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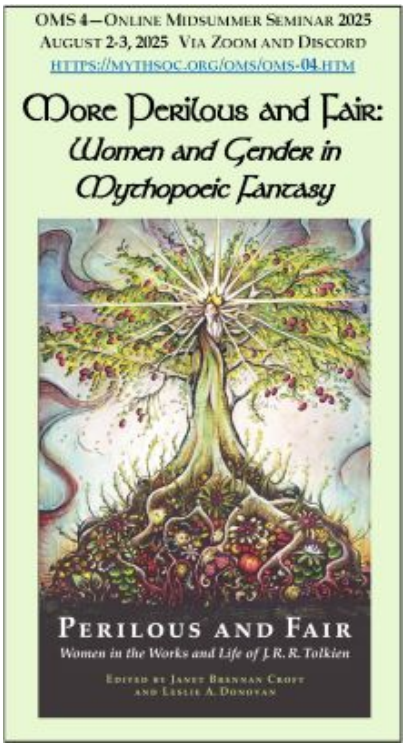

“Taliessin in the Rose-Garden”: A Symbolic Analysis

Abstract

In this analysis of a poem from Charles Williams’s Taliessin cycle, Taliessin in the Rose-Garden, I sought to demonstrate that our reading of the poem could be helped with the use of certain traditional categories of symbolism. In particular I focussed on how Williams adapts the classical model of hylomorphism to offer his own take on the relationship between spirit and matter. That he was able to accomplish this through the medium of poetry is a considerable testament to his skill and the scope of his vision. I also tried to show where hermetic ideas encroach upon his Christian storytelling, potentially posing problems for an orthodox reading of his poetic cycle as a whole.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; “Taliessin in the Rose-Garden”: A Symbolic Analysis; symbolism; poetry analysis; cosmology; incarnation; astrology; hermeticism; hylomorphism; neoplatonism; charles williams; a. e. waite; christianity

Taliessin in the Rose-Garden": A Symbolic Analysis

Joseph Thompson

Charles Williams's poetry is, among fans of the Inklings, (in)famously obscure in its meaning and esoteric in its content. His idiosyncratic use of terminology to indicate already difficult subject matter is a challenge in itself (though an integral part of his aesthetic), casting some more-or-less familiar concepts in unfamiliar language (e.g. "co-inherence"), and fleshing out commonplace ideas (e.g. exchange, substitution) almost *ad absurdum*. Yet I think the greater part of his obscurity stems from two particular areas: a lack of sympathy for what he has to say; and a lack of knowledge of how these ideas are communicated. The "what" involves Williams's own syncretism of Christianity and hermeticism; both essentially pre-modern in their approach to cosmology, anthropology and ethics. The "how" involves a necessarily pre-modern (we might say mythopoeic) use of symbolic language.

I believe that we must approach Charles Williams's use of symbolism and imagery through the lens of a traditional, biblical cosmology. With such an approach it will be possible to see how Williams's world view fits into a wider context of perennial, metaphysical debates around the relationship of spirit to matter. In this essay I want to look at how this poem, "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden," shows Williams's engagement with a classical hylomorphism, and how his response is both traditional and innovative, leading to some possible tensions with his Christian beliefs.

Spirit and Flesh: Heaven and Earth

"Flesh tells what spirit tells, / (but spirit knows it tells)."

Let us take this for an axiom that describes the operation of symbolism in Williams's poetry. We see in these two lines that Williams sets up the hierarchical relationship between flesh and spirit that will feature throughout his poetic cycle. In grappling with the existence of matter, rather than treating it as an evil along the lines of gnosticism, he sees it as imaging the spirit. We may take such a relationship as an image on the animal level of a more general, all-encompassing union between heaven and earth.[1] I believe these categories can

[1] In Neoplatonic thought these two poles were conceived as making up the two hemispheres of the cosmos—the celestial and the terrestrial—whose correspondence was

help us to decode some of Williams's imagery, or at least to approach an understanding of it.

