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Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
*Asbury Theological Seminary*

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## **Learning to Speak ‘The Tongue of the Holy Ghost’ *An Introduction to the Poetry of Charles Williams***

**Jennifer Woodruff Tait**

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## **“Learning to Speak ‘The Tongue of the Holy Ghost:’ An Introduction to the Poetry of Charles Williams”**

Jennifer Woodruff Tait, Asbury Theological Seminary

I would hazard a guess that most people coming to Williams find him by way of his prose—either his novels, which Sue has introduced to you, or his theological writings such as *The Descent of the Dove*, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, and *He Came Down From Heaven*. Certainly this was my own experience. I first read *The Descent of the Dove* in 1991, and then I was bowled over by *The Greater Trumps* when I picked it up in a bookstore in 1992. I am not sure I have gotten up yet.

It is entirely possible that many of those who find Williams by way of his prose go on to his plays, several of which Woody has described. It is less likely, but still possible, that those who have encountered his prose will go on to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest his Arthurian poetry cycle. If you have begun to experience Williams’ prose and plays, you already have some of the equipment necessary to attempt the poetry. You have some acquaintance with Williams’ dense, colorful and metaphoric style, which is, in the words of literary critic Charles Hefling, “an acquired taste” (Hefling 28). (I sometimes feel that reading Williams is like reading a stained glass window. Not *looking* at one, *reading* one!) You also have some idea of the theological and literary themes which reoccur constantly in Williams’ work. What I hope to do here is twofold. First, I want to give you just a few pieces of general advice as you sort through the Arthurian poems in *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars*. Secondly, I want to talk to you briefly about one of Williams’ most accessible poems, “Bors to Elayne: On the King’s Coins.” By showing you some of these themes at work in that poem, my hope is that you will a) want to read more and b) have some idea of how to go about doing so. So—let us plunge headfirst into the “clotted glory.”

The first thing which will help you make your way through Williams’ poetry is some familiarity with the legends of King Arthur and their literary interpretation throughout English history. I am not suggesting this has to begin as dissertation-level familiarity. I read *Taliessin Through Logres* and *The Region of the Summer Stars* for the first time with no other background than the musical “Camelot,” and I not only survived, I was hooked. However, I would actually suggest more background than that—chiefly because “Camelot” and its main source, T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, spend little time on the quest of the Holy Grail and much more time on the love story between Lancelot and Guinevere, and for Williams these proportions are exactly reversed. In White, though the quest for the Grail is described (and in that, at least, you will have more knowledge than I did from “Camelot” alone!), it functions as a tragic interruption to, and complication of, the love story (White, *Once and Future King*, 436-470; see also *The Book of Merlyn*, 167-176). But the Grail is, for Williams, central, and although the adulterous love story is an important sign of the corruptions creeping into Logres (more on Logres in a minute) it is for Williams a minor corollary to the main theme.

Ideally the best preparation for Williams is to have read Malory’s *Arthurian Legend*, which remains the classic statement of the Arthurian legend and which informs Williams either as a fellow-traveler or as an antagonist at nearly every turn. In addition, Williams was closely acquainted with Tennyson’s nineteenth-century retelling of the legend, *The Idylls of the King*. I would not advise you *not* to read Malory—it is one of the great works of English prose and one which, until the last sixty years or so, most any educated person would have read in the course of their liberal arts education. I would also not advise you not to read Tennyson, But you might just want to start on Williams before you have finished all 700 pages of Malory and 250 pages of Tennyson. In that case, I would recommend you take a look at some works of literary criticism often published with Williams’ poetry under the unforgettable name

*Arthurian Torso*. The first is Williams' prose explanation of the legend, "The Figure of Arthur," which he died before completing (Williams and Lewis, 189-274). Unfortunately Williams stopped before he actually got to Malory, or Tennyson for that matter, but he spends quite some time on the general medieval context of the story and on Malory's Welsh and French predecessors. While *The Figure of Arthur* suffers from Williams' usual cryptic theological asides, it gives you some idea of the particular bees in Williams' bonnet—chiefly the roles in the story of romantic love (which in Williams is treated much more broadly than by focusing on the love between Lancelot and Guinevere) and by the Eucharist via the Grail.

