for we are given the impression that they represent a case of perfect “co-inherence”—the one existing in the other. Their independent roles may in one extreme be understood as a case of modalism—one being working in two aspects.

We are treated with a glimpse of Merlin’s mission in his first appearance (in the publication order, if not chronologically) in the cycle:

Arthur was young; Merlin met him on the road.
Wolfish, the wizard stared, coming from the wild,
black with hair, bleak with hunger, defiled
from a bed in the dung of cattle, inhuman his eyes.

Bold stood Arthur; the snow beat; Merlin spoke:
Now am I Camelot; now am I to be builded.
 (“The Calling of Arthur,” *Taliessin*, 32)

It seems that even in his more dynamic involvement, Merlin is still a passive observer, directing from the side-lines. Speaking for Camelot, he orders “to be builded” in the passive voice, though no less forcefully for it. He seems both more and less than either an angelic or human character in certain respects, which lends him much ambiguity as a character. Yet the power he possesses is no less real for all its mystery; he has the ability to reveal the future, and also to direct fate. With such power over time it is perhaps necessary for him not to exercise much agency of his own, but to be a kind of analogue of Nimue, herself an aspect of God’s creative powers. He can only get involved in the action, it seems, in accordance with God’s will and the working of divine providence.

What sets him apart from being a mere abstraction is his subjectivity—he moves around the world of the poems as an additional viewpoint through which we can follow the action. In a sense this may only be a device of Williams’s to make us feel more connection with the character who in actuality lacks a distinct personality, but it serves its purpose well enough.

Where Merlin does appear and take decisive action, we find him overturning a state of affairs—often in correspondence with the rotation of the seasons. Appearing at winter in “The Calling of Arthur” and in “The Son of Lancelot,” he arrives with the transition from one year to another—the winter solstice, the point at which the Earth’s angle of orbit alters in relation to the sun. This detail reinforces the sense of cyclical time in the poem, and shows how this aspect of time can radically transform a situation; whether it be through the overthrow of a tyrant, or the violent reproof of a werewolf, engendering repentance (a “turning-around”) in the latter.

The prominence of the moon at these points in the poetic cycle hearkens to its traditional associations with the *ianua coeli*—the “gate of heaven”—as the threshold separating the lower, terrestrial realm from the celestial (Lewis, *Discarded Image* 108-9). This would explain both Merlin's ascent, with the arrival of the moon in “The Departure of Merlin,” and the significance of the solstices we find in the poetic cycle,⁴ for it is at the winter solstice that the “solstitial gate” to heaven is said to be open (Guénon and Fohr, *Symbols* 159, 241). This kind of symbolism relies upon the understanding, moreover, that time and space are innately linked—in much the same relationship as that of Merlin and Brisen—and thus there is a kind of temporal geography, by which these “gates” must be approached at a particular time of the yearly cycle. Williams's reference to a “secular stair of months” which the poet ascends in “Taliessin in the Rose-Garden” (144) suggests this kind of fusion of time and space with an overt astrological meaning.

ATOMISM AND QUANTITATIVE TIME

How does the quantitative side of time factor into Merlin's identity? To understand this we first have to turn to the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno and his marvelous paradoxes. To his fellow Greeks, Zeno posed a seemingly insoluble problem: if space (and time) is continuous—and thus able to be divided infinitely—how then is motion possible? Even the shortest conceivable distance is infinite, since there is no limit to how much it may be subdivided. Indeed, true continuity makes such divisions impossible, or at best, entirely arbitrary. Perhaps in response to these paradoxes, the theory of atomism (attributed to Democritus) arose.

By positing the existence of indivisible particles—atoms—which make up all bodies, Democritus rendered time and space discrete and quantifiable on a conceptual level. Thus motion became an empirically measurable phenomenon within this world view, and no longer an impossibility as Zeno had suggested. Williams makes some very suggestive references to atomism in his poetry, and they are worth examining in some detail. In the *Taliessin* cycle, Merlin is at various points described as an “atom” in his movements: in “The Son of the Lancelot,” as “an atom, moving / waxing” (TL 80); “a white atom” (TL 77); there is likewise a reference to “all the primal atoms of earth” in “The Calling of Taliessin” (TL 132).

