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Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: A Hierarchical Approach to Imagistic Mysticism

Abstract
Discusses a number of poets and writers (including Lewis and Williams) related by similar philosophical and mystical traditions. Demonstrates how their work relates to Rudolph Otto's definition of the Imagistic Way and its stages.

Additional Keywords
Mysticism in literature; Mysticism in poetry; Otto, Rudolph. Mysticism East and West; Valerie Protopapas

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DOROTHY L. SAYERS, in her essay "The Poetry of the Image in Dante and Charles Williams," speaks of them as belonging "to a particular philosophical and mystical tradition." Likewise, Charles Williams in The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante makes clear that he considers Dante and William Wordsworth as belonging to the Way of Affirmation of Images. In the study which follows, I wish to apply to this view a framework which I found in Rudolph Otto's Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism. Perhaps this sounds like a dry exercise of the sort which is usually called academic—maybe it is. But I have found this particular exercise valuable in establishing a framework within which I can understand what a number of my favorite writers, including three of the Inkling's, are saying. It enables me to see them better, to compare their statements one to another, to clarify their thought in my mind. I can ask no more of an academic exercise.

Since I am being academic, let me start with two clarifications of my intentions. First, since professionally I teach literature in a state college, no doubt this secular background influences my approach to these writers; therefore, I do not claim that the material I discuss has any necessary religious meaning. The writers often think it has, but they may be wrong. Lionel Trilling, for example, in his essay entitled "The Immortality Ode," discusses Wordsworth's poem in terms of Freudian psychology: Wordsworth thought he had a visionary gleam reflected from Heaven because his ego had not reached the point of not identifying the whole world with himself. Perhaps this is true. Perhaps these religious moments which I will discuss are simply moments in which the ego is lost in the unconscious mind. I like to think otherwise, but being an academician in a state school, I carefully point out to my students when I teach Wordsworth that a secular reading is quite possible—and has been done.

Second, let me remark that my title may be slightly misleading in two ways. "Jacob's Ladder" sounds as if I wanted to refer to visions of angels; this is not correct, as I will make clear in my next paragraph. But I could not resist the phrase about a religious ladder, since it may be thought to echo Plato's "Ladder of Love in The Symposium," which is another example of a hierarchy of experiences—one that ends, at least, in mysticism. Second, "Climbing" in my title may suggest that the mystic works his way up this ladder (whether or not he kicks away the lower rungs, as Plato's lover does); this also is not quite accurate: the scale is not static-a sequence or series of images, ideas, and emotions, and waits for the Spirit to enter. With this discipline of negation we are not concerned.

(2) The Imagistic Way: The Way of Acceptance or of Unity. Here the mystic united himself with God through, or by means of, one or more images from the world. I shall outline the steps of the process (for those who process it), or the levels of awareness, below.

In what follows, I should make clear that I am not following Rudolph Otto exactly; my first step he does not mention, but I find it in Wordsworth and others. Also, I consider nature mysticism to be part of the second step, although Otto spends some space attacking nature mysticism as not being the same thing as he is discussing, although he admits some similarities; correctly or incorrectly, I believe he is wrong at this point. At any rate, for my purposes of comparing descriptions of mystical experiences, the descriptions are enough alike that the comparisons should be made at that point, whether or not the similarities signify identities; however, I follow Sayers and Charles Williams in believing they do.

I The Experience of Joy

I SHOULD LIKE TO BEGIN with a text from Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," out of the second verse paragraph. Wordsworth is describing the effect his memory of the natural scenery of five years earlier has had on him during the time between his visits; he writes:

...I have owed to them [the beauteous forms he has remembered],
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration...

Pleasure from the memory of beauty is no surprise, nor Wordsworth's next comment, that he may have been influenced morally by his memories—the man who is at peace with himself, who is not bothered by tension, may well be politer to others, more responsive to their needs, than another. Then Wordsworth adds another way in which his memories have influenced him:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen [burden] of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Is lightened—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

The two points I wish to emphasize in this passage are (1) the loss of bodily awareness and (2) the feeling of joy. (I shall return to what Wordsworth says about "seeing into the life of things" later.) The first of these is an obvious part of the mystical experience; the second seems to be a common concomitant (I find Evelyn Underhill mentioning it). I believe in Joseph Wood Krutch one finds a man who never went much beyond this simple feeling of joy. In his autobiography More Lives than
One, he writes:

"... recreation, pleasure, amusement, fun, and all the rest are poor substitutes for Joy; and Joy, so I at least am convinced, has its roots in something from which civilization tends to cut us off.

Are some at least of the animals capable of teaching us this lesson of Joy? Some biologists deny categorically that they feel it. But by no means all and by no means the best. If I listen to my children, I am often startled and moved to tears by the wonder and beauty of the world that is unknown to them. What they feel in the presence of nature is a joy of life. This is what we might call the Joy of Life. The Joy of Life is a universal phenomenon, especially in the animal world. The Joy of Life is the thing most likely to open the door to that joy we cannot analyze. I have experienced it sometimes when a rabbit appeared suddenly from a bush to dash away to the safety which he values so much, or when, at night, a rabbit in the leaves reminds me how many busy lives surround my own. It has also come almost as vividly when I suddenly saw a flower opening or a stem pushing out of the ground.

But what is the content of the experience? What is it that at such moments I seem to realize? Of what is my happiness compounded?

First of all, perhaps, there is the vivid assurance that these things, that the universe itself, really do exist, that life is not a dream; second, that the reality is pervasive and, it seems, unaccountable. The future of mankind is dubious. But one knows that all does not depend upon man, that possibly, even, it does not depend upon this earth. Should man disappear, rabbits may well still run and flowers still open. If this globe itself should perish, then it seems unreasonless to suppose that what inspires the stem and the root may exist somewhere else. And it, I, seems, am at least part of all this.

From my point of view, Krutch is here experiencing a low-grade mysticism which he does not understand. The feeling that life is somehow unified is a hint of the Perception of Unity which I shall take as the next step. (By the way, I do not imply that Krutch did not intellectually understand what mysticism is; his references elsewhere make clear that he understood what Wordsworth was claiming—he simply was not certain that his experiences meant religiously what Wordsworth claimed.)

