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"Against the Nihil of the Age"

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Against the Nihil of the Age*

WENDELL BERRY

Against the *nihil*
One candle-flame, one blade of grass,
One thought suffices
to affirm all.

Kathleen Raine has been so lucid and indispensable a commentator on the work of Blake, Yeats, and other poets, and so devoted a defender and teacher of their tradition, that a reader of her own poetry may be led astray by preconceptions. I have to admit, anyhow, that for some time I was misled by preconceptions; probably also by my regional American ears that have sometimes had to *learn* to hear poems by English poets more recent than Browning. But my early reading of Kathleen Raine was made awkward mainly by my supposition that I would find her to be more like, or more akin to, Blake or Yeats than in fact she is.

Of course this sort of confusion is embarrassing whenever it occurs, because it is correctable by recognition of an obvious truth: being a poet oneself is nothing like studying the work of other poets, closely allied with them as one may be. However learned one may become in the lineages of thought or faith or art that sustain one's life and work one must approach every new work of one's own as a sort of innocent, trying to see what truth, old and long-honored though it is, might be found shining anew in the places, events, companions, and memories of one's own life.

The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine, more I think than most books, is the record of the struggle of its own making. It has been a complicated and a momentous struggle, and to say what it has involved and accomplished may at the same time provide an accurate enough evaluation of the book.

From early in her life Kathleen Raine's vocation pretty clearly was to become a poet of religious vision – or, more precisely, a poet of Imagi-

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nation in the high sense in which Blake used that term: the 'Divine Humanity', the 'Poetic Genius', the 'Spirit of Prophecy', the power of inspiration, the vision of eternal things, our means of conversing with Paradise. The power of Imagination is to see things in their eternal aspect; it is to know the timeless as it 'moves through time', the eternal presence that is both in and outside time and that comprehends the things we know and remember. All ways of expressing this power and this presence probably are incomplete and yet they suggest to us a completeness that the arts of imagination have always striven toward: 'That human mystery all arts praise'. The poet of Imagination in this sense is divested, almost by definition, of several concerns that have adhered to the contemporary 'profession' of poetry: art for art's sake, fashions and schools, technical innovation and intellectual display and 'originality' as valuable in themselves. This poet seems to have relinquished all of those without regret or a backward look. Her technical virtues are economy, plain eloquence, an unostentatious command of the prosodic and musical means of her art. This artistry she has put forthrightly into the service of her calling and her subjects.

The predicament of a visionary poet at any time is difficult. The poems one desires to write cannot be written merely by desire, or by intellect or learning or will or technical artistry – though they also cannot be written *without* desire, intellect, learning, will, and artistry. Beyond all these, inspiration must come, and when it comes one must be ready. The readiness is everything. It involves everything listed above, plus a life's work.

To be a visionary poet in the industrial age, in what Kathleen Raine has called 'this post-real world', is a predicament of greater difficulty than before. It is to be consigned, as a poet, to a way of images in a time of the desecration of all images, a time when 'the sacred lineaments grow faint, the outlines crumble/And the golden heavens grow dim . . . '.

The most fundamental of these desecrations has been the reduction of the human image, which we once understood as the image of God, to an image merely of humanity itself as a 'higher animal' – with the implied permission to be more bewildered, violent, self-deluded, destructive, and self-destructive than any of the animals. From the desecration of that image, the desecration of the world and all its places and creatures follows with inexorable logic. For it appears that, having once repudiated our primordial likening to be the maker and preserver of the world, we don't become merely higher animals, merely neutral

components of the creation-by-chance of the materialists, but are ruled instead by an antithetical likeness to whatever unmakes and fragments the world.

In this situation a poet, as a maker or perceiver of images, is by definition not capable of the modern indifference to the world of images and its fate, an indifference which may wear either of two faces: that of a facile and disengaged 'spirituality', which is essentially unimagining, or that of the now-dominant scientific and industrial materialism, which destroys the material world by breaking all images into ever smaller and more abstract parts.

Nor can she have very easily or very soon the solace of a perfect resolution of personal struggle within faith, within art, that was still possible, and that seems to have ended, in the seventeenth century, when the wandering or rebellious soul, as if by second nature, could find its way to rest in God:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied, *My Lord.*

Or: 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' We have continued to have poets of faith and vision, but in a time of the desecration of images, resolution has come as the result of a more and more arduous and costly struggle, of shoring up fragments against our ruin.