At the same time, there are many references to space in an atomistic sense: as “accumulated distance” in “The Son of Lancelot” (TL 73); to a “point of accumulated distance” in “The Last Voyage” (TL 103); and, conversely, to “the sea's unaccumulated distance” in “The Vision of the Empire” (TL 29). In the

⁴ See “Mount Badon” and “The Son of Lancelot.”

first two examples, the “accumulation” of distance suggests a collection of bodies in space, and is decidedly positive. Distance in this sense is only negative when it implies separation—in these cases it does not; it only implies the distinction which makes the existence of an ‘I’ and a ‘thou’ possible, and thus enables a proper relationship between persons. By contrast, the mention of the “sea’s unaccumulated distance” is a reference to the hellish realm of P’o-lu, which is perhaps the only properly evil place in Williams’s cosmology. I would tentatively posit that “unaccumulated distance” relates to the concept of infinity in a Zenonian sense—that is, infinitely extended space and time. Above all it seems to suggest a total separation between bodies, and the true “atomization” of the individual; a state of affairs that can only possibly be willed into being, as the souls in hell choose their own damnation. By way of comparison, we might say that this infinite extension of space and time is opposed to the true eternity (of God), in the same way that the extended mortality of Bilbo Baggins by use of the One Ring is contrasted with the eternal life of the blessed, in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. The relationship of purely quantitative extension to qualitative eternity is close enough to be one of sinister parody.

For Williams, atomism as a theory is only of *relative* value, since its application only extends to the physical world. It enables Merlin to “measure” time and space with his hazel rod; a symbol of his quantitative aspect. The fact is that neither of these aspects can be isolated in the physical world: wherever there is differentiation in space there must necessarily be direction and extension in a qualitative sense; and bodies must necessarily have a certain mass and quantity to manifest within that space. But, if one has to take precedence, for Williams it is surely the qualitative. That is why is he so keenly interested in geometry, which always draws our attention to qualitative distinctions.

His application of geometrical concepts to human relationships is really nothing strange or eccentric. We talk of “harmony” and “concord” between people, and mean by it peace, or a lack of antagonism. Thus Williams only extends and elaborates on our natural intuitions about the geometric dimension of inter-personal relationships. Since he always celebrates the physicality of the human person, this must needs be so. Relations between persons cannot manifest in this world except as configurations of bodies in space and time. And, insofar as these have necessarily qualitative character, they are, properly speaking, geometrical.

With this in mind we can better appreciate not only his emphasis on geometry, but the significance of ritual and astrology in Williams’s poetry. After all, both are centered around the configuration of bodies in space and time; be it constellations of planets or deliberate organizations of people. To see how ritual influenced Williams’s ideas about time and space, we must necessarily take a closer look at his history of involvement in certain initiatory societies.

WILLIAMS AND THE ZOHAR

What we have been looking at from a broader perspective of philosophy and metaphysics finds a sharper focus when we look more closely at the esoteric texts which inspired Williams's poetry. Chief among these is the Zohar, one of the central texts of the Kabbalah, which had an impact on Williams via the influence of his friend, the esotericist and scholar A.E. Waite. The biographer Grevel Lindop has suggested that Williams's interactions with Waite were instigated by the young poet after his coming across some of Waite's books on the grail legends, whilst reading into the subject. What intrigued Williams in these writings were the tantalizing hints that, for seekers of the grail, there really was "a path to mystical experience [...] even in the modern world, [open] to those determined to find it"; a path associated with unnamed "Secret Orders" (Lindop 56). After some correspondence, and Williams's sharing his early, mystical poetry with Waite (both admired the poetry of Coventry Patmore), he was initiated into Waite's own newly founded order, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross; an order that was steeped in the symbolism and concepts of the Zohar.