Another person at this level of mysticism is C.S. Lewis. His experiences of Joy, of Sehnsucht (since he refers to the German Romantics), are discussed most clearly in his autobiography, Surprised by Joy (the title is a phrase from a sonnet by Wordsworth); in his essay "The Weight of Glory"; and in his allegory of his conversion, The Pilgrim's Progress. The passage I have quoted does clarify his clearest discussion of Joy (as contrasted to recounting his experiences of it) to be found in the Preface to the Third Edition of the latter title. Lewis comments that this Desire is distinguished from other desires by two characteristics: first, that it is a pleasure even if no relief of it is forthcoming ("For this sweet Desire cuts across our ordinary distinctions between wanting and having. To have it is, by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it."); second, that the object of this Desire is unknown to the will as it is written.

Thus if it comes to a child while he is looking at a far off hillside he at once thinks 'if only I were there'; if it comes when remembering some event in the past, he thinks 'if only I could go back to those days'. If it comes (a bit later) while he is reading a romantic tale or poem of perils and sea and faerie lands forlorn', he thinks he is wishing that such places really existed and that he could reach them. If it comes (later still) in a context with erotic suggestions he believes he is desiring the perfect beloved; if it falls upon literature (like Maeterlinck or the early Yeats) which casts its spell of spirits and the like with some show of serious belief, he may think that he is hankering for real magic and occultism. When it darts out upon him from his studies in history or science, he may confuse it with the intellectual craving for knowledge.

But every one of these impressions is wrong. The sole merit I claim for [The Pilgrim's Regress] is that it is written by one who has proved them all to be wrong. There is no room for vanity in the claim: I know them to be wrong not by intelligence but by experience, such experience as would not have come my way if my youth had been wiser, more virtuous, and less self-centered than it was. For I have myself been deluded by every one of these false answers in turn, and have contempt-plated each of them earnestly enough to discover the cheat. To have embraced so many false Florimels is no matter for boasting: it is fools, they say, who learn by experience. But since they do at last learn, let a fool bring his experience into the common stock that wiser men may profit by it.

Since my purpose in this paper is not a study of mistakes about mysticism, I will leave Lewis's details to those who wish to search out his book. But the passage I have quoted does clarify by a negative definition what this paper is discussing. For a positive example from Lewis, let us turn to the first one recorded in his autobiography; he says that Traherne and Wordsworth have described the experience better, but then goes on:

The first is itself the memory of a memory. As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his house garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation that came over me; Milton's "enormous bliss" of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to "enormous") comes somewhere near it. It was a sensation, of course, of desire;
but desire for what? not, certainly, for a biscuit-tin filled
with moss, nor even (though that came into it) for my past.
'I know not what I desired, the desire itself was gone, and whole glimpse
withdrawn, the world turned commonplace again, or only stirred
by a longing for the longing that had just ceased. It had
taken only a moment of time; and in a certain sense everything else
that had ever happened to me was insignificant in compar­
ison.
Here the experience comes through the double means of the sight
of a flowering currant bush (like Krutch's experiences of nature)
and the memory of a toy garden (as Wordsworth's experiences
were to be based not on scenes present but scenes remembered).
The particular images are not important to us as analyzers
(although they are of course important to the mystic himself); as Lewis says, the experience is basic, the images are a means
—but in the Imagistic Way, a necessary means.
Lewis's negative excluded some of the images through which this experience of Seelenaucht might come; before going on
to the next step in my scale, I would like to turn to
John Heath-Stubbs' account of a discussion by Charles Williams
of the most important of these means for poetry, which necessar­
ily omits such things as the study of science or history which
Lewis mentions:
In a lecture which I heard him deliver at Oxford in 1943
[writes Heath-Stubbs], Charles Williams distinguished five
principal modes of the Romantic Experience, or great images,
which occur in poetry:
(a) The Religious experience itself. Having posited this,
Williams proposed to say nothing further about it. Obviously,
in a sense, it is in a category apart, and includes the others.
(b) The Image of woman. Dante's Divine Comedy is the fullest expression of this mode, and its potential development.
(c) The Image of Nature. Of this Wordsworth in The Prelude
...was the great exponent.
(d) The Image of the City. Had Williams not been addressing
an audience composed of English Literature students, I have no
doubt the tenor of his lecture would have cited Virgil, the
Rosae, as the great exponent. As it was, he pointed to 'what were, until recently,
known as our younger poets' as expressing, in their vision of
the Unjust City, a negative aspect of this experience. [Heath-
Stubbs adds in a footnote: "An even better, and positive, ex­
ample from modern poetry would have been provided by Hart
Crane's The Bridge, but Charles Williams had not read this
poem."]
(e) The experience of great art. Of this, Keats's Ode on a
Grecian Urn was a partial expression.

Heath-Stubbs hesitates about the last of these, saying that it,
"like the first, seems to stand in a special category. It is,
that it might be said, included by the others, just as the others are
included in the first. And it also seems to me doubtful whether it
could ever lead to a more than partial expression."

"So much says Heath-Stubbs; from my point of view, the reason it
cannot serve as a means is that the images and emotions under
the man-made, cannot (or cannot often) beyond its finite creator.
Keats was able to meditate on the paradoxes of eternal art by
the anonymously created urn, but the escape outside of time
altogether by means of art would logically seem rare.
Perhaps, the flashes of Joy he found in Nordic art; perhaps it is important that the art which
so moved him involved gods and symbolic adventures (whether in the
original myths and legends or in later treatments of them). This
question of art as a means of mysticism need not be decided here,
but rather be considered in the third and fourth steps which
I would like to turn to.

