THE NEW MATTER OF BRITAIN: T.H. White's THE SWORD IN THE STONE

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The Arthurian legend has always exerted great fascination on the minds of men; it has influenced not only literature, but also music, painting and even archeological researches. Over the centuries, the tales of King Arthur and his knights have been retold and reshaped by many writers, either in verse or prose renderings.

The first prose version of the Arthurian legend in English was Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, published in 1485. Malory's work not only culminates the Medieval Arthurian tradition, but it has also been the seminal source of most subsequent artistic treatment of the legend.

In our century, writers have continued to draw on the legend, as well as on Malory's text. One of these writers was the British novelist Terence Hanbury White, author of the following books on Arthur: a four-volume novel entitled The Once and Future King,[1] published in 1958, and a fifth novel, The Book of Merlyn,[2] published in 1977. Three of the novels which constitute the tetralogy had been published separately, at different dates. The first one, The Sword in the Stone,[3] was published in 1938. It was followed by The Queen of Air and Darkness in 1939, and by The Ill-made Knight in 1940. The Candle in the Wind, the fourth novel, appeared for the

first time in the 1958 four-volume edition, namely, The Once and Future King.

The present study concentrates on the first novel of the tetralogy, The Sword in the Stone, aiming to unfold White's treatment of the legend, mainly in what concerns character creation.

The Sword in the Stone deals with the boyhood of King Arthur and his education by Merlyn. This part of the King's career had never been mentioned in any of the previous versions of the legend. It is then, W.H. White's own contribution to the legend.

Almost all characters in The Sword in the Stone are part of the large cast of the Arthurian legend, and as the book is wholly about the boyhood of Arthur under the guidance of Merlyn, the two of them are the characters of greatest prominence in the story. They are followed by Kay, and to a lesser degree by Sir Ector, Arthur's foster father, King Pellinore, Sir Grummore, and Morgan le Fay. The other characters are based upon figures drawn from popular legends, folktale, and mythical material. Such a mixture is not only applied to the protagonists, since many of the motifs and themes intertwined throughout the story also come from those varied sources.

At first impression, the mixture of so many varied elements gives the reader a puzzling sensation and contributes to the comical tone of the story. The impression one has is that White has made a kind of cocktail, with ingredients ranging from Medieval History and Literature, to folktale,

mythical material, anacronisms, parables, and even Natural History. If the comical tone does persist in White's books, and is in fact related to the satyrical style which permeates it, the blending of so many elements is not so confusing or purposeless as it may seem at first. In reality, it is meaningful, since it is closely related to characterization and adds valuable insight into the characters' motivations and roles. It contributes not only to the clarification of the concept of the hero in White's books, but also to the meaning of his work as a whole.

The elements pertaining to folktale and to myth are very relevant to characterization and are mainly centered around Arthur and Merlyn and the development of their relationship. Sometimes the boundary between myth and folktale becomes blurred and it is difficult to distinguish it whith any precision. Stith Thompson in The Folktale,[4] categorizes the various kinds of folktale, but remarks that finding exact terms is a difficult task and comments on the blending which occurs from one into the other.

A similar blending occurs in The Sword in the Stone, but the relevance of White's use of such elements is due not so much to the exact source from which they originated, but to the way they articulate so as to give depth to the presentation and meaning of characters and coherence to his work.

The book offers the possibility of two kinds of reading; if on one level it is the light-hearted, amusing story of the childhood of King Arthur, on a deeper level

this same story presents certain fundamental truths of human life. Folktale and mythical elements are linked to the boyhood of Arthur: they are evocative of the magic world of childhood and at the same time they are suggestive of the more serious, deeper aspects of life, such as fate, wisdom and truth.

Whatever the exact degree to which fokltale and myth are incorporated within the story, T.H. White is most of the time successful in using them, and part of his success is due to his ability to apply such elements not only to the plot, but also to the characters, mainly to the figures of Wart and Merlyn.

The most striking characteristic not only of these two characters, but of all characters created by White, is the sense of humanness that they show. The Wart is the first evidence of that. To start with, the name Arthur is mentioned just once, and throughout the book, only the nickname Wart is used. The use of the nickname humanizes the character and establishes an affectionate connection between him and the reader. As opposed to all the other figures which already existed in the tradition of the legend, it also strengthens the originality of T.H. White's text. The Wart is his unique creation. He is presented as a common boy: there is nothing unusual or special about him. The first few chapters show that he is the adopted son of Sir Ector, the Master of the Castle. What is even more important, the opposition between the Wart and Kay is established immediately. This opposition is carried on until the end of the book and the presentation

and development of the Wart is continuously paralleled by that of Kay. Kay's position in the household is privileged mainly because one day he would become Sir Kay, "the master of the estate" (p. 7). He feels too dignified to accept a nickname, is not punished by the governess or by the other members of the household, and enjoys various other privileges for being Sir Ector's proper son. For the Wart, the question of precedence was a painful one, because he did not understand it very well, and Kay had taught him that "being diffetent was necessarily wrong."(p. 13) However, the Wart has a naïve and loving nature. He thinks Kay is more important than himself and "admired Kay and was a born follower. He was a hero worshipper." (p. 13)

The contrast between elder and young children plays an important role in folktales. In tales of this type, the youngest child, the unpromising one, becomes the hero, and in the case of being a son, the tales are many times referred to by the term "male Cinderella."[5] White is obviously using the same motif here. The Wart, towards the end of the book, compares himself to a Cinderella.

Unlike folktale, however, the child of shiftless habits is not the Wart, the youngest, but Kay:

> The Wart loved hay-making, and was good at it, Kay, who was two years older, generally stood on the edge of the bundle of hay which he was trying to pick up, with the result that he worked as hard as the Wart for only half of the result. But he hated to be beaten by anybody at

> anything and used to fight away with the wretched hay — which he loathed like poison-until he was quite sick. (p. 11)

Kay's role, which at first impression might be suggestive of that of the villain or of the unkind sister of folktales is really much more complex than that. Although he does perform the role of a foil to the Wart throughout the story, it is also through him that White is able to express some of the more serious passages in the book, which concern destiny, self-realization, and failure. By reverting the pattern of a folktale motif, White interestingly opposes the dichotomy good-bad, and at the same time emphasizes the complexity of his character's role, thus giving him a sense of depth.

