

Divine Madness: Archetypes of Romantic Love

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Fourteen

The Fall Of Camelot: Love's Phoenix

Entering "ordinary time" after the Quest of the Holy Grail has been an instructive experience. As long as we stayed within the Quest itself, it appeared that following the relationship was a joyful -- even glorious -- experience in which the Holy Spirit simply took over and whisked us off to where we had to go. The example of Galahad suggested that really to know the Third was to travel in a mystic boat and avoid all frustration and difficulties. Although he spent a year in prison, he did not suffer; for the Grail attended him and fed him his heart's desire -- both physical and spiritual food. Although Lancelot was by no means so well favored as Galahad, once he had undergone a dual process of repentance, he, too, was carried along by a mystic boat. It might have seemed from this that all we have to do is repent and change our ways to enjoy conflict-free progress in our relationships.

But once Lancelot returned from the Quest and resumed his affair with Guinevere in ordinary time, we obtained quite a different impression about following the relationship. It was no longer so easy and no longer so clear. Now the mystic boat of *Gelassenheit* was much harder to distinguish from more ordinary means of progress. Lancelot's ambiguous adventures brought home to us the difficulty, pain, and uncertainty of following the Third. Apart from his curing the Hungarian knight, there was nothing like a magic boat. Yet we had to conclude that Lancelot must have been in an attitude of *Gelassenheit* at least intermittently, for his accomplishments left us no other conclusion. He had to suffer humiliation, disappointment, and particularly the loss of very comforting part-personalities. He had to detach himself from possessiveness, vanity, and apparently well-earned fame. He not only suffered several losses but got himself embroiled further and further in an intolerable situation. He got to the point where he had to oppose his king in order to save the life and reputation of his beloved queen. He became estranged from his best friends and relatives. There was no longer a time to enjoy the queen, even though he had her apparently to himself at his own castle, Joyous Guard. His sufferings and those of the queen caused him to change its name to Dolorous Guard. Worst of all, his love affair with the queen led to the Round Table's destruction as the knights divided into factions and began killing one another.

Through all of these events in ordinary time -- whether glorious or dolorous -- we have asked ourselves again and again whether the Holy Spirit of the Quest could possibly be guiding Lancelot in a love affair which was not only adulterous but endangering the very kingdom God had favored with the Holy Grail. If we follow the principle Jesus articulates in Matthew (7:15-20), we are to distinguish false prophets from true "by their fruits." What shall we say about this adulterous love affair which ends in the fall of Camelot and the loss

of the greatest Christian fellowship since Jesus and his twelve Apostles? By the end King Arthur has had his heart broken by his nephews and best-loved knights and been killed by his own illegitimate son. Lancelot and Guinevere survive the whole tragedy and enter separate monasteries, completely relinquishing sexual expression of their love.

Let us begin our investigation of the fall of Camelot with the man who presided over the debacle. Arthur seems to have become little more than a figurehead in the final days of Camelot. He would very much like to ignore the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere and retain the courtly and military services of his best knight. He tells us a great deal about himself:

"Wit you well my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company. And now I dare say," said King Arthur, "there was never Christian king held such a fellowship together; and alas that ever Sir Launcelot and I should be at debate. Ah Agravain, Agravain," said the king, "Jesu forgive it thy soul, for thine evil will that thou and thy brother Sir Mordred hadst unto Sir Launcelot that caused all this sorrow" (*Morte* ii, 473f).

Arthur is clearly innocent of romantic love. We could never imagine Lancelot accepting a replacement for Guinevere. That Arthur would be prepared to do so, proves he never glimpsed the core of her personhood, never saw her through the lens of his anima, never entangled his wound with hers, never dallied in Venusberg with her. Arthur is entirely identified with the fellowship of the Round Table and the unification of Britain which it represents. In the *Morte*, he loses all personality after effecting the unification, when the narrative begins to follow the careers of his several knights. Also Merlin disappears about the time of the unification. Merlin was Arthur's spiritual navigator, a flesh-and-blood personification of the Third -- for which Arthur, personally, never developed a "feel." The one man sitting at the Round Table, decade after decade, who lived his life on the path of the Third was Lancelot. Very likely Lancelot and Guinevere clung together because they were the only people at court who had even dreamt of the possibility of a Third. No one else spoke their language. Lancelot was the one knight able to keep alive the spiritual tradition on which Camelot had been founded. This is why the Round Table could only last as long as the king and the queen's lover could behave with the greatest admiration, respect, and affection for one another.

