

The Matter of Britain

The Mythological and Philosophical Significance of the British Legends

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In honor of Stephen R. Donaldson

Originally composed in 1997 for relatives and friends from the UK, this work has been shared with others since. I make it available to all for any pleasure and insight it may bring.

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Introduction

Oh England my Lionheart
I'm in your garden fading fast in your arms
The soldiers soften, the war is over.
The air raid shelters are blooming clover;
Flapping umbrellas fill the lanes,
My London Bridge in rain again...

This first stanza of Kate Bush's song, "Lionheart," evokes a legendary image of 'Britain' only to relate it to modern imagery, specifically the legacy of World War II. The nostalgic mood, as we learn in the last stanza, reflects a dying soldier's last vision of the spirit of his country—the desires and symbols native to this land for which he would give his life. Yet the tone is visionary rather than melodramatic, as if on the verge of death the singer has seen something that can hardly be put into words: he has understood what connects *him* and his modern milieu to the glory of a mythical past, represented in legends like that of the Lionheart. It may seem strange to us an old king who lived in the 12th century and was hardly ever in his home country, should be called "Cour de Lion" and remain a symbol of something important to his nation even nine-hundred years later. How can King Richard the first still have any real significance, after Disney and Hollywood have finished with him and the Robin Hood tales connected to his reign?

But Richard "Lionheart" and the passion which earned him this title are only part of a larger mythic archive which has informed British literature since its inception. It was not the actual historical person, Richard Plantagenet, who Kate Bush wishes to evoke, but rather what he became when he was put into the 'soup' of Story – as Tolkien said of the historical figure behind King Arthur. Though the real King Richard was not as heroic as local folklore made him out to be, he stood on the threshold between later medieval times when Britain was becoming a 'nation' in the full sense, and the preceding "dark ages" of Europe when its status was less clear. The mystery that still lingers about him is inextricably tied to his young nation's search for identity. For his people, Richard represented justice and a return to cultural origins in the Holy Lands. In

Richard I, we see the long search at a turning point, as the place called “Britain” is ready to begin writing its law and to become a force in European history.

In their struggle for self-consciousness as a nation, the early peoples of this land produced a series of legendary narratives—the stories of Brutus, the episode of King Lear, and what came to be the corpus of Arthurian legend—which constitute what mythographers call the ‘Matter of Britain:’ a myth-cycle extending from the legendary founding of “Britain” to the death of Arthur and beyond. This cycle of stories gave a special meaning to Britain, providing the ultimate mythological basis for the political legitimacy of its first dynasty. But these narratives in the ‘cycle of Britain’ had an even deeper aim: embodied in their mythical pre-history of Britain is a set of themes that define an impressively original interpretation of morality and human nature, a world-view which served as the primary inheritance and context for subsequent British literature. In its thematic content, the ‘Arthurian vision’ of the narratives in the Matter of Britain are directly related to their own ‘predecessors,’ including old Saxon poetry, *Beowulf*, and Norse mythology. But despite the extent of literary scholarship on these texts, their potential philosophical significance is rarely explored in detail. Even philosophers who have worked on the philosophy of literature, romanticism and such problems as the relation between humanity and divinity, which are directly related to the themes of early British narratives, have ignored or overlooked the significance of the special *kind* of romance connected with the ‘Matter of Britain.’ But the themes of its *weltanschauung* were the primary inheritance of a whole line of later writers, from Shakespeare and Spenser to Tolkien and T.S. Eliot, whose importance for philosophy has not been completely overlooked, at least.

Because of its originality, British and other thinkers in the western tradition have returned again and again to the unique life-attitude and themes of the early national legends of Britain. Nor have they lost their relevance today: in fact, I’ll argue that the ‘Arthurian’ conception of human nature—and specifically the relation between humanity and divinity it articulates—is philosophically *sui generis*, and defines a position different in important respects from both *traditional* Christian theology and the dogmas critiqued by Nietzscheans since the late 19th

century. Despite this, the view of the world contained in the mythical history of Britain and related early Anglo-Saxon has not been analyzed as a source of potential theoretical interest; it has been relegated to the realm of fairy tale, myth, and morality play — the genres which today exist for most intellectuals only as the suppressed *other* of avant-garde hermeneutics and literary critique. For these genres offer both the patterns of motifs and archetypes that first inspired the now-hated structuralist mythographies, and also a kind of divine transcendence of structure quite foreign to that of deconstruction.

The following study is a first attempt—as provisional as it is incomplete—to fill this gap. Part I begins by examining the background and development of the British myth in the context of “origin” myths in general, its significance for the foundation of political legitimacy and a ‘national’ self-conception, and its evolution into a unified myth cycle comparable to the famous ‘cycle of Thebes.’ Part II then outlines the essential elements of the *weltanschauung* implicit in Arthurian literature and Anglo-Saxon poetry, before examines two paradigmatic narrative structures used in traditional British texts to express the ‘Arthurian’ conception of the proper relation between humanity and divinity. The first—the ‘epic/tragic’ paradigm—is discussed with reference to *Beowulf* and Arthurian literature. The second paradigm—the fairy tale or ‘story with a turning’—is discussed with reference to the Old Welsh narrative, *Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the process, I give a phenomenological analysis of the theme which appears to be uniquely characteristic of the ‘Arthurian’ conception, broadly construed: namely, *poignance* in the discovery of the reality of human existence in relation to the Divine power. I also discuss the appropriation of this theme—and the conception of the human/divine relation which underlies it—by authors such as Spenser, Mallory, and Shakespeare.

Part I: The Cycle of Britain

I. Historical Context

For many of its greatest writers, 'Britain' named not a simple political reality like a state, but rather a *problem* of the highest order. This problem included not only the issue of whether this island land, with its unique climate and beauty, was to be a single country, but more primordially, the question of its significance in the world, its destiny or purpose in history, and the relation established in it between human existence and the divine. In short, the question of the meaning of Britain was a theme of special importance for writers trying to find unity in the mixture of their land's Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Roman and Norse inheritance.

Each wave of invaders caused the question of Britain's importance or value to be redefined. The Romans who conquered the south of the island thought they had reached the limit of the world when they landed on this cloudy, peripheral land. Roman reports on Britain portray the quandry of centurions when faced with the ferocity of the tribal clans in northern Britain. And these Romans, accustomed as they were to starving out cities and reveling in gladiator battles, were horrified by the brutality of Celtic human sacrifice.

Later waves of invaders eventually brought Christian missionaries to Britain and Ireland as early as the 5th century AD. The old Britons, including the early Welsh, the Scots, the Picts, and even their Anglo-Saxon successors naturally encountered difficulties in reinterpreting their world according to the invading Christian doctrines. Like much of Old English poetry and prose, histories written by the Venerable Bede, a Northumbrian monk born in 673 AD, reflect the difficulty of incorporating Christianity.

Simultaneously, the problem of Britain's 'meaning' derived in part from a dire need to legitimate the rule of a new line of sovereigns. And above all, legitimacy required *continuity* with the previous order: some link had to be found between the English lords in the 'dark ages' and the great rulers of the ancient world, whose status in history was unquestionable. And in the process, early British authors tried to define themselves in the mold of their forebearers in the ancient world. They sought to connect their own creative efforts to the religious, mythological,

and epic literature of classical civilization. The ancient classics upheld not only the sovereignty of the Greek and Roman rulers, but also the honor code, ethical principles, and literary conventions of the time. All nations have sought to trace an ancient lineage for their authorities, whether religious or political, to connect them with established tradition. The early British were no exception to this rule.

But the need for a foundation was particularly acute in the British case because their island country was so far from the old centers of classical civilization in the Mediterranean basin. The writers of early Britain had to deal with a sense of marginality; the boundless seas spreading out north and west from their island marked the edge of the known world. And early British authors deployed extreme turns of imagination in trying to turn this psychological problem into an asset. Instead of being liminal, at the margin of the world, Britain had to be conceived instead as a haven reserved from the rest of Europe because of a privileged nature and a special destiny. Perhaps the drive of imperialism in much later centuries when Britain was a colonial power becomes more understandable (however deplorable) when seen against the background of this inherited sense of a need to recenter civilization towards its own axis.

The early British felt cut off in spatial terms from the hub of civilization. But when the dark ages brought the withdrawal of the Romans from Britain and the collapse of their empire, the British felt even more harshly divided in time from the golden ages of the past. Isolated in space and time, the British in the period of early Christianity had to create their own links to established culture, their own sovereignty. To achieve this, the British had to create their own national myth.

II. Archetypal Background

Before going further we should pause to consider certain findings about myth in general. The legends of early Britain were not made only for historical or political reasons. In his *Myth and Reality* Mircea Eliade has shown that in “primitive” societies (now called primary cultures) where myth is an active part of culture, daily life, and the yearly rituals, great prestige is placed

on knowing the origins of things. This is the key to esoteric knowledge, “For knowing the origin of an object, an animal, a plant, and so on is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them by which they can be controlled, multiplied, or reproduced at will.”¹ Knowing how something came into being and how it was named implies that one is hierarchially higher than the thing known, having a kind of gnostic power over it. Thus the knowledge of origins is itself a partial ownership or limited claim by appropriation.

Eliade perceives that the origin myths for more specific groups and natural kinds (e.g. animals and cultures) actually draw their power from the central cosmogonic myth of a givencultural tradition, the sacred myth describing the absolute origin of the whole World: “Origin myths continue and complete the cosmogonic myth; they tell how the world was changed, made richer or poorer.”² The cosmogonic myth, which implies a divine power over the world, a supernatural appropriation of the universe, is the most sacred and essential part of mythology. And the particular origin myths for creatures, charms, natural phenomena, etc., are lesser parallels of the great cosmogonic myth. In proof of this Eliade points out that many sacred geneologies which trace the lineage of royal families in fact begin with the creation of the world itself. And likewise, in medical chants, the origins of medicines are told as part of the recitation of the cosmogonic myth.³ Virtually every origin myth parallels, or alludes to, or is initially (in early versions) appended to a rendition of the cosmogonic myth itself.

Thus the potency of an origin myth resides fundamentally in being an extension of the cosmogonic myth. By appeal to cosmogonic power, the existence of something is explained and justified. Like the creation of the world, the origin of specific things occurs in a “primordial Time, the fabled time of ‘beginnings’,”⁴ which stands entirely outside ordinary history or time as we know it. In reciting an origin myth, or by enacting it as a ritual, one goes back to the

¹Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, tr. Williard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963): page 15.

²ibid, page 11.

³ibid, p.29.

⁴ibid, p.5.

cosmogony itself: “one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a ‘sacred’ Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable.”⁵ Origin myths are thus expressions of a reality that escapes time; they are returns to the sacred time “*in illu tempore*,” as Eliade says. Such myths are vehicles that allow the believer to approach divinity, the power that stands outside of time and encompasses Being as a whole.

Likewise, we should understand British mythical history as a national legend, a tale which tells the origin of a nation. Such a story does not have the sacred status of religious narrative, or ‘primary mythology’ which tells about the deeds of the gods and the creation of the world itself. In proper mythographical classifications, a national myth is actually a “legend,” or a tale of heros, not as literally believed in awe or revered as a sacred truth. But national legends are a species of origin myths in the sense Eliade describes, and as such they establish a kind of miniature ‘cosmogony’ for the nation to which they refer. This species of origin myth does not confer the power to find and control the thing described; rather, its main purpose is to justify its subject. The national legend (as it should be called) justifies the nation’s existence, establishes its independent sovereignty, and it provides a foundation for its traditions and values.⁶

Thus we should not be surprised to find that national legends usually involve a search for a basis in a previous order. The connections such legends draw are not merely political legitimations. In light of Eliade’s analysis, we should recognize that in national legends just as in

⁵ibid, p.18.

⁶In light of this formula for the national myth, we can see that the documents of the American revolution and the story surrounding the founding fathers clearly serve as a later-day national myth for the United States. Although these documents and events are also mostly historical (or literally true), they serve so vital a purpose in American national consciousness that they have acquired a quasi-mythological status. One only has to consider the monuments and works of art dedicated to George Washington to observe the almost religious reverence with which he is viewed. For example, in the “Apotheosis of Washington” painted inside the dome of the U.S. Capitol building, the first American general appears draped in a Roman toga, being taken up into heaven like a classical figure from the Sistine Chapel. George Washington embodies the ordinally ‘first’ for America; he stands for the origin of the United States. Like Britain’s Brutus, Washington’s new republic appealed to classical standards and yet defined a new identity for its people. And its Capitol, established like ‘a city on a hill,’ is an eschatological reflection of the New Jerusalem. There is even the grim irony that in the United States, the Native Americans played the role of the ‘savage giants’ in the British myth. It is even possible that this unfortunate parallel encouraged Americans to become more violent towards the ‘Indians’ once they had set about establishing their own nation. In the very structure of national myths, the inherent racism that goes with all nationalism is implied. Yet this nation’s destiny was to overcome such racism.

other origin myths, the instinct to return to the beginning is innate. The national legend's appeal to the previous order is more than that; it is an implicit appeal to cosmogony itself.

But unlike other types of origin myth, the national legend inevitably involves human actors and human initiative. While it looks into the past, the fabled time of beginnings, the national legend will also contain a new set of themes capable of embracing beliefs inherited from the nation's racial and cultural components: a new whole must emerge greater than the sum of the parts. The national legend invokes the power of the past, but also implies a new creation. Thus the national legend is the reflection *on the human level* of the divine cosmogonic act. As such, the national legend is a particularly subtle genre; it provides the most natural setting in which to compare and contrast mortal nature and immortal power.

III. Brutus and the Founding of Britain

The story of Britain's origin, episodes of which may be pieced together from many sources, fits this model of the national legend quite well. At the beginning of the process is the legendary King Brutus, the mythical founder of Britain, whose lineage was traced by popular belief to Virgil's Aeneas, and back finally to Troy and its patron Goddess Aphrodite. Implicit in the legend of Brutus was not only the desire to connect England's earliest royalty to the Romans, but also the need to balance the religion of newer Christian invaders, such as the Saxons, with a "pagan" myth.

The narrative of Brutus is richly retold from earlier sources by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his renowned work, *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Geoffrey begins Brutus' story just as if it were a continuation of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Brutus is the great-grandson of Aeneas, the legendary ancestor of the first Romans and heir of fallen Troy. Brutus' birth has several of the archetypal features often found in the birth of heroes. Like King Arthur after him, Brutus is born out of wedlock and, in a fashion similar to Oedipus, he is prophesized to "cause the death of both his

mother and father.”⁷ Brutus’ mother dies in giving birth to him, and later Brutus accidentally kills his father with a stray arrow, which leads to his exile. By this machinery Brutus is removed from home and sent on his way.

In keeping with the epic quest pattern followed by many other heroes, from Moses to Odysseus, Brutus’ route to his eventual end-point is remarkably indirect. Geoffrey sidetracks into the long story of Brutus’ return to Greece where he finds descendants of the Trojan people held as slaves under a Greek king. As if to reverse the victory of the Achaeans in the *Iliad*, Brutus proves his manhood by liberating ‘his’ people, and even marrying the Greek ruler’s daughter (just as Paris tried to marry Helen). Then, like Moses leading the Hebrews towards their promised land, Brutus sails away with the descendants of the Trojans in a huge armada. During this migration, Brutus’ ships land on a desolate island and the hero’s company visits a temple to Diana in the remains of a ruined city. Brutus beseeches the statue of the oracular goddess, “Tell me which lands you wish us to inhabit. Tell me a safe dwelling-place where I am to worship you down the ages...” After this rite, he falls asleep in the temple, and like a worshipper of Asclepius, he has a dream to heal his doubts. In this dream sequence, which recalls the underworld scene in which Virgil’s Aeneas has a vision of Rome, the goddess informs him:

“Brutus, beyond the setting of the sun, past the realms of Gaul, there lies an island in the sea, once occupied by giants. Now it is empty and ready for your folk. Down the years this will prove suited to you and your people; and for your descendants it will be a second Troy. A race of kings will be born there from your stock, and the round circle of the whole earth will be subject to them.”⁸

So Brutus is promised this goodly island ‘east of the sun and west of the moon,’ at the limits of the earth. And yet its very marginality is paradoxically turned into its strength. It shall be a haven, a “dwelling” in the true sense. And it shall become the center of power.

After further long excursions to Africa and Gaul, Brutus and his captains finally arrive at the

⁷Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, tr. Lewis Thorpe, (London: Penguin Books, 1988): “Brutus Occupies The Island of Albion,” page 54.

⁸ibid, page 65.

promised island of Albion (the island's original name in legend). We are told, "Brutus then called the island Britain from his own name."⁹ In accordance with the pattern of origin myths, the legendary founder is given the power of naming: the new land is "Brut's land," or Britain.

Then follows a particularly significant period in which Brutus and his men fight the few remaining giants on the island. Into Brutus' legend, so neatly tied to the classical world, the giants intrude like an expression of raw primitive force. The giants in Brutus' legend are motifs of enormous importance, since they come from the cosmogonic myth and other sacred mythology of the Germanic peoples. Like the Greek titans, the giants of Norse mythology were a chthonic, earthbound, violent race who express the powers of chaos and death. In Norse mythology, the giants are opposed to the gods led by Odin (a sky/sun deity).

With the defeat of the giants on Albion, Brutus and his captains overcome chaos and establish a new realm. The victory over the giants recalls the moment in the Norse cosmogonic myth when the gods set the world in order: they create the cosmos by carving up the dismembered body of the father of all giants. As Eliade's theory predicts, we can detect in this origin myth of Britain, as in all origin myths, strong traces of cosmogony.