The critic John K. Crane points out that White did not want to make a villain of Kay, who is only an ordinary human being, and adds that "the book might be, in a slight way, Kay's tragedy in itself."[6] He quotes the following lines about Kay:

> He was not at all an unpleasant person, really, but clever, quick, proud, passionate and ambitious. He was one of those people who would be neither a follower nor a leader, but only an aspiring heart, impatient in the failing body which imprisoned him." (p. 45)

Kay is a pivotal character in The Sword in the Stone.

He is not only a foil to the Wart, but he is also the means through which White expresses some of the themes of his novels. One of them is his criticism of the environment as a powerful formative force of character. This theme is more fully developed in the second book The Queen of Air and Darkness through the Orkney children, in The Ill-Made Knight through the figure of Lancelot, and finally in The Candle in the Wind through Mordred.

In addition, Kay seems to fill a structural role. His relevance is restricted to The Sword in the Stone, but each of the following books has characters who are developed in much the same way Kay is. In fact, one of White's techniques for character construction can be exemplified by his portrayal of Kay. The contoured lines of Kay's character had been already established by Malory, but T.H. White fills in the empty space within these lines. He gives a certain depth to the character, whose motivations and relationship thereby become complex ones. Consequently, this dimensionality adds to the character's credibility and simultaneously enhances his position as meaningful in the narrative. Kay and a number of other characters have a place in the story, and not just because they had been traditionally there as parts of the Arthurian World. They are handled in such a way so as to remain recognizable figures of the tradition, yet they surely fit into the pattern of White's own story.

As components of this pattern they have meaning in themselves, add to the meaning of the work as a whole and help unfold the concept of the hero throughoutthe five novels.

The basis of this concept is linked to the portrayal of characters who reflect not ideals of man or idealized life, but man as he is in real life: complex, multi-dimensional, and never simple. Although the vision of childhood is somewhat idealized, this does not interfere with characterization itself.

The characterizations of the Wart and Kay are further developed in their connection with the figure of Merlyn. The episode which precedes and motivates the meeting of the Wart and Merlyn illustrates how the different natures of the two boys make then take different paths. When the hawk they had taken from the mews fails to fly and refuses to return, Kay loses his temper, gives up trying to catch it and goes back home. But the Wart's loving nature and his concern for people make him think of all the hours and effort the falconer Hob had spent training it, so he goes on pursuit until he finds himself in a threatening forest. It is this incident that makes the Wart eventually find Merlyn.

In addition to revealing the diverse natures of the Wart and Kay, this same incident points to other important elements in the story. They are related to the use White makes of the landscape (the forest), and the quest motif. Both the forest and the quest are fundamental parts of Medieval Romance. In Malory's text[7] there is no precise description of a forest, although the knights move and act in it all the time. The words used to describe it are either "fayre" of "depe." The forest is inseparable from the quest. The knight is always led into a quest as he follows an animal (a hare, a brachet or

a hart) into the forest. There is often an encounter either with knights, damsels, and fays, or with strange creatures such as dwarfs, foul churls, and giants. The forest is also the stage for marvellous occurrences, and the refuge for those who become insane due to excess or love, such as Tristan and Lancelot.

But White's forest is "the great jungle of Old England" (p. 18). It comprises some of the elements mentioned above, but they are given a more realistic touch. It is at the same time reminiscent of the forest as found in fairy-tales, the place where one meets danger:

> ... The mad and wicked animals were not the only inhabitants of the crowded gloom. When men themselves became mad and wicked, they took refuge there, outlaws cunning and bloody as the gore-crow, and as percecuted. The Wart thought particularly of a man named Wat, whose name the cottagers used to frighten their children with. He had once lived in Sir Ector's village and the Wart could remember him. He squinted, had no nose, and was weak in his wits. The children threw stones at him. One day he turned on the children and caught one and made a snarly noise and bit off his nose too. Then he ran away into the forest. They threw stones at the child with no nose, now,but Wat was supposed to be in the forest still, running on all fours and dressed in skins. There were magicians in the forest also in those days, as well as strange animals not known to modern works of natural history. There were regular bands of out-laws, not like Wat, who lived together and wore green and shot with arrows which

> never missed. There were even a few dragons, though they were rather small ones, which lived under stones and could hiss like a kettle. (p. 19)

The references to the Wat and the "child with no nose" which at first may seem purposeless, show how T.H. White uses some of the traditional elements of the legend to fit his story. The Wat (the word in Old English means insane, mad) has a traceable connection with the wild man of the woods, a figure of Celtic tradition who was sometimes identified with Merlyn. In Malory's text Merlyn appears several times disguised either as a wild man, a woodcutter, a churl or a boy. T.H. White keeps these traditional figures but uses them in a different way. He separates the Wat and the boy "with no nose" from the figure of Merlyn. However, the Wat seems to be a replacement of the wild man. There are no dwarfs in this forest, but the reference to the boy seems to point to a common idea of physical distortion. Where in Malory's text the appearance of Merlyn in disguised forms or of the dwarf are related to prophecies and to the announcement of an adventure, in T.H. White's novel the Wat and the boy "with no nose" are related to the plot and also to the meaning of the work by becoming carriers of themes. Through these two figures White emphasizes man's basic distrusts of all that is different, and how least favored human beings are denied the right to live an integrated life in society.

There are further references to the Wat and the boy in the course of the narrative. The boy "with no nose" is the

Dog Boy of Sir Ector's Castle, who felt more comfortable living with dogs than with people. But the Wat and the Dog Boy are not in the narrative only to serve as tools for this kind of criticism. They are also connected with the Wart, who shows his concern for both, and with the action of the story, as they participate later in an adventure with Kay and the future King.