This involvement in the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross came at a significant time in Williams's life, following his marriage, and its rituals, practices, and teachings would prove a lasting influence on his work. This is no less true of his *Taliessin* poetry than of his novels, a point which I think comes through strongly in the case of Merlin and Brisen. Indeed, their ambiguous relationship becomes clearer if we turn to Waite's book *The Secret Doctrine in Israel*—an explication of the Zohar's mystical teachings.

This study focusses chiefly on the Sephiroth—a symbolic tree consisting of three "pillars"—which was the foundational image of the Zohar. The left pillar corresponds to several divine attributes (which reproduce themselves in the created order) such as severity and judgment, whereas the right corresponds to their opposites or complements—tenderness and mercy, for instance. The middle pillar is intended to show a union that transcends either pole, and it is this perfect synthesis that comes closest to expressing the nature of God.

Much of this meaning is obscured beneath layers of symbolism, since each node or attribute on the tree (indicated by a name such as "Kether" or "Malkuth") seems to be represented by at least one "hypostasis" or person, in fact gathering at each stage a constellation of qualities that correspond to these nodes. The basic principles that Waite seems to focus on, however, may be broadly simplified as consisting in a conjunction of opposites. Much of the remaining complexity in his particular reading arises from what we might call the fractal nature of the Sephiroth—by which the foundational principles are repeated at various levels. Thus the whole—that model of two poles producing a synthesis—is presented in sexual terms as a union of male and female

hypostases corresponding to the left and right pillars respectively. Yet the same idea is presented at many nodes on the tree—the part relating to the whole analogically.

Writing of one such station on the tree, Waite tells us that:

Connected by means of a white thread or bond of union with the Great Countenance, there is that which is called the Lesser Countenance, Little Form or Figure, which presents, however, a complete aspect of humanity and is extended through three symbolical worlds. The distinction between the two heads is that in this case the hair and beard are black. (*The Secret Doctrine in Israel* 46)

It is clear from the passage that follows that we can connect this Lesser Countenance—one of the symbolic hypostases of the Sephiroth—with Merlin in William's cycle.

Of this Form there is a counterpart of perfect womanhood, and these two were primordially side by side, till the Ancient of Days put the Lesser Form to sleep and detached the female principle, whose name is Matrona, Bride, Daughter, Betrothed and Twin-Sister—for the Zoharic allegories institute strange marriages in the world above. (*Secret Doctrine* 46-47)

This female complement, the "Twin-Sister," is clearly the model for Brisen. The two are repeatedly identified by their black hair. Merlin, in his first appearance is described as "black with hair"—a curious detail if interpreted out of context. When associated with the Zohar, however, its significance becomes clearer. Waite also connects the black hair with the left pillar of the Sephiroth, expressing the severity of God as opposed to His mercy (*Secret Doctrine* 45). This accords with Merlin's violent role of putting things in order, manifesting the severity of God.

It should be noted that Waite also associates the severity of God with the demon Samael—considered in some Kabbalistic traditions to be the serpent in the garden of Eden (*Holy Kabbalah* 255). The connection between Samael and Merlin is made explicit in Williams's novel, *Descent into Hell*:

It is said in the old tales that the devil longs to become incarnate that he may challenge the Divine Word in his own chosen house of flesh and that he therefore once desired and overshadowed a maid. But even at the moment of conception a mystical baptism fell on the child, and the devil was cast out of his progeny at the moment of entrance. He who was born of that purified intercourse with angelic sacrilege was Merlin, who, wisest of magicians, prophesied and prefigured the Grail-quest, and built a chapel to serve the Table till Logres came to an end, and the Merciful

Child Galahad discovered the union in a Mass of the Holy Ghost which was sung by Messias among a great company of angels. (*Descent into Hell* VIII.126)

This account sheds some light on the mysterious conception of Merlin, and accounts for his role as expressing the severity of God—a role he inherits from his “father” Samael, albeit purged of its more negative, subversive manifestations. We are to understand that, while God does not will evil, even the demons are subject to a divine plan, and what evil they attempt ultimately brings about good.

