

T. H. White, Pacifism and Violence: The Once and Future Nation

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My intellectual friends of those days, between the wars used to say to me: 'Why on earth do you waste your talents feeding wild birds with dead rabbits? Was this a man's work today? They urged that I was an intelligent fellow: I must be serious. 'To arms!' they cried. 'Down with the Fascists, and Long Live the People!' Thus, as we have seen, everybody was to fly to arms, and shoot the people.

It was useless to tell them that I would rather shoot rabbits than people.

T. H. White, *The Goshawk* (1951)

Terence Hanbury White (1906-64) had obsessive and equivocal feelings about violence throughout his life, both in his conception of himself as a private individual and as a political philosopher, which he confronted and explored throughout his fictional writings. In this essay I want to examine White's contradictory representations of violent action in his *magnum opus*, *The Once and Future King*, a tetralogy recasting Sir Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century prose epic of the matter of Britain, *Le Morte D'Arthur*. White frequently uses his fiction autobiographically, apparently trying to explain himself to himself and to anyone else who was prepared to read it. Numerous figures within his books appear to be representations of the author: in *The Once and Future King* alone, it is arguable that Arthur, Lancelot and Merlin are all versions of White at various points in the narrative. To give one example; White felt that his own upbringing had bred in him a perverse love of cruelty and a desire to inflict pain on others. This appears to have been referred to in the portrait of Lancelot who shares the same dark passion and is the horrible cause of his attraction to Guenever, traditionally represented as the cause for the destruction of the Round Table. White's narrator comments:

It is the bad people who need to have principles to restrain them. For one thing, he [Lancelot] likes to hurt people. It was for the strange reason that he was cruel, that the poor fellow never killed a man who asked for mercy, or committed a cruel action which he could have prevented. One reason why he fell in love with Guenever was because the first thing he had done was to hurt her. He might never have noticed her as a person, if he had not seen the pain in her eyes.¹

The situation is made more complex because Lancelot is also in love with Arthur, his boyhood hero, and so falls for Guenever too.² White himself suffered terrible guilt feelings concerning his own homosexuality which he felt had been caused by his relationship with his mother and had rendered him unfit for the company of "normal" people. As a result he spent much of his life as a semi-hermit and only allowed himself to love his dog, Brownie.³

However, the onset of the Second World War forced White to meditate further on the problem of violence on a much wider scale. White's Arthurian tetralogy demands to be read as an essay on the origins of war as much as an exercise in autobiographical fiction, a mixture and confusion of aims which accounts in part for the strange hybrid work which has survived. In this essay I want to show how the two interrelated aspects of White's tortured exploration of his own and mankind's aggressive nature founder on the problem of national identity, something which is simultaneously communal and individual. White ends his fiction caught between a desire for freedom from all constraints and the need for the establishment of a secure collective identity, a problem the story of Arthur serves to highlight rather than solve. In the course of the novels, Merlin emerges as the most important character. He can be seen as both the bringer of wisdom and a false prophet, a dichotomy mirrored in the two endings of the sequence.

The first part of the essay will outline the problems surrounding the text's composition; the second will examine the figure of Merlin and his involvement in the development of the plot; the third will do the same for Arthur; and the fourth will attempt to show that what links the strands of the story together is White's inability to deal with the problem of nationalism he has focussed upon.

I

White's conception of the purpose of his retelling of the Arthurian legends grew more grand and precise as the project continued into the years of the Second World War whilst he was domiciled in Ireland. Despite initial scepticism, White considered returning to fight as his friend David Garnett had done and did offer his services to the Ministry of Information, albeit rather half-heartedly.⁴ But he came to see his sequence of novels as a more valuable war effort and a specific means of combating Hitler who was "the kind of chap one has to stop."⁵ Put another way, the project became rather like that of *The Goshawk*, White's account of his retreat into the English woods to train a German goshawk in the 1930s, which develops into a meditation on the nature of fascist violence. White's final revised text of 1958, *The Once and Future King*, which collected together the three previously published novels, *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), *The Witch in the Wood* (1939)—now substantially rewritten as *The Queen of Air and Darkness*—and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1940), and the unpublished *The Candle in the Wind*, made the anti-Nazi message of the work a great deal more explicit, despite the omission of the most obviously polemical section of White's sequence, *The Book of Merlin*, eventually published posthumously with an introduction by Sylvia Townsend Warner, White's biographer, in 1977. Collins had objected to White's plan to include this in the completed sequence, ostensibly on the grounds of wartime economy. This had helped to lead to White's break with Collins and held up the publication of the other four revised volumes until 1958.⁶

Given the complicated state of the text, the long period of composition and the frequent changes in purpose, it is often difficult to attribute an overall design to the work. In other words, one can easily observe that White thought that the Second World War was a bad thing, but explaining why he thought it had come about or what could be done to prevent it happening again is far more problematic. His critics have all too often assumed that White uncritically valorized certain episodes and allowed individual characters to espouse his views rather than represent opinions he once held, possible arguments rather than final positions which the reader is obliged to endorse.

