INTO THE WASTELAND

A selection from **GALAHAD & THE GRAIL**

MALCOLM GUITE

Foreword by **Rowan Williams**

We are grateful to the publisher of this forthcoming book, Rabbit Room Press.

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Foreword

The Arthurian cycle of stories has its roots in one of the obscurest periods of the early Middle Ages, combining a cluster of legends about a rather obscure hero of folklore with material loosely grounded in traditions of sixth century native resistance to the Germanic ("Anglo-Saxon") settlers as they increased their control of Lowland Britain. The fact that this resistance was remembered in the tradition as a battle between Christians and pagans guaranteed that Arthur's future would be to some extent marked by Christian themes. The Grail narratives represent the most sophisticated development of this, and the full-blown version of this cycle in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is unquestionably one of the great literary and religious 'imaginings' of the Middle Ages.

Scholars are still less than clear about how a story involving the cup of the Last Supper came into being and found its way into the cycle of Arthurian tales. But there are two factors worth weighing. First, there is the impact of the Crusades. Warriors from Western Europe had mobilized in order to recover a "lost" territory that represented a direct connection with the incarnate Christ.

Militarized religious orders sprang up in the Holy Land to preserve what had been so precariously discovered and recovered – especially the Holy Sepulchre, a sign of incarnate presence-and-absence somehow analogous to the eucharistic sacrament itself. The idea of the Grail – with its dedicated knightly servants – was a brilliant mythic transformation of this historical moment; and the eventual restoration of Muslim control over Jerusalem and the Sepulchre went on being an intermittent cause of pain and poignant regret in the later mediaeval period. The Grail is seen and worshipped and then withdrawn, and the Grail knights disperse. We may today find the crusading ideology impenetrable or repellent, but the Grail stories show us that it was not only blindly violent aggression that motivated the – increasingly compromised and disastrous – adventures of the crusading armies.

Alongside this, though, is another, distinctively British set of themes. Welsh poetry and imaginative prose in the Middle Ages often evoked the archaic imagery of a primordial cauldron out of which flowed the uncontrollable inspiration *(awen)* that animated the minds of poets. Early mediaeval texts speak of *awen* as a sort of boiling-over of inspired speech at the beginning of all things, creation itself as a sort of overflow. Christ himself could by extension, be symbolically called a "cauldron" of joy, insight, life, or creativity. Other texts allude to another kind of cauldron into which dead bodies could be placed in the hope of revival. And just to bring all this together, there is a bafflingly enigmatic text – perhaps from somewhere in the twelfth or thirteenth century in its present form, but containing some far older material – which suggests that Arthur and his warriors made a raid on the underworld to rescue a prisoner and to possess its treasures – including a magic cauldron.

Cauldrons are not cups; but it is not far-fetched to see something of this native British tradition about the outpouring of life, healing wisdom, and inflamed imagination feeding into the gradual maturing of the Grail image. As Malcolm Guite so finely explains in his notes and poetic text, part of the hinterland of the developed Grail story is a contrast between the desolate wasteland that results from the wounding of King Pelles or Pellam and the revived, re-enchanted world promised by the Grail's presence. The city of Sarras becomes a vision of some kind of City of God. The Grail quest is thus a search for re-enchantment in the sense of finding a landscape that is once again charged with sacramental meaning, every vista opening out onto the gifts of grace, forgiveness and renewal.

It is therefore not *just* a story of re-enchantment. Malcolm beautifully shows how the process of rediscovering the sacramental depth of the world is bound up with healing: the holy and the healed belong together (as they do etymologically), and he executes a striking synthesis of Christian themes with the folkloric associations of British trees (shades – literally – of Puck of Pook's Hill here). This is a vigorous and fresh reworking of perhaps the most resourceful and haunting element in the "Matter of Britain", and whets the appetite for much more.

Rowan Douglas Williams, Baron Williams of Oystermouth is a Welsh Anglican bishop, theologian and poet, who served as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012. Previously the Bishop of Monmouth and Archbishop of Wales, Williams was the first Archbishop of Canterbury in modern times not to be appointed from within the Church of England. Dr Williams is acknowledged internationally as an outstanding theological writer, scholar and teacher. He has been involved in many theological, ecumenical and educational commissions. He has written extensively across a very wide range of related fields of professional study – philosophy, theology (especially early and patristic Christianity), spirituality and religious aesthetics.

Introduction

This booklet is an extract from a project I have contemplated for many years: *Merlin's Isle: an Arthuriad,* an epic retelling of the legends of King Arthur.

I have loved these stories since I was a child and I heard them from my mother who was a great storyteller herself but also had extensive knowledge of the mediaeval sources, especially the great gathering of those stories and their rendering into Middle English by Sir Thomas Malory in the 15th century. So, the stories that first moved me were not some sanitised Hollywood version, but the real thing: haunting, numinous, continuously suggestive of the holy and beautiful reality of God and his saints and angels shimmering through the fabric of the stories of the knights with all their aspirations and all their human flaws. At the heart of those early versions of the stories is the Holy Grail itself: the presence of Christ and his gospel, moving as an unbearably beautiful light through the mists and magic of the pre-Christian Celtic Britain, drawing even the wizards and the faery folk towards himself, baptizing the imagination of our ancestors, fulfilling, and disclosing the true meaning of our earliest stories.

I wondered then if I might be called to take up the tale myself, learning from these masters, and make a narrative poem that would appeal to many of their readers and continue their vital mission to "slip past the watchful dragons" of secularism and awaken again in the modern world that openness to beauty and mystery which prepares the heart for the coming of Christ. My aim is to make a poem that restores the spiritual elements that have been shorn away and renews their deepest meaning.

The Wasteland

The section of my poem chosen for this *Trinity Forum Reading* describes the journey of the three Grail knights across the Wasteland. And therefore, some account of the Wasteland as an Arthurian theme and its meaning and interpretation over the years may be helpful here.

There is a sequence of events, indeed a deep underlying motif, variously described, and with different emphasis in the different Arthurian sources, in which a mysterious king, sometimes called the Fisher-King[1], is wounded, or maimed in an act of sacrilegious violence known as "the dolorous stroke," or "the dolorous blow." At the moment of his maiming, the whole land, the King's kingdom, is laid waste, made infertile and barren, until the coming of the Grail knight by whose virtuous action the King is healed, and with his healing the land recovers and is renewed. Both the wounding and the healing, the wasting of the land and its recovery, are bound in some mysterious way to the sacred objects in the Grail procession, specifically the spear and the cup.

