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Gracia Fay Ellwood

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Matters of Grave Import: The Third Heaven

Matters of Grave Import

a column

The Third Heaven

Gracia Fay Ellwood

The Third Heaven is one of the background concepts of Charles Williams' *Arthuriad*. Its immediate source may be II Corinthians 12:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.... whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast....

We are not told what the first and second heavens are. But of the third we learn that Paul (the repeated embarrassed references to boasting make it clear that the "man in Christ" is himself) received there his calling, that the experience was paradisaical, inexpressible, and engaged his being at a point where the concepts of body versus spirit could not be used.

Williams develops the idea of the third heaven in his "The Calling of Taliessin." It is broached in Taliessin's riddling song derived from the *Mabinogi*: "I rose to the third heaven with her of the penitence / and was tangled through every sense by the hazel bush." It is one of many polarities in the song--the narrator is both the lowest and the highest, represented by his patron saint Marv Magdalene, the despised whore whose spiritual union with Christ made her a saint in glory.

The third heaven is sketched (hardly described) in the central scene of the poem. Taliessin, on the road to Byzantium between Broceliande in the west and Logres-to-be in the east, meets Merlin and Brisen. Night falls, and the three lie down to sleep.

The cone's shadow of earth fell into space and into (other than space) the third heaven. In the third heaven are the living unspoken truths,

climax tranquil in Venus.

The power of the third heaven is approaching earth, and Merlin seizes upon this moment to enact a magical rite.

The third heaven represents the meeting of the many, the separate, the polarized, in oneness. Heart and mind, often at war on earth, are there united in the feeling intellect, Imagination. The splendor of the Glory is manifested in the lowest and most meaningless things: "the stones of the waste glimmered like summer stars." The summer stars themselves express a polarity, for the stars visible in summer are the signs of Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces, whose force is most strongly felt when the sun passes through them in the winter.

Merlin's rite brings to the consciousness of the entranced Taliessin a union of separate times, the present moment and future moments: a future in which he journeys through the themes of the Empire on his return from Byzantium, a later future in which Camelot is built and Logres founded, a future in which the grail-ship sails to Sarras. Logres itself is a meeting of opposites, the conscious Order of the City, Byzantium, and the unconscious formless Potentiality of the Sea-Wood, Broceliande. Arthur and Pelles are one. Camelot (the world) and Carbonek (the sacred); the light of Byzantium (Prov-

idence realized on earth) and the light from behind the sun, Sarras, the ultimate.

The third heaven is further developed in "The Son of Lancelot," where the emphasis is on the meeting-point of pain and bliss, death and birth. Europe is in the grip of cold and famine, beset by wolves: the Princess Helayne is near her time. Merlin carries out another rite, opening three circles which correspond to the three heavens. The first gives him an external vision of the winter-bound continent, similar to Frodo's from Amon Hen. The second gives him entry to the minds of the pivotal human beings in Logres--Arthur, Guinevere, Taliessin, Bors, Blanchefleur. The third takes him into the third heaven, where "fixed is the full." His vision focusses on the central event, the birth of Galahad; the suffering of the Empire is identified with the contraction and dilation of Helayne's labor.

Galahad is born. His infant smile brings a flash of light over the Empire, "shining white on the sullen white of the snow:" "his wail was a song and a sound in the third heaven", two expressions of the union of opposites. In the third heaven it is known that this moment of Lancelot's humiliation is his greatest glory.

The union is further shown in the encounter of the two wolves, the metamorphized Lancelot and Merlin, the one seeking to devour Galahad, the other to become a cradle for him. The terrible blow that flings Lancelot nine yards through the air to strike his head on the ground begins the process of returning him to human shape.

The union of good and evil in the third heaven is not a state which, to certain thinkers of Uncle Andrew's sort, meant they could do what evil they chose. It is a state in which evil is swallowed up by good, anguish by peace: thus "climax tranquil in Venus," Love.

The third heaven is roughly imagined by Williams to be a sphere surrounding the earth at the height of its cone-shaped shadow, but at the same time it is asserted to be not in space: of course it is an everywhere-present reality.

The concept of the union of opposites is certainly not original with Williams: other poets have used it, as have philosophers, and it is a commonplace with mystics. For example, Lady Juliane of Norwich uses the hazel image in a manner similar to that of Williams. Like Galahad's eyes, "polished brown as hazel-nuts," she imagines all of created reality as a hazelnut. The idea of "climax tranquil in Venus" she expresses in her famous lines "It is sooth that sin is the cause of all this pain: but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Nicholas of Cusa stressed the limits of the human mind, which perforce sees many things in opposition to one another. Using images from geometry he asserted that God embraces all things in perfect unity, the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*. George Fox taught that there is a "hidden unity," a Peace at the heart of reality manifest in every person, beyond multiplicities and enmities. (This is the basis for the name Friends, for Quaker group mysticism and Quaker activism.)