To take one example, at the end of the (published) version, Arthur reflects on the course of his life as he faces death at the hands of his illegitimate son, Mordred, and muses how he “had been taught by Merlin to believe that man was perfectible: that he was on the whole more decent than beastly: that good was worth trying: that there was no such thing as original sin,” but that his efforts had ultimately led to “total warfare . . . the most modern of hostilities” (666-67). Taylor and Brewer comment: “Here, White’s characteristic nineteen-thirtyish liberal pacifism is put into the mouth of Arthur, as he concludes that wars are fought about nothing, and that the sole hope for the future can only lie in culture, and the establishment of a new Round Table.”⁷ White had, indeed, espoused such ideals at that time and a friend who had known White when he was the head of English at Stowe remembered him as a potential conscientious objector. However, the same friend, who lost touch with the author until the war years, was disillusioned to hear that White had tried to join up,⁸ which would seem to indicate that White’s political ideas had changed somewhat from those he held at the start of his literary enterprise.

In a passage which survived the transformation from *The Witch in the Wood* to *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, a different perspective on the problem of war is provided. Kay asks Merlin how one can determine who is the guilty party in the event of war. Merlin answers:

I’m not suggesting that all of them can be decided. I was saying, from the start of the argument, that there are many wars in which the aggression is as plain as a pike-staff, and that in those wars at any rate it might be the duty of a dozen men to fight the criminal. If you aren’t sure that he is a criminal—and you must sum it up for yourself with every ounce of fairness you can muster—then go and be a pacifist by all means. I recollect that I was a pacifist *once*, in the Boer War, when my own country was the aggressor, and a young woman blew a squeaker at me on Mafeking Night. (239, my emphasis)

Kay asks Merlin—who is living his life backwards—to explain about Mafeking Night, but Arthur interrupts and the event is not mentioned again.

This makes a simple endorsement of Arthur’s conclusions at the end of the tetralogy as White’s own views less straightforward, and should

make one wary of accepting the ending of the novel sequence as White's final words on the problems encountered throughout the course of narrative. The passage also indicates that more than one character has a potentially valid point of view. Merlin insists that he was a pacifist and opposed war on a specific occasion when his country was morally wrong, but he does not endorse it as a desirable general rule (the detail about the young woman and the squeaker, which seems to be unnecessary, makes it clear that not everyone agreed with his judgement, i.e., the country was obviously not united in perceiving its errors). If anything is to be endorsed by the reader here, it is surely Merlin's assertion that "there are many wars in which aggression is as plain as a pikestaff," a reference to White's not uncontroversial diagnosis of the origins of the Second World War.

A more usual judgement of the work is that White eventually despaired of humanity and gives free rein to his misanthropy, particularly in his preferred conclusion to the sequence, *The Book of Merlin*. Stephen Knight comments, "White's urge to escape is in many ways simplistic, avoiding the historical and political reasons why cities and nations have become as they are The views put forward are narrow and extreme: White's hatred and contempt for politicians has become a general misanthropy."⁹ The reason for this judgement is an equation of the views of Merlin and those of the author. Elisabeth Brewer, for example, assumes an equation of author and character takes place when she interchanges them in consecutive sentences: "we see White propounding the idea that it is 'communal property' rather than the ownership of private property that leads to war. Nationalism is the curse of man, and for this Merlyn has a simple, easy solution to propose. All you have to do is abolish nations, 'tariff barriers, passports and immigration laws, converting mankind into a federation of individuals.'"¹⁰ But it is by no means clear that Merlin is White's mouthpiece throughout the book, though he undoubtedly is on occasions: it is one thing to use autobiographical material in fiction, whether that be direct experience, notebooks or held opinions—current or not—quite another to leave this as an unmediated repository of truthfulness imposed upon the reader. The fact that White portrays Merlin as changing his mind over his pacifism—just as White himself did—should alert us to a certain conscious structure of debate

and indeterminacy in the novel sequence, especially given its laborious creation.

II

It is certainly arguable that Merlin is always meant to be right, or always in control of what he teaches Arthur (the Wart). Arthur's first lesson in *The Sword in the Stone* is to be turned into a perch, which concludes with his meeting the king of the moat, Mr. P., "the old despot" who has a face "ravaged by all the passions of an absolute monarch—cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains. . . . He was remorseless, disillusioned, logical, predatory, fierce, pitiless—but his great jewel of an eye was that of a stricken deer, large, fearful, sensitive, and full of griefs." The Wart is too nervous to ask a question, so Merlin tells the pike that they have come to find out about the realities of power. Mr. P. replies:

There is nothing . . . except the power which you pretend to seek: power to grind and to digest, power to seek and power to find, power to await and power to claim, all power and pitilessness springing from the nape of the neck.'
Thank you'.