Williams attempts to harmonize the teachings of the Kabbalah with a more orthodox Christian perspective—however incongruous its metaphysical basis is with Christianity. We have not had the opportunity to mention how Nimue, identified with “immortal being,” represents an aspect of God in the poetic cycle similar to that of the Shekhinah in Kabbalah. But we have seen that Merlin and Brisen serve a revelatory role in the *Taliessin* cycle, presenting an image of unity which is intended to reflect God, as well as offering the model for Logres to take.

Together they form an anatomical image of the Sephirothic tree, in that ritual which outlines Brisen's “pillared back” (a reference to the central pillar, perhaps), preparing Taliessin in the poem to receive a vision of the eschaton—the final union of the Empire and Broceliande that will end the poetic cycle. This union is presented as a kind of cosmic marriage, a typical image from Western esotericism and the Romantic tradition (Abrams 157). To express the opposition of the two in a nutshell: Broceliande is more or less formless—an image of the infinite or the “apeiron” as C.S. Lewis calls it, corresponding to what we may call the “quantitative” pole of matter—whereas the Empire is all ordered and hierarchical, reflecting the qualitative pole of form. They both thus reflect Williams's conception of the essentially masculine and feminine.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD

Part of the difficulty of this poem (“The Calling of Taliessin”) is that its prophetic vision seems to reference several different events. The nature of visions is such that they inevitably have a range of applications, given the polyvalency of symbolism. Thus in this case there is the eschatological vision as we mentioned (of the coming of the Trinity to Sarras), but it is also a vision of the unity of the soul, and a vision of the fate of Logres in particular.

It is in the second sense that we can understand Williams's references to the *mens sensitiva*—the feeling intellect (a concept taken from Wordsworth)—when used in relation to Merlin. In “The Departure of Dindrane,” for instance,

we are told that “in Merlin’s glass / the *mens sensitiva*, the feeling intellect, opens, / and the future comes to pass in a fleeting light” (TL 151).

The *mens sensitiva* represents for Williams another conjunction of opposites—the uniting of the two poles of reason and intuition, and as such it corresponds to the middle pillar of the Sephiroth. Only one who has transcended that dialectical opposition can approach the truth in its unity—a unity that is more than the sum of its parts. This unity corresponds to the heart—the center of man’s being—and it is in microcosm an image of the center of the cosmos, where one leaves behind the vicissitudes of time. If we regard this center as akin to the axis of a wheel in a now (I hope) familiar image, we can understand the sense in which it is outside time—it is unmoving and equidistant to all points on the circumference. Thus it is that “the future comes to pass in a fleeting light” for the one who has attained the unity of the center; Merlin, in this case.

His mission accomplished, so to speak, Merlin is depicted as ageless, “a boy and less than a boy [...] he span / into the heart’s simultaneity of repose”—the still center, from which all is “near and far infinite and equal” (“The Departure of Merlin,” TL 93-94). Indeed, Broceliande itself becomes an image of the Sephiroth, as “pillars of palace and prison changed to the web of a wood” (93). Having accomplished his mission, Merlin is free to return to his origins—to his mother, Nimue.

