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T. S. Eliot and Kathleen Raine: Two Contemplative Poets*

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Poets who are true mystics are very rare. Nonetheless there have been, even in recent times, poets who approached contemplative experience despite living in a secular age and culture, where spiritual quests have seemed very much a minority interest. Neither T. S. Eliot nor Kathleen Raine was a mystic in the full sense. Eliot himself said, towards the end of his life in 1963, 'I don't think I am a mystic at all, though I have always been much interested in mysticism.' And he added, 'A great many people of sensibility have had some more or less mystical experiences. That doesn't make them mystics. To be a mystic is a full-time job—so is poetry.'¹

This may give us a key-signature, as it were, for approaching these two poets who were not mystics but who, in Eliot's words, were 'much interested in mysticism' and had 'some more or less mystical experiences'. To write about such experiences in poetry means, in some degree, attempting a communication of some aspect of them to the reader. And since mystical experience is notoriously incommunicable, this implies a particularly interesting challenge, or perhaps a paradox.

T. S. Eliot was born in 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, and came to England, which became his permanent home, in 1915. Eliot quite early rejected his family's Unitarianism, not out of scepticism but rather because he found Unitarianism dull. It lacked the imaginative depth or intensity which he craved, and seemed to him too shallowly rationalistic. He once remarked that his parents 'did not talk of good and evil but of what was "done" and "not done"'²—in other words, their ethical values were indistinguishable from their sense of social conformity. Eliot studied literature at Harvard but spent most of 1911 in Paris, trying to write and

* This paper was originally prepared for a Study Day on 'Poetry and Contemplation' at Rewley House, the Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, in 2013; a later version was given as a lecture to the Temenos Academy on 17 June 2014.

1. Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of Four Quartets* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 1.

2. Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 11.

attending philosophical lectures by Henri Bergson, amongst others, before returning to Harvard to read for a doctorate in philosophy.

But two things happened which are perhaps typical of the way in which mysticism has made itself felt in the modern secular age. The first was that in June 1910 he had a remarkable and unanalysable experience which he described in an unpublished poem called 'Silence'. His biographer Lyndall Gordon has described this experience as follows:

Walking one day in Boston, he saw the streets suddenly shrink and divide. His everyday preoccupations, his past, all the claims of the future fell away and he was enfolded in a great silence.³

It was an experience of bliss and also quite unlike anything he had ever experienced before. He recognised it as in some way a spiritual experience but he had no idea of its meaning or what to do about it. In the event, one of the things he did about it was to begin seriously studying philosophy in the hope of understanding the true nature of reality and of the mind.

Academic philosophy gave little help with this but after his return to America in 1913 Eliot began, alongside his philosophical studies, to read the mystics: St Theresa, Julian of Norwich, Madame Guyon, Walter Hilton, St John of the Cross, Jacob Boehme, and St Bernard. He also made a close study of Evelyn Underhill's classic study *Mysticism*. He was by no means specifically committed to Christianity, and he took courses in Sanskrit and on the metaphysics of Patañjali. He also studied Pali, language of the earliest Buddhist scriptures, and read books on Vedānta and the Upanishads. He read Dante, and began to learn parts of the *Divine Comedy* by heart.

Eliot's story so far includes several of the features which were, I suspect, typical of contemplative experience in the twentieth-century West. To put it somewhat schematically, a powerful spiritual experience occurs to someone who has no particular framework of religious commitment which can make sense of it. So it remains important but enigmatic for them. Secondly, in the absence of a religious commitment, they investigate by reading a great many books. They know no one they can turn to for advice, so they go to the library seeking a context for what has happened to them. Thirdly, since the surrounding Christian

3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

tradition has already lost its exclusive hold on their culture, they look to the East. They read the *Gītā*, the Upanishads, as well as Christian material. We have, to some extent, an eclectic, improvised tradition, where people have to find their own way.

