

Voix

Voices

« *Play it again, Sim* »

*Sim Copans, ambassadeur
de la musique américaine en France*

Entretien conduit par Michel Oriano
(suivi de « Lettres à Lucienne »)



Sim Copans, nous sommes chez vous, à Paris, où vous vivez depuis fort longtemps. Votre bureau est tapissé de disques et de livres d'histoire des États-Unis qui sont un peu la seconde peau d'un homme dont la voix est familière à des millions de mes compatriotes, puisque vous avez pendant près de trente années, de 1946 à 1973, consacré quelque quatre mille émissions à la musique américaine sur l'antenne des radios françaises...

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En effet, je ne suis sans doute pas tout à fait passé inaperçu, et je suis très fier du rôle que j'ai joué dans les relations culturelles entre nos deux pays. Tenez regardez ce livre. Lisez ce passage.

« *Je me souviens des émissions de Sim Copans* » : c'est Georges Pérec qui a écrit ces mots¹. Oui, c'est exactement cela. Vous faites partie de la mémoire collective de toute une génération d'après-guerre à qui vous avez fait découvrir une musique interdite sous l'occupation. Dites moi d'abord quelques mots de vos racines américaines.

Je suis né à Stamford, Connecticut, une petite ville de quinze mille habitants qui en compte aujourd'hui cent cinquante mille. En entrant à Brown University, je n'avais fait que trois ans de français au lycée. Je n'avais pas l'impression d'être particulièrement brillant, mais un professeur m'a convaincu d'entamer des études de français, et j'ai obtenu une bourse très confortable pour aller passer ma troisième année, la « junior year », à Nancy et à Paris. C'était en 1932. Puis, j'ai rédigé un mémoire qui ne me prédestinait guère à ce que je devais devenir, puisqu'il était consacrée à la critique de Pascal par Voltaire.

Donc vous n'avez pas reçu de formation musicale ou musicologique.

Absolument pas. Je voulais devenir avocat. Mais Fernand Berger, un grand professeur de la Sorbonne invité à Harvard, m'a proposé de préparer un PhD sur la perception française de la démocratie américaine sous le Second Empire. (Rien n'a changé : les préjugés et les stéréotypes sont toujours les mêmes !) Il s'est intéressé à moi, parce qu'il savait qu'après la Première Guerre mondiale, Clémenceau avait dû s'exiler pendant deux ans dans ma ville natale. Vous voyez par quels hasards se dessine le destin des hommes. En effet, pour préparer ma thèse, il me fallait absolument consulter des documents à la Bibliothèque nationale, et c'est ainsi qu'en 1938, j'ai obtenu une seconde bourse pour séjourner à Paris.

Vous n'étiez pas en France au moment de la déclaration de la guerre ?

Si, j'étais en France en septembre 1939, et c'est à ce moment là que j'ai épousé une Française, avant de regagner les États-Unis. Donc, tout le début de ma carrière a été celle d'un homme qui s'intéressait à la France et qui, en 1942, est devenu « instructor » à Brown University. Mais le grand tournant survint en 1944, lorsque j'ai décidé d'aller à Londres pour participer à la lutte contre le fascisme.

1. Georges Pérec, *Je me souviens* (Paris : Hachette, 1993 [1978]) 53.



Angleterre,
7 ou 8 juin 1944.

Dans l'armée ?

Oui, j'avais le grade de capitaine, mais je n'avais pas le droit porter les armes, car je faisais partie de la « psychological warfare » de la Troisième Armée, et j'ai débarqué en Normandie où on m'a confié un boulot passionnant : on m'a donné un camion équipé d'un studio et de haut-parleurs ; dès que les Allemands quittaient une ville, j'avais pour mission d'y pénétrer pour rassurer la population. Par exemple, peu de temps après le Débarquement, je suis entré à Valogne au milieu des ruines. J'ai stationné dans un endroit désert, et j'ai mis un disque. Peu à peu, les gens se sont rapprochés et j'ai diffusé des informations que j'avais récoltées sur la BBC et la Voix de l'Amérique. Au bout de quelques minutes, j'ai été sidéré de voir cent cinquante personnes m'assaillir autour de mon camion. Ils me bombardaient de questions, car les Allemands avaient raflé tous les postes de radio, et ils étaient sans nouvelles de la situation militaire. J'avais l'impression qu'on m'attendait. Les G.I. avaient les poches pleines de chewing-gum et je leur distribuais des cigarettes : ils n'en avaient pas vu depuis longtemps.

Et vous diffusiez de la musique sur votre camion militaire ?

Oh ! à peine. Simplement pour annoncer mon arrivée, ou parfois à l'intention des G.I. lorsqu'ils me réclamaient un concert de jazz. Mais cela a sans doute impressionné des gens. Par exemple, je me souviens d'un petit garçon de onze ans qui venait « écouter l'Américain qui donnait des informations, à cause de la musique ». Il a eu le coup de foudre pour la musique américaine. Je l'ai revu depuis : il est devenu compositeur !

Et pourtant, il y avait beaucoup de disques dans les bagages de l'armée américaine.

Oui, l'armée enregistrait des centaines de milliers de « V discs ». D'ailleurs, lorsqu'elle s'est installée rue François 1^{er}, à Paris, la station de radio militaire, « The American Forces Network », a diffusé beaucoup de ces disques.

Et vous, quand êtes-vous arrivé à Paris ?

Le jour de la Libération, dans mon camion. A ce moment-là, les Américains ont décidé de créer un service d'information en Europe, et, en tant que « radio officer », j'ai fait partie du premier noyau de l'U.S. Intelligence Agency.