More and more it seems that the ordering of nature is an art
akin to music—fugues in shell and cartilage, counterpoint in
fibers and capillaries, throbbing rhythm in waves of sound,
light, and nerve. And oneself is connected with it quite
complexly like smoke in sunbeams or the rippling networks of
light, and nerve. And oneself is connected with it quite
clearly (or they are), and so thought he could dismiss sublimation as a cause of his
Joy since it was not what he found in physical consumption.
Perhaps so. As Kierkegaard said, belief is a leap in the dark;
in the modern world, there are many who know what is there with­
out leaping, for Freud or someone else has given them a map.
After the First Step comes the perception of unity; based
generally on Otto's summary, we may distinguish three character­
istics of this state: (1) all the individual things of experience are
seen as somehow unified or identical—despite their differ­
ences, or (2), less often, all things are transformed
as part of the deepest experience; and (3) the mystic is
unified with the things he perceives. The first and third of
these have already been suggested by Krutch in his meditation on
the meaning of his experiences; he felt that the life which
imaged his Joy was pervasive in the universe, whether or not mankind or
this world continued to exist, and that at the moment he
was part of that pervasive life. But this step, and the combination of
its first and third aspects, can also and more clearly (because
less confused with their image) be illustrated from another
passage in Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey':
I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the deepalmighty mind.
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And roll through endless states of light and shade.
The earlier passage from Wordsworth mentioned "the power of har­
mony" which allowed him to see "into the life of things"—a
description of this second step of the perception of unity;
likewise, insofar as he perceives "a spirit," not just "a
motion," as Lewis suggests, it is a very deep step, and Abbe's
"vision of "whose" and the anthropomorphic use of "dwelling" suggest the
next stage.) But the description of a unifying "something"
"a motion," which underlies the ocean, air, sky, and mind of man;
which drives both life and thought; which "rolls through all
things," seems to clearly unify at some level the individual
worlds of this world, including mankind.

Since I have been admitting possible secular interpretations,
may want to here add a secular experience: Alan Watts, in his book
The Joyous Conscience, describes his experience of taking L.S.D.
In terms which suggest a perception of unity also:
I am looking at what I would ordinarily call a confusion of
bushes—a tangle of plants and weeds with branches and leaves
growing every which way. But now that the organizing, relational
mind is uprooted I see that what is confusing is not the
bushes but my clumsy method of thinking. Every twig is in its
proper place, and the tangle has become an arabesque more
delicately ordered than the fabulous doodles in the margins
of Celtic manuscripts. In this same state of consciousness I have
seen a woodland at fall, with the whole multitude of almost
infinitely complex microscopic and macroscopic aspects of it,
all the moving, breathing, in the anthro­pomorphic use of "dwelling" and how it
been carved out with infinite patience and skill.
A journey into this new mode of consciousness gives one a
marvelously enhanced appreciation of patterning in nature, a
fascination deeper than ever with the structure of forms, the
format of a work of art. This is a new way to see the incredible
jewelry of such unicellular creatures of the ocean as the
radiolaria, the fairy architecture of seeds and pods, the
engineering of bones and skeletons, the aero­dynamics of feathers,
and the astonishing profusion of eye-forms upon the wings of
beetles interlaced.

More and more it seems that the ordering of nature is an art
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leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arabesques and flower-like subtleties. Each figure as he looked at it became a master-figure or focus of the whole spectacle, by means of which his eye disentangled all else and brought it into unity—only to be itself entangled when he looked to what he had taken for mere marginal decorations and found that there also the same hegemony was claimed, and the same divine vision of love, whether or not it is fully typical of the Affirmative Way, it does allow the type of comparisons I am interested in.

Let me begin with a vision (if it can be called such) which seems perhaps more poetic elaboration than inspiration; in a passage from Dante's La Vita Nuova, as translated by Barbara Reynolds:

"...I saw approaching me a glorious lady, renowned for her beauty, who for a long time had been the beloved of my closest friend. Her name was Giovanna, but some say that because of her beauty she was nicknamed Primavera, that is, Spring, and that what she was most admired of was her voice, her face. As I looked, I saw the miraculous Beatrice. They passed by quite close to me, one behind the other, and Love seemed to say to me in my heart: 'The first is called Primavera, and the sole reason for this is the way you see her walking today, for inspired him when he gave her this name of Primavera, which means that she will come first (prima vórra) on the day Beatrice appears... If you also consider her first name, it too signifies 'she will come first', for Joan comes from John, who preceded the True Light, saying Ἐγώ χως διαμαντινὸς ἐν θανάτῳ παρίτε ραίνοις. 'I am the one who prepares ye the way of the Lord.') And afterwards Love seemed also to say these words: 'Anyone who thought carefully about this would call Beatrice Love because of the great resemblance she bears to me.'"

If we assume this procession of Giovanna and Beatrice actually took place on the streets of Florence in the Middle Ages, then the description which Dante gives us seems to be an archetypal description. As John preceded Christ, so Giovanna precedes Beatrice—in fact, all of Giovanna's nominal history to that point was simply to be a forerunner for this personification, which means that she will come first (prima vórra) on the day Beatrice appears... If you also consider her first name, it too signifies "she will come first", for Joan comes from John, who preceded the True Light, saying Ἐγώ χως διαμαντινὸς ἐν θανάτῳ παρίτε ραίνοις. 'I am the one who prepares ye the way of the Lord.') And afterwards Love seemed also to say these words: 'Anyone who thought carefully about this would call Beatrice Love because of the great resemblance she bears to me.'
Thus Watts is able to evoke not only archetypes for the persons but also for the bread. Interestingly, Watts goes on in the next paragraph to suggest the unity of the people, and since a unity despite differences was the first point of this stage, I shall quote the passage:

"I try to find words that will suggest the numinous, mythological quality of these people. Yet at the same time they are as familiar as if I had known them for centuries, or rather, as if I were recognizing them again as lost friends whom I knew at the beginning of time, from a country begotten before all worlds... All of us look at each other knowingly, for the feeling that we knew each other in that most distant past conceals something else—tact, awesome, almost unmentionable—the realization that at the deep center of a time perpendicular to ordinary time we are, and always have been, one. We acknowledge the marvelously hidden plot, the master illusion, whereby we appear to be different."