This is a time also, as Wordsworth saw and said in his Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, of 'the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident', a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'. Our time's widespread but little acknowledged conviction that importance and even significance increase with violence discourages and obscures the paramount truths of human experience, which come only quietly into a quieted mind.

At the time when Kathleen Raine – then studying botany, physiology, and chemistry at Cambridge – was first publishing her poems, the most prominent poets of her generation had accepted scientific rationalism, materialism, and reductionism as describing the outer boundary of legitimate human experience. The idea that life is coextensive with its

physical forms, and that these forms are or will be completely intelligible within the terms of reductionist science, had already become an intellectual and academic orthodoxy. This orthodoxy still prevails in the universities and in the enterprise of science, technology, and marketing which constitutes industrial culture. Its insignia is the refusal to take seriously anything that was taken seriously in the past. It is most famously represented in poetry, I suppose, by the cocky braininess and condescension of Auden's elegy for Yeats. The result, of which the evidence is now inescapable, is a world in which work based on the recognition of sanctity is less and less possible – which is to say a world in which we are less and less able to keep from destroying even things of economic or scientific value.

For a time, during her Cambridge years, Kathleen Raine was drawn to this orthodoxy and tried to accommodate herself to it, writing, she has said, 'complex, tight, unfeeling, objective little poems'. But eventually she rebelled and began the effort of 'half a lifetime' to free herself. Why did she do this?

She did it, evidently, because by the time she went to Cambridge her life had already been rich in experience and influence. It was her own past finally that instructed her to face away from the dispirited intellectuality that she had encountered at Cambridge. Both of her parents had loved poetry. Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantic poets had been honored, read, and quoted in her childhood home, and her Scottish mother knew the border ballads. In her childhood also she had spent some time in a rural part of Northumbria where she felt at home, and where she came to know with a child's intimacy the nature and culture of a traditional landscape, soon to come under domination by the alien economy of the rapidly industrializing world. In *Farewell Happy Fields*, the first of her autobiographical volumes, she remembers this change; 'The Essex Maidens, the white foam of cow parsley, the muddy lanes bordering misty ploughed fields, farms with walnut trees, chestnut avenues, all that old slowly traced, slowly matured human pattern of life lived from generation to generation' was replaced by a 'new pattern [that] no longer bore any relationship to shelter of hill or fall of stream . . .'. She had seen the old pattern being destroyed, but she nevertheless had seen it. She never forgot it.

And so when she encountered the scientific materialism of Cambridge, she encountered it as a young woman with a cultural past that she had experienced fully and had received as an influence, though she was

not yet aware of its importance. Her later recognition of its importance probably informs her 'Letter to Pierre Emmanuel', in which she says, 'To be a barbarian is to have no past'. In a recent conversation with Grevel Lindop, she said that, at Cambridge, 'I didn't distinguish between my love of flowers[,] from the point of view of poetry and beauty[,] and studying botany ...'. She thus was able to escape the academic orthodoxy because she was never entirely in it. A friend of mine has called my attention to a sentence from George Orwell's letter, 'What Is Science?' which suggests that neither Kathleen Raine's dissidence nor the reasons for it were unique. Speaking of some unnamed British and American physicists who refused to work on the atom bomb project, Orwell wrote: 'I think it would be a safe guess that all of them were people with some kind of general cultural background, some acquaintance with history or literature or the arts – in short, people whose interests were not, in the current sense of the word, purely scientific.'

She freed herself of the influence of materialism by remaining under the influence of her past, but also by cultivating more and more consciously the poetic kinships that would support her own work. One can trace in this volume numerous influences that have affected directly not only her thoughts and perceptions, but also at various stages her ways of shaping her poems: Old English spells and riddles, the ballads, Milton, the Romantic poets, Hopkins; she owes a particular, if limited, debt to Wordsworth's Immortality Ode; and of course her most acknowledged affinities have been with Blake and Yeats.

