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The Fabula, Story, and Text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*

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Breuddwyd Rhonabwy ('Rhonabwy's Dream') is a Middle Welsh Arthurian narrative, one of the two so-called 'native' Arthurian prose pieces to have survived in manuscript.¹ Since Melville Richards's edition of 1948 a general consensus has developed which has regarded the work as some sort of satire and which has dated it to various decades of the thirteenth century.² But more recently an older argument about the date of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* has been revived by Dr T. M. Charles-Edwards. He has claimed that it was 'composed during the lifetime of Madog ab Maredudd, who died in 1159 [sic], or shortly after his death. . .'.³ He continues:

Madog ab Maredudd is mentioned as Prince of Powys at the beginning of the story, and circumstantial details are given about his difficulties with his younger brother Iorwerth. One of the main themes of the whole story is the sad contrast between the miserable physique and appearance of Rhonabwy and his companions, Madog's soldiers, and the strength and splendour of Arthur and his men. Take, for example, the passage in which Rhonabwy and his companions are brought before Arthur:

'May God bless you,' said Arthur.
'Where Iddawg did you find those little men?'
'I found them, Lord, over there on the road.'
Then the emperor smiled a grey half-smile.

¹*Culhwch ac Olwen* is the other. ²*Breudwyt Ronabwy allan o'r Llyfr Coch o Hergest*, edited by Melville Richards (Cardiff, 1948). Further discussion of dating occurs in Mary Giffin, 'The Date of the "Dream of Rhonabwy"', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymrodorion*, 1958, 33-40; Enid Roberts, *Braslun o Hanes Llên Powys* (Denbigh, 1965), pp. 41-42; J. Angela Carson, 'The Structure and Meaning of *The Dream of Rhonabwy*', *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 289-303. Both dating and satirical intent are discussed by Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd Rhonabwy', in *Y Traddodiad Rhyddiaith yn yr Oesau Canol*, edited by Geraint Bowen (Llandysul, 1974), pp. 176-95. Readers seeking a translation will be well served by the version in *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), pp. 137-52. ³T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The Date of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', *THSC*, 1970-71, 266.

'Lord,' said Iddawg, 'What are you laughing at?' 'Iddawg,' said Arthur, 'I am not laughing but I am so sad that men so weak as these should be guarding this island after men as fine as those who once guarded it.'

Now this looks very much like satire aimed at contemporaries. There would be much less point to it if it were written two generations later, and so aimed at the generation of the author's grandparents.⁴

This view of the satirical intent and the conclusions about dating have been seconded by Professor Eric Hamp:

I accept Charles-Edwards's dating of 'Breuddwyd Rhonabwy' at around 1160 on the ground that the satire of Madog's puny soldiers ought to be contemporary; indeed, if this were said of one's grandfather and his associates or enemies it would be both lacking in taste and unmotivated—the latter since it would be more likely a subject for elegy.⁵

Now these arguments for a twelfth-century date for *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* hinge neither on external evidence nor on linguistic evidence but on a view of the intent of the satire, a belief about how satire works, and some assumptions about the structure of the narrative. Both Charles-Edwards and Hamp assume, for instance, that the purpose of the Arthurian part of the tale is primarily to put the Powysian part in a bad light. But when we consider this idea carefully, we must be puzzled by the extent to which Powys comes across poorly even before we enter Rhonabwy's Arthurian dream. Moreover and more persuasively, the dream part of the narrative takes up by far the greater part of the whole piece, and the explicit comparison between the Arthurian world and the world of Madog which Dr Charles-Edwards quotes makes up only a small part of it and occurs rather early on.

Certainly the meanness of Rhonabwy's time comes in for harsh examination. But Brynley Roberts has pointed out that Arthur's world is also not exempt from critical examination:

... the author's regard for the past is not wholly admiring, for although Arthur's time is portrayed in heroic terms, the king himself has little of the heroic about him. Rhonabwy's dream is an upside-down world where black is often white, where time is reversed and values upset. The heroic atmosphere is consistently suggested, but there is nothing in the dream to justify it. ... The author of the *Dream of Rhonabwy* was [a] conscious writer of a satirical turn of mind, who may have contrived the incoherence of the vision as humorous comment on contemporary literary technique.⁶

⁴ibid. ⁵Eric P. Hamp, 'On Dating and Archaism in the Pedair Keinc', *THSC*, 1972-73, 99. ⁶Brynley F. Roberts, 'Tales and Romances', in *A Guide to Welsh Literature*, 1, edited by A. O. H. Jarman and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Swansea, 1976), pp. 233-34.

In other words, the author 'writes with satirical purpose which he expresses on more than one level'.⁷ If the satire is in part about Arthur's world, the argument that satire is only meaningful to contemporaries would push the date of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* back to a period contemporary with Arthur—an absurd view certainly. More seriously, there is reason to think that Charles-Edwards and Hamp have not considered the tale in its entirety; and that if seen in its entirety, the satire of Madog and his contemporaries would have to be regarded as only one aspect of an intent that cannot be so easily fixed in the twelfth century. So it remains to be seen how the satire or the various satirical levels are meaningful. In order to proceed to such a view, I have found it useful to employ the technical means of contemporary narrative theory.

1. FABULA, STORY, TEXT

Narrative theory might be said to start with Aristotle's *Poetics*, but the development of theory in this century has a starting place with the Russian Formalists.⁸ Since their time, the way that theories of narrative have developed can be particularly confusing since different theorists employ different terms and, worse, often the same terms in different ways.⁹ For the purposes of this essay I am going to rely on what I think is the most intellectually rigorous work in narrative theory, the Dutch scholar Mieke Bal's *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*.¹⁰ Dr Bal makes a threefold distinction among the layers of a narration, layers which can be analysed separately although they are not independent of each other, of course, since they are embodied in any given narrative.¹¹ Bal calls the three layers of narrative 'fabula', 'story', and 'text' respectively. Of these three, only *text* has linguistic substance, which means, in turn, that only *text* is 'directly accessible'.¹² Or another way of putting it is that *fabula* and *story* are only accessible through the *text*. The *text* is what we read, or, in the case of an oral narrative, what we hear. Bal defines a narrative text as 'a story that is told in language'.¹³

If a *text* is a story told in language, a *story*, then, is something that can be told in something other than language. A *story*—according to Bal and following a long if confusing tradition—is a particular ordering of narrative *elements*. The elements themselves belong to the level of *fabula*. I can illustrate the distinction among the three layers with reference to *Cinderella*; indeed, folk narratives lend

⁷Roberts, 'Tales and Romances', p. 233. ⁸For history and bibliography see Victor Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, third edition (New Haven, 1981). ⁹Some help can be obtained from Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1987). ¹⁰Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, translated by Christine van Boheemen (Toronto, 1985). ¹¹ibid., p. 6. ¹²ibid. ¹³ibid., p. 8.

themselves to illustration since the same fabula and often the same story occur in multiform narratives.