But perhaps the strangest aspect of this victory over the giants is Geoffrey's attempt to marry it to the Judeo-Christian tradition. After all the other giants have been slain, Geoffrey tells us that one remained, "a particularly repulsive one called Gogmagog."¹⁰ It is only after this last fearsome giant is thrown from a cliff by Corineus, Brutus' chief lieutenant, that Brutus can build his city of Troia Nova, or London—the New Troy. "Gogmagog" is the name of an enemy of the Hebrews against whom the prophet Ezekiel rages.¹¹ This name was borrowed by the Christian author of the Book of Revelation. In the *Book of Revelation* "Gog" and "Magog" are Satan's captains, who gather his

⁹ibid, p.72.

¹⁰ibid, p.72-73.

¹¹Ezekiel, chs. 38-39.

armies together for the last battle at the end of time.¹² Not only does Brutus' victory and the founding of Britain have cosmogonic overtones; it also has eschatological overtones.

IV. The Paradigmatic Language of Myth and Legend

This basic saga of Brutus appears to have taken shape after the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries AD. By this time the Saxon onset had pushed the 'Britons,' meaning the people descended from the indigenous tribes and the Romans, into the western and northern extremes of the island, such as south Cornwall, north Wales, the Lake District, and Scotland. Perhaps the legend of Brutus arose as a kind of response on the part of the Britons to their defeat. In times of crisis, a people may try to make sense out of their world by returning to their myths of origin. By creating new versions of their legends a people may incorporate such new elements as the doctrines of Christianity that spread across Britain along with the Anglo-Saxon invasions.

However it originated, the legend of King Brutus did not remain strictly the property of the Britons. Awed by the remnants of Roman culture that they found, the newcomers learned and contributed to the legend of Britain's founding. We can see in one of the earliest Anglo-Saxon poems certain tell-tale motifs that became part of the legend of Britain's founding. "The Ruin" is an elegy describing the remains of a Roman city, written three hundred years after the Romans fled Britain:

Well-wrought this wall: Wierds broke it.
The stronghold burst...

Snapped rooftrees, towers fallen,
The work of Giants, the stonemiths,
mouldereth.

...

And the wielders & wrights?
Earthgrip holds them - gone, long gone,
fast in gravesgrip while fifty fathers
and sons have passed.¹³

¹²*Revelations* ch. 20 verse 8,

¹³"The Ruin," from *The Earliest English Poems*, tr. Michael Alexander (Penguin Books: 1982): page 28.
(continued...)

These first haunting words of this fragmentary poem portray a world in decline, a glory that has been lost, and a terrible alienation from a bygone golden age. This motif of irrevocable degeneration, as inevitable as the power of the “Wierd,” which means the law of time and Fate, is a constant motif in the legends of Britain’s founding. The Roman builders of the ruined city are seen as “Giants” in comparison to the poet’s contemporaries. As we have seen, these giants in the mythic age of Britain’s past are a very important motif in legends of Britain’s founding.

By the time “The Ruin” was written, clearly the events of Roman and pre-Roman Britain were distant enough in the past to have almost faded from accurate record into the misty realm of pre-historic legend. For the Anglo-Saxons, the times of the early Britons could be *taken up* into the fabric of stories and legends that express profound beliefs, concerns, and convictions of the age.

This kind of ‘taking-up’ is essential to myth-making as a process of finding *paradigms* to express ideas that cannot be conveyed adequately in other kinds of language. In ordinary language, perceived phenomena provide referents for giving signs and symbols their understood significance; simpler meanings can then be recombined in grammatical forms to express much more complex thoughts and relations among concepts. But the motivation to form and employ such written and spoken language does not arise merely from the *existence* of the referents, i.e. the things present at hand, artifacts, qualia, and actions we experience. Rather, these referents become meaning-components for linguistic expression because we need language to communicate more complex thoughts, to record facts, to make declarations of ownership, and so on. It is our desire to communicate that motivates us to employ a system of signs referring to objects, sensual qualities, feelings, and actions in ways others can learn. The meanings established through these references are made *in order to be figured*, to be worked on, shaped, and moulded for the expression of relations and ideas that are *not* intuited or perceived at the prelinguistic level.

Likewise, mythology is a language that is motivated by nothing else than a completely

¹³(...continued)

conscious, intentional human desire to communicate something with which the audience is not immediately acquainted, something that cannot just be *pointed out*. But in the case of mythology, the meanings to be expressed are neither originally perceived senses nor abstract ideas of the kind that can be articulated in combinations of terms in ordinary language. Mythology aims to express absolute meanings, which could not be expressed discursively in the ordinary language available to early cultures: they required a paradigmatic language, using concrete phenomena-complexes as symbols for larger structures exemplified by the interrelation among the phenomena. Of course, many genres symbolic representations of various kinds. What is unique to mythology is that it takes the relationships represented by its symbols, i.e. the paradigmatic structures, *directly* as its terms. Myth 'speaks' by combining, juxtaposing, and figuring (or bending, weaving, and varying) meanings that are already irreducibly *structural* in their symbolism. By recombining such paradigmatic expressions, mythology can communicate otherwise ineffable religious meanings.

Thus in developing a language of symbolic paradigms for use in myth and legend, the mythmaker must find large-scale relationships whose not only structure can be commonly recognized, but can also be used as paradigmatic expressions without distracting the audience from the intended meaning of the narrative combination as a whole. Doubt about the structural associations intended in the symbolic expressions, or excessive familiarity with the phenomena on which they are based (which tends to distract from the requisite abstract *relationship* formed in these phenomena that is referenced by the symbols), both shift the audience's attention towards the phenomena or *materials* in the paradigm, which prevents effective communication of the higher mythological meaning. Without the right choice of paradigmatic expressions as terms, the mythmaker finds his audience focused on the 'ontical' significance of the phenomena interrelated in his symbolic terms, rather than the 'ontological' meaning he is trying to communicate *in terms* of these paradigms and structures.

It is for this reason that a time which has faded from ordinary factual memory may provide a ground for mythologically *effective* paradigmatic structures; *an almost-forgotten* age is ripe for mythologizing, because the audience will recognize broad structural relations and qualities among

historical phenomena of that age without being distracted towards an actually historical meaning. Phenomena of that age can be turned into symbols that will *mean* the paradigmatic relationships, without degenerating into literal signs for historical figures and events. It is symbols of this undegenerated sort which the mythmaker needs as bricks for the edifice of mythological meaning he will erect.

The Roman and pre-Roman period of British history were used by later Celtic and early Anglo-Saxon legendmakers in precisely this way. When we understand why they drew their symbols from this earlier time, however, it should be apparent that their legends of Britain's founding were *not* invented simply to "explain" a period lost from clear knowledge. The motivation for these stories is not historical 'atiology.' Nor in general are myths and legends created as substitutes for scientific knowledge, as if myths were invented to take the place of practical technique. Early mythographers such as Frazer and Malinowski, who invented these reductive theories, made the mistake of supposing that the ontical significance of the symbolic terms—precisely what the mythmaker is trying to avoid directing attention to—were the intended meaning of the myths! On the contrary, we must recognize that a myth-maker selects elemental components from the worlds of nature and history, not because the components themselves are mysterious and in need of explanations his 'primitive' understanding cannot provide, but because these components *happen* to stand in structural relations with one another that *can be used* as terms in which to express mythological themes. For example, it was simply by chance that in the Anglo-Saxon period, the time of the early Britons was ready to be used as a legendary setting. If this had not been the case, the themes expressed in the legends would simply have been expressed in a different way, using elemental components drawn from other sources.

In a sense, then, the raw materials should not be the central interest of an analysis of myth and legend. They only help us understand a part of the context in which the story arose. In his discussion of the origin of fairy stories, J.R.R. Tolkien (quoting an earlier critic) aptly summarizes this theory of myth:

"We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the

bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.”...By ‘the soup’ I mean the story as it has been served up by its author or teller, and by ‘the bones’ its sources or material — even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered. But I do not of course forbid criticism of the soup as soup.¹⁴

In examining the second major section of the British legend--the tales of King Arthur--we will find this theory of myth and legend fully borne out. Indeed, only by recognizing that myth serves a pragmatic purpose and has a specifically linguistic relationship to factual history and the natural world can we comprehend the amazing development of Arthurian legend.

V. The Development of Arthurian Legend

Although Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table are the most famous figures in British legend, in the Anglo-Saxon period he was not really part of the larger narrative of Britain’s origin. From the fifth to the ninth century, the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers Gildas, the Venerable Bede, and Nennius describe the deeds of a certain Ambrosius Aurelianus, who was later called Arthur.¹⁵ He was no more than a petty chieftan of the Britons who led one of their last rallies against the Anglo-Saxon invaders, defeating them in twelve battles, the last of which was probably fought near the beginning of the sixth century. How did such a modest “Arthur” ever become the figure taken by Merlin from his father, who as a young lad pulled the sword from the stone, to become ruler of all Britain? By what alchemy did Aurelianus turn into the legendary wielder of the sword Excalibur, the figure of romance featured throughout European art and literature, who founded the Round Table at Camelot and sent out knights on the boldest quests and errands of legend?

In the Anglo-Saxon period, Arthur was still a historical figure remembered as a fearsome opponent and fighter. It was not until the twelfth century, the age of Arthurian romance, that the historical Arthur was sufficiently remote for the legendary figure to emerge. Of course we can never know precisely why this Briton chieftan, rather than some other person, was selected as the vessel

¹⁴J.J.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, “On Fairy-Stories,” (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), page 120.

¹⁵*Arthur: King of Britain*, ed. Richard L. Brengle (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pages 3-6.

into which so much imagination and passion would be poured. However, we can be certain that the stories were not motivated by a desire to explain an almost-forgotten warlord of the Britons. Rather, Aurelianus-Arthur became an instrument for some far greater purpose.

Even in the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers we can find clues that shed some light on this peculiar rise of Arthur into the familiar figure of legend. The earliest source, a chronicler named Gildas, describes Arthur as:

..a moderate man, who by chance alone of the Roman nation had survived in the shock of so great a calamity—his parents, undoubtably of noble rank, having perished in the same disaster, his progeny today having very much degenerated from the excellence of their ancestors...¹⁶

In Gildas, Arthur is already described as coming from an ancient lineage connected with the Romans, the greatest culture ever to be associated with early Britain. This would make possible later beliefs that Arthur was descended from the line of Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain. Moreover, Arthur is seen as the final flowering of a line that has “degenerated.” We have here again the motif of decline and ruin that colors with sadness the legends of Britain’s founding and helps to express some of these legends’ most important themes. Given these qualities which would naturally associate ‘Aurelianus’ with the characteristic motifs in the legend of Britain’s founding, it is not hard to see how he could have started to take on larger proportions among the Britons and their Welsh descendants, even while the historical truth about him was still on records familiar to some. The contingencies of the historical ‘Arthur’ provided a paradigm that could be taken up into the language of legend—he was, in short, the ingredient ‘the soup’ required.

By the end of the twelfth century Arthur had become more than he was. In one of many stories about finding Arthur’s fabled tomb, Giraldus Cambrensis describes his exhumed skeleton as so huge that “the eyesocket was a good palm in width.”¹⁷ By this time Arthur had become literally larger, in stature like the giants who supposedly built the Roman ruins and inhabited the island before Brutus arrived. In sum, continuing the metaphor of fairy tales as a kind of soup, Tolkien writes:

¹⁶ibid, p.3.

¹⁷ibid, p.11.

It seems fairly plain that Authur, once historical (but perhaps as such not of great importance), was also put into the Pot. There he was boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices, of mythology and Faerie, and even some stray bones of history...until he emerged as King of Faerie.¹⁸

The transformation of 'Aurelianus' into King Arthur is a spectacular example of how a relatively unimportant person from history can be taken up into legend, because by accident his actual qualities can be associated with motifs and archetypes already present in a growing story. The person honored in this way is embellished until he becomes a key element in a language expressing ideas of universal importance. As Tolkien says, "History often resembles 'Myth', because they are both ultimately of the same stuff."¹⁹

VI. The British Cycle

Gradually the oral and written traditions developed about the founding of Britain by Brutus and his legendary heirs, including King Lear, Uther Pendragon, and King Arthur himself. As these episodes took shape, they synthesized into an entire myth cycle comparable in literary expanse to the famous 'Cycle of Thebes' in ancient Greek mythology (which begins with Cadmus's founding of the city with an army sprung from dragon's teeth and describes an entire lineage finishing with King Oedipus himself). The Greek Cycle of Thebes was chronicled by mythographers such as Apollodorus, but episodes from it later became the basis for sophisticated works such as those of Sophocles.

In the Theban case the myth cycle goes through three important stages: (1) oral development of the legends themselves; (2) codification by a succession of chroniclers; and (3) adoption of the most impressive episodes into high literature and more sophisticated works of drama.

We have already seen that the legendary stories of Britain evolved in a similar fashion, although in a staggered sequence. The earliest parts of the British cycle, i.e. the stories of Brutus, were being codified by Anglo-Saxon chroniclers while the Arthurian parts of the story were still developing in

¹⁸Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," page 126.

¹⁹Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," page 127.

oral traditions. And so it was not until the Norman period, during the twelfth century, that the legends of Arthur were chronicled and spread by bards into many European nations.

At this point, all of the pieces could be put together as one unbroken tale of wonder. For instance Wace's "Roman de Brut" considers King Arthur part and parcel of the "Book of Brutus." Eventually this 'Cycle of Britain' became recognized fully enough to acquire a name of its own: it became known simply as the Matter of Britain. In his essay on medieval romance Albert Baugh traces this term to a European poet, Jean Bodel, who said that there were only "trois maters" (or "three matters") of any importance:

...the Matter of Rome, by which is meant romances based on classical history and legend, the Matter of France, meaning stories of Charlemagne and his peers, and the Matter of Britain or the Arthurian cycle.²⁰

In fact, among authors of the late medieval (Norman Plantagenet) period, the Matter of Britain meant the entire legendary history of Britain. This narrative encompassed the mystical time from Britain's founding to the conclusion to that magical period with the death of King Arthur, the end of the 'Realm of Logres.'

Thus the Matter of Britain refers to a self-contained 'realm' of legend that stands outside of ordinary historical time. This mythical world has its own internal sequence of events, with a beginning and an end. Whereas Brutus is its cosmogonic lord, who founds a new world, Arthur is an eschatological figure who brings the 'Realm of Logres' to its climax and conclusion.

This structure is mandated by the nature of mythology itself. In his discussion of rites of renewal, out of which Judeo-Christian eschatological doctrines also arose, Mircea Eliade affirms the intimate relationship between eschatology and cosmogony, and the inseparability of the former from the latter: "Eschatology is only the prefiguration of a cosmogony to come."²¹ Just as we saw in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of Brutus, these two irreducible provinces of divine power, cosmogony and eschatology, are inseparable. We should not be surprised, as we read the end of

²⁰Albert C. Baugh, "Medieval Romance," in *Arthur: King of Britain*, ed. Brengle, page 350.

²¹Mircea Eliade, page 52.

Thomas Malory's famous *Le Morte D'Arthur*, to find King Arthur named "the once and future king."

As Roger Lancelyn Green summed up,

Never was King Arthur forgotten, and always the belief endured in Britain that he would come again to save his land in its deadliest danger; that once more Britain should become the holy realm of Logres, the land of peace and righteousness...²²

The notion that King Arthur would return to fight for Britain on a cosmic level at the end of Time, as he once fought against the Saxon hordes, makes Arthur's status as an eschatological figure undoubtable.

²² Roger Lancelyn Green, *King Arthur* (Harmondsworth, UK: Puffin Books, 1980), page 280.

Part II: Themes of the British Legend

VII. Spenser's Paean to Arthur

In his *Faerie Queene* Edmund Spenser devotes most of a canto to the legend of Britain's founding. He tells this story as a history read by two characters from ancient tomes rather than as an episode in his own story. In this reflective mode, Spenser's rendering of the Matter of Britain lacks the transparency of the older legends themselves. This indirect 'telling' acknowledges that the legend is a narrative, not of sacred status, but having an important meaning that contributes to his themes drawn from Christianity and the romance tradition.

During their stay in the House of Alma, Spenser's allegorical characters "Arthure" and "Guyon" eventually find two books called "Briton Moniments" and "Antiquitie of Faerie," which they read with avid passion. This might seem surprising for characters who stand, respectively, for the virtue of temperance and virtuous magnanimity in general. But to Spenser, this is a wholesome and even noble desire: "...they burning both with feruent fire | Their contries auncestry to vnderstand."²³ In the passion of Arthure & Guyon, Spenser portrays the desire to know the origin of Britain and its spiritual 'meaning.'

What follows in Book II, canto x, is a complete litany from the mythic first age when chaotic and savage "giants" held the island and were conquered by Brutus, through all of Brutus' heirs. The descendants of the first king are traced all the way to Queen Elizabeth I, Spenser's patronness. Spenser tells us that Brutus was driven off course and finally arrives to conquer and unite the island. As in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account, Brutus' route to Britain is indirect. Spenser's descriptions of Brutus and his captains throwing the giants off seacoast cliffs suggest a comparison to Zeus, who throws down the titans (the Greek analog to the Norse giants) from Olympus.

