

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy: A Short Critical Survey

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With the publication of *Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*¹, a 479-page volume edited by Alvin More Jr. and Rama Poonambulam Coomaraswamy, (1988) four hundred of the several thousand letters written by the Anglo-Sinhalese thinker were made accessible to a wider readership for the first time. A third of these are, to all intents and purposes, 'mini-essays' of high speculative tenor which throw light on Coomaraswamy's metaphysical and aesthetic system, as yet ill-assimilated by European academic circles.

A new collection of writings, *What is Civilization? and other Essays*² and the definitive bibliographical inventory, *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: Bibliography/Index*³, both edited by his son Rama, make the neglect of the author, a short critical profile of whom appears below, still less acceptable⁴.

Half Asian, half Anglo-Saxon, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, in his studies of Indo-European art, philosophy and religion, explored the vestiges of the ancient world, the surviving fragments of metaphysics and beauty casually dismissed as superstition by the modern world. He revealed the ritual character of art and craft, the deep mythical strata of the creative imagination, the primarily intellectual, and only secondarily sensory, foundations of aesthetic pleasure. His social and political ideas, his controversial challenge of modern 'bugbears', though influenced by circumstances and settings almost entirely alien to those of today in Asia as in the West, offer arguments of enormous relevance to the cause of a global civilization - providing a platform for the reconciliation and mutual enrichment of the knowledge that doubts and the knowledge that is certain.

A man born twice

When in September 1947, shortly after celebrating his seventieth birthday, Ananda Coomaraswamy died, unexpectedly cutting short his preparations to return with his wife to India ("We mean to remain in India, now a free country, for the rest of our lives," he had announced to his friends)⁵ there began that assiduous, patient and devoted reconstruction of the image of both man and thinker by scholars from every part of the world, which continues to this day. "I shall be content," he had remarked on one occasion, "if my writing have been of help to no more than four or five people." How wrong he was in his

calculations! - Countless people had cause to thank him, and his teachings bear richer fruit with the years.

Among the first to pay tribute to his memory, in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, was Sheikh Abdel Yahya (alias Rene Guenon), the scholar and interpreter of traditional thought, whose name had frequently been linked with Coomaraswamy's between the Thirties and mid-Forties, the most prolific period for both men⁶. Indeed, this meeting of minds ideally calls for separate analytical treatment, seeing that in 1977, the anniversary of Coomaraswamy's birth, it was the driving force behind studies by distinguished exponents of esotericism of the various currents - from Frithjof Schuon to Whitall N. Perry, from Marco Pallis to Shaya. Meanwhile experts in Oriental thought, comparative scholars, art historians and historians of religion (Mircea Eliade in particular) were building up that vast body of critical writings examined in his doctoral thesis on Coomaraswamy by Roger Lipsey, subsequent editor of the *Princeton Selected Essays* and author of the biography (see note 3). The latter was made possible by the generous collaboration of Coomaraswamy's widow, Dona Luisa, and after her death, of their son Rama. When his father died, Pallis records, Rama was a small boy coming to grips for the first time with the study of Sanskrit and Tibetan. He went on to become a surgeon, a profession which he still practices today, in Connecticut⁷.

The index of Coomaraswamy's works, edited by the National Museum of New Delhi⁸, is an invaluable source of more than biographical information. If one skims through it from the first to the last title, spanning the years 1900 to 1951, there writ clear are the vicissitudes of Coomaraswamy's life and the multiplicity of his talents - as natural scientist, philologist and aesthete. The wide dissemination of the writings and, in many cases, their extempore nature - due to chance professional occasions, to the vast web of his relations with other scholars, but also to spontaneous flights of the mind, to the sheer pleasure of research as an end in itself - explain his authorial presence under the imprints of both major and minor publishers. Indeed, in his youth he became his own publisher when, in his country house at Broad Campden, he installed the Kelmscott Press, formerly the property of William Morris, who had used it for his remarkable edition of Chaucer, designed and printed with such painstaking care. Coomaraswamy himself hand-bound all 1075 copies of *The Deeper Meaning of Struggle* (1907), which set forth the theory behind the independence programme for Sri Lanka and India; the 425 copies of *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), the work in which he revealed his precocious expertise in that neglected field; and the 279 copies of *The Aims of Indian Art*, in which he outlined the best means of safeguarding the artistic and archaeological patrimony of the sub-continent. But the catalogue has further resonances, for if we give biographical body to the places, dates and

titles found there, there emerges a fairly complete picture of Coomaraswamy the man.