Love is a trick played on us by the forces of evolution. Pleasure is the bait laid down by the same. There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind's power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right" (47-48).

The interview ends with Mr. P. warning the rather dazed Wart that he ought to flee or else he is in grave danger of being eaten.

Mr. P.'s words mark him out as a simplistic thinker, something clearly borne out in the repetitive assertions of his syntax. He conjures up a desolate universe, empty of warmth, affection, or any other human bond and he prefigures the Wart's most disturbing sojourn with the explicitly Nazi ants later.¹¹ His long litany of negatives almost transforms his message directly into action as the Wart is left paralysed for a second and only escapes at the last minute. At this stage in his education, the Wart can only run from the likes of Mr. P.; later he must learn to deal with such figures or his regime will founder (as, in fact, happens).

Merlin's theories of education demand that the Wart learn to think for himself, so that he escapes the restrictions placed upon a child's development by the inadequacies of traditionalism as espoused by Sir Ector's benevolent but flawed regime (*Once and Future King* 3-5).¹² However, it is not entirely clear what this first lesson teaches the Wart, or exactly how he uses such learning when he ascends to the throne. Mr. P. serves as a warning to those who would be king of the terrible effect absolute power will have on the individual who holds it. Can the Wart escape this legacy? Or is he doomed to be tainted by the effects of power even if he strives to be a good ruler? Mr. P. is clearly an unattractive figure, but doesn't he actually speak the truth and expose the weaknesses inherent in others' arguments by getting to the heart of the matter?

The novel sequence gives equivocal answers to such questions, partly owing to an issue raised by Mr. P.'s second, unsought for reflection on the nature of power when he warns the Wart of the hopelessness of love, it being no more than "a trick played on us by the forces of evolution." Is this supposed to forewarn the child of the disastrous effects of his own future love for his unfaithful Queen Guenever, who, after all, has an affair with Arthur's closest friend, Lancelot, who, in turn, loves Arthur? (see above 208). If so, it would seem that in a certain sense Mr. P. is possibly right that love is something which serves as a destructive force and should be discounted by those who are born to rule.

Nevertheless, Arthur does marry Guenever and events unfold as they would have done anyway despite Merlin's interventions: there is a limit to how much a tutor—especially one who is living his life backwards—can change the future. Merlin is constrained by the inevitable, just as White the novelist is constrained by the material he is choosing to retell: both are free to intervene only in a circumscribed manner. To a large extent the lessons are not for the Wart/Arthur but the reader who is to make sense of the book—again, we are taken beyond the immediacy of the story and invited to make such readings in a wider context. It is indicative of this that the lesson takes place on two interrelated but separate levels: there is the answer of Mr. P. to the Wart/Merlin's question and the preceding commentary on the appearance of the pike, i.e., lessons that the characters in the narrative

can learn and those which are only available to the reader. Mr. P. is described as possessing “thoughts too strong for individual brains,” which partly serves to explain why he has become the dangerous monster he now is. The implication is that this might be what the reader of the sequence will find happens to Arthur, despite his own qualities and noble sentiments. Secondly there is the visual image of Mr. P. whose “clean, shaven chops [gave] him an American expression, like that of Uncle Sam” (47). White is obviously referring to the American recruitment posters of First World War vintage, which might imply that Mr. P. does not stand simply for a Nazi war criminal, but that White saw no *absolute* and easy separation between the violence and corruption of power on the allied side and that of the Axis forces (see below).

Mr. P.’s facile conclusion that “only Might is Right” is questioned and debated throughout the sequence. At the start of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, Arthur starts to realise this after enthusing about the first battle of the Gaelic wars described in the novel until Merlin forces him to consider the kerns and ordinary foot soldiers killed.¹³ Merlin refuses to answer Arthur’s blunt question—“Might isn’t Right, is it, Merlin?” (229)—and makes Arthur to go off and think about the problem. Arthur presents the results of his cogitations in Chapter 6 which consists of the notion that “Might is only to be used for Right” and that a new order of chivalry will replace the violent one of his father, Uther Pendragon, so that knights will only use force to further civilised values: “It will be using the Might instead of fighting against it, and turning a bad thing into a good” (253-55). Arthur craves a response from his tutor, but instead Merlin turns to look at the ceiling and says “the first few words of the Nunc Dimittis” (255).

The “Nunc Dimittis” is the hymn based upon the “Song of Simeon” (*Luke 2:29-32*), where the holy man is promised that he shall not experience death until he has seen Christ, and records his praise upon meeting the Saviour. It begins:

Lord let thy servant now depart
 Into Thy promised rest,
 Since my expecting eyes have been
 With thy salvation blest.¹⁴

The significance of Arthur's independent thought is also pointed out by the narrator: "You might say that this moment was the critical one in his career—the moment towards which he had been living backward for heaven knows how many centuries, and now he was to see for certain whether he had lived in vain" (252-53). Merlin's hymn singing—another detail present only in the 1958 version—illustrates the quasi-religious revelation he feels has taken place. Now he can disappear satisfied with his efforts, to be imprisoned by the witch, Nimue, an event foretold in chapter two (228).