There is a fabula which we can all recognize as *Cinderella*. It consists of certain actors acting through a series of temporally sequential events in certain locations. On the other hand, we all know that *Cinderella* can be and has been narrated in a variety of different forms: an oral tale, to be sure, but also as a cartoon film, an opera, a straight drama, or a ballet in which no linguistic substance is present at all. These various narratives, most but not all of which are texts, may or may not employ the same *story*. That is, some of these texts follow the arrangement of narrative elements that we find in the Grimm Brothers' version; others follow Perrault. Many modern children's versions employ a story much like the Grimms' but eschew the self-mutilation of the step-sisters, thereby altering the *story*. There are, in other words, different *Cinderella* stories as well as different *Cinderella* texts.¹⁴

It may clarify the distinctions among the three discussible layers (not forgetting text) if I expatiate slightly on those elements which make up the fabula, the most abstract layer of narrative, and account for their transformation into what Bal calls the *aspects* of story.¹⁵ The elements consist of *events*, *actors*, a *chronology*, and one or more *locations*. In the fabula events are undertaken or experienced by actors, who may or may not be living, in time and space. All of these elements are relatively abstract in the fabula.

The most immediately interesting element in terms of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is chronology: in the fabula the sequence of events is *always* chronological. In other words, every narrative has as a theoretical norm a series of events in chronological order. In the *story*,

¹⁴The same fabula can also have the same story and appear as different texts: the most obvious example of this last case is any faithful translation of a narrative from one language to another. A little more to the point, though again it is not immediately relevant to our purpose, there is some suggestion that at least a twofold distinction was made by those responsible for the medieval Irish tale-lists. Professor Mac Cana's recent monograph on the subject of these lists dwells towards the end on the word *coimgne* as it occurs particularly in the epilogue to List A: 'Ni fili nad chomgne comathar na scéla uile', 'He is no *fili* who does not preserve *coimgne* or all the *scéla*' (Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1980), p. 49). To discuss all the ramifications of the word *coimgne*, especially in the context of *scél*, which Mac Cana does over several pages (pp. 123–27), would distract us too much from the task at hand, but I would add a note to the problem of *coimgne* by suggesting that in a culture in which narration was largely oral *coimgne* may have well meant something like 'fabula' in Bal's sense of the word. Mac Cana's final translation of the sentence is 'He is no *fili* who does not preserve the general corpus of traditional *documenta*, and, particularly in this context, all the tales' (p. 127). I would suggest trying 'He is no *fili* who does not preserve the general corpus of traditional fabulae and all the stories listed above constructed from them'. ¹⁵Bal, *Narratology*, p. 7.

to quote Bal, 'the events are arranged in a sequence which can differ from the chronological sequence'.¹⁶ The *Aeneid*, for instance, presents a story which rearranges the fabula, while the Irish translation of it restores the fabula's order.¹⁷ *Ordo naturalis*, in fact, means that a story directly reflects its fabula; the term is an indication that the ancients were aware of the fabula/story distinction.

Other aspects of story which are transformed from fabula elements include providing the actors with 'distinctive traits', thereby individualizing them into characters; providing the locations with 'distinct characteristics' and transforming them into 'specific places'; and, in some ways most crucially, choosing 'among the various "points of view" from which the elements can be presented'.¹⁸ Altogether, the aspects of the story consist of sequential ordering, the rhythm of the events so ordered (expansion, omission, and so on), the frequency of events chosen, the creation of characters and narrative space, and what Bal chooses to call 'focalization' and others call 'perspective'.

Breuddwyd Rhonabwy is, of course, a dream-vision.¹⁹ What is initially striking about this dream-vision is how unlike other medieval dream-visions it really is. Unlike *Breuddwyd Macsen* or *Aislinge Oengusso* it is not a prophetic love vision. It is certainly not a religious vision, allegorical or otherwise. Indeed, if *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* represents a typical medieval dream allegory, the allegory has escaped us. Nor does the dream-vision have an overtly prophetic cast to it along the lines of the *somnium*, *visio*, or *oraculum*, types of significant dreams detailed by Macrobius, the founder of general medieval thinking about dreams.²⁰ On the other hand, the tale itself says of the *croen dyniawed melyn*, the yellow yearling hide on which Rhonabwy sleeps, that it would bring *blaenbren*, 'good luck' or 'prosperity', to whomsoever sleeps on it;²¹ that is, *some* kind of future benefit accrues to the sleeper. In Rhonabwy's case we learn of no future benefit other than the dream itself and, therefore, we might conclude that the dream is its own reward. Nora Chadwick

¹⁶*ibid.* ¹⁷*Imtheachta Aeniassa: The Irish Aeneid*, edited and translated by George Calder, Irish Text Society, 6 (London, 1907), especially pp. xiv–xviii. ¹⁸Bal, *Narratology*, p. 7. ¹⁹For some background and bibliography on this widespread medieval genre, see Nora Chadwick, 'Dreams in Early European Literature', in *Celtic Studies: Essays in Memory of Angus Matheson, 1912–1962*, edited by James Carney and David Greene (New York, 1968), pp. 35–50; Constance B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague, 1967); and A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976). ²⁰See Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, translated by William Harris Stahl (New York and London, 1952). Worth noting is the eleventh-century Welsh manuscript copy of this work; see Alison Peden, 'Science and Philosophy in Wales at the Time of the Norman Conquest: A Macrobius Manuscript from Llanbadarn', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 2 (Winter 1981), 21–46. ²¹*Breudwyd Rhonabwy*, p. 2, line 25.

suggested that the dream induced by an animal skin reflects an ancient Greek Aesculapian practice of making patients sleep on animal skins and dream their diagnoses.²² In order to see Rhonabwy's dream in this way, we should have to assume this kind of diagnostic dreaming was so generally known that the storyteller did not need to refer to it; but we do not have any evidence that the medieval Welsh were aware of this diagnostic method per se. However, the most curious feature of Rhonabwy's dream really is how much like a real dream it is. I do not know of another medieval dream-vision which resembles a genuine dream—at least my dreams. For all the vaunted psychological accuracy of Chaucer's dream-visions, for instance,²³ my dreams are never like them. My dreams do not project complete narratives with Aristotelian beginnings, middles, and endings. Maybe this failure is a personal deficiency, but, from what I can tell, most people dream mostly in disjointed narrative fragments with many delays or digressions from whatever natural denouements a narrative fragment may be heading towards. In other words, we dream mostly as Rhonabwy dreamed, and the author in constructing this dream seems far more in touch with real dream experiences than other medieval writers. In a splendid article to which I shall have to refer repeatedly, Dafydd Glyn Jones points out that the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is satirizing dream-vision literature by breaking all its conventions.²⁴ I would simply add to this observation that there could be no more devastating satire of dream-visions than presenting a dream-vision as if it were a real dream.

Nonetheless, I agree with *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*'s editor, Melville Richards, in disagreeing with the words of the late Saunders Lewis, 'Nid adroddir dim. Y mae'n hollol statig' ('Nothing is narrated. It is completely static').²⁵ Something is narrated in this story, and there is narrative movement. But the dream itself, as I have already suggested, achieves its dream-like, static quality in part by running the story backwards. What I mean by this proposal, however, requires considerably more accuracy of expression.