Eliot evidently had by nature a profoundly religious temperament. His early poems—those written before he began work on the various fragments that eventually came together as *The Waste Land*—are poems of extreme sensitivity, and in many ways poems of anxiety about, or disgust with, the world. They are the poems of someone so sensitive that many aspects of experience lead him to feel fear or anxiety or depression. There is no overt religious or spiritual content in these poems, but they do show again and again a close attention to consciousness itself. The process of *experiencing the world* is examined—and often found to be uncomfortable. Eliot has a genius for producing memorable and very strange images to convey this sense of discomfort with consciousness itself. We all know some of these images from ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’: ‘There will be time, there will be time /To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; . . . And time for all the works and days of hands/That lift and drop a question on your plate; . . . And for a hundred visions and revisions,/Before the taking of a toast and tea.’

The ‘toast and tea’ appears so ordinary (despite being rendered slightly alien by the use of that indefinite article—after all, we don’t normally speak of ‘a toast and tea’)—that clearly we are not looking at an unusual situation here, but rather at an unusual state of consciousness, a state of self-awareness and self-scrutiny so intense that the simplest ‘normal’ processes of life, especially the ones that involve meeting other people, are difficult and painful.

A person who often experiences states like this is vulnerable; we might well consider that they appear in danger of undergoing some kind of crisis. And indeed crises occurred. In 1915 Eliot moved to Britain, first to study at Oxford and then to work, briefly, as a teacher. During that year he was tormented by a sense of unreality: experiencing states rather like his mystical experience of ‘Silence’ but without the sense of beatitude. He told Bertrand Russell that at this time the inhabitants of London began to seem to him like hallucinations. Then in June of 1915 he impulsively married Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Vivienne was a woman of great vitality and Eliot may have thought that by making a commitment to her he would cure his sense of almost pathological detachment from life and his surroundings. But it soon became clear

that Vivienne was deeply unstable and indeed chronically mentally ill. The marriage was unsuccessful and the strain of looking after Vivienne, combined with other pressures, pushed Eliot into a nervous breakdown at the end of 1921. He was given three months' sick leave from Lloyds Bank, where he was now working, and went to Margate to rest and recover. He took with him a collection of fragmentary poems which he supplemented with new material to create the work which, after much cutting and revising, would be published the following year as *The Waste Land*.

By the time he completed *The Waste Land* Eliot had already fixed on Christianity as his chosen path, though as yet without a commitment to any particular church. *The Waste Land* looks back over the desert he feels he has crossed to reach that position. *The Waste Land* is a poem about needing spiritual sustenance and not finding it. Much of the poem, as published, surveys the ugliness and squalor of urban life as Eliot had experienced it, particularly in London, and it includes his hallucinatory experiences of the unreality of the city, what we might call his negative mystical experiences: you will remember the passage—

Unreal city,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.

The missing vision, the missing spiritual comfort or sense of the divine, is typified by water, which is absent from the poem until the fourth of its five sections and which appears in a palatable form only at the very end. For the most part, the Waste Land is a desert, 'A heap of broken images, where the sun beats'.

When at last there is a promise of some divine revelation, the sign that has been longed for throughout the poem, it comes, significantly, in Sanskrit: the thunder utters the root-syllable 'DA'. This is interpreted in three ways: as *Datta*, as *Dayadhvam*, and as *Dāmyata*, which Eliot translates (rightly or wrongly) as 'Give', 'Sympathise' and 'Control'. It is striking that these can be interpreted as three fundamentals of both Buddhist and Hindu teachings: generosity; compassion or empathy with others; and self-restraint, the three foundations of the spiritual life.⁴

4. Robert Bluck has shown ('T. S. Eliot and "What the Thunder Said"', *Notes and Queries*, October 1977, pp. 450–51) that the thunderous *Da* is, in the Upanishadic myth (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.2), intended to have a different signification for each of