The second helpful piece of literary criticism is C. S. Lewis' commentary on Williams' poetry, "Williams and the Arthuriad" (Williams and Lewis 277-384). This gives a helpful order for reading the poetry (Williams and Lewis 280) as well as commentary by Lewis on each poem. This commentary combines astute observations on Williams' theological points and poetic devices with helpful connections to the sources of the Arthurian legend. Lewis does assume, and thinks that it is perfectly legitimate of Williams to assume, a fairly extensive background on the part of the reader. He compares Williams to T. S. Eliot in this:

An example of difficulties arising from Unshared Background would be *The Waste Land*. If you have never read Dante or Shakespeare certain things in that poem will be obscure to you. But then, frankly, we ought to have read Dante and Shakespeare; or at least the poet has a right to address only those who have done so. And if the only result of a first reading of *The Waste Land* were to send you to Dante and Shakespeare, your time and money would have been very well spent. Similarly with Williams. He assumes that you know the Bible, Malory, and Wordsworth pretty well, and that you have at least some knowledge of Milton, Dante, Gibbon, the *Mabinogion*, and church history (Williams and Lewis 373).

Finally, do not underestimate the introduction to this entire Arthurian conglomerate by Mary McDermott Shideler (Shideler 5-13) which is useful for a quick rundown of terms, names, and emphases—or indeed Williams' own preface to *The Region of the Summer Stars* (Williams and Lewis 117-118), which is the clearest statement of the cycle's plot Williams ever made. It also helps to know from the beginning that the cycle is largely written from the perspective of a minor character in Tennyson and in some of the Welsh Arthurian legends, the king's poet Taliessin, who "as a child had been found floating in a coracle down the River Wye, and was adopted by a tribe of pagan Welshmen. They nurtured him to manhood when, hearing tales of the City and Empire of Byzantium, he set forth to find them" (Shideler 5.) So it is worth remembering that central to Williams' re-telling is the figure of the poet, and that in many ways Taliessin serves as a stand-in for Williams—just as Stanhope may be a stand-in for Williams in *Descent Into Hell*.

In addition to having some idea of the story of King Arthur, it also helps to have some idea of Williams' particular theological emphases.<sup>1</sup> (Woody and Sue have touched on a few of these already.) Chief among them, and never far from most discussions of Williams, is the idea of co-inherence and exchange. Hefling calls the word a "kind of Williams trademark," and defines it—in relation to the Trinity—as

the principle both of the incomprehensible mystery of the three personal Individualities who nevertheless exist as one God, and of the plain, if neglected truth that human being is being-from and being-in other persons. In the Trinity, co-inherence is an eternal fact; in humankind, a natural fact. When those two facts meet the result is a third, supernatural fact, the co-inherence of the kingdom, of Christendom, of the Church (Hefling 18).

And Lewis adds:

"He saved others, himself he cannot save" is a *definition* of the Kingdom. All salvation, everywhere and at all times, in great things or in little, is vicarious. The courtesy of the Emperor has absolutely decreed that no man can paddle his own canoe and every man can paddle his

fellow's, so that the shy offering and modest acceptance of indispensable aid shall be the very form of the celestial etiquette (Williams and Lewis 306).<sup>2</sup>

The idea that we can only bear each others' burdens, and that we participate in Christ as so doing, runs through all Williams' work. At the end of his church history *The Descent of the Dove* he proposed the formation of a modern "Order of the Co-Inherence" which would emphasize this doctrine: The apprehension of this order, in nature and in grace, without and within Christendom, should be, now, one of our chief concerns; it might indeed be worth the foundation of an order within the Christian church. Such a foundation would, in one sense, mean nothing, for all that it could do is already exposed and prepared, and the church has suffered something from its interior organizations. About this there need be little organization; it could do no more than communicate an increased awareness of that duty which is part of the very nature of the church itself. But in our present distresses, of international and social schism, among the praises of separation here or there, the pattern might be stressed, the image affirmed (Williams, *Essential Writings*, 148).

Williams later drew up a constitution-which-was-not-a-constitution for this group, recommending that its members make a formal "act of union" with each other and that they study "the Co-inherence of the Holy and Blessed Trinity, of the Two Natures in the Single Person, of the Mother and Son, of the Communicated Eucharist, and of the whole Catholic Church" and "on, the active side...methods of exchange, in the State, in all forms of love, and in all natural things, such as childbirth" (*Essential Writings* 149). Furthermore, the group was to associate itself primarily with the feasts of the Annunciation, Transfiguration, Trinity Sunday, and All Souls Day (the day after All Saints' Day which is intended to celebrate the entire Christian community—the great "cloud of witnesses.")

