

**THE
TRADITIONAL
THEORY OF
LITERATURE**

RAY LIVINGSTON

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The Traditional Theory of Literature

by RAY LIVINGSTON

THROUGH a study of the works of the contemporary Indian scholar Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, as well as of other exponents of the ancient doctrine of the Perennial Philosophy, Professor Livingston develops and explicates a traditional theory of literature.

“What distinguished Ananda Coomaraswamy was his penetration beneath the fruits of art to their cultural roots and his recognition that these deeper sources are always profoundly and even technically philosophical in character.”

F. S. C. NORTHROP

Coomaraswamy, who died in 1947, published widely on a broad range of subjects

see back flap

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RAY LIVINGSTON

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THE TRADITIONAL THEORY OF LITERATURE

As long as man does not know who he ultimately is and continues to identify himself with the congeries of powers composing his earthly nature, he lives the life well described in the familiar words — almost Buddhist in their starkness — of a foe of the Tradition, Thomas Hobbes. In his unregenerate state man believes that “the felicity of this life consists not in the repose of a mind satisfied” but in the “continual progress of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter.”⁶ Men are continuously drawn toward objects of desire and repelled from objects of aversion; this ceaseless shuttle seems to make up the sum of their existence. Possessed by a “perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceases only in death,” man seems never to know his immortal Self.

When Boethius in prison was asked by Philosophia what man is, he answered (much as Hobbes would have), “I know that he is an animal, reasoning and mortal; that I know and that I confess myself to be.” To this Philosophia retorted, “Now I know the cause or the chief cause of your sickness. You have forgotten who you are.”⁷ When this amnesia is overcome and man really becomes and knows who he is, he is aware that he and God are one and that there is no other. To overcome one’s ignorance, to uncover the knowledge that lies within, to rid oneself of illusion, to be receptive to the grace flowing from the Holy Spirit who will teach all things and will bring all things to remembrance — this is the true concern of all men. If man does discover who he really is, he will know that he is the Son of God, as Christ is. Following Plato, in another manner of speaking that is translatable into Christian terms, Plotinus daringly puts it: “Ceasing to be man, he soars aloft and administers the kosmos entire: restored to the All he is the maker of the All.”⁸

This conception of man has been widespread, though now it is forgotten or not understood even by the adherents of those religions whose scriptures enunciate it. In the Orient it is, of course, found everywhere. The *Māndūkya Upanishad* describes it thus: “There are two birds, two sweet friends, who dwell on the self-same tree, the one eats the fruits thereof, and the other looks on in silence, the first is the human self who resting on that tree, though active,

feels sad in his unwisdom. But on beholding the power and the glory of the higher Self, he becomes free from sorrow."⁹ In one of his many great and inexhaustible essays Coomaraswamy has written of that Self who goes through the world with us:

Only, indeed, if we recognize that Christ and not "I" is our real Self and the only experient in every living being can we understand the words "I was an hungered. . . . I was thirsty. . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" [Matt. 25:40]. It is from this point of view that Meister Eckhart speaks of the man who knows himself as "seeing thy Self in everyone and everyone in Thee" . . . ; as [the *Bhagavad Gītā*] speaks of the unified man as "everywhere seeing the same Lord universally hypostasised, the Self established in all beings and all beings in the Self" . . .¹⁰

Coomaraswamy, who has found this doctrine of the two selves set forth in an amazing number of works from all over the world throughout the ages, nicely sums up the Buddhist expression of the condition and true nature of man in a characteristic passage:

The first step is to acknowledge the predicament, the second is to unmask the self whose sole liability it is, the third to act accordingly; but this is not easy, and a man is not very willing to mortify himself until he has known these appetitive congeries for what they are, and until he has learned to distinguish his Self and its true interest from the Ego, his self and interests. The primary evil is ignorance; and it is, in fact, by the truth that the self must be tamed. . . . Only "the truth shall make you free!" The remedy for self-love . . . is Self-love . . . and it is precisely in this sense, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, that "a man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than any other person, more than his neighbor" (*Sum. Theol.*, II.-ii. 26.4). In Buddhist terms "let no man worsen welfare of himself for others' weal however great; if well he knows the Self's true interest, let him pursue that end." . . . In other words, man's first duty is to work out his own salvation, — from himself.¹¹

The higher Self is the one Boethius forgot, the existence of which men like Hobbes do not admit. This is the Self that Socrates was adjured to know — the immortal Soul, the daimon. Socrates in the *Phaedrus* prays that these two selves may be united: "Beloved Pan, and all ye other Gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the

inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be at one." The lesser or outward self — "le moi haïssable" of Pascal — is the one that must be lost, for Christ says, "Whosoever would save his life [psyche] shall lose it." To lose his soul, a man must deny its claims and assert the lordship of the immanent Christ; then he can say with St. Paul, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."