However, there is something unique about the British story, despite its structural similarities to

²³Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. and Patrick O'Donnell, Jr., (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1981) II.ix.59-60.

other myths. Unlike the Olympian myth, for instance, in the Matter of Britain the theme of victory by combat is tempered with an inevitable aftermath of sadness. Just as the glory of Troy was destroyed, and the power of Rome faded leaving only ruins in Britain, so Spenser's retelling of the British legends brims with a pervasive sense of loss. One by one, Brutus' descendants fall victim to pride, or lust or folly. Particularly notable is King Lear, a descendant of Brutus' whose nation is eventually divided in war due to his mad hubris (II.x.27-32). In time, none of Brutus' old glory is left in the land: "This Realme was into factions rent."

The fading glory of the mythical British sovereigns is an example of the motif of deterioration found throughout the British legends. The tale of Brutus' descendants shows that Brutus' achievement is not everlasting. Order is established only temporarily and must continually be renewed if the forces of chaos, which surround human society everywhere, are to be kept at bay. Thus in the story of Brutus we already see a foreshadowing of the Arthurian tale. Spenser did not need to include the legends of Arthur in his chronicle of kings (and of course the character "Arthure" cannot be allowed to read his own history). Spenser could count on his readers' knowledge of Arthurian legend.

Although Spenser does not deal directly with the Arthurian legends, his portrayal of Arthur acknowledges both the spirit of the stories and Arthur's crucial importance for British self-comprehension. To Spenser, it is Arthur's humanity, not his heroic valor, that makes him an appropriate symbol for "magnificence" of Britain. Just as the cycle of Britain expresses the nation's struggle to be born, so Spenser's "Arthure" captures the pathos of Britain searching for its own meaning. And his struggle represents any human being's desire to know what the terms of life are, to discover where he stands relative to the powers of the cosmos. Arthur's is the universal struggle; his quest is the essential quest, the quest of human life. The knight sets out like an acolyte from Delphi in effort to fulfill the famous command, "Know thyself." The Arthurian legends reveal that knowing oneself involves comprehending one's purposes not just as a particular person, but as an existential part of humanity in general. Arthur's own life, and the manifold adventures of his noble knights, are a process of coming to know oneself by knowing one's "place," by discovering a

purpose appropriate to one as a human being, and choosing this purpose as one's own.

Taking his cue from Dante, Spenser casts this symbolic quest as a romance. "Arthure" the character in Spenser's epic poem is ever-searching for his Faerie Queene, whom he has seen only once in a mysterious dream. The Faerie Queene herself, like the Trojan 'Great Goddess' Aphrodite (or the Roman goddess Venus), is a mystic expression of beauty and glory; she is the absolute telos, dwelling at the center of the perilous realm. The Faerie Queene is an unqualified symbol of divine power, but she is not the 'meaning' of Britain.

Rather, the meaning is to be found in the human search itself, the epic and indirect quests of Brutus and Arthur. For mythic Britain is a profoundly human place; it stands as a dwelling reserved for and appropriate to human life. To live as a mortal being in this place means to strive for the ultimate, like Brutus on his odyssey and Arthur in his never-ending search for the Faerie Queene. Britain is the realm of human life in which this essential errand is carried out. So even when Brutus has arrived in Britain, he has not reached his final destination. It is only after his arrival that the real quest, the struggle for enduring order begins. Thus legendary Britain is not conceived as the telos of human existence. Rather, as Spenser perceives, the meaning which "Britain" has in the legendary Matter of Britain is the truth or *law* of human existence: it is the logos of mortal life. The themes of Britain's legendary history revolve around the ethical demands and the spiritual dangers of this life.

In the figure of "Arthure" and his unending search for the Faerie Queene, Spenser achieves a remarkable synthesis between the ethical and eschatological themes of the British cycle. According to tradition, Arthur meets three elvenqueens at his death, but in Spenser's poem they cease to be mere figures from celtic myth. Together these queens become the Faerie Queene, the desired end of the highest erotic love and thus the telos of human life. King Arthur becomes not just a warrior but a chivalrous knight in a sense larger than even the poets of the romantic age imagined. Arthur's love for the Faerie Queene represents his closeness to her divine power; and yet he is kept from her. Arthur is Britain, but the Faerie Queene is something even higher than Britain and human life taken as a whole.

The Spenserian value of romantic love thus transforms the old honor code, in which vassal and

liege lord are reciprocally bound together in duty. The warrior's pursuit of renown and remembrance among his people now becomes the love, striving, and passionate purpose of Arthur, which aim at a kind of immortality higher than fame and remembrance. The synthesis of romance and religion is the core of Spenser's genius in *The Faerie Queene*. Moreover, Spenser's achievement satisfies one of the most important aims of British legend: to fashion a view of life in which the old ideas of valour and honor can live together with Christian ideals of love and mercy.

VIII. The Arthurian Vision

Spenser has left behind his contemporaries' aristocratic version of King Arthur as a mere courteous figure of the "chivalrous" age. Edmund Spenser's genius penetrates right into the heart the Arthurian world of legendary Britain. By stressing Arthur's humanity rather than his sovereign power, Spenser identifies the most emotive and potent theme in the Arthurian legends.

These legends actually form a sub-cycle within the Matter of Britain as a whole. The tales of Arthur's knights, such as Percival, Tristram, Gawain, Gereint, and of course, Lancelot and Galahad, became numerous and complexly interwoven over time. Many of these stories, such as the quest for the holy grail, could occupy entire studies by themselves. We cannot begin to do justice to these legends in this analysis. But in considering at least the critical incidents in the central thread of Arthur's own story we can appreciate Spenser's perception more clearly.

The commonly accepted tale begins at Tintagel, a castle in southern England. There Uther Pendragon, while laying siege to the castle, makes an unholy bargain with the magician Merlin. Merlin disguises Uther in the likeness of Tintagel's lord, the Duke of Cornwall, so that Uther can sleep with the Duke's wife Ingraine. But in return, like some Rumpelstiltskin thief, Merlin is promised the child who issues from this illicit union. This child is Arthur. Uther, at Merlin's command, entrusts the baby Arthur to a certain Sir Ector who will bring him up well, but not reveal his identity to the boy or anyone else until the proper time.

In this beginning, we can detect traces of mythology which often survive in stories about the birth and youth of heroes. Just as the son often has to be hidden from the tyrannical father-god (Zeus

is hidden from Cronos, for instance), Arthur is taken from his powerful father. Many gods and heroes, from Hermes to Marduk, reveal themselves as trickster figures of great power by their feats of childhood strength (as if childhood itself were but a disguise for heroes). Likewise, Arthur has a chance to reveal himself in the justly famous episode of the Sword in the Stone.

Mallory sets the scene for this famous episode in his “Tale of King Arthur:” “During the years that followed the death of King Uther, while Arthur was still a child, the ambitious barons fought one another for the throne, and the whole of Britain stood in jeopardy.”²⁴ Like Albion before Brutus’ arrival, or again after Lear’s fateful division of the kingdom, Britain is thrown into chaos by warring factions who are all trying to take power. The parallel with Albion is clear: before Arthur becomes king, his nation is like Britain before Brutus, overrun with chaos.

But when the Archbishop of Canterbury calls the barons to London for Christmas in order to decide the succession, these unruly nobles are confronted with a test as seemingly impossible as any riddle or mythological paradox: a sword struck through an anvil into a block of marble, with an inscription saying, “Whoso pulleth oute this swerd of this stone and anyyld is rightwys kyng borne of all Britaygne.” The one who can remove the sword is ‘the rightful king born of all Britain,’ i.e. Brutus’ rightful heir. In their arrogance, the nobles all try to wrest the sword from its place, but to no avail. Yet a little while later, young Arthur finds his brother Sir Kay in need of a sword for a jousting match. Arthur promptly sets off to St. Paul’s to fetch the Sword in the Stone: “Arthur strode up to the sword, and without troubling to read the inscription, tugged it free.”²⁵

The Sword in the Stone is clearly a test to delineate mere strength from the inner quality of worthiness. Those who seek to wrench the sword out of the stone by sheer force are reduced to laughing stocks, while a young boy of fourteen summers easily slides the blade from its marble lodging as if that were the most natural action in the world. The ease with which the sword comes to Arthur demonstrates that it by right belongs to him.

²⁴Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, tr. Keith Baines (New York, NY: Mentor Books, 1962), page 24.

²⁵*ibid*, page 25.

But what, we should ask, does it really mean to possess something ‘rightfully?’ In an anthropological sense, to ‘own’ something, to have a ‘right’ to it, to ‘grasp’ it without resistance, to control it, are signs not just of appropriation, but of an appropriation which is fully ‘appropriate.’ Appropriation, or ownership is a hierarchical relationship established between the owner and the thing possessed. When this relationship actually agrees with their respective natures, it is appropriate or right. In other words, in the notion of rightful possession there is a reference to reality, to the categories of Being.

Why is taking the sword ‘appropriate’ in Arthur’s case but not for the other knights? Outwardly, because Arthur is Uther’s heir. But that explanation barely skims the surface; it belies the real issue in the story. Because Arthur is not proud, because his only intention is to serve his brother, Arthur is unlike the barons who are greedy for the throne. He does not share their desire to achieve tyrannical dominance over his fellows. In other words, Arthur is worthy because he is not moved by the desire to *misappropriate* divine powers that should belong to no man. In his innocence, Arthur is unconsciously placed in the proper relationship to the power that grants sovereignty.

The Sword in the Stone is undoubtably a symbol of divine potency. Placed there by Merlin, who is an archetypal “old man” figure of divine authority, the Sword is offered (like salvation) to any who can accept it. How a knight acts towards the Sword in the Stone indicates how he relates to divinity, i.e. the eschatological power of fate. The nobles’ pride prevents them from accepting the Sword as a gift freely offered; their moral corruption puts them in a misappropriative relation to divinity, so the Sword remains locked against them. Young Arthur, on the other hand, unconsciously shows that the secret to withdrawing the Sword from the stone is simply *to be human in spirit*. In this episode Arthur acts out of an ethical concern sanctioned by the honor code of the dark ages; he is not trying to attain godlike power by taking the sword. When the Sword frees itself into Arthur’s hands, the reader experiences this as a genuine miracle. From a category of being that transcends mortal life, it signals divine affirmation of mortal striving and pursuit of the good. Arthur does not choose the Sword or appropriate it; rather, we should say that the Sword chooses Arthur. He

becomes the instrument of fate.

And so Arthur becomes king and under the guidance of his mentors begins to unite the island under him. Yet despite the glorious battles he and his allies win against foreign kings and even against the Roman emperor Lucius (as Mallory tells the tale), King Arthur and his knights are constantly forced to rediscover and affirm their mortality, the human limits of their power. In one incident, Arthur lets rage get the better of him when one of his young knights is slain by King Pellinore. Against Merlin's advice Arthur sets out to challenge Pellinore. The ensuing fight is very bloody and both kings almost kill one another in their useless feud. Arthur's great sword is broken and Merlin has to save him from an ignominious death. Humbled considerably by this loss, Arthur is brought to the Lake of Avalon, where the Lady of the Lake gives him a new weapon even greater than the Sword from the stone: Excalibur and its magical scabbard. This talisman also expresses the indestructible nature of divine right.

The danger of hatred and pride is the theme in the main debate of Arthurian legend: namely, the conflict with Sir Lancelot over his illicit love affair with Arthur's Queen Guinevere. During this story of estrangement, Lancelot becomes a more profound and moving figure than any of the other knights. In his greatness, Lancelot's one sin reveals his humanity. He rejects any pretension to being perfect, as we see in the "Tale of the Sangreal," when Lancelot's son Galahad is first seated in the highest place at the Round Table next to Arthur. A lady comes to Lancelot weeping because he is no longer ranked as the best knight in the world. But Lancelot responds, "My lady, I have always known that I am not the greatest knight."²⁶

Unlike his son Galahad who is pure from all sin, Sir Lancelot is the main romantic hero of the tales. Galahad is a quasi-divine figure who is tangential to the main thread of the Arthurian legends. He exists in part to provide a polar opposite to Modred, King Arthur's demonic and treacherous son. While both Galahad and Modred are born out of wedlock, Modred is the product of Arthur's incestuous relationship with his aunt Margawase; Modred is as profane as Galahad is pure. This pair

²⁶ibid, page 364.

points to an ironic similarity between Arthur and Lancelot, both of whom are displaced by their progeny. Galahad and Modred symbolize religious concepts of absolute righteousness and wickedness respectively, but these are clearly not the categories for existing humans such as Arthur and Lancelot. It is the trials of Lancelot and Arthur, their struggles with each other and with themselves, with which the bard is chiefly concerned.

Perhaps even more than Arthur himself, Lancelot's courage and remorseful humility becomes the central example of the human ideal: he is the best that a man can be while remaining within the bounds of mortality. True to his love, Lancelot saves Guinevere from being put to death by Arthur for adultery, and accidentally kills Sir Gawain's brother in the fight. In a long process of rapprochement, Lancelot seeks to be reconciled with Gawain and Arthur. But when by order of the Pope he returns Guinevere to Arthur, Gawain resists his efforts to renew his friendship with the king: as Mallory writes, "The king may do as he will, said Sir Gawaine, but wit thou well, Sir Launcelot, thou and I shall never be accorded while we live."²⁷ Even after Lancelot offers to do a long penance, Gawain spurns him. Gawain later convinces Arthur to return to France to besiege Lancelot's castle for vengeance and in his fury insists on sparring with Lancelot several times. Although Lancelot wins these contests, he cannot bring himself to kill Gawain.

In the tradition of the Matter of Britain, this chaotic split that divides the knights of the Round Table leads inexorably to Arthur's death and the end of his realm. Like King Lear, who disowns and exiles Cordelia, his one loyal child, King Arthur has divided himself from Lancelot, his greatest ally and truest friend. While Gawain and Arthur are away in France pursuing their revenge, Arthur's bastard son Modred takes the chance to rebel against his father. Arthur's feud with Lancelot has left enough nobles in doubt that Modred is able to gather a considerable army to support his claim to the throne. Without Lancelot's assistance, Arthur's force has to fight desperately for a beachhead at Dover on returning to England. Gawain, who is dying from the wounds Lancelot gave him, finally

²⁷*Arthur: King of Britain*, ed. Brengle, from Mallory's "Le Morte D'Arthur" in translation, Everyman's Library, two volumes (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1906), page 299.

repents his actions:

Mine uncle King Arthur, said Gawaine, wit you well my death day is come, and all is through mine own hastiness and wilfulness...Had Sir Launcelot been with you as he was, this unhappy war [against Modred] would never have begun; and of all this I am the causer, for Sir Lancelot and his blood, through their prowess, held all your cankered enemies in subjection and daunger. And now, said Sir Gawaine, ye shall miss Sir Launcelot.²⁸

Like Gawain's speech, Mallory's rendition of King Arthur's death is pervaded by terrible regret and loss. On his deathbed, Gawain even writes to Lancelot to ask for forgiveness; he admits that he "was moved by the spirit of revenge and spite to provoke you to battle," and asks Lancelot to come one last time to aid King Arthur.²⁹ And Lancelot, true to his liege and honorable to the last, does return to Britain in answer to Gawain's call. But Lancelot is too late to save King Arthur. After warnings in a dream from Gawain's ghost, King Arthur meets Modred on the field of Camlann in hopes of making a pact of settlement. But by accident, their battle begins when a soldier draws his sword to kill an adder in the field; this serpent is the sign of an inevitable fate. In the ensuing melee, both armies slaughter each other entirely, and after all this needless death, King Arthur finally fights Modred alone, slaying him but not without himself being mortally wounded. Like Gawain, Arthur must at last face the truth of his own mortality and the error of his pride: "But alas for the good Sir Launcelot! How sadly I have missed him today! And now I must die--as Sir Gawain warned me I would--repenting our quarrel with my last breath."³⁰

In the famous last scenes of Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, we find one especially clear sign of Arthur's repentance. Arthur is helped from the field by the brothers Lucas and Bedivere who lay him in a small chapel. After Lucas dies from his wounds, Arthur is stricken so completely by grief that he says to Bedivere,

Take thou Excalibur, my good sword, and go with it to yonder water side [the lake of Avalon], and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water,

²⁸Arthur: *King of Britain*, ed. Brengle, page 312

²⁹Mallory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, tr. Baines, page 497.

³⁰ibid, p.500.

and come again and tell me what thou there seest.³¹

Twice Bedivere cannot bring himself to fulfill Arthur's last command, but finally he throws Excalibur up over the water, and it is caught by the upthrust arm of the Lady of the Lake.

In this heart-wrenching scene, the magical sword is returned to its origin and its true owner. Thus King Arthur acknowledges that as a human being he has no final claim on such a divine power; like sovereignty and life itself, Excalibur is merely 'loaned' to Arthur. In his last action before he is taken away on the barge by the three queens of death, King Arthur's humanity is clearest. There is a kind of mercy in Arthur's passing. No longer the instrument of Merlin's machinations, Arthur is just a man once more. And by surrendering Excalibur he affirms his appropriate relationship to divinity.

The predominant theme of Arthur's story is unmistakable in this final outcome. The nature of humanity itself requires that the realm of peace and glory fades again with the king's passing in the hands of the elvenqueens. They hold him until his reawakening at the end of time when Arthur will fight once more for Britain. Brutus' cosmological combat is transformed into Arthur's prophesied, but infinitely remote, eschatological victory to come. And the cycle of Britain is left as a 'fragment' in the Kierkegaardian sense: its ultimate completion is left up to God.

