

# The Bollingen Coomaraswamy Papers and Biography

Reviewed by  
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Ananda Coomaraswamy took leave of this life in the middle of a word—both literally and figuratively. His expiring word was “Yes”, being at once the testimony to a tremendous career now accomplished, and the affirmation of his readiness to go where he virtually was. Figuratively, because he was in the white heat of creative activity when the end came; and even had he lived to realize his project for retirement to India the following year, he still confirmed by letter that an exchange of “the active for a more contemplative way of life” would not necessarily entail the cessation of all scholarly pursuit.

Such, then, his written legacy: a mass of protean erudition (comprising a bibliography of some thousand items) seeded in obscure academic journals throughout the world, with but a small portion conceived in book form, or later assembled into books. In 1947, the year of his death, he was hard at work on several major projects, and there were finished articles as yet unpublished. Not only this, but desk copies of his printed works were undergoing revision, with copious marginal addenda ranging from completed changes to little more than raw material for entries.

This left his widow, Dona Luisa, who had closely assisted him for years, with the resolve to devote all her energies to establishing definitive versions of the entire corpus of writings for eventual publication. Since the Doctor had already collaborated with the Bollingen Foundation of Princeton in helping to edit the posthumous works of the Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, Mrs. Coomaraswamy applied to it for a Fellowship, and this Foundation agreed around 1950 to sponsor an edition of selected writings.

We remember visiting Mrs. Coomaraswamy in her Cambridge, Massachusetts, apartment, some sixteen years after her husband’s death. By the street door was a simple black plaque with the gold lettering COOMARASWAMY. Upon our ringing, the door opened, and the person standing there was no longer the vigorous woman we had formerly known, but someone like a frail piece of ivory who through a sort of psychic symbiosis had acquired the Doctor’s traits. We were cordially led into her office, yet one glance at the staggering amount of documents heaped about suggested that time was only serving to expand the task out of all proportion. Mrs.

Coomaraswamy was a perfectionist who could scruple over whether a particular mark was a diacritical point or a flyspeck; and while it is true that one or another eager young research assistant from Harvard University was usually there in dutiful attendance, the support was mainly moral.

Somebody was obviously needed who could take in the whole perspective neutrally from an objective distance, and it happened that the man on whose shoulders the task eventually fell was a graduate student preparing his doctorate at New York University around 1968 with as topic the writings of Coomaraswamy on art. When Mrs. Coomaraswamy died in 1971, the Bollingen Foundation arranged to have this man, Roger Lipsey, bring her project to term. And thus, some thirty years after its inception, the Princeton University Press has published the fruits of this undertaking in a handsomely presented two-volume work entitled *Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers*, edited by Roger Lipsey, with the first volume sub-titled *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, and the second, *Metaphysics*. A biographical third volume by Roger Lipsey called *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work* completes the edition, which altogether runs to some 1,360 pages.

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Dr. Lipsey regarded Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy's devoted scholarship as "praiseworthy in the extreme"; yet he knew very well that a definitive edition of the bulk of Coomaraswamy's writings would be both unrealizable as a project and unassimilable as a result—even assuming the task were theoretically possible. The thing required was a selection intelligently chosen to show the full range of Coomaraswamy's mind and intellect. Here the editor decided upon two wise courses of procedure: one, to limit the fifty-six essays in these volumes entirely to the work that was produced in the period 1932–1947 when Coomaraswamy "had reached his unique balance of metaphysical conviction and scholarly erudition"; this is certainly what the Doctor himself would have wanted; and two, to include only those addenda "which are genuinely finished paragraphs or clear references", placing these moreover mostly in footnotes and always enclosed in brackets to distinguish them from the texts as originally published. While such a course to some might seem a sacrilege, for others, improvising on unfinished material would be still more a violation of the work bequeathed. For Lipsey it was like removing barnacles the better to speed this legacy on its way. Finally, to gain time, he rightly decided "not to verify every reference" as Mrs. Coomaraswamy had been doing in an exposition where what counted was the essential perfection of spirit, "but rather to let Coomaraswamy bear responsibility for his occasional errors as he bears responsibility for his frequent grandeur."

