

“East of the Soul”

An interview with Kathleen Raine

by Françoise Kischinevsky

Kathleen Jessie Raine was born in 1908, surprisingly in the London suburb of Ilford, for the opening pages of her Autobiographies, Farewell Happy Fields (1973), tell of a luminous childhood in a world of flowers. Indeed, she regarded her wartime refuge (1916-1918) in Northumberland as a paradigmatic Garden of Eden. The hills of the Border country imprinted in her memory both the landscape of Paradise and a spiritual home from which she henceforth felt a lifelong exile. Her mother was a Scot who had retained her native culture of speech, ballads, and the love of words, which made Kathleen Raine write later: “the poet in me is my mother’s daughter.” To her father, a Methodist high school teacher, she owes an education which led her to Girton College, Cambridge, where she read Natural Sciences. Although she became part of the influential élite whose utopia was to build a better world, she soon felt she did not belong to that world. After two brief marriages, first to the writer Hugh Sykes Davies, then to the poet and sociologist Charles Madge by whom she had two children, she returned as a war refugee to her beloved “native country” of the North. There, her poetry work really began with her first collection Stone and Flower (1943), and mostly The Year One (1952). Her mystical visions of the world of nature have recurrently informed her whole work from The Hollow Hill (1965), The Lost Country (1971), to Collected Poems (1935-1980), and Selected Poems (1988). Such works as On a Deserted Shore (1973) drew inspiration from a harrowing love experience with Gavin Maxwell, the naturalist: it was “a small seed-pearl secreted by my life round its grain of pain.”

This “seed-pearl” may appear metonymic of her whole poetical and autobiographical work, highlighted by both *Recollection in the Platonic sense of Anamnesis and Imaginative Truth in the Blakean sense*. *Autobiography* as such includes, besides *Farewell Happy Fields* (1973), mentioned above, which was awarded the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger* in its French translation (*Adieu prairies heureuses*, Stock, 1978), *The Land Unknown* (1975), *The Lion’s Mouth* (1977), a later volume *India* seen *Afar* (1990), which tells of her “passage,” at the age of eighty-two, to “the *India of the Imagination*” (the first three volumes were published in 1991 as *Autobiographies*). Her major critical works on *W.Blake* and *W.B.Yeats*, her numerous friendships with European writers, such as *Elias Canetti*, *Henry Corbin*, *Rafael Nadal*, and with the Indian philosopher *Coomaraswamy*, among many others, naturally led the way to her becoming the editor of *Temenos*, a biannual review devoted to the *Arts of the Imagination* (1982-1993). *Kathleen Raine* feels “better understood outside Britain” where she is recognized as an outstanding poet.

In the “autobiographical space” which spans her whole work, what can be significantly traced is her intellectual and spiritual evolution beyond the personal account of the historical events of her life. By writing about her life experience, *Kathleen Raine* commits herself to a journey of remembrance, which carries her identity quest far beyond the *Ego*, thus relating it to the founding myths of the *Perennial Tradition*. That is why the reader cannot help being struck by the utmost clarity of mind and integrity of speech in the evocation of her former self’s erratic wanderings or illuminating visions. The *Proustian* fluidity of her poetic prose enhances the continuous process of reminiscence as a “flowing upstream” to the source of original knowledge, that of childhood and primeval happiness in a pre-lapsarian universe. Thus the epitome of her autobiographical writing stands out as a clear distancing from her former self, distinctly heard in the voice of the narrating “I”. This dialectic of the two “I”s contributes to creating a harmonious combination of order and transparency: through reordering one’s life by writing about it, there radiates a transparency of the self which mirrors a poetic vision of the numinous. By her constant reference to archetypal myths, her individual experience is made coeval with the timeless nostalgia of mankind suffering from loss and exile from *Eden*. *Kathleen Raine* recently wrote two collections of poems, *Living with Mystery* (1991), and *The Presence* (1993), whose titles epitomize her sense of the numinous and her gnostic quest for the inner self in every living being.

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Does the Temenos Academy¹ work along the same lines as Temenos, the Review of the Arts of the Imagination?²

Unfortunately, we do not have enough funding to have a Temenos Academy Review, which would be a sort of child of *Temenos*. We get some excellent lectures, lecturers and contributors.