* * * * *

In summary, the Arthurian vision embodies two primary sets of themes. First, its ethical and religious themes provide the outline for a moral world-view. In the Arthurian scheme, the honor code of ancient Norse fatalism is balanced with the Christian hope of immortality. This balance requires, on the one hand, an absolute commitment to honor and a will to fight for the good. But on the other hand it warns against the terrible perils of pride and hatred, which leads us to try to misappropriate divine powers (like the barons who try to take the sword from the stone). This balanced world-view requires courage, but forbids us from arrogating to ourselves the *divine right* of eschatological judgment and vengeance (like Gawain and Arthur when they try to judge Lancelot).

³¹*Arthur: King of Britain*, ed Brengle, page 318.

As a result, the strictures of the Arthurian vision are extremely demanding. It is not surprising, then, that the theme of repentance runs throughout the legends of Britain, especially in the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

Second, the cycle of Britain, through the episodes of Brutus, Lear, and Arthur, serves to unify the young nation politically and morally, giving it legitimacy and defining its own special *weltanschauung*. The legends acknowledge that Britain is more than the sum of the different invading tribes who populated it with so much strife. While British sovereignty originates with Brutus and his classical lineage, Arthur's Round Table is filled with legendary heroes from every culture that contributed to the British population. Before returning to the ethical themes of the Matter of Britain, we should consider in more depth the imagery of Britain itself as an expression for the themes of the Matter of Britain.

IX. Impregnable Wierd and the Human Will

In the legend of King Arthur, moral and religious themes thus bind together non-Christian notions of duty and valor with the Christian values of mercy, repentance, and humility before God. This combined ethical/religious view of man's place in existence has roots that antedate the national legends of Britain. The beginnings of the synthetic process we have seen in the Matter of Britain are perhaps even more clear in surviving Old English literature from Britain's Anglo-Saxon period, written when the young nation was redefining itself. The Anglo-Saxon scholar James Earl writes of the Old English elegies such as "the Seafarer,"

They focus particularly on the feelings of loss and decay, elevating the pain of the transitoriness of happiness, life and the world to a first principle, against which is sometimes balanced the Christian hope for salvation in a better world after death.³²

Like the Norse religion before it, the emerging British vision focuses on the human desire for glory and immortality, and recognizes the flaws and decay by which the strong power of fate defeats

³²James W. Earl, "Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in Beowulf and Other Old English Poetry," in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, vol. X, no.3, 1987; p.168.

human aspirations. But it adds to that inconsolate and difficult vision of feudal duty an awareness of love and the Christian hope for salvation and immortality. For Christianity contradicts the old fatalism. It suggests that there could be a day when Arthur returns in glory, and the realm of Albion is made anew as part of the “new heaven and new earth” promised in the Book of Revelation.

The effect of this thematic combination is a conception of man as a being who must struggle for existence in this world, facing impossible odds with bravery. And in the end, recognizing his own limits, man must turn his face towards divinity, relying on the promise of final Justice.

A recognition of human limitations is especially clear in the Old English concept of *Wierd*. The poet of *The Wanderer* several times mentions the “Wierd” (or “wyrd” in Old English), a word that is nigh impossible to translate. In short, “Wierd” means fate or destiny. An individual can have his or her own “wierd”—the poet describes earls killed in battle, saying, “Their Wierd is glorious.”³³ But in another sense, “Wierd” carries a connotation less seemingly exciting and positive than a personal “destiny;” it carries a sense of doom. The world’s return to primeval chaos is the central feature of the eschaton in Norse mythology. At the “Ragnarok” the ruling gods of Asgard will fight the primeval monsters of the universe—the trickster, the wolf, the hound, the fire-giant, and the world serpent—until all of them have destroyed one another entirely,³⁴ like King Arthur and Modred. This dire Norse eschatology, which is remarkably different from the Christian Judgment Day, lingers in the background whenever “Wierd” is mentioned. Thus the poet of *The Wanderer* sings,

In the earth-realm, all is crossed;
Wierd’s will changeth the world.
Wealth is lent to us, friends are lent us,
man is lent, kin is lent;
all this earth’s frame shall stand empty.³⁵

The changes wrought by Wierd are not just alterations happening in time, but also the end of Time itself as imagined in the Norse mythos. Thus the Anglo-Saxons were not entirely confused

³³*The Earliest English Poems*, tr. Michael Alexander, “The Wanderer,” page 73.

³⁴Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1987), page 174-175.

³⁵*The Earliest English Poems*, tr. Alexander, “The Wanderer,” page 73.

when they equated the God described by Christian missionaries with their old concept of Wierd--for both are names for a 'divine' power, which means essentially the eschatological power to change everything. Although Christianity has a more anthropomorphisized view of divinity than does Norse myth, eschatology is the key to both religions.

Even more importantly, the poet in *The Wanderer* implies that since Wierd controls the end or *telos* of everything, it is in fact the real owner of everything. In mythology, to *own* or rightfully *appropriate* something is to have the power of determining its purpose, the end or destiny towards which it will be employed or sent. In this sense, Wierd is the *Unappropriable Appropriator*,³⁶ the divine power that gives their destiny to all things but which can be appropriated or controlled by none of them. Consequently all of the things precious to us in this earthly existence are never really ours. Our mortality, and our inferior status before the Wierd, is recognized by saying that things are "lent" to us, just as Excalibur was only lent to King Arthur, and had to be returned to the primeval waters in the end of the story. The Venerable Bede went even further than the *Wanderer* poet, stating "lif is laenne," which translates literally as "life is loaned;" in other words, "life in ephemeral" or "life is transitory."³⁷ Life itself belongs to the Wierd; we relinquish our life to it in the end.

But Wierd is not only fate, eschatological doom, and a divine force superior to mankind in its right to possess and control everything. Wierd is also the irresistible *law* of Time that determines the Ragnarok, the law that divides the mortal from the divine, and forbids misappropriation of eschatological privilege. The *Wanderer* complains that his exile is bitter, but in resignation he says, "Wierd is set fast."³⁸ His condition cannot be changed, because all human existence is a kind of exile and he is subject to that law. In a similar vein, the scribal addition that concludes *The Seafarer*

³⁶This is why in his *Time and Being*, Heidegger says that the meaning of Being, Being which 'gives' both time and the 'letting-presence' of beings, is Appropriation or *Ereignis*.

³⁷*Beowulf*, Prose Translation by David Wright (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1984), Introduction page

³⁸"The Wanderer" in *The Earliest English Poems*, tr. Michael Alexander, page 70.

reflects on death: “..Doom is stronger and God mightier than any man’s conception.”³⁹ Willy-nilly, no matter what we pretend or attempt, there is a law which prevents man from becoming immortal.

This law is not like a legal dictum, or a moral rule laid down by God. Rather this law has compelling power because it describes a *reality*; it represents the firmament that surrounds and encompasses man and the gods. In fact, the “Wierd” has an almost metaphysical sense in Anglo-Saxon poetry: it is the inalterable, unchanging law of life.

The Wierd is Being itself. Like “Yggdrassil” the axis-mundi World-Tree in Norse mythology, which exists before creation and continues after the Ragnarok, “Wierd” is a name for the cosmos, the eternal. Yggdrassil is pictured as spanning the three levels of the cosmos because from the Norse perspective Being is a hierarchy, or a chain with many levels of existence. Thus the Wierd is the irresistible Reality of this hierarchy, the unbreachable division between the material, the mortal, and the divine levels. This is what makes the Wierd so very perilous: since the three levels or Categories of Being (to put it in Aristotelian fashion) simply are as they are, man cannot raise himself to the divine level, and any attempt at misappropriation is doomed to failure.

The notions Wierd embodies in Anglo-Saxon poetry are not entirely unique; similar concepts have been found (and constantly misunderstood) by scholars in other cultures. For instance, in discussing Heraclitus’ view that Zeus or “the one wise thing” governs everything, Jonathan Barnes claims that the great pre-Socratic philosopher has simply confounded together prescriptive and descriptive law: “what is and what ought to be are confused.”⁴⁰ Barnes recognizes that there is an eschatological theme in Heraclitus’s philosophy, but surprisingly, he does not recognize that Heraclitus’ *logos* and *dike* (law and justice), like Anaximander’s “infinite” *apeiron* are existential rather than deterministic concepts: they prescribe how man should freely act and view himself in temporal life, but at the same time they describe how things inevitably stand at the end of life, or the

³⁹ibid, “The Seafarer,” page 77.

⁴⁰Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pages 132-133

end of the temporal cycle of the cosmos. Eschatological law is always simultaneously prescriptive and descriptive, and the most profound concepts in every world religion have this dual quality. This is no confusion; the paradox is intentional. How else can religion communicate that humans should live in accordance with their place in the hierarchy of being?

Likewise, Wierd should not be misunderstood as a deterministic concept; it is an eschatological concept that combines moral right with fatalistic necessity, leaving human beings free to act loyally and discharge the duties of life, or to act arrogantly and even to challenge the law of Wierd. Man is free even to defy the Categories of Being itself if he wishes. But the law is adamant about the conclusion of such a course: the transgressor who will not repent in the end shatters himself against the impregnable Wierd. Such is the 'moral teleology,' as we might term it, of concepts like the *archē* or 'first principles' of the pre-Socratic philosophers, or the Anglo-Saxon Wierd. In all eschatological notions, morality and destined end (or 'telos') are combined.

Although not deterministic, Anglo-Saxon poetry seems to display a grim view of the world. It might still be thought that in a world governed by Wierd, little place is left for anything but human submission to divine fate. Faith would then become simply the total abnegation of will. But paradoxically, Wierd defines a limit that mankind must respect *only thereby to increase human responsibility* for events, and to lay further emphasis on the importance of the human will. As the stories of Brutus and Arthur testify, within appropriate boundaries *human passion is not effectless*: commitment to good ends does make a difference to the world and the actors involved. But because of the limits set by the Wierd itself, in ethical terms man can only try to do his best; in the last judgment it is not the earthly success or failure of human endeavours that matters. Wierd changes all; we are beset with suffering; and ultimately all our efforts end in death: these are seen as reasons to give up pride and arrogance, but they are never seen as excuses from the moral demands of duty. Thus Spenser's heroine Britomart urges..

That all the sorrow in the world is lesse,
Then vertues might, and values confidence.
For who nil bide the burden of distresse,

Must not here thinke to liue: for life is wretchednesse.⁴¹

Lif is laenne, life is wretchedness: Bede and Spenser tell us essentially the same thing. But these are not words of despair. They are intended as a recognition of man's limitations, but they also affirm his capacity for virtue and valor in this earthly life.

The ethical component of the Arthurian vision is accurately portrayed in several of Shakespeare's tragedies, as one little-treated example may demonstrate. Near the end of *Macbeth*, Macbeth fights and kills young Siward, the son of the Earl of Northumberland. When the father is told of his son's death, the earl asks only one question: "Had he his hurts before?"⁴² Siward only wants to know if his son was wounded in front, which will prove that he was facing his enemy rather than fleeing. Upon hearing that his sons hurts were "on the front," the earl exclaims boldly,

Why, then, God's soldier be he! Had I as many sons as I have hairs, I would not wish them to a fairer death.⁴³

We might be shocked by such a reaction to this news—the earl's son is slain, yet he seems only to care about the manner of his death. Most of us today would find it very difficult to take this attitude.

Siward's is an uncompromising view of life. It demands absolute courage as the human duty, and makes loyalty the sole criterion of honor. The thane is not concerned so much that his son lost the fight. That he actually failed to achieve his aim hardly matters if he was courageously trying to do what was right. That in a nutshell is the ethical category of the Arthurian vision.

According to these principles, human beings are responsible primarily for their intentions; it is incumbent on us to turn and stand in the face of evil, and fight it to the last. But the final outcome is left up to God. "God's soldier be he," as the elder Siward says.

It is significant that Shakespeare explicitly selects a Northumbrian noble to state the honor code in its harshest terms. For the Northumbrian lands in Britain were the center of a warrior cult who

⁴¹Spenser, III.ix.15

⁴²Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V.viii, line 46 (The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Peter Alexander, Collins, 1983).

⁴³Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V.viii, line 48-49

were not easily converted to Christianity by the first missionaries (and even less easily controlled by Anglo-Saxon and later Norman kings). James Earl describes the world-view of this cult after it had been harmonized as much as possible with Christianity:

God is king, Christ lord, the world is fleeting, falling, and soon to be destroyed; life is a losing battle against death, and fate is inexorable; never retreat or surrender, but die for your lord like a hero, so his fame (his glory) will live forever. This stark existential theology finds poignant expression in poems like 'The Seafarer.'⁴⁴

“Poignant expression” is an apt term for the spirit of all early British literature. What makes the Arthurian vision unique is precisely its severe poignance. The poignance of the Arthurian vision does not arise from the style or subject matter of the British national legends and early poetry. Rather, poignance runs through every vein of this literature; it is present in every story that portrays the position of human beings relative to the immortal power of life and death. As we have seen, in early Anglo-Saxon literature, divinity turns a paradoxical face towards mankind: the divine is as forbidding as the Wierd, hiding behind the veil of nature; and yet the divine is close by, as near as the biddings of conscience, the promptings of duty, and the courage of a bold heart. We may call this paradoxical relationship between humanity and divinity the *relationship of poignance*. Poignance, so defined, is the essence of the Arthurian vision, its highest theme.

X. The Tragic Poignance of Humanity

Dictionaries define poignance as a keen distress, or as something that penetrates or pierces. A good example of poignance in this sense is the pity we feel for the hero of a dramatic tragedy, who in the Greek tradition typically pursues a good purpose but is defeated by fate and his single 'tragic flaw.' The catharsis of the tragedy penetrates us, piercing our own illusions and letting the hero's plight move us to a greater understanding.

In the Germanic tradition, which was inherited by the authors of the British legends, the hero's mortality is not disguised in a flaw that eventually brings about his fall. The Germanic hero's 'flaw'

⁴⁴James W. Earl, p.168

is simply *that he is a human being*. As noted above, King Arthur's pride and refusal to forgive Lancelot leads to his tragic death. But what moves people when they read *Le Morte D'Arthur* is its expression of the human condition as such. King Arthur ends his stewardship of Britain. And through his tears, Sir Bedivere eventually musters the courage to give up King Arthur, to accept his death and go on, as must we all. This is the poignance of resignation.

In this light, it is not hard to see why the great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard viewed the "resignation" of the tragic hero as the highest expression of *the ethical* possible in human life. For instance, when King Arthur challenges Modred after the battle of Camlann, he knows there is no hope for victory, but he is resigned to try to the last. He tells his remaining knights: "I care nothing for my life now. And while Sir Modred is at large, I must kill him. There may not be another chance."⁴⁵ No longer burdened by hope for material reward or any possibility of gain for himself, the hero's will to fight on expresses the principle of morality in its purest form.

But what makes the tragic hero so poignant is not simply his or her goodness or passionate will to oppose the evils of the world. Poignance always lies in the human relationship to divinity. By his purification and trial, the hero not only fulfills the principles of ethics; in the same movement, he approaches closer and closer to divine splendor and glory. In his pure ethical resignation the hero brings himself to the limit of what a human can achieve; he comes right up to the boundary between humanity and divinity.

This kind of 'limiting' or approximation-process can also be seen in the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*. Although it has a decidedly Germanic background, *Beowulf* shares many themes with the legends in the Matter of Britain.⁴⁶ In the course of this epic poem, the hero Beowulf fights three monsters, each of which is deadlier than the one before. As John Niles points out in a recent study, "The three adventures show a clear progression, and to displace any one of them would alter the

⁴⁵Mallory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, tr. Baines, page 499.

⁴⁶For example, see the discussion of "wyrð" and of the honor code in David Wright's introduction to *Beowulf*, (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1984).

spiritual sense of the poem.”⁴⁷

First Beowulf kills Grendel, a ferocious troll-like creature who had been terrorizing the Danes. Like all the monsters in *Beowulf*, Grendel emerges from the shadows of ancient Germanic and Norse legends, and is associated with telling mythological archetypes. Grendel first begins to terrorize the hall of Heorot because he is a descendant of Cain (like most of the rest of the Old English bestiary), and he hears the story of Genesis sung in the hall.⁴⁸ Although this explanation is Christian, behind Genesis we may suspect that the poet is thinking of another song of creation: the Norse cosmogonic myth.

Like the giants who oppose the gods in the Norse tradition, Grendel is immense; he is so huge that it takes four warriors to lift his head when he is killed. The poet also describes how Grendel kills his human prey by ripping them apart and devouring them entirely. Such descriptions are part of the poem for more than just graphic effect. Like many creatures (giants and titans included) symbolizing “the chthonic,” or the earthbound force of death, Grendel is associated with dismemberment. This motif runs throughout the poem. When Beowulf dismembers Grendel, like Brutus triumphing over the giants, he re-enacts in miniature the cosmic dismemberment of the father of giants in the Norse cosmogonic myth. This heroic victory establishes Beowulf’s identity and restores order to the kingdom. Niles eloquently sums up the moral significance of Beowulf’s courage in facing Grendel: “..at length he comes on the scene as a man who directs his strength with all of his integrity at his command in the service of his fellow human beings.”⁴⁹

But Beowulf has a much harder time defeating Grendel’s mother, a sea-hag whom he fights in her hall under a dark and almost bottomless lake. Although she is supposed to be physically weaker than Grendel himself, she is in fact a greater threat, as the poem makes clear. Grendel’s mother has more serpentine characteristics than her son; she is more closely identified with the most powerful

⁴⁷John D. Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and Its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), page 29.

