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# Kathleen Raine and Tradition

## *Some General Comments and Personal Recollections*

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Being rooted firmly in the traditional perspective as understood by René Guénon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon and others including Kathleen Raine herself, I was interested in her works from the point of view of traditional doctrines from the very beginning of my acquaintance with them. It was in the early 1950s when I had discovered the traditional writings and had direct access to the Coomaraswamy library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in America, that I ran across her name. At that time I was searching widely for different expressions of traditional thought and the Perennial Philosophy and in this context had discovered the eccentric but important figure of Thomas Taylor, whose nearly complete translations of the Platonic canon into English was to be found at the Harvard Library. Also, Coomaraswamy mentioned Blake often. Although I had studied his poetry in general courses on English literature, Coomaraswamy's citing the poems of this remarkable figure stimulated me to study Blake further. It was at this juncture that I ran across the name of Kathleen Raine. Her interest in Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, including Taylor, attracted me to her work as did her exceptional mastery of the landscape of the imaginal world as depicted by Blake.

I knew only too well that Thomas Taylor was not, like a Plato, an Eriugena or a St Thomas, a completely traditional philosopher, nor was Blake a Dante. But seeking to find whatever was of interest from the traditional point of view wherever it might be found, I devoted myself to the reading of the works of Taylor and Blake and also to the scholarly studies of their thought by Kathleen Raine. I discovered then that she was interested in some aspects of traditional doctrines and the Perennial Philosophy but that she was not, strictly speaking, Traditionalist and I left the matter there, although upon returning to Persia in 1958 I did introduce her writings to certain intellectual and literary circles there.

Many years passed until in the middle of the 1960s during one of my trips to London, where I would always meet my dear friend Marco

Pallis, as usual I telephoned him to make an appointment to see him. He told me that the famous English poet Kathleen Raine was coming to tea at his London house and would I accept to come at the same time and meet her. Having read some of her writings, I accepted the invitation with pleasure and it was there at Pallis's house where we met for the first time. Pallis had a more open acceptance of the thought of certain writers who espoused some aspects of traditional teachings but were not strictly speaking Traditionalists than did other major traditional figures such as Schuon, Titus Burckhardt and Martin Lings. My own position was closer to them than to that of Pallis, although like Pallis I was willing to create intellectual links with others as long as there was some solid, common ground. In any case our conversation was pleasant enough but not earth shaking and we parted with cordial farewells.

After that meeting, I exchanged some correspondence with her and even met her occasionally, but I kept my distance from her because of her open criticism of Guénon and Schuon. When I mentioned this to my revered friend Martin Lings, he said, 'I am a friend of Kathleen Raine but do not think that she and most of those around her are Traditionalists'. I was particularly dismayed when she told me once that Henry Corbin was a much greater figure than Schuon and was not even willing to listen to my response, to which I thought she should have paid at least some attention since I had known Corbin much longer and better than she had. As for Schuon, I had known him and his work for many years whereas she had never met him. In any case her discovery and love for Corbin became paradoxically a factor in bringing us closer together. In the early 1970s Corbin told me of 'this English poet' who had become interested in his writings and especially in doctrines concerning the imaginal world in the teachings of Suhrawardī, Ibn 'Arabī, Mullā Ṣadrā and others, doctrines that Corbin had brought to light for the first time in the West. Corbin encouraged my coming to know her better and even collaborating with her. From her side, her discovery of Corbin's writings provided the metaphysical basis for the *mundus imaginalis*, which needed to be rediscovered in order to revive in an authentic manner poetry itself. For her the works of Corbin complemented what she had learned about imagination from Blake and to some extent Yeats.

I also think that encountering Corbin himself (who was a close friend of mine with whom I had collaborated for some twenty years),

as well as reading his books, caused her to pay more attention to my own exposition of traditional teachings. When I founded the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy in Tehran in 1974, where Corbin was one of the major teachers, she took great interest in its activity and even contributed to the journal of the Academy, *Sophia Perennis*. She had so much respect for the journal that she considered the *Temenos* journal, which she helped to found and edited for so many years, to be its successor.