In 1927 Eliot was baptised and confirmed in the Church of England. The following year he took a vow of celibacy and five years later—following the advice of his confessor—he separated from his wife. Prayer and contemplation became increasingly important to him. And of course this gave the perspective of the major poetic achievement of his later life, *Four Quartets*. Here again we have some features which seem characteristic of Western, twentieth-century contemplative poetry, in that whereas true mysticism is concerned with the timeless and the unworldly, Eliot's poems are very much preoccupied with both time and place. Each of the *Quartets* is named after a place and draws on its imagery: 'Burnt Norton' is an estate in the Cotswolds; 'East Coker' a village in Somerset; 'The Dry Salvages' a group of rocks off the New England coast; and 'Little Gidding' the site in Cambridgeshire of a seventeenth-century contemplative community. Throughout the poems, the seasons, the stages of human life and time itself are essential themes.

'Burnt Norton', the first *Quartet*, is set in the garden which Eliot visited in 1934 with Emily Hale, who was his first love but whom he never married. The poem suggests that during this visit he experienced something of a return to the state of beatitude he had experienced many years before as 'the Silence'. But he sees this in particular as an escape from time:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past . . .

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

its three audiences (gods, men, and demons). The gods understand the monosyllable to mean *dāmyata*; the men, *datta*; and the demons, *dayadhvam*. Prajāpati, the Hindu 'lord of creatures', tells these three groups—his children—that, despite the divergence of interpretation, each has understood correctly. See also Jeffery M. Perl and Andrew P. Tuck, 'The Hidden Advantage of Tradition: On the Significance of T. S. Eliot's Indic Studies', *Philosophy East & West* 35:2 (April 1985) 116–31.

The opening lines with their paradoxes suggest that there is no escape from time. Everything is remorselessly connected in an unbreakable sequence. Other possibilities can be imagined—taking that other passage to the door into the garden—but they remain unreal. And yet there are the rose-leaves: it seems someone has been into that garden. There are, if you like, traces, fragments of evidence that something else, some alternative to the grinding sequence of time, is possible.

That possibility is demonstrated when the poet leads us imaginatively into the garden—based on the garden at Burnt Norton with its empty pool ('dry concrete, brown edged') which Eliot and Emily Hale visited—where there is the sense of other beings moving: first of all 'dignified, invisible' presences and then 'children, hidden excitedly, containing laughter'. And the water which was longed for in *The Waste Land* miraculously appears: 'And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,/The surface glittered out of heart of light, . . . Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.'

The moment of vision has passed again, but it was real. The bird's comment—'Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind/Cannot bear very much reality' is often quoted out of context and given completely the wrong meaning. When Eliot speaks of 'reality' here he means ultimate reality, spiritual reality. From this kind of heightened and intensified reality, we have to fall back to the mundane. But after experiencing it, the concluding lines of the section, although repeating the statement about time, seem to give it quite a different meaning. If past and future time still 'Point to one end, which is always present', the words now seem to indicate a sense of a waking into an 'eternal now', an experience of the present as a timeless moment, rather than a trap governed by relentless causation.

Yet time continues to be a preoccupation in the other *Quartets*. In both 'East Coker' and 'Little Gidding', there are wonderful reflections on growing old: in 'East Coker', a complete debunking of the idea that age brings wisdom:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession[.]

And in 'Little Gidding' the poet, evidently after a night on duty as an air raid warden, meets the ghost of a fellow poet—unidentified but very much like W. B. Yeats, who had died in 1939—who tells him what the final stages of life have in store for him, most tellingly

the shame
 Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
 Of things ill done and done to others' harm
 Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

For Eliot's contemplative impulse is rarely separate from a desire to instruct. Not content to report on mystical experience, he also has to admonish. And that includes offering traditional advice—in this case derived from St John of the Cross—on the *via negativa*, the withdrawal of the mind from all created things so as to experience the divine, to 'go by the way of dispossession'.

And so in a way the traditional teachings of the Church on contemplation become the end point of Eliot's quest, rather than its starting point. He begins empirically, and gradually makes his way into tradition. But in the process he creates quite new forms of contemplative poetry.