Among those whom the compiler acknowledges as having judiciously collaborated both in matters of selection and editing are Wallace Brockway, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, I. B. Horner, and Stella Kramrisch. Indispensable bibliographical aid was likewise furnished by James Crouch and S. Durai Raja Singam, who have extensive knowledge in this field.

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The first volume, after some needed critical apparatus and a useful short Introduction, leads off with “An Indian Temple: The Kandarya Mahadeo”. This is followed by four Synoptic Essays, including the important “A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought?” and “The Philosophy of Mediaeval and Oriental Art”. Under Indian Art and Aesthetics are three entries, including “The Intellectual Operation in Indian Art”. Three more papers come under the rubric Mediaeval Art and Aesthetics, with the major contribution “The Mediaeval Theory of Beauty” and its jewel-like complement, “Ars sine scientia nihil”. Eight essays are offered in a section entitled Further Studies—among which are “Ornament”, “Shaker Furniture”, “Imitation, Expression, and Participation”, and “Primitive Mentality”.

Traditional Symbolism closes the sections, being subdivided into Methodology, Four Studies, and The Sundoor and Related Motifs. Included here are “The Rape of a Nâgî: An Indian Gupta Seal”, the classic “On the Loathly Bride”, plus a fascinating article we had never seen before, “The Inverted Tree”, and an indispensable study that it was paramount to retrieve: “The Symbolism of the Dome”. Further found here are two outstanding works, “Svayamâtrnnâ: Janua Coeli” and “Symplegades”. The volume terminates with three Indexes, the first being General, and the other two devoted to Greek and to Sanskrit and Pâli Terms. A number of the original illustrations and drawings accompany the text.

Our selection of titles above is unavoidably arbitrary, but then so too is the editor’s classification by sections: it is difficult to pigeonhole the universal resonance that sounds throughout the Doctor’s writings.

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The material in the volume on Metaphysics is partitioned into *Introductory Essays*, *The Major Essays*, and *Unpublished Works*, and concludes with *The Seventieth Birthday Address* in slightly abridged form. Critical apparatus and Indexes follow the same pattern found in the first volume, the only difference being that the second is without Introduction and there are no illustrations.

Although our assignment here has been to review, not Coomaraswamy himself, but rather the way in which his works have been presented, we think it nevertheless advisable to alert those readers not already very familiar with the Doctor’s thought to certain pitfalls that an unguarded approach to these admittedly difficult writings can create. These writings served during his career as a solitary witness to the Truth or First Principles that have to be reckoned with if one is to deal intelligibly with religions and their cultural offshoots, but to which Principles the majority of his colleagues in this area were quasi-blind; they likewise served isolatedly in countless academic journals as a sovereign corrective to the often brilliant but superficial and self-complacent scholarship saturating these reviews. Coomaraswamy’s aim was to inundate the milieu with eternal verities, swept in moreover on a flood tide of corroborating footnotes to anticipate and baffle refutation. It was not a book he was writing but a strategy he was pursuing,

in challenging a world of gilded pedantry with the really serious things. It might, in the words of Rhys Davids, appear as “murderous overwork”; it was certainly what Lipsey calls “intellectual karate”, and this means marshalling the literary arts of hyperbole and “overkill”. The reader, then, when confronted with this massive exposition here assembled undiluted between the covers of a single volume, has to keep in mind the original context and remember that Coomaraswamy was addressing himself more to self-opinionated university professors—the anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, orientalists, sociologists, psychologists, theologians, comparative religionists, ethnologists, in short the humanist philosophers and scientists—than to the humble seeker.

The reader, for example, might be startled by the opening words of the first essay, which is entitled “The Vedânta and Western Tradition”, and begins with the statement: “There have been teachers such as Orpheus, Hermes, Buddha, Lao-tzu and Christ, the historicity of whose human existence is doubtful, and to whom there may be accorded the higher dignity of a mythical reality.” We have already examined certain enigmatic traits in the Doctor’s writings in our article, “Coomaraswamy—The Man, Myth, and History”, which appeared in the Summer 1977 number of this journal, and cannot return to it here, but suffice it to say, apart from all other considerations, that the Jews would scarcely have tolerated two thousand years of humiliations under the Christians for having crucified a myth! This is a clear example of Coomaraswamy writing to materialists who equate history with “reality” and myth with “superstition”, hence his emphasis—even to excess—in the opposite direction.