It is interesting to notice that the Wat shares the forest not only with the outlaws, who are later identified as Robin Hood and his band, but even with the magicians, of whom Merlyn is an example. They are, after all, the excluded ones.

Ironically enough, none of these creatures whom the Wart fears hurt him. The boy meets real danger when he is almost shot by the arrows of a knight, a figure accepted and worshipped by society. This is therefore an instance of criticism which indicates a reversal of socially accepted values.

The discovery that the arrows had come from King Pellinore in search of the Questing Beast is preceded by a description of the boy's vision of this knight in full armour:

> There was a clearing in the forest, a wide sward of moonlit grass, and the white rays shone full upon the tree trunks on the opposite side. These trees were beeches, whose trunks are always most beautiful in a pearly light, and among the beeches there was the smallest

> movement and a silvery clink. Before the clink there were just the beeches, but immediately afterwards there was a knight in full armour, standing still, and silent and unearthly, among the majestic trunks. He was mounted on an enourmous white horse that stood as rapt as its master, and he carried in his right hand, with its butt resting on the stirrup. a high, smooth jousting lance, which stood up among the tree stumps, higher and higher, till it was outlined against the velvet sky. All was moonlit, all silver, too beautiful to describe. (p. 22)

The vision of the knight through the child's eyes contrasts with the description that follows it, and the magic and marvellous give place to the ridiculous and comic, in a scene highly suggestive of a cartoon:

> For the ghost lift up its visor, revealing two enormous eyes frosted like ice; exclaimed in an anxious voice "What, What?", took off its eyes — which turned out to be horn-rimmed spectacles, completely fogged by being inside the helmet; tried to wipe them on the horse's mane — which only made them worse; lifted both hands above its head and tried to wipe them on its plume; dropped its lance; dropped the spectacles; got off the horse to search for them — the visor shutting in the process; lifted its visor; bent down for the spectacles; stood up again as the visor shut once more, and exclaimed in a plaintive voice, "Deah, Deah!" (p. 23)

The situation becomes even more comical when King

Pellinore tells the Wart about the brachet that helps him trace the beast, which is described as a composite of serpent, libbard, lion, and hart.

The Quest, which is one of the noblest themes in Arthurian literature, is here made fun of.

The Wart tries to persuade King Pellinore to help him out of the forest, but the knight is unable to do it, because he hears the sound of the beast and he must continue the quest. King Pellinore has been after the Questing Beast for seventeen years. He does not know why he pursues it or why he must do it. The quest, in fact, has been forced upon him: it is "the burden of the Pellinores who have been trained with that idea in mind" (p. 24). Thus, his quest is not a search, but a curse. John Crane calls our attention to the serious side that underlies the apparent comical presentation of King Pellinore.[8]

For a better understanding of King Pellinore's role and meaning, it is also useful to mention here that the scene in which Malory introduces King Pellinore and the Questing Beast, is, as in White's text, connected with Arthur, the pursuit of a hare and the forest. It is also King Pellinore's quest to follow the beast. Although "it was a wonderful beast, and a great signification", for Merlyn prophesied much of that beast" (p. 131), its real nature is never revealed and its meaning is not made clear. Without the knowledge of King Pellinore as used in Malory, this figure would remain too eccentric, comic, and absurd.

The quest is a recurrent motif in Arthuriam romance. On the one hand it is linked to religion and to mystical vision in the Grail stories, which present the greatest of all quests. But there are also the non-religious quests in which the knights are permanently involved. These are of two kinds: there are the manly adventures the knights engage in, in order to keep up their reputation for prowess, and a higher kind of quest, the "special aventure," as John Stevens called it in his book Medieval Romance.[9] This quest has a special effect on the knight, who,through it, becomes more than a common living man. This special "aventure" involves self-knowledge and spiritual growth. In Malory's text one can detect these three modalities. There are the quests for the Grail, which are strictly religious, and the endless quests in which the knights meet adventure after adventure, joust with other knights, and exhibit feats of arms.

In Malory's work, however, King Pllinore's quest does not seem to fit strictly in any of these modalities. Perhaps this occurs partly because the nature and meaning of the beast is so undefined. His figure is more linked to the vague questing atmosphere which pervades the entire romance,rather than to any specific meaning.

In T.H. White's novels, King Pellinore's structural function is manifold. Through this character the impracticabilities of Malory's narrative are satirized as well as chivalric values. But the implications and significance of the quest are also presented through this character. T.H. White uses Pellinore's predicament to criticize contemporary values, as it becomes a symbol of a quest undertaken to fulfill familiar or social expectations, and not one's own.

But the roots of T.H. White's King Pellinore are not to be found only in the Pellinore of Malory's text, his most immediate source. King Pellinore also has a parallel in the White Knight Alice meets in Lewis Caroll's Through the Looking-Glass. Quite like White's Pellinore, he cannot stay on his horse:

> Whenever the horse stopped (which it did very often), he fell off in front; and whenever it went on again (which it generally did, rather suddenly), he fell off behind. Otherwise, he kept on pretty well, except that he had a habit of now and then falling off sideways;...[10]

He is at the same time funny, foolish, absurd, but the most human figure Alice meets in her adventures, and she is impressed by him forever.

The Wart is also very impressed by the knight he meets. Much later, in Book Three, The Ill-made Knight, when Arthur's dream of a happy kingdom is falling apart, he says that King Pellinore was the first knight he ever fell in love with.

What White does then, is to recreate a Pellinore who comprises characteristics of Malory's character and of Lewis Caroll's White Knight. This reveals how he follows the tradition, in that the Arthurian legend was a result of the combination of elements and characters taken from different stories. However, in his process of condensation White adds a satyrical touch that is a departure from tradition. The impracticabilities of the medieval rendering of the episode involving King Pellinore and the Questing Beast are more acceptable in T.H. White's work because they are part of the magic world of children, even though approaching the absurd.