Like other dream-visions *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* consists of a frame, which leads up to the dreamer having a dream, and the dream itself. The frame, in terms of its narration, is a relatively straightforward piece of Middle Welsh prose. Fabula and story here are entirely congruent. As Jones points out, in comparison to the

²²Chadwick, 'Dreams', p. 47. ²³See Hieatt, *Realism*, for a fully articulated claim for Chaucer's psychological 'realism'. ²⁴Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 177. ²⁵Saunders Lewis, *Braslun o Hanes Llenyddiaeth Gymraeg* (Llandysul, 1932), p. 43. See the comments by Richards, *Breudwyt*, pp. xliii–xliv. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from medieval or modern Welsh are my responsibility.

dream itself, 'y mae'n fwy fel darn o gronici cyfrifol a da' ('it is more like a good and responsible chronicle').²⁶ The sequence of events is, therefore, chronological; indeed, with few exceptions the style is paratactic in the manner of a *brut*. Descriptions do not proliferate here. The description of Heilyn Goch's filthy house is the only such passage, and the house is not simply described by the narrator. The house, in fact, has more character to it than the actors; it is given more quantifiable traits than the actors are. And of the actors only those in the house are provided with anything like character traits, in particular the uncivil old woman. But the other characters, Madog, Iorwerth, and Rhonabwy, remain fabula-like actors for the most part, although we are given some little sense of Iorwerth. Rhonabwy himself, however, remains a completely empty character. He would appear to exist only to serve in his fabula role as dreamer.

The dream is not a dream of the future but of the past.²⁷ Moreover, the past of the dream is one which, at least in part, the audience of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* would recognize: a legendary past, a past which it was possible to take as an historical past. In other words, the dream is a narrative involving a pre-existing narrative. We may say that the dream refers to and is dependent on another, embedded narrative, embedded to the third degree since the dream itself is embedded in Rhonabwy's non-dreaming adventures.

To just what extent the Arthurian story is indeed referential to traditional Welsh Arthurian narrative is a problem that cannot be solved completely. Professor Richards's notes on characters and incidents reveal the extent to which most of them appear in other Welsh Arthurian lore. More recently John Bollard has provided a neat chart with cross-references to the minor characters' existence in a variety of other texts.²⁸ It is the characters in the dream for whom we cannot account who present difficulties. Are we to assume that they were well-known actors in the lost Arthurian literature of Wales, or inventions of the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*? I rather think that the evidence supports the assumption that the author made up no one out of whole cloth. Whether or not the attributes and actions ascribed to those characters who receive attributes or take part in the action are invented is another and certainly important matter. Do we really understand the nature and tradition of Owain's ravens, for instance? Lukman, in a curious article which has no firmly stated thesis, nonetheless lays the groundwork for considering these man-ravens as a specific development by the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* of a motif-complex found in a variety of

²⁶Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 177. ²⁷See also *ibid.*, p. 179, on this point. ²⁸John Bollard, 'Traddodiad a Dychan yn *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*', *Llên Cymru*, 13 (1985), 155–63.

Northern European sources.²⁹ Judging from the sources he cites, the most likely way the ravens penetrated the Welsh Arthurian complex (keeping in mind that they are enigmatically mentioned also at the end of the *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*)³⁰ is through legends surrounding the battle of Clontarf, although the motifs themselves are older. But the flight of ravens is firmly attached to Owain (himself apparently an import into Arthurian narrative)³¹ at least by the third quarter of the twelfth century, whatever the date of *Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*, since Cynddelw, in a panegyric to Owain Gwynedd, makes the kind of allusion to it which he must have assumed his audience would understand.³² And this is the point, I believe, about the Arthuriana in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*: they were points of narrative reference which were traditional elements in an Arthurian fabula and which would have been clear enough to the tale's audience.

These referential aspects of the tale run counter to the chronology of the dream itself. Rhonabwy starts dreaming by supposedly continuing his journey in Powys to find Iorwerth and heading for a spot on the Severn. He looks behind him and sees a mighty warrior approaching who treats him and his companions kindly. So far the dream fabula and dream story are congruent. But the warrior, Iddawg Cordd Prydain, proceeds to tell a narrative about his nickname which in actuality is the beginning of the third embedded layer of narration and which is signalled as such by being a narrative actually told within the narrative of the dream by a different narrator—Iddawg. This narrative Richards characterized as an 'anachroniaeth ddybryd'³³ ('a serious anachronism'), since it relates Iddawg's central role in the battle of Camlan and his repentance following that battle. Of course, this information must mean that Arthur is dead. Richards adds, '... but it is necessary to remember that we are in the world of the dream where time limits are doubtful and formless and different periods are mixed up with each other'.³⁴ And Richards is quite right about the dream aspect. Since we expect Arthur to be dead, it is very dream-like to meet him as a dream character a little further on. But the story itself is not 'annelwig' or 'formless'. Shortly after Iddawg's tale, Rhonabwy is led by him to the ford on the Severn where Arthur awaits them and, after some

²⁹Niels Lukman, 'The Raven Banner and the Changing Ravens', *Classica et Mediaevalia*, 19 (1958), 133–51. ³⁰*Owein or Chwedyl Iarllles y Ffynnawn*, edited by R. L. Thomson (Dublin, 1968), p. 30, lines 819–20. ³¹*Trioedd Ynys Prydein: The Welsh Triads*, edited by Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff, 1961), p. 481. ³²*Llawysgrif Hendregadredd*, edited by John Morris-Jones and T. H. Parry-Williams (Cardiff, 1933), p. 83, lines 27–28. ³³*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 40. ³⁴*ibid.*: 'ond rhaid cofio ein bod ym myd y breuddwyd lle y mae ffiniau amser yn ansicr, ac yn annelwig a gwahanol gyfnodau yn ymgymysgu â'i gilydd!'

disparaging remarks, they join his host. We are told how Rhonabwy observes various specific troops and warriors arriving. The last of these warriors remarks that 'it was strange that a host as large as this was contained in a place so confined as this, and he thought it more strange that those who promised to be fighting with Osla Big-Knife at the battle of Badon by mid-day should be there at that hour'.³⁵ This unprepared-for rebuke alerts us to the imminence of the second most renowned of Arthur's battles and, temporarily at least, anchors an Arthurian story which runs from the battle of Camlan, in which Arthur is killed, to the battle of Badon, one of his major victories. This temporal arrangement directly reverses the chronology of the Arthurian fabula it represents.

The text proceeds to develop the story's retrograde movement. Arthur's army departs and is described by the narrator not in the manner we might expect before a battle but as 'gwaraf', a word Richards takes as the superlative of *gwâr*, 'tame, mild'.³⁶ In the same way, the Joneses translate 'most leisurely'.³⁷ The word depicts, therefore, just the opposite of what we might expect of an army a short time before a battle, especially if we understand 'most tame' with all the associations of tameness.