The point is that we do not have to accept Merlin's reading of Arthur's coming of age as the only one possible. Subsequent incidents in *The Queen of Air and Darkness* can be read to undermine his position as omniscient sage (which would tend to cast his singing of the "Nunc Dimittis" in a somewhat ironic light). On the eve of the Battle of Beldegraine, Merlin starts to become concerned that he needs to tell Arthur something before he departs, but he cannot remember what it is. Arthur tries to help jog his memory, suggesting that it might be Nimue's impending betrayal; Merlin asks whether he has told Arthur about Lancelot and Guenever and Arthur replies that he has and that not only does he not believe it, but the warning "would be a base one anyway, whether it was true or false" (293). Eventually, Arthur urges Merlin to stop thinking about the problem and take a holiday, "Then, when you come back, we can think of something to prevent Nimue" (294).

Once again, the ironies abound in this exchange. The event that Merlin forgets to tell Arthur about is his own impending seduction at the end of the novel by the Queen of Air and Darkness, his half-sister, Morgause, the event, according to White, which was really at the root of the destruction of the Round Table.¹⁵ The result of this incestuous union is Mordred, who mortally wounds Arthur in the last battle (an event never actually depicted in *The Once and Future King*). In the denouement of the final book in the published version, *The Candle in the Wind*, Arthur confesses to Lancelot and Guenever that he had tried to have Mordred killed via a proclamation which demanded that all babies born on a certain day "be put on a big ship and floated out to sea" (579). Merlin had only managed to warn Arthur of the threat of Mordred when

everything was too late. Whilst Merlin is cheerful about the effects of his imminent fate on the eve of the battle, he forgets to tell Arthur of the parallel case which will not only destroy everything, but bring back the threat of ugly violence which Arthur's plan, backed up by Merlin's approval of it, appeared to have solved. We are also forced to consider the implications of Merlin's claimed omniscience. When Arthur asks why he does not do anything about Nimue, Merlin tells him the parable of the man who encountered the surprised figure of death in Damascus, fled to Aleppo to escape the spectre, only to meet him there and learn that death had looked surprised because he had been told to meet him in Aleppo on that day and therefore had not expected to meet him in Damascus. Arthur deduces from this tale that Merlin's trying to escape Nimue is not much good and his tutor assents: "Even if I wanted to . . . it would be no good. There is a thing about Time and Space which the philosopher Einstein is going to find out. Some people call it Destiny" (295).

If this is so, then why do we have to worry about Merlin telling Arthur that Morgause is going to seduce him? What actually happens is that Arthur's attempts to prevent the future taking place make matters even worse than they need to have been and ensure disaster: the innocent Adam who was Wart has turned into a monstrous Herod.¹⁶ The implication is that had Merlin remembered to warn Arthur properly, then neither the seduction nor its ghastly aftermath would have taken place. We only have Merlin's word that he can see the future as it will *definitely* take place. The narrative demonstrates that he is not necessarily always right, in a moral and factual sense, as his own actions and those of his pupil illustrate. Either way, Merlin is trapped by his own logic and cannot be seen as the key to all the mythologies of the work.

III

For all his fine ideals, Arthur is clearly either a badly flawed ruler or one who is unable to escape the inherent dangers of kingship.¹⁷ At the start of *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, we are presented with

opposing viewpoints of the issues behind the Gaelic wars. In King Lot's castle in the Orkneys, the children, Gawaine, Gareth, Gaheris and Agravaine tell their version of the story of the events leading to the birth of Arthur, Uther's rape of Igraine, their grandmother, and the narrator comments, "They considered the enormous English wickedness in silence, overwhelmed by its *denouement*" (220). Arthur confesses that the Orkney faction do have a case against his father, but Merlin corrects him, alleging that King Lot's reasons are no more than personal ones and merely repeat the cycle of violence that Uther started off: "if we go on living backward like that, we shall never come to the end of it." Instead, they should use the results of past aggression in order to unite:

'[T]he point is that the Saxon Conquest did succeed, and so did the Norman Conquest of the Saxons Also I would like to point out that the Norman Conquest was a process of welding small units into bigger ones—while the present revolt of the Gaelic Confederation is a process of disintegration. They want to smash up what we may call the United Kingdom into a lot of piffling little kingdoms of their own. That is why their reason is not a good one.'

He scratched his chin, and became wrathful.