What is the exact meaning you give to "Temenos"?

It's the precinct of a Temple. Jung has used the word also, meaning a sacred enclosure, but, in a more general sense, any sacred space; we use the word including the Inner Temenos that we all carry with us, not merely the precinct of a temple. But what we do affirm by the name is that all art must be rooted in a vision of the sacred. We reject the materialist view of reality and affirm the spiritual nature of Man and the Cosmos.

In the Temenos Academy, we're not aiming at a wide public and a popular audience. We're aiming at establishing this knowledge on its firm ground of Tradition. When we have seminars and lectures on Plato or Rûmi³ or the Upanishads or whatever it may be, our purpose is to learn *from* them, not to learn *about* them.

You said in your Autobiographies: "I belong to the Golden Race," "I was born with gifts." Which meaning do you now give to the "Golden Race"?

There were the Four Ages: the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze, and the Iron; the story is told in Plato's *Laws*; The world in the Golden Age is guided by God; when God relinquishes the guidance of the world, the Gyres unwind automatically; We are now in the Kali Yuga (the Iron Age).

I am using the word in Plato's sense. In the Golden Age, the spiritual order guides the world; at this time the material order guides the world.

The four phases of History come everywhere: in Plato, in Hinduism even in C.G.Jung (the four psychological types). Yeats uses it in *Vision*. "The Golden Race looks dim," he says. Blake also uses the word "Golden Age": he talks about the "Pillars of Gold of Jerusalem" being built over

1. Since 1993, The Temenos Academy has gathered former Temenos contributors and readers in a yearly seminar.

2. Kathleen Raine was the editor of *Temenos*, a biannual Review, published from 1982 to 1993, grounded in "the imaginative vision of the sacred, the necessary foundation of all art and knowledge."

3. A Persian poet of the thirteenth century, a leading figure of Sufism.

England. He also talks about the “Golden builders”: “What are Golden builders doing?” He is very clear about what he means by it. Anything that is said to be golden has spiritual value.

The theme of homecoming seems recurrent in your work, especially in your late work. How has it evolved from living “across the Border” [from Scotland] as a child, to the “India of the Imagination” (described in the fourth volume of your Autobiographies)?⁴

I think all routes lead to India as spiritual homecoming, not because it's India, but because India alone has preserved this knowledge which the West has very largely lost.

It isn't that we didn't ever have it. We have had it in the Platonic, Pythagorean, Neo-Platonic Tradition, and it's even wound its way in and out of Christianity.

I wouldn't say Christianity was the perennial philosophy, but at certain times, it has included or permitted it. It's always been available. But I don't feel it's available in our modern world, not through any official religious body. I feel the Church has lost it. At one time, all roads led to Rome, they don't now, they lead to India.

There are also Sufi teachers here, the mystical tradition of Islam which is a very strongly spiritual, authentic tradition and I have a great respect for the Islamic teachers in this country.

We have currently in Temenos a Persian scholar who is giving us seminars on Rûmi. Henry Corbin was a friend of mine and Madame Corbin is a very dear valued friend.

I think he was a great scholar. He wasn't of course a convert to Islam. He was a Protestant Christian, curiously enough, but I think his works are a wonderful contribution to spiritual knowledge. When we had *Temenos* the Review, I would have said that Corbin was perhaps our most central figure. We published him quite a lot. I met him before his death.

I contributed lectures to the Université de St Jean de Jerusalem.

Kathleen Raine, if I may come back to your work, do you make a clear distinction between your prose work and your poetry or would you say that both voice the language of Imagination?

I hope either of them do. They come from the same person.

4. *India Seen Afar* (Devon: Green Books, 1990).

Or can I put it in a different way. Does writing poetry give a voice to the collective psyche, whereas writing your Autobiographies is the voice of one individual?

It was certainly a very personal book, but it was a book trying to situate the personal life within a larger context. I don't know that my poetry has expressed the collective psyche.

I hope occasionally it does.