Again, in the second essay, “Who Is ‘Satan’ and Where Is ‘Hell’?”, Coomaraswamy says, “Men no longer take either God or Satan seriously, [which] arises from the fact that they have come to think of both alike only objectively, only as persons external to themselves and for whose existence no adequate proof can be found. The same, of course, applies to the notions of their respective realms, heaven and hell, thought of as times and places, neither now nor here... .

The doctrine to be faced, however, is that ‘the kingdom of heaven is within you’, here and now,” and he goes on to cite Jacob Boehme: “The soul hath heaven or hell within itself,” adding that it “cannot be said ‘go to’ either when the body dies.” The remainder of the article is a marvelous demonstration of the total Reality which man as microcosm subjectively carries within himself: “Christ and Antichrist, both inhabit us, and their opposition is within us.” What is missing in the entire text is any allusion to the objective and transcendent (let alone descendent) macrocosm, of which the microcosm is but an abridgement, namely, all the outer worlds and states of being, visible and invisible, leading up and “going to” the Absolute itself, the Unique, the Tremendous, where all dualities can truly be said to be transcended.

Now by limiting his argument strictly to what every man in his inner conscience is bound to know short of being incurably unperceptive, Coomaraswamy presumably felt he was standing on irrefutable terrain regarding eschatological finalities. For he was deadly in earnest about what really counts—man’s ultimate salvation.

The third and last stumbling block facing the unadvised reader concerns the doctrine of “self-naughting”, which appears to deny any reality at all to the created soul, and which keeps recurring in two of *The Major Essays*, “On the One and Only Transmigrant”, and “*Ākimcañña: Self-Naughting*”; while it turns up again in three of the *Unpublished Works*, namely, “On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or Rather Pneumatology”, “Does ‘Socrates Is Old’ Imply That ‘Socrates Is’?”, and “The Meaning of Death”. The reader is confronted with such statements as: “‘This man’, So-and-so has neither free will nor any element of immortality.” ...“To presume a survival of personality is only to postpone the problem of the meaning of death.” ...“No man hath ascended up to heaven, save he which came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven’ (John 3:13).” ...“If we say that ‘Socrates is immortal’...this is as much as to say ‘eternal, immortal, and selfsame’, and will necessarily mean that we are referring to a ‘Socrates’ that has never been born.” ...“While the Vedic point of view necessarily presumes an immortality, that is to say timelessness, of all potentialities of being typically subsistent in the Self,...an immortality of this kind is in no way to be thought of as an immortality from the standpoint of any individual consciousness.” ...“It is the same when we speak of the Pope’s infallibility.... What can the Pope as a man *know* about the Truth?” ...“The saved are those who have known their Self (St. Paul’s *jam non ego, sed Christus in me*), the lost are those who have not known themselves and of whom, therefore, there is nothing to survive when the vehicle disintegrates and the Self departs.” This last, if taken to the letter, would deny what all religions teach about future punishments for misdeeds committed by individual souls in this present life. Moreover, religions without exception proclaim that man is originally created deiform with the possibility as man of knowing the Truth and realizing God, that it is not the personality as such which has to be put to death, but rather its disordered inclinations.

Two remarks are necessary here. The first is that Coomaraswamy was acutely aware of living in a world that is rampant with individualism and sentimentalism, and he felt it imperative to combat the spiritual myopia of his contemporaries with a recall to Universal Principles which alone imbue phenomena with whatever reality they possess. The second is that Coomaraswamy has again and again in other contexts championed the definition of *nirvāna* as that of fulfillment and plenitude, and not at all annihilation as is commonly understood:

The question of “annihilation”, so solemnly discussed by Western scholars...has no meaning in metaphysics, which knows only of the nonduality of permutation and sameness, multiplicity and unity. Whatever has been an eternal reason or idea or name of an individual manifestation can never cease to be such; the content of eternity cannot be changed. Therefore, as the *Bhagavad Gitā* expresses it, “Never have I not been, and never hast thou not been.”

(“The Vedānta and Western Tradition”, italics ours).