In fact they never lost that love for one another, but were forced into battle by Gawain's need to avenge his brothers' deaths.[1] Arthur cannot afford to resist Gawain's demands, because to fail to punish Lancelot publicly would be to acknowledge and accept his own cuckolding and thereby undermine his royal authority. Gawain represents the other side of the king: temporal considerations, outward appearances, and the drama of kingship. Arthur cannot hold his people without these qualities championed by Gawain, and he cannot hold his nation on its course without a feel for the Third, represented by Lancelot.

This is an issue of utmost concern to us. For Lancelot is trying his best to follow the Third, and not a few incidents have occurred which seem to supply evidence that the Holy Spirit does, indeed, favor his course. But the Third is supposed to *integrate* us, harmonize our conflicting instincts. The very notion of a transcendent function is that it appears when the more logical conscious mind has reached an impasse. The Third is supposed to transcend such impasses. But here it seems to effect a very destructive rift. This is alarming news, for

the new rift is devastating to the Camelot which Arthur and Lancelot both love. Hence the great sorrow with which both he and Lancelot take up their swords.

It is with this kind of sorrow that worthy opponents take up the cudgels after perhaps twenty years of marriage. The love is not gone. In fact it has been deepened and transformed by all those nights sleeping side-by-side, all the financial and health crises through which we have clung together, the joys and sorrows of our children. When we can see clearly, our spouse's smallest gesture calls up layers of affection. We feel our heart leap with the transparent flame of our mutual joy as we pedaled bicycle paths of lake shores and river banks in our twenties, climbed European wooded trails in our thirties, and met one another with open-hearted surprise side-by-side at traffic lights in our forties. As we look into our partner's eyes, we glimpse her slipping shyly around a bend deep in the dark cave of her solitude -- that labyrinthine and cavernous world, damp and pulsing with thrill and terror. It pulls at our wound, and we find that a flood of tears lies just behind the threshold of our tremulous wonder. Perhaps we allow ourselves to be distracted for a moment, letting our gaze wander over the cliff-face pitted with the room-sized shallow little caves in which we have cuddled and sported on and off for two or more decades.

Tender reminiscences distract us from the business at hand. Back to the cudgels. We must hold our Lancelot's "feel" for the transcendent depth and direction of our relationship very close to the center of our field of vision. But we cannot ignore Gawain whispering in our ear. There are practical matters crying out for attention. Frustrating patterns have been established despite our best intentions. We are hurting one another without wanting to and almost without knowing it. We have become defensive over matters that appear trivial to one another, but we know that deeper matters lurk beneath the surface. We are afraid to confront them. We do not know what needs, what murk, what slime from the depths, will clog the channels of our communications. We even fear that these touchy matters might conceal a powderkeg. We almost do not dare to proceed ahead. In fact, that is why we have postponed this confrontation for so long. But Gawain's whisper in our ear tells us it cannot go on. We have to take one another on, and give up the politeness and distance which have allowed matters to encyst and to fester.

Like Arthur and Lancelot, we look for any excuse to postpone or avoid confrontation altogether. We go to battle reluctantly and sadly, for we do not want to hurt that tender, joyful companion whose touch and smell are so familiar we notice them only when they are missing. We go to battle only because we know that our little circumlocutions and tacit silences are no longer just "considerate"; they have begun to conceal lies, perhaps whole complexes of lies. Very likely we have only the foggiest notion of what these lies might be. We have not made them up deliberately but rather backed into them unconsciously. We may even feel at times that they are the heart of truth. We cling to them, like Gawain to his sinfulness, and convince ourselves that these defenses and diversions are of ultimate importance.

This edifice has to be brought down. The best and most careful way of doing it is through the hand-to-hand combat of worthy opposition -- and precisely while we are still able to bring our beloved into focus through the lens of our anima or animus. We go to battle with the greatest sadness and reluctance. For only by consciously bearing the tension between our tenderness and our anger, between our savor for what has been and our hope for

what might yet be, can we attain the *Gelassenheit* which enables the Third to appear.