Matthieu Pageau, analyzing the book of Genesis, states that in the Bible's symbolic terms, 'heaven' and 'earth' are not merely physical locales, but two metaphysical principles which are "the secondary cause of all manifestation" (M. Pageau 17). They provide a pattern which manifests itself at all levels of reality. Thus we can say that flesh expresses and 'supports' spiritual meaning as, in traditional cosmology, the earth below supports the heavens above. Likewise, the spirit elevates flesh by imbuing it with meaning—we might think, for instance, of Aristotle's 'rational soul' that *animates* a human being. Man, as a conscious, spiritual and corporeal being, lies at the center of this exchange between flesh and spirit, matter and mind. This is the meeting of heaven and earth; man, the mediator between them. Yet even inanimate things have such a hierarchical relationship with 'heaven'—in philosophical terms we think of the 'form' or 'essence' of a thing which raises indeterminate matter into something intelligible. With this conception, symbols exist at this meeting-point where the intelligibility of an object—its meaningfulness—is at its peak. Neither too abstract nor too specialized, symbolism presents us with "the likeness of unlike things."[2]

Axes of Space

When categorizing symbols, however, it is useful to take a step towards greater abstraction to reveal how these 'unlike things' connect meaningfully. Williams particularly favored geometrical symbolism to capture some of these connections.

Verticals in the *Taliessin* cycle can be interpreted as signifiers of the hierarchy we have mentioned—that relationship of exchange and union between heaven and earth by which spirit informs matter/earth, and earth supports or expresses the spirit. Horizontals, on the other hand, symbolize the division between heaven and earth, marking them as distinct entities. In Williams's poetry horizontals are used frequently to suggest order, discrete measurement, and discipline. When we find the horizontal axis meeting the vertical—in a cross—we find an important symbol of unity and multiplicity coming together towards a single point. It is a concise image of everything that exists—the dimensions of space, and the relationship between 'the one and the many' that produces the whole order of creation.

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the subject of astrology. Williams utilizes this idea throughout his cycle, notably in "The Sister of Percivale."

[2] A phrase of Robert Mulcaster's, reproduced here as quoted in C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image,* p.1.

In traditional symbolism, the vertical axis (the ubiquitous *axis mundi* or 'world axis') is often related to the concept of static 'space,' held in opposition to the concept of 'time' as it represents the transformative powers of cyclical change (M. Pageau 127). For if we conceive of the vertical axis in terms of the axle of a wheel, we are presented with a dualism of the center (which is a motionless, 'unmoved mover') and the circumference, which represented, for the ancients, time in its relationship to static space. This will be of great significance to the way Williams (following a long tradition) conceptualizes God in His relationship to creation, as well as forming a model of man as microcosm.

The Garden

In the first instance we must recognize that in this poem we are in a garden, with all the associations with the earthly paradise that gives us. In that sense it is a microcosm, for it is a region in which wild "nature" and rational order are both represented and found in balance. The 'level spinal path' suggests at once the aforementioned symbolism of space. The column of the spine is what holds a person erect and gives structure to the body; it supports the mind, linking it with the center (heart) and the appetites (stomach) in a kind of exchange in which each nourishes the other. Yet this exchange could also be taken as an image of the relationship between form and matter.

Travelling up this path with his eyes, Taliessin seems almost to see such an exchange taking place before him.

> Along the level spinal path Taliessin,
> his eyes abused by the crimson, confused saw
> for a moment in the middle distance a rush of the crimson
> shaping at the garden's entrance to a triple form,
> to three implicit figures of the mind […]. (139)

We should bear in mind the association of crimson with formless matter—this is a prominent image in the cycle, most especially appearing in connection to the chaos of P'o-lu, which is cut off from the form-giving grace of the Emperor. In "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden," we are told that:

> his eyes
> cleared; appeared three women of Camelot– (139)

Williams seems to present us with the act of seeing itself—the uniting of percept and concept, of sensory stimulation and the reasoning which gives meaning to what the eye sees. One of the three women, Dindrane, is described as an "eidolon of the slaves" (139), which reinforces this idea, since according to scholar David Bradshaw, "[t]he term *eidōlon* was the name given in the atomists'

theory of vision to the visible image thrown off by an object and received in the eye" (Bradshaw 80).