“The end of all becoming is in *being*,” he writes in “Traditional Psychology”, “or rather, the source of being, richer than any being.” But the Doctor’s most luminous—even ecstatic—declaration on the subject comes in the last chapter of his final book, *Time and Eternity*:

We cannot and may not, in fact, ignore that these who speak of a static, immutable, and timeless being above the partiality of time, also speak of it as an immediately beatific experience and possession of all things that have ever been or shall ever come into being in time; not to mention the realization of other possibilities that are not possibilities of manifestation in time; it is a more and not a less “life” that subsists in the “naught” that embraces all things, but is “none” of them. In the same way men recoil from *Nirvâna* (literally “despiration”) although it pertains to the definition of *Nirvâna* to say that “he who finds it, finds all” and that it is the “supreme beatitude”!

Coomaraswamy says everything in the concluding sentence of his “Self-Naughting”: “It is not the saint, but the sinner, that is called to repent of his existence.”

Among the important essays to be found in Volume 2 are “Recollection, Indian and Platonic”, “*Âtmayajña*: Self-Sacrifice”, his famous “*Lila*”, “Vedic Exemplarism”, “*Kha* and Other Words Denoting ‘Zero’, in Connection with the Indian Metaphysics of Space”, “The Tantric Doctrine of Divine Biunity”—a study of bisexual polarity in Deity, and “Two Passages in Dante’s *Paradiso*”. *The Major Essays* closes with a very long study, “Some Pâli Words”, which is really a glossary for experts, but enhanced by frequent flashes of metaphysical insight.

Of the *Unpublished Works*, “Bhakta Aspects of the Âtman Doctrine” [“Bhakta” should presumably read “Bhakti”] merits particular attention as a corrective to the fallacy frequent with Western intellectuals of mistaking for gnosis a facility for “esoteric” understanding when this may in fact betoken little more than a cerebral hypertrophy. What characterizes the true pneumatic is a consummate equilibrium between the intellectual, volitive, and affective faculties. In writing about Srî Shankarâcârya, Coomaraswamy says “there can be no doubt that Indians whose thought and mode of being is traditional have never found any difficulty in thinking of this greatest and most intellectual exponent of nondualistic (*advaita*) metaphysics as having been at one and the same time a *bhakta* and a *jñânî*.” And he further asks: “Can we imagine a perfected ardor apart from understanding, or a perfected understanding without ardor? Can any qualitative distinction be drawn between a consummated union of lover and beloved and a consummated union of knower and known?”

The material selected for these volumes would inevitably differ between any two compilers. We personally would have been pleased to see included “Angel and Titan: An Essay in Vedic Ontology” (*Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 55, 1935), “On Being in One’s Right Mind” (*Review of Religion*, vol. VII, 1942), and “The Symbolism of Archery” (*Ars Islamica*, vol. X, 1943), for example; and yet were even a third volume of *Selected Papers* to be envisaged, it is

improbable that it could bring to light a dimension of the Doctor's thought not already found in the present selection.

The editor, incidentally, keeps discreetly out of sight but is there like an invisible presence when assistance is useful.

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And now for the biography: in undertaking this project, Roger Lipsey was not only endeavoring to do the portrait of a leading contemporary figure, but of an intellectual colossus who had an aversion to individual portraiture—whether visual or written. “A dead likeness of the dead,” the Doctor would say, quoting from the Apocryphal *Acts of John*. Porphyry tells us that Plotinus also held this attitude: “An image of the image.” “I myself am not interested in my personal history,” Coomaraswamy wrote in a letter, “and could not make it of interest or value to anyone else. The task before us all is to ‘become no one’; for He, as the *Katha Upanisad* says, ‘never became any one.’” And he concluded his Seventieth Birthday Address before a large gathering of colleagues with this note of finality: “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.”

It nonetheless remains, as Coomaraswamy would doubtless have admitted, that biographies of great men are a source of inspiration, and hagiographies an encouragement to spiritual striving. While he understandably deplored the fashion in modern biography, to “psychoanalyze” the subject by dredging up and then distorting trivia, as “a vulgar catering to illegitimate curiosity”, this is but the perversion of a legitimate art; and Lipsey justifies his own motivation on the grounds that “Coomaraswamy's life is intrinsically interesting and sheds remarkable light on his work.”