His surname reflects the Tamil origin of his father's family, who settled in Jaffna (Sri Lanka) at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. His father, Sir Muthu Coomaraswamy Mudalyar - the first non-Christian Asian barrister to be admitted to the London law-courts- and his mother, Elizabeth Clay Beeby, a lady of a good Kentish family, celebrated Ananda's birth in Colombo on 22nd. August 1877. The choice of name (Sanskrit for 'Beatitude') was to prove auspicious, and even if there is no way of knowing what hopes the parents had for their son, the elder Coomaraswamy's habit of study and his strict Hindu devoutness can only have left their mark on Ananda. Sir Muthu, however, died so early that the child was left without so much as a visual memory of him; while his mother's decision to move back to England was the first decisive event in the life of that only child. In the schools and drawing rooms of the best London society, he absorbed and adopted the manners of his social class, but his upbringing and innermost *forma mentis* remained Brahmin, and the ties with the house of his ancestors, encouraged not least by his mother, remained firm : at the age of ten he received instruction from his cousin for the Shivaite rite of the second birth, followed by his consecration in the family temple.

Coomaraswamy's Science degree and brilliant doctoral thesis in Geology at London University earned him the post of Head of Minerological Research in Colombo at the age of twenty-seven. The first thirty titles in the catalogue, when set against the succeeding fifty (though a complete inventory would run to a thousand) strike a curious note: *Serendibite, A new Boro-silicate from Ceylon, Radiolaria in Gondwana Beds Near Madras, The Point de Galle Group* or the report on his discovery of thorianite, would have more than sufficed to make for a distinguished career. Yet this career was, so to speak, 'nipped in the bud'. Indeed, the Guide to the Colombo Museum, dated 1905, provides the first signs that his interests were shifting. Even if the text contains a meticulously detailed account of the rocks and minerals of Ceylon, the inventory of archaeological items, of the statuary and ancient bronzes show that his study of the forms of nature had now joined hands with that of artistic forms.

The genesis of the aesthetic theory formulated years later on the Thomist principle : "Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation"⁹ should be viewed in the light of those parallel approaches of the geologist and naturalist with the art-historian at the outset of Coomaraswamy's career - work which brought his life and ideas to their second decisive turning point. The on-the-spot scientific investigations gave way to feverish inland expeditions : the ancient

capitals of the Buddhist kingdoms with their stone colossi revealed the infinite beauty of the works of the past, side by side with the brimming and exuberant beauty of the villages, a veritable living archive of peasant culture. A beauty and culture which cried out to be known, appreciated, cherished and saved from "corrupting" Western influence. Yet the first time that Coomaraswamy had heard that adjective uttered, he was thousands of miles from his island- in London, in the circle of William Morris, the poet and social reformer who preached the regeneration of the consciousness and welfare of the masses through the revival of manual artisan activities (in printing techniques, as noted above, interior decoration, ornamental design and cloth-dyeing). In Morris's circle much was said about the impoverishment of the quality of life in already heavily industrialized mass societies, such as England. Influenced by these ideas and by Morris's personal charisma, the young Coomaraswamy, as his biographers emphasize to a man, became, in the crucial years of his coming to maturity as an art-historian and of his political commitment, an oriental William Morris.

On the plane of intellectual creativity, he wrote, composed, translated, collected art objects, catalogued and interpreted them, building up a history of the minor arts and of iconography in south-east Asia which has not been improved on. In India he was particularly drawn to the art of the Mogul Renaissance between the 16th and 17th centuries, and to the extraordinary symbiosis (a real aesthetic *koine*), between the arts of the court, such as the miniature, and popular and local arts, permeated both by the motifs of classical epic and by the devotional fervour of the pan-Indian cult of Krishna, with its iconographic counterpoint of mystics and sensuality.