⁴⁸Beowulf, ch. 1., lines 88-100.

⁴⁹Niles, page 23.

archetype in Indo-European mythology. Like the Babylonian dragon Tiamat, for instance, Grendel's mother is a water-dweller, and the bloody lake she inhabits is swarming with slimy creatures, "dragons groping in the depths," "monsters, serpents, and fierce brutes."⁵⁰

After descending through the lake to the 'underworld' inhabited by this second monster of the poem, Beowulf finds himself in a decorated hall. When he encounters her, Grendel's mother wrestles with Beowulf and almost slays him. He is only able to save himself when he spots a magical sword, "an ancient blade forged by giants,"⁵¹ which is hanging in the hall (and which further associates the monsters with the chthonic creatures of Norse myth). Wielding this weapon as if he himself were a giant, Beowulf is finally able to kill the monster.

When Beowulf has presented what remains of this giantish sword to the Danish King Hrothgar, he is praised: "You carry all of this great strength of yours with prudence and humility." As if to sum up the meaning of the combat, Hrothgar advises Beowulf not ever to succumb to arrogance or love of power. Even as he thanks him, Hrothgar reminds Beowulf of his nature: "In the end, brave soldier, death will defeat you."⁵²

And in his third and final adventure, as an old man who has been king of his own people for fifty years, Beowulf does finally meet his death. He goes out to challenge not Grendel or his serpentine mother, but a full-fledged dragon, one which (in keeping with the Germanic representation of this archetype) is guarding a hoard of treasure under an ancient barrow or burial mound. As Niles notes, unlike the previous monsters this creature is morally neutral,⁵³ and it retains all of its mythological significance as the archetype of time and divinity itself. Like the World-Tree "Yggdrassil" or the serpent "Midguardsworm" that surrounded the seas in Norse mythology, the dragon originally symbolized cosmic being and destiny; like the Wierd, the dragon represents

⁵⁰*Beowulf*, page 61, ch. 21, lines 1426-27.

⁵¹*Beowulf*, page 64, ch. 23, lines 1559-1560. Note that the sword Beowulf finds in the underwater hall is made by "titans;" it further identifies Grendel and his mother with the giant/titan/chthonic archetype. We might say that like Arthur, Beowulf receives a sword from a "lady of the lake."

⁵²*Beowulf*, page 68, ch. 25, lines 1767-68.

⁵³Niles, p.29.

Appropriation in the divine sense.⁵⁴—thus its usual possession of glorious treasure, a motif found in dragon stories everywhere from North American to ancient China. In the Germanic tradition the giving of gold and other riches was the most important sign of a king’s relationship to his warriors, and so the association between treasure and the dragon was elaborated more in Germanic literature than in any other culture.

When Beowulf comes to fight the dragon, like King Arthur on the field of Camlann, he is eventually bereft of all but one of his companions. Though he kills this third and final monster, Beowulf dies from the poisoned wounds he receives fighting the dragon. The poet describes at length Beowulf’s funeral byre, and the wealth laid in his barrow: “They buried the gold and left that princely treasure to the keeping of the earth, where it yet remains..”⁵⁵ In this poignant last testament to Beowulf, the poet acknowledges that only divine powers have a final claim on the hoard; like Excalibur in the Arthurian legends, and the Rhinegold in the *Nibelungenleid*, the dragon-treasure must be returned whence it came.

The thematic importance of this progression is clear. As Beowulf encounters monstrous opponents successively more and more associated with the dragon archetype and the divine power it embodies and expresses, the hero himself is demonstrating the ideal of a courageous mortal life. His ethical obligation to humanity carries him to a point of purity, an extreme in which victory is impossible: there he encounters the religious as the limit of the human world. In this way the hero can experience Divinity *indirectly* as the boundary of the ethical world and human life. Commenting on the dragon in *Beowulf* as a “threshold figure,” John Niles writes:

He comes to Beowulf as a reminder of the limits that bound all earthly success. He is the last power that stands between the hero and the successful completion of his passage. He is not death himself, nor is he any other allegorical figure, but when

⁵⁴It is not inconceivable, in fact, that the Old English word “wyrð,” from which “Wierd” derived, was etymologically related to “wyrm,” the Old German word for the dragon. Since the Wierd and the Dragon mean essentially the same thing at bottom, such a relationship should not be as surprising as it might at first seem. Whether they are related or not, the similarity in sound and form between the “wyrm” and the “wyrð” is interesting, and has been noted by some modern authors. For example, Stephen Donaldson makes use of this parallel in his novel, *The One Tree*.

⁵⁵*Beowulf*, page 101, ch. 43, lines 3160-3173.

Beowulf chooses to seek him out he does so with a trace of reluctance, as if he knows what the outcome of the fight must be.⁵⁶

Beowulf's reluctance is poignant because it reveals the resignation in his choice; even knowing that he will die, the tragic hero willingly enters his last trial and purification. In this extreme, the ethical principle carries his mortal life to the threshold of the divine level of being, the eschatological category.

Thus the death of Beowulf, as much as "Le Morte D'Arthur," is a catharsis of poignance. And what draws an emotional response from us is the recognition in the poem that humanity and divinity are different, yet perilously close to one another. After reading these stories, the alien power of the Wierd does not seem so totally inscrutable, or 'wholly other,' after all. For the hero has struggled with it. When the Wierd takes the shape of the dragon and it is sought out by a hero such as Beowulf, it does not seem unapproachable. In the approximation-process of the heroic life, humanity approaches divinity like a mathematical asymptote, drawing ever nearer to it but never quite meeting it, never crossing that ordinal barrier. Yet the hero is poignant to us because he reaches out to touch divinity, even if he cannot hold on to it. At the infinite point of death, the incommensurable categories may meet.

XI. Poignance and the Mark of Mortality

The heroic literature of early Britain establishes an intimate relationship between man and divinity arising from the hero's progress through the ethical category to a point of final resignation. The same relationship can, however, be presented in the opposite way. Rather than starting out with a young hero and tracing his approach towards divinity, a poet may begin with the divine category and 'work backwards,' so to speak, to humanity. This process, which is structurally the reverse of the heroic approximation to divinity, involves a kind of categorical stepping down or 'withdrawal' from divine or eschatological powers into the realm of humanity. In the literature of early Britain

⁵⁶Niles, page 30.

this spiritual movement is achieved mainly through ‘the mark of mortality.’

In folklore, any blemish that indicates profanity, taintedness, or imperfection is an example of this motif. For example, famous heroes such as Achilles and Siegmund who are magically protected from weapons usually have a spot on their bodies where they are vulnerable to attack. This point of weakness is the flaw that eventually allows them to be slain: it is the sign that even though they are great and powerful, they are mortal. In other cases, the ‘mark’ may not be identified as an explicit point of physical weakness. Oedipus, the hero of the Cycle of Thebes, whose name means “club-footed,” is not slain because of the flaw on his foot. But his wound is a sign of imperfection with archetypal significance. As with Achilles, Oedipus’ ‘mark’ is found on his lame foot because this is the point where the body touches the inanimate matter of the earth: the mark is a reminder of man’s emergence out of the dead ground and it forebodes his return to the dust.⁵⁷ In fact, in archaic mythology the ‘mark of mortality’ motif developed from the notion that mankind had *autochthonic* origins. The idea that humans were first born out of the ground, like the warriors who sprang from the dragon’s teeth sown by Kadmus, was a reflection not only of an early agricultural society but also of the mythmakers’ consciousness of human mortality.

In much later literature, such as the tales of King Arthur and his knights, the mark of mortality loses its clear connection to feet and the chthonic in general, but retains its significance as an indication of mortal limitations. For instance, the mark of mortality is found in the famous legends of Sir Percival on which Edmund Spenser drew so heavily in Book I of *The Faerie Queene*. In the end of the quest for the holy grail when Sir Galahad has found the grail and cured King Pellles’ wound, Sir Percival finds his beloved Blanchefleur. Percival had fallen in love with her when he first saw her in his youth. He lost her on his first visit to Castle Carbonek because, after a vision of the grail, he ran out of the castle in a mad pursuit of his quest. He did not pass the test of the enchanted hall in the castle, and could not find Blanchefleur’s castle again.

At the end of the grail story, Percival finds Blancefleur once more. She is the maiden bearing

⁵⁷For further reading, see Claude Levi-Strauss’ famous paper on autochthony in the Oedipus story and the entire cycle of Thebes.

the holy grail, and he and she become the new king and queen of Castle Carbonek. When King Pelles' wound is cured, the pestilence that turned the kingdoms around Carbonek into "wastelands" is ended, and the marriage of Percival and Blanchefleur symbolizes the rejuvenation of life in the land. The entire episode is one of miraculous renewal and joy.

But the victory is not perfect. As a token of their marriage, Blanchefleur brings Percival a sword that was broken, saying that whoever can remake it will be the rightful king of Carbonek.

When Percival places the pieces together,

...at once they were joined, with only one small crack. "If you had spoken the words which would release the spell when you first came to Carbonek," she said, "there would be no crack in the sword."⁵⁸

The one tiny flaw in Percival's sword is a mark of the knight's human nature. By this blemish Percival is distinguished from the unearthly perfection of Sir Galahad, who is taken up into heaven after his victory at Carbonek and his communion with the blood from the Holy Grail. Unlike the quasi-divine Galahad, Percival does not win the quest of the Holy Grail, but he does win something more appropriate: his wife Blanchefleur. The crack in the sword suggests that the renewal he has achieved is limited by the bounds of human power--and within these boundaries is the proper place for mortal love, i.e. romantic love. By introducing the crack in this sword, the storyteller takes us back from the ghostly world of the grail and Galahad's apotheosis into the world where Percival and Blanchefleur will share their joy. By stepping back just slightly from the threshold of divinity, we re-enter the world of humanity.

This conclusion to the quest is poignant because through it we perceive how close the otherworld is to our reality. All around us this perilous divine category threatens to break through like the sudden arrival of the grail procession; an awful power is hidden behind a veil as thin as the

⁵⁸Roger Lancelyn Green, *King Arthur*, page 247. Green notes that Mallory omitted the early adventures of Percival in which he first sees Blanchefleur asleep in her tent. These details are drawn mainly from the French *Conte du Graal*. Likewise, the marriage of Percival and Blanchefleur and the crack in the sword signifying their union are not to be found in Mallory's "Tale of the Sangreal," his version of the Holy Grail legends. Green has drawn these from Wolfram von Eschenbach's famous romance *Parzival*. In Mallory's version, instead of Percival remaking a sword with a small crack, we find that Galahad puts together the pieces of the spear of Christ. The spear is healed flawlessly by Galahad in Mallory's story, while Percival cannot mend it. The contrast between Galahad and Percival is retained across the different versions, even if the 'mending' motif may have derived from the same source in both.

small flaw in the reforged sword.

But perhaps the most moving example of the mark of mortality is to be found in a tale about Percival's companion knight, Sir Gawain. The 14th century Old Welsh poem *Gawain and the Green Knight* opens with a brief retelling of the Matter of Britain from Aeneas through Brutus to King Arthur, thus fixing the story in the context formed by the larger cycle of British legend. As rendered in translation by Tolkien, the first passage concludes:

...and far over the French Flood Felix Brutus
on many a broad bank and brae Britain established
full fair,
where strange things, strife and sadness,
at whiles in the land did fare,
and each other grief and gladness
oft fast have followed there.⁵⁹

And like Britain itself, the tale that will follow is a poignant mixture of grief and gladness.

In the first scene, King Arthur's court is about to begin its feast on New Year's Eve at the end of the twelve days of Christmas. Before they can begin, the company of the Round Table is interrupted by an immense intruder. This figure, whom the poet describes at length, is giantish in size and glowing green all over. He is bearded and has curly hair down to his elbows, and (like many gods) "his glance was as lightning bright." In one hand he holds a gold and green axe, and in the other "a holly bundle, that is greatest in greenery when groves are leafless."⁶⁰ In humiliating terms, this terrifying figure challenges any knight in Arthur's hall to a bargain or game he has devised: he will give his axe to any knight and without resistance let them use it on him, provided that a year and a day later they will submit to the same stroke from him. Everyone is too terrified to accept this absurd compact, and Arthur finally becomes furious enough to take up the challenge himself. But out of duty to his uncle, Gawain dissuades Arthur from the duel and accepts the perilous bargain in place of the king.

Before striking the Green Knight, Gawain agrees that a year later he will search out the Green

⁵⁹J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, & Sir Orfeo* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), page 14.

⁶⁰*ibid*, page 19.

Knight wherever he lives and submit to whatever blow the Green Knight may then give him. He says this with candor, although it seems like the Green Knight is submitting to certain death. Yet when Gawain chops off the Green Knight's head with the axe, the Green Knight picks it up and gets back on his horse. With chilling laughter the severed head reminds Gawain that a year later "To the Green Chapel go thou, and get thee, I charge thee, such a dint as thou has dealt."⁶¹ He then rides off leaving Arthur's entire company aghast.

The first part of the poem is dominated by the Green Knight, whose appearance in Arthur's court is a potent manifestation of divinity. His traits and qualities are rooted not only in Celtic folklore but also in the highest archetypes of world mythology. Aside from being a giant like all the chaotic monsters of British legend, he is a trickster by virtue of his 'detachable head.' This motif is derived originally from the dragon archetype in Chinese and Indian mythology. In brief, the dragon's head is celestial, standing for the heavens, and it can be separated from the lower part of the dragon which represents the chthonic and death. Together, both 'parts' of the dragon together form the cosmos, or the cycle of time (thus the uroboros stands for the cycle of birth and death). The same notion of completeness can also be expressed by a pair of dragons, the female (or tail) inhabiting the nether regions and the male (or head) flying around the sun. This is particularly significant since the Green Knight's glowing face, with his hair streaming in all directions, is clearly derived from a celestial symbol in Celtic myth.⁶²

This Celtic symbol is the "Green Man," the figure whose face turns up in Celtic art portrayed amidst wild and tangled growth, or on the trunks of trees. By color the Green Man is a nature spirit, expressing the celestial power of life present in growing things. His medusa-like hair reveals that the Green Man is also a celestial symbol, like the detachable head of the dragon. The Green Knight

⁶¹ibid, page 25.

⁶²The separability of the dragon's head, deriving from the fact that the Dragon is a symbol of the unity between upper and lower parts of the cosmos, has many derivatives in legend and folklore: for example, the popular medieval notion that witch's heads could turn 360 degrees. When something like this is represented in late 20th century culture—for example, in the famous scene in *The Exorcist* where the possessed girl's head spins around—it is so far removed from its original mythological origins that the significance of the symbolism becomes inaccessible to modern audiences.

bears a branch of holly, a symbol of power sacred to the Celts since it remains alive when all else is brown and dead in the winter. Thus the Green Knight is associated with the natural powers of the Celtic Green Man figure; indeed, he almost seems to be an Arthurian metonymy for the Green Man. In the Green Knight, the poet has found new expression for several old symbols of immortal power and cosmic renewal. From whatever angle we consider him, the Green Knight is a potent symbol of divinity.

The poem, however, is focused on Sir Gawain and his honor code, which demands courtesy and fulfillment of his covenant with the Green Knight. Before Christmas the next year, Gawain reluctantly sets out on a quest to keep the bargain he made at the court of King Arthur. He travels through many harsh lands and fights many enemies until he becomes lost in a wintery wilderness. On Christmas Eve, he chances on a castle that seems animated with a paradoxical life: it is Sir Bertilak's stronghold. Like the holly that lives in the winter, or like Christmas itself, which proclaims new life in the midst of nature's bleak season, Sir Bertilak's castle seems like a miracle. Already this suggests that the power of the Green Man is at work here. But this is only the first hint of the peril into which Sir Gawain has come.

He is welcomed into a fair castle by its lord Sir Bertilak (whose name we learn at the end of the poem). The weary Gawain is wined and dined handsomely, and meets the lady of the castle, whom he finds more beautiful than even Queen Guinevere. On hearing Gawain's mission to find the Green Chapel, the lord of the castle tells him he can stay there right up to New Year's, since the place Gawain seeks is not far away. Thus Gawain remains in the castle throughout the days of Christmas as the guest of a most gracious host. For day after day Bertilak commits Gawain to his wife's care while he is away in the woods hunting, and in another absurd bargain, both promise to exchange whatever they may win during their day's adventures.

Of course the lord of the castle and his lady are actually the Green Knight and his wife in disguise. And their hospitality goes farther than Gawain could ever have dreamed. The lovely lady of the castle tries to seduce Sir Gawain, coming to his bed and offering her favors. Like the Green Knight, behind this lady is a wealth of mythological association that affords no misinterpretation.

She is the archetypal female figure who lures or tempts the hero to his death; this is the role especially reserved for *female dragons* in the mythologies of many ancient cultures. When we realize the Green Knight's relation to the dragon archetype, the significant peril his wife represents becomes much clearer. The lady of the castle is the Green Knight's complementary opposite: as Tolkien emphasizes, we should assume that she is as much of a trickster as her husband. Only in this light does the full horror of Gawain's situation become clear. The poet's 14th century audience would have recognized that the lady of the castle could have dropped her disguise and "protected herself by some sudden change, or destroying power" if Gawain transgressed and gave in to the temptation.⁶³ She is no less powerful than the Green Knight, but her peril is even more beguiling.