In the short run, the easy way out of such an impasse with our beloved is to cling to the tenderness and the sense of eternal, unchanging wonder which has always held us together. But there are Agravains and Mordreds in every union; and their whispers are going to get louder and their evidence more and more difficult to dismiss. When we cling, frightened, to one pole of the tension, the other always gathers strength, weight, and momentum. Eventually our frustration, rage, and lust for vengeance will overcome our sense of depth, wonder, and tenderness. We will give up our tenderness and identify completely with the other pole where our anger will make things a lot easier for us. Our fight will be, not sad and reluctant, but rabid and bitter. Because we will have forgotten the archetypal roots of our union, there will be little to temper our aggression; and we are sure to overween, like Gawain beheading the lady. We will cover our wound with our rage and believe ourselves almost invulnerable as we wade into an emotional slaughter.

In the short run this is the easy way out. In the long run it spells disaster. Too many relationships founder on quarrels like this. Quarrels occur when we cannot bear the tensions between our conflicting emotions. The aftermath rage of divorce continues to hide our woundedness and distract us from the deep, tender feelings which we still have for our ex-spouse. We allow our rage to reconstruct our past -- by revising and distorting our memories -- , and we dredge up all the insults and injuries and convince ourselves of what a dupe we have been. Why is it that we could not see earlier what is so clear to us now? It is clear because we have let go of the tension and lost all "feel for," and perhaps all memory of the Third.

The attitude of a Lancelot is always difficult to maintain. We never lose our propensity to slip back into a more simplistic Gawain attitude. But even though Arthur and Lancelot fought with love, care, sadness, and reluctance, even though they never lost their respect for one another, their battle brought down Camelot. Since childhood, I have carried a ball of sadness in my heart for the fall of Camelot. What an ignominious end for the "greatest Christian fellowship": to have fallen into warring factions over honor, adultery, and vengeance! Still the battle was fought with love and reluctance, rather in the style of worthy opponents. If we apply this to human relationship, the fall of Camelot might refer to the end of the affair, or a divorce after decades of what seemed to be happy marriage. But it might also refer to the demise of a much loved *style* of relating: perhaps a couple which stops sleeping together but remains friends, or a couple which gives up a sentimental cottage-for-two image for a much less defined and uncertain way of life.

Tragic as it may be, Camelot's fall appears to have been foreordained. This is made clear at the coming of the Grail to the Round Table, for the *Quest* tells us that many "were more vexed than joyful at the news" (46). Both the King and Queen express their sorrow that the Round Table will lose all its hundred fifty knights. The immediate literal meaning of this sorrow is that there will be -- at least for a time -- no soldiers to defend Camelot and Britain and no jolly fellowship around the table in the great hall. But there is a more essential meaning than this, whether or not it was known by the king and the others who were vexed. The Grail is accepted by all without dispute as a higher goal than that of a safe and prosperous kingdom. The Grail issues a transcendent call to explicitly commit ourselves to the One, to be open in *Gelassenheit* to whatever direction the Holy Spirit leads. This cannot

be done unless we "detach" ourselves from less-than-ultimate concerns.

The Round Table is less than ultimate, but it has been the center of these people's lives: a magnificent success story of reconciliation, peace, prosperity, dedication to high ideals, and universal joy. They have believed, and they are right, that they have been doing the work of God on earth. Now God wants something else of them. They do not have to repudiate or in any way undermine the Round Table; they just have to recognize that it has lower priority than the Grail. As Gawain shows us, this ideal is more easily paid lip-service to than lived. But Lancelot tries to live it. He learns to follow the Third, disciplines himself to *Gelassenheit*. The *Morte* so celebrates his transformation that it is hard to believe Lancelot was not also following the Third in his relationship with Guinevere. He does not lose his chivalric love of Arthur and the Round Table, but he "detaches" from these things. His detractors will say that it is in his self-interest to detach. Perhaps so, but conniving is inconsistent with following a Third. Cynical motivation is utterly opposed to the attitude of *Gelassenheit*.