After further descriptions, to which I shall return, Rhonabwy, the army, and Arthur move 'is Kaer Vadon'³⁸ ('below Caer Badon'). A brief commotion which might be the signal of a battle turns out to be only Cei arriving, whereupon Arthur and Owain sit down to play their gwyddbwyll game. A kind of battle does ensue here, of course; the gwyddbwyll contest is mirrored in the off-stage combat between Arthur's men and Owain's ravens. But the point I wish to emphasize just now is that the battle of Badon never takes place, nor do the characters act at any time as if they expect it to. After the gwyddbwyll games, messengers come from Osla or Ossa Gyllellwawr to seek a truce for a month and a half, a boon which is granted. So from the moment we first hear of the battle of Badon 'yr awr hon'³⁹ ('now'), according to Caradawg at the ford, we are eventually pushed back from it in time 'hyt ym penn pythewnos a mis'⁴⁰ ('to the end of a fortnight and a month'). The story motion is still backwards in time in relation to the fabula to which it refers, since we do know that the battle of Badon takes place at some time.

³⁵*ibid.*, p. 8, lines 21–26: '... bot yn rŷued kysseingaw llu kymeint a hwnn yn lle ky gyfyghet a hwnn, ac a oed ryuedach ganthaw bot yma yr awr honn a adewei eu yg Gweith Uadon erbynn hanner dyd yn ymlad oc Osla Gyllellwa[w]r'. ³⁶*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 47, n. 9.13. ³⁷*The Mabinogion*, p. 143. ³⁸*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 10, line 4. The descriptions and identifications of men here may well have had the effect of increasing the references to traditional Arthurian narrative. ³⁹*ibid.*, p. 8, lines 23–24. ⁴⁰*ibid.*, p. 20, lines 21–22.

A further point about Osla. He is a shadowy figure in Welsh Arthurian tradition. Richards speculates that he represents a memory of the eighth-century Mercian king Offa,⁴¹ in which case he must have been associated with Arthur very late, being introduced as a traditional enemy of the Welsh. A late addition to *Bonedd y Saint* tells us that he fought against Arthur at Badon,⁴² but I rather think that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* pre-dates this material and has influenced it. Earlier and independent is the information from *Culhwch ac Olwen*, where Osla Big-Knife is cited first in the long list of heroes Culhwch names in asking Arthur for a boon, and then more interestingly as a member of the Twrch Trwyth hunting party who is drowned when he falls in the Severn and his huge scabbard fills up with water.⁴³ While the drowning incident sounds like the author's invention built around Osla's epithet, we have no reason to suppose other than that Osla was a character traditionally associated with Arthur in Welsh narrative, at least for a few centuries, and that they worked in concert as allies on occasions. If this is the case, then Osla as the enemy at Badon is, like Owain, an example of someone who should be the king's friend or ally instead of at odds with him. But this particular conflict is deferred. We move to a period before the battle of Badon when men are at peace with each other, a situation evoked by the equative 'ky helaethet'⁴⁴ ('so abundant' or 'so munificent') in Iddawg's last explanation to Rhonabwy.

2. THE FUNCTION OF DESCRIPTION

If the story of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* runs backwards, it must also be said that the retrograde relationship of story to fabula is something we scarcely notice in the tale (or it would have been noticed before now) because the *text* manages to disguise the fact that there is any narrative going on in it at all. Saunders Lewis's judgment on the narrative stasis of the tale, though untrue, nevertheless reflects an impression conveyed by the text of the tale. As Clifton Fadiman once wrote in a review of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, the author has adopted 'a set of complex devices used to keep the story from being told'.⁴⁵ The main device employed in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is description.

⁴¹*ibid.*, p. 46, n. 8.25. Patrick Sims-Williams has pointed out to me, quite rightly, that *Osla/Offa* would have been an easy palaeographical error to perpetuate, given the way of writing a 'long' s. ⁴²P. C. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff, 1966), p. 64, §71, and see pp. 144–45 for the useful note. In the same tract, Iddawg is made the brother of a Medrod ap Cawrdaf (p. 66, §88), a confusion that seems built around *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. ⁴³*Culhwch ac Olwen*, edited by Rachel Bromwich and D. Simon Evans (Cardiff, 1988), p. 41, lines 1193–96. ⁴⁴*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 20, line 27. ⁴⁵Clifton Fadiman, *Party of One: The Selected Writings* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1955), p. 113. The review originally appeared in *The Nation* in 1936.

It is not possible to discuss this style or how it resembles or differs from the style of the frame narrative (style is always a comparative concept) without reference to genre. I am assuming that *breuddwyd*, as a title, was a generic term which carried with it for medieval Welsh audiences certain expectations. I am assuming also that entering into the Arthurian world carried with it also certain narrative expectations. By the thirteenth century (if we follow the pre-Charles-Edwards consensus on dating), there must have been at least three forces at work shaping the notion of a *breuddwyd*: a native Celtic tradition that can be perceived in various Irish *aislingí* and *fiseanna* as well as in *Breuddwyd Macsen*; a tradition of Latin religious visions like the *Visio Sancti Pauli* (translated in medieval Wales as *Breuddwyd Pawl Ebostol*), a tradition which perhaps the native Celtic tradition helped to shape; and a European tradition of allegorical dream-visions of a purely secular nature.⁴⁶ As I have mentioned before, *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is strikingly non-allegorical and non-prophetic. It does not lead to a discovery of love or of heaven or hell. It does fulfil, nonetheless, some expectations of all three traditions by being heavily laden with descriptions. Indeed, thirty-seven per cent of the text of this tale consists of descriptive passages, roughly speaking. (It is only possible to speak roughly since there are always some grey areas between narration and description; often in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, for instance, description is initiated through the narrative act of seeing, 'sef a gwelynt' (that is, 'sef a welynt') being the most common formula.) With over a third of the text given over to description, most often in the form of nouns plus strings of adjectives, one cannot discuss *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in its totality without understanding how the descriptive nature of the text overwhelms the story. I might add that if we include the final catalogue and the various dialogues of question and answer with the amount of text given over to description, less than half—more like one third—of the text is devoted to narrative strictly speaking.⁴⁷

The nature of the descriptive passages in the tale is traditional enough in Celtic literature. In the frame story we find the Welsh

⁴⁶The literature on these separate traditions is too voluminous to cite more fully here. However, what is lacking is any synthesizing work which takes the whole into account, detailing how each becomes a function of the others. ⁴⁷Richards goes to some effort to prove that there are more noun-plus-adjective 'rhetorical' epithets in the three Romances than in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (see 'Rhagymadrodd', pp. xviii–xxii); and Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 192, draws on this material to convince us that the descriptive passages are not merely rhetorical in nature. But the sheer numbers mislead us. It is the very heavy ratio of description, including epithets, to narrative that is significant. The three Romances contain nothing like this percentage of description. The text(ure) of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* presents itself as highly 'rhetorical' as a result, since the descriptive passages are set so far in the foreground.

reflex of a kind of *descriptio* we may call 'the inhospitable house'. Richards in his edition shows extensive parallels between Heilyn Goch's house and the description of the guest-house in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*. 'Nid fy mod yn tybio benthyca', he writes ('I am not imagining borrowing here'), 'ond yn unig fod traddodiad cyffredin gan gyfarwyddiaid Cymru a seanchaidhe Iwerddon' ('but only Welsh storytellers and Irish shanachies having a common tradition').⁴⁸ This common tradition is even more apparent in the dream descriptions, although Cecile O'Rahilly has suggested in both cases direct borrowing from Irish sources.⁴⁹ But, as I have already indicated, it is not the tradition of dream-visions which is invoked by these descriptions. What does emerge from both native Celtic and religious narrative traditions is the Otherworld guide who explains and answers the questions of the visionary; but the descriptions here are of warriors and they emerge less from dream-visions or Otherworld journeys than from the heroic saga literature associated most of all with the Irish Ulster and Mythological cycles. There are a few, rather brief, descriptions of marvels—Arthur's ring, the sight of which ensures that Rhonabwy will remember the dream, and the mantle of invisibility upon which Arthur and Owain play gwyddbwyll. The landscape is not so much described as referred to; and it is interesting that it remains more or less a Powysian landscape of essentially real places to which Rhonabwy might well have journeyed. The lavish detail, however, is heaped upon the personae of Arthurian narrative, described by the impersonal narrator but from the focus of Rhonabwy, who eventually asks and receives from Iddawg an identification of them.