Incidentally, this term was adopted by the Neoplatonist Plotinus to describe the relationship of soul to intellect in the One (the first cause or prime mover of the cosmos); as a hierarchical relationship of an image to its prototype. This relationship is envisioned by Plotinus as a gaze of passionate intensity: "Despite the intellectualist imagery, Plotinus wishes us to think of it as a state of total engagement and concentration, much like rapturous love. […] As he remarks in the passage on the generation of Love, Love is like an eye 'filled with what it beholds' […], ready to bring forth new beings" (Bradshaw 83). (How appropriate for Williams to link this term to Taliessin's Platonic lover, to whom he is united in "intellectual nuptials" ["Taliessin's Song of the Unicorn" 41].)

The "rose-alleys" (140) of the garden draw us towards the Lady Guinevere, "the consummate earth" (140) of Logres—her womanhood is here presented as potentiality and fertility. Yet she is not our final point of focus—that would be the ring on her finger. This is the point to which Taliessin's eyes are drawn; it forms a further microcosm: "the contained / life of Logres-in-the-Empire" (140), which shakes physically in a presage of the outbreak of war, and with the "dolorous blow" (140)—the immanent fall of humanity that permeates all the evil and misfortune in the cycle of poems.

We can see the immediate connection to Guinevere in the verses that follow, as at the same time as the stone shakes, she laughs and her eyes search for Lancelot. Their adultery—seemingly a domestic affair—if realised, will participate in the sin that brings down the empire, rupturing the web of co-inherence that holds the kingdom together.

Microcosm/Macrocosm

The incarnation, the key doctrine of Christianity that informs Williams's poetry, gives such honor and precedence to the human body that, as he perceives it, actions on a corporeal plane have ramifications at all other levels of reality. Indeed, the Empire itself is conceived of in the form of a female body in his scheme. Arthur, as King of Logres—a province of the Empire—is supposed to embody the Emperor at a lower level; the Emperor himself is an image of God in these poems, a God who is immanent in His creation. As the Queen of Logres, we might say that Guinevere is to Arthur what earth is to heaven—by failing in her role as a wife—by lying with a stranger—the union of heaven and earth would be torn apart with cosmic significance. We can understand this on a basic level by the fact that infidelity breaks apart the vertical, paternal lineage of a family—without a coherent line of succession the Kingdom of Logres seems doomed to fall apart.

> The path of the garden was a verse into the wound,
> Into the secrets of Carbonek and the queen's majesty,
> in the king's poet's mouth; he heard himself say:
> 'The Wounded Rose runs with blood at Carbonek.' (140)

Verse, for Williams is part of the ordering of earth by heaven. A complex structure of sounds into syllables; syllables into words; words into phrases; phrases into verse; the process is emphatically hierarchical. By associating it with the path he reinforces its link with the spatial axes as an ordering principle, and shows how in this case the meaning of the verse directs us 'into the wound', the very heart of the problem of evil.

Also referenced here is Pelles, the wounded king and guardian of the Grail at Carbonek, an intentionally ambiguous figure. His wound is symbolically linked by Williams to a woman's menstruation—a symptom of the fall whereby women (in Williams's view) mystically share in the sacrifice of the crucifixion. It is also a traditional symbol of 'flooding the land' in Biblical terms; the overturning of ordered space by cyclical time as a force of renewal (M. Pageau 282).