Twice in cunning bouts of word-play Gawain manages to resist the lady's approaches without seeming to violate the code of romantic honor and courtesy that demands respect for her. Finally the lady of the castle comes to Gawain's bower on New Year's Eve, when he is brooding over his likely death the next day. He is forced to choose between discourtesy and sin, and refuses her advances. But Gawain is a human being; he resists her offers only with great difficulty, all the more because he fears his life is already forfeit on the very next morn. Under this doom, Gawain is at last persuaded by the lady to accept her girdle as a small token of her affection. She has told him that the belt is magical and will protect its wearer from any weapon. And as if this violation of his host's hospitality is not enough, that evening Gawain does not give this gift to the lord of the castle as he should by the terms of their game.

Gawain then prepares himself "as if for Doom's Day indeed, were it due on the morrow."⁶⁴ This eschatological allusion is appropriate: the Green Knight and his wife are figures of divine power, with a double-potential to save or damn. Just as the one threatens him with certain death the other promises to save him with a girdle. Finally Gawain goes to the 'chapel'—which is simply a cave under a green barrow—against his host's warnings that he will surely die if he faces the Green

⁶³J.R.R. Tolkien, lecture titled "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," from *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), page 83.

⁶⁴J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, page 62.

Knight. Then, in a way that is genuinely spine-chilling, the poet lavishly describes the Green Knight's loud approach to the Chapel, his fearsome appearance, and his terrifying weapon of death.

After this harrowing experience, Gawain still will not yield to his fear, but he does flinch as the first axe stroke falls next to his neck into the ground. Like a merciless executioner, the Green Knight taunts him for this sign of weakness, suggesting that it is even a breach of their bargain. And then as if to torment Gawain with further heart-rending terror, the assailant moves to strike him again, but stops the blade just before his neck. This time Gawain does not move at all—his courage seems to be proven beyond doubt. Then in the climax of the story, the Green Knight hauls back for the third and final blow, but instead of killing Gawain, lets the axe fall so that it barely slices through the outer skin on the side of his neck. After Gawain springs up to face his tormentor, the Green Knight explains that he first “..offered only two harmless feints” for the two times Gawain refused his wife's advances. The small nick in the neck is for accepting and keeping the girdle in the hour of the third temptation:

“But in this you lacked, sir, a little, and of loyalty came short,
But that was for no artful wickedness, nor for wooing either,
but because you loved your own life: the less do I blame you.”⁶⁵

In this seemingly impossible reprieve is the overflowing joy of salvation. From wrath and lust for death the divine face of the dragon is turns towards the mortal hero in mercy. And this transformation takes place through two signs of mortality: the girdle and the mark on Gawain's neck.

Gawain escapes from doom and death, and is able to return to the human world of King Arthur's court, but on his neck he bears the small wound he received from the Green Knight. The story unfolds according to the reverse-heroic structure, defining the humanity of Gawain by a slight subtraction from the perfection of the Green Knight. This difference is recorded by the mark of mortality graven on Gawain's skin. Yet precisely in such a minuscule difference lies the poignance of the Arthurian vision. For Gawain will always bear the mark on his neck, and he will always live close to the perilous world of the Green Knight, his court, and his chapel. For a hero like Gawain,

⁶⁵ibid, page 76.

who lives up to the fullest demands of ethics, this world of divine power is only an axe-stroke away. The girdle Gawain wears symbolizes the border between these two worlds.

The thematic importance of this marvelous outcome is clear. As the Green Knight says, despite all of Gawain's courage, by accepting and keeping the girdle Gawain proves that he loves his earthly life and does not wish to die. And for the girdle, instead of death he receives the mark of mortality. These tokens of slight imperfection bind Gawain within the limits appropriate for human beings in this earthly life. And paradoxically this turns out to be more of a blessing than a curse: the girdle really has in a sense 'saved' Gawain after all, encircling him like the uroboros itself. From the human point of view, Gawain's flaw is not really an imperfection at all. As Tolkien writes of Gawain: "His 'perfection' is made more human and credible, and therefore more appreciable as genuine nobility, by the small flaw."⁶⁶

Thus, like the famous 'mark of Cain,' Gawain's girdle and scar are symbols with opposite possible meanings and functions. Just as they chastise the one who bears them, they are also supposed to protect him from death—spiritually, rather than physically. When Gawain leaves the Green Knight, he thanks him for the girdle as if it were the gift of life itself:

...as a token of my trespass I shall turn to it often
when I ride in renown, ruefully recalling
the failure and the frailty of the flesh so perverse,
so tender, so ready to take taints of defilement.
And thus, when pride my heart pricks for prowess in arms,
one look at this love-lace shall lowlier make it.⁶⁷

Because it is a constant reminder of mortality, the girdle will defend Gawain from pride, keeping him within the circle of love, the human world, divided from the immortal world of divinity. By the lady's love and the lord's mercy, Gawain is preserved.

The girdle and the scar have double-significance, like the eschatological promise itself, because these signs point to two different worlds: the divine that imposes them, and the mortal that accepts them and is defined within them. This is why Gawain exudes a simultaneous disgust and affection

⁶⁶J.R.R. Tolkien, lecture titled "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," page 97.

⁶⁷J.R.R. Tolkien, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," page 77-78.

for his badges of dishonor. As he explains to King Arthur and his knights:

This is the token of the troth-breach that I am detected in,
and needs must I wear it while I in this world remain;
for a man may cover his blemish, but unbind it he cannot,
for where once 'tis applied, thence part will it never.⁶⁸

Like the indelible mark on his neck, Gawain considers the girdle to be a permanent part of him, and vows to wear it as long as he lives. Together these two signs are essentially one 'mark,' both marring Gawain and preserving him.

* * * * *

Sir Gawain's paradoxical, hard-won mark of mortality is poignant because in it we read the secret of humanity's proper relation to divinity. The eschatological power of divinity is close to us, man or woman, always marring and always preserving. It is always renewing its promise in the end either to destroy or save us, according to the choices we make. We are half-way creatures, existential beings with a choice to conclude. Any time or any hour could be for us the moment of the terrible tryst when we must pay the Green Man the proper fee for the brief span lent to us in his world. But while we are here, we live best when we have honor and courage, and most of all love. It is only in love that we can make the right choice, the choice to be human, to affirm what we are. This is how Gawain faces the Green Knight, and this is how we should meet divinity. The gods forbid absolute rebellion but they do not demand ascetic otherworldliness nor childish faith. Rather, they demand that we be true to our own and ourselves. And in the last analysis we can only find this truth in real human love, the love that is fostered and upheld by our love for this mortal world and for human life itself. In this poignant choice, we affirm what we are. Love of life itself, the highest of all loves and the heart of true romance, is the essential flaw of our nature—as the Green Knight says--and it is beyond reproach.

XII. The Phenomenology of Poignance

⁶⁸ibid, page 79.

Despite the manifold traditions behind them, the tales relating to Sir Gawain, Percival, and all the knights of the Round Table reveal a common theme.⁶⁹ In their different ways, Percival, Gawain, Lancelot, and King Arthur are all very human heroes. Although they battle their way to fame and great achievements, what matters in the end is how they come to terms with their own limits. It is only by rising to the pinnacle of knighthood that they genuinely encounter the power of divinity as something that stands above them. Their trespasses are corrected by repentance and marks of mortality, but they remain on the threshold between the worlds.

Aside from King Arthur himself at his death, perhaps the poignance of these stories is clearest in the case of Lancelot du Lake. Lancelot is sullied by his one sin (which is essentially love, the romantic ideal itself) and so he is prevented from achieving the quest of the holy grail. Along with his fellow knights Lancelot struggles through many grim trials looking for the grail. And Lancelot is granted just one vision of the immortal glory he seeks. As he tries to enter Castle Carbonek, Sir Lancelot is overwhelmed by “an intense ethereal light,” and within the chamber he beholds the holy grail and its priest performing mass in the company of angels.⁷⁰ For a lingering moment, Lancelot is poised on the edge of the divine world forbidden to him; he peers into the domain of an Other existence that breaks through into this world from above like a shaft of light.

⁶⁹Against the trend of modern Arthurian scholarship, this analysis suggests that the ever-evolving body of Arthurian literature was more “of a piece” thematically than critics have realized. Although there seem to be enormous differences between the Arthurian legends of early Welsh, on one extreme, and the Arthur of Spenserian romance on the other, there is an underlying continuity of themes and motifs that has not been sufficiently appreciated. It is said that the French and German traditions of romance in the 12th century influenced and changed Arthurian legend from hard celtic warrior mythology into courteous romance. But when one compares Gawain and the Green Knight with all its Welsh background to the European-born legends of Percival and Lancelot, there principles seem remarkably similar. Where the former has a nature god in the form of the terrifying Green Man, the other has classical references and allusion to early Christian beliefs--but in both cases the human being’s poignant relation to the perfection of divinity is the outcome. Perhaps this is because the differences between the traditions that contributed to the rise of Arthurian legend were more pronounced in superficial details, such as their mythological motifs, rather than in their real meaning to the people who sang and heard the stories. The originality of the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian vision at its core lies precisely in the successful synthesis of the hope of Christianity, the love of romance, and the fatalism of Germanic mythology and religion. We are told that in later romance Arthur became a mere courtly figure, a stuffy aristocrat emptied of all the color he had in the earlier myths. But in Mallory and the other classics of Arthurian romance there is a deep sensitivity to what these stories suggest about humanity and the limits of mortal power. Even in Spenser’s idealization of Arthur there is an abiding insight into the primordial meaning of Arthurian legend.

⁷⁰*Le Morte D’arthur*, tr. Keith Baines, page 422.

But Lancelot is a human knight: he must remain on the threshold gazing into wonder. He comes in contact with divinity, but he is not allowed to cross over the barrier. The cleansing sorrow and poignance in this scene lies in the fact that Lancelot is *not completely rejected* in his quest for the grail. Underneath its apparent cruelty, there is a subtle kind of mercy in this miraculous manifestation. Lancelot is neither welcomed in nor turned away—rather, he is held at the meeting between humanity and divinity. This poignant position is the climax of Lancelot's life.

In Lancelot's vision of the holy grail there is a paradigm that applies to King Arthur and all the greatest knight of the Round Table. In their finest hour, Arthur's knights reach a borderline existence where the passion of human hope meets the incomprehensible power. Divinity always puts the knight in his place, *but* it does not utterly reject contact with him. And in this lies the miracle, the joy of the Arthurian vision. The contact with divinity is humbling and fleeting, but *it is real*. And therefore divinity's power to uphold human hope and to strengthen human courage is substantial.

In Lancelot's vision and all the Arthurian legends we see that the synthesis at work in the Matter of Britain has tempered Norse fatalism with the Judeo-Christian notion of mercy. The wide gulf between the powers of creation and the individual mortal has narrowed to thin line which affords genuine contact, *yet without destroying the distinction between the categories*. Herein lies the true originality and potency of British legend. The extreme closeness of humanity and divinity is the poignance of the Arthurian vision.

The theme of poignance we have detected in the literature surrounding and constituting the Matter of Britain is never articulated as part of a systematic philosophy. Although different works of early British literature consistently point to a poignant relationship between the mortal and immortal worlds, this relationship is always a complex one. The full originality and importance of this poignant relationship cannot be disclosed simply by literary analysis. Poignance is not more than a roughly outlined thematic phenomenon in Brutus' founding of Britain, in Beowulf's battles, and in the endeavours of Arthur and his bold company. We require the refinement that allows passage from a literary theme to a genuine concept. To understand its full significance, we need to step back from

literature and examine poignance as a concept in its own right.

The literary analysis has yielded two preliminary notions of poignance. Firstly, we have examined the poignance of the tragic hero whose courage and determination lead him ever closer to divinity until finally, in resignation, he comes to the limit of human power. Beowulf, Lancelot and King Arthur illustrate this kind of poignance: in their stories, the human being finally comes into poignant, genuine contact with something inscrutable and infinitely more powerful than himself. Secondly, we have identified the poignance in the stories of Percival and Gawain, where the hero's humanity is preserved by a symbolic 'mark of mortality.'

From these examples we can define two distinct and provisional formulae for poignance. First, there is the Epic-Tragic expression: Poignance is the limit of the ethical category, the highest point attainable by the human will. At this zenith, the hero's intentions are purified because he is resigned to his or her duty with no hope of temporal victory or reward. Gawain obviously fits this category: the resignation in his journey to the Green Chapel is palpable. The limit of the human category is this purification and trial, which draws forth an empathetic feeling of sorrow and cleansing in viewers or participants who witness it. This empathetic feeling is the poignant catharsis of tragedy. The sorrow it expresses is for the human condition *as such*. Because we are human in the sense tragedy recognizes, we fail, and our efforts to live up to the demands of love and conscience can bring us unbearable pain. But in spite of all our sorrow, we must resolve to pursue the good even unto death. This unyielding position, which views our inherent weakness as no excuse, is the pure ethical perspective on human life.

But the poignance of this ethical extreme does not result from the pure experience of moral sanction as such. In epic and tragic literature, when the hero reaches this point in his course, there is something more: there is the presence of divinity, perhaps hardly even sensed, yet real. There is a tangible divine sanction for the hero's last actions. In Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, the elder Siward recognizes the divine sanction by saying of his fallen son, "God's soldier be he." In *Beowulf*, behind the hero's last opponent is the shadow of the future, the divine power of fate, waiting to destroy and yet to immortalize Beowulf. And even as King Arthur dies repenting his feud with Sir Lancelot,

there is the eschatological promise of Arthur's return in the end of time to save his nation.

The way the hero reaches this experience of divinity is a crucial clue as to the deeper nature of poignance. It is important to see that *just by* attaining the limit of an ethical life, a heroic story seems to call up the presence of divinity as a limit. At the extreme of the ethical category, divinity is experienced not as a barrier that denies and rejects, but as a presence that confirms and strengthens us, allowing us to accept our humanity. Thus the Arthurian vision, and the tragic view of the world in general, is hard, and seemingly as heartless as Siward's reaction to his son's death. But precisely because of the extremity of its harshness, it contains a secret consolation. The heroic drama or epic is poignant because through the sorrow of the conclusion, the hero, very clearly a mortal hero, receives some kind of positive response from the power of divinity itself.

Thus we have refined our first expression: poignance is the contact with divinity achieved purely through coming to the limit of the ethical. This first formula for poignance is paradoxical, for it describes a hero who stays within the ethical category as a mortal human being *and yet* is touched by divinity.

Secondly, there is what I shall call the Faerie-Religious expression: in this formula, poignance is identified as the slightest difference between the worlds, over which it is possible to pass from the divine category into the human category. In faerie tales such as *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poet shows us that one can locate the human category by an infinitesimal subtraction from the perfection of divinity, as represented by the Green Knight. The mark of mortality is the expression of that infinitesimal, ordinal difference. In this case, the poignant movement comes from divinity towards humanity: the god of judgement and vengeance is changed into a god of mercy. The Green Knight's mercy towards Gawain is poignant, because in it the power of divinity reaches out to touch the humanity of the courageous hero. In general, this is the meaning of the happy ending in faerie tales.

In religious literature it is also possible for the same movement to occur in another fashion. In repentance, the human being who pretended to eschatological powers or divine status 'withdraws' from misappropriation; he ceases his attempt to seize divine powers or privileges. This withdrawal

moves the human being in exactly the same way, with respect to the Categories, as does the mark of mortality in the faerie tale: the hero's humanity is restored by subtracting from him all his pretensions to eschatological powers or divine perfection. By being marked he is 'passed over' and preserved. In the faerie tale this is an involuntary movement; the movement is made symbolically by the application of the mark upon the hero. But in a genuinely religious narrative, this movement must be made voluntarily by the person concerned.

For example, in Shakespeare's version of King Lear's story, the king has "usurped" his own life by letting vanity and narcissism dictate his judgment. But eventually the lesson provided by his youngest daughter convinces this erring king to turn back from his folly. From the wild heath to his last battle, King Lear travels the long journey of withdrawal from misappropriation. He dies the death of a very mortal man, hoping against hope for an impossible reprieve to save Cordelia. Yet in this, as many critics fail to see, there already lies a victory and a resurrection. In his final passion, we see Lear oriented towards the divine promise of immortality as a man should be. In his gradual progression out of arrogance, the king's humanity is restored. Lear's ability at the last to love his daughter as one human being to another is in fact the consolation, or the mercy of the narrative. It is a mercy even more grim and poignant than the Green Knight's sparing of Sir Gawain.

The comparison between chosen repentance and the categorical movement implied by the mark of mortality reveals the deeper significance of our second expression for poignance. Because of the infinitesimal subtraction from divine perfection, the mortal hero experiences the *divine as the power of mercy*. The poignance, however, does not arise simply because the hero is saved or spared from absolute destruction. The poignance of divine mercy consists in the fact that it restores to the hero his humanity; it reconstitutes the hero within mortal limits. Here again, neither the actions of the divine powers nor of the human hero are poignant on their own: divine mercy is poignant because through it divinity comes in contact with the human world. And again, this poignance is paradoxical because the human being experiences divine mercy precisely in being preserved as a human being.

If we juxtapose our provisional definitions of poignance we can now discover their essential similarity. Poignance is experienced in the human being's sorrowful approach to divinity as the

power that both sanctions and limits of his ethical category of earthly responsibilities. And poignance is experienced in mercy, the divine movement towards the individual human being by which his humanity is preserved. These expressions are mirror images of one another; they describe complementary movements.

