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Introduction

Coomaraswamy once described the only sort of portrait that he could respect:

if an ancestral image or tomb effigy is to be set up for reasons bound up with what is rather loosely called “ancestor worship,” this image has two peculiarities, (1) it is identified as the image of the deceased by the insignia and costume of his vocation and the inscription of his name, and (2) for the rest, it is an individually indeterminate type, or what is called an “ideal” likeness. In this way both selves of the man are represented; the one that is to be inherited, and that which corresponds to an intrinsic and regenerated form that he should have built up for himself in the course of life itself, considered as a sacrificial operation terminating at death. The whole purpose of life has been that this man should realize himself in this other and essential form.¹

We too need to make an “ancestral image,” not for worship but because Coomaraswamy’s life is intrinsically interesting and sheds remarkable light on his work. He himself was adamantly opposed to biographies and autobiographies. He was touched once and for all time by the attitude toward idiosyncratic personality implied by the above passage, an attitude that recurs in the Neoplatonic and Gnostic, Christian and Asiatic writings to which he constantly turned for illumination both as a scholar and as a man. Plotinus, whose works deeply influenced Coomaraswamy, is described in Porphyry’s life of the philosopher as

ashamed of being in the body.

So deeply rooted was this feeling that he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parentage, or his birthplace.

He showed, too, an unconquerable reluctance to sit to a painter

¹ AKC, “Why Exhibit Works of Art?” (1941). References to this article will be made in the most accessible place of publication, the collection of essays published as *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* (London, 1943), where this passage appears on p. 43.

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or a sculptor, and when Amelius persisted in urging him to allow of a portrait being made he asked him, “is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think I must also consent to leave, as a desirable spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?”²

In his maturity, Coomaraswamy shared not only this reluctance but also the quest for intensity of inner life that gave rise to it. His indefatigable reading had brought him to a similar passage in the apocryphal *Acts of John*, the Greek text attributed to a Gnostic Christian community of the second century, which he often quoted in art-historical and philosophical writings. John discovers that one of his disciples, without his consent, has had a portrait made of him; when he manages to accompany this disciple to his living quarters and finds the portrait, he makes a compassionate reprimand, but concludes in the unyielding attitude of Plotinus: “This that thou hast now done is childish and imperfect: thou hast drawn a dead likeness of the dead” (vv. 26–29). In the light of these texts, Coomaraswamy’s reply to a colleague who urged him to write an autobiography appears as simple obedience to what he held to be true: “I would not think of writing my autobiography. . . . There are only a very few autobiographies that I think have been necessary and fully justified. I myself am not interested in my personal history 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 *Kātha Upaniṣad* says, ‘never became any one.’”³ Yet the man who maintained this extreme position received, as a token of homage on his seventieth birthday, not only a Festschrift⁴ such as is frequently offered to outstanding senior scholars, but also a much rarer kind of tribute: a book of memoirs and personal appreciations written by friends, colleagues, and admirers, containing a great deal of biographical material. In the second edition, published several years after his death, it ran to more than three hundred pages, with contributions by something more than one hundred authors.⁵ The fact is that Coomaraswamy

² Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of His Work*, in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. Stephen MacKenna (London, 1962), p. 1.

³ AKC, letter to K. Bharata Iyer, quoted in K. Bharata Iyer, ed., *Art and Thought: A Volume in Honour of the Late Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (London, 1947), p. xiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ S. Durai Raja Singam, ed., *Homage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: A Garland of Tributes* (Kuala Lumpur, 1948); 2nd ed., *Homage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (A Memorial Volume)* (Kuala Lumpur, 1952). Quotations from this work will be

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through much of his life was engaged in the world, not only as a scholarly expositor of Indian culture, but as a critic of politics and society, a partisan of reform, an Indian nationalist who paid dearly for his views, an art historian and philosopher whose ideas ran counter to the majority view and kept him contentedly mired in controversy. Only in his last two decades did he simplify his life, partly, of course, because of advancing years, but also because the nature of the work that he undertook during these years required simplicity. Looking back on the earlier part of his life, he did on one recorded occasion not simply reject it as a negligible preface to the philosophical way of life of his maturity, but recognized its necessity: “if you must say something, do not try to white-wash me. I have lived in very confused times, I have played the game as thoroughly and completely as necessity demanded. . . . Where is the man who has not made mistakes? To have lived in any other way would have been to evade the issue—had this not been required of me it would not have happened. . . . I am not a Victorian. By meeting the conflict one comes to know the better from the worse and learns to discriminate.”⁶ The manly but balanced tone of this conversational excerpt takes us far from the ancestral image characterized by vocational insignia and “ideal” likeness only, the type of portrait that Coomaraswamy especially admired. It alerts us that his biography is not a serene movement toward still more serenity in later years, but punctuated—it might be truer to say punctured—by conflicts and resolutions of a thoroughly human kind.

Because of his aversion to biography, until now no one has tried in more than summary fashion to describe his life. Coomaraswamy’s life and works fall into three major periods: the early years in England, Ceylon, and India, running from the year of his birth, 1877, to 1917, when he accepted a curatorial post at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the first ten or twelve years in America, when he was occupied with very exacting scholarly publications, on the one hand, and an agreeably unsettled personal life, on the other; and the last sixteen years of his life, during which his most memorable writings on art, religion, metaphysics, and culture were produced. Throughout the first period his writings were intertwined with his life pursuits, and these in turn were largely a response to conditions

from the second edition, henceforth referred to as *Memorial Volume*. A third and larger edition, under the title *Remembering and Remembering Again and Again*, was published in 1974.

⁶ Cited in Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy, “Some Recollections and References to Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy,” *Kalāmanjari*, I:1 (1950–1951), 20.

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of cultural deterioration in Ceylon and India that accompanied British dominion in each country. In order to understand the early writings, not only Anglo-Indian relations, but the state of art-historical knowledge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries regarding India and its sister island must be taken into account. Late Victorian England, quite apart from its relations with India and Ceylon, must also be considered. The line of Coomaraswamy's life until 1917 moves through and is for the most part directed by a complex array of influences and historical conditions; what the early writings lack in intrinsic interest is made up for by the interest of the latter. Biography is necessary for this period; and I cannot erect a wall at any point in time, after which it would no longer be necessary. But to the extent that Coomaraswamy achieved that "other" and more essential form of himself, which he mentioned in the passage on portraiture, his portrait in later years will naturally, without forcing, become a more "ideal" likeness.

In the course of this biography, there will also be found a fairly continuous account of his writings, a selective *bibliographie raisonnée*. Given the great number of his books, articles, and reviews, this is necessary in order to know his mind.

In a manner of speaking, there does exist an "icon" of Coomaraswamy: it is the photograph of him in the late 1930s taken while he worked in his garden (Frontispiece). Bearded and grey, with an old canvas hat pulled down to his ears, he leans over his work. His thin cheeks and gnarled hair bespeak fragility, but the weight and dignity of his movement say something of his strength. The photographer (his wife) caught him mid-way between vertical and horizontal, higher and lower, detachment and involvement.

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