I dwell at this on some length because it is so central to Williams' *Arthurian*. First and foremost, co-inherence is central to the Eucharist, which is central to the Grail story. Furthermore, It is for this purpose of divine exchange that Logres exists. Williams describes Logres as "Britain regarded as a province of the Empire with its center at Byzantium" (Williams and Lewis 117). Given the theological resonance for Williams of the terms "Empire" and "Byzantium," Logres represents both the historical kingdom of Britain as ruled by Arthur, and a potentially holy kingdom of redeemed community brought into being with the ultimate goal of achieving the Holy Grail (Shideler 9; Williams and Lewis 286).

But for a number of reasons this quest fails. Lewis in several places intimates that Williams thought it was bound to fail, for "every Logres fails to receive the Grail and sinks back into a mere Britain: Israel, Athens, medieval Christendom, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment"(Williams and Lewis 364). In Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*, which attempts (among other things) to mediate Williams' Arthurian legend to the world, Lewis has Dimble comment that "Something we may call Britain is always haunted by what we may call Logres. Haven't you noticed that we are two countries? After every Arthur, a Mordred; behind every Milton, a Cromwell: a nation of poets, a nation of shopkeepers: the home of Sidney—and of Cecil Rhodes" (Lewis 369).

Why does Logres fall? Chiefly it does so through the fallout from two disordered loves. The first is the incestuous relationship of Arthur with his half-sister Morgause of Orkney (in his defense, he does not know she is his half-sister at the time), which produces his illegitimate son Mordred. The second is the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, which gives Mordred something solid to make a fuss about in his efforts to divide and inherit the kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Both of these relationships become co-inherence gone wrong. As Shideler says about Lancelot and Guinevere,

Their sin consists not so much of adultery as of the disordering of their relationships to the Kingdom of Logres. The facts of their position decree that they can love, but not become lovers with impunity. When they do become lovers, they pervert their relation to the King and his Kingdom, and because they are among his subjects, they also pervert his relations with all his

subjects, and as a result, Logres cannot achieve the Grail. Further, because the web is sundered, the two lovers can no longer love each other (Williams and Lewis, 11-12).

Other disordered loves which touch on Logres also make their appearance in the poems, chiefly those of Queen Morgause for the knight of the Round Table Lamorack, and of the Saracen (i.e. Muslim) knight Palomides for Queen Iseult, who is not only already married to King Mark of Cornwall but also involved in an adulterous relationship with Tristram.

However, even as Logres goes down in flames, Williams gives us some examples of places where holy community and co-inherence are still being formed. Taliessin himself gathers, or finds himself surrounded by, a company of followers and servants who practice the way of exchange. As Lewis describes Taliessin's household:

It is something subtly less than a religious order. It has not a rule, only 'a certain pointing': it has no name, no formal admission. It is also, I suspect, the most autobiographical element in the cycle. Something like the Company probably came into existence wherever Williams had lived and worked...There is nothing to distinguish them from people outside the company except the fact that they do consciously and joyously, and therefore excellently, what everyone save parasites has to do in some fashion. From one point of view they are merely good slaves, good soldiers, good clergy, good counselors and the like. But their goodness in each vocation springs from the fact that they have taken into their hearts the doctrine of the Exchange (Williams and Lewis 325-326).

In addition to Taliessin's household, properly ordered love and co-inherence are seen primarily in two relationships. One is the relationship of Taliessin himself—who is vowed to remain celibate—with the princess Blanchefleur or Dindrane, sister of the knight Percivale, who is destined to join a convent (Williams and Lewis 321, 335). While great affection springs up between the two of them, it remains a chaste affection; it is, as Lewis says, "a meeting of two unicorns, two celibates between whom nothing but 'intellectual nuptials' are at any stage in question" (Williams and Lewis 322; see also 41). In Shideler's words, they "are also separated, but their separation is the means of their union. They are bound by their mutual love to incarnate Love in the style that is appropriate for them...They affirm the sexual character of their love precisely by assigning it the role where it will contribute supremely to the web of their loves for each other, the Kingdom of Logres, and God" (Williams and Lewis 12). In describing the poem where they part—Dindrane to her convent to follow the Way of Negation, Taliessin back to the life of the court and the Way of Affirmation—Lewis describes them as "spiritually wedded, not despite the difference of their vocations but in spite of it" (Williams and Lewis 335). They function as symbolic opposites to Lancelot and Guinevere throughout.