There are deep mythic, or as the Inklings would say, mytho-poeic, resonances at work here. Something is being said here about the intricate and intimate links between humanity and nature, between fall and redemption, sin and grace. We have a sense of a primal, archetypal pattern being enacted, of a journey from catastrophe to "eucatastrophe." There is an explicitly Christian element in the telling of this tale by Robert De Boron and the anonymous author of the *Queste Del Saint Graal*, which is taken up in Malory, but without doubt there is also a deep pre-Christian underlay to these stories, for, as we shall see, this motif of the link between king and kingdom, this notion of a kind of death and resurrection, a ritual wounding and a ritual healing, is to be found in almost all early mythologies. Almost all cultures had some tale of a dying and rising god, of a king of summer who is somehow slain or maimed by winter and who revives and rises again in spring. The great cycles of nature in planting, the death and burial of the seed and its rising again are somehow personified, as if the land itself had become a person who could be maimed, laid waste, and

1 There is some confusion in the sources, some of which name the king whom Balyn wounds as Pelham, others name him Pelles, still others say Pelles is Pelham's son, though the story makes it clear that the person healed by Galahad is the same as the person wounded by Balyn. Some just refer to him as "the maimed king" and also "the fisher king." For clarity's sake I have followed Roger Lancelyn Green in naming him Pelles throughout.

die and rise again. The classic, and hugely influential work of anthropology which first noted and brought together all these various "vegetative" myths and ceremonies as they came to be called was Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion,* later retitled *A Study of Magic and Religion*. It was first published in two volumes in 1890, but continuously revised and expanded by Frazer himself until it became a 12 volume work in its third edition published between 1906 and 1915. It had a wide influence, and its findings were differently interpreted, according to the prior assumptions and beliefs of those who read it. Of special interest to us is the way Frazer's theories were applied to the Grail stories by one of his disciples and admirers, Jessie L. Weston. In 1920 she published *From Ritual to Romance,* a highly influential book in which she interpreted the Grail stories through the lens of Frazer's work, seeing them as full of survivals of much earlier religious and ritual motifs concerning the link between king and kingdom, echoing, or witnessing to pre-Christian fertility rituals. Naturally this meant she foregrounded the *Waste Land* motif, in a new way. Previously it had been seen as a kind of minor motif, another marvel amongst a series of marvels that made up the Romance-Fantasy genre. But Weston sees it as far deeper and more central to the hidden meaning of the whole cycle. So, in a crucial passage in chapter five she writes:

> Thus the position assigned in the versions to this feature of the Waste Land becomes one of capital importance as a critical factor. This is a point which has hitherto escaped the attention of scholars; The misfortunes of the land have been treated rather as an accident than as an essential of the Grail story, entirely subordinate in interest to the dramatic persona of the tale, or the objects, Lance and Grail, round which the action revolves. As a matter of fact I believe that the 'Waste Land' is really the very heart of our problem; a rightful appreciation of its position and significance will place us in possession of the clue which will lead us safely through the most bewildering mazes of the fully developed tale.[2]

Of particular interest to literary readers, as opposed to anthropologists, is the influence her book, and indeed this particular passage, had on T. S. Eliot, providing as it does both the title and some of the deepest themes of his epoch-making poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, two years after Weston's

2 Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance,* (Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 63-64

book came out. Indeed, at the beginning of the notes he appended to *The Waste Land,* Eliot cited both Weston and Frazer:

> Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jesse L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do [...] To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced our generation profoundly; I mean *The Golden Bough...*[3]

Eliot is indeed, as he acknowledges, indebted to Weston for drawing his attention to the *Waste Land* theme in the Grail legends, but his approach, as a literary reader of Malory and as a poet, is radically different from hers as an anthropologist. Hers is essentially reductive -– i.e. she is saying that what appears as a fearful and perilous tale of marvels is really only the heavily-coded survival of a pagan fertility ritual. But Eliot, as a poet, is alive to *meaning* as well as *origin*. What he found in the *Waste Land* motif was an emblem or symbol, perhaps more than that, a complete embodiment, of the desolation, despair, the sense of anomie, waste, and impotence for life, culture, and art in the years after the twin catastrophes of the First World War and the Spanish Flu epidemic which had killed so many and left so many survivors broken and without a sense of purpose. Indeed, when subsequent research in both anthropology and Arthurian studies called much of Weston's thesis into question, Eliot was unperturbed. Many years later, in 1957, he wrote in a letter to Bonamy Dobrée: "After all I was not concerned with the validity of her thesis, but with the value of the imagery as a springboard."[4]

"Springboard" is the key word here. The fact that Jessie Weston drew such central attention to the motif of the *Waste Land* was a starting point for Eliot's symbolic development of the imagery. But such was the densely allusive, elliptic, and oblique nature of his high modernist poetic technique, that unless you had read his notes you would be hard put to recognise The *Waste Land* as a Grail poem at all. The journey through the *Waste Land* is implicit rather than explicit, teased out with an occasional fleeting image. Do we first glimpse the Fisher

3 Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue Faber, *The Poems of TS Eliot, volume I,* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 72

4 Ibid p. 590

King, transported to a landscape of urban decay in those lines in Part III?

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter's evening round behind the gas house[5]

The hints come a little more frequently in the fifth and final part "What The Thunder Said," but again, all is transmuted, so the chapel perilous, which ought to hold an anticipatory glimpse of the Grail, becomes "the empty chapel, only the wind's home," the Fisher King reappears in his Waste Land, but not as one who is soon to be healed, only as one who knows he has not yet "set his lands in order":

I sat up on the shore
Fishing, with the arid plane behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order?[6]

If we are to read this as a Grail poem then we gradually become aware that there is no Grail Knight, there is no redeeming figure, unless, in some deeper sense, the reader himself or herself is that knight crossing the Waste Land, still with their question unasked and unanswered, and in place of the longed for Grail Castle left only with the desolate lands and "these fragments I have shored against my ruin." And yet the poem does not end without hope: the thunder speaks, there is the promise of rain and the very last words of the poem, "Shantih shantih shantih," taken from the Upanishads, are words of worship and release. Significantly, and perhaps anticipating his conversion to high Anglican Christianity, Eliot, in his final note glosses them thus:

"'The Peace which passeth understanding' is our equivalent to this word"

A deft move from the Upanishads to the Book of Common Prayer!
So, between them, Jessie Weston and T. S. Eliot have drawn our attention to the Waste Land and significantly changed the way we read the original sources. In Malory we find the following descriptions, first of the calamity and then of the consequences:

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5 Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue Faber, *The Poems of TS Eliot, volume I,* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 62
6 Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue Faber, *The Poems of TS Eliot, volume I,* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), pp. 70-71

> And when Balin saw that spear, he gat it in his hand and turned him to King Pellam, and smote him passingly sore with that spear, that King Pellam fell down in a swoon, and therewith the castle roof and walls brake and fell to the earth and Balin fell down so that he might not stir foot nor hand. And so the most part of the castle, that was fallen down through that dolorous stroke, lay upon Pelham and Balin in three days. (Book II Chapter XV)

After three days (the sacral and gospel significance of which is clear) Merlin arrives and pulls them from the wreckage. Malory goes on to tell us:

> And King Pellam lay so, many years sore wounded, and might never be whole till Galahad the haute prince healed him in the quest of the Sangreal, for in that place was part of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that Joseph of Arimathea brought into this land, and there himself lay in that rich bed. And that was the same spear that Longius smote our Lord to the heart; and King Pellam was nigh of Joseph kin, and that was the most worshipful man that lived in those days, and great pity it was of his hurt, for through that stroke turned to great dole, tray and tene. Then departed Balin from Merlin, and said, In this world we meet never no more. So he rode forth through the fair countries and cities, and found the people dead, slain on every side. And all that were alive cried, O Balin thou hast caused great damage in these countries; For the dolorous stroke thou gavest unto King Pelham three countries are destroyed, and doubt not but the vengeance will fall on thee at the last. When Balin was past those countries he was passing fain." (Book II Chapter XVI)

And later in Book XVII Chapter iii he gives this description of the *Waste Land* (a description Eliot knew and quoted in his correspondence):

> And it was in the realm of Logris; and so befell great pestilence and great harm to both realms. For sithen increased neither corn, nor grass, no wellnigh no fruit, nor in the water was no fish; wherefore men call it the lands of the two marches, the waste land, for that dolorous stroke.

