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Philip Sherrard on 'Kathleen Raine and The Symbolic Art': Some Reactions and Thoughts*

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Philip Sherrard's long essay is, as one would expect, insightful, thought-provoking and incisive. It is also firmly appreciative of Kathleen Raine's work in prose as well as in poetry. Indeed, the essay's main thrust and two-thirds of its length are concerned with her ideas and beliefs, her specific views on the nature of poetry and the imagination; only the final third dealing with the poetry itself, although in a significantly thematic way.

The essay therefore falls into two sections, even if links are made between them, notably along the line of the poet taking 'her stand (on) the ground of the soul'; while in her actual poetry concentrating on 'the archetypal myth of the soul in the treasury of Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition', i.e. 'the myth of the descent of the soul from its native realm into an alien and hostile world, and its final return to the land of its origin'; so that 'in its classic form . . . it is the myth of Demeter and Persephone, of mother and daughter: of the daughter's defection and estrangement from the maternal source of life, and of the mother's search to find her and to restore her to her native heritage'.¹ This is perceptive and well said. However, Sherrard's essay is first and foremost a substantial critique of the basic principles, as he sees them, underlying Kathleen Raine's whole view of the *ars poetica* itself, with these principles then being illustrated and discussed through one prose-work alone, *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967), a procedure justified 'for two main reasons': firstly, that 'the fundamental statement of (Kathleen Raine's) *ars poetica* in this work may be said to represent her thought in a mature and coherent form'; secondly, that in 'purely practical' terms the reader can 'check my own

* The essay by Philip Sherrard to which the present piece responds, first written in 1989, was published in *TAR* 11 (2008) 180–208. (Ed.)

1. Sherrard, 'Kathleen Raine and the Symbolic Art', p. 196.

appraisal of its philosophy . . . and . . . deepen his own understanding of it'.²

Now certainly, *Defending Ancient Springs* can be 'said to represent her thought in a mature and coherent form', at least up to a point; but this is not at all to say that there was no further development or qualification. Philip Sherrard correctly mentions that 'particularly through her later reading of the works of Henry Corbin' she 'may subsequently have altered an emphasis here and there, and deepened her understanding of certain central concepts'.³ But this is to put it quite peripherally. Take *Golgonooza, City of Imagination*, which admittedly didn't appear until 1991, two years after Sherrard's essay. It contains fourteen references to Corbin, with his presiding presence there now enabling Kathleen Raine to sharpen and qualify her approach to the Traditionalists, including our author:

Two members of that group—Titus Burckhardt and Philip Sherrard himself—have made radical attacks on Jung and in so doing revealed the limitations of that school. . . . I find what is missing from Guénon and his followers in the writings of Henry Corbin, who, together with Jung, was among the founding members of the Eranos circle.⁴

Again, in the last volume of her autobiography, *India Seen Afar*, which was also published later (in 1990), there is a shift in the same direction, this time occasioned by its writer's increasing contact with and submergence in Indian culture and spirituality, something that leads her to stipulate:

And is it not a true reflection on Western followers of Guénon's traditional school that they would have wished to stop the world as it was at the end of the Middle Ages . . . rather than addressing themselves to the problem which is the same in every present, of embodying a vision? And did not followers of that school of thought look a little odd in India; rather a kind of intellectual . . . dressing-up?⁵

However, to return to the real focus of Philip Sherrard's critique,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 182. 3. *Ibid.*

4. *Golgonooza, City of Imagination: Last Studies in William Blake* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1991), pp. 3–4. 5. *India Seen Afar* (Bideford: Green Books, 1990), p. 120.