The second properly ordered relationship is the marriage of Bors, another knight of the Round Table, to his true love Elayne: "They had set love in an order appropriate to them...when they married: the perfect expression of love can be by means of either sexual intercourse or virginity" (Shideler 12).<sup>4</sup> Two poems in the cycle focus specifically on the relationship of Bors and Elayne. In the first, "Bors to Elayne: The Fish of Broceliande," the two of them make their acquaintance and he offers his love to her in the words, "Everywhere the light through the great leaves is blown on your substantial flesh, and everywhere your glory frames" (Williams and Lewis 44). It is to the second, however, that I want to now turn.

The poem opens with Bors coming home from a season at court just as his wife Elayne is giving out bread to their workmen. This produces from Bors an extended meditation on the co-inherence and exchange shown by this act. He describes how "my fieldsmen ate and your women served" this bread, and how he himself is "come again to live from the fountains and fields of your hands" (Williams and Lewis 60)—focusing especially here on Elayne's opposable thumbs, as being one of the things which distinguishes humans from other animals.

Bors sets this picture of exchange—“bread of love for your women and my men; at the turn of the day, and none only to earn; in the day of the turn, and none only to pay”—against the court he has just come from: “organization in London, ration and rule and the fault in ration and rule, law and the flaw in law” (60-61). Williams valued the life of the City as a metaphor of the kingdom, so the fact that there is organization and law in London is not necessarily a bad thing. But into that organization has come a new feature which Bors distrusts. King Arthur has begun to coin money, and the third stanza describes these coins, which feature the head of King Arthur and the picture of a dragon, as they “scuttle and scurry between towns and towns” and “carry on their back little packs of value” (61). As Lewis comments on this poem, “Bors does not question the utility of the new coins; but he has had bad dreams about them” (317). While the king thinks he can “tame dragons to carriers,” Bors is afraid that houses will “under their weight creak and break” (61)—that they will destroy Logres. He pleads with Elayne, who as “mother of children” is already a sworn participant in the way of exchange, to “redeem the new law” (61).

We might imagine that Elayne asked Bors for further details; at any rate, he describes to her the meeting where the coins were introduced. Sir Kay, who is “wise in economics” (62)—and who, if you know Arthurian legend, you know is Arthur’s older and somewhat clueless foster brother—is thrilled by the new coinage, which will “cover the years and the miles and talk one style’s dialects to London and Omsk” (62). Essentially, he foresees globalization. For Kay, money becomes *the* one medium by which exchange between people can now take place—and be controlled.

Taliessin, however, is not convinced. Again, as Lewis puts it in his commentary, “The danger which is hidden from the economist Kay is very clear to the poet Taliessin. Coins are symbols: and being a poet he knows much more about symbols than Kay. A symbol has a life of its own. An *escaped* metaphor—escaped from the control of the total poem or philosophy in which it belongs—may be a poisonous thing” (317). Taliessin says, “Sir, if you made verse you would doubt symbols. I am afraid of the little loosed dragons. When the means are autonomous, they are deadly; when words escape from verse they hurry to rape souls...We have taught our images to be free; are we glad? Are we glad to have brought convenient heresy to Logres?” (62).

The Archbishop, somewhat surprisingly, takes a conciliatory position. He explains the true doctrine of exchange. Despite the fact that “might may take symbols and folly make treasure, and greed bid God, who hides himself for man’s pleasure by occasion, hide himself essentially” (62)—the fact that humans may really sin and screw things up—it still “abides—that the everlasting house the soul discovers is always another’s; we must lose our own ends; we must always live in the habitation of our lovers, my friend’s shelter for me, mine for him” (62-63). The Archbishop allows that, rightly employed, money may, in fact, facilitate this. Money is, in his words, “*a medium of exchange*” (63; italics mine.) Like anything else, it may be used or abused.

Bors, however, is not convinced, and wants Elayne to restore his faith in co-inherence. (One unresolved question about this poem is who is actually speaking for Williams; Bors and Taliessin, or the Archbishop?) Bors has come to “kiss each magnanimous thumb, muscles of the brain, functions of the City.” He trusts that at least in Elayne, and in his relationship to Elayne, proper exchange will still take place (though he admits to a fear that “the Council had turned you into gold” [63]). He recognizes, as he says “what without coinage or with coinage can be saved?” (63), that money may in fact be necessary. Lewis comments, “The city by reason of its legitimate complexity, does really need instruments such as coinage which themselves need to be continually redeemed if they are not to become deadly” (318). As I frequently remind my evangelical seminary students when they study the early church, a church cannot long survive without structure and accountability, even if there is always a danger of accountability turning into bureaucracy. But Bors, who (like a good evangelical) fears that “compact is becoming contract,” ends the poem with a plea to Elayne to pray for a good ending to this ominous

trend: “Say—can the law live? Can the dead king’s head live? Pray, mother of children, pray for the coins, pray for Camelot, pray for the king, pray” (63).

