

The Mystic's Intellectual Hymn to Love

By Sherry L. Ackerman, Ph.D

"Gilbert Chesterton remarked, 'it is not children who ought to read the words of Lewis Carroll—they are far better employed making mud-pies. Carroll's words should be read by sages and gray-haired philosophers...in order to study the darkest problems of metaphysics and the borderland between reason and unreason.'"

The mystical currents within nineteenth century Christianity were opposed to the notion that ritualism was the custodian of the knowledge of God. These currents maintained that every individual, regardless of creed, had access to the knowledge of God. Where ritualism demanded slavish obedience to creeds and dogma, theosophy pointed the way to knowledge through direct experience. An essential tenet of this position was that nothing sound in the way of philosophy or religion could be built on the foundation of a material being's ordinary sense experience. As long as man accepted the faulty evidence of his physical senses, he was at the mercy of the fashioners of creeds. Likewise, reliance upon the evidence supplied by sense experience rendered man dependent upon the capricious claims of science. Interest in Hellenistic theosophy and gnosticism ran high in England during this period, as evidenced by the London based Theosophical Publishing Society. Although many academicians were involved in these pursuits, **discretion was exercised** in order to avoid scholarly prejudice.

An article from *Theosophy*, dated March 5, 1939, asks "how many realize that no initiated philosopher had the right to reveal his knowledge clearly, but was obliged by the law of the sanctuary to conceal the truth under the veil of allegory or symbol?" Roger Bacon, centuries earlier, in *Wisdom of Keeping Secrets* (c.1260), had similarly written, "a man is crazy who writes a secret unless he conceals it from a crowd and leaves it so that it can be understood only by effort of the studious and wise." Lewis Carroll was not a crazy man.....and he did a masterful job of concealing his secrets from the crowd.

In a broad sense, the story of philosophical inquiry in England is a history of the changes in view of the structure and foundations of knowledge. When, as a result of the birth of the new sciences, the men of the seventeenth century lost faith in the innate capabilities of the mind, a gradual shift from rationalism toward empiricism took place. During this period, Plato had few partisans who were courageous enough to defend him against the ground swell of empiricism. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century there began to be a strong revival of interest in Platonism and Neoplatonism as a result of the earlier influence of the Cambridge School (c.1650- 1700), and the work of Thomas Taylor, the Platonist (1758-1835).

In 1881, Thomas M. Johnson wrote an article, 'The Way and the Wisdom Teachers, for The Platonist, I' in which he traced the gradual progression from Platonic idealism toward nineteenth century England's interest in theosophy. He cited that reactions created by the cold, barren dogmas of modern science had served as catalysts for a revival in the mystical beliefs of Platonism, Neoplatonism and Pythagoreanism.

Thomas Taylor had asserted that Plato was the greatest link in a chain of transmitters of a philosophy first promulgated by Orpheus, then by Pythagoras. Plato, according to Taylor, concealed in obscurity from the vulgar and ignorant the most sublime of his doctrines. These were the teachings, in short, of the ancient mystery schools. The meanings lay hidden for years until the appearance of the Alexandrians. Men such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Sallust and Damascius freed the mystical doctrines of Plato from obscurity. Taylor's interpretations of the ancient doctrines fueled the interest in ancient mystery teachings that was growing in nineteenth century England. Evidence of this influence was being seen in the Romantics' emphasis on the truths buried in literary symbol, allegory and myth. Many of the poets, writers and artists of this period held that Plato and his followers concealed divine truths in allegory and

ambiguity. Several of the Romantics, among the most prominent of whom is Blake, not only accounted for the enigmas in the writing of the ancients by the doctrine of intentional obscurity, but accepted it as a fundamental aesthetic principal in their own work.

Interestingly, the original version of *Alice*, begun in 1862, did not contain the Cheshire Cat, the Pig and Pepper, or the Mad Tea Party, and contained only a very abbreviated trial of the Knave of Hearts. These additions occurred during the re-working of the manuscript, between 1862 to 1865, while Oxford, the English Church and the country as a whole were fiercely divided on the religio-philosophical questions of doctrine versus reason. During this period, Carroll read Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies* and found all of the questions of the day "neatly wrapped up," as Kingsley said, in allegory and satire. Considerations of evolution, spiritualism and materialism were set into the enlivened "nonsense" of *Water Babies* probably encouraging Carroll to introduce more allegory and satire into his developing *Alice* manuscript.