In any case we began to correspond more often and she also began to appreciate more than before the significance of the Traditionalist perspective and traditional writings. Once in the late 1980s she asked me, 'what is going to happen to the Traditionalist school once you are gone, since now most of the other known figures of this school are either gone or are old? It is so important to have this perspective be always present.' I responded that all is in God's Hands and He will take care of how the truth is presented in each age and who bears witness to it. There is no doubt in my mind that from the 1980s onward Kathleen Raine began to be more appreciative of traditional teachings and to realize more than before the importance of the Perennial Philosophy, as understood by the Traditionalist authors, as the firm basis for what she was trying to achieve in reviving the significance of the world of imagination and in creating understanding of all sacred and traditional art including poetry.

My closer collaboration with Kathleen Raine began in the 1980s when I was already in exile in the West. We kept in close touch and whenever in London I would usually meet her. It was she who approached me about the idea of creating the Temenos Academy. I consulted on the matter with Martin Lings and he suggested that it could do no harm and that it might do some good. At this point I remembered the saying of Frithjof Schuon, 'all that is traditional is ours'. I told Kathleen Raine that I would participate provided the Academy would be open to traditional teachings, although I did not expect it to be fully traditional. I was also encouraged by the fact that my friends Keith Critchlow and Brian Keeble, both Traditionalists, as well as Philip Sherrard who was also a major Christian Traditionalist, were going to play a central role in the Academy. Critchlow, who is an important authority on sacred geometry, I had known since I met him in London and invited him to Iran in the early 1970s, and Keeble (who is an adherent of the traditional doctrines of art and a publisher and

designer of books of high quality reflecting traditional canons) I also knew since the World of Islam Festival held in London in 1976. I had also met Sherrard and knew his valuable writings. The participation of these figures in the foundation of the Temenos Academy was for me proof that the traditional element would be present in future activities of this newly founded institution and also that Kathleen Raine was more open to this perspective than before. Furthermore, the fact that The Temenos Academy was to be under the high patronage of the Prince of Wales whose interests in tradition and the sacred, as demonstrated in his many writings and lectures, as well as in his patronage of The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, with its department dedicated to Islamic and traditional art, I knew well was guarantee of the worthwhile nature of the activity being undertaken.

I decided to help the Temenos Academy in every way possible and was chosen as a Fellow. I wrote several articles for the *Temenos* journal and also monographs which were published separately in distinguished format. Kathleen Raine would also prevail upon me to give talks at the Temenos Academy whenever I was in London and arrangements could be made. The final talk I gave for her was the second L. M. Singhvi Lecture on the theme of the integrating power of Sufism, the theme being chosen by Kathleen Raine and High Commissioner Singhvi himself. Besides the Temenos activities, I participated in a number of other seminars and conferences with her including one arranged by the Global Dialogue Crossroads in London and the famous conference on 'Time' in Delhi, arranged by our mutual friend, Kapila Vatsyayan, the then director of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

The experiences of this conference and another meeting with her in India, as well as reading some of her works on India, made known to me a side of Kathleen Raine of which I had not been fully aware before. She revealed herself to be a member of that long caravan of westerners whose souls pulled them in the direction of India, the caravan so brilliantly described in Harry Oldmeadows's recent book *Journeys East*. And she was one of those, like many in that caravan, whose love for India eclipsed to some extent their sense of discernment between the authentic traditions of that land and their modern dilutions, distortions and deviations.

Now that her earthly life has come to an end, different authors will

without doubt evaluate various aspects of her literary legacy, from her poetry, she having been the foremost woman poet of the English language of her day, to her scholarly contributions to Blake studies, to her creating a space in the British literary world for the revival of the significance of the imaginal world and many other aspects of her multifaceted life. What I wish to do in this short essay is to evaluate her work and activities from the traditional point of view. Of course, to understand what tradition signifies is to realize that it includes not only thinking but also being, that it necessitates knowledge of certain truths and also their realization by living in an orthodox tradition and practising its tenets on both the outward and inward levels. But our concern here will not be with the practical and operative dimensions of tradition as far as Kathleen Raine is concerned. Rather, it will be with its intellectual, theological and artistic dimensions.

As far as religion and theology are concerned, she espoused fully the central traditional doctrine of the unity and universality of religious truth, or what Schuon called 'the transcendent unity of religions'. Raine did not study or write about all the major traditions, confining her interest primarily to certain aspects and dimensions of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. But she was in principle in accord with the doctrine that the enduring religious traditions of humanity are all based on universal principles and, on the highest level, the same Truth.