La musique a-t-elle pris une place prépondérante sur la Voix de l'Amérique ?

A ce moment-là, ce fut uniquement grâce à moi. Ce n'est que beaucoup plus tard que la « Voice of America » a diffusé dans le monde entier une formidable émission de jazz à partir de Washington, avec un commentateur professionnel.

Mais alors comment êtes-vous devenu vous-même un professionnel de la radio ?

Rien ne m'y préparait vraiment. Au début, mon rôle était d'entretenir les relations avec la radio française. A la fin de 1944, j'ai négocié un échange avec elle, qui était très démunie après l'occupation. La Voix de l'Amérique a proposé le marché suivant : sur ses émetteurs parisiens, les Américains diffuseraient une émission culturelle et, en échange, les professionnels français présenteraient des informations diffusées dans le monde, et notamment en Algérie. Je me souviens en particulier d'une excellente émission intitulée « Ce soir en France » qui fut diffusée pendant plusieurs années par la Voix de l'Amérique. Moi, je ne faisais pas d'émission : je servais simplement d'intermédiaire. Un peu plus tard, en 1946, le poète Paul Gilson a créé l'émission « Tour du monde autour d'une table », à laquelle participaient cinq ou six intervenants étrangers, et à laquelle il m'a invité : grâce à ma grande discothèque, je passais beaucoup de musique. Mais c'est par hasard que j'ai accédé aux antennes françaises. En effet, quand l'*American Forces Network* a décidé de suspendre ses émissions le 31 décembre 1946 à minuit, j'ai suggéré que son émetteur soit vendu à la France, ce qui permit de créer une nouvelle station à Rueil-



De gauche à droite : Sim Copans, « Voice of America »,
Richard Condon, « Voice of America », directeur technique.
Hôtel Scribe, Paris, 1945.

Malmaison, suffisamment puissante pour émettre sur toute la région parisienne. Aussitôt, le nouveau directeur a décrété qu'il était normal que la première émission de « Paris-Inter » fût confiée à Sim Copans.

Ainsi naquit « Panorama du jazz américain », diffusé tous les samedis de midi à une heure, et où j'ai rapidement introduit le Negro Spiritual, la musique folklorique, les Gospel songs, mais aussi la musique de Copland ou de Bernstein, les variétés, la country music, etc. J'étais très occupé, jusqu'au jour où j'ai démissionné de la Voix de l'Amérique.

C'était au début des années cinquante, en pleine période du maccarthysme. Je suppose que vous n'étiez pas trop marqué politiquement. Mais à quelles conditions pouvait-on conserver des responsabilités dans le domaine hautement surveillé de l'information à cette époque ?

J'ai eu de grosses difficultés avec Washington qui voulait introduire de la politique dans les émissions culturelles, et j'ai rapidement acquis aux États-Unis la réputation d'être un « French lover », ce qui ne semblait pas plaire.

Et vous n'avez pas été inquiété par les enquêtes du maccarthysme ?

Si. En 53, [Roy M.] Cohn et [G. David] Schine sont venus en Europe. Ces deux messieurs étaient les avocats de McCarthy, deux salauds qui fouinaient partout. Ils étaient impitoyables. Beaucoup de gens ont perdu leur poste à cause d'eux. Il suffisait que la moindre réponse ne corresponde pas à leurs attentes pour qu'on se fasse jeter dehors. A cette époque, beaucoup d'Américains ont perdu leurs jobs et ont dû élire domicile en France. Quand les deux agents de McCarthy sont arrivés à Paris, l'ambassade m'a fait savoir que j'étais la seule personne qu'ils voulaient interroger. On me reprochait d'être trop lié à la radio française, ce qui les empêchait de donner leur point de vue politique sur la Voix de l'Amérique. J'ai donc démissionné, mais la radio française m'a demandé de poursuivre mes émissions en France, en changeant simplement les titres. Par exemple « Le Negro Spiritual » est devenu « Deep River », « Panorama du jazz » « Le jazz en liberté ». Ces émissions se sont poursuivies et diversifiées, d'abord sur Paris-Inter, puis sur France-Musique et d'autres stations...

Et à partir de ce moment-là, vous étiez complètement indépendant de l'ambassade ?

Oui, à cent pour cent.

Mais c'est tout de même l'époque où le Président Eisenhower déclarait que « le jazz était le meilleur diplomate de l'Amérique », et en pleine guerre froide, le Département d'État a encouragé des tournées de jazz en URSS, en Afrique, en Europe, au Japon, à des fins de propagande.

Oui, en effet, et c'était organisé avec beaucoup de professionnalisme. Mais ce qui est étrange, c'est qu'après ma démission de la Voix de l'Amérique, j'avais conservé des copains à l'U.S.I.S. [United States Information Service], qui m'ont demandé de faire des tournées de conférences sur le jazz. J'en ai fait plusieurs centaines, dans toutes les régions de France ; ils m'ont également envoyé partout en Afrique, et notamment dans le Maghreb.

Vous avez également joué un rôle dans le développement des études américaines au sein des universités françaises, à l'époque où vous dirigiez le Centre Benjamin Franklin, lié à l'ambassade, où vous siégiez au Conseil d'administration du Centre culturel américain du boulevard Raspail et où vous enseigniez au Centre américain de la rue du Dragon. Et j'en profite pour vous demander votre sentiment sur la disparition de ces centres, sans lesquels je peux témoigner du fait que, dans les

années 70, nous n'aurions sans doute pas été en mesure de développer le champ des études américaines comme nous l'avons fait dans certaines universités, souvent en collaboration avec vous.