It might be argued that the Doctor in his maturity wanted no connection with the man in his various guises who had gone before, like King Henry the Fifth's “Presume not that I am the thing I was,” but we suspect the root of his antipathy lay deeper. St. Augustine, for example, poured out his *Confessions* with an “*O felix culpa!*”, since the indiscretions of his early years were seen as the providential inducement to self-conquest—a *metanoia*, or turning to God. For similar reasons the biographer of Tibet's great saint Milarepa did not scruple to relate how Milarepa's involvement with black magic during his youth was the contributing factor to his resolve to renounce the world and win enlightenment.

In “Coomaraswamy—The Man, Myth, and History”, we proposed that the solicitude for anonymity shared alike by the Doctor and René Guénon could have its explanation partly at least in the fact that both men, due to exceptional cosmic circumstances, may have conjointly vehicled elements of a prophetic function (the “Eliatic current”) with which they were not fully identified, thus accounting for a note of ambiguity in their individual substance, and hence this reticence to speak about themselves, as likewise their insistence on the discontinuity between the “merely” human plane and the Supernal Truth. Coomaraswamy quotes as though a matter of personal

verification an observation Socrates makes about his Daimon being ‘a very near relative of mine, living in the same house with me’ (*Hippias major* 304 D.). *Duo sunt in homine*, the Doctor would say, appearing at the same time to say that the self that was there for all to see was not the one by which he wished to be remembered.

Whatever the case, two records of the man already exist, the first being the extremely copious compilations of memorabilia already published and still being assembled by S. Durai Raja Singam, and the second being the Lipsey biography, which has in its turn much benefited from the material made accessible by the former. In addition, Lipsey has been able with the help of personal family files, the documents at Princeton, and the cooperation of many scholars and acquaintances of Coomaraswamy to blend together a smooth-running chronicle that is tastefully written and appears free of invention. Disparate threads from multiple sources, places, and periods have been artfully pulled together to produce a harmonious and believable whole. Although no stone is left unturned, the result is never prolix, this being partly due to a flow of appropriate citations continuously leavening the text (when we are in New England, for example, we hear the voices of Emerson and Thoreau, or when in England those of Eric Gill or William Morris, while in India echoes from Tagore and a whole circle around him). A number of well selected photographs and illustrations closely accompany the narration.

The reader may observe Coomaraswamy’s life—begun in 1877—as evolving through four cycles, the first being that of the scientist-geologist, the second that of the social reformer, the third his years as an art historian and critic, and the fourth his final genesis as metaphysician. Curiously enough his four marriages approximately coincide with these cycles, as though his wives were destined each to serve as the “*śakti*” for a particular phase.

One thing that never changed throughout Coomaraswamy’s years was a profoundly aristocratic nature, in evidence from the beginning and foretoking the remarkable “mine of gold” to come, which certainly derived from his illustrious Ceylonese ancestry,<sup>1</sup> but also from his English mother’s family. While he could have made a name for himself in geology (in 1904 he discovered a rare oxide composed of thorium and uranium which he named thorianite), greater things were stirring in his blood; and it only required a look at “the factory art of Birmingham and Manchester” fast submerging the East’s artistic heritage, for him to rise to the challenge:

How different it might be if we Ceylonese were bolder and more independent, not afraid to stand on our own legs, and not ashamed of our nationalities. Why do we not

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<sup>1</sup> In Singam’s *Ananda Coomaraswamy, The Bridge Builder*, an entry in the Chronicle section for the year 1897 gives the following information: “Whilst in Ceylon [Coomaraswamy] received the Saiva *thidsha* or in Hinduistic terminology ‘twice born’. It is an experience called *maattippriththal* by Saiva saints and ‘being born again’ by Christians. This ceremony was followed by an *abhseka* (or consecration) at the family temple. This was done under the initiative of his distinguished cousin and father-figure of the family, Ponnambalam Coomaraswamy.”



meet the wave of civilization on equal terms?... Our Eastern civilization was here 2000 years ago; shall its spirit be broken utterly before the new commercialism of the West?

The fruit of his research at this period is resumed in his first major work, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, which appeared in 1908, and was hand-printed, in keeping with Coomaraswamy's concern to pioneer a restoration of individual crafts, upon the Kelmscott Press formerly used by William Morris for producing his edition of Chaucer; this press had been purchased by a handicraft guild run by the English architect Charles Robert Ashbee, and was now installed in Coomaraswamy's handsome home, Norman Chapel, in Broad Campden.

