Dennis Wilson Wise*

A Schema for *Artorius*: History, John Heath-Stubbs, and the Last Modernist Epic

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Abstract: Although John Heath-Stubbs's long modernist epic *Artorius* is largely unknown, this ambitious text combines a cyclical vision of history with a linear one on its way to understanding Great Britain's loss of imperial status. If this point has generally been missed, the complexity of Heath-Stubbs's multiple symbolic superstructures partly accounts for the text's unfortunate reception. Accordingly, I present an explanatory schema for *Artorius* in line with what other modernist texts – most famously Joyce's *Ulysses* – have benefitted from. Besides unpacking the symbolic superstructures used by Heath-Stubbs, I also address how the poet, who lived in Egypt during the 1956 Suez crisis, uses them to answer a British nation that can no longer identify as a global power.

Résumé: Bien que la longue épopée moderniste de John Heath-Stubbs, *Artorius*, soit largement méconnue, ce texte ambitieux combine une vision cyclique de l'histoire avec une vision linéaire pour comprendre la perte du statut impérial de la Grande-Bretagne. Si ce point n'a généralement pas été remarqué par la critique, c'est la complexité des multiples superstructures symboliques de Heath-Stubbs qui explique en partie la réception manquée du texte. En conséquence, je présente un schéma explicatif pour *Artorius*, comme ceux dont ont bénéficié d'autres textes modernistes, dont le plus célèbre est l'*Ulysse* de Joyce. En plus de décortiquer les superstructures symboliques utilisées par Heath-Stubbs, j'examine également comment le poète, qui a vécu en Égypte pendant la crise de Suez en 1956, les utilise pour répondre à une nation britannique qui parvient plus à s'identifier à une puissance mondiale.

Zusammenfassung: Obwohl John Heath-Stubbs' langes modernistisches Epos *Artorius* weitgehend unbekannt ist, verbindet dieser ehrgeizige Text eine zyklische Vision der Geschichte mit einer linearen auf dem Weg zum Verständnis von Großbritanniens Verlust des imperialen Status. Wenn dieser Punkt im Allgemeinen übersehen wurde, so ist die Komplexität von Heath-Stubbs' mehrfachem symbolischen Überbau teilweise für die unglückliche Rezeption des Textes verantwortlich. Dementsprechend wird hier ein Erklärungsschema für *Artorius* vorgelegt, wie es auch für andere modernistische Texte –am bekanntesten ist Joyces *Ulysses*– ange-

***Corresponding author: Dennis Wilson Wise**, University of Arizona, E-Mail: dwwise@arizona.edu

wandt worden ist. Diskutiert werden nicht nur die von Heath-Stubbs verwendeten symbolischen Überstrukturen, sondern es wird auch darauf eingangen, wie der Dichter, der während der Suezkrise 1956 in Ägypten lebte, sie nutzt, um einer britischen Nation zu antworten, die sich nicht länger als Weltmacht identifizieren kann.

Keywords: John Heath-Stubbs, *Artorius*, modernism, epic poetry, King Arthur, philosophy of history

In 'Epitaph', John Heath-Stubbs's most anthologized poem, he jokingly laments – still merely thirty years old – that he has 'outlived his friends and most of his reputation'.[1] Despite the self-deprecation, this statement describes his later literary fate well. As with many British poets who first came to prominence in the 1940s, Heath-Stubbs's postwar reputation dwindled steadily, and his long poem *Artorius* (1973) – despite earning him a Queen's Gold Medal in Poetry – is now virtually unknown. This is a shame. After all, not only is *Artorius* a powerful, semiotically rich text that weaves seamlessly between pathos, comedy, and horror, but Heath-Stubbs joins T. S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*, 1922) and Charles Williams (*Taliessin Through Logres*, 1938) in a dazzling trifecta of modernist Arthurian poets who combine an aesthetics of difficulty with non-linear narratives in order to meditate, as W. David Soud argues for a slightly different group of authors, on the 'relationship between history and eternity'.[2] Yet whereas the early Eliot sings of culture despair and Williams invokes an elaborate spiritualism, Heath-Stubbs repurposes the Matter of Britain for a nation suffering the aftereffects of two devastating world wars and an empire in rapid collapse. Rather than reactionary nostalgia, however, *Artorius* represents a critical, late modernist attempt to acclimatize Great Britain to the end of its imperium, connecting that end (via symbols) with the downfall of King Arthur. To help alleviate the starkness of this vision, Heath-Stubbs hints that just social orders can be constructed through *poesis* – even if, otherwise, he acknowledges that all such orders are ephemeral and imperfect: mere temporary stays against history's anguished chaos and the endless churning of its cycles.

My final section will tackle *Artorius's* anti-imperial dimension, but getting there requires unpacking the 'symbolic superstructures' that make *Artorius* the modernist epic it is. There are several concrete reasons, I suspect, for why this text has languished so long in obscurity, unstudied by anyone except the poet's friends or col-

1 John Heath-Stubbs, *Collected Poems: 1943–1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p. 325.

2 W. David Soud, *Divine Cartographies: God, History, and Poiesis in W. B. Yeats, David Jones, and T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 3.

leagues.[3] Although Heath-Stubbs blamed his own unpopularity on being wrongly associated with the New Apocalypse, a 'short-lived and never very influential school [that …] more or less disintegrated before any poems of mine appeared in book form',[4] *Artorius* is also, simply, a challenging poem to read – a *very* challenging poem. Nor did Heath-Stubbs ever provide the 'companion' one of his friends once implored him to provide.[5] As a result, *Artorius* has gone without any of the paratextual aids that have, historically, rendered other modernist texts more accessible. Famously, Eliot appended footnotes to *The Waste Land*, and David Jones did likewise for his two major poems. Even C. S. Lewis wrote a book, *Arthurian Torso* (1969), that explicates his friend Charles Williams. Yet the honor of best-known paratextual supplement goes to Stuart Gilbert, whose schema for *Ulysses* is especially relevant given that Heath-Stubbs borrows so much directly from Joyce. With that in mind, in the absence of any author-supplied map or companion to *Artorius*, I propose to supply one for him. Accordingly, my article's first half decodes the 'symbolic superstructures' that guide *Artorius's* shape and meaning. This schema appears as Figure 1.

To summarize briefly, these symbolic superstructures – borrowed by Heath-Stubbs from the Western literary canon, traditionally understood – convey themes of historical cyclicity and the interchangeability of universal myth. Classical literature inspires two structures, medieval literature three more. A minor sixth structure, medical astrology, rounds out the schema. Modern anachronisms suffuse them all. Yet whereas Heath-Stubbs names the major structures explicitly in his text (the minor one he names in a later interview), my division into 'classical' and 'medieval' is editorial. This I consider justified because Heath-Stubbs draws widely upon his vast erudition to help establish the core equivalency of all myths across time and geographical origin. In other words, *Artorius* practices a mythic cosmopolitanism, and it is Heath-Stubbs's denial of any true historical progress in time that, for him, validates this procedure. Of course, other modernists subscribed to non-progressive (or cyclical) philosophies of history too. Joyce leaned on Vico; Yeats's gyres hail from esotericism; and Pound supported Imagism through his theories on cyclicity. Unlike these others, though, Heath-Stubbs never translated

3 For example, the magazine *Aquarius* has dedicated two special issues to Heath-Stubbs, one in 1978 and another in 1998, celebrating the poet's 60th and 80th birthdays; most contributors as well as the magazine's founder, the poet Eddie Linden, were either acquaintances or close friends. The only book-length study, *The Haunted Heart* (1993), was written by John van Domelen, a former student. The one critical work *not* written by a personal acquaintance, a three-part article by Joe R. Christopher, was published in *Mythlore* in 1986–87.