If we thus understand the arrival of Merlin and Brisen as a kind of centrifugal motion into manifestation, “The Departure of Merlin” represents the reverse—a centripetal return to the heart. Its references to the center confirm what we have said of it so far in its relationship to time and space. We are told that “the method of phenomena is indrawn to Broceliande” (93), the realm of Nimue—perhaps suggesting the Kantian opposition of *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, a contrast between the realm of the intelligible and that of the sensible (*Critique of Pure Reason*, II, III). Kant describes time and space as belonging solely to the phenomenal realm, being a product of our subjective, sensory experience. Could this be the sense in which we are to understand “the method of phenomena”: as an oblique reference to Merlin and Brisen? They would thus be two powers operating on the human psyche, to define the phenomenal world in these spatial and temporal dimensions. Such a reading would explain their relationship to Nimue, “the mother of making,” and would clarify their role in bringing a vision of Logres to Taliessin; that is, they reveal what we might call the eternal doctrine of Logres (‘the City’ as it exists in the mind of God) at a particular point in time, in a particular place—Britain. When they withdraw to Nimue, Logres departs with them, and myth gives way to history.

Throughout the cycle, both Nimue and her children are associated with the sun and moon—not least in “The Departure of Merlin,” where she is described as the “lady of lakes and seas” (95) whose tides are governed by that lower planetary body. We are told that, after Merlin has gone, “the moon waxes and wanes in the perilous chair, / where time’s foster-child sits, Lancelot’s son” 95. Here it may help to point out that in esoteric symbolism, the sun and the moon can symbolize two kinds of knowledge. The sun represents what we might call “heart knowledge”—the immediate intuition of truths that bypass the processes of reasoning and transcend our logical antinomies. The moon, as the reflector of the sun’s light, corresponds to the lesser kind of knowledge or intellection, that of discursive reasoning (Guénon and Fohr, *Man and His Becoming* 14). A ritual text of the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross upholds this definition:

In another and not less important aspect, the Moon is the natural mind, the state of reflected and partial light, the illusion, the glamour and the uncertainties of the logical understanding in the presence of the great problems. I have said that the new Moon is on the side of CHESED; in the waning it is on that of GEBURAH; and at the full it is said to reflect the Sun of Beauty and Righteousness. These also are aspects of the mind, which in the glory of its fulness reflects the Mind of Christ, thus corresponding to SHEKINAH, whom I have termed the vesture of Messias. (“Ceremony of Advancement in the Grade of Philosophicus” 23)

In the mystical traditions of both East and West, the attainment of the former kind of knowledge is associated with a return to the heart, with all the connotations we have given it as the center of being (Guénon and Fohr, *Man and His Becoming* 32; *Mystical Theology* 201). Discursive reasoning is only necessary for those of us who have lost our way and are in search of that center. Thus it is appropriate that Merlin, as time in its own distinct mode, should be associated with this lower kind of knowledge, and at his departure should leave behind the moon to watch over his “foster-child,” as it were. Since the supreme center in the poetic cycle is the grail, it is also appropriate that it should be covered by “the saffron veil of the sun itself” in its progress towards Sarras, the land of the Trinity (“The Calling of Taliessin,” *Taliessin* 136).

This lower, sublunary domain of logical antinomies (which we have associated with the phenomenal realm and with discursive reasoning) should call to mind the two external pillars of the Sephiroth which must be transcended in order to attain the middle pillar of ascent. It seems only a short step to associate these two sides of the Sephiroth with the *via positiva* and *via negativa* as Williams conceived them. It is thus striking that the grail, the image of union par excellence in the cycle, should be covered with a “saffron pall,” which in one

instance is described as “the rent saffron sun” (“The Last Voyage” 104; “Percivale at Carbonek” 99). A saffron veil, the *Historic Note-book* of 1891 tells us, was worn by Greek and Roman brides, covering them head-to-toe, and would have been removed by the husband in a symbolic consummation of the marriage (Brewer 787). Combining the imagery of the sun, the grail, and the rent veil calls to mind many ideas simultaneously—the center; the highest sphere of the heavens; the holy of holies in the Jewish Temple. It is above all an image of communion between God and His creation couched in Eucharistic and sexual terms. This is presented as a deliberate paradox, combining the *via positiva* and the *via negativa* as the veil of division is “rent” and God’s nature is made participable through communion.