But as I began by saying, knowledge of her long attention and service to the work of the latter two poets can cause a reader to come to her work with wrong expectations. Her study of their work has unquestionably helped her to form her own, and her debt to them (like theirs to her) is great. Her own poems certainly belong to this tradition, and carry it forward. But her work is also different from theirs. To make that difference has been crucial to the development of her poetry, and to see it is indispensable to a reader.

On page six of the first volume of *Blake and Tradition*, she wrote: 'Blake saw nature through symbol, not symbol through nature'. The opposite, I think, is true of her. Because of her persistent remembrance of the landscapes of her childhood and her intimate knowledge of natural history, her clear perception of the natural world wherever she has encountered it, and her affection for it, she has seen symbols (when

she has seen them) through or in nature. For example, water in these poems nearly always has the power of a symbol, and yet it always has also the local character of a particular seashore or stream. I don't think her poems emerge so directly from *systems* of symbols or beliefs as she has shown those of Blake and Yeats to have done. More than either of them, because of her disposition and circumstances, she is a poet of the world of experience. Her allegiance to the traditional wisdom that informs their work is no less than theirs, but the underlying drama of her work is not shaped by a system of ideas or symbols, but rather by archetypal stories: primarily by that of Demeter and Persephone, but also by the stories of Eve and of Psyche and Cupid – stories of loss and restoration.

Her fidelity to her own experience and her own way of perceiving is one of the major qualities of her poetry. As a poet of experience, she is without recourse either to the purity of the mystics or to the abstract coherences of the philosophers and theologians. She may believe, as Plato did, that the things of this world are only shadows of their eternal archetypes, but still she loves many of the things of this world. The True, the Good, and the Beautiful exist immortally in their archetypal forms – she never doubts this – but they also manifest themselves in the creatures and works of this world, and she loves these manifestations and is ever grateful for them. She grieves over their loss, and rejoices at their recovery. Demeter, as Milton said, must seek the lost Persephone 'through the world', not in thought or vision only.

This poet can speak confidently enough of 'unsolid matter,' but she also confronts without flinching the fundamental ambiguities of experience: the dream-likeness of the world, the world-likeness of our dreams, the dream-likeness and world-likeness of our memories. The poet is ever aware of the possibilities of illusion and error. She is affectionate and sorrowful and delighted. She confronts her limits and failures with remorse but also with humor, and the overturning of expectations, even her own, with pleasure. Not one of the book's highest moments, but one of its best, is this couplet:

Incredible that anything exists – this hotch-potch
World of marvels and trivia, and which is which?

With the same candor, but with something like despair, she recorded in 1951 her failure to see, like Blake, 'a world in a grain of sand':

I have come seeking
The infinite cipher
And sum of all wisdom
Inscribed on a grain
Of sand . . .

But she is walking, according to the poem's title, 'On a Shell-strewn Beach', where she finds that she lacks the necessary vision:

I have found
A myriad particles
And each is all
That can ever be told,
But all are inscribed
With a signature
That I cannot read . . .

This, however, is the experience of a day. At other times she is more favoured, and the desired insight comes, as in these lines from 'In My Seventieth Year':

Light falling on a London wall
Filtered through curtains or through leaves
Stirred in the gently moving air,
Or circles spreading in a pool
About each falling drop of rain,
A sparrow basking in the sun –
Each is the presence of the all,
And all things bear the signature
Of one unfathomable thought,
Lucid as universal light . . .

The presence of both of these poems in this book gives us, I think, a way to understand the character of the 'I' who is speaking in the poems and the quality of the voice. The 'I' can sometimes be very general; sometimes it can be so inclusive as to remind at least this American reader of the 'I' of Whitman's 'Song of Myself'. But though the 'I' at its most personal never indulges in the 'confessional' self-exposure of

much recent verse, it is also never entirely impersonal. It seems always quietly to be insisting on the personal basis of the writer's experience. Her voice is not as rhetorical as the voices of Blake and Yeats; she is, I think, too sternly honest, particularly about herself, to adopt the self-assurance of a highly rhetorical form of speech; she speaks sometimes from the upper reaches of perception and inspiration, but even then, and especially if one is keeping in mind the whole book as the context of the individual poems, one hears her speaking as herself, a mortal and fallible woman, grateful for the light and clarity she has been given.