On the political plane, in Calcutta at the right hand of Rabindranath Tagore, Coomaraswamy embraced *Swadeshi*, the Gandhian independence movement, and promoted initiatives for safeguarding the Indian artistic patrimony, arousing perplexity and embarrassment in New Delhi no less than in London.

In the ten years from 1906 to 1916, the catalogue lists writings on questions of social criticism and political theory, two translations from the Icelandic *Voluspa*, essays on musical aesthetics, poetry criticism and analytical studies of folklore and iconography - such as the famous *Dance of Shiva*, the French translation of which, as Eliade recalls, appeared with long, enthusiastic review by Romain Rolland¹⁰. Besides these, there are monographs on the arts of the Mogul court: *Rajput Painting*, *Mughal Portraiture* and *Originality in Mughal Painting*. These, together with his precious collection of miniatures, were, so to speak, Coomaraswamy's passport to the United States when, as *persona non grata* after refusing to join the coloured troops in the British Army on the outbreak of the First World War,

he accepted Denman W. Ross's offer of a post at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The section of the museum devoted to Indian, Islamic and Far-eastern art, one of the richest and best documented outside Asia, and the scrupulous contributions to its *Fine Arts Bulletin* are entirely Coomaraswamy's work.

Towards Vanaprasthya

From 1932, when he married for the fourth time, but particularly in the ten years that followed, several subtle interior changes, which did not however escape the notice of his family, imperceptibly modified Coomaraswamy's life. What was happening was at once inevitable and momentous : he was growing old. Indian wisdom was careful to provide a system of rules for the passage from one to the other of the four main stages of life - childhood, youth, maturity and old age - assigning to each the style and setting fitting to it. Thus, after *brahmacarin* (study and education) and *grhasthya* (professional responsibility and marriage), *vanaprasthya* and *sanyasin* prescribed the abandonment of family and social duties, and the espousal of an alert and aloof solitude.

Coomaraswamy adapted to the style of *vanaprasthya* by degrees. He began by cutting down on public commitments, the hours not spent among his books were taken up in tending his garden, long tramps through the country, solitary walks along the seashore. The waters, the earth, the sky, the sun- all the forms of pulsing life now met in the rarefied spaces of a unified mind.

On the evening of his last birthday he took leave of his friends in the age-old manner : palms joined, murmuring *svaga*, he explained that this form of valediction contained a dual desire : "May you come into your own, that is may I know and become what I am, no longer this man So-and-So, but the Self that is also the Being of all beings, my self and your Self"¹¹.

The paths of writing

A few words on Coomaraswamy's style of writing would not be out of place here. And what comes into mind once more is a village, one of those many inland villages of Sri Lanka and India with which he was familiar : a jumble of rooftops, a widening in the street and a temple. But one's mind runs still more strongly along the roads leading to this village : highway and narrow secondary tracks. The contrast between the two goes back to the Vedas, where it recurs at once literally, allegorically and anagogically. *Marga*, the main or 'master' road, derives from *mrg*, to pursue, to go hunting, beating trails. A 'hunt' which in Vedic times meant both physically capturing one's prey and ritually hunting after the divine : two forms of nourishment which, though on different planes, are homologous, indispensable and effective.

Desi ('path') in turn derives from the word *dis* ('to point to'), and stands for native, local, secular as opposed to *marga*, which means other-worldly, solar.

Highways and byways run through Coomaraswamy's writings too. the former are the spacious and luminous course of his exposition. The writer is there to pursue and capture his prey, namely his subject and this requires subterfuges, unnerving pauses in the chase and even the use of traps. The more arduous and intricate the subject, the more elusive; and so disorienting manoeuvres are called for, the beating of secondary, 'local' trails. In the text this network of paths is formed by the notes, a maze in which the reader can easily get lost. But losing oneself proves a blessing, since by persevering, one regains the highway with the advantage of having acquired some inside experience of an enterprise which has called into play the knowledge, memory, attention and heart of the writer. "I have not remained unaffected by the doctrines I have met with and to which the study of art has led me, " Coomaraswamy had confided at the farewell dinner- "*Intellige ut credas*, 'Understand in order to believe', in my case has had its effect"¹².

