

# THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

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“Global Unity and the Arts”

Author: Kathleen Raine

Source: Temenos Academy Review 16 (2013)

pp. 9-15

Published by The Temenos Academy

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# Global Unity and the Arts\*

KATHLEEN RAINE

I

We have listened, during these days of intense thought, to many world-famous authorities on the natural and social sciences, and we have heard them speak of the scientific and technological means now available for the transmission of information linking the whole planet in 'global unity'. But I am here to speak for the poets, and poetry is the language not of quantifiable and computable fact, but of the soul, whose meanings and values are immeasurable. And I have found myself wondering what is the use of all these communication techniques, interdisciplinary dialogues, satellite transmission of instantaneous information to myriad television sets all over our planet, indeed of that much-vaunted and unchallenged activity 'education' itself, unless we address ourselves to a question raised here by John Huddleston and Professor Bushrui.

That question is the oldest in the world: 'What is Man?'

The answer Oedipus gave to the Sphinx's riddle about 'Four legs, two legs, three legs' is surely simplistic. So natural man may be defined, as T. S. Eliot reminded my generation when he wrote that 'life on a crocodile-isle' is 'just three things: Birth, and copulation, and death'. But the Hebrew psalmist's cry to God,

What is man, that thou art mindful of him?  
And the son of man, that thou visitest him?  
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels  
And hast crowned him with glory and honour

concerns man as a living spirit, a mystery.

\* This essay was first published in *Transition to a Global Society*, ed. Suheil Bushrui, Iraj Ayman and Ervin Laszlo (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1993), pp. 151–6; it was originally presented as a lecture at the First International Dialogue on the Transition to a Global Society, held at the Landegg Academy, Wienacht, Switzerland, on 3–9 September 1990. The editors are grateful to Professor Bushrui and to the Literary Estate of Kathleen Raine for permission to reprint it here.

William Blake, our English poet-prophet, also asked the question, and his answer was: 'Man is either the Ark of God, or a phantom of the earth and of the water'. To Blake, man is without doubt the bearer of the divine presence. Again in this century, Rabindranath Tagore, in one of his last poems, 'The Rising Sun', puts the question to man: 'Who are you?' Tagore gives no answer, for indeed man is rooted in mystery: not only unknown but unknowable.

This at least we know, that humanity cannot be defined or described in material terms or in terms of quantity. Measurement cannot discover the immeasurable. The power that moves the sun and the other stars lies altogether outside the order of materialistic science and its child, technology. I quote again from William Blake:

Every natural effect has a spiritual cause,  
And not a natural. A natural cause only seems.

And I ask again: What is the use of more and more communication systems, universal literacy and the rest, unless we know whom we are educating and for what end? I am reminded of some lines by T. S. Eliot, from *The Waste Land*:

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.

Technology, whose 'medium is the message', so we have been told, can only connect 'nothing with nothing'. All those international and interdisciplinary exchanges, all that instantaneous flashing of information on TV screens across the globe is futile unless there is a reconnection with the lost source.

In the context of a culture built on the premise that the ground of reality is 'matter', the arts can only be cosmetic, a coating of pink icing to sweeten harsh reality: classes in 'creative writing' and everyone 'doing their own thing', indulging in harmless pastimes while the scientists and technicians decide the 'real' issues. This widespread and popular concession to 'human values' and 'the arts' has been described by C. S. Lewis as 'making mud-pies'. Yet until relatively recently every human civilization since the dawn of time had been based on the recognition that the ground of reality is spirit. The world's great heritage of knowledge and wisdom, of philosophy and the arts, is

grounded in this premise. Ours is an imaginatively and spiritually illiterate culture that no longer takes values and meanings seriously, nor gives Plato's inner realities of the good, the true and the beautiful one fraction of the attention given to technological inventions.

There has been much talk of 'new values'. But reality is always itself; there is already a great treasury of knowledge and wisdom, which is only rendered irrelevant, and excluded, by materialist science. It is not the *conclusions* of this materialist science that we must question, however, but the *premises*.

