

Circles of Sam's Somnolence

As Sam lay in bed that night he thought back to the dervish *dhikr* he had witnessed earlier that evening. After the recitation of devotional Islamic prayer, the dervishes, holding their arms crosswise, bowed to the sheik and each had circled round the dancing place, moving counterclockwise like the orbit of a planet; this they had done three times, bowing to the sheik as they passed in front of him each time.

As they orbited around the dancing place in their black cloaks, they had reminded Sam of circles of standing stones which our Neolithic ancestors had set up in Ireland, Britain and the European continent millennia ago. He saw them again, imagining the stones as dancers, petrified in time. Why were they there? What was the purpose of these circles? Ritual surely, but certainly not the pseudo-druidic rites borne of the 18th century Romantic movement.

Then the music had changed and each dervish removed his cloak and began whirling counterclockwise, with his arms open and his right hand directed upwards to heaven to receive God's beneficence and his left hand, on which he fastened his eyes, turned towards the earth to convey that beneficence there. In his half sleep, Sam saw the standing stones remove their cloaks and whirl counterclockwise with their arms wide and hands held as the dervishes had done. Yes, he thought, that's what these circles must have been about: places where heaven and earth met, where goodness was channeled to earth from above. Or may be, he half thought, vaguely remembering hearing about burials at Stonehenge, where the living and the dead met.

Then his half awake mind became mesmerized by the whirling of the long white skirts of the dervishes. Or were they of the vivified stones? They became confused in his mind as the wide whirling skirts dazzled him. He thought of other mystic circles; of the mandala, which he knew was a Sanskrit word for 'circle' and which, it is claimed, leads the mind through meditation to the world beyond. He saw again Buddhist sand-painting mandalas he had once seen in Nepal. They seem to fuse in his mind and whirl like the dervish skirts; and there was the bright Chenrezig sand mandala, created in the House of Commons when the Dalai Lama visited in May 2008. In his mind the colours grew brighter in intensity.

Now he seemed to be looking down on the whirling figures from above. The white flared skirts of the dervishes had become the colourful mandalas, all whirling counterclockwise to the music he had heard earlier that evening.

Some skirts indeed resembled rather the colourful amate prints of an Aztec Sun Stone; and the dervish's camel-hair hat – or was it the top of the whirling stones? - became the centre sun face; and concentric circles around the face were whirling counterclockwise just like the planets around the sun.

As the dervishes, stones, suns or whatever they were, whirled, they seemed at times to coalesce and then to separated out again and coalesce again; there was constant separating and coalescing of all the bright counterclockwise whirling colours.

Then they each began coalescing with another until all became like a rose window such as Sam had seen in Gothic cathedrals, especially in France. It was not, however, a specific rose window but rather a sort of generic one. Then he thought he saw individual ones. That was surely at Rheims, he thought; and then no, at Notre Dame in Paris; no, not Notre Dame, but Sainte-Chappelle – or was it Notre Dame after all? Was it the west rose window or the north rose window? They kept changing as they also whirled counterclockwise. Then it was at Chartres - surely at Chartres. But was it the north transept one or the one in south transept? Maybe it was both at the same time. Anything was possible in Sam's semi-dreamlike state.

Then the rose window, or whatever it was, became a centre like the sun and Sam saw planets

orbiting around it; and as he looked, he found himself ascending through their eight orbits: out past Mercury, Venus then his own planet, Earth, and past Mars and through the asteroid belt and on past the great giants, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune and Uranus.

‘What now?’ thought Sam.

‘The ninth heaven,’ he seemed to hear a voice say, ‘the one Dante thought was the Primum Mobile; and there you shall see all the vast cosmos with its trillions of constellations.’

Sam did indeed see the vast, unbounded cosmos with all its constellations whirling, some apparently counterclockwise and others clockwise; and Sam stared in wondering contemplation.

‘So like Dante,’ thought Sam, ‘I have ascended through the nine spheres of heaven. Shall I then pass beyond the physical world and enter the Empyrean?’

As though in answer, the rose window Sam had seen was there like a speck in the centre of the cosmos and as he watched, it grew in size and brightness and filled all his vision. ‘La rosa sempiterna, che si digrada e dilata e redole odor di lode’ said Sam to himself. ‘The rose eternal that spreads and multiplies and breathes an odour of praise.’

Indeed it was as Dante once saw it: the Rose of divine love, in whose countless petals were enthroned the souls of all the faithful since the beginning of mankind; and angels were continually flying around the Rose like bees, distributing peace and love. There in the very centre Sam saw, as Dante saw, the essence that was the source of all light: ‘Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri di tre colori e d'una contenenza’ (Within the deep and luminous subsistence of the High Light appeared to me three circles of threefold colour and of one dimension).

Sam saw the three distinct circles, though they appeared as one: the brilliant circles of very purest green, and red and blue, shining as one great circle of the purest and most brilliant white. As he watched, the white filled the centre and grew and grew until it became one great, perfect and pure circle that filled his whole vision: the Form of the Good, as Plato called it.

So Sam fell asleep at last.