Just as in Arthurian Romances the hero is led into the forest as he pursues an animal and meets adventure, here the Wart penetrates the forest as he goes in search of the hawk and has an encounter with a question knight. Finally, after a night's sleep in the forest, he meets Merlyn . Thus the Wart, the hawk, the forest, and the questing knight are part of just one pattern, which parallels the "questing pattern" of medieval romance. In addition to these elements taken from romance, T.H. White also draws elements from fairy tales and children's stories and make them fit into his version. In fairy tales, birds may be the announcers of an adventure.[11] Significantly, the knight that Alice meets comes to see her safe out of the wood, and after she has crossed the next brook she becomes a Queen. The crossing of a river symbolizes in fairy tales a transition, and a new beginning on a higher level of existence.[12]

Anyway, be it in fairy tales, romances and even dreams,

the entering of a forest has been associated with the call to adventure and expresses the passage into new stages of life. Related to this call is "the figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage, a new biography."[13]

In The Sword in the Stone, this figure is Merlyn. Going after the hawk the Wart has found a tutor, and the Wart's relation to this quest is best expressed through his own words, when the boy finds out that Merlyn is going to return to the Castle with him:

> At this the Wart's eyes grew rounder and rounder, until they were about as big as the owl's who was sitting on his shoulder, and his face got redder andredder, and a big breath seemed to gather itself beneath his heart. "My!" exclaimed the Wart, while his eyes sparkled with excitment at the discovery. "I must have been on a Quest." (p. 41)

The meeting of the Wart and Merlyn marks the beginning of a relationship which constitutes the bulk of this first novel. But the significance of Merlyn is to be found as much in the development of such a relationship as in the way he is characterized in the story.

Merlyn is portrayed first like the character from the Walt Disney cartoon The Sword and the Stone, and as such belongs to the world of children. Instances which are strongly evocative of the film are, among others, the descriptions of the magician when the Wart first sees him:

> The old gentleman that the Wart saw was a singular spectacle. He was dressed in a flowing gown with fur tippets which had the signs of the zodiac embroidered all over it, together with various cabalistic signs, as of triangles with eyes in them, queer crosses, leaves of trees, bones of birds and animals and a planetarium whose stars shone like bits of looking-glass with the sun on them. He had a pointed hat like a dunce's cap, or like the headgear worn by ladies of that time, except that the ladies were accustomed to have a bit of veil floating from the top of it. He also had a wand of lignum vitae, which he had laid down in the grass beside him, and a pair of horn-trimmed spectacles like those of King Pellinore. They were extraordinary spectacles, being without ear pieces, but shaped like scissors of the antennae of the tarantula wasp. (p. 31)

But as a wizard, Merlyn has a parallel in Malory's Merlyn: both are powerful, prophetic , and responsible for the future of King Arthur. In Malory's text Merlyn uses his power to aid Arthur in battle, either by helping him overcome his enemies in actual fight or by giving him advice. He is both a counselor and a strategist, always ready to safeguard the position of the King.

Merlyn always enjoys using his ability to appear under several disguises or simply to vanish away. Besides the magic power which enables him to devise such childish surprises, he combines the qualities of a skilled technician, something like an engineer, with those of an artisan, as he is able to construct a "bridge of stone and steele and write names on tombes with letters of gold."(p. 58)

Merlyn's most striking power, however, is that of vaticination. He foretells all future events and the destinies of Arthur and of other characters as well. His prophecies emphasize the sense of doom which pervades the story, for in spite of all his foreknowledge , destiny cannot be changed. Even when the characters are aware of what will happen to them they are unable to go against their predestined fates. Merlyn's power is useless even for himself. He knows the woman he will fall in love with will be the cause of his destruction. None of his skills and magic power are strong enough compared to the forces of love. He is able to control most forces of nature, but not those of love.

The magician is also a dream-reader,and in addition to this role, he is presented by Malory as a religious prophet, as all his forebodings are uttered in the name and by the wish of God. Thus, fate is in the power of an omniscient being, and there seems to be no place for the question of free will. In spite of his constant invocation of the name of God, Merlyn is seen by many as a witch, as the devil's son, or as having acquired his powers through the devil's craft.

Although the figure of Merlyn provides a great part of the fascination of the Arthurian legend and constitutes one of the most interesting parts of Malory's <u>Le Morte D'Arthur</u>, he is present only in the first book (out of eight), disappearing completely afterwards. The function performed by Merlyn as a prophet and magician is then extended to a number of mysterious men similar to Merlyn himself. The other characters

through whom magic is performed are Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half-sister and enemy, and other mysterious women. Like Merlyn, they are the operators of magic, having the special skills that enable them to manipulate the forces of nature in a marvellous manner.

Unlike the Merlyn of Malory's text, T.H. White's character occupies a great part of The Sword in the Stone. His relevance is not restricted to this first novel, but is in fact extended to all the others. The importance of Merlyn is due to the relationship he bears to the development of the plot, to the central characters, and to the thematic structure of the subsequent works.

As developed by T.H. White, the figure of Merlyn is a mixture of absent-minded intellectual, alchemist, and naturalist. The description of his hut attests to that. The objects in it vary from a gold-medal for being the best scholar at Eton, the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, roots of Mandrake, different types of vessels and glasses, retorts with cauldrons, and hundreds of thousands of brown books in leather bindings, to all kinds of insects, stuffed animals and birds, as well as live animals under the care of the magician. The introduction of modern elements and objects in the description of the hut, adds a note of humor and contemporaneity. Merlyn seems to be all at once: a seer, a scholar, a teacher, and a sage.

Such a variety of aspects for Merlyn seems to be a reflexion of the changing characteristics attributed to him by the different authors and sources of Arthurian Literature.

Thus, Merlyn has been associated with the Welsh poet and prophet Myrddyn, with Taliesin, with wild mad men, with a magician who undergoes transformation, with a dream-reader, and has been regarded as the guiding genius of Arthur's reign.[14]

T.H. White is successful in reconciling in Merlyn so many different aspects at once. Each of these is in fact complementary to the other, and the character becomes remarkable dimensional, fascinating, and charming.

