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

Joe R. Christopher

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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
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 linkings, 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 a sequence, but some mystics seem to grasp onto the top rung without climbing up the steps. However, we, as students of the subject, will certainly climb up rung by rung.

Proceeding academically, I next propose a definition of this Imagistic Mysticism: Roughly, it is, in the book which I am following, a space distinguishing type of mysticism. Particularly, two distinctions should be made. First, the visionary experience should be separated out—such visions as St. Teresa or William Blake saw. These mystics are called the Illuminists by Otto. And since one of the angels was climbing up and down from Heaven, which Jacob saw, was similar, my earlier comment about my title is pertinent here. Second, a distinction should be made between the two types of mysticism which ultimately seek identification (or union):

1. The Inward Way: The Way of Rejection. Here the mystic withdraws from outward things, empties his mind from all 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 unites 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 up 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,

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 a bird singing beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly comes (later still) a context with erotic suggestions 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 toy 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 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 contemplated 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 toy 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.

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II The Perception of Unity

AFTER THE FIRST STEP comes the perception of unity; based generally on Otto's summary, we may distinguish three characteristics of this state: (1) all the individual things which are seen as somehow unified or identical—despite their differences, or (2), less often, all things are transformed as part of a divine dream; (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 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":

And 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 light of设置法ities, and me.

Since I have been admitting possible secular interpretations, let me here add a secular experience. Alan W. Watts, in his book The Joyous Company, describes his experience of taking L.S.D. (a drug) in the form of a tramp-like experience, as follows:

I am looking at what I would ordinarily call a confusion of bush—tangles of plants and weeds with branches and leaves going every which way. But now that the organizing, relational mind is uppermost I see that what is confusing is not the bush but my clumsy 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 night, with the whole multitude of almost insubstantial objects that make up our environment, seen not as a confusion, but as the lacework or tracery of an enchanted jeweler. A rotten log bearing rows of fungus and patches of moss became as precious as any work of Cellini—an inordinately luminous construct of jet, amber, jade, and ivory, all the driving, spontaneous, inauthentic and spontaneous wood seeming to have 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 the universe. For the infinite matrix of a novel being seen through the incredible jewel-like, single-celled creatures of the ocean as the radiolarians, 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 butterflies and moths.

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 intricately—oneself, a ganglion, an electronic interweaving of paths, circuits, and impulses that stretch this hum through the whole of time and space. The entire pattern swells in its complexity like smoke in sunbeams or the rippling networks of sunlight in shallow water. Transforming itself endlessly into itself, the pattern alone remains. The crosspoints, nodes, nets, and curious wrinkles fold and fold into each other. The "baseless fabric of this vision." It is its own base. When the ground dissolves beneath me I float.

Let me move directly from this drug-induced vision to C. S. Lewis's description of Ransom's vision near the end of Perelandra; it is not clearly a vision growing out of an image of this world, yet it is obviously related to what Watts discussed.

He thought he saw the Great Dance. It seemed to be woven out of the intertwining undulation of many cords or bands of light,
leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arboresques and flower-like subtleties. Each figure as he looked at it became the 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 vision was present, but incompletely enjoyed and dispossessed but finding in its new subordination a significance greater than that which it had abdicated. He could also see (but the word "seeing" is now plainly inadequate) wherever the ribbons or serpents of light intersected, minute corpuscles of momentary brightness: and he knew that these particles were the secular generalities of which history tells—people, institutions, climates of opinion, civilisations, arts, sciences, and the like—ephemeral coruscations that piped their short song and vanished. The ribbons or cords themselves, in which all illusions were lived and were things of some different kind. At first he could not say what. But he knew in the end that most of them were individual entities. If so, the time in which the Great Dance proceeds is very unlike time as we know it. Some of the experience and some of the patterns streamers of personal beings "flashing with colours.

At this point in the book, Ransom does awake; the unity he has been told in the account of the other's experience presumably on the basis of others' descriptions, a vision of the Great Dance, the universal harmony, which includes in its weaving patterns streamers of personal beings "flashing with colours." According to Rudolph Otto, most nature mystics—such as, in the East, Jelal, or as he might add, in the West, the white godess, Joseph Wood Krutch—do not get much beyond an ecstatic identification with nature.