Williams’s combining of these elements—liturgical, sexual, astrological, and Kabbalistic—has a precedent in the rituals of the Fellowship of the Rosy-Cross. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that the Fellowship conducted lengthy services at the winter and summer solstices, complete with Eucharistic rites. During this ceremony, the “Door to the Sanctuary is open to its full extent,” and early on the “High Priest” intones:

Assist me to open, O Lord, this Consecrated Temple in the Grade which is above all Grades, in the Mystery which has not been declared. I open it as a Door in CHESED for the descent of Supernal Influences from the Light of the Crown, from the Face of Eternal Beauty, on which all the choirs of sanctity have desired to look from the beginning. I open it as a Door for the Descent of Divine Influence from Thee, O Father of Wisdom, by Whom the worlds were made, and from Thee, O Mother of Understanding, Holy, Holy Bride. Glory be unto the Three Supernals in the place where no evil enters, the place of the Tree of Life. There are Three that bear witness in Heaven, and these Three are One. Hereof is the Bond of Union between all who desire below and all who are blessed above, from henceforth and for ever. (“Pontifical Ceremony of Celebrating the Festivals of The Winter and Summer Solstice” 1)

These references to the descent of divine influence through the open door are too close to the concept of the *ianua coeli* to be mere coincidence, given that this is a celebration of the solstice. Indeed, passing through doors and “gates” in conjunction with the sun is a prominent feature of the Fellowship’s initiation rites (“Ceremony of Advancement” 26). Given the years of Williams’s involvement in the Fellowship, moreover, it is very likely that he participated in one of these solstice ceremonies. No doubt it left some impression on the young poet’s imagination.

It may be possible now to try and summarize the role of the Merlin and Brisen, and to see how central it is in the narrative of the *Taliessin* cycle. We must

piece this together somewhat, for Williams died before he could progress onto what he called "the more serious narrations" (Lindop 366); a "third *Taliessin* volume" of longer poems, which would be "graver than our last" (375). These might have more fully fleshed out the story, or at least shed light on the themes of the first two volumes from another angle, but he never managed to write them, and it is from the published poetry that we may infer what he had in mind for the overarching story.

We have seen that Merin and Brisen represent time and space in some degree of distinction, and they have been sent by their mother Nimue to disclose the pattern of Logres as the plan for Arthur's kingdom. The establishment of Logres will give a place to the grail and thus enable the coming of the Trinity—effecting a perfect union of heaven and earth. This union may have been intended to be universal, but for the sins of Arthur's knights—only three of whom are worthy enough to attain the grail. Thus these three are in some sense taken up with the grail into Sarras—the land of Trinity—and Merlin and Brisen return to Nimue, to await the next attempt at union, which may not be until the *Parousia*, the second coming of Christ. The grail corresponds to the center, and with the source of all being, and it is also cast as feminine, as a receptacle, and through its associations with the Shekhinah—the bride and also the "body of God" (*Secret Doctrine* 59). Thus the coming of the Trinity is presented as a type of mystical marriage between Christ and His Church—represented through the sacramental aspect of the grail. As the "Lesser Countenance" of God, Merlin and Brisen present a "type" of this union through their perfect co-inherence, and also resemble the unity of the "Greater Countenance" by the analogy of the moon's relation to the sun. At the same time, in their duality they embody a lower, discursive kind of reasoning (which relies on hard distinctions and antagonisms) which will pass away when the grail is attained.

In conclusion, what began as an investigation into the place of a single character has become a much more involved engagement with many of the central themes in Charles Williams's *Taliessin* poetry. Nevertheless, by understanding how Merlin and Brisen are identified with time and space, manifesting the influence of a pre-modern philosophy and the esoteric teachings of the Zohar in Williams's poetry, we are able to account for their roles in the story, and to understand more clearly Williams's eschatological vision of unity to which all events in the cycle are either directed or opposed. This vision incorporates archaic, Neoplatonic, and Kabbalistic elements in harmony with one another, adapted through the filter of Williams's own esoteric involvements and Christian beliefs.

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