Merlyn's knowledge is neither only scientific nor excessively intellectual. Most of all he has knowledge of human nature, and his wisdom is greatly due to his understanding of men. He is wise too, in that he perceives that wisdom, courage, and virtue may be learned through nature.

He also possesses the gift of prophecy, although he does not make much use of it. He only reveals to the Wart his royal origin and utters prophecies concerning his future as a king, in the very last page of this book. When in the succeeding novels Merlyn tells Arthur about future events, he does so not in the vaticinating manner of Malory's Merlyn, but as warnings that could prevent future suffering. Arthur himself never pays too much attention to them, "because he didn't like to know the future" (p. 282). Merlyn's prophetic power is related to the fact that he has come from the future,that is, he moves backwards in time. This is not the usual role played by prophets, who live now — in a present time — and know about the future.

Merlyn's trajectory is the same trajectory of the author — the twentieth century man looking back into

the past. Merlyn's capacity to transcend time is reminiscent of that of the Welsh wizard-poet Taliesin, "who was there when the world was created and will endure to the end."[15] Although they transcend time in inverted ways, they have in common the characteristics of agelessness and omniscience, Merlyn for possessing the knowledge of the future, and Taliesin for bearing within him the history of the world and the lore of the ages.

In addition, T.H. White seems to be making a similar use of the traditional motif of prophet-poet, as he establishes a link between his and Merlyn's same trajectory in moving back in time. The prophet-poet motif found in the tradition is then reinforced.

Still related to this reversal of time order is Merlyn's forgetfulness of important details which leads the story to a tragic outcome. An instance of this is Merlyn's omission of Igraine's relationship to Arthur, which leads to his incestuous affair with his half-sister Margause in the second novel The Queen of Air and Darkness.

As for magic, Merlyn does control the forces of nature by making it snow or rain, by vanishing away, by producing various objects or by turning the Wart into animals. But these are transformations which remind one of tricks of a hypnotist or of an illusionist, as Sir Ector himself comments, after having asked Merlyn to give some testimonials of his abilities as a magician.

The fact that Merlyn is a magician does not impress Sir Ector, neither the other members of the household, and

all of them regard the old man as just good enough to be the tutor of the Wart and Kay.

Whereas Malory's Merlyn is an inscrutable and impressive figure, feared by all, the Merlyn of White's creation lives unnoticed in the Castle of the Forest Sauvage, and people's lives are unaffected by his presence of by his magic powers. In fact, he ranks equally with the priest of the Castle or with the sargeant who trains the boys in the art of chivalry — the kind of training which Merlyn does not consider at all valuable, but which is accepted by all as the only fit one. Fighting and military tactics, as well as tilting, jousting, and horsemanship, are considered worthless activities by the magician. The old man cannot value the sort of education which aims only at the muscles:

> A lot of brainless unicorns swaggering about and calling themselves educated just because they can push each other off a horse with a bit of stick! It makes me tired. Why, I believe, Sir Ector would have been gladder to get a by-our-lady tilting blue for your tutor, that swings himself along on his knuckles like an anthropoid ape, rather than a magician of known probity and international reputation with first class honour from every European university. The trouble with the English Aristocracy is that they are games-mad, that's what it is, games-mad. (p. 85)

Merlyn's attempts to show the Wart the futility of such education is one of his most difficult tasks. The boy is so involved with knights and fighting that he can perceive

nothing wrong in joustings and combats. He is too used to the fact that men periodically make war against each other.[16]

The scene which shows Pellinore fighting with Sir Grummore is hilarious. But there is nothing funny in the fact that they feel that at the sight of each other they must fight. In this scene, T.H. White is not only parodying the almost formular style of Malory's presentation of knights fighting. His criticism is not only directed against Malory's narrative, or the chivalric ideals of prowess and bravery of the Middle Ages. Merlyn's task of showing the Wart the hopelessness and futility of the conventional training of knights is linked in fact to one of the most important themes of the novel. Through Merlyn's teachings, the Wart realizes the violent and destructive potential that exists in men. This theme is present not only in The Sword in the Stone but is extended throughout the other four novels and is indeed a unifying principle. Thus, the power of Merlyn seems to reside not so much in his magic, but rather in the knowledge and wisdom he possesses. It is as a tutor to the Wart that he will best perform his role of guardian and helper, by showing him that his success will not come by magic, but by living and experimenting and relying on his own human means. Most of all, it is Merlyn's task to show the boy that victories are not necessarily the ones achieved in battles, even if whole civilizations have considered and may still consider it to be so.

Merlyn comes to the Castle to serve as a tutor for both the Wart and Kay. Though the relationship of Merlyn and the Wart is primarily one of master and pupil, the teachings the boy receives from the old man are of a very special kind. Disregarding formal knowledge, Merlyn tries to teach him lessons which are meaningful and necessary for a future King, and whose effect proves to last for a lifetime.

The special teachings of Merlyn, however, are not extended to Kay, whose education is limited to the conventional. Kay perceives there is something special in the relationship of Merlyn and the Wart, and he resents it. The Wart himself knows he is somehow provileged by their tutor's guidance and tries to understand why it is so. Merlyn tries to show the boy how powerless he is to change what had already been settled by destiny. Although unfair, he cannot do any magic for Kay. John Crane assigns to fate and to the environment a powerful influence on the destinies of the two boys. According to him, Kay was placed by fate in an environment.

> which cultivates pride in selected members and allows it to evaporate at the very moment the cultivated character must depend upon it — as it does for Kay when he lies about having pulled the sword from the stone.[17]

Of the Wart, and of Merlyn's relationship to the boys, he adds:

> Wart, for several reasons, all of which are

> denied to poor Kay, overcomes the environment. Most basically, born in a lower position, he has less oportunity to succumb to the environment than Kay. Next, he has Merlyn, and Merlyn knowing that Kay is socially a nobody, concentrates entirely upon England's unknowing but future monarch.[18]

In fact, among other reasons, the treatment Kay received from the members of the household, for example, might have led the boy to think that he would always be the best one. So, why not the King of England? However, T.H. White seems to show that the overwhelming force of destiny is related not so much to the environment one is placed in. That there is an element of predestination in the Wart's life is quite clear, but White also implies that his success was partly due to the potentialities inherent in himself. Merlyn saw in the boy what others did not, but it was not only the truth concerning his royal origin. The wise man perceived that the Wart possessed the potentialities, the necessary qualities to be the King. His role as a tutor was not to "give" the boy such qualities, but to develop to the fullest what already lay there.