4 John Heath-Stubbs, 'Preface' in *Collected Poems: 1943–1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p. 21 n. 1.

5 Jenny Joseph, '*Artorius*', *Aquarius*, 23/24, (1998), pp. 80–84 (p. 84).

	CLASSICAL				MEDIEVAL						
Book	*Muse	Province	Style	*Labor of Hercules	Sign	*Zodiac	Calendar	*Ruling God	Medical Astrology	*Annwyn	Plot
[Bk1]	Calliope I	epic poetry	alliterative	Nemean Lion	♈	Aries (the ram)	March	Pallas Athena	head	---	Invocation; Battle of Badon; Artorius rejects empire
[Bk2]	Urania	astronomy	prose dialogue	Lernaean Hydra	♉	Taurus (the bull)	April	Venus Urania	neck (*shoulders?*)	---	Synod against heresy
[Bk3]	Thalia	comedy	Greek comedy	Ceryneian Hind	♊	Gemini (the twins)	May	Apollo	arms (*hands?*)	---	Gwion and Daegrafn against Phyllidulus
[Bk4]	Calliope II	epic poetry	alliterative	Erymanthian Boar	♋	Cancer (the crab)	June: solstice	Mercury	the breast (*womb?*)	Antechamber	Descent into underworld
[Bk5]	Polyhymnia	sacred poetry	Pindaric Ode	Augean stables	♌	Leo (the lion)	July	Jupiter & Juno	shoulders (*bowels?*)	Level 1: excrement	Artorius's coronation ode
[Bk6]	Erato	love poetry	prose romance with verses	Stymphalian birds	♍	Virgo (the maiden)	The harvest	Ceres	the guts (*spine?*)	Level 2: summer; birds	Modred fetches Guanhumara
[Bk7]	Calliope III	epic poetry	alliterative	Cretan Bull	♎	Libra (justice scales)	29-Sep	Vulcan	buttocks (*liver?*)	Level 3: scales of justice	Discourse on law
[Bk8]	Terpsichore	dance	No play	Mares of Diomedes	♏	Scorpio (the scorpion)	31 Oct	Mars	genitals	Level 4: betrayals of passion	Modern historian meets Guanhumara's ghost
[Bk9]	Clio	history	prose lecture	Belt of Hippolyta	♐	Sagittarius (the archer)	November	Diana	thighs	Level 5: the Hippodrome	Prof. Chelifer on history and Arthur's defeat
[Bk10]	Calliope IV	epic poetry	alliterative	Cattle of Geryon	♑	Capricorn (the goat)	Dec./early Jan.	Vesta	knees	Level 6: castrating boar	Modred reveals himself
[Bk11]	Melpomene	tragedy	Greek tragedy	Golden Apples of the Hesperides	♒	Aquarius (water-bearer)	January	Juno & Jupiter	legs	Level 7: dying of thirst	Battlefield of Camlann
[Bk12]	Euterpe	lyric poetry	Free verse with lyrics	Cerberus	♓	Pisces (the fish)	Unclear	Neptune	feet	Level 8: submersion	Sea burial of Artorius
										Level 9: Ceridwen	

Fig. 1: Major structures are denoted by an asterisk (*). Medical astrology is a minor structure.

his instinctive distrust of secular-liberal ideologies into a contempt for modernity. *Artorius* practices a more temperate politics. Despite a muted Christian teleology wherein Heath-Stubbs hints at an ultimate freedom of the will beyond historical time, he instead hopes (as I shall argue) to establish a new, just social order, at least in verse, that acknowledges and accepts Great Britain and his native England as a former global power: a postimperial country.

My argument appears in two stages. In 'Reading the Schema', I briefly describe *Artorius's* classical and medieval structures before outlining how these structures interact through a close reading of *Artorius's* ninth book. Altogether, I show that Heath-Stubbs's mythic method encourages a kind of semiotic overload that is more creatively suggestive than is rationally dissectible. Afterwards, I examine *Artorius* as anti-imperial text, defending my conception of the poem as a late modernist epic before, finally, linking Heath-Stubbs's critique of empire to a view of history that is nine parts cyclical, one part teleological.

Reading the Schema

The Classical Structures

The most obvious structuring device in *Artorius* are the Twelve Muses. By tradition every epic should invoke a muse, but Heath-Stubbs – not wishing to offend any one goddess – prudently chooses to invoke them all. Calliope, however, takes pride of place. As the muse of epic poetry, she guides all four 'books' in *Artorius*; her sisters

govern but a single section each. From his first lines, though, Heath-Stubbs quickly signals the irony with which he will employ traditional epic machinery. The invocation begins:

> Take down, Calliope, your trumpet from its tack:
> Rested has it long, and rusted? Give us a rouse, girl.[6]

Needlessly to say, Homer never pled the goddess's favour via trumpet, and in fact these instruments only saw widespread usage during the late medieval period. Today they're mostly associated with jazz ensembles and marching bands, not the music of the spheres or Dante wending his way through Hell's nine circles. Perhaps Heath-Stubbs is crossing his fingers and hoping that Calliope will be grateful for having been roused at all, a new age's divine Dizzy Gillespie. In any event, Heath-Stubbs frequently pairs irony with his own sincere classicism, lending his poem a touch of playfulness wholly absent from Eliot or Williams. By stratagems such as this, Heath-Stubbs hopes to enlist the reader's sympathy for a poetic form – the epic – that, to modern ears, now seems almost unbearably archaic.

In *Artorius,* each Muse dictates the poetic form used within her section or book. The 'Clio' section appears as a lecture since the Muse of History speaks 'in prose, though she plod'.[7] Likewise, 'Polyhymnia' is a Pindaric ode, 'Melpomene' a Greek tragedy, and so on. Nonetheless, every section demonstrates Heath-Stubbs's experimental touch, his willingness to modify a classical form. The 'Clio' section is laced with surrealism, and 'Terpsichore' is marked by a form Heath-Stubbs probably learned from Yeats or Pound: the Japanese Noh. According to one critic, Yeats and Pound both considered Noh an Imagiste form of drama that, like *Artorius* as a whole, forsakes linear narrativity in favour of presenting one Image of increasing intensity; this Image should ideally hint at metaphysical permanence, a moment of transhistorical stability amidst the endless flux of things in time.[8] The same principle holds as true for 'Terpsichore' as for Yeats's Noh plays: each abandons a 'sense of progress and [instead presents] various ages in the past contemporaneously with the present'.[9] Heath-Stubbs accomplishes this feat by literally having his contempo-

6 John Heath-Stubbs, *Artorius* in *Collected Poems: 1943–1987* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), pp. 493–595 (I p. 493). Since the third edition text of *Artorius*, which appears in *Collected Poems, 1943–1987*, does not include line numbers, my citations will use section and page numbers. Thus, 'I p. 493' indicates Book I, page 493.

