

INTRODUCTION

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *Guardians of the Sun-Door* is one of the last remaining unpublished group of essays of this prolific author; it is also in many ways the culmination of his life's work. While it is presented in a scholarly manner, it is also the story of a spiritual journey – his and possibly ours. As he wrote in an earlier essay, “When the deceased reaches the Sundoor, the question is asked, ‘Who art thou?’” Depending upon the answer one is either allowed to enter in or “be dragged away by the factors of time.” The present work aims at providing us with the correct answers and at teaching us how to negotiate the difficult passage between this world and the next.

As the material is presented in a highly academic manner – AKC was by vocation a scholar, who dedicated the last decades of his life to “searching the Scriptures” – something his extraordinary linguistic ability (he read and spoke some 30 languages which enabled him to seek out the original sources), and because he wrote primarily for fellow scholars, it has been suggested that an introduction providing the potential reader with a brief outline of the issues under consideration while avoiding the multiplicity of unfamiliar linguistic references would be of use. Without this simplification – hopefully one that does not violate the depth of content – many who would greatly benefit from the text itself would perhaps be frightened off. It is because the content is of such spiritual importance – that our very souls depend upon both our understanding and following the paths set out by the author – it is of equal importance that a few “sign posts” be provided to enable us to follow in his footsteps.

The ideas and concepts discussed go back to pre-historical times, but show a consistency of meaning that those imbued with evolutionary ideation would find difficult to accept.¹ Metaphysical ideas however are best expressed by analogy, and hence by symbolism. Indeed, as AKC has elsewhere explained, “symbolism is a language and a precise form of thought; a hieratic and metaphysical language and not a language determined by somatic or psychological categories...symbolism can be defined as the representation of reality on a certain level of reference by a corresponding reality on another...traditional symbols are the technical terms of a spiritual language that transcends all confusion of tongues and are not peculiar to any one time and place. Indeed, they are the technical language of the philosophia perennis.” As Professor Nasr has said, “the symbol is the revelation of a higher order of reality in a lower order through which man can be led back to the higher sphere. It is not accidental that Christ spoke in parables.

¹ This is not surprising. Augustine said that the very thing that is now called the Christian religion was not wanting among the ancients from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in the flesh, after which the true religion which had already existed, began to be called ‘Christian’.” (Stephen Cross, *Avaloka*, VI, 1992, p. 56) And Origin says “There has never been a time when the saints did not have the gift of spiritual salvation pointed towards Christ. The Word became man at the final hour; He became Jesus Christ. But before this visible coming in the flesh, he was already, without being man, mediator for humanity.” (Commentary on Gospel of John, 20.12).

What could be more common than a doorway? To quote Gray Henry: “It is more than coincidental that many doorways throughout the world exhibit a corresponding set of symbolic motifs that point to the One manifesting itself as duality – a duality and a world that must return to that One.” One must pass through the duality of the door jambs to the unity which is only to be found in the centre. As Christ said, “I am the door,” and “No one comes to the Father but through Me.” The passage through the door is always a passage that at least symbolically involves a change of state, and what is required metaphysically is a casting off of the “old man” much as a snake casts of his skin. In our prosaic lives we easily forget that the door both allows us “in” and keeps us “out.” We forget that the husband carrying his wife over the threshold symbolizes a psychopomp carrying the soul to another world – hopefully a paradise where the couple will be “happy ever afterwards.” Should the husband stumble, it is a sign of bad luck or impending misfortune. On the other side of the door is the “One” or “centre” which is represented by the Tree of Life, the Axis Mundi, the Fountain of Immortality, a Throne, a Mountain, Royalty, a sun disc, and so on. Also, the centre can refer to the garden of Paradise where the tree and fountain are located.

The entrance is however not open to everyone – as mentioned above, the door functions both as entrance but also an excluding barrier. And so it is that the Door or the Tree is guarded by “cherubim” who each hold “a flaming sword, turning every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3, 24). The affronted Cherubim are themselves the “contraries” (of past and future, ruling and creative powers, etc.), of which the wall is built, and therefore the appropriate ornaments of the wall on the Temple as in *Ezekial* XLI. I8. Each and every pair of affronted Cherubim represents the clashing jambs of the living door through which the strait way leads, - “strait,” because the line that divides past from future, evil from good and moist from dry is literally, what is so often called, a razor edge. Thus it is that sacred structures – Churches and Temples, almost invariably place flanking guardians at their entrances. As Gray has pointed out, “one finds paired lions at the door of each Burmese Buddhist shrine, Sphinxes at the entrances of Egyptian temples (not to be confused with the famous Egyptian Sphinx) and affronted male and female Griffins over the Gates to Christian churches. The configuration still continues to be used for secular doorways which often exhibit palmettes (representing the Tree of Life), and vases (indicating the font of living waters). The threshold of the yurt in central Asia is decorated with the image of the Tree of Life flanked by two mountain sheep which are represented by their horns.” Such is appropriate and understandable when one conceives of the home as a mini-shrine or church – for a genuine “home” is a sacred enclosure. (This is why in many cultures one leaves one’s shoes at the doorstep.) One even sees an appropriate secular reminder of this in libraries (presumably the depository of wisdom) whose entrances are flanked by lions. These guardians are of various types including “Scorpion-men, sleepless and baleful Serpents or Dragons, Centaurs (notably ‘Saggitarius’), Gandharvas, Cherubim and in many cases armed Automate.” (*Symplegades*).