Understanding the way in which these descriptive passages inform the text of the narrative not only helps us understand *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* but may also help to shed light on other Celtic narratives. One thinks particularly of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, another narrative almost overwhelmed by its descriptive text. Contemporary narrative theory again offers some helpful perspectives on this problem.⁵⁰ Philippe Hamon, who takes a wider, historical view of description, makes a point about the performance value of proso-

pography or *ekphrasis*; there is a ludic function to descriptions: 'To describe is never to describe a reality', he writes, 'but to prove one's rhetorical know-how. . .'.⁵¹ This sort of proof of competence certainly seems a function of Irish descriptions; in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* it is specifically undercut by the rather nonsensical epilogue in which we are informed that the text cannot be performed 'without a book' since the descriptive content is too abundant for a bard or *cyfarwydd* to know. The claim seems to be here that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* cannot be performed in the normal way just because of the descriptions. So their performance status is explicitly undermined by the tale's conclusion.

Dafydd Glyn Jones, on the other hand, claims that the author of our text 'nid rhethregwr a fyn dynnu'r sylw at ardull ar draul popeth arall' ('is not a rhetorician who wishes to draw attention to style at the expense of everything else').⁵² This perspective is based on a view of rhetoric as a kind of evil which divorces sense from sound and is interested in empty syntactic patterning. Jones goes on to characterize the writing as 'tryloyw'⁵³ ('transparent') and to put the burden of incoherence on the arrangement of narrative events rather than on the confusion of sentences. Of course, he is quite right if 'rhetoric' is taken only in this narrow and pejorative sense. Certainly, however, the relationship of description to narrative and the way in which importance signalled through description is never fulfilled in the story-events are two other, basic ways in which *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* serves to 'enrich' its text at the expense of story. The effect is to put description, and the author's ability to create description, into the foreground, since narrative becomes so hidden behind it.

Another function of description is to increase what Barthes has called a text's *lisibilité*, its readability.⁵⁴ What is meant here is that descriptions heighten the reader's acceptance of the genre in which they appear by conforming to and reinforcing the ideology which informs the genre. Hence descriptions in realist fiction permit readers to accept more easily the generic conventions of realism. In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, then, we might hypothesize that the descriptions should heighten our sense of heroic literary conventions, as I would suggest they do in, say, *Fled Bricrenn*. Description should orient the reader or listener to the nature of the discourse. But such an orientation does not take place in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*; rather, the descriptions tend to disorient us. Hamon makes the point that

⁴⁸*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. xv. Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', also discusses the connection on pp. 189–91. ⁴⁹Cecile O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales: Their Historical and Literary Relations* (London, 1924), p. 119; but see Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Riddling Treatment of the "Watchman Device" in *Branwen* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', *Studia Celtica*, 12/13 (1977–78), 89 and 97. ⁵⁰Important studies include Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris, 1970); Gérard Genette, *Figures* (Paris, 1968) and *Figures III* (Paris, 1972); Philippe Hamon, 'Qu'est que qu'une description?' *Poétique*, 12 (1972), 465–84, 'Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive', *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), 1–26, and *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif* (Paris, 1981); Mieke Bal, *Narratologie: Essais sur la signification narrative dans quatres romans modernes* (Paris, 1977).

⁵¹Hamon, 'Rhetorical Status', p. 6. ⁵²Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 191. ⁵³*ibid.*, p. 193. ⁵⁴This concept is first articulated by Barthes in *S/Z*, p. 10. The role description plays in *lisibilité* is discussed by Hamon, 'Qu'est que qu'une description?', pp. 263–65.

there is a kind of exchange that takes place between narration and description, narration giving up its progression in order for description to heighten our acceptance of convention; description, in turn, restrains itself from overwhelming the narrative.⁵⁵ But in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* description does not play fair; it swamps the narrative and hence undermines its own potential for pertinence. Far from being transparent, it contributes to the opacity of the dream-vision in general.

Still another aspect of description has been suggested by Genette: descriptions are metonyms of the larger fictional world in which they occur.⁵⁶ This seems especially true of the description of Heilyn Goch's house. We are led to understand it as a metonym for Powys in general and for the sorry Welsh world in which the cipher Rhonabwy exists. This world is specifically contrasted to the world of the dream by Arthur himself, not, however, in terms of place but in terms of person—not topography but prosopography: '... truaned gennyf vod dynyon ky vawhet a hynny yn gwarchadw yr ynys honn gwedy gwyr kystal ac a'e gwarchetwis gynt' ('I am so sad that men so weak as these should be guarding this island after men as fine as those who once guarded it').⁵⁷ (This is where Dr Charles-Edwards's passage fits in.) Conversely, then, the luxuriant descriptions of the dream are metonyms for the people of Arthur's world and stand both in the values expressed of wealth and well-being and in their sheer quantity as derogatory contrasts to the world of the frame story. I think this aspect of the descriptions is not unrelated to the other equative expression I quoted from the text when I was discussing story, the 'ky helaethet' ('so abundant') which Iddawg uses to describe the advice which Arthur receives that results in the final truce, the last narrative act in the tale. The dream and the tale end on a note of *helaeth*, and through the descriptive passages the dream has illustrated *helaethiant* all along, the opposite of the meagreness which Rhonabwy has encountered in 'real' life and 'real' time in the frame story. Of course, this is not the only way in which the dream reflects back on the frame story; I shall return to this issue.

There is a final point to make about description. Mieke Bal has suggested that a description serves frequently as an *icon*, something which '*ressemble*, par une analogie des relations entre les éléments, à un signifié' ('through an analogy of relations between the elements looks like a signified').⁵⁸ Icons are kinds of symbols, like maps, models, or portraits, which have a planned semblance to what they

⁵⁵Hamon, *Introduction*, pp. 263–65. ⁵⁶Genette, 'Métonymie chez Proust', in *Figures III*, pp. 41–63. ⁵⁷*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, pp. 6 (line 28)–7 (line 3). ⁵⁸Bal, *Narratologie*, p. 108.

are intended to represent. This notion of iconicity certainly serves both the notion of *helaethiant* and the inverse relationship the dream has to the frame. The descriptive elements in the dream become so thick, finally collapsing into a bare list or catalogue at the end of the tale—just names as descriptive elements, so to speak, prosopography without qualifiers—and the narrative becomes so submerged by the descriptive that the dream misleadingly appears at the level of the text as a series of static tableaux. We might well think of these tableaux as an icon for Arthur's world, just as Heilyn Goch's house becomes an icon for Powys, both icons in a kind of referential inverse mirror.