During the next years Coomaraswamy so divided his time between England and India that the biographer expresses anxiety in following up various documents "over finding him in two places at once." In the West he was trying to demonstrate to an imperial nation that the very people they had subjugated and colonized possessed an artistic heritage superior to their own Graeco-Roman one, while in the East he was chastising the Indians for their cultural blindness:

India, politically and economically free, but subdued by Europe in her inmost said is scarcely an ideal to be dreamt of, or to live, or die, for...It is the weakness of our national movement that we do not love India; we love suburban England, we love the comfortable bourgeois prosperity that is to be some day established when we have learned enough science and forgotten enough art to successfully compete with Europe in a commercial war.

Meanwhile, he was frequenting the Tagore circle. When the British imperial government moved its administrative seat around 1912 from Calcutta to Delhi, Coomaraswamy militated without success to have the new Delhi constructed Indian style by native architects and masons. But his real destiny was already shaping up through a progressive discovery that would far outweigh his earlier find as a mineralogist in Ceylon.

Living on a house-boat in northern Kashmir, and travelling about "the sandy plains of Rājputāna and the Punjab, the little hills and swift rivers of the sub-Himalayan valleys, and the snowy peaks of the inner ranges," as he puts it, Coomaraswamy was gathering a vast collection—some nine hundred pieces—of Rajput painting, the highly beautiful art from the Hindu courts, which until brought to light by his endeavors had been practically unknown in the West.

This treasure was not long in catching the eye of Dr. Denman W. Ross, a leading patron of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. These were war years, and Coomaraswamy was hardly ambitious to serve in the army of a nation that had brought so much of the corruption which he detested to his father's people. Hence through a conjunction of circumstances Coomaraswamy met Ross in America who decided to purchase the Rajput collection, at the same time persuading the trustees of the museum to appoint Coomaraswamy the curator of a newly created Indian

section; this happened in 1917, when the Doctor was forty years old. “Thus,” writes Lipsey, “in the United States, the most heavily industrialized, least traditional parcel of land that the Lord tolerates on earth, a set of conditions came together that suited Coomaraswamy—far better than he knew when he accepted the museum’s proposal.”

During the next fifteen years Coomaraswamy was to gain reputation as a great art historian, known for his thoroughness, his profound scholarship, and critical cataloguing of works—all a new dimension in this field. If he delivered somewhat less in the humdrum tasks of a curator than had been counted on, this was fully compensated by the prestige which his constant flow of publications lent to the museum’s *Annual Report*.

He found the American scene of the early Twenties an invigorating challenge, and rarely failed to savor the best of any world he touched upon. When his painstaking scholarship at the museum reached a saturation point, there was the soul-renovating solitude of the Maine woods, where his dexterity as a fly fisherman became legendary. Then again, we find him frequenting semi-bohemian circles in New York, where he “kept” his third wife (she preferred it that way). Little wonder if this Boston Brahmin—in the real sense—seen, perhaps, on the steps of the museum at sunset in a white suit with a pair of Afghan hounds at his side, or else in another setting quietly discoursing on Oriental culture, sporting maybe a gold earring, his dark hair flowing to the shoulders, should be capable of quickening feminine hearts! Yet the premonition *sic transit gloria mundi* was ever more pressingly dogging his steps; and by the time he married Dona Luisa in 1930, immediately after the divorce with his previous wife, he was already entering upon a sea-change where Heaven would exploit his vast potentials, for a work now to be oriented onto a universal plane.

It is here exceptionally that the biographer almost loses track of his quarry. For Coomaraswamy seems momentarily to drop out of sight, only to reappear as another man with a new intensity of purpose; the passage itself has taken place in darkness: “What is difficult to follow is his transition from the first state to the second.... [There is] a new sense of purpose accompanying new purposes. But by such reflections we already cheat, because they describe the results of transition, not the transition itself.”

