

## Coomaraswamy, Vols. I-III edited by Roger Lipsey

(Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press; Vol. I, 560 pp., \$30.00; Vol. II, 464 pp., \$30.00; Vol. III, 400 pp., \$17.50)

### Martin Green

The name Ananda Coomaraswamy seems to be one to which the reading public responds only vaguely. In some ways such indifference is appropriate, and he might even have welcomed it; for he saw his mission as being the education, or reeducation, of professors. He wrote for colleagues and professionals, not the general public. He was one of the great footnoters and would dart aside from his argument, in pursuit of an image or a rite, from century to century, language to language, and art to art. But in other ways it is wrong that he should be lost to the view of the general public, for what he wanted to teach the professors was something very general and large—the nature of life. He called it rather the nature of mind, or the *Philosophia Perennis*. But it was in effect a new religion; the old and only religion, but so forgotten, so buried under the wrong sort of science and art, that it seemed new.

Coomaraswamy died in 1947, and work began immediately on a new edition of his works. It was to be an edition that would concentrate on the essays of his last fifteen years, when he was the scholar I have just described. (He was a prolific writer at all stages of his career; his bibliography contains a thousand items; and the stages are quite distinct, one from another.) Only now has Princeton produced these three volumes, a biography, a selection of papers on *Metaphysics*, and another selection on *Traditional Art and Symbolism*. As Roger Lipsey says, Coomaraswamy belonged to the Bollingen family of scholars. He helped Joseph Campbell (author of *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*) prepare for Bollingen publication the posthumous papers of Heinrich Zimmer, the Indologist. Those names

give some sense of where to locate Coomaraswamy intellectually, but he was everywhere; a Sanskrit and Pali scholar, an art historian, mythographer, metaphysician, and Indologist.

He is interesting in more than academic ways. His whole life story deserves and rewards study. Unfortunately, Roger Lipsey is too much his disciple to tell that story. He sees the life very much from Coomaraswamy's own Plotinian point of view—being embodied is a cause of shame to the spirit, and it would be no act of reverence to depict that embodiment. Thus though Coomaraswamy had four wives and other affairs, Lipsey tells us that "finally" love was of no importance in his life, and so we aren't even told the dates of the marriages and divorces. Nor is Lipsey interested in the Indian or English phases of the career; he has not even found out the facts of Coomaraswamy's leaving England for good in 1917. The book is in its way very knowledgeable, and written with great care and some eloquence; but it is not a biography.

As the reader pieces together the main events of this life, and especially if he makes reference to the parallel life of Coomaraswamy's great contemporary, Mahatma Gandhi, he discovers a pattern that challenges anyone committed to religion, or thought, or social change. Gandhi was born in the 1860's, Coomaraswamy in the 1870's, and both got their first *ideas* (ideas about culture and civilization) from the England of William Morris, in the 1880's. Indeed, though each went through a long development after that, each remained true to the gospel of anti-industrialism, of preserving traditional crafts, of pursuing a new Simplicity. It was a gospel part aesthetic, part political; in part a

matter of life-style, in part of religion, in part of Indian nationalism. The two men developed and applied different aspects of the doctrine, but they never lost touch with the whole.

At a *Festschrift* dinner for his seventieth birthday, Coomaraswamy told his friends that he was returning to India (now free) to spend the rest of his life in realizing the religious truths he had so long studied. He was unable to do so because he died not long after his speech and not long before Gandhi's assassination. Both men made religious values their main concern but served them in nonreligious realms, the realm of politics and that of scholarship. It would be a paradox, to my mind, to claim an equal religious intensity for the scholar, but he had enough of such intensity to be no ordinary academician. As one of his admirers wrote of him: "If the deep learning and strong will of one man can avail anything to lift the curse of Babel today, Dr. Coomaraswamy deserves the gratitude of mankind."

Of course there were great differences between him and Gandhi from the beginning. Though born in Ceylon, Coomaraswamy's mother was English, and he was brought up by her and her family in England. His father, the first Asian to be knighted, and the first Hindu to be called to the London Bar, died when he was two. Ananda grew up an only child in a wealthy family and went to a public school and London University. He studied geology, and in 1902 went back to Ceylon to make a mineralogical survey there. His first wife belonged to the Arts and Crafts movement in England, and while in Ceylon he began to write about preserving Kandyan crafts and founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society to discourage the imitation of European customs. In 1907 he returned to England. (These were years when Gandhi was becoming a political leader of the Indians in South Africa.)

In England, Coomaraswamy bought a grand manor house, near Chipping Campden, and decorated it in Morris style. He bought Morris's Kelmscott press and printed on it his *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), which compares that period in Ceylon with medieval Europe. (He had earlier sought out that Icelander who had collaborated with Morris on Saga-translations, and with him translated another of the Eddas.) He sponsored lectures by Sister Nivedi-

ta (a leading disciple of Vivekananda and Vedantism) and issued pamphlets demanding Home Rule for India.