3. THE FUNCTION OF THE FRAME

We have crept up on another striking aspect of the text of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, the lack of frame-story closure which leaves us in suspense about the outcome of the story started in the frame. Instead of resolution we get the epilogue, which in some ways undermines the status of what the tale has presented. It occurs with the meta-critique of the tale just after the 'conclusion', if we want to call it that, of the frame story:

And with the extent of that tumult [of the troops leaving for Cornwall] Rhonabwy awoke. And when he awoke, he was on the skin of the yellow yearling after having slept for three nights and three days.⁵⁹

This is the whole extent of the frame part of the frame story, and pretty skimpy it is.

What happens in the frame story? The chief action of the frame narrative serves four obvious purposes: (1) to explain the condition of Powys as the story opens; (2) to characterize in particular the low nature of Heilyn Goch's house as a metonym for Powys; (3) to motivate a visitation to it; and (4) to focus eventually on Rhonabwy and get him to sleep on the yellow hide. All of these actions are told through a narrator whose voice determines a rather objective text and who is part neither of the fabula nor of the story (one of the reasons for requiring a third layer of narrative in our analysis). This narrator continues to be the voice reporting on Rhonabwy's dream, but we achieve a different level of story at this point. In the frame we have a narrator reporting objectively on external actions and appearances. But the dream is Rhonabwy's experience alone. The level of narration on the textual level maintains his presence for us as a character in his own dream. At the same time, since we know

⁵⁹*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 21, lines 5–8: 'Ac rac meint y kynnwrf hwnnw deffroi a oruc Ronabwy. A phan deffroes yd oed ar groen y dinawet melyn, gwedy ry gyscu ohonaw teir nos a thri diu'.

the dream to be Rhonabwy's, he is its producer and narrator on the levels of fabula and story. In effect, the dream narrative on these levels is embedded in the way that stories within frames like the *Thousand and One Nights* or *The Canterbury Tales* or *Acallamh na Senórach* are embedded. But in *The Canterbury Tales* or the *Acallamh* we are always told that some character is speaking, so that if the speaker of the embedded text should refer to herself or himself, the first person is employed throughout, without (as it were) quotation marks. This sort of self-reference does not happen in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*; the objective narrator's voice continues, producing the very dream-like situation in which the producer of the dream is also a character in the dream. This effect is a product, let me emphasize, of the layer of *text* where narrators' voices are achieved. The fabula and story of the dream are embedded layers, as is the nature of narratives with frames.

Now this use of the objective narrator is not in itself an extraordinary feature of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*. On the contrary, unlike English or French dream-visions, which employ first-person accounts of events even in the frame narrative, the norm for Celtic dream-visions is just the sort of pervasive narrator who reports both on the events of the frame and on the events of someone's dream. This narrative voice is used to produce, certainly, a very dream-like effect of the dreamer becoming a character in his own dream. But it is also used as a bridge or link between the dream and the frame. Rhonabwy has started to dream but the same narrative voice continues to report on the dream just as it reported on Madog and Iorwerth. The narrator is the chief means of coherence between the frame and the dream. But that hardly explains why, when the dream ends, we do not get a completed frame.

Indirectly the abrupt ending suggests that Rhonabwy has been temporarily halted from continuing his search for Iorwerth. In this respect the dream's deferral of action leads to Rhonabwy's stasis as well. But I would suggest that our first reaction to this abrupt conclusion is *discontinuity*. Professor R. M. Jones has suggested that interweaving structural design and a medieval penchant for 'events . . . linked by succession, not by coherently motivated causality' lead to the surmise 'that the impression left on a medieval reader by the disjointed details of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* would be less incongruous than they are to us'.⁶⁰ But in the case of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* the discontinuities are of such a singular nature and so deliberate that one could hardly attribute them to some sort of medieval mentality.

⁶⁰R. M. Jones, 'Narrative Structure in Medieval Welsh Prose Tales', in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*, edited by D. Ellis Evans and others (Oxford, 1986), pp. 186–87.

Instead of fulfilling the expectations about the frame by providing some sort of action taken by Rhonabwy (other than waking up) in response to the dream, which in turn led back to the Madog–Iorwerth relationship, the conclusion forces us back into the dream for significance. That is to say that significance does not emerge in the reality of Rhonabwy's life or the more immediate past of his time. Of course, the audience of the narrative would have known that continual feuding between Madog and his relatives, not to mention that between Powys and Gwynedd, was the beginning of the reduction of Powys both in terms of a coherent geo-political unit and in influence and prestige. This is well summarized by Richards.⁶¹ But knowledge brought to tales does not compensate for what seems left out of them: ask any child when you leave out a sentence of a favourite story. So the frame story does not really serve as a frame at all but, I would suggest, exists in a dialectical relationship to the dream.

This dialectical relationship, while not explicitly pointed out, has led in its effect to that general consensus about *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*'s intent as a rather complex satire. I believe that my analysis leads to the observation that the incoherence of the vision is a carefully contrived, quite coherent literary plan. The satire runs in a way *dictated* by the author's choice of embedded fabula and enhanced by the ways story and text are integrated or, rather, fail to be integrated. I mean by the word 'dictated' that there is a problem built into the Arthurian biography for writers who wish to use it to celebrate and promote its values. It is, in the end, a fabula of failure, of collapse, of internal betrayal and breakdown. Indeed, it is Rhonabwy's very Vergil, Iddawg, who claims responsibility for the final collapse. Writers, unlike our author, of a Romantic, neo-medieval vein who enjoy imaginative projections to a mythic time when men were knights and slew giants for beautiful ladies are faced with the fact that the age of the Arthur of tradition ends very badly. So if you are planning a happy medieval romance with an Arthurian background, you must arrange your story in such a way as to overcome this problem inherent in the fabula; the history of Arthurian literature could be charted along these lines. Rhonabwy's dream has a happy ending but at the conscious expense of avoiding anything that would justify an heroic atmosphere: heroic atmospheres are justified, after all, by people killing each other—no doubt for the best reasons—not by representing festive occasions in Cornwall.

There are conflicts in the dream, of course, in particular the curiously embedded conflict between Arthur and Owain. These two apparent friends, the king and his warrior, play at the war game

⁶¹*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, pp. xxv–xxx. See also David Stephenson, 'The Politics of Powys Wenwynwyn in the Thirteenth Century', *CMCS*, 7 (Summer 1984), 39–61.

gwyddbwyll, and this ludic contest seems mirrored in a non-ludic and increasingly grisly way by the conflict between their men out of the range of their immediate vision. Rhonabwy as the dreamer and we who are following the narration from his perspective can see both contests at once. Do we refer back to the previous story Iddawg has told of the battle of Camlan between Arthur and his nephew? Can we help but refer back to the internal Powysian conflict between Madog and his brother Iorwerth in the frame narrative, as J. Angela Carson has suggested?⁶² In this sense, as is frequently the case with embedded narratives, the dream becomes a comment, a reading of the frame.