To repeat what we said in “The Man and the Witness”, published in Singam’s volume of tributes, *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*, Mrs. Coomaraswamy wrote to us shortly after her husband’s death: “For about fifteen years he has been living a form of *tapasya* [Sanskrit term for an asceticism having to do with the intensity of an inner heat which is at once sacrificial and creative], it was his wish to live this way, and he felt the need of getting his work done, perhaps at the risk of a shorter life. He was by no means unaware of what he was about. To have interfered would have been to mistake him.”

Chapter XII in the book is entitled “1928–1932: *Tapas*”, the word being taken from *A New Approach to the Vedas*, 1933 (p. 10). We see from Mrs. Coomaraswamy’s letter that the culminating cycle in the Doctor’s life began around 1932. It is no reproach if the biographer fails

to pinpoint “the transition itself”, since a metamorphosis of this kind necessarily entails a certain temporal discontinuity or break with the past, and being purely interior, is consequently invisible. Lipsey does, however, devote much attention to what must have been the single most important contributing factor, namely, the intellectual polarization sparked through Coomaraswamy’s contact with the works of René Guénon. And Lipsey with persevering research carefully follows the evolution in Coomaraswamy’s thought, writings, and *modus vivendi* during this period. In a chapter called “The Two Selves”, which has already appeared in this journal, an elucidation is attempted of the Doctor’s unrelenting concern with “self-naughting”, as brought up earlier in this paper, and which concludes with the observation that “in his later years, Coomaraswamy was trying to free himself from his biography.” His object in retiring to India, had he lived to realize it, would have been, as he wrote to Marco Pallis, “to *verify* what I already ‘know’.”

The chapter on the Last Days fittingly resumes the final episodes in the life of what has justly been called “this ‘myriad-minded’ intellect”. Here again is given, this time in full, *The Seventieth Birthday Address*, delivered only three weeks before the Doctor’s death. The chapter closes with a statement formulated in his brilliant book, *Hinduism and Buddhism*:

The Hindu of any caste, or even a barbarian, can become a Nobody. Blessed is the man on whose tomb can be written, *Hic jacet nemo* [Here lies no one].

There is a chapter on William Morris, examining the amount of influence he may have exerted on Coomaraswamy’s own attitudes about art and society. What is clear is that they both shared the view that “the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man a special kind of artist”, and that any social system which fails to realize this leads to an “impoverished reality” which cannot long endure.

A final chapter is reserved for the meaning of the concept Tradition—both as *Idea* and as *Truth*. If the idea has acquired a special prominence in our century, this is not because it is anything new, some kind of brilliant fashion or subterfuge beckoning to anti-modern intellectuals, but rather because earlier, more “normal” civilizations had no need to proclaim an evidence embedded in their very structure. A compass only becomes indispensable when all landmarks are obscured; and if there are those who make a cult of the compass, this does not invalidate its rightful use as a means of finding one’s bearings. It may be that the temptation to dabble about in the different esoterisms made accessible through the exposure of Tradition is, as the author says, “characteristically modern”, but this is purely owing to the character of the modern world, which is one of little understanding. Any serious person knows that a Perennial Philosophy presupposes a Perennial Religion, which means full adherence to a religion which has proven itself perennial.

Contrary to what his biographer claims, Tradition for Coomaraswamy is neither “full of hope” nor “full of despair”. For Coomaraswamy and all who use the term correctly, Tradition is nothing else than Reality, and since Reality is by definition static, immutable, and everlasting,

the ideas of hope and despair in this context have no meaning. When the writer claims that “as long a study could be devoted to breaking down the distinction between traditional and modern as to establishing it”, this is being pedantic about a tradition—of simple cultural conventions—that has nothing to do with Coomaraswamy’s use of the term. But he comes back to it in a beautiful concluding citation from Coomaraswamy:

I ought perhaps to warn you, that if you ever really enter into this other world, you may not wish to return: you may never again be contented with what you have been accustomed to think of as “progress” and “civilization”.