7 *Artorius*, I p. 493.

8 Louise Blakeney Williams, *Modernism and the Ideology of History: Literature, Politics, and the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 169.

9 *Modernism and the Ideology of History*, p. 169.

rary professor of history, C. Chelifer, encounter the ghost of Guanhumara (Guinevere) on an archaeological site on a desolate heath somewhere in northern England.

The four Calliope books deserve special mention for their metrical style. Rather than Miltonian blank verse or Greek hexameters, epic poetry's two most traditional meters, Heath-Stubbs selects a greatly loosened form of Middle English *alliterative* meter.[10] During his Oxford days in the early 1940s, medieval languages and literature dominated the university's English Syllabus, and several Oxford faculty members saw the alliterative meter as indigenous to the English nation. Indeed, one scholar whom Heath-Stubbs greatly admired, the Inkling C. S. Lewis, once praised 'our native prosody' over and against imported French-and-Italian meters from the continent.[11] Despite Heath-Stubbs's core cosmopolitanism, then, his clear willingness to explore myths and literatures from across the western tradition, in his heart he held a special place for England and its 'native' prosody. In *Artorius* he even grants England a special tenth muse of his own invention, Chrysophone, whom he has preside over all English verse. No less than Calliope, this tenth muse inspires *Artorius's* four narrative books in the alliterative meter. Heath-Stubbs thereby joins himself to a company as diverse in metrical form as Cædmon, William Langland, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Wordsworth, and Dylan Thomas.[12]

The second classical structure governing *Artorius* are the Twelve Labors of Hercules. These labours are, generally speaking, far less architectonic than the Twelve Muses, playing a comparatively small role in the overall text, but Heath-Stubbs cites them prominently near the end of his invocation. The life of Artorius, he implies,

10 Heath-Stubbs would have understood the alliterative meter in Middle English poetry as having four or five heavily stressed syllables per line (three of which usually alliterated); a medial caesura; and an irregular number of unstressed syllables. The alliterative pattern most commonly followed was *aa/ax*. His four 'Calliope' books, however, ignore formal caesuras and vary their alliterative patterns considerably. Formally, Heath-Stubbs's main interest seems to lie in simply inserting three alliterating syllables into every line regardless of placement. He deviates from this 'three alliterations' principle only when he deploys crossed (*ab/ab*) or transverse (*ab/ba*) alliteration. Heath-Stubbs also, unhistorically, frequently alliterates on unstressed syllables. One line from 'Calliope II', for instance, yokes together *revolted, rebellion,* and *wrested* (see IV 569). Sometimes Heath-Stubbs overloads lines with extra heavily stressed syllables as well.

11 C. S. Lewis, 'The Idea of an "English School"', in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 59–77 (p. 70).

12 Before her ascension, Chrysophone is called 'Lalage', the name for a genus of triller birds; notably, Heath-Stubbs was an avid bird-watcher. Yet this name has strong literary associations as well. For instance, Heath-Stubbs surely knew that a 'Lalage' also appears in Horace's *Odes*, book 1, poem 22, and he *might* have known that his major poetic hero, Charles Williams, also once called a young woman of his acquaintance by this epithet (Lindop 386). If so, the original name for Chrysophone in *Artorius* may well be a triple homage.

thus requires deeds as monumental as anything undertaken by ancient Greece's greatest hero.

The Medieval Structures

As previously mentioned, my division of structures into classical and medieval is editorial, not authorial, yet it helps us better realise the sheer historical range of Heath-Stubbs's erudition. No other modernist – certainly not Eliot or Williams – does anything quite comparable. In *Artorius*, Heath-Stubbs's strongest medieval structure is the Zodiac, second only to the Nine Muses in terms of architectonic importance. The poet presents his astrological framework in the 'Urania' section. This section draws inspiration from a first-century Latin epic in five books, M. Manilius's *Astronomica*, and although Heath-Stubbs did not himself take astrology seriously, he considered the subject essential for understanding 'almost any poetry from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century'.[13] He was probably heavily influenced in this view by C. S. Lewis, whose lectures on medieval cosmology and worldview (later published as *The Discarded Image* in 1964) Heath-Stubbs considered a 'revelation' for viewing the cosmos in ways 'beside that of modern scientific humanism'.[14] Perhaps a more immediate influence than Lewis, however, was *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* by Alastair Fowler.[15] In a review, Heath-Stubbs admires Fowler's argument that astrological symbolism pervades *The Faerie Queene*, and he later applies this insight in an essay of his own on *The Shepearde's Calender*.[16]

Accompanying the Zodiac are two supplementary medieval structures: the ruling gods and medical astrology. Both derive from M. Manilius as well. A few interesting discrepancies, though, distinguish *Artorius*'s presentation from its source text – more than likely, Heath-Stubbs was relying on memory alone given his full blindness at that time. Notably, his source text for Manilius probably was *not* A. E. Housman's Latin edition of *Astronomica* – Heath-Stubbs could not read Latin fluently – but, instead, Thomas Creech's flawed 1697 English translation. Despite the inaccuracies of this latter version, only two minor errors creep into Heath-Stubbs's ruling-gods structure. In 'Urania', St. Illtud observes that the sign of Leo is ruled by Jupiter and Juno,[17] but the actual deities according to Creech are Jupiter

13 John Heath-Stubbs, *Hindsights: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), p. 214.
14 *Hindsights*, p. 62.
15 *Hindsights*, p. 164.
16 John Heath-Stubbs, *The Literary Essays of John Heath-Stubbs*, ed. by A. T. Tolley (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 203.
17 *Artorius*, II p. 509.

and *Rhea*, his mother.[18] Indeed, Creech's pairing makes better sense for Leo: Rhea's iconography often includes lions. Creech furthermore has the goddess Juno rule alone over Aquarius, but Heath-Stubbs once more pairs Juno with Jupiter, evidently misremembering a symmetry that did not exist.

In the medical-astrology structure, more severe discrepancies appear. Since Heath-Stubbs never describes this minor structure in *Artorius*, my main information comes from his *Camelot Project* interview given two decades after the fact, which I then compared against Creech's original text (see *Astronomica,* Bk II, para. 27). Heath-Stubbs's deviations are marked by italics:

> the head is Aries, *the shoulders Taurus, the hands Gemini, the spine and back Virgo, the stomach and womb Cancer, the bowels Leo, the kidneys Libra*, the genitals Scorpio – that's quite important in my scheme – the thighs Sagittarius, the knees Capricorn, the legs Aquarius, and the feet Pisces. It would be difficult to make this work exactly, but it does work roughly.[19]

In other words, Heath-Stubbs differs from Creech in exactly half his twelve Zodiac signs. Once again, a faulty memory can explain things, but, notably, neither his *Camelot Project* interview nor Creech wholly align with the text of *Artorius*, although the poem generally tends to confirm the interview. In 'Gemini', Heath-Stubbs mentions Lalage's *hand*, and in 'Cancer' he compares Annwyn to a *womb*. Both sections therefore align perfectly with Heath-Stubbs's interview. He does not mention *bowels* specifically in 'Leo', but this organ clearly pairs well with the Herculean labour of cleaning the Augean stables; likewise, although 'Virgo' lacks any specific reference to guts, spine, or back, Heath-Stubbs's conversation between the Stymphalian Birds could well be hinting at corpses' exposed intestines after a battle. Nonetheless, the *Camelot Project* interview is wrong in two respects. In 'Urania', Bishop Bedwini refers to the 'nine necks' of the hydra of heresy, which confirms Creech rather than the interview.[20] Both Heath-Stubbs *and* Creech, however, are wrong in 'Libra'. Whereas Creech mentions *buttocks* and Heath-Stubbs *kidneys*, the text only names Julian the Apostate's pierced *liver*.[21] Perhaps Heath-Stubbs conflated two similar organs in his recollection – like kidneys, livers help eliminate toxins from the body.