There are occasions in the novel in which the Wart himself seems to make his own choice and to set his own destiny. His speech in the kitchen scene, when he regrets his lower social position which impeded him to become a knight, reveals that his choice had already been made. This choice seems to be unrelated to preordained forces, but rather to come from himself:

> "If I were to be made a knight",
> said the Wart, starting dreamily
> into the fire, I should insist
> upon my doing my vigil all by
> mvself, as Hob does with his
> hawks, and I should pray to God to let me
> encounter all the evil in the world in my own
> person so that if I conquered there should be one
> left, while if I were defeated,
> it would be I who would suffer
> for it. (p. 255)

Kay, however, in addition to the limitations caused by the aristocratic environment he lived in, was hindered by his own inner limitations. Basically afraid and insecure, he developed feelings of conceit and pride which were really only a disguise for his fear. And it is mainly his incapacity to overcome his fear, for instance, that prevented him from going through the forest after the hawk, whose chase caused the Wart to find Merlyn. Kay seems to be a representative of most of humanity, that is, of that large majority who, for one reason or another, do not fulfill their own expectations.

That the environment is not the only responsible factor for one's success or failure is to a certain extent demonstrated by Sir Ector. He most probably came to be the ruler of the Castle of the Forest Sauvage in much the same way Kay would be one day, by heredity. Belonging to the aristocratic class, he has received the kind of treatment given to Kay, being used to similar provileges. Both belong to the same environment and thus have been under similar

influences, but Sir Ector seems to be much happier than Kay and to perceive much more of life. Aware of the limitations of his own son, Sir Ector doubts he had the necessary qualities to be the King, acknowledges it, and at the same time he reassures the boy of his love, in one of the most moving passages of the book:

> Sir Ector did not say anything silly. He looked at the Wart. Then he stared at Kay again, long and lovingly, and said "we will go back to the church." "Now then, Kay," he said, when they were at the church door. He looked at his first-born again, kindly, but straight between the eyes. "Here is the stone, and you have the sword. It will make you the King of England. You are my son that I am proud of, and always will be, whatever happens. Will you promise me that you took it out by your own might?" Kay looked at his father. He also looked at the Wart and at the Sword. Then he handled the Sword to the Wart quite quietly. He said, "I am a liar. Wart pulled it out." (p. 284)

A similar scene is presented in Malory's text. It coincides with the introduction of Kay into the story, in the beginning of Book I. The Noble Tale of King Arthur. For comparison, the passage is quoted here:

> And as sone as Sir Kay saw the swerd he wist wel it was the swerd of the stone, and so he rode to his father Syr Ector and said.
> 'Sire, loo here is the swerd of the stone, wherfor I must be kyng of thys land.'
> When Syre Ector beheld the swerd he retorned

> ageyne and cam to he chirche, and there they alighte al thre and wente into the chirche, and anon he made Sir Kay to swere upon a book how he came to that swerd.
> 'Syr,' said Sir Kay, 'by my broder Arthur, for he brought it to me' (p. 8)

The juxtaposition of the two renderings of this scene shows how T.H. White gives a psychological dimension to the event. The use he made of this incident, and the way he re-created the characters, are examples of how he filled the empty space within some of Malory's figures. This is particularly noticeable with Kay, who in Malory's text is sometimes presented as Arthur's "discomfited seneschal"[19] and in other occasions has the role of a hero. T.H. White's treatment of Kay is consistent although his character is more complex than Malory's. The episode of the sword reveals the character's depth and emotions and it also points to the different directions taken by the Wart and Kay. For reasons that ultimately escape understanding, the moment the Wart reaches the climax of his long preparation under Merlyn's guidance is the moment in which Kay's failure is, after all, only strenghtened. Though the role of King was assigned to the Wart, T.H. White pointed out throughout the novel that predestination was not the sole agent in the career of King Arthur, implying that a heroic status may to a certain extent be achieved.

This may be further confirmed by an analysis of the relationship of Merlyn and the Wart, and of the long process that made the Wart develop his potentialities and assimilate

the special teachings from his master. Through the lessons he receives, he is transformed into different animals, and each of them discloses to the boy its natural wisdom and special knowledge.

The role of animals as helpers to the hero is widespread in folktales and myth, forming in some tales the actual center of interest. Similarly, it is also relevant that many heroes are either transformed into animals or associated with animals; in this way, they are able to partake of their natural and supernatural qualities. Alwyn and Brinley Rees have discussed the relevance of the role attributed to animals:

> In mythology, animals are not mere brutes; they are possessed of a supernatural intelligence and power. Their association with the birth and infancy of heroes is world-wide, and in many cases they befriend or serve their heroic kinsmen beyond the days of childhood.[20]

The lessons and the transformations evolve quite smoothly from the narrative, and even in the concluding novel of White's Arthurian series, The Book of Merlyn, when Arthur returns again to see the animals, the transition is felt to be natural. In any way, the lessons are believable all the time.

The first lesson significantly takes the Wart into the water. The association of water with birth or rebirth or even baptism, suggests that the Wart is being initiated into a

special learning process from which he will emerge as a different person. Transformed into a fish, the Wart has the opportunity to see the King of the Moat, who professes just one law, that of power, and who lives by one decree, that of might as right. It is exactly against the motto "Might is Right" that Arthur is going to fight during his whole life.

As a merlyn, the Wart has a chance to see hawks living in a military-like organization. They are trained to kill by hunger, and owe blind obedience to their leader. Unaware that they are in fact prisoners in the Mews, they feel proud and honored for belonging to such a privileged and strong class.