This gwyddbwyll scene has, at least from the time of Richards's edition, been taken as a model of the author's craftsmanship and careful construction.⁶³ Dafydd Glyn Jones, who finds one basic technique of the tale to be its alternation between the formal and the chaotic, sees the scene as an interval of formal, if lunatic, order in the centre of aimlessness.⁶⁴ It is a passage which the narrator 'yn llwyr reoli' ('totally controls').⁶⁵ He believes that the artistry of the section would have afforded its original audience considerable pleasure; at the same time, as a whole the passage breaks the rules for permissible *digressio* and would hence be an occasion for laughter.⁶⁶

I would suggest that the increasing detail of the real combat while the game combat is going on, culminating in Owain's ravens 'yn gollwg y gwyr a'r meirch yn drylleu y'r llawr'⁶⁷ ('letting the men and horses fall to pieces on the ground') represents the deepest, most discontinuous part of the dream. This genuinely destructive combat is embedded within the most static part of the narrative. The details of the combat—first Arthur's men against the ravens, then the ravens against Arthur's men—is set within the most lavish descriptions of the messengers who come to report it. Melville Richards comments admiringly on the 'cydbwysedd', the 'balance' or 'symmetry' of this passage, without noting just how deadly symmetry can be to narrative movement.⁶⁸ The two heroes, Arthur and Owain, play their unmotivated board game, a curious thing to do before a battle, each unconcerned about the other's losses until the conflict is ended by Arthur crushing the gwyddbwyll pieces, a sign, I would suggest, of the way in which games and reality interact and a clue to the author's view of the traditional narrative he has undermined. In microcosm, the Arthur and Owain episode reflects the entire work: a symbolic game, meaningless in context, is played between two men; reflecting it, and

⁶²Carson, 'Structure', pp. 299–303. ⁶³See Richards's discussion, *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, pp. xli–xliii. ⁶⁴Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 182. ⁶⁵*ibid.*, p. 184. ⁶⁶*ibid.*, p. 185. ⁶⁷*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 17, lines 21–22. ⁶⁸*ibid.*, p. xli.

off to the side, two sets of men are engaged in meaningless, competitive combat. The text relating these events, however, overwhelms whatever significance they might have through lavish description. These descriptions, moreover, are not only the most lavish in the tale; they are also the least meaningful. Up to this point, and in line with their generic nature, the descriptions provided information. Normally in Celtic literature warriors are described so that they can be identified and named: hence the connection between description and catalogue. In *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* up to the gwyddbwyll game, men are described so that Rhonabwy can learn about an heroic past and the men who created it. But the messengers who report to Owain and Arthur are not named until the gwyddbwyll incident comes to a close, deceiving us into thinking their purpose is somewhat different. Indeed, they seem to serve only a minor narrative function as links between the real and symbolic combats taking place and, narratologically, they scarcely exist beyond the level of actants. However, they receive the most fulsome descriptions which do nothing to represent their natures, about which we learn nothing, and just at the point where Rhonabwy's dream is developing genuine conflict and narrative movement. It is only after that movement has been brought to a close that Rhonabwy asks and Iddawg names the messengers, restoring them to the general set of Arthuriana. Again, the author has forestalled in a dream-like way the expectations the narrative creates.

If this passage evokes laughter, as Jones suggests,⁶⁹ it is a curious kind of laughter, since it can only be achieved once an audience realizes that the events of the gwyddbwyll game are inconsequential. But *this* realization in turn can only emerge once the tale has ended and no consequence has been revealed. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is a funny piece, but only to readers who have the time to reflect on the action or lack of it, not to listeners. Dafydd Glyn Jones sees the tale as essentially comic, witty and satiric—amusing on a number of levels. True, but amusement has its own significance and happens in a variety of ways. Certainly a false *digressio* cannot be interpreted as false until its inconsequence is manifested, and the resulting humour is therefore retrospective, thoughtful in that it requires some thought to see it.

We should look more closely at the text and its relation to story and fabula in this gwyddbwyll passage. Up to this point, not much has happened in the immediate context of Rhonabwy's dreaming. There has been the bustle of men and troops. Jones makes the good observation that each new character is introduced by a 'twrf', a tumult, each leading to another greater tumult.⁷⁰ Iddawg has told

⁶⁹Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', pp. 183–84. ⁷⁰*ibid.*, p. 188.

his tale. Addaon has splashed water on Arthur, and Elphin has struck Addaon's horse—the one act of genuine violence. It is made very explicit that the act was one of *cyngbor* 'counsel' and not one of *amarch* 'dishonour' or 'insult': violence properly applied and leading to correct, courteous behaviour.⁷¹ Some of the descriptions sound pretty ferocious, but the warriors described do nothing in particular but muster. When the gwyddbwyll game starts, we are certainly ready, given this gathering of heroic figures and preparations for battle, for something to start. At the story level something of a martial nature *does* happen. But the improper combat of Arthur's men and Owain's ravens is dialectically opposed to the game going on and the refusal of Arthur to be distracted from it by the initial injustice done to the ravens. That Owain's followers are birds is disconcerting, certainly, reminding us that the scene is a dream. But we are forced by the juxtaposition of events to consider the symbolic combat of the game in terms of the 'real' combat nearby: the events are reflections of one another, a commentary, a reading. When Owain finally has his standard raised and his ravens counter-attack, the text relates the savagery of the battle in more and more graphic terms until, by ending the game, crushing the game pieces, the symbolic men, Arthur signals his willingness to cease hostilities. Owain has his banner lowered—another symbolic activity leading to a 'real' one: 'Ac yna y gostyghwyd ac y tagnouedwyd pob peth',⁷² a finely crafted sentence: 'And it was lowered and everything was set at peace'. The text relates these dialectically related events but also smothers them with the meaningless descriptive passages to the point that the gwyddbwyll episode takes up one third of the entire tale, about the same ratio as description to other kinds of discourse in it. If I am right about the generic nature of the descriptions, they should contribute to the martial, heroic quality of the scene. But they do not because the scene is not especially heroic. The descriptions seem to be there for rhetorical display, a display of narrating skill and performance-oriented bravura. Just as the symbolic activity of the gwyddbwyll game seems to motivate and be reflected in the actual activity of combat, so the symbolic activity of describing heroes motivates heroic activity—or would do so if text and story were genuinely reinforcing those values. What in fact they reinforce is the emptiness of all this activity—combat, symbolic combat, narrations about combat and its symbols. The dialectical process in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, and the way in which fabula, story, and text integrate to produce this process, continually direct our attention to the narrative act itself, which is seen as deeply problematic. And if that is a very modernist (I will not say post-

⁷¹*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 8, lines 6–7. ⁷²*ibid.*, p. 18, lines 16–17.

modernist) way of looking at *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, I would only say that the genuine end of the piece, the epilogue, also forces our attention back to the status of the text as an act of narration. Unless we take the position that *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is an incompetent piece of writing, a position hard to justify when we examine the craftsmanship of its parts, then I believe we must take the whole of it—the whole story, fabula, and text if you will—as being about the status of narratives.

