

TEMENOS ACADEMY REVIEW

The fourteenth issue of the *Temenos Academy Review* will be published later this year. From it we have taken the Editorial by John Carey, which we hope you will find time to read and enjoy.

Kathleen Raine liked to quote A. K. Coomaraswamy's saying that it takes four years to get a first-rate university education, and forty years to get over it. That a deadly seriousness lay behind this quip is apparent from Coomaraswamy's words elsewhere:

A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondescript and superficial being deprived of all roots—a sort of intellectual pariah who does not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future (*The Dance of Śiva*, 1918).

This was written with specific reference to the exporting of British educational methods to colonial India; but it has a more general application. In the battle for the soul of the world, education is probably the most potent weapon of all. It is in this light that I would like to reflect on the seventh of the Principles that guide the work of the Academy: *Mindfulness that the purpose of teaching is to enable students to apply in their own lives that which they learn.*

What is it that we teach at Temenos? A matter-of-fact answer would be religion, philosophy, literature, art—the familiar stock in trade of the humanities. It is a range of subjects that can be found in the arts faculties of most universities; and it is from the universities that many of our speakers come to us. Temenos could be seen as an outgrowth of the academic establishment, providing educational evenings as one of the cultural amenities of Greater London.

This is doubtless what the Academy represents for some at least of those who attend our lectures and seminars—perhaps, indeed, for some of our speakers as well—and such visitors are welcome on that basis. Our true concern, however, is with something fundamentally different. If all that Temenos purveyed were education in this familiar, innocuous, conventional sense, then it would have failed.

The Temenos Academy differs from most modern schools and universities in its affirmation of the reality and centrality of the Sacred; and many of the texts, teachers and traditions which it studies—more and more of them, it sometimes seems—are difficult or impossible to learn about in conventional institutions. In the address which she delivered at the opening of the Academy, twenty years ago, Kathleen Raine spoke of rediscovering an ‘excluded knowledge’ which, largely ignored by professional academia, is in fact the life-blood of all that is most precious in our civilization:

What was at issue was not simply a matter of a few forgotten names but of the whole body of the world’s wisdom, the mainstream of an alternative tradition, grounded not in the naïve materialism of a few centuries, but in the ‘Perennial Philosophy’ in all its branches . . . simply excluded from our Universities as if it did not exist . . .

This is of great importance, but it is by no means all. The real essence of our endeavour is conveyed in the words with which she went on to qualify the passage which I have just quoted:

. . . Or, if mentioned, not as the sacred literature of wisdom, but as ‘history of ideas’ in which students are expected to learn *about*, not to learn *from*, these records of humankind’s deepest thought and highest vision.

This is the crucial distinction, involving two entirely different modes of relationship. When we learn *about* someone or something, we are studying an object: our mind’s eye could just as well be directed at a culture in a Petri dish or at a reaction in a flask, and what we confront is in Martin Buber’s terminology an *it*. But to learn *from* is to sit—at first, perhaps, simply to pray for the privilege of sitting—at the feet of a teacher. And this teacher—whether man or woman or book or painting or tree or star or deity—is a *thou*.

The word ‘academy’ has had a long and often dreary history, and a good deal of dispiriting baggage has attached itself to its offshoots ‘academic’ and ‘academia’. But the Temenos Academy looks back to the first Academy: the shady park northwest of Athens, sacred to the Arcadian hero Akademos, where Plato discoursed with his disciples. Truth was sought there in dialogue, in relationship: in learning *from*. It is perhaps paradoxical that Plato put all of his teaching into written

accounts of conversations—it is as if writing is telling us that writing cannot tell us. This is the paradox of the Gospels also. Behind it is the recognition that wisdom can only be sought in the humility, in the vulnerability, of an encounter.

Plato's conviction that truth is found in the meeting of minds, not in some fixed form of words, finds its most vivid expression in a famous passage in his *Seventh Letter* (344b–c):

When each of these things—names and statements, appearances and perceptions—was laboriously compared with the others, examined in friendly discussion, employing questions and answers without envy: then the intellect and mind of each, straining human capacity to the utmost possible, were filled with light. No one seriously concerned with such matters would attempt to replace this process with a written account

Plato stood on the threshold of a new age of the mind, both exhilarated and troubled by the power of the written word. The generations who have come after have found that books need not by any means be mere passive objects: we can learn from them, argue with them, journey into them, almost as if it is their writers who are there with us. But in such cases the principle is the same: such a book stands for a person, a *thou*.

In these terms, if what we learn does not change us then we have not really learned anything at all. The Buddha warns of this when he compares one who 'speaks many holy words but he speaks and does not' to 'a cowherd who counts the cows of his master'; and again when he speaks of the fool who 'never knows the path of wisdom as the spoon never knows the taste of the soup' (*Dhammapada* §§19, 64; Mascaró trans.). Truly to learn anything is also to learn about oneself: it is almost as if, like the ancient Egyptians, we place our hearts on the balance against the feather of Truth. But in the halls of Osiris, everything has already been done; now, and here, everything is yet to do.

One more analogy suggests itself in this connection: the intimate encounter that is eating and drinking. Do we merely look at what we study, or do we take it into ourselves? What we consume becomes a part of us; and we, by the same token, are changed by every mouthful. In *In the Vineyard of the Text*, his remarkable study of pre-scholastic attitudes to learning, Ivan Illich quotes Gregory the Great:

Sacred scripture is sometimes food, sometimes drink for us. In the more obscure places, it is food, broken up through study, made nourishing through chewing. It is drink in the clearer places, and is absorbed as soon as it is read (*Moralia in Iob* i.29).

Such concreteness may startle our fastidious cerebralism; but it reflects ways of thought whose roots go deep. The Latin *sapientia* derives from *sapere*, a verb which means ‘to be wise, discerning, aware; to be in one’s right mind’; but also, and originally, ‘to taste’.

It is wisdom, as Kathleen Raine insisted, which ‘should be the goal of all education’: ‘where the existing universities have increasingly failed, is to relate human studies to any unifying perspective of wisdom’. The impoverished outlook which takes the goal of learning to be knowledgeability rather than wisdom has been with us for a long time. We see it in the Athenians of Saint Paul’s day, who ‘had no other recreation than saying or hearing the latest thing’, and who responded with mockery when he called on them to ‘feel’ their way to God, and to repent (*metanoein*) (Acts 17:21, 27, 30–32).

Having related the parable of the sower, Jesus observed to his disciples that his hearers were themselves like the unproductive seeds of which he had spoken:

The heart of this people has been thickened, and they hear heavily with their ears, and they have closed their eyes—lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn again; and lest I should heal them (Matthew 13:15).

The opening of eyes and ears goes together with the opening of hearts, and with the transformation (*epistrophe*) of lives. What can follow from such transformation is described in the culmination of the parable:

The one sown upon the good earth, he is the one who hears and understands the word, and who bears fruit. One produces a hundred, another sixty, another thirty (23).

Fruitfulness should be the aspiration of every teacher, and of every student.

JOHN CAREY