From the intellectual point of view one cannot say that she was completely rooted in traditional metaphysics and accepted all its teachings, nor was she much interested in traditional theologies. And yet she realized the significance of traditional doctrines and became ever more interested in the Perennial Philosophy. At a young age she was already attracted to the Platonic tradition and discovering similar doctrines elsewhere especially in India and the Islamic world, she could not but have been drawn to an ever greater degree to the Perennial Philosophy. In her younger days she was probably not willing to give up the modern world enough to create a space within her mind and soul for traditional teachings in their totality, teachings which being sacred demand of us all that we are. But as she grew older, at least during the last decades of her life when I knew her, she came to appreciate increasingly what those of us who espouse the traditional perspective stood for and why we see the world as we do.

An important aspect of traditional teachings, as expounded in the West, is the criticism of the modern world treated so majestically by

Guénon in his *Crisis of the Modern World* (1927) and in the larger work, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times* (1951). Coomaraswamy and Schuon were also to write major criticisms of modernism such as the former's *The Bugbear of Literacy* and the latter's *Light on the Ancient Worlds* and *To Have a Center*. Kathleen Raine was acquainted with these and similar works and had had many conversations with Marco Pallis, Richard Nicholson, Philip Sherrard, Martin Lings and other Traditionalists including myself on the question of tradition and modernism. I discovered that, as time went by, her earlier instinctive revulsion against much that was going on intellectually and artistically in England turned into a more coherent philosophical attitude towards modernism based on traditional principles. From the arid philosophical scene in most academic settings to the total profanation of art to the destruction of nature, all of which she perceived in depth, these manifestations came to be seen by her not as mere accidents of history but logical consequences of the eclipse of metaphysical principles and the attempts of a humanity 'to live by bread alone'. In her attitude toward the modern world and the criticism of it, about which she wrote often, she joined the voice of traditional critics of modernism. When my Gifford Lectures *Knowledge and the Sacred* appeared, she expressed to me how she agreed completely with my analysis of the process of the secularization of knowledge in the modern West and its tragic consequences.

Being a poet, however, she came to appreciate most of all the traditional doctrines concerning art, its formal expressions and modes of operation. She sensed deeply the loss of the sacred in art and created the Temenos Academy, using on purpose this Greek word rather than the word sacred, in order to resuscitate the traditional view of art in a contemporary setting. She thought that the contemporary art scene had become so depleted of spiritual quality that it was not possible to use the term sacred without discouraging many potential readers. Like William Morris and John Ruskin, she appreciated the relation between art and the making of things or the crafts and like her fellow countryman Eric Gill she was drawn deeply to the spiritual significance of traditional art, although she was not as strict as Gill in drawing lines of distinction between traditional and non-traditional art. She appreciated the expositions of Coomaraswamy concerning symbolism and myth, of Philip Sherrard concerning Christian art and of Corbin as far as the significance of the imaginal world for artistic creation was concerned. She did much to turn the attention of her contemporaries

to the significance of artistic imagination as understood by Blake, of traditional symbolism and mythology and the importance of the renewal of art as wed to the spiritual rather than to the merely subjective, dispersive and sometimes demonic.

In her later years Kathleen Raine became also ever more aware of the spiritual and intellectual factors involved in the environmental crisis. My own works on the subject, which were followed by those of Sherrard, drew her more into the study of the environmental crisis from the traditional perspective. In many conversations which we had during the past two decades she would turn to this subject over and over again. Following a lecture I gave on the subject for Temenos, which appeared as a monograph, she wrote me a long letter confirming fully what I had said, adding that she agreed that man and nature have fallen, except of course for the (her) cat, which she added had never fallen and remains a paradisaal creature. In any case her understanding of the spiritual significance of nature and the real import of the environmental crisis were very much in line with the traditional perspective.

Now that Kathleen Raine has passed through the Solar Gate, we can view her life as having contributed in many ways to drawing attention to the significance of tradition especially in the domain of art. She will surely be remembered as a major poet who like Blake and Yeats spoke in the languages of symbols and myths belonging to the realm of the spirit and like them she was a principled critic of all the errors, artistic and otherwise, that surrounded her. But in addition she had a life-long personal contact with the major voices of traditional teaching in England, such as Marco Pallis, Martin Lings and Philip Sherrard, and played her part through Temenos, her poetry, lectures and conversations in bringing the message of tradition to certain circles which would otherwise have been deprived of the salvific message of that wisdom that has always been and will always be and which belongs to both East and West.