Our second poet, Kathleen Raine (1908–2003), was a generation younger than Eliot. She knew Eliot to some extent—I am not sure quite how closely—and was a friend of Eliot's widow, Valerie. She was one of the few poets who carried a distinctly contemplative and mystical type of poetry on into the second half of the twentieth century. Kathleen Raine certainly admired Eliot's work, and her poetry has important features in common with his. Like Eliot's, her spirituality seems eclectic: she was a reader of the Christian mystics but also, significantly, of Plato and the Neoplatonists, of the visionary works of William Blake, on whom she wrote an important and substantial scholarly work, and of the Indian spiritual tradition, of which she read extensively for much of her life in the Vedas and the Upanishads.

As with Eliot, Kathleen's first impulse towards some form of mysticism came from a moment of altered perception of nature. The foundations for this were probably laid early in life. The happiest time of her childhood had been a period during the First World War when she had been evacuated from the London area to live with her Aunt Peggy in Northumberland at Great Bavington, a small village where, between the ages of eight and twelve, she experienced a country way of life which had not changed for centuries. There were no cars or domestic machines, and her daily task was to fetch the water from the well, which she carried in two buckets with a wooden yoke. She recalls:

The roughly hewn well-head which covered the spring might have dated from the forgotten monastery, and simple as it was it spoke a language entirely strange to me at that time, not of nature, but of a different kind of meaning, which I recognised because this primitive shrine (for the well had, for me, a kind of numinosity) was raised upon a marvel of nature itself whose magic it served to enhance . . . This perpetual welling up of the water was to me a marvel, that emergence from the rocky darkness where the water has a secret life of its own, profound, flowing in underground streams and hollows under the hills which none can know or enter. It was as if at this spot a mystery were perpetually enacted. If I found in the stone basin leaves or water-shrimps I removed them as from a sacred source.⁵

This is a childhood memory which might have many parallels. Kathleen returned to London and in due course went to Cambridge where she studied biology. She had thoughts of becoming a scientist but instead turned to literature, poetry in particular. But the quality of those early intuitions at Great Bavington was recalled when she was again in evacuation from London, this time during the Second World War, when she lived in a cottage at Martindale in the Lake District. It was at this time that she wrote her first published poems. In Martindale she had an experience which in many ways parallels those recounted, or implied, in Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Kathleen Raine recalls:

There was [on my table] a hyacinth growing in an amethyst glass; I was sitting alone, in an evening, at my table, the Aladdin lamp lit, the fire of logs burning in the hearth. All was stilled. I was looking at the hyacinth, and as I gazed at the form of its petals and the strength of their curve as they open and curl back to reveal the mysterious flower-centres with their anthers and eye-like hearts, abruptly I found that I was no longer looking *at* it, but *was* it; a distinct indescribable, but in no way vague, still less emotional, shift of consciousness into the plant itself. Or rather I and the plant were one and indistinguishable; as if the plant were a part of my consciousness. I dared scarcely to breathe, held in a kind of fine attention in which I could sense the very flow of life in the cells. I was not perceiving the flower but living it. I was aware of the life

5. Kathleen Raine, *Autobiographies* (London: Skoob Books, 1991), pp. 22-3.

of the plant as a slow flow or circulation of a vital current of liquid light of the utmost purity. I could apprehend as a simple essence formal structure and dynamic process. This dynamic form was, as it seemed, of a spiritual not a material order; of a finer matter, or of matter itself perceived as spirit. There was nothing emotional about this experience which was, on the contrary, an almost mathematical apprehension of a complex and organized whole, apprehended *as* a whole. The whole was living; and as such inspired a sense of immaculate holiness. . . . The experience lasted for some time—I have no idea how long—and I returned to dull common consciousness with a sense of diminution.⁶