If the Grail teaches us anything, it is to reorder our priorities. When this happens, Camelot is sure to fall. The Camelots which have to fall in our relationships are generally our dearest plans. Surely our castles in the air will mostly fall, but I refer to the joint projects we have worked on so long and hard and with quite a bit of success. It is the house we built or remodeled. All those trips to the salvage company and antique shops. How our plans grew as we laughed over the coffee table in the evening. Those personal touches we came upon spontaneously, saturated as they are with what we two were going through at the time we found them. A whole way of life is wrapped up in that house. The way we managed to schedule half-hour dinners on those nights we both were working. How we would arrange our whole day around that half-hour, so that our days were saturated with one another even when we barely met. The very forks and saucepans were molded and colored and imbued with those dinners. Imbued with us the way we were, the way we thought we would always be. Imbued with a heart beat and a certain soft shade of yellow light.

When we follow the relationship, these are the things we have to be detached enough to leave. We could not have become the lovers we are without having created -- in our joint love and wrangling -- this unique *Mitwelt*, its every object pregnant with our plans and memories. Our Camelot will always be dear to us, for we put our whole selves into it. We are aware of the eternal quality of our bond. But Camelot is not eternal. If a relationship is alive, it will lead us onward. We will be able to follow it, as long as we do not cling to the past. Every Round Table in our life will eventually be superseded.

In the penultimate snapshot Malory provides us of the lovers, they are in separate monasteries. Like Eliduc and Guilliadun from Chapter II, Lancelot and Guinevere follow their relationship to a very large and institutional naked sword. This makes sense to our contemporary mentality only as a penance: because they see in the fall of Camelot what their adultery has wrought, they don sackcloth and ashes. They are sorry, indeed, that Camelot has fallen; but the narrative as a whole tells us that the Holy Spirit led them. They may feel at odds with the people at court and the citizens of Britain, that their mutual affection brought a golden age to its end; but I do not believe they feel at odds with God. Rather in the style of Shiva and Parvati, they continue their meditation on the One but now in solitude rather than in physical union. This is not a punishment, self-inflicted or otherwise, but the next stage of

their love affair. The Third has led them to a unity of even greater transparency. Whereas formerly they had needed to gaze into one another's eyes and feel the tremulous interpenetration of souls with their bodies, the fall of Camelot has been their "Dark Night." The Holy Spirit is weaning them from her maternal breasts so that they can enjoy a far more sublime and satisfying union. Formerly they united with God in one another, now they unite with one another in God.

Perhaps the clearest example of such a transformation in love making is that of Teresa of Avila. In her earlier years she enjoyed a spiritual and somewhat bodily love making with her confessors. From a literal point of view, this appears grossly sinful. But in the context of her whole life, it is clear that the Holy Spirit was leading her; for these human affairs were explicitly about the love of God. They nourished her mystical longings while employing the faculties she already knew how to employ. By this means, she was led to more and more subtle and sublime experiences of love. Gradually she moved from one chamber to the next of her Interior Castle.

If the Holy Spirit can lead Teresa to such spectacular sainthood by way of years of earnest romantic love despite her perpetual vow of chastity and that of the priests she befriended, may Lancelot and Guinevere not also be on the right track? Here again we see the Third acting like Khidr when he drove holes in the boat of poor and virtuous fisher folk. It seemed inconsistent with our expectations for an angel of God, but there were reasons we had not guessed. This is the way it is, too, with the Dark Night. We work hard at our prayers and meditations and seem to be making important progress; and then suddenly everything comes to a halt. The God who seemed nearer than our jugular vein (Quran 50:16) seems remote and unreachable. We languish in a desert of apathy. Did the Holy Spirit lead us here? Is this the way the Third rewards our sincere spiritual efforts? John of the Cross tells us that that may very likely be the case, for the Dark Night is a necessary disappointment and discipline which enables us to enjoy God in a far more satisfying manner -- "both hotter and cooler."