Then there is the question of language, the type of 'dialect' used by Coomaraswamy in his treatises and scholarly essays :

We all speak an identical spiritual language which, though employing different words, expresses the same ideas, and very often by way of identical expressions.

To put it another way: there exists a universally intelligible language- not simply verbal but visual as well - of the fundamental ideas on which the various civilizations have been built¹³.

The command of many ancient languages - from Old Norse to Sanskrit to Pali - had enabled him to distinguish that essential invariance at its sources and to make it his own. This explains why his writings dense as they are with references to the major texts of Eastern and Western thought and to the celebrated commentaries on them, are at one with these works, echoing yet never betraying them.

The way West and the way East

Aesthetics, as Coomaraswamy conceives it - following a line of thought which dates back to the Tenth Century - is nothing other than a branch of metaphysics, one of the 'local' byways which leads out into the highway of ultimate conceptual abstractions. Western and Eastern metaphysics had seen eye to eye in this matter until the eve of the European Renaissance. A shared outlook

founded not on external contingent circumstances, registered by the graph of history from its perspective of linear time, but on a structure of the human mind common to us all, which forms its world picture (the 'real' and the 'possible', the 'thinkable', the 'imaginary' and the 'imaginal') along common lines, notwithstanding differences in cultural latitude. Hence the importance of the comparative method, which enables one to perceive analogies and constants in cultural models spatially and temporally distant from one another.

For the work of art and the aesthetic experience therein derived to work as vehicles of metaphysical knowledge, the rules which they share need to be as rigorous as those of a rite. To a greater or lesser extent - in sacred or secular art respectively - every artisan or artistic operation is a liturgy. The artist and artisan, therefore, are required to submit to an exacting and scrupulous discipline, a form of yoga.

The whole process, up to the point of manufacture, belongs to the established order of personal devotions, in which worship is paid to an image mentally conceived (*dhyatva yajet*); in any case, the principle involved is that true knowledge of an object is not obtained by merely empirical observation or reflex registration (*pratyaksa*), but only when the knower and known, seer and seen meet in an act transcending distinction (*anayor advaita*)¹⁴.

Emotional gratification and so-called 'freedom of expression' are, consequently, discouraged, in favour, however, of a subtler and more rewarding conquest - as in the case of those Taoist and Zen Landscape painters, bound to the rules and yet, or rather for this very reason, triumphing in the unexpected freedom of the brush-stroke which, appears as it were, 'out of the blue'. At that moment, mind, hand and heart respond in unison, and the artist who "becomes what he does" is overwhelmed with joy. As for the ladder of the nine aesthetic 'tastes' (*rasa*), from it the Indian rhetoricians constructed a geometry of the passions, with Drama as its supreme backcloth but also its vertical therapeutic solution, as, incidentally, Aristotle had earlier understood.

Patently, well aware of how insensitive the modern European mind is to such reasoning, Coomaraswamy formulates and re-formulates that single lesson, applying it to the most diverse contexts. To cite an example, in *What is Civilization?*, a paper written in memory of Albert Schweitzer, he showed how the Sanskrit word *purusa* ('man') contains together with the idea of 'civilization', that of *polis*, St. Augustine's dual 'city', in the same sense that *purusa* is dual: *duo sunt in homine* - the I 'person', to whom immortality is denied, and the impersonal self to which death is denied¹⁵.