To claim that opposites are one, that "all luck is good," that "all manner of thing shall be well," is manifestly absurd. No mind can satisfactorily explain away the basic tensions of reality, and especially the problem of evil, by simply saying that everything's fine, all's right with the world. These assertions, if they have validity at all, come from human perceptions in a dimension inaccessible to the mind, a dimension where concepts and categories, dependent as they are on separateness, no longer work. It can as well be imagined as "above" us, or within us, as any other way.

But the absurdity of the claim is not likely to stop mystics and poets. In some way or other, from all corners of the world, they will continue to tell us that the stones by the wayside are Elven gems, that they glimmer like summer stars, that they are the sapphires, emeralds and beryls that make up the foundations of the City.



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CONTRIBUTORS

We are pleased to begin this new feature to introduce the writers of articles and the cover artists.

Mark Allaby

Born in Scunthorpe, England, a son of a Church of England clergyman. After two years' army service in the U.K. and Nigeria, he graduated from St. Chad's College, Durham. He taught in a teacher training college in Nyasaland for three years. He currently teaches English to children aged 10-13. His main interests are trees, poetry and mysticism.

Sarah Beach

She was born in Michigan and moved to Houston in 1969, where she received her B.A. in English from the University of Houston in 1976. Her M.A. in English is from the University of Texas, her thesis being on Beowulf. Her main area of study is English Medieval literature, having also studied Old Irish. She writes, draws and paints when time and inspiration allow, and claims to be a lazy musician.

Rhona Beare

She teaches at the University of Newcastle, Classics Department, in New South Wales, Australia. She had correspondence with J. R. R. Tolkien. Three responses to her are printed in his Letters. She had probed deeply into little known details about Tolkien and his works.

M. L. Carter

She has her B.A. from William and Mary, her M.A. from the University of Hawaii, and is working for her Ph.D. at UC Irvine. Her dissertation will be on the Gothic Novel. She has published more than one book, and is interested in Supernatural Fantasy, role-playing games, poems, and Vampires.

Brad W. Foster

He lives in Irving, Texas. After six years of college, he now works as a free-lance artist as the head of Jabberwocky Graphix. His interests include cats, books, and fusion jazz. He has published a portfolio of his art.

Gerald V. Gallespie

He has his B.A. from the University of Massachusetts, and his Masters of Library Science from the University of Rhode Island. He is the Assistant-Supervisor of the Reference Dept of the Springfield City Library, and is a graduate student of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His speciality is Medieval Literature, especially Old Irish, Middle Welsh, Old and Middle English, and Old French.

Bettina L. Knapp

B.A. : Barnard College; M.A. & Ph.D. : Columbia University; Sorbonne Certificat. She is a Professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of CUNY, and Lecturer at the C.G. Jung Foundation of New York. She has published

22 books, has a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Grant from the American Philosophical Society, Palmes Academiques (awarded by the French Government), Medal from the Alliance Francaise, a member of the National Humanities Faculty, and is President of the North-East Modern Language Association.

Anita Moss

Assistant Professor of English, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she teaches courses in fantasy, children's literature, and Victorian literature. She has published a number of articles and reviews in a variety of periodicals, and has also appeared on regional and national programs on children's literature and fantasy. Currently she is at work on a critical study of the works of E. Nesbit, and is the U.S. Editor of Children's literature in education.

Mary Ellen Pitts

She has her B.A. from the University of North Alabama and her M.A. from the University of Florida. She has taught for several years at Western Kentucky University and Memphis State University. In the Spring of 1982 she is moving to Florida to complete the resident requirement for her Ph.D. in English. She plays a harpsichord she has made herself as well as an Ozark Mountaineer dulcimer.

Teresa Noelle Roberts

She is a freshman at Hamilton College deciding to major in English or Comparative Literature, but really to investigate whether or not there are unicorns in upstate New York. She has had an interest in fantasy since reading Tolkien at the age of nine, and an interest in unicorns since seeing the Cloisters in New York.

Mantred Zimmermann

He entered the University of Marburg, West Germany, in 1969. 1973-74 he was an affiliated student at Pembroke College Cambridge, where he first read The Lord of the Rings. 1976-79 he was a Research Assistant in Medieval German Language and Literature at Marburg University. He finished his Ph.D. in 1979. After 18 months as a teacher in secondary education, he is now back on the staff of Marburg University.