> [H]appy the woman who in the light of Percivale
> feels Galahad, the companion of Percivale, rise
> in her flesh, and her flesh bright in Carbonek with Christ,
> in the turn of her body, in the turn of her flesh, in the turn
> of the Heart that heals itself for the healing of others […] (145)

This turn of her flesh is a kind of turning of the wheel of fortune; the axis of time that can bring about a reversal of fate; that can result in "the fixing of all fidelity from all infidelity" (145). This infidelity, either referring to Guinevere's unconsummated love for Lancelot, or the latter's union with Helayne (mistaking and in a certain sense substituting her for the queen) will lead to the birth of a child—Galahad—who will redeem Logres, overcoming evil with goodness as a type of Christ. As time—the process of transformation itself—is cyclical, it can even turn things into their own opposites (M. Pageau 159). The word 'fixing' here is significant, however, in that it also suggests the imposition of space, of a static order. Thus we see suggested here that the two opposite poles of time and space are ultimately united in Christ's sacrifice, meeting in the symbolism of the cross—that relationship of the one and the many whereby "the altars of Christ everywhere offer the grails" (144)—and in the ultimate embodiment of transformation: Christ's death and resurrection.

THE CENTRE AND THE PERIPHERY

Indeed, God (in His relationship to creation) is symbolized by both the vertical ordering of heaven and earth, and by the relationship of the center to the periphery. Both are images of hierarchy operating on different planes. This image of God as the point of a circle is of great importance to Williams. In a theological work, he paraphrased the (variously attributed) quotation: "God is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere" and related it to the grail motif in his poetry (*Figure of Beatrice* 24; cf. *The Image of the City* 171).

His approach to the fall tends towards orthodoxy in the sense that it is not a gnostic falling away from union with God into matter and multiplicity, but the experiencing of good *as* evil by divorcing "the good" from God. It is literally a loss of the 'center'—the point which accords the proper places to all created things—by making those lesser goods at the peripheries another 'center.' Hence we have the "split zodiac" associated with the murder of Abel by Cain, those direct descendants of the fall.

> He called into being earthly without heavenly justice,
> supposing without his brother, without the other,
> he solely existed: fool! (144)

In this case a literal *ego-centrism* is the sin of Cain according to Williams, which necessarily alienates him from God. The image of the split zodiac suggests that this sin amounted to breaking apart the great chain of being by which men and the angelic powers move in perfect symphony and synchronicity—yet for Williams it has not lost all its meaning or correspondence thereby. On the contrary, he seems to regard it as at least potentially illuminating, for relations between 'above and below' (in explicitly astrological terms) abound in the poetic cycle, as a natural corollary of his incorporation of the microcosm/macrocosm idea as it was understood by hermeticists throughout the ages.

C.S. Lewis explains this passage in his usual eloquent way:

> In the state of innocence all the Houses of the Zodiac are 'co-inherent': each is in all; whichever you go into, you will find yourself at the centre. But since the Fall, instead of Co-inherence there is Incoherence. […] That 'danger' in it which had been in [God's] mind an unrealized contingency becomes for the children of Adam, and especially for Guinevere, an actuality. ("Williams and the Arthuriad" 149)

The poem continues with its astrological allusions, stating:

> Libra in the category of flesh is the theme of Caucasia,
> the mesh of the net of the imperially bottomed glory;
> and the frame of justice and balance set in the body,
> the balance and poise needful to all joys
> and all peace. (143)

In the 'gynecomorphical' scheme of the Empire drawn up by Williams, the naked female body is superimposed upon a map of the late Roman Empire. The buttocks cover the region named Caucasia, and here Williams elucidates some of the significance of this symbol. It is typical of his appreciation for the body in all its aspects that he gives a place to this member. The "glory" of the buttocks is that they give a seat to the higher principles in man—and along with this humble function, they are also essential to holding the spine upright, of maintaining "the balance and poise needful to all joys." This makes clear their link with Libra, which is always represented by weighing scales. Just as the pelvis can tilt the whole body in a contrapposto stance—the most elegant pose in antique art—so the scales of Libra provide the same 'balance and poise' at a spiritual level.