'I never could stomach these nationalists', he exclaimed. 'The destiny of Man is to unite, not to divide.' (235)

Arthur is clearly persuaded by such logic when he decides to harness might in the service of right to Merlin's obvious approval (see above). One might also note that in accepting that nothing can be achieved without power, he is not that far from endorsing the argument of Mr. P. that "There is nothing . . . except . . . power." But must the reader accept Merlin's verdict as correct and endorsed by T. H. White as most readers seem to have assumed? To do so we must assume that there is no intentional irony in the phrase "living backwards" when Merlin speaks about the Gaelic league as an atavistic alliance, for he himself only knows what he does through "living backwards." More to the point, is it obvious that larger national units are necessarily better than smaller ones and inflict a lesser violence upon their subjects or upon each other? Merlin repeatedly points out to Arthur the costs and horrors of war, but he may well have created a benign monster who cannot escape from a logic he is told to condemn in his attempt to impose a system of order

on disparate peoples. In a devastating addition to the 1958 text, White includes an exchange before the Battle of Bedegraine between Kay and Merlin which deserves quotation at some length. Kay tells Merlin that he has just thought of a good reason for fighting a war and Merlin, who initially freezes, asks him to explain exactly what it is:

‘A good reason for fighting a war is simply to have a good reason! For instance, there might be a king who had discovered a new way of life for human beings—you know, something which would be good for them. It might even be the only way of saving them from destruction. Well, if the human beings were too wicked or too stupid to accept his way, he might have to force it on them, in their own interests, by the sword.’

The magician clenched his fists, twisted his gown into screws, and began to shake all over.

‘Very interesting’, he said in a trembling voice. ‘Very interesting. There was just such a man when I was young—an Austrian who invented a new way of life and convinced himself that he was the chap to make it work. He tried to impose his reformation by the sword, and plunged the civilized world into misery and chaos’.

Merlin then continues to contrast the aggressive imposition of ideas on people by Hitler to the passive process of reformation inaugurated by Jesus Christ who simply made ideas available to people: “Kay looked pale but obstinate. ‘Arthur is fighting the present war,’ he said, ‘to impose his ideas on King Lot’” (273-74).

This is an extraordinarily scandalous passage which has received only perfunctory analysis from critics.¹⁸ Initially it sounds as if the rather intellectually limited Kay is about to illustrate the extent of his misunderstanding of Merlin’s teaching, but as the passage continues it becomes clear that Kay has actually understood the import of Merlin’s teachings far better than Merlin himself: Arthur is indeed more like Hitler than Jesus, despite Merlin’s fondness for religious comparisons. One cannot escape from the need to use force in governing because systems of order do not appear from nowhere: in seeking to unite one may actually destroy, so that Merlin’s assumption of a linear narrative progression of history towards greater reason, bigger “imagined communities,” better government and so on is disrupted (as it is, in fact, by his own choice of the examples of Hitler and Jesus Christ).

Merlin's desire to prove that it is easy to distinguish between good and bad motives for war is shown to be more problematic than he pretends it is. In the same way his increasingly strident assertions of his moral correctness undermine his attempts to educate his pupils by allowing them to find things out for themselves: in the final analysis, they are supposed to discover what the tutor wants them to discover (but, ironically, Kay seems to have proved Merlin's point by disagreeing with him).

In fact, the lessons of *The Sword in the Stone* pave the way for Kay's revelation: the Wart's second transformation was into a merlin so that he could learn from the birds of prey. White portrayed these as British army officers who are in some ways nearly as disturbing as the Nazi ants and certainly not obvious counters to the despotic abuser of power, Mr. P. Worst of all the birds proves to be the Wart's own pet falcon, (Colonel) Cully, who turns out to be an insane, dangerous bigot, perhaps based on Powell and Pressburger's creation, Colonel Blimp.¹⁹

Arthur's problem is that he cannot escape from the legacy of his father, Uther, or his own violent past as it comes to light in *The Candle in the Wind*. There is surely a bitterly pointed irony in Arthur's attempt to replace the violence of chivalry with the process of justice because it is the very process of the law which neutralises the effective force of Lancelot and enables Agravaire and the Orkney children to triumph. White expands considerably Malory's brief narration of Agravaire and Mordred's disclosure of the affair between Arthur and Guenever.²⁰ When Arthur explains that he is replacing trial by combat with trial by jury, "Agravaire, exulting in his cold mind, thought, 'Hoist with his own petard!'" (589). Against such ruthlessness, Arthur is helpless, not least because he is entrapped within the cycle of violence:

'Agravaire: you are a keen lawyer, and you are determined to have the law. I suppose it is no good reminding you that there is such a thing as mercy?'

'The kind of mercy', asked Mordred, 'which used to set those babies adrift, in boats?'

'Thank you, Mordred. I was forgetting.'