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18 M. Manilus, *The Five Books of M. Manilius Containing a System of the Ancient Astronomy and Astrology*, trans. Thomas Creech in *Early English Books Online* <https://proquest.libguides.com/eebopqp> [accessed 28 May 2023], II para. 26.

19 Raymond H. Thompson, 'Interview with John Heath-Stubbs', in *The Camelot Project* (Rochester: Robbins Library, 1989) <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot-project> [accessed 7 April 2021].

20 *Artorius*, II p. 507.

21 *Artorius*, VII p. 558.

In any event, medical astrology holds the least architectonic sway of any structuring device in *Artorius;* hence, I call it a minor structure. Things are much different with our last medieval structure, perhaps the boldest one deployed by Heath-Stubbs overall: the traditional *katabasis* or descent into the underworld. Notably, before Milton settled on the Fall as his great theme, he once considered writing an epic on King Arthur – an ambition he expresses in *Mansus*:

> Si quando indigenas revocabo in carmina reges,
> Arturumque etiam sub terries bella moventum.
>
> [If ever I shall summon back our native kings into our songs,
> And Arthur, waging his wars beneath the earth.][22]

This quotation occurs as one of *Artorius's* two epigraphs, so Heath-Stubbs thus takes Milton's 'wars beneath the earth' quite literally. As Merddyn tells Artorius, there *is* precedent for such dangerous descents – they have been previously made by Aeneus and Scipio Aemilianus, and one *will* be made by Dante.[23] And like those other wayfarers, Artorius must have a guide – not Merddyn himself, but Anubis, Egyptian mythology's dog-headed conductor of souls. This represents a clever choice by Heath-Stubbs. Historically, the deity who rules under Cancer – Hermes/Mercury – was so frequently linked with Anubis in Roman Egypt that they were eventually syncretised into a single deity: Hermanubis.

Yet Artorius's specific trek through the underworld owes its greatest debt, not to *The Aeneid* or *Somnium Scipionis*, but to *Inferno*. Like the Hell imagined by Dante, Annwyn subdivides into nine levels and an antechamber. Each foretells a future situation in Artorius's kingship. What makes this structuring device so unusual, however, is its relative lateness in the text. Although it shapes Books V–X11 in *Artorius* strongly, it touches nothing beforehand. In my final section, I'll suggest that Heath-Stubbs uses this lateness as a way to signal the advent of Christ's Nativity into history, a divinely mandated 'correction' to endlessly repeated cyclicity, but for now, let me emphasise one particular structural oddity about Artorius's underworld sojourn. Annwyn has *nine* levels … but the poem only has eight books remaining. There is thus nothing in *Artorius* that corresponds with its hero's culminating encounter with Ceridwen. This event seems to happen outside History, perhaps in

22 John Milton, 'Mansus', in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, trans. Merritt Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), qtd. in Joe R. Christopher, 'John Heath-Stubbs' *Artorius* and the Influence of Charles Williams: Part II', *Mythlore*, 13.2 (1987), pp. 51–57 (p. 52).

23 *Artorius*, IV p. 529. Technically, the dream journey of Scipio can be viewed as an *ascent*, since it occurs up through nine celestial spheres, but, structurally, it serves the same purpose.

mythical time or even absolute time. Accordingly, my schema in Figure 1 formally excludes this ninth level. From this uniquely ahistorical vantage point, however, King Artorius receives – no less than does Virgil's Aeneus and Milton's Adam – a vision of futurity: the next fifteen centuries in the history of Great Britain.

How the Structures Interact: 'Clio'

By this point, readers have surely noticed that no specifically *modern* symbolic superstructure graces the formal architecture of *Artorius*. Instead, modernity suffuses the text as a whole. Far from a straight – yet stylistically experimental – historical poem, *Artorius* continuously affirms the unity of symbols across historical time. The mythic method does for Heath-Stubbs as it does for Joyce: it grants order and significance to the 'immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.[24] The anachronisms brought by *Artorius* into 6th-century Britain, though, are intellectual rather than material. As already mentioned, Merddyn proleptically invokes Dante's *Inferno*, but Heath-Stubbs also has Cerdic of the Saxons extol the proletariat and rail against tax-gatherers; parodies F. R. Leavis in 'Thalia'; and surveys Western political thought in 'Calliope III'. This latter includes a state sanctioned by religious myth (Bishop Bedwini); Shelley's notion of poets as legislators (Gwion); Thomas Hobbes (Gerontius); Sir Robert Filmer (Urbigena); John Locke (Gaius); royalism (Gwalchmai); socialism (Flaccus); and imperialism (Modred). The poet Gwion even critiques utopianism via references to Plato, Thomas More, and Francis Bacon.[25]

24 T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 175–78 (p. 177).

25 George Every has criticized Heath-Stubbs's political canto as a 'good idea defectively executed' (67), complaining that the 'discussion in Parliament ought to have been about empires, their fall and foundation', rather than about various political philosophies (68). I suspect Every misreads the larger political dimension to *Artorius*. Although a full argument must await a future article, I see Heath-Stubbs's core message as appearing within 'Erato'. Phyllidulus tells Modred that, although 'perfect justice is something not to be discerned in any contemporary social situation', legislators bear a duty to 'establish and of maintaining some sort of social order, however imperfect' (VI 545). This message directly precedes the political canto, and it indicates Heath-Stubbs's strong distrust of ideological purity. At Artorius's council, no single character preaches the one best state. Indeed, loyal Bedwyr preaches nothing at all, telling Artorius later that he stayed silent because the 'single thing that slipped into my thought / Was my simple love. And it could find no word' (XI 589). Personally, I suspect Gwion the Welsh poet comes closest to articulating Heath-Stubbs's own viewpoint, at least *as* a poet, but the text never privileges Gwion over other speakers. Notably, Merddyn earlier explained that the law is a labyrinth at whose center lies a 'monster of cruelty and malice'. The labyrinth of Minos, however, was designed by Daedalus, a fosterling of the 'only honest Olympian',

With these symbolic superstructures in mind, readers now have everything required to analyse how they operate within a single section of *Artorius*. Here I'll consider the structures in 'Clio', which according to Figure 1 are:

Muse: Clio, the muse of history
Style: prose lecture
Herculean labour: Belt of Hippolyta
Zodiac: Sagittarius, the archer
Ruling God: Diana
Body part: thighs
Annwyn: the Hippodrome (level 5)

The prose-lecture format makes easy sense. Ever since Herodotus and Thucydides, historians have traditionally written in prose, so it's a good method for discussing Arthurian historiography. Among the authorities cited by Professor C. Chelifer are E. K. Chambers (1866–1954), R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943), Geoffrey Ashe (1923–2022), and Beram Saklatvala (1911–1976). Yet the professor's first initial, C., stands for 'Cheiron', which aligns this section with its Zodiac sign. Cheiron was the wise centaur who tutored Achilles, and the traditional association of centaurs with archery brings them under Sagittarius.