Following on with more Zodiacal imagery, we are told by Taliessin that:

> Aquarius for me opened the principle of eyes
> in the clearness above the firmament, I saw below,
> patterned in the stellar clearness, the rosed femininity
> particled out of the universe, the articled form
> of the Eve in the Adam; the Adam known in the Eve. (142)

Aquarius represents spiritual vision and insight, traditionally corresponding to the eyes in the macrocosmic scheme. A harmonious relationship between the heavens above and the earth below results in clear vision, whereas we are told in "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden," that in consequence of Cain's sin,

> the rosed shape
> vanished; instead, the clearness of Aquarius was bloodshot (144)

The vision of that "rosed shape" has even lost its telltale "femininity." This archetypal unity of masculine and feminine has been damaged by sin; the Adam and the Eve no longer co-inhere in this fallen world. The result it seems, prior at least to the incarnation, has been a rupture of the co-inherence of spirit and matter—if only in the perceptions of fallen man. Out of this rupture arises a

body-hatred and dualism that Williams strove to counter ideologically in theological writing.

Taliessin continues narrating what he sees, saying:

> 'Within and without the way wove about the image,
> about the City and the body; I followed the way
> from the eyes; it was swallowed in the sweet dark pit
> of the palms—lit how? lit by the rays
> from the golden-growthed, golden-clothed arms,
> golden-sheathed and golden-breathed, imperially
> shining from above toward instruments and events,
> rays shaken out towards the queen's hand […]' (142-43)

The 'way' being spoken of suggests Williams's conception of the *via positiva*—the 'way of the affirmation of images' in his terms. I will tentatively suggest here that this way is being associated with the path of the planet Venus—the morning-star—whose orbit forms a pentagram around the Earth. Since Venus is associated with divine love in the cycle, it is a suitable symbol for Williams's *via positiva* which attempts to integrate romantic love into the scheme of salvation. Moreover, it is represented with the "Star of Percivale," the five-pointed star on Percivale's coat of arms. The connections build up in this passage, since it seems as though the human being is envisioned as forming a five-pointed star, with the outstretched limbs emanating from the center like solar rays. In the same way, the hand forms a further fractal of this image, with the five fingers simulating the same rays in microcosm.

The "sweet dark pit" of the palms could thus represent on a local level the "divine darkness" of the unmanifested center. This divine darkness presents the point of departure from the *via positiva*, as one leaves behind all analogies and images of God, but it also has a paradoxical, real relationship with the *via positiva*, in that it is the source of all manifestation.[3] It is for this reason that Vladimir Lossky, discussing Saint Dionysius the Areopagite's theology, suggests that the two ways may really be one and the same, albeit viewed from different directions (Lossky 39). The *via positiva* is a condescension of God ("shining from above")—revealing Himself to His creation through images, whereas the *via negativa* is the ascent of the creature towards contemplation of the "unimaged" in Williams's terms.

[3] Cf. "The Ceremony of Reception into the Grade of Neophyte," pp.38-9.

THE ROSES

Thus far in the analysis we have not addressed one of the most significant of all images in the poem, and the most ubiquitous—the roses. They prove a difficult nut to crack, insofar as they may be said to mingle orthodox Christian and hermetic ideas, especially if we consider them in light of Williams's interest in Rosicrucianism. If we can understand them properly, however, we will see how they shed light on the *Taliessin* cycle as a whole.

In a general sense they can be understood in terms of the center and its relationship to the periphery, since they are structured like fractals with the petals emanating out from the center in a repeating pattern. These petals are veils of a kind, like the veils that covered the altar of Solomon's temple, since they both cover the center and at the same time give it form and dimension in space. This is in a sense the mystery of matter and creation—it both reveals and conceals God, for man's benefit.