Every sacred enclosure is representative of the Garden of Eden. The central point of a Church as traditionally conceived, is either the Cross, the upright stem of which is the Tree of Life or the Dome open to heaven, under which is the Tabernacle containing the

Body of Christ who is Himself the Door. The very cruciform structure of the Church repeats this principle as does the Maze found in many mediaeval cathedrals. Again, every genuine Catholic altar has as its prototype, the altar in the Holy of Holies guarded by the cherubim. Between the cherubim is the Shakina or the Divine Presence now replaced by the Tabernacle. Similarly the well of Zam Zam situated in the sacred precincts of the Kabba in Mecca represents the Divine Centre, where is to be found the Fons Vitae, a pattern repeated in the fountains of mosques around the world. The water functions to wash the “old man,” and hence to purify the worshipper. And of course our bodies are also sacred enclosures, for the Kingdom of heaven is within the human heart.

The well guarded door-posts also represent the duality – the past and future, regret and anticipation, etc. - which must be overcome if one is to enter into the Present or the presence of God, a place where, to use the words of Eckhart, “neither virtue nor vice ever entered in.” Such statements may confuse, but not if one listens to Nicholas of Cusa who tells us “The walls of Paradise in which Thou, Lord, dwellest, is built of contradictories, nor is there any way to enter but for one who has overcome the highest Spirit of Reason who guards its gate.” This would seem to be a common doctrine recognized throughout the history of the world. If we are to reach the other shore which is in Dante’s words, a place “where every where and every when are focused,” (*Paradiso* xxix. 22) we must pass through this Door of duality, “though here, under the Sun, we are overcome by the pairs” (xxii. 67). As *the Maitri Upanishad* teaches: “Every being in the emanated world moves deluded by the mirage of the contrary pairs, of which the origin is our liking and disliking... but only those who are freed from this delusion of the pairs... freed from the pairs that are implied in the expression ‘weal and woe’ reach the place of invariability.” As Boethius said, “Truth is a mean between contrary heresies” (*Contra Eutychem* vii). Another word for this duality is “Maya” which both points to unity and at the same time obscures it. As Coomaraswamy explains, the “Vedantic maya-veda doctrine must not be understood as meaning that the world is a ‘delusion,’ but that it is a phenomenal world and as such a theophany and epiphany by which we are deluded if we are concerned with nothing but the wonders themselves, and do not ask ‘Of what’ all these things are a phenomenon.”

Coomaraswamy explains the process each of us must undergo. The passage through the Door is always a “Middle Way” and is frequently symbolized by the “clashing rocks” of mythology through which the “hero” must pass. As AKC said in his essay on Symplegades, “the severing Logos (itself symbolized by a flashing sword) is at once the narrow path which must be followed by every Hero, the door that he must find, and the logical Truth and Highest Spirit of Reason that he must overcome if he would enter into the eternal life of the land ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon,’ This is also the “Logos of God,” the trenchant Word that like a two-edged sword ‘sunders’ soul from spirit (*Heb.* 4:12); ‘sunders,’ because whoever enters must have left himself, his “Achilles heel,” behind him; our sensitive soul being the ‘mortal brother’ and the ‘tail’ or ‘appendage’ of which the Master surgeon’s knife – the Islamic Dhu’l-fiqar – relieves us, if we are prepared to submit to his operation.”

Again, this desired locus is described as a place where “shine no stars, nor sun is there displayed, there gleams no moon; (and yet) no darkness there is seen.” It is here that Dionysius’ “Divine Darkness is entered and where one is “blinded by excess light,” where the Darkness and the Light stand not distant from one another, but together in one another. Darkness and Light, Day and Night are contraries that must be overcome and passed through which can only be done at dawn and dusk when these archetypal contraries that were divided “in the beginning” are surpassed. Christ said He was the door through which we must pass, but having done so, united to Him, we are also United to the Father, for as He said, “I and the Father are one.” As Rumi said, “Our Soul is, as it were, the day and our body the night: We, in the middle are the dawn between our day and night.”

The well at the world’s end is not to be found by walking, for it is within us. It is the Spirit within us that, having shaken off our bodily attachments (and above all our attachment to our little self or ego) that can make the journey. The priest in approaching the altar prays for the joy of his youth which as Eckhart says is the casting off the “old man.” He also prays that God will lead him to the light, the truth and the Mountain in which He dwells. Reverting to the symbolism of the “clashing rocks,” it is clear that one must pass them in a “flash.” This “moment” of transition corresponds to the “single moment of full awakening” (The Buddha is not by accident called the “Wake”), for all spiritual operations are necessarily “sudden.”