The Bible, of course, contains many references to the nature of man who is first mentioned as made in the image and likeness of God. In the Psalms we read, "I have said, Ye are Gods; and all of you are children of the most high." In the Book of Wisdom are these words: "For God created man incorruptible and to the image of his own likeness he made him." It is evident that the means for realizing his true nature are considered to be somehow within man's reach, for it is stated in the New Testament that "the kingdom of God is within you." But it is further noted that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

According to the Tradition the problem of rebirth in the spirit is the greatest one of life. Throughout the Tradition it is recognized that the ignorance of man in his mortal soul is responsible for his troubles. Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras* says that the cause of bondage to life is first the universal ignorance which covers the face of reality. From this ignorance of the divine nature of all, there arises the sense of ego. Then comes attachment to pleasant things and aversion for the unpleasant things of the world; lastly, the blind lust for life consumes man.¹² Because the passible part is of the world, it strives to become more deeply immersed in its element, for like is drawn to like. The powers with which man is endowed are dissipated in the fixations to created things or imaginings. The Tradition therefore generally decries concern with created things ("creatures") taken separately and apart from the whole because they draw one from the Creator who is man's final end. "The creature is vanity in so far as it comes from nothingness, but not in so far as it is an image of God."¹³ The creation, however, as God's work of art or as theophany is universally praised.

It is generally held that atonement (literally at-one-ment) with the Father or union of the two selves is obtainable while man is yet

same purpose as the lotus in the Orient.¹⁷ "What presents itself directly to men [e.g., the sensible aspect of the flower] presents itself indirectly (or metaphysically) to the Angels, and what presents itself indirectly to men presents itself directly to the Angels."¹⁸

In yet another essay Coomaraswamy quotes from St. Thomas Aquinas the Scholastic distinction of sign and symbol: "Whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science [theology] has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification; . . . the parabolical sense is contained in the literal, for by words things are signified properly and figuratively."¹⁹ These distinctions Coomaraswamy applies to art. Since the truly significant works of art are essentially metaphysical in import, it is necessary to use those devices — i.e., symbols — that have efficacy in revealing or suggesting the reality behind or beyond sense experience. The doctrine suggested by St. Bonaventura in the title of his opus, *The Reduction of Art to Theology*, is acceptable to Coomaraswamy, who might, however, speak more precisely and refer to the metaphysical rather than to the theological significance of Traditional art, metaphysics being of a higher order of intellection than theology.²⁰

Traditional art, we have seen, is conceived as being imitative of the *forms* (i.e., reality on a certain level of manifestation) and not merely the aspects of things.²¹ "And true 'imitation,'" Coomaraswamy writes, "is not a matter of illusory resemblances (*ὁμοιότης*) but of proportion, true analogy or adequacy (*ἀπὸ τὸ ἰσον*, i.e., *κατ' ἀναλογίαν*), by which we are reminded of the intended referent; in other words, of an 'adequate symbolism.'" ²² Symbolism is adequate if it is an efficient means of producing in a qualified and receptive person an "adaequatio rei et intellectus," or a condition of true knowledge. "The work of art and its archetype are different things; but 'likeness in different things is with respect to some quality common to both.'" ²³

In his closely reasoned essay, "Imitation, Expression, and Participation," ²⁴ Coomaraswamy draws upon St. Bonaventura, who discusses three kinds of likeness (*similitudo*). The first is absolute



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in art, philosophy, literature, and other fields. Although he is relatively little known, those acquainted with his work acclaim him as one of the great thinkers of our time. His study and writing were devoted primarily to bridging the gap between Oriental and Western cultures.

From the treasury of traditional learning which Coomaraswamy amassed in his profusion of books and articles, Professor Livingston has drawn those elements which contribute to an essential theory of literature. Although he quotes from some of Coomaraswamy's Oriental sources, he delineates the theory in an idiom that is more familiar to the West, as stated or implied in the works of Dante, Milton, and Blake, among others.

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