But it is only possible for poignance to result from both of these complementary movements if the limit of the human-ethical category as it approaches divinity on the one hand, and the limit of the divine-eschatological category as it approaches humanity on the other, *are the same limit*. In other words, poignance is more than just a literary mood. In our two different ways of experiencing the same paradoxical phenomenon, we have made a fundamental discovery about the nature of reality. Poignance signifies that humanity and divinity share a border; the relationship between these levels of reality is not one of distance and separation, but of perilous intimacy. In the Arthurian vision, distinct as they are man and God are poignantly *near* to one another. In the sorrow of human resignation and in the mercy of divinity, man and God can even touch one another. Thus in its primordial meaning, poignance is a testament to the relationship actually obtaining between the mortal and divine worlds. Poignance is nothing less than the balance between the ethical and the eschatological strictures of life.

This refined and unified concept of poignance has considerable implications which help explain its significance in the Matter of Britain. In particular, the balance between humanity and divinity established by the concept of poignance ensures that the ideal of human life *remains an ethical ideal*, rather than a *purely religious* ideal as such. In the Arthurian vision, 'salvation' or the passage into immortality, is not the knight's immediate goal. Attempts to attain divine status are revealed as pride and misappropriation. Man is held within the sphere of this world, where the dictates of duty apply, and it is these rather than the issues of religion that should occupy his immediate attention and direct his will. But when the ethical life leads to extremity and trial, divinity is not absent; its presence is the solace and strength we require to continue, in resignation, even unto death.

For poignance testifies that there is something beyond the sadness of this mortal life. As the theologian Karl Barth wrote in one of his last papers,

We can meet God only within the limits of humanity determined by him. But in these limits we may meet him. He does not reject the human! ...We must hold fast to this.⁷¹

In the Arthurian vision, the old Norse view of honor has been combined with the highest hopes of Christianity. And the Christian story of a God who not only touches man in mercy, but actually becomes man and God both wholly at once,⁷² combines the reciprocal movements of poignance more completely and radically than ever before, in a joy that transcends all sorrow and death. In the movements of “the man-encountering God, and the God-encountering man,”⁷³ the categories cross: purified man and divinity made merciful can meet one another *in joy*, joy even deeper and more real than the dark sorrow of Norse fatalism.

Paradoxically, then, joy is the highest of all themes in the Arthurian vision. The poignance that runs throughout the Matter of Britain testifies to the courage of the human will and to the desperate need to remember the limits of mortal powers and rights. Against the peril of pride it balances the possibility of mercy and miraculous reprieve. But out of all Britain’s troubled mythic history, out of all its heroes’ glory and all the chaotic darkness that threatens them, comes a joy that is only attained in poignance. The joy discovered in the Matter of Britain is the joy of authentic human existence, rediscovered again and again despite every setback. And it is the joy of the ethical life lived to the full, not overshadowed by organized religion or by fatalism, but complemented and finally fulfilled by the eschatological promise.

⁷¹Karl Barth, “The Humanity of God,” page 54. Delivered as a lecture to the Swiss Reformed Ministers’ Association in Aarau, on September 25, 1956.

⁷²This is the definition of the central Christian mystery according to the Nicene Creed.

⁷³Barth, “The Humanity of God,” page 55.

Conclusion: Resentiment or Eucatastrophe

We have considered in some detail the mythological background and structure of the Matter of Britain, the development of Arthurian romance, and the ethical and religious themes expressed in the Arthurian legends and other classics of early British literature. But what insight can this literature offer us today, in an age when many people are not convinced that there is any kind of transcendental standard for human ethics? Are the Arthurian legends and *Beowulf* nothing more for us now than emblems of a bygone 'age of faith,' or can they speak to the human spirit in the 'age of postmodernity,' when even morality (let alone religion) has been falsified in the eyes of our leading artists, writers, and scholars? Can the Arthurian vision offer us inspiration in terms of contemporary problems?

I believe that the Arthurian world view, including its poignant vision of the relationship between human beings and the divine, has revolutionary implications. If considered seriously, it can overturn the foundation upon which all of 'postmodernity' stands: namely, Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of morality, as related primarily in his *Genealogy of Morals*. There could be nothing more relevant to modern culture than this.

Nietzsche's central reason for denying that there is such a thing as goodness or a 'good' will, is the phenomenon of 'resentiment.' In the resentment critique, Nietzsche proposes that human beings are never motivated by purely selfless or good intentions; they only pretend to be (even deceiving themselves) out of the conscious or unconscious desire to attain power. By playing the martyr, for instance, it is possible to attain political power. Furthermore, this critique applies to the very notion of transcendental ethics as such. Not only do individuals who appear to be selflessly moved or well-intentioned hide their ulterior motives; the norms established by human society, the social 'mores' themselves evolved out of a will to power. The Judeo-Christian tradition in particular, we are told, evolved as 'slave morality,' through which certain early Greeks and Jews convinced themselves that they were morally superior to their Roman conquerors.

The critique by resentment focuses even more squarely on the claims of religious faith. Against the eschatological articles of theology, Nietzsche suggests that the belief in a final

‘justification by faith’ reveals the spiteful will-to-power behind all who try to keep up the illusion of good intention. For instance, to Nietzsche the Christian ideal of salvation is a subtle way of gaining power over others: if you are ‘good’ and meek, you are saved, so you have a kind of superiority that eventually draws supporters to you and undercuts the tyrants who rule you. To Nietzsche, so-called ‘morality’ is a clever plot to overthrow aristocrats who rule by the more ‘natural’ code that one man’s gain is another’s loss, kill or be killed, and so on.

Likewise Nietzsche claims that the religious notion of an afterlife is simply another trick invented to justify the delusion of morality. Indeed, Nietzsche claims that people are enslaved to standards of righteousness not out of any pure goodness of heart, but out of a miserable desire to attain the awards and delights of heaven as if they were material goods--thus these ‘believers’ reveal that their morality is nothing but a false front for a will to power. The victory of the saved is a spiteful victory, and religion as a whole is a mask for resentment. In the Nietzschean creed, the entire aim of religion is to satisfy the revenge fantasies of believers, who are consumed by resentment for their masters. Religion and resentment serve the desires of people too weak in ‘spirit’ to admit their hatred and make it a source of strength. This resentment critique of morality stands at the core of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Since World War II it has become, for reasons that are understandable to a degree, Nietzsche’s most influential dogma.

How can a literary phenomenon such as the theme of poignance address a critique of this epoch-making magnitude? In traditional literature, the central ideas of religion are represented in many different ways, but none is more revealing than the happy ending of the faerie tale. As J.R.R. Tolkien convincingly argues in his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories," the famous ‘happy ending’ of almost all faerie tales is in fact a reflection in the imaginary world of the eschatological promise we face in our world. For the happy ending of the faerie tale is never an immediately obvious outcome; it fails if it is predictable in ordinary terms when reading or hearing the story. Nor is the happy ending’s significance in the immediacy of the aesthetic experience. Rather, in the ending of faerie tales, the happiness is always *ironic*.

The conclusion of the typical faerie tale is not so much a ‘happy ending’ as a *turning*, an

umkehr, an unexpected reprieve, or a paradoxical shift in which even apparent disaster turns into victory. To capture this paradoxical and ironic quality, Tolkien calls the happy ending of faerie tales the "Eucatastrophe"—the good catastrophe.⁷⁴ As Tolkien explains:

In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the possibility of dycatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.⁷⁵

In this remarkable passage, Tolkien identifies the special kind of irony that makes a narrative a faerie tale: it is poignant irony. We might contrast this with the opposite kind of irony which depends on the difference between what one character thinks and what another knows in order to exploit this difference and spite the ignorant character. In this kind of irony, the 'turn' of events when the truth is revealed becomes a vehicle for expressing the superiority of one party over the other. If one has planned an ironic reversal in one's favor, then it involves exactly the kind of will-to-power Nietzsche has described.

In essence, the theory of resentment is the claim that all assertion of ethical codes and all practice of religious faith is an attempt to engineer (or at least project) the ironic outcome in one's favor. In this perspective, religious and moral appearance then becomes a game of political tactics and power-hungry actions deploying spiteful irony as the primary weapon--they are just like the campaigns of a brazen tyrant, only more subtle. Thus according to the gospel of Nietzsche, the salvation of the good on Judgement Day would represent the ultimate spiteful irony: in the fantasies of the weak, the world will suddenly be turned around, and all strong oppressors will be destroyed in a thrilling flash because they did not know what the faithful knew.

Firmly against this Nietzschean interpretation of ethics and religion stands the concept of poignance. It is the *poignance* of the ironic turn at the end of fairy tales, the lack of misappropriation in the 'happy ending,' that prevents the grace from becoming a vindictive, Nietzschean triumph. The

⁷⁴Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," from *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, page 153.

⁷⁵*ibid.*

faerie story acknowledges that the miraculous reprieve cannot be anticipated; a human being can only experience the eucatastrophe in the genuine humility of joy. Like Gawain accepting the girdle from the Green Knight, the hero of a faerie story can receive the grace, but cannot anticipate it nor bring it about. Likewise, a human being may be consoled by the eschatological miracle, the mercy of divinity, but he is specifically kept from the divine province by the mark of mortality. Because the Arthurian vision acknowledges the limit of human power and rights, it seeks to eliminate spite and resentment from its courageous ideals for human life. Thus the Arthurian hero is inviolate from the ulterior motives Nietzsche would attribute to anyone espousing moral and religious beliefs.

Because it ensures that the human hero only relates to divinity from within the limits of human existence, Arthurian poignance forbids attempted misappropriation of eschatological powers. The tremendous joy readers have felt in the Arthurian legends comes from the dark and poignant hope these tales inspire. They say that even to creatures as imperfect as us, divinity may respond. By its very constitution, the joy of that revelation can never be separated from a consciousness of mortal limits and ethical duty.

The poignant relationship of humanity to the divine eschatological promise is thus the true opposite of resentment. In poignance, the irony is entirely to the advantage of divinity; it does not aggrandize one man over another. And the great joy of which Tolkien speaks, joy "poignant as grief," is felt precisely when we realize that a glory or beauty we could not even have hoped for has come true. For irony as pure poignant joy, cleansing and renewing, is only possible in the first place because a person has lived in the trial of human suffering without hope of victory.

In poignance there is no spite, no ulterior self-aggrandizing purpose, no mere appearance of goodness or humility, no 'resentment' in the Nietzschean sense. In the Arthurian world-view, a human being who lives up to the highest demands of conscience simply comes to the human/divine border, and at death he may look into the face of God with joy. But because he is preserved within the boundaries of mortal life, he does not transgress against the Werd, and his hope of salvation is purified of all spite. His desire for salvation is not a concealed desire for superiority over others, because his 'religiousness' never was a direct attempt to secure some kind of reward. For he may

only reach the point of true religious consciousness when he has fought for the causes of goodness *in this world*. The hero must struggle for specific ends, pursued through imperfect yet passionate human striving; only then does the story conclude in a grace which he hardly conceived and a joy he never imagined.

Thus it is only in poignance, not in his own intentions, that the Arthurian hero meets divinity. Not in 'resentment,' but in poignance, a life may be lived in the proper balance between the ethical and the eschatological.

To explain this crucial implication of the concept of poignance, we can turn briefly to T.S. Eliot's remarkable play, *Murder In The Cathedral*. This play is Eliot's version of the death of Archbishop Thomas Becket, the saint of the Canterbury cult who was so celebrated in 14th century British literature. Eliot's Becket knows he is likely to be killed by King Henry's assassins if he doesn't do something to protect himself. He anticipates and faces three allegorical tempters, each of whom challenge him with increasingly difficult aspects of his situation--and his piety allows him to dispose of them each in their turn. He expected each of these temptations and was prepared for them.

But then there comes an unexpected visitor, a fourth and final tempter. This perilous figure presents Becket with a temptation based not on ethical dilemmas, but on the religious category itself. This is the temptation to become a martyr *on purpose* to spite his enemies. By doing this, the tempter assures him, Beckett could take fate into his own hands, acquiring lasting fame for himself and gaining thousands of converts for his church. The tempter encourages him to give free reign to his hatred of the king's shallowness and ignorance. The last tempter tells him to usurp eschatological privilege by spiting his enemies with his own martyrdom itself--thus he could consign them to damnation forever and bless himself with eternal sainthood. As the tempter tells him:

You hold the keys of heaven and hell.
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind,
King and bishop under your heel...⁷⁶

⁷⁶T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1982) p.47

In other words, Thomas Becket is tempted by resentment, precisely the intention Nietzsche attributes to all religious faith. According to Nietzsche, the desires the fourth temptation would fulfill—the lust for power and god-like control—are the only motives that a ‘great’ man can really have. Only a man willing to ‘bind’ fate, to seize the eschatological or ‘creative’ initiative, is strong enough in pride and hatred to conquer his predecessors and foes. Others are condemned to petty acts of spite clothed in a deceiving shell of self-denial, on Nietzsche’s view. This fourth and final temptation is the desire to engage in perverse romanticism of the self.

In Eliot’s play, Thomas Becket is shocked by this temptation; he realizes that resentment in the form the fourth tempter suggests is a real possibility. In a sense, the temptation simply is the possibility that he could try to be martyred with the aim of undercutting King Henry. For Nietzsche, this bare possibility translates into arrogant certainty: because resentment is conceivable, Nietzsche madly extends it into a universal critique, which supposedly exposes the spiteful motives that underlie all ethical and religious authority.

But for Thomas Becket, the answer is not that easy. Becket eventually finds that resentment is a possibility that can also be rejected; it can even be rejected without surrendering religious faith. Eliot’s Beckett refuses the temptation that poisons religion itself, the temptation of misappropriation: "The last temptation is the greatest treason | To do the right deed for the wrong reason."⁷⁷ He is able to resist this temptation and yet to retain his religious relationship to the eschatological promise. This paradox is possible because he finds a better answer than spite. He finds a way to relate to divinity that the theoreticians of resentment, trapped in their narcissistic dreams, could never imagine. The answer Becket finds is poignance.

After the moment when he makes his choice, Becket simply goes on serving the common people and his community at Canterbury. He stays in the cathedral rather than fleeing Henry’s knights, but he stays only out of an ethical commitment to his people. Therefore in resignation, he is

⁷⁷ibid.

nevertheless killed *unwillingly*, just as Beowulf loves life and so is reluctant to fight the dragon. Becket faces his doom with courage, but he does not attempt to determine his own fate; he does not *try* to become a martyr. Just as he never wished to become Archbishop, Thomas never allows himself to maneuver or strategize for martyrdom. It is only his obedience to conscience and service to his charge that brings him to this death.

In Eliot's play, the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket, and the triumphant inspiration it becomes for all Britain, are a poignant victory. By remaining focused on the ethical task at hand, Becket remains entirely human, and yet the eschatological power responds to him. His sacrifice is not a strategem of resentment. It is simply and purely the poignant meeting of the categories of humanity and divinity. And in this meeting is infinite joy, 'joy poignant as grief.'

* * * * *

The concept of poignance, as seen in the synthesis of the heroic honor code and Christianity in the romantic legends and literature of Britain, contains an answer to Nietzsche's most influential argument against ethics and religion. As the balanced relation between humanity and divinity that paradoxically preserves the significance of both categories, and yet allows their intimate contact, poignance is the existential refutation of Nietzschean philosophy. When poignance is recognized as a *possibility* for mankind, as a choice that is available, then the theory of resentment is overcome.

Nietzsche's theory of 'ressentiment' and the willingness he has engendered to suspect that *any* ethical or religious practice has an evil ulterior motive cannot be defeated by philosophical theories of ethics or theology. For over a hundred years, Nietzsche's argument has stood unanswered. Yet we have had the answer all along. It is the experience of poignance, and the literature that records it, which refutes Nietzsche. It is King Arthur, Sir Bedivere, Gawain, Lancelot, Beowulf, and Becket who refute Nietzsche. It is Tolkien and Spenser, not Kant, who can answer the great positor of 'genealogical' critiques. If Kierkegaard had the chance to respond to Nietzsche, this is surely how he would have responded too.

In poignance, then, we find a renewal for absolute ethics, i.e. the universal and infinite imperatives of honor, courage, and love for all mankind. Thus the themes of the Matter of Britain

are not bygone chivalry and courtly love, but the hardest and yet the most inspiring truths of life itself. Not in Nietzsche's Superman, but in figures like Beowulf, Brutus, Lear, Lancelot, and King Arthur himself, we find an ideal that affirms the value and effectiveness of human life in this world.

This opens for us a door that Nietzsche tried to close forever: the door behind which lie the resources of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. Those for whom Nietzsche closed this door have been forced to search for their answers solely in the classical tradition stemming from ancient Greece. Greece also had a heroic honor code like that of the Germanic peoples, but it was never synthesized with a religion that propounded the love of all mankind and the equality of free people made in God's image.

Hence the absolute ethics of courage demanded by the Greek honor code remained the affair of the ruling classes. What in north Europe romance did by incorporating love into the honor code and tempering the hard fatalism of its eschatology with mercy, was never done in ancient Greece. So the deep ethical implications in its heroic epics and associated tragic literature remained unshielded from classists who would read into them a Promethian rebellion against the gods, misinterpreting Prometheus himself as a hero of Faustian humanism. Those determined to find a classical legitimization for elitism in education, or for the spiritual defiance exemplified by Milton's Satan, could not be prevented. Cut off from the Judeo-Christian tradition, great writers and artists have been convinced that the honor code of heroes leads only to a "higher ethics" for "we noble men" alone. Finally, when fascism determined to make its new myths out of the ruins of old epics, even Germanic myth and legend was not protected from the 'new romanticism,' the romanticism of Byron and Madam Bovary, which set out to misappropriate it.