Unlike Eliot, Kathleen did not make a decisive commitment to the Christian church. Her quest for guidance on her path remained eclectic. She did convert to Catholicism around the end of the war, but it never became her single path or even, probably, her main path. Naturally enough she found important kinship with the Romantic poets. She studied both the Neoplatonists and the Kabbala extensively, and turned increasingly towards Indian thought in her last years, visiting India twice in the 1980s; during her final illness she arranged for an Indian friend to read to her daily from the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The parallels with, and differences from, Eliot are clear enough. Given her strong Romantic affinities, Kathleen's poetry tends to be lyrical, without the discursive and didactic elements that are so strong in Eliot's later poems. Here is an early poem called 'The Traveller'.

A hundred years I slept beneath a thorn
 Until the tree was root and branches of my thought,
 Until white petals blossomed in my crown.

A thousand years I floated in a lake
 Until my brimful eye could hold
 The scattered moonlight and the burning cloud.

Mine is the gaze that knows
 Eyebright, asphodel, and briar rose.
 I have seen the rainbow open, the sun close.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 195–6.

A wind that blows about the land
 I have raised temples of snow, castles of sand
 And left them empty as a dead hand.

A winged ephemerid I am born
 With myriad eyes and glittering wings
 That flames must wither or waters drown.

I must live, I must die,
 I am the memory of all desire,
 I am the world's ashes, and the kindling fire.

It will be seen that the central tendency of the poem is towards what used to be called pantheism: a sense that everything is one and that the individual has been all things; and implicitly, that this 'all' is sacred. This harmonises clearly with Kathleen's account of her mystical experience, where she says 'I and the plant were one and indistinguishable; as if the plant were a part of my consciousness'. The poem, written around the same time, universalises that experience.

But this *via positiva*, where parts of the natural world are the vehicle of a spiritual vision, is balanced by another poem which uses minimal means to perceive the world as a living and sacred *void*:

THE WORLD

It burns in the void
 Nothing upholds it
 Still it travels.

Travelling the void
 Upheld by burning
 Nothing is still.

Burning it travels
 The void upholds it
 Still it is nothing.

Nothing it travels
 A burning void
 Upheld by stillness.

Here, albeit in radiant images, we have the *via negativa*. The poem is made simply from six elements, two of which occur in each line, and which are used in a series of permutations, almost mathematically. The only elements which occur in the same line more than once are 'burn' and 'void', which are present in that order in the first and the penultimate line. Both ideas are of course familiar from Indian thought.

A very different poem which shows clearly Kathleen Raine's debt to Greek and Neoplatonic sources is the fifth poem from a sequence called 'Soliloquies upon Love', from her 1965 volume *The Hollow Hill*. The poem describes and interprets a stone given to the poet by the writer and naturalist Gavin Maxwell:

Your gift to me was a grey stone cast upon a wild shore, traced over
 With calligraphy of inscrutable life. A marine annelid
 With stroke as free as by master-brush, one fluent word
 Has written with its life in the record of the *logos*,
 Yet lacked senses to see its delicate coils and meanders of white masonry.
 Mind unknown that blind plasm signed
 With weight and drift of sea, of wave-refracted light, and stress of spirit
 Omnipresent in every part, universal being here imprinted.
 The number-loving Greeks built their white temples
 To Apollo of the measured and Aphrodite the veiled source:
 Does the same harmony inform those marble shells,
 The word that is and means always and everywhere the same?
 Your message of life to life was written on the sea-floor before we were;
 Serpentine, strange and clear
 The deep knowledge we share, who are not the knowers but the known.
 You gave and I received as beauty what the *logos* writes:
 Intelligible, though not to us, the inscription on the stone.