C'est une absurdité. Les budgets ont été coupés. Les bibliothèques sont encore accessibles, mais par Minitel ou je ne sais quoi.

Mais pensez-vous que les Américains considèrent qu'ils sont en mesure de diffuser leur culture sans le relais de ces institutions à l'étranger ?

Le Congrès américain n'a jamais manifesté d'enthousiasme pour ce genre d'activités. Le sénateur Fulbright a été une exception... Peut-être quand même deux mots sur la création de l'Institut culturel américain à Paris. C'est la première fois que je raconte cela. Vers 1957, deux professeurs américains ont constaté qu'en dehors d'un ou deux cours mineurs à Sciences Po, il n'existait pratiquement rien en France dans le domaine des études américaines. Avec le président de l'Université Columbia, ils ont décidé de chercher des fonds pour créer quelque chose en France. Malheureusement, la Ford Foundation a répondu qu'elle ne finançait que des institutions existantes. Placé devant ce dilemme, l'attaché culturel, qui était aussi le directeur de l'U.S.I.S, m'a proposé de me salarier pendant six mois pour créer un Institut, trouver des professeurs, démarrer quelques cours. Une fois que nous avons eu pignon sur rue, la Ford Foundation a débloqué de grosses sommes d'argent. Et c'est ainsi que nous avons organisé des cours d'américain qui furent fréquentés par plusieurs milliers d'étudiants de la Sorbonne, de professeurs de lycée, etc. pendant les années soixante, jusqu'au jour où le Congrès a coupé les crédits de l'U.S.I.S. et a décidé de fermer la Bibliothèque Benjamin Franklin. Malgré cela, j'ai réussi à négocier pour poursuivre les activités pédagogiques de l'Institut, en conservant les immeubles de la place de l'Odéon et de la rue du Dragon.

En effet, vous avez joué un rôle important dans ces années soixante, où, en dehors de quelques rares exceptions comme Roger Asselineau ou Maurice Lebreton, les anglicistes français étaient tous spécialistes de la Grande-Bretagne. Les années soixante ont tout de même connu l'amorce d'une évolution et, en 1967, l'Association Française d'Études Américaines a vu le jour. Vous avez collaboré à cette fondation.

Oui, nous avons hébergé l'Association à Benjamin Franklin et, avec mes secrétaires, j'ai fait tout le boulot pendant plusieurs années : nous assurons la correspondance, nous trouvons les lieux d'accueil pour les congrès, nous envoyons les invitations... J'ai conservé une photo de ces

années pionnières, où vous vous trouvez d'ailleurs avec une poignée de collègues. Songez qu'il n'y avait à l'époque pas un seul historien des États-Unis en France, et qu'il a fallu que Claude Fohlen, qui avait fait une thèse sur un tout autre sujet, effectue un recyclage pour devenir le premier spécialiste français de cette discipline !

Et aujourd'hui, vingt cinq ans plus tard, l'AFEA regroupe quelque quatre cent cinquante membres, ce qui vous récompense de vos efforts. Mais si vous voulez bien, revenons à la musique. Au fond, après la Libération, vous vous trouviez sur un terrain qui était conquis d'avance pour vous : la période de Saint-Germain-des-Près est indissociable du jazz. Mais n'y a-t-il pas un paradoxe à constater que cette musique, qui prend ses racines dans l'esclavage, et qui s'est épanouie dans les ghettos ou dans les régions soumises à la ségrégation raciale, ait pu servir d'étendard et de porte-parole du « monde libre » ?

Vous savez, la question des rapports entre les intellectuels et le jazz est extrêmement complexe. Aux États-Unis, le « Jazz Age » des années vingt a correspondu à une libération des mœurs.

Cela était associé à la libération de l'expression musicale : l'improvisation, la fantaisie, le débridage du corps.

Sans doute. En France, le jazz a très tôt influencé les artistes : Matisse a intitulé un de ses collages « Jazz », et le chien de Ravel s'appelait également Jazz. Mais c'est surtout dans les années trente, avec Django Reinhardt, le Quintette de France, etc. que le jazz a vraiment atteint le grand public. Et après la guerre il y a eu beaucoup de petits orchestres noirs dans les cabarets parisiens. Il y a eu une grande soif de jazz, et très peu d'intellectuels se posaient la question des origines sociales de cette musique, à part quelques extrémistes qui m'ont rendu furieux en déclarant que, pour sauver le jazz, il fallait maintenir les noirs dans les ghettos.

Justement : dans vos émissions, avez-vous parlé de la distinction jazz blanc-jazz noir ?

Non. J'ai refusé cette ségrégation. J'ai souvent invité des groupes français lorsqu'ils sortaient un disque.

Et je suis convaincu que le jazz français reconnaît ce qu'il vous doit. Vous continuez d'ailleurs à le soutenir au Festival de Souillac qui a fêté son vingtième anniversaire l'année dernière. Dans le catalogue publié à cette occasion, tous les articles font votre éloge. Par exemple on peut y

lire cette phrase qui résume bien ce que vous représentez pour tant de fans français dont vous avez été l'initiateur : « Évidemment, [Souillac] tu brilles à la flamme de Sim Copans qui depuis un demi-siècle, lui, sans jamais faillir, a éclairé nos jeunes passions avec son Jazz en liberté... Tu parles, moi, toute petite, je rentrais de l'école à la course pour l'écouter à la radio... »²

