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Author: Stephen Cross

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John Allitt (1934–2007)

STEPHEN CROSS

It is difficult to know where to begin when writing of John Allitt. He was a man of remarkably wide culture and diverse interests: on the one hand, an Englishman with a strong feeling for the religious and cultural traditions of his country; on the other, a man imbued with the civilization of Continental Europe, and especially of France and Italy whose languages he spoke with fluency. What is certain is that his contribution to *Temenos* was very great. He was a frequent contributor to the original *Temenos* journal (1981–91), and was closely involved with Kathleen Raine in the conception and establishment of the *Temenos* Academy in 1991, delivering one of the three Inaugural Addresses. He served continuously on the Academic Board until shortly before his death, contributed many memorable lectures and led outstanding seminars.

The seeds of John's later achievement were sown in childhood. Born at Calais of English parents, at the age of two he loved to visit a French neighbour who was a harpist and would sit transfixed on the floor while she played. At six he fled with his mother before the German army; he spent the war in England, undergoing a long and almost fatal childhood illness. In 1946 the family moved to Milan and John's long association with Italy began. At boarding school in Switzerland he was taken to his first opera: it was Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, and the beauty of the music sank deep into his soul. In Milan during the school holidays he drank in performances at La Scala, standing at the back of his parents' box: Verdi, Wagner, Mozart, Puccini—no wonder he grew to love opera!

After studying Art History and Italian Literature at Leeds University, then Theology at Wells, John in 1964 obtained a post at the Central School of Arts (now Central St Martin's) in London, where he remained for over twenty years as a Senior Lecturer in Liberal Studies. Here a long friendship began with the painter Cecil Collins. Both were in revolt against the dominant modernism, by then well past its prime and more than a little threadbare—Conceptualism was the *dernier cri*. It was Goethe who had noted long before that artists are attached to

their time by their weaknesses and not by their strength; taking their cue from this, and carrying many of the students with them, they emphasized the importance of the representative element in painting as a vehicle for the life of the Imagination.

At the same time John was working privately on the music of Donizetti, with which he had fallen in love as a boy. He travelled whenever possible to the composer's home town of Bergamo, rediscovering the early works of Donizetti and the forgotten significance of his teacher—the Bavarian J. S. Mayr, a highly creative composer and theorist and, as John perceived, the link between German music and Italian Romantic opera. John saw that the music of Mayr and Donizetti went far beyond Romantic expression of the emotions: 'The score of a mature opera by Donizetti', he wrote, 'is the response of an intuitive genius to a cosmic framework of ideas. Music is understood to be like a Jacob's Ladder uniting heaven and earth.' John's work led to the establishment in 1973 of the Donizetti Society (he was Founding Chairman); and, with the singer Ian Caddy and the conductor Leslie Head, to a notable revival of the music of Mayr and Donizetti. John's books, *J. S. Mayr: Father of 19th Century Italian Music* (1989) and *Donizetti: In the Light of Romanticism and the Teaching of J. S. Mayr* (1991) are regarded as authoritative.

Within the framework of the Temenos Academy, John was able to give expression to what he was before all else: a teacher who delighted in sharing his knowledge by direct and personal communication. He lectured upon a wide range of subjects—the Cambridge Platonists, Botticelli's illustrations of Dante, Goethe, the thought of Martin Buber and much else. But perhaps his gifts found their fullest expression in the many seminars he led, above all those on the *Divine Comedy* in the Reading Essential Texts series, in which he presented the fruits of a lifetime's loving study of Dante's great epic. It was very largely John who ensured that the Christian contribution to the 'ancient springs' which Temenos draws upon was not forgotten. Kathleen Raine, having passed through an earlier encounter, had by the time the Academy was founded relatively little interest in the Christian tradition, and it was John who made sure—sometimes not without opposition—that 'the opening of the treasury of our own Western tradition', as he put it, made a rich contribution to the work of Temenos.

John's warm and generous nature, his love of good food and wine—and coffee!—found a natural response in Italy. Here he had many

friends, and several years before his death he turned to writing in Italian and for Italians. His book *La musica classica inglese* (reviewed later in these pages) was published last year; another book, introducing the thought of Thomas Traherne to Italians, will appear shortly; and a third book, on Dante and also written in Italian, awaits publication. Not quite completed at the time of his death (and this time in English) were two stories for children, into which John poured much of his own philosophy and values.

In spite of his varied talents, John was essentially a gentle and modest man. Few of his friends were aware that he had been knighted by the Italian Republic (Cavaliere del Merito della Repubblica) in recognition of his services to Italian culture. Civilized values—of courtesy, hospitality, conviviality—were natural to him, and behind all his activity there lay a fervent life of the spirit. As time went on he drew close to the Orthodox traditions of Eastern Europe, visiting Mount Athos in the company of the icon painter Aidan Hart, and in 1997 entering, together with his beloved wife Eleanor, the Orthodox Church. As he said in his Inaugural Address at the Temenos Academy in 1991, 'Truth is all we can take with us on our journey beyond the grave.'