'We do not want mercy,' said Agravaire, 'we want justice.' (590)

Just as Merlin forgets to tell Arthur about the threat to his plans from Morgause/Mordred, so does Arthur forget in trying to codify the legal system, eradicate violence and unify the British Isles. Ultimately he is forced to appeal to a series of private principles, precisely what he has just eliminated from the formalised code he has established:

‘But if I may speak for a moment, Mordred and Agravaine, as a private person, the only hope I now have left is that Lancelot will kill you both and all the witnesses—a feat which, I am proud to say, has never been beyond my Lancelot’s power. And I may add this also, as a minister of Justice, that if you fail for one moment in establishing this monstrous accusation, I shall pursue you both remorselessly, with all the rigour of the laws which you yourselves have set in motion.’ (591)

Yet again, this retelling and elaboration of Malory is shrouded in complex ironies, not least because it was Arthur who had earlier argued against Merlin that the Gaelic faction had a legitimate grievance which could not be dismissed as purely personal (see above 217). It is clear that the behaviour of Mordred and Agravaine shows that there is no straightforward advance of civilization towards harmony and peaceful government and that the mechanisms of justice can be used to undermine the abstract idea of justice. Arthur—who shows that having established the means of justice he is keen to work against them—cannot escape from the cycle of violence. Mr. P.’s words come to seem more and more like the riddle of the Sphinx. As *The Candle in the Wind* progresses, it becomes clear that Mordred’s thrashers are the obvious equivalents of the Nazi ants encountered in *The Sword in the Stone*, but at an earlier stage: “Their aims were some kind of nationalism, with Gaelic autonomy, and a massacre of the Jews as well, in revenge for a mythical saint called Hugh of Lincoln. There were already thousands, spread over the country, who carried his badge of a scarlet fist clenching a whip, who called themselves Thrashers” (628).²¹ Nevertheless, enough questions have been posed to show that separating the legitimacy of the violence of Arthur’s centralising government and that of the Celtic fringe is not as easy a task as one would like it to be.

IV

The Once and Future King can be read as an elaborate discussion of the problems resulting from the assumption of a national identity. In the reverie that concludes the published text of the tetralogy, Arthur feels that he is finally able to pinpoint what causes war: "It was geography which was the cause—political geography. It was nothing else. Nations did not need to have the same kind of civilization, nor the same kind of leader, any more than the puffins and the guillemots did. They could keep their own civilizations, like Esquimaux and Hottentots, if they would give each other freedom of trade and free passage and access to the world. . . . The imaginary lines on the earth's surface only need be unimagined" (676). Here, I would suggest, it is at least a possibility that such free indirect discourse has the author's approval and is not yet another passage which demands an ironic reading (but see above 210-11). Arthur feels that he has sorted out the problems to his satisfaction and goes out to meet his death with equanimity.

But can the reader accept this as an adequate conclusion to the complex and tortuous discussions of the book? Sylvia Townsend Warner found the ending of the published text inconclusive and felt that *The Book of Merlin*, for all its faults, would have drawn together White's themes rather better given its explicitly didactic purpose as a fictional treatise on the nature of war.²² The 1958 text ends with an adaptation of the Latin epitaph said to be found on Arthur's tomb: in Malory's text this reads, "HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS" ("Here lies Arthur, the once and future king"); White adapts this to "EXPLICIT LIBER REGIS QUONDAM REGISQUE FUTURI" ("Here ends the book of the once and future king") and underneath this is stated "THE BEGINNING,"²³ perhaps an indication that the book is there for the reader to learn from, avoiding the mistakes that Arthur made and accepting the perpetual existence of problems which human nature simply cannot solve.

However, Arthur's thoughts on the origins of war, if they are not meant to undercut the speaker, are hard to accept given what has gone before in the narrative. They appear to negate the greater part of the sequence's continuing discussion of war and national identity. Throughout the four

novels, White uses the matter of Britain to show how difficult government over disparate peoples is because they are competing for occupation of the same territory, i.e., in terms of Arthur's rather naive final thoughts, their political geographies overlap. When Merlin gives Arthur a potted history of the British Isles, he argues that first the Gaels fought among themselves before being invaded by two waves of Saxon invasions mixed up with a Roman intervention, before the arrival of the Normans, represented in the book, by Arthur's father, Uther Pendragon. Arthur becomes confused and asks why the Gaels should fight him "when it was really the Saxons who hunted them" and Merlin explains: "So far as the ancient Gaels are concerned, they just regard both your races as branches of the same alien people, who have driven them north and west" (233-34).²⁴