En effet, je possède une maison à Souillac, en Dordogne, où je préside un festival de jazz qu'on a surnommé « Du Mississippi à la Dordogne ». Quelle grande joie nous avons ressentie le 11 juillet 1976 quand plus de mille personnes ont rempli la belle église abbatiale de Sainte-Marie pour écouter la grande chanteuse de *gospel songs*, Marie Knight, et un grand chanteur de *blues*, mon ami Memphis Slim. La plupart des grandes stars du jazz français s'y sont produites aux côtés de leurs collègues américains, comme Eddy Louiss, Ranee Lee, Betty Carter, Hank Jones, Clark Terry, Dexter Gordon, Roy Haynes, pour ne citer que quelques noms. Parmi les Français, il y a eu Pierre Michelot, Pierre-Yves Sorin, François Moutin, Françoise Guerlin, Guy Laffitte, Martial Solal, Henri Texier, Christian Escoudé, Michel Portal, Michel Petrucciani, Elizabeth Caumont, etc., etc. L'énumération de leurs noms occuperait au moins trois pages. Je crois qu'aucun festival n'a donné autant de place aux musiciens de jazz français.

Et les grands jazzmen américains des années quarante à soixante ? Avez-vous parfois invité des gens comme Coleman, Gillespie, Miles Davis ?

Non. Cela aurait demandé trop de temps et trop d'argent, et j'ai toujours refusé de faire venir des gens gratuitement. J'ai eu un certain nombre de chanteurs noirs, surtout des chanteurs de *spirituals*, qui m'ont demandé de passer dans mes émissions. Par la suite quand Frank Ténor et Daniel Filipacchi ont créé leur émission « Pour ceux qui aiment le jazz » sur Europe 1, ils ont pu inviter des stars, parce qu'ils organisaient leurs concerts en salle et les interviewaient ensuite.

Dans le jazz, il n'y a pas de paroles. Mais comment expliquez-vous l'immense succès des chants noirs, dont le public étranger ne peut retenir les paroles que phonétiquement ? Est-ce le caractère essentiellement communicatif de l'antiphonie, du « shout », du rythme, de la litanie ? Le fait que, même dans le blues, il n'y ait ni récit, ni

2. *20 ans de jazz à Souillac* (Martel : Les Éditions du Laquet, 1995) 27.

action, ni début, ni fin, mais des accumulations d'images, une énergie intrinsèque, une magie qui se passe d'explicitation ?

Oui, c'est la musique qui communique l'émotion, puisque même les Américains ont parfois du mal à comprendre les paroles des blues. Mais moi, je n'ai jamais passé un spiritual ou un blues sans en donner le sens général. C'était souvent très difficile, même pour moi. En revanche, dans les chansons de contestation, j'ai tenu à donner la traduction intégrale. De même pour la comédie musicale, faute de quoi on n'aurait rien compris.

Est-ce que la Voix de l'Amérique a jamais diffusé des chants de contestation noirs, syndicalistes ou autres ?

Ça m'étonnerait. Pour vous donner une idée, quand j'ai commencé mon cours sur l'histoire des États-Unis à travers la chanson dans les années 60, j'ai eu besoin de disques de Pete Seeger qu'un jour j'avais oubliés chez moi. Je suis allé à la bibliothèque de la rue du Dragon, et j'ai découvert que Pete Seeger était censuré ! J'étais furieux.

Parmi vos innombrables émissions, est-ce qu'il y en a une ou deux dont vous avez conservé un souvenir particulièrement ému ?

Il y a eu l'émission spéciale de *Porgy and Bess* que m'avait demandé Paul Gilson. Et puis, j'ai fait une grande émission sur Roosevelt. Madame Roosevelt était à Paris, mais elle n'a pas pu venir, et c'est Françoise Rosay qui a joué le rôle de l'ancienne First Lady : j'ai trouvé cela émouvant. Ou encore, à l'occasion du voyage du Président Vincent Auriol en Amérique, la radio m'a demandé une émission sur tous les États-Unis. J'ai écrit à tous les maires, et j'ai illustré chaque région par une musique.

Et les auditeurs ? Vous ont-ils souvent écrit ?

Oui, j'ai reçu des milliers de lettres, mais, dans neuf cas sur dix, c'était pour demander des références de disques. J'étais une sorte d'annuaire.

Un Internet avant la lettre... Donc vos émissions ont eu un impact sur le marché du disque.

Cela dépend. Beaucoup de disques étaient introuvables en France. Sauf à un moment où Le Chant du Monde reproduisait certains « Folkways », la précieuse collection d'enregistrements historiques entreposée à la Bibliothèque du Congrès. Je les ai un peu aidés.

Une toute dernière question, Sim : à votre avis, quelle est la vision de l'Amérique qui a été communiquée par Sim Copans ?

Jamais, dans aucune de mes activités, je ne me suis posé la question de savoir quelle impression tel ou tel disque susciterait chez les auditeurs. J'ai toujours essayé d'être objectif. Par exemple, je n'ai jamais hésité à passer des blues souvent féroces à l'égard de mon pays. Que de fois j'ai passé « Black, get back », ou encore des disques d'avant-garde que je n'appréciais pas beaucoup personnellement. En ce qui concerne le folklore, parfois, je prenais des thèmes très contestataires, et j'ai publié un livre sans concession sur ce sujet³. Je n'ai pas cherché à masquer les aspects critiquables de l'Amérique. A l'Institut, je n'ai jamais refusé d'embaucher un professeur pour des raisons idéologiques, et d'ailleurs moi-même, après certains de mes propres cours, je me disais : Grand Dieu, si les gens de l'ambassade m'entendaient, leurs cheveux se dresseraient sur leur tête... Je crois que j'ai toujours cherché à être aussi honnête que possible.