Rather than spend time discussing Watts' vision, I am satisfied in having presented two archetypal passages, one Christian and one pagan. I now wish to tie this into the Inklings—Charles Williams, to be specific. For my purposes, I shall not use the most obvious example, the archetypal animals of The Place of the Lion, but rather an archetypal policeman in Chapter Four of The Greater Trumps:

A policeman's hand held them up [while he controlled the flow of traffic]. "Behold the Emperor," he said to Nancy.

"You're making fun of me, my dear," she half protested.

"Never less," he said seriously. "Look at him."

She looked, and, whether the hours she had given to brooding over the Tarots during the last few days, partly to certify her courage to herself, had imposed their forms on her memory, or whether something in the policeman's shape and cloak under the lights of the dark street suggested it, or whether indeed something common to Emperor and Khalif, cadis and magistrates, praetor and alcalde, lictor and constable, shone before her in those lights—whichever was true, it was certainly true that for a moment she saw in that heavy official barring their way the Emperor of the Trumps [in the Tarot deck], helmed, in a white cloak, stretching out one sceptred arm, as if Charlemagne, or one like him, stretched out his controlling sword over the tribes of Europe, pouring from the forests, and bade them pause or march as he would. The great roads ran below him, to Rome, to Paris, to Aix, to Byzantium, and the nations established themselves in cities upon them. The noise of all the pausing street came to her as the roar of many peoples; the white cloak held them by a gesture; order and law were there. It moved, it fell aside, the torrent of obedient movement rolled on, and they with it.

Here the archetype is in terms of the Tarot cards, since Williams is using them (and particularly the Fool) in his novel as the basic symbols of the universe. The Tarot Emperor sums up the principle of rule, of order, in the world: both the policeman and Charlemagne are particular manifestations of the archetype. Thus, within the fictional world of the novel, Henry and Nancy perceive the universal through the individual. Is Rudolph Otto right that this is connected to a perception of unity? Perhaps, if we consider that the particular policeman and Charlemagne, as well as all the Emperors and Khalifs, and others of the passage, are unified in the Archetypal Ruler; I suppose most Christian theologians would call this archetypal principle God the Father. But it is far easier to see a unity through the archetype here than it is in Watts' book, where the mythological archetypes suggest individuality of personality rather than generality of function, of office. I am not certain, therefore, that Otto is correct in assuming that archetypes necessarily suggest an underlying unity.

II The Perception of The One

Rudolph Otto turns to the writings of Meister Eckhart in medieval Germany for four steps moving from the Perception of Unity to the Perception of the One:

The Many [the things of this world] are seen as one (and only the rightly seen).

The Many are seen in the One (where the One is still a form of the Many).

The One is seen in the Many [as supporting and conditioning reality].

The One is seen.

As often with mystical theologians, the description is somewhat lacking; but the general movement is clear. Obviously "the One" is often called God (by Christian mystics, for example), although Emerson can write of going out into nature as a naked eyeball which eventually perceives the Oversoul. But it is one Spirit which is found (or so writers on mysticism usually assume), whether the mystic refers to it as God, the Godhead, the One, or the Oversoul.

In this procession from one level to the next, the passage from "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" with a spirit whose dwelling was in nature seems at the third step: "The One is seen in the Many." I have already alluded to Emerson's Nature and "The Over-Soul"; let me give two brief examples from the former: near the end of the next-to-last chapter, Emerson writes, "Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of beings, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul." In this, Emerson suggests more than just the perception of unity in nature; he seems to be at the second of the four steps which Eckhart listed: "The Many are seen in the One." Again, like Wordsworth's passage, a sentence or two from the last chapter suggests the third step: "...the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the Oversoul speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it." For my purposes of illustration, these passages are enough; after all, Emerson and Thoreau continue the Nature Mysticism of Wordsworth; in my terms, they equally represent the Imagistic Way, here by means of images drawn from nature.

Examples of actual perception of the One—where the mystic has completely penetrated through the Many (the images from which he began), and, leaving them behind, sees the One as completely as he is able—are rare in the material with which I am dealing. Alan Watts has a description at the end of his L.S.D. experiences which resembles it: against his closed eyelids, and it involves so much imagery that it seems to be more part of the visions of the Illuminists; nevertheless, I will quote it here:

"Time to go in, and leave the garden to the awakening stars... Again music—harpsichords and a string orchestra, and Bach in his most exultant mood. [These are records.] I lie down to listen, and close my eyes. All day, in wave after wave and from all directions of the mind's compass, there has repeatedly come upon me the sense of my original identity as one with the
very fountain of the universe. I have seen, too, that the foun-
tain is its own source and motive, and that its spirit is an
unbounded playfulness which is the many-dimensioned dance
of life (like Ransom, in Perelandra). There is no problem left,
but who will believe its Will if I return to normal consciousness? Yet I can see at the moment
that this does not matter. The play is hide-and-seek or lost-and-found, and it is all part of the play that one can get
very lost indeed. How far, then can one go in getting found?

As if in answer to Hessel's, there is a vision before my
closed eyes a vision in symbolic form of what Eliot has called
"the still point of the turning world." I find myself looking
down at the floor of a vast courtyard, as if from a window
high upon the wall, and the floor and the walls are entirely
surfaced with ceramic tiles displaying densely involved
arabesque, gold, purple, and blue. The scene might be the
inner court of some Persian palace, were it not of such immense
proportions and its colors of such preternatural transparency.
In the center of the floor there is a great sunken arena,
shaped like a combination of star and rose, and bordered with a
strip of tile that suggests the finest inlay work in vermil-
ion, gold, and obsidian.

Within this arena some kind of ritual is being performed in
time with the music. At first its mood is stately and royal,
as if there were officers and courtiers in rich armor and
many-colored cloaks dancing before their King. As I watch,
the mood changes. The courtiers become angels with wings of
golden fire, and in the center of the arena there appears a
pool of dazzling flame. Looking into the pool I see, just for
a moment, a face which reminds me of the Christos Pantocrator
of Byzantine mosaics, and I feel that angels are drawing back with wings over their faces in a motion of reverent
dread. But the face dissolves. The pool of flame grows
brighter and brighter, and I notice that the winged beings are
draw back with a gesture, not of dread, but of tenderness—for
the flame knows no anger. It is as if the flames were a
"tongues of flame infolded"—are an efflorescence of love so
endearing that I feel I have seen the heart of all hearts.