At the same time, a touch of surrealism continually disrupts Chelifer's lecture. In the prior section, he had encountered Guanhumara's grief-stricken ghost, and her laments disorder his thinking. Surrealism is a thoroughly modernist technique, of course, but it enables Heath-Stubbs to fulfil his remaining structures. Otherwise, the professor's random utterance – 'Onward, Christian solders, Amazons of the spirit, votaries of Diana' – would make little sense, but it connects the medieval legend of St. Ursula's eleven thousand virgins to a Herculean labour (Queen Hippolyta of the Amazons) and the Ruling God (Diana, a virgin goddess and hunter who, like centaurs, is skilled at archery).[26] Through this schema, moreover, readers can unlock other obscure references. Although the professor admits that the Huns have no bearing on his subject, as 'nomad archers of the steppes … so entirely dependent on their horses as to be almost permanently united to them', they are explicitly linked to centaurs. Indeed, toward the end of Chelifer's lecture, his stream of surreal

Hephaestus (VII 549). Although the law is imperfect, it therefore remains the best, most forthright available tool for justice so long as it remains 'love in action' (VII 550). This is a lesson Artorius learns well, at least in the short term – he reminds his council that the goddess Venus choses to marry lame Hephæstus the blacksmith, not Ares god of war (VII 550). Heath-Stubbs's political canto thus does not discourse upon Britain's loss of empire so much as the conditions necessary for achieving an ideal state – something that no *single* political philosophy, however, can accomplish.

26 *Artorius*, IX p. 567.

associations come so rapidly that Heath-Stubbs clearly is appealing to intuition, not reason.[27] The ultimate effect is one of rapid-fire equivalencies, x = y = z, and the medical astrology structure enters via this method as well. When the professor concludes by mentioning the 'waste land and the dolorous blow', Heath-Stubbs invites his audience to remember that, in Arthurian tradition, the dolorous blow had been struck to the king's *thigh*.[28]

Yet the Annwyn superstructure constitutes Heath-Stubbs's deftest use of structuring device. Thematically, *Artorius's* ninth book signals the point of no return in Artorius's imperialism – the moment he makes his fatal decision to invade Byzantium. There's no historical or even medieval literary precedent for Artorius (or Arthur) attacking the Emperor Justinian. Nevertheless, two factors tell us that this decision occurs 'in' this section. Our first clue hails from Professor Chelifer himself. His lecture concludes with naming himself, 'Taliesin-Tiresias, churchwarden in Gloucester Road or proof-reader for the Press', a statement which thereby creates a triune poetic identity between Heath-Stubbs, Eliot, and Williams.[29] At various points in *Artorius*, Heath-Stubbs variously adopts the alter egos of Chelifer, Taliesin, *and* Tiresias. Likewise, it was Eliot who, after divorcing Vivienne Haigh-Wood, briefly served as churchwarden at St Stephen's Church on Gloucester Road, and Williams who worked for Oxford University Press. (This latter poet, moreover, was the first author to link King Arthur with Byzantium.) Even if readers miss this exceedingly obscure triune identity, Heath-Stubbs's Annwyn structure provides a second, better hint. When Artorius reaches the Welsh underworld's fifth level, he meets a 'harlot for the whoremasters of the Hippodrome' – i. e., the Empress Theodora, Justinian's wife.[30] Yet this Annwyn-empress, another huntress like Diana, transforms suddenly and nightmarishly into a cat, and she snaps Artorius's spine as if he were a mouse. By this action readers know that Byzantium will eventually throw back Artorius's armies, specifically in the 'Clio' section that aligns with it, and thus break the Ymheradwr's power.

As Artorius lays paralyzed by the Annwyn-Theodora on Annwyn's fifth level, though, the following words appear as if out of nowhere:

> A prim and pedantic and prosy voice,
> In a lengthy discourse growing louder and louder,
> For futurity defined his defeat and his failure.[31]

27 *Artorius*, IX p. 567.
28 *Artorius*, IX p. 568.
29 *Artorius*, IX p. 568.
30 *Artorius*, IV p. 533.
31 *Artorius*, IV p. 534.

Within the context of 'Calliope II', this passage makes no sense … but the 'prosy' voice, of course, belongs to none other than Professor C. Chelifer, the historian. His unusual surname, moreover, invokes the family *Cheliferidae*, the genus name for pseudoscorpions. The professor even calls himself a 'harmless book-scorpion', essentially stingless, but Artorius's treacherous nephew Modred, whose coup takes place under the sign of Scorpio, will bear a deadlier sting by far.[32] Nonetheless, this distant, subtle link between Modred and the professor suggests that some historians are less harmless, or less ineffectual, than they might suppose. Centuries after Artorius's downfall, in 'long futurity', it is *historians* – not traitors like Modred – who will muster meaning out of the king's grievous fate. Perhaps their careful weighing of evidence will garner nothing more than a 'matter for lays, and for lyrical laments', as indeed happens in much Arthurian literature.[33] Still, their judgements will last until history's end.

Artorius and the Philosophy of History

Artorius as Late Modernist Epic

To this point, I've argued that the symbolic superstructures shown by Figure 1 create a kind of semiotic overload within *Artorius*, nudging readers toward accepting that all mythic symbols and archetypes are basically equivalent: x = y = z. To this interchangeability Heath-Stubbs adds fervent stylistic anachronisms that help merge the modern with the medieval and the classical. Yet to what end? I shall now argue that Heath-Stubbs welds a muted Christian teleology into his overall theory of cyclical history, yet he directs this unique synthesis to a British nation struggling to understand its own postimperial position. Before getting to that argument, though, let me briefly address my designation of *Artorius* as a modernist epic. Nowadays, although questions about whether a text counts as modernist or not have grown rather tired, I can still imagine some obvious objections to either term in my phrase 'modernist epic'. For one thing, Heath-Stubbs himself avoided calling *Artorius* an epic. It was the sequence, he believes, that is the 'characteristic twentieth-century poetic form'. Examples include *The Waste Land, Taliessin Upon Logres,* and Tennyson's *Maud.*[34] Second, since many critics still typically associate literary modernism with avant-

32 *Artorius*, IX p. 564.
33 *Artorius*, I p. 500.
34 'Interview'.

garde work produced between the world wars, calling any text published in 1973 'modernist' seems like a stretch at best.