This viewpoint can be read in two ways, whether we follow a Christian or a hermetic interpretation. Roses, and flowers in general, insofar as they are asexual or hermaphroditic, can represent the trysting-place of the sexes and the integration of the masculine and the feminine. This is one aspect of the image of the wounded "rose-king" Pelles, who could present a type of the "androgyne," or the primordial unity of male and female known as "Adam Kadmon" in the Kabbalah. It also could account for the description of "the rosed femininity / particled out of the universe, the articled form / of the Eve in the Adam; the Adam known in the Eve" (142). The rose, standing in for the created order, can be cast as feminine in respect to God (the creator), yet within it is contained both Adam and Eve—just as *the* Adam whence Eve was derived was formed out of clay from the earth.

The links to Christian doctrine appear in that Christ is regarded as the "new Adam." He takes his flesh from the *Theotokos* (the Mother of God), the "new Eve" according to Christian typology. We find this connection supported by Jan Curtis, who writes that Williams "finds in the doctrine of *Theotokos* the trysting place between heaven and earth and the creed of immortal beauty substantial in the incarnation" (57). Indeed, with the rosary and other devotions the Theotokos has come to be symbolized through the rose; an ancient title for her being "rose without thorns."

I think we can associate all these meaning of the rose with what we I have called a classical hylomorphism—the relationship of matter and form (and of body and soul) as pioneered by Aristotle and the far later, scholastic philosophers. In this sense, the relationship of matter and form can be symbolized by the relationship of center to periphery as we have been examining it. Thus the body manifests the soul, but as such it shares in the mutability of all things manifested in time and space. Hence the soul—like the

still center of the circle—maintains the identity and integrity of the person over time while the body changes and decays. The roses, as symbols of manifestation and body in its relationship to spirit, are thus suitable material to clothe the slave-girl in "The Queen's Servant," in a ritual evoking the incarnation. In "Taliessin in the Rose-Garden," as elsewhere, they are also associated with the crimson of blood, of the passions, and sin. All these are suitably connected with the margins, since they all draw us away from the center towards the edges of experience: mutability and death.

To shed further light on this theme, bearing in mind what we have already seen with the prominence of blood in this poem, and the notion of women's menstruation sharing in the sacrifice of Christ, I would like to refer to the role of Dindrane in the wider narrative. Aside from being the muse and Platonic lover of the poet Taliessin, she distinguishes herself by offering her blood in order to save the life of Helayne in one episode from Arthurian legend.

As Jan Curtis points out, in the source material (Malory's *Morte Darthur*) the woman who receives this exchange is suffering from leprosy, which is highly suggestive of a Biblical influence, calling to mind the Old Testament purity laws (62). It specifically recalls Miriam in the Old Testament, who is struck with leprosy on account of her hardness of heart, and for criticising Moses her brother—her hand is turned "white as snow," which ironically suggests an extreme degree of purity. It is therefore significant that it is the *blood* of Dindrane/Blanchefleur that heals Helayne, who is afflicted by the same disease. We are to associate her blood with her womanhood (sharing "with the Sacrifice the victimization of blood," 144), indicative of impurity under the old Jewish law. Thus the affliction ("an excess of purity" in Jonathan Pageau's terms [Pageau and Rohlin]) is cured by its opposite and antithesis. Williams was probably struck by this story because it reintegrates ideas of the impure and the unclean—associated with women's menstruation in this case—having it become the means of healing and renewal. I have already referred to the connections with "flooding the land"—associated with cyclical time and its power of renewal. We have also seen how the 'crimson' of blood is associated by Williams with mutability and raw matter. The Dindrane episode is thus one of his answers to the Platonic hatred of matter, for it restates the Christian idea that man's mutability is a saving grace, insofar as it enables him to repent and not remain fixed in his sins. While he never recounts the story from Malory in its entirety, Williams permeates his Taliessin poetry with this theme, making prominent use of the characters concerned.