I should add a note to this passage from Watts: I have been
taking his descriptions of his experiences of the
first light as we saw earlier, had a vision of Christ within Beatrice, which
he recounted in his New Life. Later, at the first of La Divina
Commedia, he has gone astray from his original vision and was in
danger of damnation; Beatrice, in Heaven, had pity on him and
was the instrument which caused Divine Grace to be extended to him,
to lead him to the Right Way, to Salvation. At the end of the
poem, after Beatrice has guided Dante up the spheres of Heaven,
he is allowed to gaze at the Godhead.

[8] Bernard conveyed to me what I should do
by sign and sound when he saw me,
I had looked upwards, as he wished me to,

For now my sight, clear and yet clearer grown,
Pierced through the ray of that exalted light

Wherein, as in itself, the truth is known.

Dante pauses at this point to say that language is inadequate
for what he is to describe; he prays for aid in recalling what
he saw at that moment—and then he continues:
The piercing brightness of the living ray
Which I endured, my vision had undone,
I think, if I had turned my eyes away.

And I recall this further led me on,
Wherefore my gaze more boldness yet assumed
Till to the Infinito, which Dante looks at
In that abyss I saw how love held bound
Into one volume all the leaves whose flight
Is scattered through the universe around;

How substance, accident, and mode unite
Pursed, so to speak, together, in such wise
That this I tell of is one simple light.

Yea, of this complex I believe mine eyes
Beheld the universal form—in me,
Even as I speak, I feel such joy arise.
As, according to Ernst Haeckel's biogenetic law, Ontogeny
recapitulates Phylogeny, so one notices here a recapitulation of
the earlier steps in this vision: as Dante looks
at God, he perceives the Unity which ties together the universe,
and he feels Joy. (In the original Italian, the phrase is oh'to
godo.)

Dante continues, with a passage which foreshadows the
Union with the One, which will be the fourth and final step of
my analysis:

That light doth so transform a man's whole bent
That never to another sight or thought
Would he surrender, with his own consent;

For everything the will has ever sought
Is gathered there, and there is every quest
Made perfect, which apart from it falls short.

(For those of us who are much involved in mythopoeic literature,
the statement that in the Godhead "is every quest / Made perfect,
which apart from it falls short" is one which almost demands
another paper, and one far longer than this which I am writing—
and probably a less secular essayist.)

The word quest, I should add, is not in the Italian, but I can only consider it an
inspired translation!

To continue:

Now, even what I recall will be exprest
More feebly than if I could wield no more
Than a babe's tongue, yet milky from the breast;

Not that the living light I looked on wore
More semblances than one, which cannot be,
For it is always what it was before;

But as my sight by seeing learned to see,
The transformation which in me took place
Transformed the single changeless form for me.

That light supreme, within its fathomless
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space;

The first mirrored the next, as though it were
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame
Breathed equally from each of the first pair.

Eternal light, that in Thyself alone
Dwelling, as in Thine own light, and smile
On Thy self-love, so knowing and so known!

The sphere thus begot, perceptible
In Thee like mirrored light, now to my view—
When I had looked on it a little while—
Seemed in itself, and in its own self-hue,
Limed with our image; for which cause mine eyes
Were altogether drawn and held thereto.

The first of these steps, the seeing of the Eternal Light, is the equivalent of the first sphere of different hues which occupied the same space, is a Christian vision of the Trinity (Dante seems to
follow the Western version of the Nicene Creed in which the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son jointly, rather than
just from the Father, as the Eastern [and original] version has it; here, "the third seemed flame / Breathed equally from each of the first pair"); the second step, the seeing of "our countenance"—that is, a human face, Christ's face—indicates the Mystery of the Incarnation, in which God became Man. It is at the point
that Dante is unable to comprehend any more of God, by himself:

As the geometer his mind applies
To square the circle, nor for all his wit
Finds the right formula, how'er he tries,
So strove I with that wonder—how to fit
The image to the sphere; so sought to see
How it maintained the point of rest in it.

Thither my own wings could not carry me,
But that a flash my understanding clove,
Whence its desire came to it suddenly.
So grace provides the answer which understanding could not give.
At this point, The Divine Comedy ends; the question is
Made perfect, and it is broken off; yet,
Yet, as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars,
My will and my desire were turned by love,

The love that moves the sun and the other stars.

There are three notes which I would like to add to this
discussion of Dante's poem. First, I am uncertain as to how well
it illustrates my thesis. Obviously, Dante did not see Beatrice,
see her inner, Christ-like character, and somehow pierce through
to the Godhead behind the figures of this world: there is a time lag
here. It was not until a number of years later that Dante, by means of Beatrice's guidance, was able to have his ultimate vision. No doubt those who wish to draw parallels to the Inner Way, the Way of Negation of Images, will say that Dante's period of apostasy is equivalent to the Dark Night of the Soul. Perhaps so. Perhaps this delay is inevitable; Dante returned to his Image of Beatrice and saw God, while Wordsworth could not (or, at least, did not) return to his Image of Nature, and so his poetic life dwindled. (This is the comparison made by Dorothy L. Sayers, in her essay "The Beatrician Vision in Dante and Other Poets.") Even so, Beatrice was dead by the time Dante returned to the True Way; as she appears in The Divine Comedy, she is an image in a dream-vision. Thus is she an image of this world (as she clearly was in The New Life), or is she an Illuminist's vision? She is obviously somewhere in between: she was a person, she is now a ghost (a saved one, of course, but not yet in her resurrected body); on the other hand, she is also part of a dream. Yet she remains an Image, in the Williams-Sayers interpretation of Images. Where am I left? She is not exactly an image of the world, being dead; yet she is an image which was in the world, and which appears in her human appearance to Dante when he finishes his climb of Mount Purgatory. Further, she is not exactly an image through which Dante sees God, or at least such a vision is not literally so described. (Sayers argues, in her essay "The Poetry of the Image in Dante and Charles Williams," which I cited earlier also, that Beatrice on her appearance at the top of the mountain is literally herself but is allegorically the Sacrament—that is, morally, she is the manifestation of God as he appears to each individual, Beatrice being His manifestation to Dante; historically, she is the Sacrament of the Altar, and in a larger sense the Church; and mystically, she is "the whole doctrine of the Way of Affirmation—the union of the soul with God in and through all the images.") However that may be, at the literal level, Beatrice is not an image penetrated by Dante as his vision of God; yet she guides him up the ranks of Heaven to his ultimate vision. Therefore, although her image does not work precisely the same way here that images have worked on other levels, yet there is obviously a nearness to the tradition I am concerned with.