So; it is all there in this poem—a description of Williams’ ideal of co-inherent community, an explanation of the forces pushing against this ideal, and a foreshadowing that all will not end well for this particular historical community. There is much that this poem does not capture, of course. (Hefling calls Williams “a great phrasemaker” full of “aphorisms and epigrams,” and I tend to agree [28]). Some of my own favorite moments involve the conversion of Palomides, who decides to give up both his hopeless love of the already two-timing Queen Iseult, and his overly spiritualized and aggressively monotheistic faith (Shideler 11), and be baptized into the Mercy. He begins by wanting to convert to Christianity on his own terms and in recognition of his achievements: “I determined, after I saw Iseult’s arm, to be someone, to trap the questing beast that slid into Logres out of Broceliande through the blank between the queen’s meaning and the queen” (Williams and Lewis 82). But he eventually realizes after numerous setbacks that he will not get anything he wants by demanding it, and must instead submit. He agrees at last to abandon his quest of this mysterious beast and turn aside for the humiliation of baptism: “It was true I should look a fool before everyone; why not look a fool before everyone?” (85).

There is also the wonderfully bureaucratic, practical, and scheming poem from the perspective of Arthur’s son and nephew Mordred, left in charge of the Kingdom and shortly to bring about the Round Table’s end, who dismisses the Grail airily with “My father dwelled on the thought of the Grail for his luck, but I can manage without such fairy mechanism. If it does prove to be, which is no likely thought, I will send my own dozen of knights to pull it in” (166). (Haven’t we met Mordred before in the halls of Congress?) And there is the brief but cutting description of Guinevere, after an entire poem where Taliessin has contemplated what she—what all women—should be in Logres, and what Guinevere will in fact fail to be: “The king’s poet came to the entrance; the queen said, with the little scorn that becomes a queen of Logres: “Has my lord dallied with poetry among the roses?” (146).

Finally, there is the poem which ends the second volume, “The Prayers of the Pope,” where the “young Pope...Deodatus, Egyptian-born” (168) is seen in prayer for a community, a co-inherence, and a glory which is already passing away. Lewis compares the poem’s recreation of the troubles in Logres as Arthur’s reign ended to the real-life situation which presented itself to Williams at the beginning of World War II: “The lights are being put out all over Europe” (364).<sup>5</sup> The Pope is another representation of order and the City, and an emblem of the co-inherence Williams desired to see throughout Christendom. He reminds us as he prays to Christ that there is yet a great day of co-inherence coming, brought by the Christ who defeated death and who offers himself in the Eucharistic exchange: “Thou hast harried hell, O Blessed, and carried thence the least token of thyself. Thou hast spoken a word of power in the midst of hell, and well are thine Acts everywhere qualified with eternity. That Thou only canst be, thou only everywhere art; let hell also confess thee, bless thee, praise thee, and magnify thee forever” (178).

Though I could go on, I will stop there. I encourage you to discover the rest for yourself. And my prayer for you is that Williams’ examination of the depths of human sin, and the heights of redeeming grace, will assist you to—as the Pope prays for his Christian community, the “unknown elect—” to “take the trick of the weak devils with peace, and speak at last on the coast of the land of the Trinity the tongue of the Holy Ghost” (Williams and Lewis 175-176).

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<sup>1</sup> Besides Hefling's own study, I strongly endorse, as a guide to Williams' theology and spirituality, the brief bibliography of Williams interpretations which Hefling gives on p. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see not only Hefling (particularly 68-90, 146-163, 204-230), but *Outlines of Romantic Theology* throughout.

<sup>3</sup> All of this is a great deal clearer in Malory and White than it is, at least at first glance, in Williams.

<sup>4</sup> For those who already know something of the Arthurian story, be aware that this is *not* the same Elaine—spelled Helayne by Williams—who is the mother of Galahad.

<sup>5</sup> This quotation is, in its original form ("The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time") attributed to Sir Edward Grey before World War I, and it was much repeated in the run-up to World War II.