## II

We are a centrifugal society, seeking to join together pieces of the fragmented periphery, when 'the centre cannot hold'. Unless that lost centre, that dimension opening into eternal, immeasurable worlds, is restored, all these peripheral connections of 'nothing with nothing' can only result in a global unity that is bleak indeed. I offer a few very simple thoughts on the necessity of the arts of the imagination as one means of restoring the lost dimension. These thoughts may be considered almost too simple and self-evident; yet truth may often elude us by its very simplicity.

The simple truth is that there is one sphere in which there is no need for a 'transition' to a global society. For that society is already here, has been from the beginning and will be always: that is, the world of the arts of the imagination. Of that 'kingdom not of this world', all are citizens who choose to enter its regions. In the 'realms of gold' where the poet John Keats had so 'many goodly states and kingdoms seen', there are no frontiers, and no conflicts. Within that world there is no competitive struggle for possession because there is no property; all belongs to everyone, like the light of the sun.

The nature of property is a principal cause of conflict and division in the material world. For only one person, or group of persons, or nation, can possess a piece of land or other form of wealth, to the exclusion of others. If a sum of money is shared by a hundred people, each receives only a hundredth part. In the world of the arts of the imagination, the opposite is true: if a hundred people listen to a symphony by Schubert or a play by Shakespeare, or visit some cathedral, mosque, or temple, or memorize a psalm or sonnet, each one of that hundred possesses the whole undiminished by no matter how many other participants.

The capacity of a concert-hall or theatre may be limited, but the music or poetry itself is not. The world of Homer, or Valmiki, or Shakespeare, or Proust, or Shelley, or Tagore, can be ours totally, according to our capacity, with added delight because these worlds are also shared by many others.

The principle is a very simple one: the greater the numbers in the material world, the more human beings fear, mistrust, and compete with one another. In that other world, far from separating the many who participate in music, drama, poetry, or whatever art, all are united in a bond of shared knowledge and delight in a single imaginative experience. And what is a civilization if not the participation of many in certain shared imaginative regions? We live not only in houses of stone, but also in regions of the mind. Because the imagination is universal, the vision of one, given its fitting form, thereby becomes 'the house of the soul', a description the Cambridge scholar I. A. Richards used of poetry. There is no limit to how many can dwell in such a house.

### III

Each nation, or tribe, has its own imaginative identity; indeed it is certain shared modes of expression, or melodies, stories, dance or other arts, that above all unite tribe or nation. From a material standpoint, what is England but a small, overcrowded island with a wet climate and an industrial economy? But what of the England of the imagination? What would England be without her poets, without Shakespeare and our theatre, without our Gothic cathedrals? The England of the imagination belongs to the whole world; and there is an Ireland, a France, a Germany, an Italy, an India, a China, a Japan, an America, a Russia of the imagination. Citizenship is a privilege more or less jealously guarded by national governments. But the vast landscapes of French literature, German music, the treasures of Greece and Italy, are open to the whole world. There are no frontiers, not even between nations that are politically very hostile to one another. We too may possess dual or multiple citizenship if we so wish. All may be fellow-citizens of the one world of the imagination; we are in some measure already citizens of any country whose arts we love and have become part of our being.

In the West and in the westernized modern world, we live under the domination of a materialist ideology that has prevailed since the seventeenth century. None can know the ultimate nature of reality, but as we believe it to be, so our belief becomes an agent in creating a certain kind of world. Materialist ideology rests, as I have said, on the hypothesis that matter is the basis of reality and that it exists independently of mind or thought. This belief has created a lifeless universe, to be known by weight and measure, infinitely divisible but devoid of qualities, of meanings and values; devoid of life. The inevitable result is that human meanings and values appear insubstantial, irrelevant, less real than the many ingenious products of technology.

This material system, regarded virtually throughout modern westernized society as the whole and only reality, envisages a world made up of an infinite number of parts, divisible *ad infinitum*, not a unity but a multiplicity, a fragmentation. Individuals, like nations, each seek to possess as much of the property to be divided as possible; all is partitioned and 'owned'. A materialist civilization is inevitably self-destructive in the long run because it is so divisive and competitive. Nor is a materialist egalitarianism any solution, for an equal division is no less a division than an unequal one. England's great visionary poet William Blake understood these things as early as the end of the eighteenth century, a time when materialist science was already in the ascendant:

More, more, is the cry of a mistaken soul.  
Less than all will not satisfy man.