3. Sim Copans, *Chansons de contestation, reflets de l'histoire américaine* Vol. 1 (Paris : Minard, 1964) ; Vol. 2 (Paris : Minard, 1966).

Lettres à Lucienne

Au lendemain du Débarquement, tandis qu'il traverse la Normandie et se dirige avec l'armée américaine vers Paris, le capitaine Sim Copans écrit à sa femme. Il a rencontré Lucienne (née Godiard) dans la capitale française en 1938-39. Lui était étudiant en doctorat à la Sorbonne ; elle travaillait à la grande librairie Gallimard. Ils se marient en septembre 1939. Lucienne quitte la France en mars 1940 en passant par l'Italie ; Sim, lui, est déjà parti : il a pu s'embarquer en octobre 1939 sur le dernier bateau américain en partance pour l'Amérique, le President Harding, paquebot qui au cours de la traversée dut porter secours à plusieurs cargos coulés par les Allemands.

Nous sommes heureux de pouvoir publier quelques-unes de ces lettres qui, au-delà de la personnalité attachante de Sim Copans, laissent transparaître toute une atmosphère et toute une époque. Lucienne Copans, à qui ce courrier était adressé, résidait alors à New York. Nous avons respecté l'orthographe, parfois pittoresque, des documents originaux.

27 juin, 1944. For the first time I am writing you from the soil of sweet France. I am writing in English as a letter in French may take a lot of time to get through the censorship.

We arrived here from our last destination without any trouble [...] I cannot give you any details about the trip, where I left from, where I arrived. [It was Omaha Beach].⁴ In the short time I have been here, I have not seen many signs of war. I have seen fields with cows and horses, farms with geese and chickens and dogs. I had the great joy last night of seeing and talking to some little French girls, Denise, Jeannine and Simone. They were so pretty, and so very French! They are very happy to see the Americans here and hope the war will end soon.

4. The retrospective comments in brackets are Sim's.

There are many things you will want to know that I will not be able to write, but I will try hard to tell you as much as I can that does not concern military security. I am very happy to finally be here. The past few days, the convoy, England, the crossing—it all seemed like a very strange dream, especially the arrival here in France. What a great joy it was to see France from the distance yesterday and then to walk on her soil! As I promised you, I kissed the beach as soon as I landed. I picked up some little pebbles and a shell for Jeannot⁵ and a handful of sand for you. I will send them to you in one of my future letters. [Lucienne still has the shell and the sand!].

2 juillet 1944. Hier je t'ai été infidèle ! J'ai embrassé une jolie française. Elle s'appelle Nicole. Elle n'a pas encore trois ans mais je suis fou d'elle. [A Ste. Mère-Église j'ai été très ému de voir des petites filles portant des robes taillées dans des parachutes américaines].

7 juillet 1944. Comme tu sais, les allemands ont pris tant de postes de TSF aux français, et en ce moment le courant manque presque partout pour ceux qui ont gardé leurs postes. Par conséquent, il y a un grand besoin de répandre les nouvelles aux gens qui en sont privés. On m'a dit qu'on le fait en envoyant des camions dans des villes et villages. On joue des airs pour avoir du monde, ensuite on lit les derniers bulletins, ensuite un peu de musique et beaucoup de conversation. Ça me semble bien intelligent comme moyen de combattre les faux bruits, et on me dit que les populations aiment beaucoup ça [...]. [En fait,⁶ c'est le travail que je faisais depuis mon arrivée en France. Mon camion était le seul à circuler et à faire ce travail].

10 juillet 1944. Je pense sans arrêt avec beaucoup de joie que je fais un bon petit travail auprès de ton peuple – un petit travail secondaire, d'accord, et je n'ai aucune prétention, mais un travail nécessaire. Si je te disais que je serre la main à des centaines de personnes, parfois une centaine par jour. J'ai mes petits copains, surtout un petit Michel, qui m'embrasse quand il me voit. C'est une grande joie de voir les visages de ton peuple quand je leur annonce une bonne nouvelle, comme hier la nouvelle de la libération de Caen et de la Haye du Puits. J'ai travaillé dix jours de suite sur les routes sans me reposer.

5. Fils aîné des Copans, né en 1942.

6. Mais Sim Copans ne pouvait le révéler dans ses lettres.

21 juillet 1944. L'aspect le plus intéressant de notre travail, c'est l'amitié, le contact personnel. Il y a tant de gens qui nous accueillent comme des amis, comme des libérateurs, et très sincèrement. Je voudrais aussi avoir le temps de te parler des villes démolies et de l'esprit magnifique des habitants qui ont tout perdu [...] C'est très émouvant de venir dans une place publique d'une ville presque complètement démolie, d'être entouré de 75 ou 150 personnes qui viennent de je ne sais pas où.

22 juillet 1944. Je reste au château aujourd'hui. Je viens de me raser, comme toujours avec mon casque comme lavabo. [Notre casque avait trois utilisations pendant la guerre. Bien sûr on le portait dans la journée pour nous protéger la tête. Le soir on l'utilisait comme pot de chambre et le matin on le rinsait avec l'eau chaude qu'on nous donnait et on se rasait].

8 août 1944. On a déménagé. On n'est plus au château. Je n'ai pas de regret. On est dans de grandes tentes en plein air. Nous donnons aussi des nouvelles de vive voix, mais on le fait surtout du camion avec un système d'amplificateurs parfois devant 25 personnes, parfois devant 400, comme tout dernièrement. Et nous ne sommes même pas allés dans de très grandes villes.