It is the Wart's ordeal to stand by the murderous assalts of the half-crazed colonel Cully, the subaltern so trained in killing, and so pressed by the leader, that he is no longer able to control his obsessive killing instincts. The Wart comes off successfully from this ordeal, which is in fact a foreshadowing of his future actions. He will never accept that "Might is Right" and it will never be through military actions that he will govern his kingdom. But it is exactly the Wart's non-action and proof of courage that make him acclaimed as King by the birds. He withstands the attacks of Cully and saves himself at the last moment by using his intelligence and by restraining the instict to strike back. In the fourth novel, <u>The Candle in the Wind</u>, Arthut meets a similar madness in Mordred, whom, like Cully, he protects and even loves.

Such a performance differs from the usual behaviour of heroes. Traditionally the role of heroes, both mythical and legendary, is associated with their valor in fighting. The heroes celebrated in heroic poetry, for instance, are primarily men of war, and are often compared to wild animals in their ability to fight: "irresistible onslaught and power to destroy" are the essential characteristics of the hero.[21]

In Malory's book, the quality of a good knight — his "might" — is measured by the blows he gives and by the number of opponents he smites down. White's hero not only lacks these characteristics, but also actively opposes the values associated with them.

The lessons which took the Wart into the Moat and then into the Mews are related to his future performance as a king. He experiences each of these events, and it is based on such experiencing that in the future he is going to make decisions concerning how he is to govern, and how he is to use his power.

The other lessons the Wart goes through seem to be linked not just to particular ways of governing but equally to the knowledge and perception of man's own animal nature. The meaning of these lessons has a mythical implication. Thus, the boy's meeting with the serpent enables him to learn of the reptilian nature of man. A symbol of wisdom, the ancient serpent tells him about the primeval water from where both reptile and man sprang. When transformed into snake, the Wart has the chance to view man from a totally different point of view: that of the snake. Curiously, T. Natrix reacts to man

in the same way human beings react to snakes, with fear and repulsion. As one of the most ancient beings of nature, it is the snake that teaches the boy History and legend.

Through History, the Wart becomes acquainted with the slow evolution of animals on earth, with the forces of competition and evolution that nature imposes, and with the role of man in the chain of evolution. The snake relates the destructive power and ferocity of the ceratosaurus to that of men. Just as it happened with the ceratosaurus, man can also destroy his own kind.

Through legend the Wart learns how poison was spread in nature by the python — and how all the creatures who became venomous agreed to use their killing power only to defend themselves. History and legend showed the Wart that the human animal, together with all the other beings of earth, have just one origin — water, which symbolizes the mysterious immensity from which everything comes and to which everything returns; that is, life itself.

It is from the same ancient water that the rose, a symbol of perfection, springs. What the little verse at the end of this lesson seems to imply is that man should not forget his reptilian side. Only by cominq to terms with it, will he be able to balance his beastly and his human sides and then possibly attain perfection:

> In the great sea the stars swing over the eternal whirpool flows. Rest, rest, wild head, in the old bosom which neither feels nor knows. She only rocks us, cradled in heaven, the reptile and the rose. Her waters which

> bore us will receive us good night and sweet repose. (p. 182)

The instinctual destructiveness of mankind is further reinforced in the episode of the boar hunt, which immediately follows the lesson with the snake. Although this is only a "regular adventure" it is another opportunity for the boy to acquire important knowledge concerning human nature.

The hunt of the boar mobilizes the entire population of Sir Extor's Castle, and during the chase the instinct to kill the boar at bay seems to take hold of all, as if they were being chained in the same electric current:

> There were five long minutes during which nothing happened. The hearts beat thunderously in the circle, and a small vein on the side of each neck throbbed in harmony with each heart. The heads turned quickly from side to side, as each man assured himself of his neighbors, and the breath of life steamed away on the north wind most sweetly, as each realized how beautiful life was, which a reeking tush might, in a few seconds, rape away from one or another of them if things went wrong. (p. 203)

At this moment, the people participating in the hunt are very similar to those groups of humans who killed the animals in pre-historic times, but with one difference: in the distant past men might have killed for fear and self-protection, for survival mainly. In the boar hunt, however,

the feeling that moves them is that of pleasure in killing.

However, the leader of the hunt, Master William Twyti whom everybody admires does not like to talk to his eager admirers about his skillfulness in killing and disjointing the animals. Forced to pursue animals for the royal table, his work contrasts with his love for hares and dogs:

> Summer or winter, snow or shine, he was running or galloping after boars and harts, and all the time his soul was somewhere else. (p. 198)

This episode shows us that the gregariousness and animality of our ancestors still survive in man. Nevertheless, the episode also shows that this same violent man is equally capable of emotion and love. The Wart is given a glimpse of this paradox of human nature mainly through Master Twyti himself. The boy had been taking part in all the events from the arrival of the huntsman to the end of the chase. With the acute perception peculiar to children he seems to be the only one to notice the feelings of Master Twyti when his dog Beaumont gets killed in the hunt:

> The Wart did not like to watch Master Twyti for a moment or two. The strange little leathery man stood up without saying anything and whipped the hounds off the corpse of the boar as he was accustomed to do. He put his horn to his lips and blew the four long notes of the mort without a quaver. But he was blowing the notes for something else, and he startled the Wart because he seemed to be crying. (p. 207-08)

In the next lesson the Wart is taken by the owl Archimedes to visit Athene, the Goddess of Wisdom. The Wart then has the chance to see the world of trees: he watches how they grow, live, and at last die. Next, he sees the formation of minerals and of earth, and the first beings that walked on it. He witnesses the emergence of man and how he slew his brother. Once again the idea that man is only one more being in nature is shown to the Wart. As part of nature, man is under the same laws that work equally for plant and animal. All beings are born, live and die. Even the oak, the strongest of all trees, the emblem of strength, stability and power must submit to the course set by nature. Once again, the destructiveness and ferocity of man is reinforced, as the Wart sees the first man appear and kill one of his own kind, his own brother.