I took from Otto concerning this level of perception of unity; he suggests that the seeing of the archetypal in the individual is a method of such perception. I must admit that I am somewhat uncertain about this, for it seems to me that this vision often becomes very like, or perhaps part of, the Illuminist's type of vision—those of St. Teresa, William Blake, and Jacob, mentioned at the start of my paper. However, it is worth considering the archetypal visions of Blake, whether or not it is fully typical of the Affirmative Way, it does allow the type of comparison I am interested in.

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

"...I saw approaching me a gracious 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 this is what she was called and consorted with her, 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 she inspired him with this name of Primavera, which means that she will come first (prima verra) 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 ego vos clamantis in deserto pariter vobis loquar. . . . 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness; prepare 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 proceeding 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 foretaste for that of Primavera, which means that she will come first (prima verra) 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 ego vos clamantis in deserto pariter vobis loquar. . . . 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness; prepare 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.'

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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 clans 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 other magistrates are united; 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.

III 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 this 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 reality 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 he 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 in 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—harps and drums, flutes, and a string orchestra, and Baal 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 fountain is its own source and motive, and that its spirit is an unbounded playfulness which is the many-dimensional dance of life (like Ransom, in Perelandra). There is no problem left, but who will believe it? Will 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 these vision, with 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 ceramics—elaborate, 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 tiles that suggest the finest inlay work in vermilion, 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 I am gazing 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 drawing back with a gesture, not of dread, but of tenderness—for the flame knows no anger. Its warmth and radiance—"tongues of flame infolded"—are an effulgence 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 as literal ones of his experiences, as he does in the last paragraph of his "Prologue" that he has combined a number of experiences into that of a single day for artistic purposes; I suspect also that the ending of his experience with this vision against eyelids is a deliberate climax in his mind. He writes: "as I gazed upon the vision of God, he suggested. He goes on to suggest also that these hints be followed up with meditation; since Watts is within the tradition of Zen Buddhism, his final suggestion is obvious enough—but I'm not certain what a Zen priest would say about that vision of "Christos Pantocrator."

But, as I suggested before the quotation from Watts, his vision of the tiled courtyard seems more an example of the Illuminists' type of mysticism than of the Imagistic Way; let me set up another example, partially as a contrast—that of Dante's vision of the eternal light, which we have already discussed. As we saw earlier, had a vision of Christ within Beatrix, 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; Beatrix, in Heaven, had pity on him and was the image 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 Beatrix has guided Dante up the spheres of Heaven, he is allowed to gaze at the Godhead. [88] Bernard conveyed to me what I should do by sign and smile: to ascend higher. 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 infinitest of the infinite; 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, Fused, 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 Haekel's biogenetic law, Ontogeny recapitulates Phylogeny, so one notices here a recapitulation of the earlier steps in the mysticism: 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 mythopoetic 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 express 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. .................................................. ...........................

External light, that in Thyself alone Dwelling, did in Thy smile 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, Lumined 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 what the experiences of Jewish, Moslem, and Neo-Platonic mystics (and perhaps others as well); the second step, the seeing of the three spheres 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 third 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 which was to be seen
How it maintained the point of rest in it.

Thither my own wings could not carry me,
But that a flash my understanding clowe,
Whence its desire came to it suddenly.
So grace provides the answer which understanding could not give.

At this point, The Divine Comedy ends.

High phantom lost in thought, and there it broke off;
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 Beatrix, see her inner, Christ-like character, and somehow pierce through to the God 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. 
In This Ever Diverse Pair (published under the pseudonym of G. A. L. Burgeon), 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 his true nature flashes upon the inward eye of the observer.

The lynx's proper element is litigation and negotiation.... In the City, he must enter the eye of the law and his partisans, the sums about which he litigates and negotiates are substantial in quantity, whether or not they ever existed in cash. In the little streets adjoining the Police Courts and County Courts he acts for anybody who comes along and strives to ally his cravings 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 wrinkles. He has a muddled but efficient mind, and it is this characteristic, although it is eponymous, is not absolutely essential....