One can only do one's best and hope that something comes through of a certain vision one has seen. But you have no means of knowing whether you have communicated it or not. But it always seemed to me that the only instrument we have with which to explore the world is ourselves. So, in that sense, I think to write in the first person can be purely personal and mostly rubbish *or* [the author's emphasis] you can see yourself as your necessarily only way of knowing anything. That is if one properly understands who one is, and that one is not necessarily one's empirical ego, sometimes the Imagination in us resonates with the greater Imagination. I can't say: "now I am going to write a poem that is inspired". How can one? I can only pray for inspiration and if it comes, so much the better. But at least one can believe in the possibility. So much is written by people who have no belief in higher worlds. They can't expect to be inspired if they don't believe in the possibility of inspiration. I would say David Gascoyne is our last great poet in that sense.

Why did you entitle your Autobiographies in the plural? Is there any reference to Yeats's?

They were first published as three separate volumes and then they were published in one volume. I wouldn't venture to compare myself with Yeats because he is writing about the literary history of his time, whereas I am telling a personal story.

You said your main purpose in writing your Autobiographies was to understand your life at a difficult moment, so would you call it catharsis?

I suppose one would.

By publishing it, did you want to share your life experience?

Yes, I don't feel there is anything proprietary about one's life. Anyone is welcome to it who can use it. I don't have any feeling this is my life somehow, my property.

While you were writing, did you address a particular reader? When you said: "It is not me, it's you," whom do you mean by you?

Well, I think one writes in a sort of act of faith that other people are like oneself, because at our deepest level, we share the one humanity. The level below that is the level of education and culture. You see, one makes allusions to Shelley or Porphyry or the *Baghâvad-Gîta* which educated readers pick up and uneducated ones can't possibly.

Therefore I have been called an elitist writer. That's a term of reproach, but it seems to me that one writes at the level at which one lives one's life. You can't pretend to be either more or less than you are.

How do you account for the fact that there are so few autobiographical works in English literature?

You see, I think when I was young, people wrote novels which were really autobiographies. When you didn't want to tell the truth, you could fudget a little bit. Thousands of women's novels were really autobiographies. I thought that was dishonest, that if you were going to tell the truth, you tell the truth; otherwise, what's the point? You're just, as it were, disguising the truth and I think one has to be truthful.

It is particularly unusual to be as humble and honest about one's own life as you are.

Well, people are not humble and honest, are they?

In the older generation, I knew Rosamund Lehmann. Her early novel *Dusty answer*⁵ is very well known in France, isn't it? That is really autobiography. In her later books she used different episodes of her life, and in *Swan in the evening*⁶ she drops the preterite and tells the true story in her own person.

So did Doris Lessing in the *Golden Notebook*.⁷ I rather admire her. I think she is a good writer.

5. 1927.

6. 1967.

7. 1962.

I was thinking of Vera Brittain's autobiography⁸ which describes the background of the war years.

I haven't read her. She was left wing. All the intellectuals in this country are left wing. I am not left wing, not right wing either. I am a truly non-political writer.

When you wrote your Autobiographies you said: "I deliberately organise memories after another pattern than the factually accurate." Could you explain what you meant?

Well, the connections between the things in one's life are not really chronological, are they? They are associational. It doesn't matter whether they're this year or last year, it's what happened that matters. The links between things are links of associations, not the order in which they occurred in time. Besides, I can never remember when they happened, I am very inaccurate. You can't rely on the dates I gave at all.

Would you say you reconstructed your life according to what Stendhal called "l'illumination rétrospective"?

Yes, I think so. I don't, as it were, reconstruct it deliberately, because the memories reconstruct themselves in fact. It isn't a deliberate choice, but there are groups of associations that link themselves. That is how the imagination works.

Would you now write a different story of your life from what you wrote in the 70's?

I wouldn't do it at all. Having done it once, that's enough.

Would I tell the story differently? Well, I imagine that every five years, one would tell the story differently but one can't really know in what way because one is changing all the time. I may say I have read Proust four or five times and that is the supreme autobiography. He had this amazing clarity of recall of events but the organising principle that holds it together is imaginative, associative. It's a very wonderful work. There's nothing like that in English. Edwin Muir wrote a beautiful autobiography—*The Story and the Fable*—that was more personal than Yeats's.

8. Vera Brittain, *Testament of youth*, 1933.

“One’s life is not one’s own property,” you said. Do you view the object of autobiography as universal? To quote Montaigne: “Je porte en moi la forme entière de l’humaine condition.”