The insistently, persistently *human* quality of this voice makes it trustworthy. This voice might read but it could not produce poems such as Yeats's 'The Choice' or 'Sailing to Byzantium', both of which deal with choices that, for actual people, do not exist. My purpose here is not to praise one poet at another's expense; I am merely trying to say something precise about the quality of the speaking voice in Kathleen Raine's poems. 'The Choice' is a valuable poem, I suppose, but to me it is mostly valuable as an example of a fictitious choice between 'perfection of the life, or of the work,' which does damage to people who think they can really make it. On the other hand, I love and greatly admire 'Sailing to Byzantium', and the older I get the more I love and admire it, even though I think it proposes another choice – between 'dying generations' and 'monuments of unageing intellect' – that exists only in sonority. My point is that the tension of the drama underlying Kathleen Raine's poems comes precisely from the humble and humbling recognition that now, in time, in this world, no such choice exists. She has willingly received into her poetry her great reverence for the monuments of unageing intellect without ever repudiating her grief for the dying generations. This is her humanity and her honesty which establish the tone of her voice, and which – as I will try to show – set the terms of her triumph.

Perhaps because she did not distinguish between her love for nature and her study of it, she also took into her poetry something of her scientific education that would affect her thought and her work profoundly and would never be absent from it. This was her understanding of nature as process. The creatures of nature that she loves she sees both as they momentarily are and as embodiments of the world-long becoming, into which as they momentarily are they will disappear. As a poet, but from what she learned as a scientist, she knows

... With what infinite gentleness being flows
 Into the forms of nature, and unfolds
 Into the slowly ascending tree of life
 That opens, bud by bud, into the sky.

She is working here as a poet of incarnation at the most physical level. But this knowledge makes available to her a set of analogues that she never ceases to explore: the way being flows into its creaturely forms is analogous to the way the cultural and historical birthright enters into human minds and is passed on, and to the way souls enter the world, and to the way the Holy Spirit, Milton's 'Heav'nly Muse', Blake's 'Imagination', or what Kathleen Raine eventually will call 'the Presence', passes by inspiration into human acts and works.

Her old love of the ballads, under the influence of this resonant sense of incarnation, gives us, much later, 'Maire Macrae's Song':

The singer is old and has forgotten
 Her girlhood's grief for the young soldier
 Who sailed away across the ocean,
 Love's brief joy and lonely sorrow:
 The song is older than the singer.

The song is older than the singer
 Shaped by the love and the long waiting
 Of women dead and long forgotten
 Who sang before remembered time
 To teach the unbroken heart its sorrow.

The girl who waits for her young soldier
 Learns from the cadence of a song
 How deep her love, how long the waiting.
 Sorrow is older than the heart,
 Already old when love is young:
 The song is older than the sorrow.

This is perfect and beautiful, and no more needs to be said about it.

She seems always to have been capable of closely wrought, musical verse, as in this poem or, much earlier, 'The World'. But as both idea

and subject, the incarnational principle seems, at least at first, to have required a looser, roomier kind of poem, affording her the scope necessary to accumulate details and demonstrate what she is talking about. In 'Northumbrian Sequence', from which I have already quoted, the subject is not only the way being 'flows/Into the forms of nature', but also the way being *over-flows* its forms:

The sleeper at the rowan's foot
 Dreams the darkness at the root,
 Dreams the flow that ascends the vein
 And fills with world the dreamer's brain.

...

And the burden is so great
 Of the dark flow from without,
 Of sun streaming from the sky
 And the dead rising from the root,
 Of the earth's desire to be
 In this dreaming incarnate
 That world has overflowed the tree.

...

The sleeper of the rowan tree
 As full of earth as dream can know,
 As full of dream as tree can bear
 Sends the bird singing in the air
 As full of world as song can cry,
 And yet the song is overflowed...

We tend to think that form in art should, and in nature does, perfectly contain its content. But what if, in reality, life in nature does overflow its forms, and can continue only by so doing? And what if the artist, in mere faithfulness and honesty, must struggle to make this overflowing the subject of art? And is it not the most fundamental knowledge of the poet of inspiration that inspiration always exceeds the formal attempt to contain and express it? Such questions disturb profoundly the processes both of thought-making and verse-making.