The second note I wanted to add to my discussion to Dante's poem returns me to a problem I have raised before: in this case, are the three spheres with three different colors which occupy one space and which also, somehow, contain Christ's face—are they a true picture of the Godhead, or are they the vision of an Illuminist? Or—a third possibility—are the spheres an intellectual attempt by Dante to create a picture for the reader of something which cannot be described at all? I cannot answer this question, for, to begin with, I do not know how much fictionalizing there is in The Divine Comedy. Did Dante really have any such dream vision? All we have is the poem; all we can trust is the poem. I suspect that most readers take the three spheres as symbolic, but whether they were a symbol that Dante's mind created for him in a vision, as a limited means of comprehending something incomprehensible, or whether they were a symbol which Dante invented for his reader, in order that he might have something more specific to grasp than an emotional rhapsody on Dante's part, I do not know.

The third and last note is a simply a promise to return to Dante's poem at the end of this paper, at the fourth step, to suggest an application there.

Dante's level of mysticism has taken us far beyond C.S. Lewis, with his personal moments of Sehnsucht, who is far down the scale now, and even Charles Williams' archetypal policeman is left behind; my commentary on this level is logically at a close. However, I would like to digress for a moment on an idea which I do not find in Rudolph Otto. It seems to me that if the perception of the Archetype in the objects of this world is typical of the previous level, so also the perception of the Archetype by itself should logically appear at this level. No doubt this could be illustrated by the perception of the pure Ideas in the Platonic scheme; however, I have in mind another passage from an Inkling—this time from Owen Barfield.

**VISION**

This deals with the quotation of the vision of Alan Watts, which mentions several iconographic references (the Christ Pantocrater and seraphim). The head of Christ is produced in the iconographic way, sans halo, as are the eyes and the eye-nose and flames. The seraphim are usually represented as six wings with faces in the middle (sometimes just a single eye in the middle, but it was felt that this was already esoteric enough)
In this Ever Diverse Pair (published under the pseudonym of G.A. L. Budge), in Chapter VII, entitled "Vision," he describes the three types of solicitors under the names of Lynx, Glossy, and Applejohn:—

With the human lynx it is not the physical act of swallowing, but the spiritual one of over-reaching that is typical. It is in the moment when he is over-reaching someone that its true nature flashes upon the inward eye of the observer.

The lynx's proper element is litigation and negotiation. In the City of Industry there are many types of lynx-like practitioners, and the sums about which they litigate and negotiate are substantial in quantity, whether or not they ever existed in case. In the little streets adjoining the Police Courts and County Courts he acts for anybody who comes along and strives to ally his claims by getting 6s. 8d. allowed by the Registrar instead of the 3s. 4d. to which he is entitled.

The second of these sub-archetypes:—

The Glossy is better educated than the Lynx and more of a gentleman. He is often to be found occupying such of the better-paid legal appointments in the Civil Service as are open to Solicitors. In private practice he is usually fortunate in his clients, perhaps because he is well-to-do enough to refuse those whom he does not like.

He of course acts so as to further his client's (sic) interests, but he does not identify himself with them, as the Lynx does. Consequently you may feel quite at ease in negotiation and disagreement with him, even when the clients themselves are embittered.

And the third of these figures:—

The true Applejohn, as his name implies, has a face covered all over with little Lawyer's facets which is not the more diminutive inasmuch as this particular one of the Applejohn's characteristics, although it is eponymous, is not absolutely essential...  

...the Applejohn is not so much the philosopher as the craftsman of our profession. I think the little wrinkles have something to do with the general disposition of the documents as such. He relishes the drafting of them, if he knocks your draft about, it is because you have departed in some way from conveyancing practice or precedent, and it grieves his soul. He is an 'Attorney' in the good old sense, carrying an aroma about him of the last-fading days of parchment and the 'fair and clerkly hand'.

Now let us return to "Burgeon's' vision of the Absolute Solicitor; Barfield writes:—

I am at a loss to know how best to convey or in what imagery to nourish the true nature of this great One, which manifests itself so partially and imperfectly in each of us individual solicitors. It has been said that no-one has ever really seen Tree or Horse, but only trees or horses. Those who would rise in contemplation from the particular manifestation to the underlying Forms of things must train themselves by rising first to intermediate levels. Thus they may learn to perceive, as types, the Deciduous Tree and the Draught Horse.

It is at this point that Barfield offers, as intermediate types, the Lynx, Glossy, and Applejohn; after teaching his reader to perceive the sub-archetypes, he continues commenting on the combination of types often in actual solicitors; then the true Archetype is described:—

But the Absolute Solicitor, whom I now perceived in the spirit, stood far beyond and above these faulty approximations. In him none of the facets was predominant and none deficient, but all three were mingled in just proportion and sweet harmony. The gentleness and sure craftsmanship of the Applejohn chimed perfectly with the tact and suavity of the Glossy and, while the Lynx was to preserve a balanced detachment from the passions of the client, so as to uphold the fraternity of the profession, the Lynx, tamed now to a trusty bandog, crouched at the feet of both, with a watchful eye open to ensure that the client's true interest should never be sacrificed at the sake of gentleness or the love of ease, or to preserve the gravity or that fraternity.

It was an inspiring vision. I do not know if this Absolute Solicitor, whether or not he is an inspiring vision, is appropriately considered here.