In fact, in Malory's (or perhaps Caxton's) rather confusing reiteration of more than one version of the story, this latter description is related as the consequence of a dolorous stroke given with a sword, and when Malory's narrative finally gets to the arrival of Galahad and the achievement of the Grail, King Pellam has become, as he is in earlier sources, King Pelles, Galahad's grandfather. Lancelyn Green helpfully and characteristically irons out these differences

and gives us a consistent single narrative which is the one I have followed, but always also turning back to Malory's original description and phrasing.

What are we to make of this story now? And more specifically what have I made of it in this poem? I think we must follow Eliot and find in the story, not some theory of origin, but rather some of its rich and implicit *meanings*. Eliot's reading of it as an emblem of the brokenness, desolation, and anomie of the 20th, and we might say 21st century western culture still stands, and it is certainly part of my understanding of the *Waste Land*. But in my view, Eliot's reading doesn't go far enough. The story is, as the critics say, *multivalent:* it carries many meanings and truths. I think the *Waste Land*, and indeed the Dolorous Stroke that brings it about, stand for something far more widespread and deep-rooted than the mere sense of ennui and dislocation that followed the First World War. When my mother told me this story as a child, sometimes directly citing from memory, sometimes paraphrasing Malory's astonishing prose, I remember, when she had described the dolorous blow, the devastation and Balin having to ride through the ruined countryside with the few survivors cursing him: she paused and said "It is terrible that one man with one action could cause such devastation. But we live in such a world. For even now wicked men have made such weapons as one person, at a single stroke, could bring barrenness and devastation on the whole world." It was sobering stuff for an eight-year-old to hear but I was growing up in the age of the atomic arms race and amidst the fears of a nuclear winter, and she thought I needed to know. But unlike Eliot, she did not tell me only about the *Waste Land*, but also about the coming of Galahad, and the healing of all the harms that had been done, and when, after her story-time, I played at knights of the round table, I always wanted to be not Lancelot, but Galahad.

And what do I make of it now? The story still haunts me, but now, as I come to a deeper appreciation of my faith and inheritance as a Christian, this story seems to reach to an even deeper root. For the Great Story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption also tells us how the action of one person, the one in whom we were all implicitly contained, the Adam, the first human being, brought ruin on all, and because of that ruin the land itself was cursed. But the story also tells us of another man, a son of Adam but also the son of God, who came to heal his ancestor's devastation and to renew not only mankind but also the whole earth, that once more, like heaven, it should be full of the glory of God. For this link between the king, the singular representative figure, and the land itself is

not just an outmoded pagan superstition, as Frazer and Weston thought, but a deep insight born witness to in scripture. The poet Milton (who also once thought of writing an Arthurian epic!) understood this. When, at last, in Book Nine of *Paradise Lost* he describes the moment of our fall, he does not say "and so it was that somebody committed a private sin." The first thing he says of that calamitous action is this:

> Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
> Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,
> That all was lost.[7]

And so also in the coming and revelation of Christ, the second Adam, there will be a restoration, not just of humanity but of nature herself, caught up in humanity's ruin. Paul put this very famously in Romans 8:19-21:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

And of course, for the writers of the Grail stories, and for Malory, who gathered the stories together, the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, manifest in the Grail, is precisely the coming into the midst of time of that promise of final healing and redemption. For Eliot, at the time of writing *The Waste Land*, the chapel may have seemed "empty," "only the wind's home," but for Malory and for me "the wind" is the Spirit, and the chapel is not empty but radiant with the healing presence of Christ. In the end of course Eliot too, in his own way, achieved the grail, found his "midwinter spring" and came to another apparently deserted chapel, on a winter's afternoon, at Little Gidding, and knelt "where prayer has been valid." Little Gidding is the "fire" quartet, patterned through with Pentecost, just as Galahad is always introduced, in Malory, with Pentecostal imagery.

And here we come to the deepest of Frazer and Weston's misunderstandings of this material. Of course, they are right to observe that the themes of desolation and restoration, death and resurrection, and even of a dying and rising king

7 John Milton, *Paradise Lost Book 9*, (1667), lines 782-784

or God are to be found in hundreds of pre-Christian or non-Christian folk tales, and possibly religious rites and rituals, but they are wrong to assume that these are *only* about vegetation, about sowing and reaping. They are wrong to assume that Christianity, if it is relevant at all, is just another example of the same thing. They do not seem to have understood, or even heard Christianity's claim to be the true inner meaning of all these things, to be the central story that makes sense of, and brings into focus all that was true and lasting in the earlier stories.

So, I follow Malory and most of his predecessors in finding a deeply Christian meaning in the whole sequence that moves from the dolorous blow, through the wounding of the king, and the consequent Waste Land, and finally to the coming of the Grail Knight and the manifestation of Christ himself in the achievement of the Grail. But like Eliot, I have also found that this story, and especially the motif and imagery of the Waste Land itself, have in addition to their over-arching cosmic dimension, some specific resonances for our own time, that they offer us images with which to understand our own crises and dilemmas in a new way.

Most of my studies, as a literary scholar and a theologian, have been concerned with the recovery of the Imagination as a truth-bearing faculty, intended to work alongside and complement the analytic reason which has become so dominant since the enlightenment and the scientific revolution. In the third chapter of my book *Faith, Hope and Poetry,*[8] I summarised the problem, drawing on the work of Owen Barfield, the inkling whom Lewis called the wisest and best of his teachers, and also drawing on the work of Theodore Roszak, the historian of culture and science, in his significantly titled book *Where the Wasteland Ends,* and Barfield's prescient review of that book. This is what I wrote:

> As a project the enlightenment was essentially about a search for truth, for the real nature and meaning of things as we find them and ourselves in relation to them. It is hugely ironic then that the path western thought and assumptions it has taken since then, the path through what was once called positivism, and is now called materialism has led to an experience of alienation from any notion of truth or meaning at all:
>
> 'Amid all the menacing signs that surround us in the middle of this twentieth

8 Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination,* (Ashgate 2010)

> century, perhaps the one which fills thoughtful people with the greatest sense of foreboding is the growing sense of meaninglessness. It is this which underlies most of the other threats. How is it that the more able man becomes to manipulate the world to his advantage, the less he can perceive any meaning in it?'[9]

These words written by Owen Barfield in the 1970s seem even truer now. He argues that the problem is rooted in a false division between the subjective and the objective which was part of the enlightenment quest, part of that dialogue between reason and imagination… The "whole scientific and common-sense concept of objectivity" is flawed, he argues, and these flaws are now surfacing. Barfield is of course not the only one to have observed this, and the trickle of unease about the intellectual validity of the enlightenment project has since become a flood. Reviewing *Where the Wasteland Ends,*[10] Theodore Roszak's important critique of western cultural and scientific method, and summarising its arguments Barfield writes:

> The vaunted progress of knowledge, which has been going on since the seventeenth century, has been progress in alienation. The alienation of nature from humanity, which the exclusive pursuit of 'objectivity' in science entails, was the first stage; and was followed, with the acceptance of Man himself as part of a nature so alienated, by the alienation of man from himself. This final and fatal step in reductionism occurred in two stages: first his body and then his mind. Newton's approach to nature was already, by contrast with older scientific traditions, a form of behaviourism; and what has since followed has been its extension from astronomy and physics into physiology and ultimately psychology.[11]