The essential point of the poem, I think, is the sense that the pattern on the stone is the pattern of a creature's life; yet that creature could never see it. We in turn can see the shape, but its full meaning still eludes us. The analogy with our own lives, which make a pattern we cannot properly see and whose meaning is hidden from us, is very clear—all the more so because the stone was given to the poet by a man she loved but who could not, ultimately, return her love. Rather as in Eliot's poem, which reflects on 'the door we never opened/Into the rose-garden' whilst recalling a visit to a garden with a woman

he loved but never married, so here the personal is taken up into a larger perspective of time and meaning. The debt to Neoplatonism is especially clear: and it combines beautifully with the biologist's perception of how mathematical structuring in natural form interacts with the unpredictable elements of the marine environment and the creature's living actions. The two types of determinants—geometry and the sea—are represented as Apollo and Aphrodite. At the same time, reference to the *logos*, the sense that the whole creation is somehow a word uttered from a divine source, connects us to Christian Platonism, the mysticism of Plotinus or of St John's Gospel. The whole poem is full of an intuition of meaning, yet a meaning which we cannot grasp except as beauty: 'You gave and I received as beauty what the *logos* writes'. This leads in turn to a profound humility: 'Intelligible, though not to us, the inscription on the stone'.

We might turn now to consider a poem which seems very much a work of humility.

TOLD IN A DREAM

'You have a hundred months to live,' I was told in a dream,
The speaker unknown, but the words plain:
Waking into this world, my death nearer than I had known.

What to the immortal signifies number or months or years?
Up and down the light is woven, a golden skein,
But how hold the living clue that runs time out of mind?

I, standing before the superhuman within, above me,
Glimpsed and gone, 'It will be enough,' replied,
Pledging my human time to enact a timeless will.

Little is enough, where of each part there is so great a whole;
Myself, or any self, must answer so,
What, of the poem I write, the life that lives me, can I know?

The prediction of a hundred months was in fact wrong: Kathleen lived more than thirty years after writing this poem. It is striking that here, despite the portentous tone of 'a hundred months', number—as mere quantity—is dismissed. 'What to the immortal signifies number or months or years?' What matters is the timeless. And there is a sense

now that we have a task to fulfil, which we do not set for ourselves. The poet cannot interpret the poem she writes—and this echoes the perspective of the poem about the inscription on the stone. And as for life, it is life that lives *me*, not the other way around. We are the vehicles of a living process which we ourselves cannot understand.

To draw some points together here, Kathleen Raine and T. S. Eliot have a number of features in common as contemplative poets. Both underwent quite unexpected experiences which we can call, I think, mystical. Neither was practising any particular religion at the time, and both had rejected types of Nonconformism. (Kathleen's parents were Methodists whose interest in religion was mainly ethical and philanthropic, not unlike the Unitarianism of the Eliots.) Both investigated a range of spiritual writings to understand their experiences and to find guidance. In both cases Indian philosophy played a central part. And we should note how essential reading was for both of them. The twentieth-century mystical poet in the West did not turn first to a person or an organisation, but to books.

In Kathleen Raine's case the commitment to Indian spirituality became increasingly strong. Her last significant poem, written during 1999, was 'Millennial Hymn to the Lord Shiva'. It is a very dark poem, cataloguing insistently the evils and threats which human society seems to be accumulating for itself as it approaches the new millennium, and turning for salvation to the purifying fires of the Lord Shiva:

Earth no longer
Hymns the Creator,
The seven days of wonder,
The Garden is over –
All the stories are told,
The seven seals broken
All that begins
Must have its ending . . .

. . . But great is the realm
Of the world-creator,
The world-sustainer
From whom we come,
In whom we move

And have our being . . .
The unknowable mystery
To whom we return
Through the world-destroyer –
 Holy, holy
 At the end of the world
 The purging fire
 Of the purifier, the liberator!

It is a critique Eliot himself might have made, and its eclectic blending of Biblical phraseology with references to Karma and invocation of Shiva, though very typical of Kathleen Raine's thought, is not so very different from the cultural *mélange*—ultimately a polyphonic harmony—which Eliot created in *The Waste Land*. And so we return to our starting-point; as Eliot wrote, quoting an ancient saying, 'In my end is my beginning'.