Imagination, the world of mind and spirit, is by its nature a unity, a universe of sacred values and meanings, of joys and sorrows, whose reality does not depend on any hypothesis about 'matter'; whereas in the world of materialist science, where reality is equated with what can be measured and quantified, nothing is sacred. Again, the contrast is highlighted by Blake; to the follower of a materialist science who asked him 'When the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire, somewhat like a guinea?' he replied: 'Oh no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host, crying "Holy, holy, holy"'.  
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Over the years I have come to realize that the crisis of these times can be resolved by nothing less than a change in the premises of our

civilization. W. B. Yeats, in his book *A Vision*, set forth a paradigm of the historic cycles, in which world civilizations succeed one another. He too proclaimed a New Age. 'The three provincial centuries are over,' he wrote to a friend, 'wisdom and poetry return.' Poetry is the language of wisdom, which belongs to the spirit, to the imagination, not to a science of quantification and a technological civilization. The prophecies of Blake, Shelley, Yeats, and other poets are self-fulfilling.

Must we not have more cultural exchanges between nations? Yes, but what culture is to be exchanged? Exchange is of no avail unless it be at the level of the unifying imagination. For this the participants themselves must possess such a culture of the imagination. This may be a traditional culture, like that of India, or a learned tradition, like that of pre-war Europe, based on a high degree of literacy. Where are we to turn in a new post-literate world?

#### IV

No true cultural exchange can take place unless the education of the imagination is first established. Those who are responsive to works of the imagination within their own culture will naturally bring the same response to other cultures. The widespread advance of technological education throughout the world cannot bring about global unity, only global uniformity. Unless we provide a different education, the education of the imagination, that world will remain closed, and competitive acquisitiveness will continue to prevail.

In speaking of the imagination we are not appealing to an elite such as the elite of science, comprising those who are exceptionally gifted and highly trained in some special field of knowledge. We are speaking of universal human nature, the great human family. The shared vision of Christendom once gave a unity of imaginative culture to Europe, for the great 'revealed' religions are traditionally vehicles for a collective imaginative vision, giving stability and coherence. But they remain so only as long as that informing vision is not obscured by attempts to manipulate a vision of higher things for worldly ends. Are not the world's religions themselves at this time in dire need of imaginative renewal?

Unfortunately, modern education tends to be utilitarian and technological. With this kind of education, a nation's imagination is no longer sustained by some shared mythology or poetry. But the loss of

such cultural unity can destroy a civilization more speedily than the imagination can build it. How can we restore that unity? What is the new education that can give back to a new generation that lost kingdom?

Worldwide dissatisfaction with the materialist values that seek to feed humankind with 'bread alone' is perhaps already creating its own antidote: there is a deep need, a universal search for the lost values of the spirit. I can speak only for my own *Temenos* circle in England, at present working towards the establishment of a Temenos Academy of Integral Studies, which will seek to plant a seed of what may be the education of the future: an education grounded in perennial wisdom, which alone can bring about global unity at the level of humankind's highest vision and deepest understanding. There are other movements in other parts of the world, inspired by the same need. Yet once a culture has been lost, a continuity broken, might it not be impossible to restore it? If we act now, we may be just in time to save our rich heritage of the treasures of the imagination.

The human imagination itself, of course, is always there. Yet we also need the works of the imagination hitherto preserved in all cultures, which constitute the language of every nation's experience. They are the means whereby we learn from the past, from our ancestors, and communicate with future generations.

It is for this reason that I speak for the arts, for language through which alone we partake of what the Christian scriptures call 'the gifts of the spirit'. The universe of the imagination, for those who participate in it, remains a living unity in an ageless, deathless world with no frontiers, embracing past and future alike in the only universal reality, our shared vision of eternity.