Again, Dafydd Glyn Jones, in a set of typically perceptive remarks, cautions us, as 'cyfoeswyr Ionesco', 'contemporaries of Ionesco', to beware of letting our inclination to see the universe as meaningless be reflected in *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*'s absurdities. For the tale's original audience, he writes,

the great thing would be the pleasant shock from observing the rules being broken and as a result a deviation from the recognized ways of relating a story. They would not see there an illogic reflecting some failure of meaning in the universe, but an illogic which was funny because of its impossibility, because logic was sacred and the universe did make sense.⁷³

I certainly agree that it would be a mistake to interpret *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* in absurdist terms. But the piece is absurd for all that, its absurdity focused on the substance and nature of narrating this particular kind of story. As Jones points out in his final sentence, 'Y mae waith awdur sy'n gwybod ei chwedloniaeth, sy'n gwybod beth yw nerth chwedl, a'i hapêl, a'i dylanwad, ar feddyliau ei gyd-ddynion; ond nad yw, o'r rhan ei hun, yn credu un dim ynddi' ('It is the work of an author who knows his mythology, who knows what the power of a story is, and its appeal and influence on the minds of his fellow men; but he does not, for his own part, believe anything in it').⁷⁴

I would go a step farther. The Arthurian age of Rhonabwy's dream ends up as a better world than Rhonabwy's because it either keeps deferring conflict or else, in the case of Arthur and Owain, finally rejects it and its symbols. The conflicts which we are told about, or which are referred to, are rather like the conflict between Madog and Iorwerth which motivates the entire piece. They represent, as I have suggested, a ruler and a kinsman or a close ally at odds. Now if the Arthurian fabula were presented in its proper order, what we would get at the end is a world looking like Heilyn Goch's house.

⁷³Dafydd Glyn Jones, 'Breuddwyd', p. 188: '... y peth mawr fyddai'r sioc bleserus o sylwi bod rheolau'n cael eu torri, a bod yma wyro oddi wrth ddulliau cydnabyddedig o adrodd stori. Nid gwrthresymeg yn adlewyrchu rhyw ddiffyg ystyr yn y bydysawd a welent hwy yma, ond gwrthresymeg a oedd yn ddigri am ei bod yn amhosibl, am fod rhesymeg yn gysegredig a'r bydysawd yn gwneud synnwyr'. ⁷⁴*ibid.*, pp. 194–95.

In other words, the Arthurian narrative in its proper chronological sequence leads to the historical circumstances which open the tale. I think the author stresses this by deliberately running the Arthurian fabula backwards, away from the present into a more and more distant past, at the same time avoiding the natural consequences of conflicts in narrative and revealing connections through elaborate mirroring and dialectic. That is certainly why the dream seems to have no consequence. Consequence depends upon sequence, resolution on a conflict to be resolved, an heroic resolve on a kind of militarism which the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* appears to disfavour. The literal *inconsequence* of the dream highlights the reality of the frame which is not a dream. That is one reason why, I would suggest, the author worked hard to convey a genuinely dream-like atmosphere and did not simply rely on medieval conventions about dream-visions. The point is not that the dream is an allegory but that the dream is a dream. The reality is that Arthur and Medrawd die fighting each other. The reality is also that tales about Arthur, as the author realised and Jones has pointed out, influence people's values. Madog and Iorwerth are in conflict, Iorwerth is stirring up the English against Powys, and all because Iorwerth aspires to *anrhydedd* and *meddiant*, 'honour' and 'power', which he envies in his brother. Honour and power are heroic qualities, the kinds of values that the traditional Arthurian narrative as we commonly think of it tends to promote. And yet wanting them seems to lead Powys into the sort of situation dramatized most vividly by Heilyn Goch's house.

The satire, then, is not directed simply at contemporary society. And for that reason we cannot accept the arguments of Charles-Edwards and Hamp about the date of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy*, which are based solely on the work's satiric intent. For that matter, I do not think that the satire is directed so much at the past as at stories about the past, be they Arthurian narratives or *brut*-like narratives. That is why we get the satire on the bards at the conclusion of the story, centred on the figure of Cadyrieith.⁷⁵ He is the last of the long catalogue of counsellors, a man who seems young to Rhonabwy, but who is the only one to understand the song the bards sing. It is Cadyrieith who recommends rewarding the bards with gold and who recommends the truce. Rachel Bromwich suggests that the few traditions about Cadyrieith indicate that he 'figured in the *chweddlau* as a bard'.⁷⁶ He is certainly associated with them here, and his role in the tale leads to its peaceful conclusion. The function of the bards, however, is more ambiguous. Only the most wise man understands

⁷⁵I am grateful to Mr Paul Jefferis for suggesting this point to me. ⁷⁶Bromwich, *Triodd*, p. 291.

more of their work than that it is 'yn uolyant y Arthur', 'praise of Arthur'.⁷⁷ Praising Arthur, then, is ambiguous, a largely incomprehensible activity. And hence the satire, as Jones indicates, is directed chiefly against *cyfarwyddiaid* who take the Arthurian myth and its values seriously. Traditional narrative leads to the world of Madog, Iorwerth, and Rhonabwy, the world of little men and uncivil women. From this point of view the ironic statement about all the detail of the piece which a *cyfarwydd* must memorize and the overtly satiric comment about the bards, the chief repositories of traditional values, are perfectly in keeping with the general thrust of the tale. *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* is a carefully critical look, made with serious but good-natured humour, at the way in which the past, through narrative, haunts the present, any present.

Rhonabwy's dream is a dream of truce and peace, and hence cannot be a 'proper' Arthurian story, which would recount conflict and battle. The sensitivity the author reveals about the way signs determine behaviour, the way in which the gwyddbwyll war game apparently generates a parallel conflict between the players' retainers, is another tightly controlled argument against the *reality* of Arthurian tales and their values. In a way, Mrs Chadwick was right to suggest that we might take the dream as a diagnosis of the ills of Powys and Wales.⁷⁸ But the specific ills the author had in mind may well be those of the thirteenth century or of the twelfth century—or of any period at which he perceived Powys to be the victim of its narratives. It seems more likely to me that the period would be some time after Madog's death. However, the author of *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* was a genuine humanist, a literary man who, like most satirists, cared deeply about human values, and a subtle literary craftsman who distrusted his craft. Such a sensibility transcends specific circumstances and cannot be tied to any specific period without other kinds of evidence.⁷⁹

⁷⁷*Breudwyt Ronabwy*, p. 20, line 16. ⁷⁸Chadwick, 'Dreams', p. 47. ⁷⁹This paper originated in some informal remarks made at the annual seminar of the Celtic Studies Association of North America's conference in Ottawa in 1985, which was led by Catherine McKenna. It was expanded into a fuller presentation at the Eighth International Celtic Congress in Swansea in 1987, which I attended with the assistance of the Charles Phelps Taft Memorial Fund. Finally, something like a complete version was prepared for an invitation to speak at the Center for Literary Studies and the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University in March of 1988. I am grateful to those who either hectored me or encouraged me to bring this essay to a final form, especially Professor McKenna, Professor John MacQueen, Dr Rachel Bromwich, and Dr Dafydd Glyn Jones. None of these have seen this final version, and hence it should not be assumed that any of them necessarily approve of it. Finally, I am very grateful to Patrick Sims-Williams for the many excellent observations he offered me, most of which I had the sense to adopt.