Although Merlin goes on to dismiss such "nationalism," revealing that he is in fact the son of a demon father and Gaelic mother (236), it is quite clear that Arthur's ultimate response to the problem of national identity does not answer the question of what constitutes the imagined community of a nation and at what point such a national community can become a self-determined and self-determining unit. Arthur uses the term "imagined" in opposition to "real" as if such notions could be "unimagined" and a reality reasserted—although he also simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of living without such distinctions and boundaries. White's adaptation of Malory in the (published) conclusion of his work effectively shelves the problem by spiriting both king and nation out of the present and into the past and future. Neither exist as current realities, only as once and future fictions, so that all we are left with is the contradictory notion that we need national identities but can also leave them behind when we want to. Arthur is referring back to the freedom he experienced with the Utopian geese, who do not recognise boundaries, but his experience as a ruler illustrates that their way of life is no more plausible than White's own attempt to escape from the violence of fascism by retreating into the wood to train a goshawk.²⁵

In *The Book of Merlin*, where Arthur is whisked away into the set of the badger he originally met in *The Sword in the Stone* to discuss the problem of war with Merlin and a select group of animals, such

contradictions are dealt with at greater length. White had been reluctant to abandon this novel and, having been forced to do so, transferred the central episodes where Arthur is transformed into an ant and a goose into *The Sword in the Stone*, where, arguably, they lose their polemical force as a diptych illustrating the two extreme possibilities of national identity. Despite its patently unfinished state and obviously distorted relationship to the published omnibus, *The Book of Merlin* perhaps represents a more accurate approximation of its author's intentions than the published conclusion.²⁶ Arthur has two equal and opposite experiences in the book. First, he is transformed into a Nazi ant (an episode later transferred to the revised version of *The Sword in the Stone* published in *The Once and Future King*), where aggressive nationalism is a constantly ingrained ideology. Then he spends time with the pacific geese, where he falls in love with his tutor, Lyo-lyok, who answers all the questions Arthur puts to her. Arthur reflects on the inescapable nature of his own patriotic feelings and is dismayed to discover that they go beyond his affectionate bonds for Guenever, Lancelot and even Lyo-lyok. Despite all that he has learnt among the geese his patriotism remains exactly the same as it was before when he decided that it was his duty to fight for his country: "He was an Englishman, and England was at war. However much he hated it, or willed to stop it, he was lapped round in a real but intangible sea of English feeling which he could not control. To go against it, to wrestle with the sea, was more than he could face again" (*Book of Merlin* 102).²⁷

This appears to be a recognition that the assumption of a national identity and the need to defend right with might cannot be avoided and obviously refers directly to the Second World War. Whereas at the end of the published version of *The Once and Future King*, national boundaries were assumed to be imagined and therefore expendable entities, here such forces are beyond the control of the individual mind. However, Arthur has changed the territory over which he rules: he is no longer the king of Britain, but of England so that his struggle with Mordred changes from a battle over a contested space to a war between separated and separable countries. The Gaels have moved beyond Arthur's nation and Merlin's belief in the easily distinguishable nature of good and bad wars once more applies.

Arthur makes a choice to return to his country rather than escape and it is clear that he has made the right decision because "He had been made for royal joys, for the fortunes of a nation" rather than "private happiness" (*The Ill-Made Knight* 539). Merlin becomes increasingly ridiculous in his vilification of man, nationalism and war, and the animals start to poke fun at his theories (*Book of Merlin*, ch. 19). Merlin himself accedes: "He knew now, since the royal hero had returned victorious in his choice, that his own wisdom was not the end. He knew that he had finished his tutorship" (*Book of Merlin* 163). Merlin's wisdom is not the end because he has little understanding of the problem of national identity.

The Book of Merlin, unrevised, sketchy and its themes closely tied to a specific situation, gives a more coherent answer to some of the issues least satisfactorily resolved in the published conclusion to *The Candle in the Wind*, but only at the expense of ignoring other problems, principally the vexed question of how to resolve the contested space of national identities and eliding the distinction between Britain and England. (In *The Ill-Made Knight* we are told that "The Saxons and Normans of Arthur's accession had begun to think of themselves as Englishmen," 447.) The sequence is both nostalgic and prophetic: nostalgic for an ideal England/Britain that never was, captured in the rural childhood of *The Sword in the Stone* and prophetic that eventually Arthur will return to govern an ideal nation.²⁸ In revising the work for publication, particularly in transforming the essentially comic *The Witch in the Wood* into the gloomily tragic *The Queen of Air and Darkness*, White came to focus much more heavily on the problematic and competing states of the nation which lie between these two poles. White initially dismissed the possibility that he might fight for a patriotic ideal in his letters and placed his ideal of art outside such boundaries: "I asked myself before I got the "flu: if I fought in the war, what would I be fighting for? Civilization. Not England, qua geographical boundaries; not freedom, that is always in the mind; not anything except what I call civilization."²⁹ Nevertheless, he came to discover that civilization could not exist unless it had a particular form. White was consequently forced to return to the question of that form time and again in his fictional explorations of such matters. How to conceptualise British nationality

became both the blind spot and the vanishing point of the fictional world of *The Once and Future King*, something it could neither properly substantiate nor do without.