Other, seemingly incidental, details in the cycle reveal the influence of this Biblical theme. For example, when Galahad as a child is clothed in wrappings of "crimson wool" in "The Son of Lancelot" (79), he brings together a paradoxical union of opposites, in an allusion to this passage from the book of

Isaiah 1:18: "Come now, and let us reason together," saith the Lord. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

This recalls the very same wording of the passage (Numbers 12:10) concerning Miriam's leprosy. Galahad, despite being a bastard, conceived out of Lancelot's infidelity to Guinevere, is the most saintly and Christ-like knight in the legend. As a symbol of Christ, Galahad suggests how the incarnation and the resurrection overthrow the power of sin and death, for Christ does not maintain a distance from the 'impurity' of His creation—rather he recapitulates it in Himself. For Williams, however, it is possible that this idea—particularly the notion of uniting opposites—had a hermetic significance that would take his poetry outside the orthodox Christian tradition.

We must also, therefore, consider this abstract symbolism in light of Williams's involvement with the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, founded by scholar and occultist A.E. Waite. The significance of that particular symbol (the rosy cross) is explained in the words of Israel Regardie, a member (alongside Waite) of a parallel society, The Order of the Golden Dawn:

> The Rose-Cross is a Lamen or badge synthesizing a vast concourse of ideas, representing in a single emblem the Great Work itself—the harmonious reconciliation in one symbol of diverse and apparently contradictory concepts, the reconciliation of divinity and manhood. It is a highly important symbol to be worn over the heart during every important operation. It is a glyph, in one sense, of the higher Genius to whose knowledge and conversation the student is eternally aspiring. In the Rituals it is described as the Key of Sigils and Rituals. (Regardie and Greer 46-47)

This placing of the rose at the center of the cross—the meeting point of heaven and earth, and of unity and multiplicity—reinforces its associations with the incarnation, yet the significance of this can lead us in two diametrically opposed directions, whether we take a Christian or gnostic path of interpretation. We have seen that the former gives place and honor to physical matter (professing the incarnation and the resurrection of the body), whereas the latter, adhering to a Platonic paradigm, regards matter as ontologically inferior to the spiritual realm, and thus valuable only insofar as it gives us knowledge (*gnosis*) of how to ascend spiritually. To the latter kind of hermeticist, the incarnation is merely a potent image of divinity being revealed as pre-existing within man—it has no claim to exceptionalism as a dogmatic truth about the transcendent God.

Drawing extensively on the Kabbalah, Waite's order conducted rituals which sought to unite the masculine and feminine poles in its members—

invoking the 'Shekhinah,' the feminine aspect of God in the Zohar, a central text of Kabbalism. Significantly, Waite describes the Shekhinah as both the "body of God" and an aspect of God in manifestation—being married to His masculine aspect metaphysically (Waite, *Secret* 59). She was connected, moreover, with the rose and the rose-cross in several of the order's rituals, fulfilling the typically esoteric function of uniting opposites or contraries (Lindop 61-3, 92-3). Finally, her associations with Venus (to which A.E. Waite draws our attention in *The Secret Doctrine* 221) points to an underlying connection with the orbit of the planet, which is often pictured as forming a flower-like pattern with five petals.

Uniting the ritualistic correspondences of the Shekhinah with his own views on the sacredness of the human body, Williams built upon his own Romantic Theology to arrive at a complex relationship of theology and sexuality in his poetry. Regarded from this angle, the Rose-Garden of the poem is an image of female sexuality and maidenhood—into which Taliessin gains entry, like the protagonist of the *Roman de la Rose*. The poem, taken as an allegory of sorts concerning sex itself—the way union between male and female produces new life, with all the pains of childbirth that accompanies it—further unites the seemingly disparate imagery we have been examining.

Last of all we should not neglect at least to mention the etymological significance of the word 'chalice' being derived from 'calyx', for thus we can see that the flower is an image of the grail itself. Thus the roses, these "hearts folded strong in a hundred meanings" (139) draw together a whole constellation of themes in Williams's cycle.