What we are seeing in 'Northumbrian Sequence' is another significant and lasting result, maybe the most important result, of Kathleen Raine's scientific education: her revolt, increasingly conscious and

principled as her work goes on, against any form of reductionism. In 'Exile', the third of 'Three Poems on Illusion', this revolt is made explicit. She has begun by speaking of her childhood knowledge of the creatures, when 'They never wearied of telling their being', and then, in exile from the clarity of that innocent knowledge, she goes on to speak directly of her experience in the laboratory:

But still the mind, curious to pursue
 Long followed them, as they withdrew
 Deep within their inner distances,
 Pulled the petals from flowers, the wings from flies,
 Hunted the heart with a dissecting-knife
 And scattered under a lens the dust of life;
 But the remoter, stranger
 Scales iridescent, cells, spindles, chromosomes,
 Still merely are:
 With hail, snow-crystals, mountains, stars,
 Fox in the dusk, lightning, gnats in the evening air
 They share the natural mystery,
 Proclaim I AM, and remain nameless.

I think this is an astonishing passage, one of the high places of the history of poetry as I know it, and certainly of my own reading. It is a 'breakthrough' — in the right direction — full of the resonance of the poet's relief and exhilaration at having found at hand the language for what has long needed saying. But, wonderful as it is, it does not have the fineness of finish or the assurance that the best of her later work will have. The marks of struggle are on it; the syntax is tentative in places, and there is a sense of the words piling up, as if she is asking of the poem or herself something not yet fully available to her.

Kathleen Raine is one of the poets whose work contradicts the idea (too often repeated) that a poet exists to write one or two or a handful of 'great' or anthologizable poems. Unless we don't mind overlooking most of the value and excitement of it, we must not think of her *Collected Poems* as a heap of ore from which critics will eventually smelt enough gold for a ring or two. Who can know? Maybe eventually they will. But for us, now, the work of chief importance is the whole

book, which is a landmark. The book records the effort of a long lifetime to learn to see and speak in a way the poet could not see and speak when she began – in a way, I think, that no poet of her time could see and speak when she began.

When I spoke of her 'breakthrough' in the poem 'Exile', I meant that she had broken the narrow boundaries of materialist and empirical thought, and had come into the real presence of the creatures of the natural world. She had done this by recognizing in each of them the immanence of that originating and sustaining Presence that in her later work will be so named. She had seen that every creature participates in, represents, and speaks for the I AM of creation who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. She had begun the rectification of her vision of nature. Now she began to see the world in the dimension of the 'everlasting to everlasting' that is present in every creature at every moment.

There are several ways by which one might follow her development from such crucial poems as 'Northumbrian Sequence' and 'Exile', published in *The Year One* in 1952, to the new poems at the end of this book, published in 2000, for this book has something of the character of a 'braided stream' of several channels and islands. To try to write about it in an essay of reasonable length is to realize how much one *might* say about it that one is not going to be able to say. But probably the most useful thread to pick up is the theme of Paradise, which gives the book its underlying mythic and dramatic structure.

The biographical starting point of this theme is the poet's childhood stay in Northumbria. She recalls this experience again and again and always thinks of it as paradisaical. In *The Land Unknown*, the second volume of her autobiography, she suggests how this memory becomes for her a story: 'Those who in childhood have known the state of Paradise perhaps always expect to find again what was once so simply there'. And in *Farewell Happy Fields*, she speaks of Paradise as 'a state of being in which outer and inner reality are at one, the world in harmony with imagination'. Where she parts company with Wordsworth, of course, is not in the state but in the story, in her expectation of finding again, in exile, what was lost.

The cultural descendants of the Bible can't speak of Paradise without remembering the first couple's expulsion from Eden, and Kathleen Raine is ever mindful of that story, in the Bible and in Milton, of 'The locked gate and the flaming sword ...'. But in her mind Paradise is also

indelibly associated with Demeter and her seeking 'through the world'. And so the resolution here is not specifically Christian, not dependent on the restoration by the 'one greater Man' of Milton's poem. But some of the poems in this book also work a variation on the Demeter myth, for the Persephone sought by the poet is what she sees as her truest self, herself as a child:

It is myself
I leave behind,
My mother's child,
Simple, unlearned,
Whose soul's country
Was these bright hills,
This northern sky.