Such is the analysis of our present malaise that Barfield, Roszak and many others share. But Roszak does not leave us in this wasteland, as his title suggests he is concerned with where the wasteland *ends*, and he goes on to argue that this bleak reductionism, far from being, as has been generally assumed, a reflection of fact, is an arbitrary mental construct. It is "a convenient and necessary one for

9 Owen Barfield *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Barfield Press California 2nd edition, 2006), p. 11

10 Theodore Roszak, *Where The Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post Industrial Society* (London Faber, 1973)

11 Barfield, *Rediscovery* p. 216

the purpose of manipulation (technology) but in so far as it is assumed to reflect the whole truth, or the most important part of it, it is an illusion."[12]

So it is that we experience this deep split in our modes of knowing, a split which Lewis brilliantly summarised in his own experience as he remembered it in *Surprised By Joy:*

> The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism.' Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.[13]

A further consequence of this reduction of the world to a series of mere things, quantities, not qualities, mere dead stuff to be exploited rather than living realities with which to commune, is that it opened the way for the ruthless exploitation of the natural world, treating it as a mere resource, and that exploitation is itself at the root of our current ecological crisis. Healing this split in our ways of knowing and restoring a more mutual and participative knowledge of nature may be key to the healing of our ecological crisis and to our finding a more harmonious way to live alongside the rest of nature. These are very much themes I explore in this cycle of poems, especially in Book III section VII "The Wasteland," the extract included here.

Barfield believed that we experienced this split because we had lost an earlier participative relation with nature which was courteous, mutual, and in which we did not experience consciousness as an isolated thing islanded in the concavity of our skulls but as something we shared with nature, with streams and trees and mountains. And this is why, so Barfield argues, earlier poets wrote of these realities in personal terms and discerned them as Naiads of the water, Dryads of the trees, Spirits of the mountains. Barfield believed that we might one day move out of our present alienation into what he calls "final participation," in which we would recover that deeper kinship and exchange without losing our personal inner identity, and indeed Barfield believed that the coming of Christ, and the new creation initiated in his resurrection might be what makes that possible. I agree with Barfield in this, and most of my life's work, both as a scholar and a poet, has been an exploration of how the poetic

12 I cite these passages in *Faith Hope and Poetry,* pp. 76-77

13 C.S. Lewis *Surprised by Joy; The Shape of My Early Life* (Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 161

imagination might help us anticipate and hope for that transformation.

So when I came to tell the tale of Galahad and the Grail, and came to see that the narrative structure meant that my Grail knights would have to traverse the Waste Land before they could arrive at the Grail Castle and the fulfillment, I asked myself, what would it be like if someone who had always enjoyed that earlier participative way of knowing, suddenly stepped across a borderland and found themselves fully in the grip of our modern, materialist, reductive perception of nature? What if they were thrust for a while into our alienation? So I decided to make my account of the Grail Knights' crossing the Waste Land into exactly that experience.

We take our present alienation for granted and mistake it for reality. Unless we read old books and stories, we have no access to any other way of seeing and knowing. But my hope, in the Wasteland section of my poem was to shock the reader with the sudden contrast between the earlier and later ways of knowing and, if I could, to break the spell of modernity and have my reader awaken at least for a moment to a different mode of knowing, that they might experience what Barfield said all poetry should offer: "a felt change of consciousness."

I believe that we will, collectively, come out of the Wasteland. The immanent frame, the merely material paradigm we have inhabited for the last three hundred years is breaking up on every side, and one of my purposes in retelling this great primary story is to assist us in that recovery.

Malcolm Guite is a Trinity Forum Senior Fellow. He is also a Life Fellow at, and the former Chaplain of, Girton College, Cambridge. He is the author of five books of poetry, including two chapbooks and three full-length collections, as well as several books on Christian faith and theology. His research interests include the intersection of religion and the arts, including the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield, and British poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In 2023 he was awarded the Lanfranc Award for Education and Scholarship, for his outstanding multifaceted promotion of the Gospels through poetry, public speaking and scholarship. Guite earned degrees from Cambridge and Durham universities, serves as a member of the clergy at St. Edward King and Martyr, Cambridge, and is also a singer-songwriter with the band Mystery Train.

Into the Wasteland

From **Galahad & the Grail**
Book One: *The Achievement of the Grail, Stave VII*

And so they bid Gawaine farewell
and turned to face their trial:
To ride into that cursed place,
across its waste some path to trace,
to find and face what must be faced
o'er many a weary mile.

They left the forest's friendly eaves
and urged their horses on.
As they drew near, the beasts showed fear,
and had they not been bridled there,
they would have tried to turn.

The land lay barren on each side,
with scarce a blade of grass.
And noxious airs assailed them there,
and choked them as they passed.

The greenwood had once flourished there,
but many trees had died.
Withered they were, leafless and sere.
Their hollowed trunks, all gaunt and bare,
stood sadly on each side.

Those three knights felt the silence grow.
Alas, no bird did sing,
no chorus came from branch or bough.
Sterile and stifling, summer now
followed a silent spring.

And all three felt their spirits quail,
but Galahad spoke first:
"I grieve for what I do not hear,
but there's a deeper absence here
that makes this land accursed.

O how can I express the lack,
the sense that something's wrong?
Where ere I rode, both far and near,
I had been always wont to hear
the good earth singing in her sphere
her lovely undersong.

Just on the edge of consciousness,
just under everything–
scarcely a sound, yet all around
a subtle song, through fertile ground
I'd hear creation sing.

Sometimes I'd hear a naiad's song
swift flowing like her stream,
or dryads' sylvan serenades
like voices in a dream.

And so I never felt alone
but felt their presence near.
In mutual dance and courtesy,

we sensed each other, fair and free.
The one life flowed through them and me,
we made each other poetry,
and held each other dear.

But now, that sweet exchange is gone,
and sterile silence reigns.
I do not hear their greeting fair
or sense the life that all things share
still flowing in my veins.

Instead, I feel as though I ride
the Kingdom of the Dead–
as though kind Nature left her throne
and for the kinship once we'd known
left nothing but a heap of stone
and left us all, all, all alone
in dreariness and dread."

"I feel it too," said Good Sir Bors,
"yea, almost to despair.
I am a knight of poor estate,
a lowly man amongst the great,
but oft by field or fold or gate,
tilling my land, early or late,
I heard, as in some blessed state,
the song of earth and air.

But all is silent now and bleak.
The spirits are all fled.
You may not tell, by field or fell,
the living from the dead."

And as these three rode silently,
there rose, as from the ground,
a dark grey fog, from fen and bog,
that swathed them all around.

It seemed the sun shrunk to a disc
round which the grey fog swirled.
So wan it gleamed, the good sun seemed
all paler than a pearl.

"We cannot fare far through this fog,"
said good Sir Percivale.
"We must wait here, and let it clear,
and hope that some more wholesome air
comes in a little while."

And so, the three dismounted there
by a dry riverbed.
Where once a stream made glad the day,
now scarce a trickle made its way,
and all three felt, each in their way,
a mounting sense of dread.

The slow hours passed till Galahad
broke the dead silence there:
"My heart tells me we must move on,
however pale the light of sun.
This place will freeze us, one by one,
and not just with the cold alone
but with this chill despair.