In 1909 he went to India and became friends with the Tagore family, several of whom were involved in the revival of Indian arts for cultural reasons. He published *The Aims of Indian Art* in 1908 and *The Message of the East* in 1909. These may be said to mark his move away from Morris and in a direction somewhat opposite to Gandhi's, for the Mahatma's vocabulary got ever drier and more rationalist, while in these books Coomaraswamy said that the secret of Indian greatness was the infinite superiority of Intuition over Intellect. (Both men diverged from the main current of post-Morris development, Marxist socialism.)

Coomaraswamy was reading Blake, whom he had come to via Yeats's study of 1893, and his vocabulary was full of terms like Imagination and Genius. He was also reading Whitman and Nietzsche, who was something of a cult in England then. A.R. Orage published two books on Nietzsche in 1907 and 1908, and Coomaraswamy contributed articles to Orage's magazine, *The New Age*. During these years also Coomaraswamy began to wear his hair long, with a gold earring, and when in India wore Indian clothes. He separated from his wife and soon took another, also English, but a performer of Hindu music under the Hindu name of Ratan Devi. It seems clear also that his imagination was being eroticized and fantasicated by his literary and art studies (he made a large collection of Rajput paintings, a genre he in effect discovered). In this he was moving away from Gandhi.

When war broke out in 1914, Coomaraswamy felt no obligation to support England. He tried to establish himself back in India, either as a professor or in a new national museum, to which he would have given his collection, but neither scheme worked out. In 1915 Gandhi returned to India, and in 1917 Coomaraswamy settled in America: he settled into a life and intellectual style much more remote from Indian nationalism than he had observed before. Up to then the two could have been counted as allies in Indian nationalism, and in the same cultural wing—both being friends of Rabindranath Tagore.

But in America, Coomaraswamy became curator of the Indian art section of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston,

and his writing became less humanist, less "cultural," less generally affirmative. Cultural themes recurred, but he kept them separate from his scholarly work. He had decided that Indian art had to be *studied*, with the exhaustive objectivity and detail of German scholarship, not the exuberant moralism and life-affirmation of Morris. At the same time, he participated in postwar experimentalism and eroticism. Ratan Devi dressed in the style of their friend, Isadora Duncan, and both he and she attracted attention on the street. When that marriage failed, he took up with a seventeen-year-old dancer, whom he later married but rarely lived with. He wrote love poetry and made erotic drawings. In both scholarship and life-style he broke with nineteenth-century humanism. (Gandhi also broke with it, but to opposite effect.) Then, about 1928, he began his work on Indian iconography and philology and came under the influence of Jacques Maritain and neo-Thomism and also that of Rene Guénon and Tradition. Guénon (1886-1951) left France for Egypt, where he became a Sufi. He preached the doctrine of a metaphysical tradition once known to the West and still known to India and other parts of the East; in the name of that doctrine he denounced modern philosophy, modern art, and modern life generally. He wrote for a journal, *Etudes Traditionelles*, which had begun life in the 1890's as *Le Voile d'Isis*, and it seems clear that his gospel is a more scholarly and less magical form of Theosophy.

This was the *Philosophia Perennis* in

whose service Coomaraswamy worked in the last phase of his life, and which has adherents today. Indeed though I don't know whether Northrop Frye has ever read Coomaraswamy or Guénon, his enormously influential work in literary studies is closely parallel to theirs. In this phase Coomaraswamy's work was essentially scholarly, like Frye's. But it was far from being mere scholarship. It made him so indifferent to the work of his museum that, according to some reports, he refused promotion there and even neglected his duties. He set his face against modern art as a whole; it was destructive of the spirit. In his way he was true to the same cultural and spiritual truths as Gandhi; and at age seventy he was on his way home.

But of course when we put the two men side by side, we must be conscious of enormous disparity, and several particular contrasts stand out strongly. One of the most vivid is their different uses of a stanza of Blake. In an article on "Literary Symbolism" for *Dictionary of World Literature* (1943) Coomaraswamy says: "Thus when Blake writes, 'I give you the end of a golden string, Only wind it into a ball; It will lead you in at heaven's gate, Built in Jerusalem's wall,' he is not using a private terminology; but one that can be traced back in Europe through Dante (*questi la terra in se stringe, Paradiso* I.116), the Gospels ('No Man can come to me, except the Father....draw him,' John 6:44, cf 12:32), Philo, and Plato (with his 'one golden cord' that we human puppets should hold on to and be guided by, *Laws* 644) to Homer, where it is Zeus that can draw all things to himself by means of a golden cord (*Iliad* viii.18ff, cf Plato, *Theatetus* 153)." And on through Islamic, Hindu, and Chinese.

When Gandhi in 1946 received birthday congratulations from an Englishwoman who quoted the same stanza and said, "You also have put this thread in our hands," he replied: "Have you ever noticed that my ball is an unending ball of cotton thread instead of Blake's 'golden string'? Blake's was the imagination of a poet, mine can become now and here the gateway to heaven if the billions of the earth will but spin the beautiful white ball of the slender unbreakable thread." Gandhi, you see, could meet even Blake on his own ground and, as it were, disarm him—take over his metaphor and improve upon it. *This*, I think, is Tradition.

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