12 août 1944. J'ai fait plus de 100 miles aujourd'hui en jeep avec un gentil aviateur belge. J'ai rencontré des gens très intéressants dans une ville sur la côte. Un professeur de lycée. Un repas fantastique, avec trois bouteilles de Bordeaux – deux blancs, un rouge –, deux bouteilles de cidre bouché, un bon calvados, et une bouteille d'Armagnac de 1904 ouverte pour moi. Le rêve ! [Il s'agit de Granville. C'était un professeur d'anglais, un veuf. Note amusante : mon chauffeur de jeep, un gars du sud des USA, appartenait à une secte pour laquelle la boisson alcoolique était interdite. Comme le professeur était malheureux de ses refus répétés de boire !].

21 août 1944. Toute la journée dans le camion sur les routes de France – plus de 200 miles dans la journée. Je ne peux te dire dans quelle direction j'ai voyagé. J'ai vu du pays. J'ai dû dormir dans le camion dans un champ à cause de la pluie. Maintenant, j'ai une petite chambre chez des gens très sympas dans un gentil petit bourg de 400 habitants. Je suis à une heure de la petite ville [il s'agit de Chartres] où je suis tombé amoureux de ma Lucienne.

24 août 1944. Que de choses depuis 24 heures ! Je en suis pas loin du coin qui t'a vu naître. J'ai passé hier pas loin de l'endroit du 7 mai 1939 [Chartres].⁷ Mais j'étais dans un camion en panne et j'avais trop d'ennuis pour pensée à cette journée. [Le chauffeur du camion avait oublié de changer l'huile et la moteur a claqué. L'armée américaine était si bien approvisionnée qu'ils ont réussi dans deux ou trois heures à installer une nouvelle moteur]. La ville n'est pas du tout touchée. [J'ai visité la ville et j'ai vu la Cathédrale sans vitraux. On les a descendus par sécurité. C'était extraordinaire de voir la Cathédrale avec du verre transparent. On voyait la statuaire à l'intérieur.

Hier soir j'ai couché dans une ferme, sur le plancher, avec des américains et des français. Je suis dans une grande grange. La machine⁸ est perchée sur une botte de paille. Je viens de parler à un groupe très sympa de tes compatriotes habillés comme moi. [Bien entendu, il s'agit de soldat de la Division Leclerc avec qui nous nous trouvions dans cette ferme à Fontainebleau⁹]. Quelle bande sympa de durs ! [J'ai assisté à Fontainebleau à une scène inoubliable. Un petit français d'à peu près 10 ans a porté comme cadeau aux soldats français un lapin dépouillé et une bouteille de vin rouge. Les soldats ont fait un feu de bois, ont découpé le lapin et l'ont fait cuire avec le vin rouge dans un casque de soldat ! C'est ainsi que j'ai découvert un quatrième utilisation du casque de soldat !].

7. C'est à Chartres que l'étudiant Sim a « rencontré » Lucienne.

8. Il s'agit d'une machine agricole.

9. En fait, Rambouillet.

Challenging Conventions

An Interview with Howard Barker

by Gilles Menegaldo
University of Poitiers

Howard Barker was born in South London in 1946. The son of an industrial bookbinder, he read history at the University of Sussex. His career as a dramatist began with Stripwell staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in 1970. He shot to prominence in the Seventies, with plays such as Claw (1975) which give a dark uncompromising portrayal of British society and challenge conventional morality, provoking the Royal Court public. He has written since then about thirty plays, a book of theoretical essays in which he develops, among other things, his concept of a "catastrophic theatre." He has also published collections of poems and has written plays for both radio and television. Howard Barker has had a privileged relationship with the Royal Shakespeare Company which has staged several of his productions, notably The Castle (1985) and The Bite of the Night (1988). Another company, The Wrestling School, regularly stages his works.

One specific aspect of his theatre is the revisiting of classic authors such as Shakespeare in The Seven Lears (1990) or Chekhov in his own version of Uncle Vania (1991). He also frequently chooses myth and legend as a basis for his stories, as in Judith. He is concerned with the relationship between art and politics, with the moral responsibilities of the artist in society as testified Scenes from an Execution (1985) whose main protagonist is a woman painter in the Italian Renaissance in Venice. His theatre is violent and provocative, probing into the dark sides of the human psyche, exploring the complex issues of power and sexuality. His language is highly theatrical and striking, using a variety of styles, ranging from the raw and crude to the utmost poetic and lyrical. One of his latest and most brilliant plays, Hated Nightfall, which depicts the last days of the

*Romanous in 1917 was staged by the author at the Odéon in Paris in 1995.
Howard Barker now lives and works in Brighton.¹*



*How did you start writing and, more specifically,
for the stage?*

Gilles Menegaldo is Maître de Conférences at the University of Poitiers. Conducted in Poitiers at the end of 1994, the interview was revised by Howard Barker in 1996.

I wrote from a very early age. As an adolescent I wrote voluminous novels. On leaving university I wrote some stage plays. One of these I sent to the BBC Radio, which then had a good reputation for encouraging new writers. They performed *One Afternoon on The 63rd level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great*, which as the title indicates was a satirical/historical piece. Following that I sent plays to the Royal Court, the obvious destination for an aspiring writer. Despite its icy atmosphere and its peculiar snobbery, a snobbery mingled with a high-minded liberalism and a voyeuristic fascination with working class culture, I wrote a number of plays for the Royal Court, and whilst my whole approach to theatre ruled me out as a 'Royal Court writer,' I have continued to see my work played there.

Was there any particular event or performance or reading of a play that urged you to write?

None. My relationship with the theatrical form is entirely instinctive. My background was working class and whilst not philistine, completely detached from all serious art forms. Even at university I had no connection with drama groups. If anything, I entertained a prejudice against them.