The overall epic character of *Artorius*, though, seems relatively straightforward. Epic machinery pervades the text: an invocation, a *katabasis*, a foretelling of future history, a council with speeches, a great theme, a hero-centred narrative. Even when Heath-Stubbs wryly subverts epic machinery, he advertises his awareness of it. Battles are a major part of most epics, for example, but *Artorius's* speaker loudly calls attention to his complete disinterest in describing the Battle of Badon. As he archly tells the goddess Calliope, 'Murder in the mass is no matter fitting / For a maiden lady, like you, to muse upon'.[35] The speaker does something similar, more discreetly, in the 'Melpomene' section. As in genuine Greek tragedy, the main action – in this case, the Battle of Camlann – occurs off-stage. Yet, rather than in simply possessing epic machinery, Heath-Stubbs believes that an epic's essence lies in having central events that conform

> to a basic mythic pattern or archetype, such as is reflected in religious ritual and symbolism. The event is one in which the whole community feels itself to have participated, and which is the type and source of its present and future destiny.[36]

In contrast to Milton, who abandoned King Arthur as an epic subject after beginning to doubt Arthur's historicity, such dubious historicity becomes a virtue for Heath-Stubbs.[37] It allows him to seek out the mythic, to bypass the particular for the universal. Thus Heath-Stubbs can present his hero's life as a 'paradigm, his passage, / Like the sun, through symbols' without regard to verifiable individual details.[38] His Artorius does not have a genuine personality. Neither is he just *one* king, his empire just one empire – instead, Artorius is *all* kings, and his realm all realms. Historical 'facts' thereby become epiphenomenal under this archetypal perspective, and *Artorius* guides its readers on a phantasmagoric journey through symbols. Even symbols derived from Heath-Stubbs's own Christian faith are not exempt. When Bishop Bedwini recounts his parable about the angel and the king in 'Calliope III', Gwion immediately recalls its similarity to the tale of Pwyll from the *Mabinogion*: both stories partake of the mythic archetype of sacrificial kings.[39] Likewise, Heath-Stubbs equates Pallas Athena with 'another Parthenos', i. e. the Virgin Mary,[40] and

35 *Artorius*, I p. 498.
36 *Hindsights*, p. 181.
37 Lewalski, Barbara K., *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 444.
38 *Artorius*, I p. 494.
39 *Artorius*, VII pp. 553–54.
40 *Artorius*, I p. 496.

both women to the virgin Sinora, a woman from Cornish legend who is equally 'Christian votaress' and 'Druid lady of the standing stones'.[41] All three figures are incarnations of divine femininity, suggests Heath-Stubbs, and thus participate in the White Goddess archetype identified by Robert Graves.[42]

So categorizing *Artorius* as an epic seems easily justifiable, but my further description of modernist requires more defence. If we see modernity and postmodernity as periodizing concepts only, then *Artorius's* 1973 publication puts it firmly in the latter "postmodern" category – a product of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson would say. Or we could view *Artorius* as postmodern in terms of its literary poetics. According to Amy J. Elias in *Sublime Desire*, a 'metahistorical romance' seeks the impossible: the '*past itself* as a situating, grounding foundation for knowledge and truth'.[43] If historical writing is nothing but a type of fiction, an active construct by historians rather than a means by which one can articulate history-in-itself, then metahistorical romances yearn to bypass this situation and do the impossible: capture the historical sublime. In many ways, this seems to describe *Artorius's* treatment of history. Heath-Stubbs even deploys several techniques commonly associated with postmodern poetics, including blatant self-referentiality and highlighting the fictiveness of his text.[44] Moreover, Heath-Stubbs utterly abandons the interiority often associated with literary modernism. Instead, he focuses on the fragmentation of history itself, particularly in 'Clio' when Professor Chelifer deconstructs Arthurian historiography. Given all these factors, *Artorius* seems postmodern through and through.

Nonetheless, we cannot ignore Heath-Stubbs's mythic method or his structural debt to Joyce. In this regard, Anthony Mellors's concept of 'late modernism' is a useful one; it provides a mediating aesthetic between postmodernism and high modernism. In Mellors's view, modernists usually affirm that a mythic consciousness can allow

41 *Artorius*, XII p. 593.

42 Heath-Stubbs once wrote a review criticizing *The White Goddess* (1948) for insufficient documentation and its alphabet-based numerology, yet he also praises the book for promoting 'imaginative, mythopoeic, or poetic forms of thought' against more Apollonian ways of thinking ('Cauldron' 139).

43 Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 23.

44 The text's strongest metafictional moment occurs when Heath-Stubbs forces Artorius to confront the literary fabulation of his own career. In Ceridwen's vision of future history, Artorius beholds the 'mound of Badon … [but the] issue was altered, to another outcome: / The Brythons fled, and the fierce barbarians / Drove them from the field' (VI 536). That 'altered' outcome, of course, represents the *real* history of Great Britain after Rome abandoned the island. There never *was* an Arthurian empire that spanned half of Europe and all the British Isles. As Professor Chelifer observes, Geoffrey of Monmouth had created this imperial fiction (IX 566), and Artorius thus comes face-to-face with his own fictionality.

humanity to 'recover and participate in natural processes rather than symbolizing the division between human significance and a chaotic universe'. Modernists therefore upheld 'mythic values against perceived threats to selfhood and community'.[45] In contrast, postmodernists usually try to see myth as ideology.[46] Given how sincerely Heath-Stubbs employs mythic archetypes (despite his customary, semi-self-mocking irony), *Artorius* clearly demonstrates a greater affinity with the modernist perspective. Indeed, his metafictionality notwithstanding, Heath-Stubbs consistently sees symbols as viable pathways to a numinous core reality that transcends historical or cultural particularity – a viewpoint he owes partly to Williams and Joyce. At one point he even paraphrases one of Joyce's most famous lines from *Ulysses*. In that novel, Stephen Dedalus proclaims history 'a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'.[47] A similar dismay is expressed by Gwion when he contemplates two dialectical dragons, Gwyrthyr ap Greidawl and Gwynn ap Nudd, from whom

> ... all our myths
> And the horrors of our history, howsoever it is told,
> Are images of their dream, the dialectic of those dragons.[48]

If history is a form of traumatic nightmare, as Gwion and Stephen claim, then *Artorius* affirms that poets – whether Stephen Dedalus, Gwion, or Heath-Stubbs himself – can alleviate that nightmare through *poesis* or art. Poetic orders are castles made of sand, perhaps, but at least they are castles for a time.

For Mellors, what ultimately distinguishes late modernists (i. e., those authors writing between 1945 and 1975, roughly) from earlier modernists is politics. The Second World War had forced newer poets to reconsider the illiberal and reactionary views of interwar modernism.[49] By Heath-Stubbs's time, the fascism of Pound had grown thoroughly discredited. Of course, Heath-Stubbs leans conservative himself. In one obituary, his friend Michael Meyer calls him a 'self-confessed – and at times self-parodying – reactionary and arch-royalist'.[50] Nonetheless, modernists such as Yeats and Pound championed cyclical theories of history because

45 Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 23.

46 Mellors, p. 23.

47 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 2.34.

48 *Artorius*, I p. 502.

49 Mellors, p. 42.

50 Despite this conservatism, Heath-Stubbs held several views that are today recognizably left-leaning: opposition to the death penalty, some feminist sympathies, and a fervent antipathy to racism, anti-Semitism, and South African apartheid. For more information, see his autobiography, *Hindsights*.

they yearned for some sort of return to an ancient organic unity. Nothing like that appears in *Artorius.* Although Heath-Stubbs certainly distrusts liberal-secular progressivism (his character Flaccus, for instance, a socialist, plots with Modred), Heath-Stubbs buttresses his cyclicity philosophy of history with a view that *all* political orders are ultimately imperfect and ephemeral. Let the cycles of history turn as they may, placing one's hope in an ancient order is just as problematic as placing one's hope in a future one. Thus does *Artorius* proffer a grand narrative of history that, through symbol and myth, incorporates and explains the collapse of Great Britain as an imperial power, a historical fall from grace where nothing remains to them now except a 'tedious decline, / With two rival crews of contending rats', i. e., the Labour and Tory parties.[51] In order to motivate this reading of *Artorius*, I'll now turn from the text's symbolic superstructures to the vision of history which Heath-Stubbs presents in his late modernist epic.