And so the story underlying the poems of this book is that of a woman exiled from Paradise, wandering through the world in search of the innocent, undivided, profoundly illuminated world or world of vision that she has known and cannot forget. To remember is her actuating principle. It is also, of course, her anguish. The poems in this book never turn away from the world of exile and grief – which for her, as for Blake, Hopkins, and others, is now unavoidably the machine-world of our own time, but which for her is also the world of 'Dear human faces that must die'. Her grief is enforced by the memories of the lost clear world of her childhood, of lost love, and by the thought of what might have been. Without the paradisaical memory there would be no grief; but it is the grief that preserves and clarifies the memory of her joy, and gives it life and value.

As these themes of loss and memory and grief work themselves out through the years and the pages, the poet learns to see in memory itself, however painful, a recovery of what has been lost, as she learns to see also the eternal Presence manifested in the things of time. That Presence and its Paradise are always present to Imagination, though not always to human imaginers. And as the book never turns away from the world of exile and grief, it also never turns away from the possibility of moments of vision when Paradise is again present and visible to the imaginer, and she knows that

All stands in two worlds, and the ground
Of Paradise is everywhere.

The truest vision comes, one might say, when Demeter, without ceasing to be herself or forgetting her experience, sees with the vision of Persephone; *because* she grieves, because she does not forget or give up her search, she is permitted to see what is paradisaical even in the world as it is:

Not lonely, now that I am old,
But still companioned like a child
Whose morning sun was friend enough,
And beauty of a field of flowers
Expressive as my mother's face.

In such moments of vision 'then' is 'here and now', eternity comes alight in time, in every creature is the seed of all: 'one apple-bud/Opens the flower of the world . . . '.

In contemplating the theme of Imagination or paradisaical vision as it is carried through this book, one is impressed by the extent to which the literary quality of the work is affected by concerns that far surpass the present interests of the 'literary world'. These poems, like George Herbert's, could be shelved as justly with religious writings as with poetry. But they might with equal justice be read by people interested in the politics of conservation or the methodologies of land use. Lines such as the following are certainly poetry, but it is hard to keep them confined in that category for they are full of implications that are religious, economic, and (as we may hope) scientific:

As you leave Eden behind you, remember your home,
For as you remember back into your own being
You will not be alone; the first to greet you
Will be those children playing by the burn,
The otters will swim up to you in the bay,
The wild deer on the moor will run beside you.
Recollect more deeply and the birds will come,
Fish rise to meet you in their silver shoals . . .

I am trying to say what I think has been accomplished by the life's work that this book represents, and singling out the theme of Paradise has helped me to do that. But I am afraid that in doing so I have made the book's achievement seem too deliberate and too neat. I would not like to obscure either the difficulty and length of the poet's effort, or its variousness. There are several other strands that one could follow through this book, and all are finally indispensable to its development and significance. One that is most important is the compounding of the poet's sense of herself as a woman writing, culminating in these lines at the end of 'Testimony':

This woman whose hand writes words not mine,
Bequeathed by multitude of the once living
Who knew, loved, understood, and told
Meanings passed down
To the yet to come, whose faces I shall not see,
Yet whom as I write these words, I already am.

Another vital strand, always related to the theme of paradisaical vision, is the development of what I earlier called her revolt against reductionism, or her long unlearning of that way of thought. She begins this consciously, in poems from *The Year One*, written about fifty years ago, by dispensing with the specifically scientific impediments to recognizing the presences of the creatures. One cannot, of course, come into the presence of anything by dissection or analysis or the cataloguing of parts or the assaying of predictability. But she goes farther. As she grows older, and grows in knowledge and in practice, the paradisaical vision ceases to be a memory and ideal that she seeks for; it becomes rather a blessing that she accepts as a native property of her life and mind, but accepts always with the understanding that it comes only unexpectedly, in its own time:

I had meant to write a different poem,
But, pausing for a moment in my unweeded garden,
Noticed, all at once, paradise descending in the morning sun
Filtered through leaves,
Enlightening the meagre London ground, touching with green
Transparency the cells of life.

The blackbird hopped down, robin and sparrow came,
And the thrush . . .