There's scarce a trickle in this bed,
but it must have a source,
and so, I deem, we move upstream
along this watercourse."

And then he reached beneath his cloak,
where hung the lady's gift:
the precious pearl on silver chain.
And when he held it up again
their spirits seemed to lift.

"How like the sun, the lady's pearl!
Perhaps in its pale light

we'll see some sign, some clue divine,
to help us in our plight."

They gazed upon the lady's pearl
pulsing with subtle light,
and in its milky depths they saw
a shifting shape that seemed to draw
their eyes, and open them in awe,
and clarify their sight.

And now, the shape grew clean and clear
within the pearl's pure heart,
and there they saw, in hope and awe,
the image of the Hart!

The White Hart, stooping through a mist
and drinking at a stream,
all glimmering white within the pearl
where colours seemed to dance and swirl
like figures in a dream.

"Look on! Look up!," it seemed to say.
"I am not far away.
Wake from your dream, move up the stream
and keep the holy way."

All three looked up, looked through the mist,
and faintly they could see
the true White Hart, not far ahead.
And as they gazed, it turned its head.
It seemed to Galahad it said,
"Come swiftly! Follow me!"

"We come," said Galahad. "We come.
We follow as we may."
Along the bank, as in a dream,
they led their shivering steeds upstream,
towards that faint and milky gleam
that scarcely lit their way.

Then far ahead the White Hart stopped
and turned to face them there.
It tapped the ground and turned its face,
as though to say, "This is the place."
Then, leaving neither track nor trace,
it vanished in the air.

Swiftly, they came up to that place
where they'd last seen the Hart.
Three leafless trees stood gaunt and pale
around an almost empty well.
A spout edged from an old stone wall,
from which some few sad drops did fall
down into that exhausted well.
Galahad caught them where they fell:
"This was the source, if I can tell,
where this sad stream should start.

At least these last few drops are pure
that weep from stone like tears,
although, I fear, the fountain here
has been half-dry for years.
The White Hart led us to this well
and called us here, I deem,
to bless this place, by gift or grace,
and heal the stricken stream.

Once by this well, a naiad dwelt.
I feel her absence here.
But something desecrates her haven,
and deep into the earth she's driven,
and fled away in fear.

For this was once her sacred home,
deserted for so long,
yet from this well I almost hear,
far off and faint, and tinged with fear,
the echo of her song.

It may be I can summon her
and bring her hope at last,
for if we win through to the Grail,
and come at last beyond the veil,
the Wasteland will begin to heal,
and her dark days be past.

So, good Sir Bors, take out the harp
the lady gave to you.
Let music soothe and calm her fear.
Strike up the harp that she may hear
the song that I will make for her,
if I can sing it true."

So good Sir Bors took out the harp
and let its soft notes ring.
And like a rippling stream he played,
and water-music filled the glade
and seemed to push back every shade,
and Galahad stood back and prayed
and then began to sing:

O gentle Naiad, hear my voice
and hearken to my song.
I come to summon thee to light,
to banish the dark dreams of night,
to heal the land, to set things right,
and to redress all wrong.

I weep to see your sacred place
made desolate and drear.
I come upon a holy quest,
that harm and hurt may be redressed.
I ask that I may be your guest.
Reply, and have no fear.

He paused, and still the harp flowed on,
most like a running stream.

The music echoed through the well
then ceased in silence for a while.
They thought they heard—they could not tell—
a song, as from a dream:

Alas, alas, who calls me now?
Who finds my hidden nest?
Who draws me from my holy well,
up from my haven's depths to tell
the inner hurts no man can feel
that stir within my breast?

How can I trust an unknown man
or ever trust a knight?
It was a knight who struck the blow,
the dolorous stroke, that brought our woe
and forced us all to flee below—
laid waste our brooks and streams also,
all heedless of our plight.

I understand, sang Galahad,
When trust has been betrayed,
to trust again, through grief and pain,
is hard for any maid.

Like you, I grieve the dolorous blow,
the stroke that Balyn gave.
My grandsire is the king he struck.
Our hall was ruined at the stroke.
But where that fell knight rent and broke,
I have been sent to save.

The very sword that Balyn bore,
who rashly brought our loss,
was given me to set us free,
to break its curse and infamy,
and carry as a cross.

And as a token, Naiad fair,
of all my good intent,
lend me your ear, that you may hear,
and hearing may relent.

For once I found a naiad fair,
a sister sure to you,
made captive by a wizard grim,
and for her sake I challenged him,
and broke him by his dungeons dim,
and so she found me true.

And we, together, searched his keep
and found the golden key.
She reached the Source behind the source,
the head of every water course,
and so her stream ran free.

Perhaps she told you of that time;
perhaps she spoke my name.
O tender lady, lone and sad,
the one who sings is Galahad.
I came in hope to make you glad
and you may always trust my word–
I make no other claim.

He ceased and sighed and waited still,
and slowly from the well
they sensed a growing light draw near,
and a sad song came running clear,
and then they saw a maid appear
whose beauty none can tell.

And now she stood above the well
and shimmered in the air.
She stretched her arms, as half in dream,
the Spirit of the stricken stream,
a maiden young and fair.

Her face was pale and sorrowful;
her eyes were moist with tears;
her robes were woven blue and green
and threaded through with silver sheen,
like glinting brooks that they had seen
all rippling through the forest green.
And when she spoke, her voice did seem
like music in their ears.

"O Galahad," they heard her say,
"I know your name right well–
and how you saved my sister dear
and set her sweet stream running clear.
I know that you were good to her,
and so I give you greeting fair
and welcome to my well.

I pray that you may help us, too,
and yet I fear the worst.
My sister faced a single threat
and only her one stream was hurt,
but in this wasteland all are hurt,
and every stream is under threat.
This evil pierces to the heart,
for the whole land is cursed.

Even to breathe this air a while
is more than I can bear.
Like every spirit, I have fled
the banks that once my rivers fed,
withdrawn deep into earth instead,
and all that lived through us seems dead,
all that has been our care.

Could we return, we might revive
the land laid waste and bare.
Though still we love and still we feel,
there is a wound we cannot heal.
We feel it through each stream and well.

When it will end we cannot tell,
and, almost, we despair."

"Do not despair," said Galahad,
"unless our quest should fail.
This land was wounded with its king;
if he is healed, then that will bring
your healing, too, so sages sing.
Our quest is also yours—to bring
the three knights to the Grail.

We cannot cross this land alone,
yet cross this land we must.
Without your aid to cross, I fear
we and our steeds will perish here
of thirst, and hunger, and despair.
For fiends of Hell infect the air,
and wicked whispers choke our prayer
and make us dry as dust."

"Indeed, you need my help," she said,
"and not my help alone.
When men forsake or choke the land
and break their trust with us, they stand
alone at last, on desert sand—
a wilderness of bones.

And yet your coming may restore
the kinship men betrayed.
For we are interwoven—we
are children both of earth and sea
and fashioned in God's mystery.
So now, in mutual courtesy,
we will come to your aid.

You see these three sad, hollow trees
that stand beside my well?
They flourished once, ere you were born,
the sacred trees: Oak, Ash, and Thorn.

Men blessed them on midsummer morn,
but now their dryads have withdrawn
deep to their mother earth, forlorn.
But we might wake them with the dawn,
singing some kindly spell.

For Oak and Ash and Thorn, you know,
stand sentinel for you.
The kindly trees that flourished here,
long ages before men appeared,
they know the land, its heart they bear
and keep its secrets true.