Since Coomaraswamy wrote extensively on many aspects of traditional Christianity with which he felt completely at home, mention can just be made of the expectant but typically oblique encounters he had with present-day Catholicism. “I am too catholic to be a Catholic,” he said on more than one occasion, and writing to a nun whom he knew by correspondence: “Please do not pray that I may become a Christian; pray that I may know God better every day. That will be a greater charity; it will leave you free to think that it means becoming a Christian, but at the same time leave it to God whether or not that is the condition.” To another Catholic friend he wrote in 1936: “What I am appalled by is that even the Catholics who have the truth if they would only operate with it wholeheartedly, are nearly all tainted by modernism.... Christianity is nowadays presented in such a sentimental fashion that one cannot wonder that the best of the younger generation revolt. The remedy is to present religion in its intellectually difficult forms: present the challenge of a theology and metaphysics that will require a great effort even to understand at all.” It is precisely the opposite remedy that the Second Vatican Council thirty years later chose to apply, in keeping with its modernist outlook.

In an Appendix there is an appreciation by Eric Schroeder, called “Memories of the Person”, reprinted from Singam’s *Memorial Volume*. Lastly, comes a select bibliography of Coomaraswamy’s writings. The three volumes are carefully and clearly printed. We did find, however, for a reference work, a disproportionate number of false page and volume indications, which should be rectified before a second edition appears.

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The liability in a work of this sort is that, if done from the “inside”, its perspective may be too unilateral, while if done from the “outside”, it may miss the essentials. Lipsey manages for the most part remarkably well to steer a middle course.

There are notwithstanding some misinterpretations which, if peccadilloes in relation to the whole, nonetheless need mention. The author makes the common error of failing to distinguish clearly between what is *contemporary* and what is *modern*. The first term is a neutral concept, simply describing the moment in which one or another event takes place, indifferently whether it be 1978 B.C. or 1978 A.D.; whereas the second term—from *modo* “just now”—has a usage

connoting something better than the past, implying the notions of evolution and progress, and hence in fact signifying divorce from traditional principles.

When Lipsey writes that Coomaraswamy “damned modern art, no doubt unfairly, but this negative view is redeemed many times over by his brilliant and positive account of traditional art,” we see no need for either of the qualifying clauses, as it is not *contemporary* art that is in question here; his much admired Eric Gill was a contemporary artist. Again, if Frank Lloyd Wright’s “forceful modernism passed tangentially by [Coomaraswamy] and never penetrated,” it is for the good reason that Coomaraswamy was hardly a target that such an art could penetrate. When the biographer in another place talks about his subject’s “virulently negative views on modern art redeemed by neither much compassion nor much understanding”, the fact is, Coomaraswamy had just that understanding which excluded any such sentimentalism.

The German art historian Hermann Goetz took Coomaraswamy bitterly to task for his “one-sided glorification” of the past, insisting on the contrary that the Kali Yuga is a necessary phase of the whole cycle. While conceding that the Kali Yuga has its place in the cosmic picture, Coomaraswamy nevertheless rejoined, “I feel under no obligation whatever to acquiesce in or to praise what I judge to be evil, or an evil time.” Commenting on this, Lipsey writes: “The difference between Goetz’s and Coomaraswamy’s attitudes is the difference between intelligent compromise and prophetic wrath,” when in reality the difference is between unintelligent compromise and prophetic wrath.

A page further on, the biographer tells of the admiration Coomaraswamy had for the erudition of the Assyriologist Walter Andrae, whose ideas about the spiritual significance of ancient symbols were published by Coomaraswamy in the *Art Bulletin* and reprinted in his *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought*, without realizing, according to Lipsey, that the man was an Anthroposophist, and he concludes from this: “In view of Coomaraswamy’s quite rigid division between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’, one is glad to see him occasionally fooled—fooled by the quality of persons who benefited from contemporary thought outside of his own list in which *nihil obstat*.” Does it need saying that Coomaraswamy was quoting the Assyriologist and not the Anthroposophist, or that talented people—especially in our age of compartmentalization and fragmentation—frequently manifest great gifts in one field, and equally great lack of discernment in others?

But what is crucial and in the end alone counts is that the editor has given us such an abundance of Coomaraswamy’s writings in the *Selected Papers*, and such a many-faceted portrait of the man in the biography, that every reader has more than ample material from which to draw his own conclusions.

We can imagine, had the Doctor lived to see this work, that he might well have said something as follows—ending with an exhortation from the *Dhammapada*: “The essentials of my patrimony are here—little matter for the rest—and it now only remains for those who have understood, putting precepts into practice, to ‘swelter at the task’.”