The Grail and the Eucharist

It is important to situate this symbolism of the grail within the context of the expansion of the grail myth in the 12th and 13th centuries, wherein much discussion focused around the holy mystery of communion. With this in mind, A.E. Waite, in his book on the subject, draws attention to the discussions around whether the Eucharist should be received in two 'kinds,' i.e., the Body and Blood of Christ (*Hidden Church* 24-25). One traditional practice is for the Host to be 'steeped' in the Precious Blood—the bread immersed in the chalice of wine. The resolution to the medieval debates around Communion seems to have been the formal acknowledgement that there is blood in the body and body in the blood, so to speak. Williams seems to have adopted this symbolism in his view of the incarnation, suggesting the immersion of spirit in matter, forming a "grand Ambiguity" in his terms.

Williams saw a profound significance to the statement in the Athanasian creed: "not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh but by taking of the manhood into God," calling it "the very maxim of the Affirmative Way" (*Descent of the Dove* 60). I think this suggests at the very least that he saw in the

incarnation the revelation that the material world forms an image of the spiritual to the believer. Just as Christ can iconize the invisible God, so Williams appears to suggest that all matter can image spiritual realities: "flesh tells what spirit tells" (145). This is, after all, one of the tenets of alchemy, which ranks the elements according to their spiritual properties—gold is considered the highest and purest, closest to the spirit in quality.

Hence we see the "golden-creamed and rose-tinctured" ("The Founding of the Company" 157) flesh representing the proper balance of the primacy of spirit (or form) in its relation to the crimson blood of mutability, movement, and raw matter. These active and passive principles, envisioned here on the material plane, correspond to the masculine and the feminine respectively. In the incarnation of Christ, as 'universal man' and the 'new Adam,' He must bring together these opposing poles—symbolically recapitulating the state of the first Adam (who embodied both the masculine and feminine in Williams's view). This seems to be one way in which Williams reads the doctrine of the 'two natures' in Christ—the Divine and the Human co-existing within one person (Prelude, *Region of the Summer Stars*).

This commingling of what otherwise appear to be two poles or opposite aspects falls in line with Williams's interest in the Kabbalah. In that scheme, an initial, divine unity leads via the fall to division and multiplicity, yet with a way of return remaining open for the divine spirit in man. Matter, being a product of the fall, has no place in this path of salvation. Similarly, for the gnostics, the return to this primordial unity necessarily excludes the enduring incorporation of matter into God—for the act of creation itself bears an intrinsic relationship to the fall in this world view. For Williams, on the other hand, by taking on flesh, God demonstrates once and for all that the created order is not only *good*, but plays a part in man's own salvation. As we have seen with Williams's use of the macrocosm/microcosm idea, this redemption does not concern man alone, but impacts the whole cosmos. These correspondences between different planes of reality are the basis of the internal unity and consistency of his imagery, for nothing in the created order is outside the reach of this pattern of redemption.

Thus Williams surpasses the simplicity of the Kabbalistic/Neoplatonic model, like many of the Romantic poets before him, in having this return to unity represent a real progression, insofar as it is able to incorporate not only a creation set apart from the divine nature, but also the suffering that has been undergone along the way (Abrams 184): "The new union can hardly be scarless; the original Unity, so again unified, must bear the marks of its wounds—as indeed it does: say to name but one, of the spear-thrust in the side" (Williams, *Image of the City* 104).

This "new union" is the glory and victory of the crucified and risen Christ, made manifest for Williams at all levels of reality; in the Eucharist as in the sacrament of marriage, or indeed, in something as "profane" as the craft of poetry.

In conclusion, I hope this rather rambling analysis proves helpful in understanding this poem and others from Williams's Arthurian cycle. I hope also to have begun to show how Williams's use of symbolism draws in elements from the hermetic tradition, in an attempt not at syncretism, but at a more traditional synthesis of esoteric ideas with Christian doctrine. This attempt produces inevitable ambiguities in his poetry, and prompts varied readings of the *Taliessin* cycle as a whole.

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