Let's take a look for a minute at Carroll's poem 'Rhyme and Reason':

**"The world is but a Thought, said he:
The vast unfathomable sea
Is but a Notion-unto me."**

In this passage, "Thought" is assigned a capital "T," a mystical short-hand for referencing the product of Universal Mind. The position is developed further when he continues:

**"Thought in the mind doth still abide:
That is by Intellect supplied,
And within that Idea doth hide:
And he, that yearns the truth to know,
Still further inwardly may go,
And find Idea from Notion flow:
And thus the chain, that sages wrought
For Notion hath its source in Thought."**

Here, "Thought," "Intellect" and "Idea" are all capitalized, again suggesting that he is alluding to Universal Principles. Likewise, the verse continues "Notion hath its source in Thought," indicating that even what appear to be our individual, or particular, notions are a part of Source. "Thought in the mind doth still abide: That is by Intellect supplied, And within that Idea doth hide," gives credence to gnosis. Carroll hints that the Idea is already present in the Intellect, dormant, waiting to be awakened by Thought (capital T). "And he, that yearns to know the truth, Still further inwardly may go," suggests that truth can be found by taking the inward/esoteric journey of the mystic. Carroll strengthens this suggestion in the next line as he states, "And find Idea from Notion flow." Whereas a "notion" is a whim or fancy of the mind, while an "idea" is a more clearly defined image existing in the mind; the capitalization of both words intimates that Carroll is signifying that they are not particular, but Universal, qualities. Thus, an Idea can be arrived at by a process initiated by considering, or contemplating, the Notion. Carroll goes on to assert, "And thus the chain, that sages sought, Is to a glorious circle wrought, For Notion has its source in Thought." In these verses, he introduces the Platonic concept of Thought as timeless and continuous, without beginning or end. Likewise, he implies Platonic dualism, as both Notion and Idea, participants in both the phenomenal and noumenal realms, initiate and conclude in Thought. Finally, his allegorical reference to Platonism, "...the chain, that sages sought," echoes Thomas Taylor's assertion that Plato was the greatest link in a chain of transmitters of a philosophy first promulgated by Orpheus, then by Pythagoras.

The fairy duet sung by Sylvie and Bruno provides a key to further understanding Carroll's position:

In this duet, Carroll's vision of Love is presented as the embodiment of the Spirit of God and symbolizes an essential knowledge of Ultimate Reality.

**"Tis a secret, and so let us whisper it low-
And the name of the secret is Love!"**

This is the quintessence of Carroll's spirituality, identifying Love as the sole principle in religious experience. Indicative of the nineteenth century theosophical intellectual hymn to Love, it is unique in its theological sophistication and esoteric qualities. The fundamental premise was that "of God's nature in Itself we can and do know one thing only-that it is transcendent Love." This is one of the most distinctive features of true mysticism, setting it apart from every other kind of transcendental theory and practice. "It is the eager, outgoing activity whose driving power is generous love, not the absorbent, indrawing activity which strives only for new knowledge, that is fruitful in the spiritual as well as in the physical world." In this sense, love is to be understood as the ultimate expression of the self's most vital tendencies, and not as a superficial affection or emotion. "Mystic Love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency of the soul towards its Source. It is a condition of humble access, a life-movement of the self: more direct in its methods, more valid in its results-even in the hands of the least lettered of its adepts-than the most piercing intellectual vision of the greatest philosophical mind." (Evelyn Underhill) It is impossible to limit mystical truth to the doctrine of any one religious system. The mystic only feels thoroughly natural, fully alive, when he is obeying the voice of Love. For him, Love, as opposed to ritual, provides the source of joy, the secret of the universe and the vivifying principle of all things.

In conclusion, rather than knowing about (episteme) truth, Carroll chose a path through which he could know (gnosis) Truth. This being so, Carroll chose to sing a new song. Instead of dogmatic liturgy, he sang the theosophist's intellectual hymn to Love and preached from carefully crafted allegory instead of from a pulpit. The mystical consciousness considers unity as both an internal and external focus as it seeks the truth about reality. The mystic goes beyond specific religious dogmas, espousing an inclusive and universal perspective that rises above doctrinal differences. Generally approached through a purification process, the mystic seeks to transcend his internal duality that constrains his direct experience of the divine. The potential of a transcendent heroic self was traditionally psychologically detailed in powerful myths such as, for example, Theseus and Odysseus. In his own particular way, Carroll turns Alice into Odysseus journeying home to Ithaca. The hero's journey always involves the departure, an initiation and the return. The process of becoming conscious requires forming unity out of a pre-existent state of fragmentation. This is achieved through an integration of the ego with the more authentic self, forming a transcendent wholeness. This struggle to achieve a transcendent wholeness, the act of self-recollection, is the heroic struggle. Similar to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, the hero is required to gather together what is scattered, of all the things in him/her that have never been properly related, and to come to terms with him/herself with a view toward achieving full consciousness. Alice, as an alter-ego for Carroll's transcendent heroic self, underwent a gentle initiation in Wonderland so that Carroll could share, discretely, his secret of gnosis. Heeding the advice, written centuries earlier by Roger Bacon, Carroll concealed his secret carefully, leaving it so that it could be understood only by the efforts of the studious and wise.

© Sherry Ackerman 2010