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NOTES

¹T. H. White, *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958) 353. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses. On White's representation of himself as Lancelot, see Elisabeth Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1993) 83-84; on his reactions to his upbringing see Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* (London: Cape / Chatto and Windus, 1967) 30-31, 54, 83 *et passim*. I have greatly benefited from the discussions I have had with my undergraduate students who took my special option course, "Arthurian Literature: Myth and Interpretation," especially Joanna Terry, James Shingler and Heather Savage. Thanks also to Tim Woods who read an earlier draft and saved me from numerous errors.

²*Once and Future King* 327. See also White's entry in his journal, 27 September, 1939, which lists the characteristics he intended to give Lancelot; cited in Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King* 82-83.

³Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* 30-31, 82-83, 86, 97, 209-11, 232.

⁴Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* 121-22, 146; François Gallix, ed., *T. H. White, Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence Between T. H. White and L. J. Potts* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984) 105-06, 116-17.

⁵Cited in Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King* 11; see also Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography*, ch. 8; "The Story of the Book," in T. H. White, *The Book of Merlin* (London: Collins, 1978) 17-18. All subsequent references to this edition in parentheses.

⁶For details and commentary on the changes see Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King*, chs. 2-7.

⁷Beverly Taylor and Elisabeth Brewer, *The Return of King Arthur: British and American Arthurian Literature since 1900* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 1983) 294.

⁸Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* 235.

⁹Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 205.

¹⁰Brewer, *T. H. White's The Once and Future King* 155, citing *The Book of Merlin* 135.

¹¹The episode with the Nazi ants was clearly of great importance for T. H. White. It started out as a key moment in *The Book of Merlin* as a stark contrast to the freedom of the pacifistic geese (see below 222-23), but when that volume was left unpublished, it was transferred to *The Sword in the Stone* and became part of Wart's education.

¹²For an overview of White's ideas see Brewer, *T. H. White's Once and Future King*, ch. 8.

¹³Most of this material was added in the rewriting of the novel which deliberately focusses on the problem of might versus right and Arthur's growing awareness of the problem.

¹⁴John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (London: Murray, 1907) 822-23.

¹⁵Brewer, T. H. *White's The Once and Future King* 49.

¹⁶Martin Kellman, T. H. *White and the Matter of Britain: A Literary Overview* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1988) 107.

¹⁷See C. N. Manlove, "Flight to Aleppo: T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*," *Mosaic* 10 (1977): 65-83, at 74-77; John K. Crane, T. H. *White* (Boston: Twayne, 1974) 79, 108-10; Kellman, T. H. *White and the Matter of Britain* 107-10, for various analyses of this.

¹⁸See, for example, Crane, T. H. *White* 91-92; Brewer, T. H. *White's The Once and Future King* 73.

¹⁹I owe this point to my student, James Shingler.

²⁰Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Janet Cowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), Book XX, ch. 1.

²¹See also the passage on 548-50.

²²Warner, T. H. *White: A Biography* 189-90.

²³Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, II, 519. For details on the epigraph see John Withrington, "The Arthurian Epitaph in Malory's *Morte Darthur*," *Arthurian Literature* 7 (1987): 103-144.

²⁴See also the passages on 211, 249-50, 559-69. White expands both time and historical possibility to enable him to include Saxons, Normans and Gaels as distinct peoples within the realm of Britain: Uther the Conqueror has supposedly reigned from 1066 until 1216 (198). For a discussion see Brewer, T. H. *White's The Once and Future King*, ch. 9, "White's Historical Imagination" 188-206; Kellman, T. H. *White and the Matter of Britain* 87, 101; Maureen Fries, "The rationalization of the Arthurian 'Matter' in T. H. White and Mary Stewart," *Philological Quarterly* 56 (1977): 258-65, at 262.

²⁵For an alternative reading of the purpose of Wart's sojourn among the geese see Francois Gallix, "T. H. White et la legende du Roi Arthur: De La Fantaisie Animale au Moralisme Politique," *Etudes Anglaises* 34 (1981): 192-203, at 200-01.

²⁶On this problem see Duncan Wu, "Editing Intentions," *Essays in Criticism* 41 (1991): 1-10.

²⁷"The trouble is that my mind does not want to join this war, and is able to face isolation of not joining it, but my heart floats in the subconscious of my race," letter to David Garnett, June 20, 1940, cited in Warner, T. H. *White: A Biography* 169.

²⁸Merlin has just finished *The Prophecies of Merlin* at the end of *The Book of Merlin* and he reads out extracts to Arthur (160-61). These are based on those in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), Pt. 5, 170-85. Further reflections on English rural nostalgia can be found in David Gervais, *Literary Englands: Versions of "Englishness" in Modern Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); M. A. Crowther, "The Tramp" in Roy Porter, ed., *Myths of the English* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992) 91-113.

²⁹White to Potts, September 21, 1939, cited in Warner, T. H. *White: A Biography* 146.