We have found that the structure of romantic love is identical with that of the love of God. Therefore, if erotic love also has its Dark Nights, we might begin our exploration of the last days of Camelot with the question of whether the ideal Christian kingdom did not have to suffer disaster. Literally, we could say that Camelot had to fall in order that Britain might enter "ordinary time." Symbolically, we might speculate that every relationship creates its own Camelot over time and that each Camelot is splendid in proportion to the quality of the lovers' relationship. But success in building a Camelot is not rewarded by its becoming eternal. The reward comes, rather, after the Dark Night of the soul; after something of seemingly highest importance is destroyed; after our hearts are broken.

We will consider this possibility that Camelot had to fall, first by looking at the end of an affair and then by looking at a relationship which survives the crisis unbroken.

In the beginning there has to be a good deal of fumbling and physical exploration, as we gradually get to know one another's souls through our bodies. We laugh at conventional assumptions of physical attractiveness, as we find an extraordinarily satisfying beauty in one another's middle-aged, out-of-shape bodies. I find her body is the perfect expression of her soul. I do not want her to gain or lose weight. Thus, when she tells me she dreams of my

soft, white belly, I believe her, even though I am generally ashamed of it. There comes a time, however, when our meetings nourish our union more in non-physical ways. For example, there are those moments in which a golden rainbow arches between our breasts and we feel a quasi-physical sensation as it cascades through us. Perhaps we find one another standing across a crowded room from one another. The moment our eyes meet, we feel our bodies drop like curtains, and our souls join.

When our relationship so leads us away from the physical into a more and more spiritual direction, it may be preparing us for a parting. It is teaching us that we do not need to be in the same room with one another to enjoy a sublime union. Our bodily intercourse has fed something which develops a life of its own independent of the body. Thus when we have those sad, reluctant conversations about how the spirit is beginning to lead us in different directions, we know that there is a sense in which we will never be parted. We know we can always take it up again, if life somehow draws us back together. Majnun has become Layla. The years of our common quest have transformed us, bound us inextricably, and yet somehow given us a greater freedom. We know that if we live at opposite ends of the earth we will still be together.

This proves true, as well, in our subsequent relationships. We have less patience for the kinds of connection which used to satisfy us. And at the same time, we have an eye for potentials we formerly overlooked. It is not just that I have an eye now for matronly figures. I certainly have that. More importantly, I have an eye now for geysers of yellow light in a woman's aura and that shadowy black core in her heart which resonates so movingly with my wound. My Guinevere lives on in my subsequent relationships because she has so widened and deepened my knowledge of my own soul. I have all that to bring now to new relationships. And not only to new relationships, to every undertaking in my life. Like Lancelot in his last years, my notion of prayer has deepened and become more satisfying and effective. My enthusiasm for my professional activities has, in the words of Malory, grown both cooler and hotter. In this sense I have "become" my Guinevere, and I bring both of our souls to everything I do. She is always near me.

In this case the fall of Camelot is our physical parting. It is an occasion of great sadness, of course; but there is also a transcendent joy in our reluctant and lingering adieux. We know that what we have achieved can never be lost. We have taught each other one of the greatest secrets of human life, and our lives will never be the same again.

While the fall of Camelot may symbolize the end of an affair or a divorce, it may also be experienced by a couple whose marriage or affair continues. When we have discovered these mysteries by which our love gradually becomes spiritualized so that we require less bodily contact or even physical presence, the Third does not necessarily lead us in separate directions. Fortunately, there are also occasions in which we are allowed to stay together and enjoy our deeper, more spiritual union as companions. In this case the fall of Camelot represents all the favorite fantasies we have long entertained and even accomplished. We give this up with the same sadness and reluctance as another couple might resolve to go its separate ways. As we look back on the years of innocent hope and joy and hard work which built our Camelot, we cannot close our eyes to our fighting and misunderstanding and disappointed expectations. Through it all we have been intermittently -- and now perhaps more continuously and deeply -- aware of our Self-level connection. Indeed, we know this

now in a different way than ever before.

Now we see how our Camelot fantasies were a necessary but distracting vision and how our wrangling -- sometimes more than our cuddling -- defined for us the tender heart of our union. There may have been long periods of time in the last decades when we related more like brother and sister than like lovers. It was as though we had the same blood flowing through our veins as we worked on our complementary projects and saw one another from the outside only. We took our unity for granted. We never looked for it -- much less used it as a touchstone or discovered it as an autonomous entity we might follow. We forgot how much we had to say to one another in our early days and how much we bowled one another over with our divergent perspectives. We got to the point where we thought we knew one another. No doubt what we knew about one another was important and useful and assisted the building up of Camelot. We even came to accept for ourselves these two-dimensional images we took in exchange for one another.