They hold the pass, they know the paths–
with them you travel well.
Their leaves are keys to every way,
and if you carry them then they
will carry you, and show the way,
and bring you on the chosen day
to the castle of the Grail.

But they have withered, as have I,
since we withdrew so deep.
Yet deep down they are still alive,
waiting for better times to thrive,
waiting in dreamless sleep.

You need their leaves to find your way;
they need my streams to live.
It may be, if I lave their roots,
they may yet show some tender shoots
and blossoms that foretell good fruits.
Though they've grown bitter with their hurts,
some love still wells within their hearts.
It may be they'll forgive.

If I can raise my sunken stream,
and you can speak them fair,
water and song may make them strong

and kindle them, though not for long,
in this most deadly air."

Then Percivale spoke up and said:
"Fair Lady, you speak right.
In all my days of errantry,
I've felt the life of every tree,
and most of all revered these three
and sighed when blossoms fell on me
as soft as morning light.

My own true love is named Blanchefleur,
and fair as flower is she.
As blossom on the hawthorn tree,
her sudden beauty came to me
when I was like a thorny tree
in all my misery.

And in my childhood, we would sing
of Oak and Ash and Thorn.
And, with my sister, I would go
to woodlands in the valleys low,
and we would pay respect and bow
to Oak and Ash and Thorn.

There was a song my mother sang
and taught us how to sing,
and singing we would laugh and play
and make the valleys ring.

Perhaps if I should sing it now
the old trees would recall
those better days, when with their praise
men decked the woodland hall."

"Sing on!" the lovely Naiad said.
"And whilst you sing, I'll raise
my sunken stream from her deep dream
and lave them whilst you praise."

So good Sir Bors struck up the harp,
and Percivale did sing
the song his loving mother made,
wherewith her children made the glade,
the woods, and valleys ring:

The three great trees that Logres bore
are Oak and Ash and Thorn.
They took their stand, and held the land,
ere elves and men were born.

By Oak and Ash and Thorn you pass.
If you will bless them still,
if you will do them courtesies
and honour them amongst the trees,
then they may do your will.

Strong Oak may make a ship for you
to sail upon the sea,
and Ash will grow beside your well,
a sign of purity.

And O the flowering thorn will be
sweet forerunner of spring.
And, if you let her deeply root,
her sharp, dark sloes will be your fruit,
and you will bless her, branch and root,
and to her you will sing.

For Thorn was made the Saviour's crown
and blossomed on his brow,
and through these three, the Trinity
will bless and keep you now.

And as he sang, the Naiad danced,
and where her footsteps fell
a little stream broke free and fed
the water in her well.

And there, amidst the dance and song,
they felt a change begin:
The three sad trees, forlorn and bare,
were stirring in a different air
and feeling, with the music there,
the sap that rose within.

The Naiad turned unto their roots
and watered them with tears
and called, "My kindred, come to me!
Dryads, come back, each to your tree,
for men renew their courtesy,
and you need have no fears."

And lo, the Oak came into leaf;
white blossom crowned the Thorn;
the Ash Tree stirred, last of the three,
put forth his seed, most like a key–
the place felt less forlorn.

And then, the naiad turned to them
and sang: Dryads, come forth!
O grace us for a little while,
and drink pure water from my well,
and help these true knights find the Grail.
Then, till they break the wasting spell,
you may return to earth.

And, stepping from their boughs, there came
the spirit of each tree:
Oak was an old man, yet full strong.
Then, clothed in blossom and in song,
the Hawthorn maiden danced along.
And last came Ash to right their wrong,
the wisest of the three.

Ash was a tall and graceful man
of whom the north-men tell.
He was the first to tread the earth,

and when he grew from his first birth
his tree joined Heaven unto earth,
and he presides in home and hearth
and stands beside the well.

"We come because you call," he said,
"yet here we scarcely breathe.
O Naiad of the running stream,
are these true knights? Or do I dream?
Some men are not all that they seem–
though fair above, as some may deem,
but foul enough beneath."

"Good Ash," the Naiad soon replied,
"and you, fair Oak and Thorn,
who stood beside my brooks and burns,
I called you, for our hope returns.
In Galahad, God's Spirit burns.
He to the Fisher King returns
and for this he was born.

But he and his two friends must cross
the cursed wasteland first,
whose haunted air doth breed despair.
All those who walk unaided there
lose hope and die of thirst.

So I have summoned back my brook
to cleanse and to renew.
These three and their good steeds will drink
from waters lapping at the brink
of my clear well. They'll drink their fill,
but now I turn to you.

I bid you now put forth those leaves
that grant them passage free,
that they may leave us in the dawn,
by grace of Oak and Ash and Thorn,

and come upon some blessed morn
to the last mystery.

Then the Oak-Dryad stretched his arm,
most like a branch it seemed,
and opening his gnarly hand,
as earthen brown as the good land,
he said to good Sir Bors: "I lend
the leaves and acorn in this hand
and make you my ambassador to send
unto the king, to make amends."
And good Sir Bors, who clasped that hand,
still wondered if he dreamed.

And then the Hawthorn Maiden spoke
gently to Percivale:
"You told your love for fair Blanchefleur.
This blossom you may give to her.
True love like yours is rich and rare,
and I foretell you'll find her there,
if you win through past every fear
and come unto the Grail."

And lastly, the Ash-Dryad spoke
in grace to Galahad:
"My seed is made most like a key;
a master key I give to thee.
Though Hell should bar your way, this key
opens a door to set you free,
and these watch-words I give to thee:
The true path to the mystery
runs through the doors of dread.

Now, let us all drink deep, as friends,
both man and tree and beast.
For God, who formed and brought us here,
out of His bounty gives good cheer.
He keeps us in his tender care
from greatest unto least."

Then the fair Naiad bowed to them
and drew them to her well.
And lo, clear water brimmed the brink.
"First, let our thirsty horses drink,"
said Galahad, "whom we must thank
for bearing us so well."

Their grateful steeds stooped down and drank
most deeply from the well.
The Ash said: "He who cares for beasts
will care for men as well."

Then the three dryads dipped their roots,
as their feet seemed to be,
and drew from deep within the well
such drafts as made their green leaves swell,
and with what pleasure none can tell
who has not been a tree.

And last the three knights came to her
and knelt in courtesy.
She gave to each a wooden cup,
that they might dip and fill them up,
and each knight felt with that first sip
new strength and vigour rising up.
And rising with it, a new hope,
and courage for the final steps
across the Wasteland's barren slopes
to where they might be free.

And with those cups they pledged the trees,
the Naiad, and the beasts.
And this good pledge gave Galahad:'
"God bring us all at last" he said,
to where the High King feasts!"

And they took counsel from the Ash
for all their road ahead.
"Demons will try to harry you,

but with these gifts you can win through.
Remember all I've said.

And if they tempt you to despair,
or mock at you and scorn,
be bold and say, 'We hold this way
by Oak and Ash and Thorn.'"

And so, they mounted on their steeds,
to dare and do their deed.
And all three felt their spirits lift,
for each bore his own magic gift:
blossom and leaf and seed.

The Naiad and the Dryads stood
in beauty by the well,
and, with bright blessings for the road,
bid those three knights farewell.

Three Trials

So those three knights set off once more,
the true path to pursue.
And straightway they were veiled in mist,
for still the bleak fog did persist
and soon obscured their view.