Empire and Its Discontents

When the Suez Crisis broke out in Egypt in 1956, Heath-Stubbs was there teaching at the University of Alexandria; he thus witnessed the event that many historians claim signified the end of Great Britain's tenure as a world power. In fact, Heath-Stubbs was one of the few foreign nationals *not* to be expelled during the crisis.[52] Besides his university affiliation, which was a significant factor, what helped him were his close ties with the local Muslim and Coptic communities. As one former Egyptian student recalls, unlike

> other British lecturers before him, who preferred to live on the city's margin, he led an active life, enriched with interesting contacts with different social groupings […] those who lived in villas […] and with modest villagers, his students' families.[53]

With this background in mind, it is perhaps easier to grasp the anti-imperial dimension of *Artorius*. Heath-Stubbs does not celebrate empire. When Artorius styles himself a Comes (or count) after the Battle of Badon, the realm flourishes. It even survives his crowning in 'Polyhymnia'. After Modred, however, urges a 'civilising mission' upon his uncle to expand Artorius's kingdom into an empire, the Ymheradwr's fall happens quickly.[54] Heath-Stubbs foreshadows this fate in an earlier tale

51 *Artorius*, VII p. 537.
52 *Hindsights*, pp. 203–31.
53 Shafik Megally, 'A Poetic Vision of Alexandria', *Aquarius*, 23/24 (1998), pp. 31–35 (p. 33).
54 *Artorius*, VII p. 558.

about King Minos of legend. According to Merddyn, the Cretan king currently serves as a righteous lawgiver in Hades, but during life Minos had been cursed with the Minotaur as divine punishment for his 'lust and covetousness'.[55] Merddyn thus hints at two separate analogies. In the first analogy, he links Modred to the Minotaur through their monstrous, unnatural births – incest for one, bestiality for the other. In the second analogy, he links Artorius with King Minos. Although Artorius will eventually gain legendary fame – like Minos – as a lawgiver, his final mortal years will be cursed by an unholy sin. In *Artorius*, that sin is empire.

This anti-imperial stance is reflected in Heath-Stubbs's cyclical vision of history. Generally, cyclical theories reject at least three key propositions:

1. that historical change is cumulative;
2. that chronologically later periods are superior to earlier periods; and
3. that significant change or progress occurs over time.[56]

These propositions distinguish cyclical theories of history from linear ones, which nonetheless come in various shapes and sizes: eschatological, teleological, Whiggish, Marxist, Providential, etc. What such theories share, though, is a belief that the future will be demonstrably different from the past – usually, though not always, for the better. In contrast, cyclical theories deny any such irrevocable difference, and they reject any fundamental incommensurability between past and present. Although Heath-Stubbs does hint at a kind of muted Christian teleology, this hint is *extremely* muted, and it impinges only on *Artorius's* outermost edges. Otherwise, Heath-Stubbs's epic overwhelming emphasises a cyclical historical vision.

As per his usual method, Heath-Stubbs presents historical cyclicity in multiple ways. The first and most obvious is structural: the Zodiac, i. e. the Celestial Wheel. Wheels, of course, rotate, and their revolutions can go on forever. Since the stars govern all fate, the paradigmatic life of Artorius will be repeated again at some future time. Ancient authors assumed such cyclicity as a matter of course, but among modern philosophers, the major proponent has been Vico. Joyce borrows heavily from Vico, notably, and Heath-Stubbs from Joyce. As with *Finnegans Wake*, *Artorius* is a text that comes full circle. It both begins and ends with the same phrase: 'Take down, Calliope, your trumpet'.[57] Yet Heath-Stubbs also presents cyclicity through reference to Ovid's Four Ages of Man, creating a direct parallel between Artorius's imperial ambitions and the twilight of the modern British Empire. In *Metamor-*

55 *Artorius*, VII pp. 548–49.
56 Williams, p. 11.
57 *Artorius*, I p. 493; XII p. 595.

phoses, Ovid had recounted the four ages – gold, silver, bronze, and iron – as a tale of steady decline unto his present day. Heath-Stubbs modifies this conception by envisioning his current century as a latter-day 'Iron Age', a time when war – he means the two world wars – had become 'less human, more horrible and more hideous'.[58] Lest this be too subtle, the poet adds that the 'wheel is in motion, willy-nilly we march on / To the uses of artillery, and atomic overkill'.[59] Progress is a myth; 'mutability masters us'.[60]

The third marker of cyclicality in *Artorius* comes via Heath-Stubbs's conceit of 'Three Dark Ages'. The notion of a dark age, of course, which Petrarch first coined, does not imply cyclicity on its own, yet for Heath-Stubbs it connects three separate historical collapses of civilization: Minoan-Mycenæan Greece (11th century BC); the Western Roman Empire (5th century AD); and modernity, a period whose decline, according to Professor C. Chelifer, began in either 1945, 1914, or 1789.[61] In any event, *Artorius* treats its three alleged Dark Ages as thematically equivalent. The Second Dark Age mirrors the First when Myrddin draws a parallel between King Arthur and King Minos, and Heath-Stubbs draws a further parallel between Arthur's fallen kingdom and the disintegration of the British Empire. Nevertheless, from the First Dark Age arose an epic poet afflicted with blindness, Homer, and from the Third Dark Age arises its own blind epic poet: Heath-Stubbs himself. In the text's boldest and most self-referential passage, Gwion muses on the necessary conditions for epic poetry in the future:

> We evoke an order: an interim is assigned –
> *As a poet, perhaps, in the future predicament*
> *Of the doubtfulness and dullness of a Third Dark Age*
> Might undertake the unfashionable inditing of an epic,
> Though his colleagues and his confrères confined themselves merely
> To little linguistic and logical constructs,
> Or deployed their egos in the Dionysiac delirium
> Of surreal illumination, or psychedelic self-indulgence –
> He might establish an order, by the example of his experiment,
> Driving his through-road across the thickets of thoughtlessness,
> And he also if temporarily, might turn the tide –
> But they come back, they come back again, those currents of meaninglessness;
> Language lags, and languishes away –
> The Daughter of Chaos reconsolidates her reign,
> Universal Darkness, and delivers it to the dunces. (emphasis added)[62]

58 *Artorius*, X p. 570.
59 *Artorius*, X p. 570.
60 *Artorius*, X p. 570.
61 *Artorius*, IX p. 565.
62 *Artorius*, I p. 503.

Despite the writing of epics being unfashionable today, Heath-Stubbs sees little choice given the allegedly dismal state of modern verse. He hold the Beats ('psychedelic self-indulgence'), automatic writing ('surreal illumination'), and the New York School ('linguistic and logical constructs') in little regard.[63] Yet this passage also articulates a vision of poets coming together to evoke order through art. Against the ravages of Chaos's daughter, Chance or Tyche, an interim order *can* be forged. Of course, such orders cannot last forever. Inevitably, meaning gives way to meaninglessness; the cycle must continue. But *poeisis* provides temporary hope.