There were certainly moments when we glimpsed one another again with our original eyes of innocence: an angel gleaming in gold from across a smoke-filled room and a whirlwind with shy dancing eyes and an entire sun bursting from her chest. We were too innocent and too sure of ourselves to notice that these visions were but the sheen on our wounds. The angel was out of place in a world of space and time and too frightened to acquire the necessary experience. The whirlwind's darling swagger was terrified of coming to rest and harbored a horror of the very naivete the angel seemed to cultivate.

This is the way it generally is with couples. We share the same wound but we try not to notice it. Unconsciously we conspire to avoid all reference to it. A major function of our Camelot is to deny the very existence of our wound, to prove by our strength and success that we are whole. We need to believe that our *Mitwelt* is built on solid rock. We cannot tolerate the bridge of fog which really supports Camelot.

While all this is going on, our wounds fester. We begin to feel dissatisfied, although we try not to admit it. We cannot work as hard on the expansion of Camelot. We may even begin to dream about other designs and look for new adventures. We are not following the Third anymore. We become more aware of one another's faults -- and rightly so, for these bring us back to the central matter of the wounds. But we are not looking at one another through the lens of our anima and animus. We are carping at superficial matters while we feel our partner is kicking us in our sorest wound, as indeed she is. We just will not let ourselves realize that she is feeling the very same pain from our carping as we from her kicking.

In this very typical kind of breakdown, the Holy Spirit is shouting at us through our pain. When we forget to keep in touch with our Self-level connection, we do not know that our pain is mutual. When we are newly in love and barely know one another, we are aghast at all the evidence for mystical participation: reading one another's minds, knowing the exact moment to call, preparing one another identical valentines. But when we think we know one another, all this stops. We neglect the Self-level and forget how much in harmony we really are. In the beginning we felt the same ecstasy and marveled over it to one another, thereby reinforcing our sense of oneness. Now again we feel a mutual emotion; but this time it is painful; and we recoil from one another, feeling puzzled and resentful. We feel isolated and

alone with our pain, not knowing that our pain is what binds us. It is the spirit of the relationship right now. It is the Third. We have to follow our pain.

Not realizing any of this consciously, we blame one another for our misery. We carp and we kick back, aiming without knowing it at one another's wound. Painful as it may be, there is an advantage in this; for we are learning the shape of our wound. Although we are in an aggressive, intolerant mood, our common pain is right there for us to see. It is just as plain as our common ecstasy was a few years ago. Above all, it is a common emotion which binds us together and makes us one.

Camelot begins to fall the moment we realize that our partner is feeling just as misunderstood as we are. This is the crucial insight. It is the moment we recover the elusive Third, and with it our anchor in our Self-level bond. When I pay attention to the pain itself and give up simply trying to ward it off, I begin to notice our joint woundedness. If, as our fighting continues, I do not entirely lose sight of our wound, pretty soon my attention shifts and I can see that the one who is flailing away at me and so much in pain is really the same beloved whirlwind with a swagger I have not glimpsed, perhaps, in months or years. At this moment the fray is all about us, and we stand in the center, the same darling god and goddess we always were.

It is not easy to hold onto a bit of *Gelassenheit* when we are in pain and feel attacked by our beloved. But if we can, a marvelous transformation of our struggle takes place. Our quarrel becomes worthy opposition the moment we appreciate that we are mystically participating in the same pain. Worthy opposition becomes love-play when we can again appreciate and enjoy our beloved's protean transformations. When we get to this point, we can hardly continue to regret the fall of Camelot. Our love has risen phoenix-like from its ashes.

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1. Lancelot was able to kill them so easily and unconsciously that he did not know what he had done until much later. The reason for this is that , out of respect for Lancelot, Gareth and Gaheris had agreed to the king's order to stand as guards at the queen's execution only on condition that they do so unarmed and without armor. It is understood that they would not have been killed, had they taken ordinary precautions.