Writing in 1958, Umberto Eco, to his credit, illustrated Coomaraswamy's thought in terms of its relationship to *Indian aesthetics and Western aesthetics*:

Western philosophy has had Plotinus, but it has also vigorously resisted too great a commitment to Plotinus; and if it is also true that such doctrines as Schopenhauer's of the 'pure contemplating eye' form a legitimate part of Western aesthetics, nevertheless, since one has to choose one's ascendants well, we prefer to recognize, as the most vital characteristic of Western art, the functional, communicative (rather than revelatory) conception of art, and the constant attempt to extend the artistic and aesthetic to discursive activity as well, without limiting them to the intuitive moment, or reserving them for the creative and diffusive activity of an All which speaks within us, and in which we in turn should lose ourselves at the moment of artistic apprehension¹⁶.

A reflection admirable for its honesty, since it lays bare the calculation behind the intellectual systems which have triumphed in the West in the modern era. Every individual clearly has the right to choose his own ascendants well. Coomaraswamy exercised that right, calculating in turn the effects of his choice: "one becomes what one thinks", the Upanishad reminds us.

Notes and References

1. Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Oxford University Press, 1988.
2. Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Golgenooze Press, Ipswich, 1989.
3. Prologos Books, Berwick on Tweed, 1988. Further bibliographical details may be found in the 'Bibliography Appendix' of Selected Letters, cit., pp.449 seq.; while the most complete and authoritative biographical source to date is the third volume of the trilogy A.K.Coomaraswamy, Selected Papers (I: Traditional Art and Symbolism; II: Metaphysics; III: His life and Work), ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, Princeton University Press, 1977.
4. To date, some ten of A.K.Coomaraswamy's works, comprising both complete volumes and essays, have been translated into Italian. The author of the present article has given considerable attention to Coomaraswamy's aesthetic thought in: *L'armonia estetica. Lineamenti di una civiltà laotziana*, Dedalo, Bari, 1974; *La patola e la forma*, Dedalo, Bari, 1977; *La cognizione estetica tra Oriente e Occidente*, Guerini & Associati, Milano, 1987. She has also introduced and translated

- Transformation of Nature in Art* (*La trasfigurazione della natura nell'arte*, Rusconi, Milano, 1977) and *Christian & Oriental Philosophy of Art* (*Come interpretare un'opera d'arte*, Rusconi, Milano, 1977). She is the editor of a selection of aphorisms, *Aforismi di Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, Stile Regina, Roma, 1988.
5. He made this announcement during the dinner in celebration of his seventieth birthday at the Harvard Club, commemorated by J. Marshall Plumer in 'The Farewell Dinner', *Sources of Wisdom*, ed. Rama Coomaraswamy, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Sri Lanka, 1981.
 6. In 'A Fateful Meeting of minds : A. K. Coomaraswamy and Rene Guenon', *DILIP*, Jan-Feb 1978, Marco Pallis recalls how it was at his instigation, and that of his friend Nicholson, that the two thinkers first came into contact. Many of Coomaraswamy's most important essays were translated and reprinted over the years in *Etudes traditionnelles*.
 7. Rama P. Coomaraswamy, guardian and editor of his father's works, is himself an essayist on religious, and particularly Christian, themes. See, for example, *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition*, Perennial Books, London, n.d.
 8. *A Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Paintings and Books in Honour of the Birth Centenary of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, National Museum, New Delhi, 1976. (The index of the works is updated to 1951).
 9. See 'The Nature of Medieval Art', *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1956, previously published by Luzac & Co., 1943, under the title 'Why Exhibit Works of Art?..
 10. Translated by Madeleine Rolland in 1922, the book met with immediate critical success and was discussed in the leading European literary journals. In Bucharest Mircea Eliade reviewed it on two occasions, in 1937 and 1943, as he himself recalls in 'Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin: concerning the *Theosophia perennis*' in *Briser le toit de la maison*, intr. and notes by A. Paruit, Gallimard, Paris, 1986.
 11. In 'the Farewell Dinner', *cit.* See note 5.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. In *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, New York, 1946.
 14. *Transformation of Nature in Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1934, p.6.
 15. 'What is Civilization?' and *Other Essays*, ed. Rama Coomaraswamy, *cit.*
 16. Umberto Eco, *La definizione dell'arte*, 1st. ed., Bompiani, Milano, 1958, P. 77. Translation from the original.