I might agree with that but I think we are not really separate. I do believe there is one spirit and we are scattered through multitudes. I hold the Indian view that the Universal Self is present in every individual self. But the presence of the Universal Self is overlaid with the individual Ego, and it gets very confusing. If we were always speaking for the Collective Self, we would be prophets as W. Blake was. He seemed to know that he was speaking as a prophet.

But for most of us, it’s only intermittent. One hopes that there are moments when one speaks from that Higher Self.

But in my *Autobiographies*, I am telling my own story. I am not an angel I am a pilgrim, making my way over the hard and stony floor of the Universe towards the Holy City or whatever there is. At the end of a long life I don’t feel that I possess answers, but I do trust the Mystery. India knows quite well that we live in a Mystery which we can never attain. We can only approach it. We have moments of illumination. We have greater or less consciousness of what is there, but one can never hope to have a final answer, can one? because the Mystery is so much greater than our powers of comprehending it.

From that wonderful source, every day there issues this epiphanic world. Tagore has expressed it very well. That is his particular contribution, understanding that this miracle is happening all the time.

It seems to me that if the Nihil, the Nothing, can every day produce something as wonderful as this Universe, people and their thoughts, it can’t all mean nothing at all. It is something one can only venerate. The “Nothing” of the Mystics from which everything flows is the real Truth, it’s not a negative nothing. It’s a boundless plenitude, but it’s still No-thing because it’s Un-manifest. It is manifest in us in what we experience and what we do.

Blake has been my teacher, my master. I spent a lifetime studying his works and writing on them.

I have learnt everything from Blake, so when I reached India, I was prepared.

Blake led to Yeats, and Plotinus, and from there to India.

It took me a long time to reach that point. I tried from time to time to come to terms with Christianity, but I have finally decided that I can’t. The Lord Jesus was an illuminated prophet of the highest order but that is not the same thing as to believe in the teaching of the Church.

I think, though, I am more Protestant than Catholic because I think there is in every one that Illumination, the Inner Light. People went to their

death in defence of that idea, which was the great revelation that came in the time of Reformation, but they have made an awful mess of it since.

You mentioned the words "epiphanies," "clarity," that acute vision of oneself. Do you understand it in the same way as Joyce did?

Joyce was basically a Catholic. He always falls back on the Church. He gave it a twist of his own. He used to think in Catholic theological terms which he was very familiar with.

He wouldn't like to hear that, I am sure. Isn't there a similitude between what he called "paralysis" and what you call "the dead," the "sleepers," this "somniaulist" world?

That is Plotinus and Blake. Blake's great call through his writing is: "Awake!" He never says "repent," he says "awake!" That is not the Christian but the Platonic Tradition that we are sleepers and have to wake, and Plotinus is most eloquent on that:

"We move from life to life, from bed to bed, from sleep to sleep" and the awakening is possible. That is also an Indian idea. In order to obtain knowledge, you don't accumulate more and more facts about the external universe, which is the Western idea, you change, you expand your consciousness.

Blake writes: "contracting our infinite senses, we behold multitude, expanding we behold as one." He talks about the expanding and contracting of our consciousness in a very Oriental way really, although he didn't know it.

Another of Blake's key words is "Bliss," which is the Indian "Ananda." I felt that the personal evolution you described in your Autobiographies was from sorrow to bliss, is that so?

Bliss is in the nature of things. "Sat-Chit-Ananda"⁹ is not a personal thing. It's not a direction in which you travel. "Being-consciousness-and bliss" is in our nature. This is something that Christianity has totally eliminated from the Western way in which we look at ourselves. We are supposed to be fallen beings and miserable sinners...

Blake challenged that. He said: "We are immortal beings, not mortal worms."

9. The definition of Self in the Vedas: "Being-Consciousness-Bliss."

"Bliss," then, is in the nature of the being, not something you achieve.

Of course it is. It is given us at certain moments. It's so simple once you know it's there. It's reassuring even if at given moments, you are not there. Every animal, every bird expresses its Ananda. My little cat is full of Ananda, she is a little spirit of Joy. When she curls up and goes to sleep, when she wakes up and chases a fly, it's always her Joy that is the impulse. I think Ananda has been terribly neglected in the West. It's a great tragedy that we're in such a very joyless materialist civilisation.