which fundamentally is levelled at the status given to the soul by Kathleen Raine, as he sees it, in contradistinction to 'the Divine Intellect' or 'the world of intelligible realities, of metaphysical or theological meanings'.⁶ The latter he represents as appertaining to a higher order of things, arguing that, to begin with, Kathleen Raine also recognised these two orders of reality, quoting from *Defending Ancient Springs* as follows: 'If the psyche reflects figures which on another level contain theological and metaphysical meanings (as Sallust and all traditional definitions would say . . .) it remains true that the figures themselves take form in the psyche . . .'.⁷ His critique then goes on to maintain that these two orders are elided by Kathleen Raine in favour of the soul and the psychical, so that their true hierarchical placement, such as we find in 'the perennial philosophy', is disrupted. Incidentally, in the above quote from *Defending Ancient Springs*, Philip Sherrard omits from within the brackets the words 'and as Jung also would, in principle, allow', since he may not have agreed with their inclusion. Nevertheless, this is where Kathleen Raine appears to stand; and Jungian psychology would doubtless have had the role of strengthening for her the pivotal presence and function of the psychical. It is therefore not for nothing, I believe, that with the statement 'it remains true that the figures themselves take form in the psyche' she seems to give a syntactic and aesthetic priority to the side of the soul rather than the intellect; whereas Philip Sherrard stresses first and foremost 'the world of intelligible realities'. His basic approach is therefore top-down, Kathleen Raine's bottom-up from the plane and domain of 'that interior world' of 'the living imagination', which is clearly both subjective and poetic, but also most definitely encompasses for her an unimpeded outreach into the intelligible and Platonic. The one wells up out of the other. In this she has her roots in the Romantic period rather than, like Philip Sherrard, in the more doctrinaire universe of Dante's Middle Ages. Not for nothing is Blake the central plank in her world, with Shelley and Coleridge closely following, together with Yeats as a belated Romantic with strong roots in Shelley and Blake.

Milton likewise fits in as the great English epic poet of inner symbolic worlds, demonstrated (not uncritically) in Blake's own inner epic, *Milton*; but not the Metaphysicals, to whom Kathleen Raine refers in a

6. 'Kathleen Raine', p. 185.

7. *Defending Ancient Springs* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 126.

revealing passage quoted in part by Philip Sherrard, and which I now quote in full:

Beyond the epic lies the cosmic, the world of the gods in whose presence the human scenes take their due proportion. 'Religious' poetry is not necessarily of this kind. The devotional poets of the seventeenth century, or Hopkins, are beautiful minor poets whose experiences of the divine are (in no moral or pejorative sense) self-centred; whereas Blake, Milton, Dante, and the author of 'Byzantium' speak from beyond the human personality, from that life of which the individual man is no more than a form or organ.⁸

Kathleen Raine's poetic credo is expressed here in its evocation of symbolic worlds inclusive of the human, but where the cosmic and the mythic are foundational. What is then, however, quite instructive is the way in which Philip Sherrard reads and unfolds 'self-centred', giving it a totally different interpretation. For while she sees 'self-centred . . . experiences of the divine' as indicating a limitation via the human, he regards this as expressing 'essentially a dialogue between man and God' which is unavailable to her, the key sentence being:

For Dr Raine, . . . such a dialogue is precluded because her experience of a supra-individual world is equated, not with the experience of God as a trans-psychic reality, but with the experience of the soul.⁹

But Kathleen Raine, I feel, wouldn't want to be involved in 'such a dialogue', even if able to, since this would mean a polarization and separation between the human and the divine which was uncharacteristic of her. Such a position, with its implicit emphasis on the personal and individual, undoubtedly derives from Philip Sherrard's Christian-Orthodox stance, something which Kathleen Raine, from her more Platonic-Neoplatonic, even alchemical outlook on life, would, I feel, have had difficulty endorsing. Her world, as just stated, rather subscribes to or embodies 'that life of which the individual man is no more than a form or organ'. It is *inset* within a larger context, as with Edwin Muir, of whom she speaks just after the extract quoted above, that 'he never writes of the human scene without some haunting of

8. *Ibid.*, p. 15. 9. 'Kathleen Raine', p. 183.

the larger presence of the gods'; all of which Philip Sherrard refuses to accept 'as a trans-psychic reality', which it clearly is for Kathleen Raine, the one being an extension of the other, not a reduction to an 'experience of the soul'. There are palpable divergences here, a parting of the ways and worlds, which shouldn't be smoothed over, in spite of the substantial communal allegiances.

In brief, I would argue that Philip Sherrard's hard-line, top-down approach in all this obscures for him the real nature and functioning of Kathleen Raine's aesthetic-symbolic world in both its prose and verse manifestations. So what we get is really a fundamental difference of position and perspective, with Philip Sherrard the theological philosopher and Kathleen Raine the subjective poet whose personality and vision are marked by a natural extension of the subjective into the metaphysical. Indeed, this same difference of position and perspective goes so far as to invade the heart of Kathleen Raine's belief-system. For Philip Sherrard applies his previous argument regarding 'her experience of a supra-individual world (being) equated . . . with the experience of the soul' to her key-concept of the imagination:

And what is quite unambiguously explicit in this understanding of things is that the imagination, as the soul's organ of cognition and vision, is in its own right and through its own natural powers incapable of knowing and perceiving the realities of the intelligible and spiritual order.¹⁰