Clearly the hero’s quest is never meant to be a one way street – The Holy Grail must be brought back to the world of manifestation. The Hero becomes a “soma-thief,” where Soma is the waters of life, the Golden Fleece or the golden apples of Jason. It is also called the “vessel of plenty.” “No dweller on earth partakes of the true elixir, but only of substitutes ‘made to be Soma’ by rites of transubstantiation, participation being a prefiguration or anticipation of the blessed life of the deceased.” This transubstantiation is achieved in a ritual sacrifice that allows the sacrificer to identify himself with the hero who is always a Christ figure, and who as it were crosses over and brings back the Soma. It is the Catholic priest who identifies himself with Christ who crosses over or through the clashing rocks – between the Cherubim and brings back Bread and Wine, (both crushed” like the soma branches), the Body and Blood for others to participate in.

Space only allows us to touch upon some of the basic ideas in this work. Tied in with these are a host of treasures explaining the symbolic meanings of a variety of associated ideas drawn from all the genuine traditions of the world such as the meaning of “Sacrifice”, “Ether” “Space” “Solar Symbols,” etc. The Sphinx then, which Philo identifies with the Cherubim and describes them as made of the creative Fire, is also identified with the Logos and with Wisdom. The Sphinx is also represented by the Eagle or the Indian Garuda. This explains the symbolism of the “rape of the Nagi” – or of Ganymede, which is the inverse of the “Rape of the Soma.” Here as AKC explains, “the Sphinx represents the Psychopomp who bears away the soul of the deceased, as she bore away the Thebans ‘to the inaccessible light of the Ether.’” Here we have a further elucidation of the traditional symbolism, for as AKC explains quoting Euripedes: “the spirit dies away into Ether” which is nothing but its return to God who gave it. This is at

once the background for Philo's pronouncement that when, at our death the four lesser elements are returned to their origins, "the intellectual and celestial species of the soul departs to find a father in Ether." In the words of AKC "We have seen that in the mythological formulations, verbal and visual, winged pneumatic powers, whether we call them Sirens, Sphinxes, eagles or Angels, convey the soul to the heavenly realms of ethereal light, the soul itself not being winged, only clings to its bearer. On the other hand Plato in the *Phaedrus* speaks of the soul itself as growing her wings; Philo similarly, says of souls that are purified from mundane attachments that "escaping as though from a prison or the grave, they are equipped for the Ether by light wings, and range the heights for ever" (*Somn.* I. 139).

In the same way Dante speaks of those who are, or are not "so winged that they may fly up there" (*Paradiso* x.74). In India, likewise, both formulations occur; on the one hand, it is the Eagle that conveys the sacrificer, who holds on to him (TS. III.2.1.1.), by means of the Gayatri, whose wings are of light, that one reaches the world of the Suns, on the other hand it is asked, what is their lot who reach the top of the Tree (of Life), and answers that "the winged, those who are wise, fly away, but the wingless, the ignorant, fall down (PB. XIV.1.12.13); uplifted on wings of sound, "the Sacrificer both perches fearless in the world of heavenly light, and also moves" i.e. at will, "for wherever a winged one would go, all that it reaches."

And so as AKC points out: "We are ourselves the Sphinx. Plato himself implies as much by his "etc." when he discusses the problems of man's relation to Chimaera, Scyllia, Cereberus and other composite animals. Plato equates the two parts of the composite creature with the two parts of the soul, the better and the worse, immortal and mortal; the composite represents the whole man, the human head the Inner man, the lion or dog, the mettle. He might even have gone further, and pointed out that the serpent tails of these creatures correspond to the appetites, equating the two animal forms, those of the lion and the snake, with the two parts of the mortal soul, as Philo assuredly would have done. In any case, Plato says, that man is one who can be described as *just* (or in Christian terms, is *justified*) in whom the Inner man prevails and is not pulled about by the beasts, but makes an ally of the lion or dog, and so cares for the other beasts as to make them friendly to one another and to himself. On this basis one might say that the composite animal that he really was, carries him off at last, either to punishment in case the beasts have prevailed, or to the beatific life if the Man in the man has prevailed: the question is really just that of the *Prasna Upanishad*: "In which, when I depart, shall I be departing?"

In concluding these introductory comments, I must first of all express my admiration for the work of the Editor, Robert Strom, who faced with a confused mass of notes and illustrations was able to collate and bring together this difficult material. Equally remarkable has been the work of Rebecca Renzi, who working from the notes of Mr. Strom, has typeset a text involving several languages with great accuracy. One must also be grateful to Gray Henry for whom this has been a work of love as well as spiritual growth. Her contributions are by no means limited to the role of publisher, for she has been responsible for the collating of illustrations, many of which she has herself found

and replaced when they were missing from the original text. Finally, and most important, thanks are due to Peter Schroeder whose patronage made the entire work possible.

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