Still, one bare means exists by which humanity can escape history's mutability. Soon after Heath-Stubbs describes Ovid's cyclical Four Ages in 'Calliope III', his passage turns to the Roman festival of Saturnalia. The pagan Romans celebrated this holiday at winter solstice, and Christians later absorbed these rituals into Christmas. From this exemplary syncretism, though, comes *Artorius's* sole hope of historical teleology:

> The stable, for once, was the centre of the world;
> Not the dialectical dragons, but the dumb ox
> And the ass in humility, hung their heads
> By a manger of straw, where Mary the Mother
> Looked at her Love and hushed Him with a lullaby.
> From the Solstice of Capricorn the Cross stems up,
> The ends of the transom transfixing the equinoxes,
> The summit at Cancer – Christ in the circle
> Of the stars of fatality, to ensure our freedom,
> Slain for our salvation, in the celestial wheel,
> From the foundation of the world; He was found worthy. [...]
> Not the mirth of Saturn's mythical magisterium,
> But the felt prescience of a possible freedom
> Eschatologically offered at the end of the ages,
> Whose shoots are burgeoning, and begin now to show.[64]

With that opening pun on *stable,* Christ's Nativity introduces a new directionality into history. Against the perpetual and purposeless succession of events in time, the endless cycle, the ox and the ass provide a *potential* alternative to Gwyrthyr ap Greidawl and Gwynn ap Nudd, the dialectal dragons whose dreams, says Gwion, are the 'horrors of our history'. I emphasise 'potential'. Traditionally, Christian historians have seen the Nativity as the moment when eternity enters history, but Hearth-Stubbs suggests something different. In *Artorius*, the Nativity does not *change*

63 Indeed, Heath-Stubbs once compared the work of John Ashberry, the New York poet, to the 'unending verbal drivel' of the New Apocalyptics (*Hindsights*, p. 126).
64 *Artorius*, VII pp. 570–71.

human history – it only *promises* ('guarantees') freedom at the 'end of the ages'.[65] Only someday, in other words, can humanity choose other than what the Celestial Wheel ordains … but that time certainly is not now. Nor can we imagine when that time might be. There is no 'Christian historicism' in *Artorius* – only a vague promise of eschatological freedom of the will at history's end.

Yet such vague hopes offer little consolation for anyone still trapped by history, ruled by fate, and governed the Celestial Wheel. This is where Heath-Stubbs finds *amor fati* – Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence of the Same – a useful concept. Freedom consists in actively choosing our fates despite those fates' predetermination. In *Hindsights*, Heath-Stubbs admits to having read 'quite a lot of [Nietzsche] when a boy', and he comes closest to articulating this love of fate in *Artorius* during Artorius's death scene.[66] Wishing to aid and comfort his king's departed spirit, the loyal Bedwyr says

> […]. But I must not:
> We stand as sentries, and the order
> For knock-off is not yet given.
> And I have his orders too. I go
> To throw the bitter sword [Caliburn] into the bitter lake.
> By that gesture, I affirm, on his behalf,
> My own and his existence – not bound
> By myth, the starry returning wheels.[67]

Through this affirmation, Bedwyr chooses voluntarily to fulfil his remaining duties because of the uncritical love he bears for Artorius, his lord. I do not read Heath-Stubbs as saying that Bedwyr literally unbinds himself from the 'starry returning wheels', since that would contravene the entirely of *Artorius,* yet, despite the intransigence of the Celestial Wheel, Bedwyr actively chooses the role that necessity has allotted him: the orders that bind and obligate him.

A muted double vision of freedom thus appears within *Artorius*. One is an eschatological but complete freedom at the end of time, and the other is a lesser freedom obtaining within concrete historical time. Both, though, are compatible with historical cyclicity. By way of analogy, let us imagine a coin set spinning on a tabletop. Several simultaneous motions apply to this coin. One motion, of course, involves the coin rotating rapidly along its own axis. Another motion is the coin as it circles the tabletop. (Technically, as friction from the tabletop slows down the coin, these circles will grow wider, but for now let's ignore the impact of friction.) In this

65 *Artorius*, VII p. 571.
66 *Hindsight*, p. 69.
67 *Artorius*, XI p. 591.

analogy, the spinning coin represents the Celestial Wheel, which rotates along its own axis in perpetuity. The Celestial Wheel, though, like the coin on the tabletop, follows a secondary circular path through the cosmos. With the Nativity, however, a *third* motion is introduced into this complex system. Now imagine that the table in our analogy suddenly starts moving forward in linear fashion. For the Celestial Wheel, its primary and secondary motions – its circular rotations – remain in force, but this third linear motion is goal-directed: it seeks the freedom promised by the Nativity. In this way, *Artorius* maintains the cyclical vision of history conveyed by its symbolic superstructures, but a light appears at the end of history's tunnel.[68]

The outstanding virtue of Heath-Stubbs's system is how well he reconciles pagan ways of thought with Christian ones. Whereas Milton had condemned all pagan deities as devils, Heath-Stubbs supports a wider tolerance. Although the Nativity enjoys a special status in *Artorius*, the poet sees all religions – including Christianity – as partaking in universal mythic archetypes … and Heath-Stubbs's Annwyn structure, which significantly does not take effect until *Artorius's* fourth book, structurally parallels the late arrival of the Nativity on the world-historical stage. With this observation, then, I wish to conclude. As suggested, most readers have probably overlooked *Artorius* because of its great difficulty, and this rich, fascinating late modernist epic has, sadly, never enjoyed the paratextual aids that have eased critics or other readers into the text. In the first half of my article, I therefore supplied one such paratextual aid with Figure 1. Nonetheless, Heath-Stubbs's classical and medieval superstructures are more than just late modernist window-dressing for a poetics of difficulty. They actively contribute to a remarkable synthesis of the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. *Artorius* then applies this synthesis toward a stoic endurance of postimperial Great Britain – a moment witnessed personally by Heath-Stubbs during the Suez Crisis – by rejecting imperialist nostalgia and coming, finally, to terms with the sinfulness of human empire.

68 Heath-Stubbs's anticipates this complicated conception in his early poem 'Alexandria'. In this text, Christ appears as a figure 'standing among the stars, / Our Fortune, in the firmament' (*Collected* 302–03). As John E. Van Domelen observes, the 'entire poem could be said to lead to the *breaking* of the wheel of endless recurrence' (60, emphasis mine.) *Artorius*, however, I suggest, instead seems to suggest synthesis, not diremption. Moreover, as poem in honor of St. Catherine, formerly Hypatia, 'Alexandria' attempts to confute 'all false doctrine of Greece or the wide Orient' (*Collected* 303); however, the frequent mythic equivalences in *Artorius* demonstrate a considerately more moderate view in Heath-Stubbs's maturity. *All* myths, including the Christian one, now participate in the same universal archetypes. Even the pagan astrological framework of *Artorius* deftly incorporates Christianity. According to some astrologers, the Christian era coincides with the Age of Pisces, a 2,100-year period marked by the precession of the equinoxes. In acknowledgement of this, some early Christians employed the Ichthys symbol to indicate their religious affiliation.

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