I doubt altogether that Kathleen Raine would even contemplate such a definition, such a demotion of her most cherished human faculty with its roots, for her, in the cosmic and divine. At bottom, Philip Sherrard wants to keep what he calls 'this dual order of things'—'the intelligible or spiritual and the psychic'—separate or, at very least, to remain consciously aware of them as being such, with the former as hierarchically dominating partner. For him, Kathleen Raine 'confuse(s) or conflate(s) these two planes of reality . . . disrupting the hierarchic order of things in a manner for which no warranty can be found in any form of the Perennial Philosophy . . .'. More specifically:

Hence she virtually dispenses with the idea that a true knowledge of

10. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

the meaning of imaginative symbols, and thus of their creative use in art as analogues or correspondences through which the lower can be linked with the higher, visible with invisible, created with the uncreated, is a function of the intellect and depends upon a prior knowledge of the intelligible world in which these symbols themselves have their origin. Instead she substitutes for this idea the idea that the soul itself is a self-determining principle capable in its own right and through its own unaided powers of discerning the meaning of such symbols and so of determining their hieratic deployment in the forms of art. Thus she writes that 'the living imagination alone has the key to the meaning of traditional symbols'.¹¹

This last sentence is quintessential Kathleen Raine, and ties in very much with the order of priorities expressed in the following:

'Tradition', as understood by followers of Guénon, for all their insistence on 'revealed' knowledge and the metaphysical order, seems unconnected to the living source itself and highly suspicious of those very inner worlds from which it ultimately derives.¹²

What strongly emerges here is the emphasis placed on 'the *living* imagination alone' and 'the *living* source itself', plus the oppositional stance vis-à-vis 'Tradition' and 'traditional symbols'.

To further clarify this divide between Kathleen Raine and Philip Sherrard, we can say that the former comes down on the side of the source, the latter on the side of tradition, from which side his critique is basically levelled. Hence, where he maintains that

In any case, genuine traditional symbols can never lose their potency; and if one finds it difficult to relate and respond to them that is ultimately because one is not inwardly attuned to the metaphysical or spiritual realities to which they correspond.¹³

she counters with

If the present use of symbolism can no longer be in the form of old

11. *Ibid.*, p. 189. 12. *Golgonooza, City of Imagination*, p. 4.

13. 'Kathleen Raine', p. 191.

religious myths, we must, knowing as we now do that the mythological order is an interior order, follow those figures who were at one time objectified in the cults of the old religions, into their own country. Into that interior world the figures of the gods and their myths have withdrawn, drawing after them the old cults, there to renew their immortality by reimmersion in the source: which has at all times been the only source of the life of the cults themselves.¹⁴

Then at the end of her essay, 'Vernon Watkins and the Bardic Tradition', we get this final sentence, which Philip Sherrard also includes:

Tradition, which recognizes a difference between knowledge and ignorance, cannot come to terms with a world in which there are no longer any standards by which truth and falsehood may be measured.¹⁵

—but which he interestingly misquotes, substituting 'may be *distinguished*' for 'may be measured', a more extreme verb, immediately going on to declare that

The standards by which truth and falsehood may be distinguished are of course enshrined in the doctrine of the religion in question, or in the Perennial Philosophy in the particular doctrinal form of that religion.¹⁶

Kathleen Raine, I believe, would never have made such a pronouncement. Indeed, Philip Sherrard himself observes that 'Dr Raine is ill at ease with doctrine, and tends to regard it as a constrictive use of the imagination'.¹⁷ Certainly, throughout Philip Sherrard's essay, as elsewhere, one gets the impression that, like René Guénon and other Traditionalists, he is uncompromising on all such issues, whereas Kathleen Raine is much more responsive and sympathetic to the nature of the age she is dealing with, as well as noting when visible the hardening of tradition's arteries. Her frequent critical references to 'the cults of the old religions', as opposed to 'a return to the source', surface as in this example: 'At this time we have no shared cult, no collective mytho-

14. *Defending Ancient Springs*, p. 138. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

16. 'Kathleen Raine', p. 192. 17. *Ibid.*

logy which speaks to us with the immediacy of our dreams and visions of the primordial images themselves."¹⁸ It is not insignificant here, either, that the employment of the term 'primordial images' derives from Jung, who first used it to designate 'archetypes', having adopted it from the Swiss Renaissance art-historian, Jacob Burckhardt. And again in more detail:

The poets and painters of the Renaissance did not, surely, turn to the pagan gods and their myths because these seemed more true, or even more beautiful than the Christian, but because, being freed from cult, the old gods had, paradoxically, become more valid as symbols of the primordial images; the archetypal figures of Apollo and Venus and the rest once more plastic in the imaginations of Botticelli, Spenser and Shakespeare; free from cult, they moved once more towards their source.¹⁹

Philip Sherrard also criticizes Kathleen Raine in her identification of 'Blake's world of the Imagination' via Boehme's 'definition of the divine Logos as "the imagination of God"' with the poet's own 'Eternal Christ "Jesus the Imagination"'.²⁰ He censures what he calls the equation of all these 'with the psyche, or the *Anima Mundi*, or the world of imaginative symbols', when 'the world of divine images that (God) embraces is a world of celestial Intelligences, not of psychic figures or symbols'. Again, it is the same line of argument as used earlier, only now applied specifically to Kathleen Raine's view of the imagination, which indeed has much in common with Yeats's, who writes in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1908) that '(Blake) has learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, "the body of God", "the Divine members"',²¹ a statement well known to Kathleen Raine.

In summarising Philip Sherrard's total critique at this point, I would like to quote the following résumé, itself pretty inclusive:

18. *Defending Ancient Springs*, p. 74.

19. *The Inner Journey of the Poet, and Other Papers*, ed. Brian Keeble (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 64.

20. 'Kathleen Raine', p. 188; cf. *Defending Ancient Springs*, p. 59.

21. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 112.

Dr Raine, in order to reach the conclusion she has reached, . . . has invested the psyche with the status of the divine Logos. This in its turn she has been able to do because she has assumed that the meaning that the word 'imagination' has for Boehme and Blake when they speak of the imagination of God and of Jesus the Imagination is equivalent to that which it has for her when she equates the imagination with the *Anima Mundi* or Jung's 'collective unconscious', and that this gives her the authority, so to speak, to equate the Eternal Christ with these latter psychic categories This is to say that the soul is now regarded as deiform or divinized not by virtue of participation in a principle that in itself transcends it, but in its own right and because it is in itself its own divine principle, the divine Logos, Jesus the Imagination Consequently it is itself the touchstone of its own truth, and there is no need for it to conform to any Perennial Philosophy, still less to the canonical tradition, doctrinal or symbolic, of any particular religion, for it to function in accordance with the metaphysical law of correspondence and so to fulfil its analogical role in an authentic work of symbolic art.²²

The approach and cast of mind demonstrated in this passage are authoritative, prescriptive and critical, yet rather static and external—i.e., rooted in tradition and the past—much less inner-directed and fluid, as with Kathleen Raine's perspective on things; so more dismissive of creative tensions and conflations or elidings of any kind, and less responsive to dreams and visions.

Finally, when Philip Sherrard comes to deal with Kathleen Raine's actual poetry, it is totally in keeping that he should find its central theme in 'the archetypal myth of the soul' which we referred to at the start of our analysis. Certain features of the Christian account of the Fall are now likewise posited, but Philip believes that Kathleen's specific version of events is marked by 'a bias . . . peculiarly English' in that it appears in our own literature rather than anywhere else and involves what he terms 'equating the vision of Paradise with the vision of childhood', whereby the latter is then regained as a transformation neither Neoplatonic nor Christian, but rather, as he puts it, exhibiting 'a certain naturalistic bent'. He cites Wordsworth and Traherne as

22. 'Kathleen Raine', pp. 194–5.

examples of writers illustrating this connection; but he could just as easily have cited Henry Vaughan and the Blake of *Songs of Innocence*, as well as *Wuthering Heights* and the novels of Dickens, who treats the theme in reverse. Clearly, English writing has the child centre stage in a way untypical of other European literatures, so that Philip Sherrard is right in pointing to this as an essentially English feature, characterised also by countless children's books with their implicit harking back to a golden age of childhood, so often idealized, yet nevertheless revelatory in terms of national cultural psychology, however we respond to this. Kathleen's early experience of deadly suburban Essex and her First World War move to idyllic Northumberland, with far-reaching consequences for her whole outlook and writing, obviously fit into that tradition of things. And when looked at, say, with Peter Coveney's *The Image of Childhood* in mind, that perceptive study of the Romantic and Victorian child in English literature,²³ it takes on an infinitely more substantial role, enabling us to explore and reflect on some central constellations in English psychologies of soul.

23. *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society—A Study of the Theme in English Literature*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).