Had you seen performances on stage?

Pantomimes.

No production of Shakespeare?

Possibly at school there may have been visits to amateur theatres. Our set Shakespeare text was *King Lear*. I might have been taken to see a version of that.

1. Selected Bibliography: *Victory* (1984), *Scenes from an Execution* (1985), *Crimes in Hot Countries*, *Downchild*, *The Castle* (1985), *The Last Supper*, *The Bite of the Night* (1988), *The Seven Lears*, *The Europeans*, *Judith* (1990), *Hated Nightfall* (1994); *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989). In French (Éditions de l'Atalante, trad. Philippe Regniez): *Tableau d'une exécution* (1993), *Les sept Lear* (1994).

You are both a theoretician and a writer of plays. Could you explain why you felt the necessity at one point in your career to write theory concerning the theatre?

I was compelled to articulate my position in theatre because I was in danger of suffocation. It was a desperate flinging off the deadening weight of critical ignorance and hostility. Whilst I had allies in the universities (and many enemies there also) I had none with access to print. These attacks continued and continue today, with increasing vehemence. People find this rage incomprehensible. Why are they so apoplectic? I have my own views on this. But certainly, in daring to articulate a theory I drew down even more fury on my head. One gets used to this. The English hate theory. They think it is presumptions. And one must not forget that the theatre is a national propaganda. There's nothing at all puzzling about why, to take one example, my work has been banned from the National Theatre of this country for 25 years.

What form does your own particular theorising take?

As a poet, I took first to the aphoristic form in *49 Asides for a Tragic Theatre*. I then developed a taste for longer pieces, and theoretical poems. I was never an academic, so these interventions rarely reproduce arguments as such, and there is a deliberate irony in calling these books *Arguments for a Theatre*. They are impassioned, spontaneous, assertive. Their style is as important as their content. Perhaps it *is* the content.

I think that for me an aphorism is an easier form than an essay. I have since then learnt how to construct quite elaborate arguments in prose. Sometimes I write scenes almost in aphoristic form, it comes quite naturally to me. It's also a very unfamiliar way of expressing yourself in English culture and therefore immediately troublesome and irritating.

It tallied with your aim of provoking the reader?

I have never wanted to provoke anyone. But they carry in them the same immunity that a poem carries. They can't be taken unawares, or refuted, any more than a poem can.

You use the term "catastrophe" to define your theatre, could you explain that?

My attempt to construct a tragic theatre needed a theoretical articulation of some kind because I knew I was not simply reproducing the Aristotelian or the Shakespearian model. Tragedies have always been

assumed to be a social necessity. The community was able to redefine and support its values through the theatrical practice of tragedy. I knew that it was not something I was able to do since my own attitude to art was that it was a morally chaotic experience and not one of order. The catastrophic form of tragedy is one in which hugely painful endurance and ordeal is inflicted upon one or two characters. This ordeal does not lead to any particular resolution whereas tragedies always resolve. Resolution is always a key in English Shakespearian tragedies for instance as are reconciliation or apology. None of this affects the catastrophic theatre at all, it is open-ended and continues... All that the audience can expect to gain from it—which is a great deal I think—is a sense of human complexity.

You obviously connect catastrophe with tragedy and you intend to write a contemporary kind of tragedy. Why do you consider tragedy as a necessary aspect of the theatre?

I think the absence of modern tragedy from the English scene has its origins in a number of causes. Probably the serious upheaval in the English theatre occurred in the fifties when a naturalistic socialist critical theatre emerged, partly under the influence of Brecht but also quite English in origin thanks to people like Wesker, Osborne, apparently politically committed people. This entailed a change of style as well as a change of subject matter. None of that was in any way tragic. It was entirely due to what was considered exposure to social conditions. There are things outside the drawing-room we should see what these things are. I began to think this so-called exposure and activation of political thought was already redundant to what was happening; it had become televised, it had become the daily material of television, it then was domesticated and ceased to be dangerous. There was a necessity to move on from that because it had become stagnant. My own inclinations towards painful experience in drama clearly contributed to that. It was not enough to show people lived in certain conditions. The function of the theatre is not to stimulate revolution but to engage with the individual soul of the audience at a different kind of level, a level beneath the political.

The dominance of a non-poetic discourse in the theatre and the hypervaluation of comedy is an aspect of a political populist democracy position. The tragic play is an act of liberty for each member of the audience whereas the comic experience is one of unification and subordination. The form of tragedy that interests me is not one in which, in a classical sense there is a restatement of moral values but one in which morality is discarded and the ending of the work is open. This kind of tragedy emphasises the freedom of the individual to make up his or her mind on matters of morality. This is not a traditional form of tragedy at all

since traditional Shakespearian or Greek tragedy is a reemphasis of moral certainties. It is also, it seems to me, within a tragic form that a poetic language is possible. The theatre is the last site, the last space in which a creative language can be developed in a public sphere. One of the political conspiracies of populist democracy is the elimination of complication and it follows from this that language must also be debased. A new tragic theatre is in essence a revolutionary form but at the same time as it is revolutionary, it is also traditional. In certain times in history, the tradition is revolutionary.

You said writers like Wesker wanted to take the theatre out of the drawing-room and chose their subject matter among the working class. Pinter, though, is different; there is also a metaphysical dimension in his work. Do you feel in any way close to him? I am thinking in particular of your own interest in violence, not only verbal but also in terms of bodily expression.