Barfield's approach to the intellectual, very Platonic, but in the context of the book, the vision is also a dream—that is, Barfield's explanation of the Solicitor is intellectual, but the vision itself seems to come to Burgeon in a moment, not through intellectual training. Is the perception of an archetypal perception of the One in the Imagistic Way? Certainly there seems to be no exact piercing through the Many to the One Archetype—or is the movement from individual lawyers, to the three types, to the Absolute Solicitor, a movement from Many to One? It is analogous, at least. And the perception of the Archetypal Solicitor part of the illuminists' tradition, or is not it?

have no answers here; I only offer the parallels for what they are worth.

IV The Union with The One

Ultimately the objects of this world are forgotten as the divine union takes place, the soul/wife uniting with the bridegroom. Obviously the mystic's soul can unite with God only to the extent that the soul is prepared to experience the Omni-Aspected One: Sankara finds the static joy, Plotinus finds the aesthetic eros, and Eckhart finds the moral agape, of God. I do not consider this perspective need for another secular interpretation—-to demonstrate, in the language of the next-to-last sentence of Pilgrim's Progress, "that there is a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven," although I hardly intend my illustration as seriously as Bunyan intended his. The reader will notice that the first three steps of the Mystic Ladder I have been climbing are steps in an ascension from a this-worldly experience of joy, to a half-this-worldly, half-other-worldly discovery of unity, to a wholly other-worldly vision of the One; but this final step, the Union, does not rise above the One; instead, it seeks a merging with the One. Now then, since my argument is that it tells us that the rhythm of climbing ladders is a symbol of sexual intercourse, may we not suspect this whole structure I have developed is simply an intellectual sublimation of the sexual drive: a three-step rhythm followed by a mental orgasm? Since I am a confirmed archetypalist, I would prefer to put it the other way around: sexual intercourse may be simply a physical imitation of a spiritual truth—yet I suspect that few in the modern world would agree to such an interpretation. Still, whichever way a reader or critic wishes to take the parallel, he should not deny the similarity of the two.

Indeed, C. S. Lewis, in discussing Psalm 45 in his book Reflection on the Psalms, makes a comment which reflects both my language of the bride and bridegroom and in the first paragraph of this section and which prepares for my final examples in this paper will the critic will discover that it does not deny the Freudian interpretation, although, like my archetypal suggestion, it looks at the matter from what is, from Freud's point of view, the wrong way around:

Few things once seemed to me more frigid and far-fetched than these interpretations, whether of this Psalm of the Song of Songs, which identify the Bridegroom with Christ and the bride with the Church. Indeed, as we read the frank erotic poetry of the latter and contrast it with the edifying headlines in our Bibles, it is easy to be moved to a smile, even a cynically knowing smile, as if the pious interpreters were feigning an absent innocence. I should still find it very hard to believe that anything like the spiritual sense was remotely intended by the original writers. But no one now (I fancy) who accepts that spiritual or second sense is denying, or saying anything against, the very plain sense which the writer intended. The divine union which is a rich, festive Epithalamium, the Song remains fine, sometimes exquisite, love poetry, and this is not the least obliterated by the burden of the new meaning. (Man is still one of the primates; a poem is still black marks on white paper.) And later I can see that the new meaning is not arbitrary and springs from depths I had not suspected. First, the language of nearly all great mystics, not even in a common tradition, some of them Pagan, some Islamic, most Christian, confronts us with evidence that the image of marriage, of sexual union, is not only profoundly natural but almost inevitable as a symbol of the union between God and man. The very word "union" has already entailed some such idea.

Lewis goes on to discuss pagan mysteries, the Jewish "marriage" of God and Israel, and the similar Christian "marriage" of Christ and the Church; but this is another purpose. I quote from Lewis instead of Evelyn Underhill (for example) because I want to prepare a passage which hints at this type of union; it appears in Lewis's fictional retelling of the Greek myth of Psyche and Cupid, Till We Have Faces. Near the end of the book, Orual, Psyche's sister, writes a vision which in which she is reunited with Psyche; the passage continues:

Suddenly, from a strange look in Psyche's face (I could see she knew something she had not spoken of), or from a glorious and full meaning of the blue sky above us, or from a deep breadth like a sigh uttered from the bottom of our hearts, or from a deep, doubtless quaking and surmise in my own heart, I knew that all this had been only a preparation. Some far greater matter was upon us. The voices spoke again; but not loud, as if we were whispering. "He is coming," they said. "The god is coming in to the valley." And then:

If Psyche had not held me by the hand I should have sunk down. She had brought me now to the very edge of the pool. The
air was growing brighter and brighter about us; as if something had set it on fire. Each breath I drew let into me new terror, joy, overpowering sweetness, and the horror of the things they brought with the dawn of it. I was being unmade. I was being undressed. But that’s little to say; rather, Psyche herself was, in a manner, no one. I loved her as I would once have thought it impossible to love, would have died any death for her. And yet, it was not, not now (that really counts). Or if she countered (oh, gloriously she did) it was for another’s sake. The earth and stars and sun, all that was or will be, existed for his sake. And he was coming. The most dreadful, the most beautiful, the only dread and beauty there is, was coming.

The pillars on the far side of the pool flushed with his appearance, and my eyes were closed.

In Lewis’s work, Orual awakens a moment later. It would have been nice to have found an actual description of sexual intercourse, symbolizing spiritual union, to conclude this paper. But I am afraid that poets are more discreet than that: they bring the heavenly Bridgegroom together and allow us to imagine the rest. Unfortunately, most of us have what in Christian terms would be called fallen imaginations. Let us therefore return to Dante for a moment. I used his poem as an example of seeing the Godhead, not of becoming one with it. Yet, intellectually, he certainly tries the latter. First, he is pierced by “the living ray” of the light of God that: they bring the earthly bride and the heavenly Bridegroom (which in Freudian terms also suggests God’s masculinity and the individual soul’s femininity); then, as he writes, I recall this ladder led astray.