On the several occasions in which the Eart experienced his lessons, there was some reference to his state of sleep. In the episode with the Goddess Wisdom this detail becomes specially important since the Goddess seems to be nothing more than wisdom of his own unconscious. References in the text that favor such an interpretation are, for example, the fact that when Archimedes came to fetch the Wart "he was fast asleep," the reference to "the invisibility of the Goddess," and the boy's memories upon awakening the following morning: "he was aware of her without seeing her" (p. 225). Even later, when the Wart reflected on this experience, "he realized that he had not only never seen the Goddess but that he hade also never heard her speak" (p. 226). The visions that the Wart had of the trees and of the formation of the world were

described as a dream by Archimedes, who also related night to wisdom.

To finish off the Wart's education, Merlyn sends him underground to meet the badger. In the previous lessons the the Wart had been shown the similarities of man and beast. He was repeatedly reminded of the savage and destructive potential man carries within himself, even surpassing the animals in this sense. In the final lesson it is time for a creature of the earth to unfold to the boy the greatness of man and his superiority over all other earthly beings. Through the parable of the embryos, told by the badger, the Wart learns how animals chose to receive the characteristics for which they are best known today, and how man's embryo declined the offer to change, and preferred to stay as God had made him. Because of his faith and foresight, man was blessed by God and received not just the Dominion of all other animals, but also the capacity to share the power of the Creator. He continues to be the potential image of God. The following words by the great humanist Pico Della Mirandola, quoted by Otto Rank, complement the meaning of the badger's parable:

> Animals bring forth from the womb what they should have. The higher spirits, on the other hand, are from the beginning, or at least soon after, what they remain in all eternity. Thou alone hast power to develop and grow according to free will: in one word, thou hast the seed of all-embracing life in thyself.[22]

Through the lessons he had, the Wart got to know and could bring into harmony his animal and his human sides. Merlyn's role in the process the Wart passed through was that of a guide. Their relationship resemble that of an initiate and his teacher. Merlyn is the one who takes the hero to a succession of trials that must be overcome. He is the one who shows the way, though allowing the initiate to experience each of the ordeals. He resembles the tutelar figure who makes it possible for the hero to fulfill the tasks he would have been unable to do by himself [23] As such, according to Jung, Merlyn can be compared to the mythical figure of Poseidon, protector of Theseus, or to Chiron, the master of Achilles and other heroes. Merlyn is in fact very similar to Chiron, the centaur who is the archetypal figure of the wise man, the one who has the two sources of wisdom, the instinctive and the intellectual, in harmony. Merlyn's instinctive nature is to be seen in his oneness with nature. He talks to the animals, understands them, and lives with them. As a tutelary figure, the magician Merlyn successfully fulfills his role of conducting the Wart through several ordeals, until he is ready for the most important of all: the magical contest through which all heroes must pass and which frequently involves the hero's display of power over the elements.[24] The Wart's power over the elements is accomplished as he draws the sword from the stone, which enables him to become the rightful king. He is only able to overcome the elements after having integrated and harmonized in himself the various aspects of nature to the extent to

which he is supported by all the animals, which have each contributed their part. Drawing the sword from the stone is both a symbol of the Wart's integration and an indication that he is now prepared for the tasks with which life will confront him, now no longer as the Wart, but as King Arthur.

There were no precedents for T.H. White to draw on for the boyhood of King Arthur and his education by Merlyn. However,he shows, in his recreation of the Arthurian Stoff, a sound knowledge of the tradition of the legend, of the Medieval Period, and of History as well. He achieves in The Sword in the Stone an integration of such varied elements, which is partly the main factor for the power of his creation .

White's heroes are surrounded by fantasy and magic, but they are also endowed with a common, warm humanity. Therefore,by transforming the familiar figures of the Arthurian cast into characters with credible motivation and a psychological dimension, T.H. White enables the reader to have an emotional experience of their world, and to come closer to "what these men were when they were alive."[25]

NOTES

[1]T.H. White, The Once and Future King (Glascow: Williams Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1974).

[2]T.H. White, The Book of Merlyn (Luffolk: Richard Clay, The Chaucer Press Ltd., 1978).

[3]T.H. White, The Sword in the Stone (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1979). All quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.

[4]Stith Thompson, The Folktale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 10.

[5]Thompson, p. 170.

[6]John K. Crane, T.H. White (Boston: Twayne Publishers, Inco., 1974), p. 45.

[7]Sir Thomas Malory, in Malory: Works, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). All quotations from this text are taken from this edition.

[8]Crane, p. 20.

[9]John Stevens, Medieval Romance (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973), p. 80.

[10]Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1960), pp. 207-08.

[11]Bruno Bettelheim, A Psicanálise dos Contos de Fadas, trans. Arlene Caetano (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1979). p. 199.

[12]Bettelheim, p. 224.

[13]Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (New York: Hazell Watson & Vinay Ltd., 1975). p. 56.

[14]Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970). pp. 124-30.

[15]Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, Celtic Heritage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975). p. 230.

[16]Crane, p. 83.

[17]Crane, p. 78.

[18]Crane, p. 78.

[19]Loomis, p. 19.

[20]Rees and Rees, p. 232.

[21]C.M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961). p. 97.

[22]Pico Della Mirandola as quoted in Otto Rank, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, ed. Philip Freund (New York:Vintage Books, 1964), p. 98.

[23]Carl Jung, Man and His Symbols (London: Aldous Books Ltd., 1964), pp. 102-03.

[24]Raglan, p. 153.

[25]From the following epigraph of the opening Chapter in The Sword in ~~the~~ Stone:

> "And now it is all gone — like an insubstancial pageant faded; and between us and the old English there lies a gulf of mystery which the prose of the historian will never adequately bridge. They cannot come to us, and our imaginations can but feebly penetrate to them. Only among the aisles of the cathedral, only as we gaze upon their silent tombs, some faint conceptions float before us of what these men were when they were alive."