Christianity is joyless, so is materialist science. We feel guilty about joy and happiness. Blake saw it in terms of sexuality:

*"The caterpillar lays its eggs on the fairest leaves
So the priest lays his curse on the fairest joys."*

By condemning the erotic, the West is condemning joy.

What does womanhood mean to you now; is it something like the Indian Shakti?

Yes, absolutely. You see her face [Kathleen Raine shows a statue of Parvati]. She is so much more beautiful than the Virgin Mary. This is the real face of Love.

You seem to have been very severe on women. You said "women are on an ego trip."

Absolutely, I think feminism is a dreadful thing. They are anti-woman. They are against the feminine. They want to be masculine. They don't love themselves...

Is it why you wrote in your Autobiographies: "The poet still remembers Eden long after the woman has left its fields"?

Well, the poet continues the imagination of the contact one has with Eden. The Imagination is still able to enter that world, whereas one's mortal self has to walk this long pilgrimage through this world but Eden, as a state of being, is a higher world. It's timeless. We traverse our lives in terms of time whereas the eternal Reality is timeless. It's always there. One only has to raise one's soul to it. The poet is continually attempting to raise one's consciousness into that other world, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. One gets glimpses, one gets flashes, but it's always there.

Because that is Reality. We lose sight of it continually, then we get it back. Nevertheless, the mortal condition is the journey through Time. Blake says: "Time is the mercy of Eternity."

Otherwise, we couldn't bear it.

As a woman writer, would you say there is such a thing as feminine writing. How would you define it?

Women are naturally gifted in personal relationship. They have a very subtle sense of what private life is about. I think novels by women are basically concerned with what everyone is feeling and personal relationships.

Virginia Woolf's women are very feminine. They have subtle sensitivities about people...

Is there any specific way for women to write? What Beatrice Didier called "l'écriture Femme."

They write as they are. We can't decide: "I am a woman writer, I am going to write like a woman writer." If you are adopting a deliberate attitude, that's politics.

You said: "To write well and to write truly is the same for either sex."

I don't think there is anything specific in that respect to the male or the female, but there are very few women poets. Men seem to have this extraordinary gift of tuning in to the Universal mind, Mozart's operas or Dante's epic poetry. Shelley just seemed to tune in and poetry streamed out like a river. No women poets seem to have that gift. Certain kinds of imaginative inspiration are sex-linked. Emily Dickinson writes excellent poems but they are very minute, whereas Whitman has this other gift of tuning into the Infinite.

Kathleen Raine, your poems, especially your late poems, seem to me to tune in to the Infinite.

Oh, no. I couldn't write an epic. My poems are on a small scale. I am only a minor poet. I am a good minor poet.

I knew St John Perse. He had that gift: inspiration just flowed. He was a wonderful poet. David Gascoyne has that major gift of not writing about himself. He is the last great poet in this country.

Isn't there a sense of the cosmic presence in your poetry?

Yes, but I couldn't write a long epic poem. My lyrics may have a sense of the cosmic presence but they're on a small scale.

Would you use the word "numinous" to define that Divine Presence?

Yes, I think I would. And I hope it does appear at times. And that is common to men and women alike, a sense of the Divine Presence.

*You had that early question in your Autobiographies: "Who was Kathleen?"
Can you now answer it?*

No. I don't think so. The answer obviously is: one is simply one incarnation and one expression of the Universal Life which expresses itself in many embodiments.

Each of us has a unique insight into life. There are no two lives alike. In the Bhagâvat Gîta it speaks of: "The Divine Life blowing across the world, absorbing, taking in the fragrance of every flower." Every life is a different flower, a different expression.

The epiphanic abundance of the world is unlimited. It never repeats itself, it is always there. It is always manifesting itself and I am just one of multitudes. We all do our best.

If we can see a little further into what is happening, that is Ananda.

Kathleen Raine, Where is the Golden String now leading you to?

I wish you could tell me. Like Prospero in Shakespeare I have reached the stage when every third thought must be my grave. I am 87 and I feel when I wake up in the morning: "Here I still am, I'd better get on with it, since I am here." But I have no idea what follows death, whether that is the end of our consciousness or whether it is as they say in India: "The water in the vessel is the same as the water in the sea that is outside the vessel."

I have no idea.

Thank you.