Wherefore my gaze more boldness yet assumed Till to the Infinite Good it last had won. Since the medieval position on eyesight was that it was carried by rays, Dante (again, in Freudian terms) can be said to become masculinity (in this case, spiritual exchange, sexual roles is why Christ said that in Heaven there was no marriage or giving in marriage.) However that may be, Dante’s actual imagery is chaste enough; yet this winning of “the Infinite Good” may be the best way of expressing in Christian terminology the union of God and man’s soul.

It is the spiritual climax of the Imagistic Way.

**Bibliography**

**AUDEN, W.H.** "Introduction" to The Protestant Mystics, edited by Ann Freeman, pp.3-37. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964. [Auden’s introduction is an interesting survey of four types of mystical experience: The Vision of Divine Kind (nature mysticism), The Vision of Eros (the Beatarian experience, with some negative comments at Plato), The Vision of Agape (the experience of sudden, unearned charity felt for others or among members of a group), and The Vision of God. I did not read Auden’s work until the above essay was finished.]


**DANTE ALIGHIERI.** La Vita Nuova: Poems of Youth. Translated by Barbara Reynolds. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969. [The passage describing the procession of Giovanna and Beatrice appears in Section XXIV, pp.70-71 of this translation.]

**FREUD, Sigmund.** "Symbolism in Dreams," The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, translated and edited by James Strachey, pp.149-169. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966. ["Ladders, stairs, or, more precisely, walking on them, are clear symbols of sexual intercourse. On reflection, it will occur to us that the common element here is the rhythm of walking up them—perhaps, too, the increasing excitement and breathlessness the higher one climbs" (p.159).]


**LEWIS, C.S.** "The Weight of Glory." In Transposition and Other Addresses, pp.21-31. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947. [Important for its identification of Heavenly Glory, or the energy of glory, with—a distant remove—Sehnsucht; its discussion of a few of the ways of dismissing the religious meaning of Joy, p. 24, is tied to my final paragraph on the first step.]

**LEWIS, C.S.** "William and the Arturialad." In Arthurian Torso, containing the Posthumous Fragment of “The Figure of Arthur” by Charles Williams, and a Commentary on the Arthurian Poems of Charles Williams by C.S.Lewis. London: Oxford University Press, 1948. [A discussion of Williams concept of Brocroallia appears on pp.99-102.]

**MILLER, James Whipple.** English Romanticism and Chinese Nature Poetry. Comparative Literature, 24:3 (Summer, 1972): 216-236. [I add this item to the bibliography in lieu of footnoteing my paper. Miller’s essay provides an interesting contrast of the English and Chinese approaches to nature, for one of the basic elements in the discussion is the Chinese refusal of any transcending of the self or of the world.]


**SAYERS, Dorothy L.** The Beatristic Vision in Dante and Other Poets. In The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement, and Other Posthumous Essays on Literature, Religion, and Language, pp.45-68. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963. [The four poets most thoroughly compared are Dante, Wordsworth, Blake (to a lesser degree), and Traherne; the loss of the First Vision is the given source of God’s failure to return to it (as contrasted to the other three poets’ return) on pp.61-67. Parallel to my citation from Alan Watts in the essay above is Sayer’s quotation from Aldous Huxley’s Doors of Perception on p.47. In fact, Sayer’s essay is close to my thesis throughout, except that she is not working with a Mystical Scale.]


WALDOFF, Leon. "Wordsworth's Healing Power: Basic Trust in the Celtic Myth itself, and about the comments made on it and its becoming familiar with folklore we must admit that the ancient analyze them. So I think I'll do better if I just talk about those who danced on the hills or in the depths of the forest.

It is this sense of mystery, of unseen or half-seen lurking things—of terror somehow transmuted into beauty—that seems to me to be the Celt's greatest contribution to literature. It is what makes your blood leap with delight as well as fear when Tolkien's Gandalf is leading the Fellowship of the Ring down into the black mysteries of Moria. The scenes that follow—the fight in the cavern, the dreadful meeting with the Balrog, etc.—are necessary and tremendously dramatic, but I never enjoy them one tenth as much as the weird journey itself. During the fighting the reader can only wait and watch, but during the descent into the abyss with its awesome sense of unseen watchers and gathering forces—the horror made all the more real by the little ordinary human touches, such as hobbits' inquisitiveness and Gandalf's snappiness—you too use your imagination. You keep wondering: "What are they going to find?" or "What is going to happen next?" without telling it. Even the reader is not passive, but terrifyingly alive.

To revert to Yeats himself: having always been fascinated by forests I am particularly interested by his remarks about the different moral approaches to nature: the Celt's, the English, the Romans, and even the Ancient Greeks, "see nature without ecstasy," with the affection a man feels for his garden, where nature has faded and is only friendly and pleasant, while in Matthew Arnold's felicitous phrase, Celtic love of nature "comes almost more from a sense of her mystery than from her beauty." This is brought out even more strongly by Heinrich Zimmer when he speaks of the forest as a place of initiation "where demonic presences reveal themselves...a terrifying abyss, full of strange forms and whispering voices."

But he preferred to look upon them as part of what he called the "Ancient Religion of the World," in which he sought even modern Celts were still closer than most people. In his essay on Magic he described this primeval religion as only a poet could, speaking of gods whose passions flamed in the sunset, of ancient fishermen and hunters, and of the ecstasy that descended upon those who danced on the hills or in the depths of the forest. The balloon-pricking type of person might say he worked a good deal of W. B. Yeats into primitive man, but now that we are becoming familiar with folklore we must admit that the ancient people became poets long before they learned how to read or write, and if Yeats ignored their existence, there would always be plenty of others to point it out. Too many of them, in my opinion. Whenever I read a modern, non-fiction novel based on an ancient myth—generally on Greek or Norse material: I don't think the Celts have as much appeal for the realists—I am always shocked at how much more the wonderfully weird reconstructions seem than Homer or the sagas ever did. But then our realists seem to me to have cultivated a really wonderful sense of smell, whereas Homer and the Norse "song smiths" appeal to the eye—beauty or terrible images—and the imagination. (Though of course these ancient gentlemen may have been too used to the smells to notice them: I admit that.)