...the Applejohn is not so much the craftsman of our profession. I think the little wrinkles have something to do with the fact that their 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 conveying practice or precedent, and it grieves his soul. He is an 'Attorney' in the good old sense, carrying an aroma about himself of the fast-fading days of parchment and the 'fair 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 embellish 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 or 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 faults was dominant and more deficient, but all three were mingled in just proportion and sweet harmony. The gentleness and sure craftsmanship of the Applejohn chime perfectly with the tact and swiftness of the Glossy and, while the Wynns continued to preserve a balanced detachment from the passions of the client, so as to uphold the fraternization 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 for the sake of gentleness or the love of ease, or to preserve the gravity or the fraternization.

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 expression of 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 archetype a 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 it not? I 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/bride uniting with 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. If we consider this passage 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. My reader will notice that the first three steps of the Mystic Ladder I have been climbing are steps in a descent, 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 from the One; instead, it seeks a merging with the One. Now then, similar analasis 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.

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 in the first paragraph of this section and which prepares for my final examples in this paper. The critic will reject the suggestion 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 sexual interpretations, whether of this Psalm or 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 absurd 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 meant. The deeply veined yet a rich, festive Epithalamion, the Song remains fine, sometimes exquisite, love poetry, and this is not in 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 am sure to 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 invariable as a symbol of a cosmic 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 Israel to God, and the similar Christian "marriage" of Christ and the Church; but this is only another example) because I want to prepare for 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, looks at a vision 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 (false) meaning of the blue sky above us, or from a deep breath like a sigh uttered in a deep silence, or from a longed for or from a deep, doubtful 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 louder than this. When I trembled, "He is coming," they said. "The god is coming into him at last."

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 through it I saw three things: the pillars of fire on the far side of the pool flushed with his appearance, and my eyes were opened...

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. The passage does bring the heavenly Bridegroom together and allow us to imagine the rest. Unfortunately, most of us have what in Christian terms would be called fallen imaginations.

I turned therefore 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 (which in Freudian terms also suggests God's masculinity and the 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 chased 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

AUGDEN, 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 Dame Kind (nature mysticism), The Vision of Eros (the Beatristian experience, with some negative comments at Plato), The Vision of Agape (the experience of sudden 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.]

BARFIELD, Owen A. (under the pseudonym of G. A. L. Burgeon). This Ever Diverse Pair. With an Introduction by Walter de la Mare. London: Victor Gollancz, 1950. [The various passages quoted in the above essay concerning "the vision" and the semi-archetypal humors of lynx, Glossy, and Applejohn appear on pp. 90, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96-97, and 98.]


FEUD, 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, steps, and staircases, 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.21-33. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947. [Important for its identification of Heavenly Glory, or the energy of God, with—distant remove—Sehnsucht; its discussion of a few of the issues of dismissing the religious meaning of Joy, p.24, is tied to the final paragraph of the first step.]

LEWIS, C. S. "Williams and the Arthuriad." 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 Broccolian 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 footnoting in my paper. Miller's essay provides an interesting comparison 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.]
people became poets long before they learned how to read or write, and if Yeats ignored their grossness, there'll always be plenty of others to point it out. Too many of them, in my opinion, 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.)

To revert to Yeats himself: having always been fascinated by forests I am particularly interested by his remarks about the different racial approaches to nature and culture. We, the English, the Romans, and even the Ancient Greeks, "see nature without ecstacy," 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 of 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." I PROMISED TO SPEAK ON WELSH AND CELTIC influence on Mythopoeic literature, but on thinking it over I see that that is not exactly my thing. I'm a story-teller, not a critic; it's my business to put things together, not to take them apart and analyze them. So I think I'll do better if I just talk about Celtic myth itself, and about the comments made on it and its influence by the Celtic-born authors who can be said to have influenced my own work.

Wm. Butler Yeats, himself every inch an Irishman, felt that it was wrong to nail down certain literary traits as "Celtic." He preferred to look upon them as part of what he called the "Ancient Religion of the World," to which he thought even modern Celts were still closer than most people. In his essay on Magic, where 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.)