But their good steeds kept plodding on
and seemed to sense the way.
Maybe their draughts of water clear,
drawn from the Naiad's well most pure,
gave those good beasts some knowledge sure
–sometimes when men are still unsure
their beasts know more than they.

But as they rode on through the murk,
their sense of dread returned.
Around them came false flickering lights,

as though somewhere, just out of sight,
some evil spirits burned.

And then, ahead of them, they saw
a figure made of flame,
though in its mocking face it had
no eyes, but pools of dark instead,
as though it bodied forth their dread–
a nothing with no name.

And from it came a hollow voice,
most like the wuthering wind:
"You ride too late. I keep the gate
and failure is your only fate.
Hell-fire finds sinners, soon or late,
and all mankind has sinned"

But Galahad the glad replied:
"You waste these words of scorn.
Our sins were paid for by our Lord,
and we still hold to his good Word.
We travel safely on this road,
by Grace and Nature both restored,
by Oak and Ash and Thorn."

At that the demon seemed to quail
but soon renewed attack:
"Lo, I will pierce you with my spear,
and all my fiery archers here,
with flaming darts, will pierce your hearts
and force you to turn back."

"Quick, good Sir Bors!" said Galahad.
"Bring forth the oak leaf now.
Stout-hearted Oak will shield us here,
although we know not how."

Already they could hear the shriek
of flaming darts fly past.

The hot air seethed that each knight breathed
and feared he breathed his last.

But good sir Bors held up the leaves
and cried: "We will not yield!"
And as he spoke, those leaves of oak
became an oaken shield.

The three knights stood behind that shield,
which grew as they stood fast.
And lo! the great shield drew and quenched
the fiery darts, the hellish stench.
They stood with fists on weapons clenched,
withstood till every dart was quenched,
and the attack was passed.

And lo, the great shield shrunk again
to leaves in good Bors hand.
It seemed they heard the old Oak say:
"Now you have stood fast in the fray.
By Oak and Ash and Thorn alway,
you cross fair Logres land."

"So we press on," said Galahad,
"whatever trials may come.
We've come so far, through thick and thin,
and we'll still keep the way we're in
and trust each trial and test to Him
in whom we overcome."

So those three knights rode on apace.
The fog began to clear.
It did withdraw, but all they saw
were barren lands and drear.

After a while, Sir Percivale
began to grow dismayed:
"I sense another presence here,
some spirit of this land most drear,

some loathsome thing, for what I fear
is neither man nor maid."

And even as he spoke, they saw
an apparition fell.
It towered there, both foul and fair,
its likeness who can tell?

To some, like a fair queen it seemed,
with hair all flaming red.
It wore no chaplet of soft flowers,
that true loves gather in their bowers,
but as a sign of its dread powers
a crown of ice instead.

Fair was that face, or once had been,
but now was set and stern.
It wore an air of cruel despair,
and yet compelled the gazer there
to look and not to turn.

It wore a coat of chain-linked mail
that clung close to its form,
both sinewy and threatening,
and bore a flail with deadly sting,
and all about that icy thing
seemed set to do them harm.

"Stop now, or I will freeze your blood!"
the apparition cried.
"O you will rue what you have seen.
Of these wastelands, I am the queen,
and every knight I've ever seen
has loved, despaired, and died.

I come for you, Sir Percivale,
whose heart was made for love.
All love, I say, is base desire,
to start but never quench the fire

that burns with lust, with greed, with ire.
Your so-called love comes from those fires
below and not above.

All in the end will come to me
and know me in despair.
For I divide the friend from friend,
and to the pit my slaves I send.
All blossoms wither in the end.
My breath doth every beauty rend;
they perish in that air."

Percivale quailed and half believed
the bitter lies she spoke.
But from his breast he seemed to scent
that hawthorn blossom, Heaven-sent,
and hope in him awoke.

"Not so, dread queen," the knight replied.
"Some blossoms none can blast.
The blossoms that return each spring
are pledges of some better thing.
The great day comes, the sages sing,
when Love will flower in everything.
For Heaven's summer, Heaven's spring,
are seasons that will last.

And as a token of my hope,
behold the flowering Thorn.
Here is the flower she gave to me
in token of eternity.
This night will but an instant be
and joy comes in the morn."

And saying this he held aloft
the flower the Hawthorn gave.
When that fell fiend beheld the flower,
it trembled there, for all its power,
its falsehood was exposed that hour.

For now it sensed the greater power
of Love that comes to save.

"I keep the flower," said Percivale.
"I also wield the Thorn!"
And as he spoke a sharp thorn grew
into a great spear, straight and true,
and at that wraith, the spear he threw,
and straight he pierced it through and through.
Wailing, it dwindled and withdrew,
as night recedes at dawn.

"Well done!" the others cried. "Well done!
Your trial is overpast.
The living trees are on our side.
By Oak and Ash and Thorn, we ride.
We'll win through to the further side
and find the Grail at last."

So they rode on, in growing light,
through that wide wilderness.
And still their horses sensed the path
and trod soft o'er the silent earth.
Their riders felt an inner dearth,
a bone-deep weariness.

All day they rode, until the shades
of night began to close.
Till they drew near to grey hills drear
and saw a grim gate-house appear.
"I know not," said Sir Galahad,
"whose battlements are those.

Before these lands were wasted, here
stood many a house and hall.
But since all life was drained and fled,
they're haunts of emptiness and dread
that once with folk were full."

They came unto that ragged tower
and found the gates flung wide,
though darkness and deep shadows thronged
within and on each side.

Above those gates, they read these words
engraved on blackened stone:
Through me the world will pass at last,
through doors of dread to fire and frost.
Abandon hope from first to last
who pass beneath this stone.

"Surely," said Percivale, "we heed
this warning whilst we can.
Come, let us turn another way
whilst we still have some light of day.
Whoso presume to pass this way
must be a foolish man."

"Not so," said Galahad. "Not so.
Our way lies straight ahead.
These are the words the Ash gave me:
The true path to the mystery
runs through the doors of dread."

"If you so choose, I choose with you,"
brave Percivale replied.
And Bors said too, "I go with you,"
though both knights inly sighed.

Their horses, too, would have turned back,
but Galahad spoke fair:
"Come, noble steeds, who bear us best,
be with us through this final test.
Tomorrow comes good hay and rest,
given by those you bear."

So those brave knights dismounted there
and led their horses on.

Beneath the fateful arch they passed
into a dark hall overcast.
Then they looked back and all aghast.
There, in the gap through which they'd passed,
with dreadful clang, were shut full fast
the two great gates of stone.

And in that instant all was dark.
The horses neighed in fright.
In deep dismay they felt their way,
for all was black as night

There's no way back, they heard a voice.
The gates are locked and sealed.
O foolish knights, who chose in pride
through the dread doors of Hell to ride,
remain and die where others died,
for all to death must yield.

"Alas! Alas," cried Galahad,
"my folly brought us here.
What prayer or vow can help us now
in darkness and in fear?"

"Now is the time," said Percivale,
"to wake the hidden seed.
Surely the seed the Ash Tree gave
he gave to meet this need."

And Galahad drew from his cloak
the seed that they might see.
The winged seed slipped from him there
and turned and circled in the air,
all wreathed in its own light most fair,
then slow descended to the floor.
And as it fell, the three knights saw
the seed became a key!