It is against this background that we can understand the full significance of the Matter of Britain. It lets us see clearly how in early romance, epic and the honor code were bound together in a religious world view rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Over the centuries, a genre of authors including Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Hawthorne, Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Stephen Donaldson have constantly tried to preserve the tradition of the older romance seen in the Matter of Britain. They have tried to renew our understanding of the

relation between divinity and humanity using the resources of religious romance. And although they were marginalized, the tradition which they kept alive continued to grow in depth, until it practically converged with the world view put forward by Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was working from many of the same resources, as his debt to Shakespeare, the 'romance' overshadowing his whole authorship, and his "knights" infinite resignation and faith will testify.

The name 'existential romance' would not be inappropriate for this tradition. Others who have been close to it, if not directly in its mainstream, include Edmund Rostand, Mary Shelly (although not her husband), Charles Dickens, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, George Orwell, Graham Greene, and Flannery O'Connor. The authors defining and drawing from the tradition of existential romance constitute a substantial part of our literary heritage, but the deeply rooted connections between them have rarely been perceived and little understood. Should we succeed in renewing our understanding of the heroic/religious synthesis and the world view of early romantic epic, we would not only have overcome the obstacle Nietzsche has placed between us and the Judeo-Christian tradition, but also recaptured an almost entirely obscured dimension of our shared literary heritage as well.

Afterword: The Proof of the Myth

This brings me back to the matter of Britain as it continues this very day; out of literature, I turn to recent history and my own experience to show how the themes of Arthurian poignance have upheld and informed the spirit of Britain in our own 20th century.

It is not generally understood that myths, like prophecies, are things waiting to come fully true in the end of time. They may have more validity in a later time than they did in the age when they were formed, for even then they were formed to express potential and existential possibility. And there is a very peculiar sense in which Britain today has partially 'proven' the mythical premonitions in the "matter of Britain."

The 'proof of the pudding' came for Britain in the challenge of World War II, an episode that required all of the strength and spirit left in this old island. It was the crucible of World War II, not its ancient, or medieval, or even Victorian history, that really confirmed and preserved the beauty of this land, and retroactively altered the 'meaning' of the preceding centuries. It is World War II, the ultimate trial, that has made Britain a poignant nation.

This is an answer that has eluded us just because it was right in front of us, and almost patently obvious. Americans do not perceive the extent to which the environment in which British people live and breathe in 1989 is still largely conditioned by the heritage of World Wars I and II. The experience Britain went through in this last war especially was absolutely consuming, and to some degree everything else has been pervaded by that experience and reevaluated in the light of it.

While American hegemony and global economic power took off after World War II, the war took out of Britain practically everything it had. The devastating effect of the war in terms of loss of lives, lasting economic depression, and desperation in the "Battle of Britain" was especially severe because Americans held out so long before Roosevelt could persuade them that, if nothing else, it might be 'in their interest' to help the British by direct involvement. Young people in America today can scarcely understand what it is like to grow up in a nation that once very recently staked its very existence in the fight for a good purpose in the history of mankind. As yet the United States has made no contribution like that, and the way things look in our foreign policy, maybe it never will.

But in Britain the decision to go to war was even more difficult because of the nation's history (thus MacMillan's infamous attempt to appease Hitler and stop short of war). In the war, everything had to be sacrificed: wealth and power, prestige, and the last functional vestiges of aristocracy, once the decision was taken to oppose Hitler to the death. As the Jewish population also remains keenly aware, a close brush with complete destruction can deeply alter a person, or a people.

I speak of one Britain, as a genuine community, no matter how much internal strife there appears to be on the surface, because the power of that common and authentic experience still unites Britain. My bus driver spoke of D-Day in the same way as our landlord spoke of his campaigns with the ghurka regiments. Differences of class, region, and race were diminished by the war in which even the king's house was burned, and the Houses of Parliament bombed: people whose children were slain by buzz bombs knew that their leaders shared their agony and their pain.

And with unity came a strength, ingenuity, and determination that existed before only in fables. Once again a man like Arthur emerged, drawing the sword from the ancient stone, and proclaiming "We will never surrender." At the time that Winston Churchill became like a new Arthur, the people of Britain really did believe that Hitler would cross the channel, invade them, and slowly capture the entire nation (as he had done with France). And it is poignant to realize that Churchill did not promise his people victory; he promised them only the trying, the effort to the last. An entire nation decided, in effect, that what mattered was 'having one's hurts in front.'

Churchill was actually a very flawed governor, guilty of mismanaging important problems in Iran, Israel, India and Ireland, for example. But to people who have lived through the war in Britain, he has remained a symbol like no other person since Arthur himself. In Churchill, somehow, the best side of their land's heritage is summed up. The truth on which this reverence is based was perhaps best expressed by Churchill's own daughter, in what she said to her aging father just before his death: "Not only do I owe you the honor and respect every child owes a parent. In addition I owe you the same as does every man, woman, and child in this land: freedom itself." Cordelia loved her father King Lear "like salt," and this was how the people of Britain loved Churchill. When he died, for several days thousands of people of every age and background stood in lines literally miles long

to see him lying in state. This is what common experience means.

On Remembrance Day in Britain, there are poppies, little dark red flower replicas sold for charity by the millions. Everywhere across Britain, services are held for war heroes. In the capital city there is a minute of silence during which even cars stop and taxicabs cease their shrieking. No missiles drop, no planes roar overhead, because all that is finished, and as the song says, all the graveyards have gone to flowers, every one.

The poppy is really the symbol of Britain now, an expression of the fundamental poignance at the heart of life in this land. From the inhabitants of earls' palaces, to the small village shopkeepers and pub barmaids pitched into the war effort, the rationing, engineering, and battle missions of the war. But the amazing and moving thing is that so much elitism was finally given up and so much history redeemed simultaneously in the struggle against the Nazis. False ideas of greatness dispersed and a fallible, human kind of goodness became more important: in short, the themes of "the matter of Britain" came true. When British people were staking all their national resources and their lives on the fight against Hitler, they found all of a sudden that something noble and romantic, in the true sense, had come out of their nation's bitter history after all. It turned out that all the banners and battlements really did mean something for everyone, not just for an elite few. The British found that there was something deeply worth fighting for in "this land of such dear souls, this dear dear land."

And then, like a miraculous prophecy coming true, the "silver sea, which serves it in the office of a wall, or as a moat defensive to a house," protected Britain from the German army. The German planes they fought with their Spitfires and their bravery. The V-1 and the V-2 they faced with their honor and their endurance. And what their own strength could not have done, "the triumphant sea" itself did for the British. The Castle at Dover is pock marked with German artillery fire that made it across the English channel. But no German soldier touched its ancient walls, for "the rocky shore beats back the envious siege." So John of Gaunt's words came true. In this way also, the old myth was proven.

It took such a long time of living in Britain for me to begin to see things differently, to understand why Britain's modern history has hallowed the places and monuments which really

represent bygone times. Consider the Plantagenet castles which early English monarchs created to conquer Wales and hold Scotland. Then there are the great houses and palaces from which aristocrats organized British men to venture abroad on missions that have since become a shame to this nation, such as colonial wars, and slave trading. There are the little towns where miners and early industrial workers huddled and tried to form their first unions. In Llandudno and Brighton one may visit lazy 1920's-1930's beachfront resorts where England's less well off usually made their holidays, because travel abroad was out of reach. There are also the rich fields of Derbyshire where Hardy's 'Tess' tried to make her way, and nearby are Robin Hood's dark forest hideouts occupied before there were such things as rights. In the midlands we still find the remains of Dickens' industrial revolution cities. But all these things with their flawed or ignoble histories, and many many more, were saved through great peril in two world wars, and they have now become the common spiritual property of all British peoples who fought together irrespective of class or origin. It is these people who have proven the myth.

Poignance, as opposed to the perverse kind of romanticism, is founded not on nature nor on a holistic vision of destiny and greatness, but on the sacrifice of individual people. Though Canterbury was established, Becket died. Though the hundred years war yielded something like a victory for England, the Black Prince and others died in the plague. Though World War II was won, one has only to see the acres of thin white crosses and stars of David on the grassy Normandy downs to know what it cost. In Normandy, "earthgrip holds them," these plain heroes, defends them in memory, and makes them 'fast.'

Not only in real life, but also in modern British art and literature the myth of Britain has been shown anew, but transfigured in poignance by the modern experience of the war. For example, consider a simple tale called *The Snow Goose*,⁷⁸ which a teacher gave to me when I first moved to Britain. The book tells the story of Philip Rhayader, a hunchback who lives alone in a disused lighthouse on the coast of Essex. Like the giants in Brutus' story he is a frightening figure, but as a

⁷⁸*The Snow Goose*, by Paul Gallico (Alfred A. Knopf, 1941; 1990 reprint).

man he is marked with human imperfection in a bodily form. Although he "loved very greatly" both humans and the wildlife he painted, this man retreated from human contact because of "his failure to find anywhere a return of the warmth that flowed from him."⁷⁹ But one day a young girl named Frith brings to a wounded goose to this man whom she believes "had magic that could heal injured things."⁸⁰ The bird has lost its way from Canada—like Rhayader it is an exile. The girl, who becomes the hunchback's friend, lived "Wi' t' fisherfolk at Wickaeldroth" in an ancient Saxon culture preserved since the time the legends of King Arthur were first written down. As she grows older, she and the Snow Goose periodically visit his lighthouse, finally bringing him the companionship he has lacked so long.

But the possibility of romance, of lasting relationship, is not fulfilled. The bird and Frith fly through the hunchback's life like the sparrow that flies briefly through the meadhall—Bede's famous symbol for the fleeting insecurity of life. The snow goose itself is a symbol for the beauty and value that it beyond human possession, human misappropriation. One can only relate to this symbolic animal in reverence. When the goose makes the lighthouse her home, it is "of her own free will."⁸¹

The great events of the world finally break their way into the hunchback's life. Word comes to him of the English army trapped at Dunkirk. The hunchback silently takes out his little sailboat, along with the hundreds of Britons who braved the rough English channel in small sailcraft and fishing boats that night to enter the shallows and save the soldiers. Like the "Seafarer" of Anglo-Saxon poetry, he takes the final voyage from which there is no return in this life. After saving seven-hundred men himself, making trips from the shore to the transport ship all day and night, the hunchback dies by machine gun in the mine-ridden waters, and the snow goose who has stayed with him the whole time finally flies off, like a symbol of his soul. But his friend remembers the man, just as his country honors him along with the nameless thousands who perished that night. Thus a man

⁷⁹*The Snow Goose*, p.9.

⁸⁰*ibid*, p.16.

⁸¹*ibid*, p.31.

afraid of human contact becomes human again, very human indeed, for he dies 'with his hurts in front.'

There is no promise of earthly victory in this story. There is only the flawed, imperfect human striving for the good, a lone voyage of conscience, given its last beatitude by the hope and glory embodied in the snow goose herself. This story is thus written in the vein of an old Norse fairy tale, and it draws on images from the matter of Britain. But it is essentially a modern story that has preserved and renewed the ancient myth by treating it in a new way, the result being pure poignance. The old mystery of Britain has been taken up again and woven into the poignance of an individual life and sacrifice in World War II.

In a quiet moment by the sea or in a park, I have occasionally thought about Rhayader and his snow goose. I thought about him once while taking a walk through Parliament Square, where there is an bronze statue of Churchill facing the houses of the British government, rebuilt after they were fire-bombed in the Blitzkrieg. Strange to tell, but that statue of Churchill looks like the hunchback.

If Hitler had won the war, doubtless he would have constructed many fabulous triumphal replicas of himself as a Superman or 'perfect' self-creating figure, a master of "great politics" indeed, decked in glorious headgear like Pallas Athene, and surrounded by eagles in the air and serpents at his feet. Hitler would no doubt have dressed himself in all the ancient signs and symbols of divinity, claiming them as his own, his statue striding boldly over the Lion of opposition he had mastered. Hitler, who died like a coward rather than 'with his hurts in front,' would have tried to make himself a god, because he despised human life with its little failings and imperfections. And his perverse followers would have thought that this attitude, in which human spite is expressed as divine glory, was the meaning of romanticism! But of Churchill there is only this one plain statue; his dark form stands unadorned in the park. Like Rhayader looking on his love Frith for the last time, Churchill's likeness stands hunched and bent, as he leans on his cane and looks silently towards ancient Westminster Hall.

Thus I have come to see things differently in Britain, to view them like Shakespeare's prophet new-inspired. I have begun to see them as they really are. The meaning that was given this

century now fills every place in Britain. In this nation, all human works, no matter how proud and mighty, have a flaw that marks them as human, and keeps them properly related in poignance to the world, to themselves, and to whatever higher power holds the keys of life and death. The ravens must not be taken from the Tower of London or it will fall, so the myth says. It 'keeps' them in, like a concealed weakness that could wreck its great stone: and how close it came to destruction.

In the center of Westminster Cathedral's apse, like the heart of old Britain, lies the monumental tomb of King Edward the Confessor. In the peace and stillness of this most ancient shrine a light comes from beyond a millenium of time. The mystery of Britain pervades places such as this. From the Eagles Tower, the topmost pinnacle of proud Castell Caenarvon in North Wales, one looks across the distance to the mist shrouding the mountains of Snowdonia.

At last I really know what Kate Bush meant in her song. As she imagines the lament of a fighter pilot shot down in the Battle of Britain, she lets us hear his final thoughts:

Oh England My Lionheart,
Dropped from my Black Spitfire to my funeral barge,
Give me one kiss in appleblossom,
Give me one wish, and I'd be wassailing
In the orchard my English Rose,
Or with my shepherd who'll bring me home.

...

Oh England my Lionheart,
I don't want to go.⁸²

Kate Bush has seen that the Battle of Britain is now part of the Matter of Britain; the pilot's experience is part of the essential 'meaning' of Britain. Thus he passes in death from a modern airplane to an old Norse funeral barge, for he is essentially the same kind of hero as a shield-king, a Beowulf. This means that his world view is a poignant one: he does not *wish* to die or be a hero, but would prefer life in Britain with his earthly love. He would rather be wassailing in a beautiful garden, the earthly paradise that he helped to save. His honor code is that of romance, surrounded, limited, and preserved by the final Christian promise. Like the man being led out of Plato's Cave, or

⁸² Kate Bush: from the song "Oh England My Lionheart," from the album *Lionheart*, recorded by EM1 Records Ltd., Produced and Arranged by Andrew Powell, lyrics by Kate Bush.

Spenser's Redcrosse Knight being led into heroism and lastly to a vision of the New Jerusalem, or Beowulf on his way to the dragon, Kate Bush's "lionheart" is unwilling to go. He does not desire to fall and die any more than Thomas Becket desired martyrdom. But he goes because he must, and is met in the end by the promise of the Good Shepherd.

Whatever perverse idealism entered into later continental romanticism after Rousseau, the uniquely British version of romance-as-poignance was the original and true form of romance after all. This point can be seen in a passionate testimony made by Tolkien in a letter to his son Michael, written in June, 1941. This was Britain's "darkest hour;" on the eve of American entrance into the war, it appeared that the Churchill would not be able to stave off invasion and ravaging destruction much longer. Through this gloom, and fear such as we cannot now imagine, Tolkien wants to send a message of hope to his son on the front. As an artist and scholar who devoted his life to making the themes of ancient myth come alive in the modern context, not least to oppose the horror of the mechanized world that Blake scorned, he is intimately familiar with his subject.

I have spent most of my life, since I was your age, studying Germanic matters (in the general sense that includes England and Scandinavia). There is a great deal more force (and truth) than ignorant people imagine in the 'Germanic' ideal. I was much attracted by it as an undergraduate (when Hitler was, I suppose, dabbling in paint, and had not heard of it), in reaction against the 'Classics.' You have to understand the good things, to detect the real evil. But no one ever calls on me to 'broadcast' or do a postscript! Yet I suppose I know better than most what is the truth about this 'Nordic' nonsense. Anyway, I have in this war a burning private grudge—which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler...ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light. Nowhere, incidentally, was it nobler than in England, nor more early sanctified and Christianized...⁸³

Tolkien states what he sees as the ultimate issue of the war, in unyielding terms. Yet he does not promise his son victory in this world, or long life. Tolkien knows, "It is something to be the father of a good young soldier."⁸⁴ He only hopes to inspire his son, even if that means his dying like Young

⁸³J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter & Christopher Tolkien, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1981). From letter #40, dated 9 June 1941, page 55. For pointing out the special significance of this letter to me, I am indebted to Dale Favier.

⁸⁴*ibid.*

Siwall in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Thus Tolkien clearly distinguished two kinds of romanticism: the one perverse since its attempts to misappropriate divine powers to mankind (and of course cannot succeed), the other the true form which has only duty and pity, the human categories of trial and failure. It was this romanticism which needed a religious complement, and so took to Christianity when the missionaries reached the British isles.

In 1941 Tolkien could not see the outcome, but in fact the war did not destroy or discredit romanticism altogether, as Tolkien feared. Rather the war revealed the rotten core of the perverse kind of romanticism, the kind that leads to despair and evil. The rage in which the aesthetic and demonic romanticism of 'Germanic' idealism burned itself out, also purified and annealed Britain, where the other kind of romance was saved in poignant victory, and given a permanent home. Just as was promised in the myth of Brutus, fate overcame its spiteful Achillian opponets, and Britain became Troy reborn. And thus it was determined that the tradition of romance as poignance would continue not only in our literature, but also in the life and culture of Britain.