Later (apparently) comes the poem 'Garden Simurgh', in which the poet puts out nuts for the blue-tits, but only the sparrows come, and she is disappointed. But then she finds in herself a sufficient tenderness even for

these two-a-farthing sparrows
Each feather bearing the carelessly-worn signature
Of the universe that has brought them here to the Lord's table
With such delight, never doubting their welcome?

The world overturns our expectations simply because the world is large and our expectations necessarily are small. This is a plain and ordinary truth that the world teaches us every day. But the world does not teach us to welcome so humbling a truth. The triumph of this book is that it has taught its poet to welcome these overturnings of expectation, and the reason for this also is plain and lowly, though perhaps always long to learn: You can't see 'paradise descending in the morning sun' by expecting to do so.

The poet follows the logic of this realization to its limit. As she rejects the reductionism of scientific materialism and of her own expectations, so finally she rejects as reductionistic all systems of thought and belief:

But all we know is hearsay, save
The record in the Book of Life:
Where Sandaig burn runs to the shore,
Where tern and eider rest secure
On their far island salt and bare . . .

And:

No written page more true
Than blade of grass and drop of dew.

And:

I believe nothing – what need
Surrounded as I am with marvels of what is,

This familiar room, books, shabby carpet on the floor,
 Autumn yellow jasmine, chrysanthemums, my mother's flower,
 Earth-scent of memories, daily miracles,
 Yet media-people ask, 'Is there a God?'

As she more and more directly confronts the marvelous, rejecting the inevitably reductive forms of human comprehension, and as her sense of the greatness of the mystery of being increases, a tenderness of charity grows in her and reaches out unaskingly to the creatures: flowers always, her cat, the sparrows who come to the feed she had prepared for the blue-tits.

The last poem in the book and the most recent is the 'Millennial Hymn to the Lord Shiva', which anathematizes the world as we have made it, but in doing so affirms all that she has stood for and spoken for. It is a plea for the overturning of all our reductive expectations, an invocation of the cleansing fire that is both end and beginning:

Our elected parliaments
 Parrot their rhetoric
 Of peace and democracy
 While the truth we deny
 Returns in our dreams
 Of Armageddon,
 The death-wish, the arms-trade,
 Hatred and slaughter
 Profitable employment
 Of our thriving cities,
 The arms-race
 To the end of the world
 Of our postmodern, post-Christian,
 Post-human nations,
 Progress to the nihil
 Of our spent civilization.

...

To whom shall we pray
 When our vision has faded
 But the world-destroyer,
 The liberator, the purifier?

There is a triumph also in the ability to see these dissolutions as a necessary cleansing and this is arguably the climactic poem of the book, leaving little more to be said, but, perhaps for those reasons, it is not a representative poem. I would like to end with something representative; and, since I've been quoting mostly fragments, which was necessary but unfair, I want to quote a whole poem:

Woodruff

Today the Presence
 Has set before me
 Woodruff's white foam
 Of petals immaculate,
 Fourfold stars numberless
 Open life's centres,
 In a London garden
 They grow in a spring wood
 Before the city and after
 Machines whose noise
 Tears the sky.
 The white stars
 Do not hear; they tell me
 'The woods are always'.
 Lily of the valley
 Feels for loam of leaves
 And the blackbirds
 Build anew, repair
 The rents we tear
 In times and places.
 Immemorial woods
 Are here, are near,
 The white stars cross
 The invisible frontier:
 'Come to us,' the flowers say,
 'We will show you the way.'

This is a beautifully realized poem. It runs a certain risk in its plainness, its closeness to prose, but there is not a dead or an inert line in

it. It is utterly without technical ostentation, but its assonances and rhymes sound and resound and have their influence. It is a nature poem about the unnatural modern urban world. In speaking of the four-petaled flowers as 'fourfold stars', the poet commemorates Blake's concept of the Imagination: 'fourfold in . . . supreme delight'. The flowers of the woodruff are accepted as instructors, like the 'lilies of the field' in Matthew 6:28, that come effortlessly into glory. They speak for the forest, the original world, of which London, however old it is, however old it may become, is a temporary interruption. The blossoms and the birds manifest the ongoing presence of the life of nature, which manifests the Presence of the Spirit that in-forms all things, including the mind of Kathleen Raine and this poem, in the few short lines of which she seems to have compacted all she has learned. And with what quietude of mastery she has done it!