The Good Knight stooped and took the key,
and by its glimmering light
he turned back to the gates of stone
and found the lock, and all alone
he tried the key, but still the stone
stood fast. The key refused to turn,
though he used all his might.

And Percivale and Bors both tried,
but it was all in vain.
Slow minutes passed in growing dread
then came the mocking voice. It said:
You foolish knights, you were betrayed
by false trees and foul water-maid,
and here you will remain.

The hours crept by and Galahad
was tempted to despair:
"This is my fault!," he cried aloud.
"I was too trustful and too proud,
and all the hopes and dreams we held
die in the darkness here.

I have betrayed your trust in me,
and that of fair Dindrane.
It grieves me most, now we are lost,
to think that by my choice accursed,
the sacrifice she made for us,
alas, has been in vain."

"It is not so," said good Sir Bors.
"so yield not to despair.
'There's no way back,' that voice spoke right.
The way lies on, even into night.
You did not read the runes aright
when you turned backwards there.

The road runs through the doors of dread,
not back through them again.

If we win through to light of day,
it will be by some other way
than that which we came in.

My own poor house, like many halls,
has one great gate before.
But also, on the other side,
away from the false show of pride,
a little postern door.

Fare forward, Galahad, fare on.
Take up the golden key,
and by its light we'll cleanse our sight,
for to explore what lies before
and see what we shall see"

And Galahad took heart again
and said, "Forgive me, friends.
My mind is sapped by grief and pain.
I grieve always for fair Dindrane,
but I'll not call our quest in vain
whilst I still have such friends."

And so he took the golden key
and softly they moved on
into the deeper darkness there,
in silent dread, hour after hour,
into the black and stifling air,
and put behind them their despair
and just before them, frail and fair,
the golden ash-key shone.

"This hall," said Galahad, "must end,
must have a further wall.
And surely in that wall a door
must stand above the dusty floor,
and in that door some keyhole there
through which the light might fall."

So slow and sure they made their way
through fearful darkness there.
And in that dark their feet soon found
armour and bones, whose cracking sound
taught them that many dead lay round,
who'd perished in despair.

At last they glimpsed a tiny light,
a little breath of air.
And just before them there they saw
the outline of an old oak door.
And from its keyhole to the floor
fell daylight, fresh and fair.

"Fair brothers, now," said Galahad,
"my true friends pray for me.
For now, by Oak and Ash and Thorn,
we try the Dryad's key."

And so he took the golden key
and set it to the lock.
The dread voice mocked them eerily
But with a prayer he turned the key
and pushed the door, which opened free,
and light so streamed on them that they
felt blinded by its shock.

The doorway was scarce wide enough
for each knight on his own.
Unsaddled then, their steeds they drew,
and scarcely they could get them through.
At last they stood where day was new,
beyond the realm of stone.

They closed the door behind them then,
and, even as they did,
they heard three voices that fair morn–
the speech of Oak and Ash and Thorn

at once to bless them and to warn,
and this is what they said:

Farewell you three good knights, the friends
of Oak and Ash and Thorn.
You crossed the Wasteland and are blessed.
Our healing waits on your success.
But with this warning, ride in quest:
If someday men, forget again
to treat the woods and streams as friends
and share in equal courtesy,
in woven mutuality,
our spirits will withdraw and flee–
the Wasteland will return.

So tell this tale all down the years,
and let your children learn
that woods and streams and earth and air
are kin and friends and fellow heirs,
not slaves or tools, and let them share
God's bounty, and be thankful there
for Oak and Ash and Thorn.

Now ride, good friends, into the light.
Ride on! Fulfil your quest.
And by the fields and streams and trees
be loved and always blest

"We mount and ride," said Galahad.
"The way before us lies.
See how the grass on either side
grows green again as on we ride.
We leave the Wasteland and can ride
once more 'neath friendly skies."

And as they rode, there came in view
a valley rich and wide.
And at its further end they saw
a sight which filled those knights with awe,

which Galahad, when first he saw,
reined back his steed and cried:

"Behold the Castle of the Grail!
My grandsire Pelles' keep.
Its towers and turrets shine with light,
though veiled so oft from mortal sight.
It was my playground of delight
before my father made me knight.
With joy it makes me weep."

They saw the towers, high and white,
the banners fluttering free.
And there, beyond the enchanted hall,
beyond its furthest marble wall,
they saw the glittering sea.

"At last! At last!," cried Galahad.
"Dear friends, who with me roam,
at last, after so many trials–
tested by demons' evil wiles,
after so many weary miles
–at last I can come home."

The Trinity Forum

Group Discussion Guide

1 Rowan Williams suggests that the Grail narratives merge Christian themes with pre-Christian British folklore, creating a rich symbolic tapestry. How does this synthesis of traditions shape the way we interpret the Grail story today? In your view, does this blending strengthen the legend's spiritual resonance or undermine it?

2 T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* draws from Grail imagery but omits a clear redeemer figure, leaving the reader to inhabit the role of the questing knight. How does this shift in narrative responsibility affect the reader's engagement with the text? What might Eliot's modernist retelling reveal about the spiritual climate of the early 20th century?

3 Guite recalls his mother warning him that one person's single destructive act could devastate the whole world, connecting the Dolorous Stroke to nuclear warfare. How does reframing medieval legend in light of modern global threats deepen—or alter—its moral and spiritual impact? Can this kind of mythic reframing help us process contemporary concerns?

4 Owen Barfield's concept of "final participation" envisions a restored, mutual relationship between humanity and nature, enabled by Christ. In what ways does the Grail quest narrative anticipate or symbolize this restoration? How does this idea challenge the materialist worldview Guite critiques?

5 Guite intentionally sets his Grail knights' journey through the Wasteland as a metaphor for entering our modern, reductive perception of reality. How does this narrative choice help readers become aware of our own "immanent frame"? Do you think literature still has the power to "break the spell of modernity" in the way Guite hopes?

6 Both the medieval sources and Guite's retelling ultimately frame the Grail not as an abstract ideal but as the healing presence of Christ himself. How does keeping this Christological center change the nature of the quest? What dangers or distortions might arise if the Grail is sought apart from its theological meaning?

7 Each knight receives a specific gift from the Dryads—acorn and leaf, blossom, and key—that proves essential to overcoming trials. How does the narrative use these tangible, natural items to demonstrate the interplay between grace, creation, and human courage in completing the quest?

8 Percivale's confrontation with the icy queen challenges his understanding of love, contrasting lust and despair with enduring, redeemed love. How does the hawthorn blossom function as both a personal token and a theological symbol in this encounter?

9 The Ash's key can only open the "doors of dread" when the knights move forward, not backward. What might this narrative detail suggest about the nature of faith, perseverance, and the refusal to retreat in spiritual trials?

10 Galahad's homecoming at the sight of the Grail Castle is framed with deep joy but also with the memory of trial. How does the narrative balance triumph with humility, and why might the author choose to end the Wasteland passage with a vision of both restoration and continued responsibility?

11 The cooperation between knights, trees, and water-spirits is essential for success in the Wasteland. What does this mutual dependence reveal about the author's vision for the relationship between humanity, creation, and the Creator? In what ways does it challenge modern notions of human independence?

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Further Resources

Jessie L Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Princeton University Press, 1993)

Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue Faber, *The Poems of TS Eliot, volume I* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015)

Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: A New History* (Penguin, 2007)

Kevin J. Harty (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

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