Pinter is a writer for whom I have a considerable respect. He has also, partly through his relationship with Beckett, a very profound interest in language and the rhythm of language. So his theatre is not, in the way that most sixties' realism was, an attempt to recreate the real, it has no realistic pretension.

Your theatre involves a certain challenge of conventions and you emphasize the rejection of two cardinal notions: clarity and realism.

My hostility to clarity is a hostility to a form of conventional wisdom about production values. Through Stanislavski but more through Brecht, the Royal Court theatre developed a governing notion in these productions of transparency and clarity. This is initially a political impulse: the need to educate an audience. There has always been a vulgar enlightenment instinct in Royal Court theatre practice. When one talks about the Royal Court, one talks about the main power house for the English theatre, textual theatre. This form of clarity consists in the fact the audience must always know what's going on at any given moment, know the direction of the scene. The actors must also be totally in control of their material as well. This is a powerful inheritance from the Stanislavskian practice that the text has a single meaning called the intention of the author. Authors don't know what they are doing at all, we are driven by some impulse, which is quite internal, psychological... The Royal Court never addressed with that, never allowed the ambiguity of the moment to occur. When a character meets another character in a Royal Court production, he knows—this is pure Brechtianism—what he is intending, what the intention of any action

is. When two characters meet in life, they do not know what 's carried on between them, there are many levels of debate, emotional recoil, ambition, seduction. They can do this both by surrendering or by being provocative, aggressive. That seems to me a much more complex way by which the theatre can operate.

You once said that you wanted to create a sense of division in the self of the spectator. Could you comment about that?

The enterprise of the kind of theatre I am engaged in entails a change in the habits of the audience. Frequently the effect of my work on the audience is to send them away in a state of division, in a sort of despair, a creative despair, one in which there is no ability to turn to one's neighbour and know you have experienced the same thing he or she has. The audience should be atomised rather than unified by what they see. Thus at a moment when comedy releases laughter, this laughter should create embarrassment among individuals, some will laugh and some won't. The practice of uniting the audience in pursuit of a morality is redundant. This morality is located in types of narrative, of course. So by both disrupting narrative *and* permitting a regime of ambiguity to exist in theatre, you effectively dethrone morality from the experience. This is necessary simply because the theatre is expiring from its own ethical vacuity. It is repetitive. It staggers like a dying ideologue frothing dead slogans. It is a lethal combination of entertainment and political message. What is the use of it, I am asking for an audience that is prepared to expose itself to the risk of inventing morality for itself. Who are authors, anyway? Are they gods? Do they know more than any other man? They have one power only, one claim to authority. They imagine. This imagination is by definition anarchic, unreliable, bad testament. But you must trust human beings to judge their feelings and act or not act on them. I am called an elitist. I have called myself one. But it is a typical irony of our time that I, an elitist, trust human beings more than the entire liberal-humanist dispensation, which can't resist its appalling impulse to educate others. To get back to what I stated about clarity, you say to the audience this is not a clear scene because neither the author nor the actors themselves are clear about it. Therefore there is confusion but you must accept and enjoy that. The audience must also expect to find a work difficult and complicated. When a play is working effectively, the actors are working properly, many meanings may be deduced from any single moment. The fact that people often return to see the plays two or three times suggest to me that if there is any alienation from what they are seeing, it also means they are really engaged in the play. This experience is a consequence of my belief that the play exists in the first instance between the writer and the actors. As a writer I do not

think of the effects of what I am writing on an audience, I think of it as a practice between actors. This is a serious transgression in English theatre where everything is geared towards the satisfaction of the audience.

Do you challenge realism in your plays?

I don't challenge realism because there are always arguments to be assembled which would prove I am profoundly more 'realistic' than Brecht or the entire English Royal Court school. They merely confuse realism with—in Brecht's case—"The actual truth about society..." or in the Royal Court's case, 'the representation of the real world through naturalistic aesthetics...' Both utterly dubious propositions. We can't use the word 'real' any more. But is there a word to replace it? I would insist that poetry and passion is as authentic to human life as any naturalism dares claim for itself. One might talk of layers of authenticity. The imagination is authentic, is it not? Nothing that occurs in any play of mine is a literal impossibility. They are not fantasies. They reside always within the possible. I wrote a series of plays called 'The Possibilities' and that title might describe the entire oeuvre. My challenge to *naturalism* however, is located in my commitment to a poetic discourse. A densely metaphorical, indeed rhythmic form of speech is something important to me. I always like to quote Nietzsche: "If you don't understand the rhythm of the sentence, you can't understand the meaning of it." For an actor, that's an instinct. For me rhythm is crucial. When I hear an actor grasp the rhythm, I know he is almost certainly in control of meaning. In the Royal Court practice, this would not be important, they would only be interested in what the meaning was. It would dominate the entire production.

Do you feel close to any particular theatrical tradition in terms of either theme, motive or even language?

I recognise my connections to a sixteenth-century theatre, not only for its language practice but also for its understanding that if theatre was not located at the extremes of human experience, it could not exist as a theatre at all. Theatre is emotion, an archaeology of emotion. This emotion, even at its cruellest, must be perceived as a thing of beauty—that is its profound psychological disturbance—and this disturbance, this chaos, is the purest moment of theatre, occurring in a dark place which is immune from the traffic of everyday life (even though it is intimately connected to it). How is this done? Through poetry. Poetry is the means to enable an audience to interpret its own collusion with murder and death.

Could you tell us about your interest in rewriting myths or classical masterpieces of the theatre?

I have now done this four times—with Middleton, Shakespeare, Chekhov and Lessing. Each time the function of the interrogation was different, but never did I attempt to *modernise* the texts, which would be a futile and chic enterprise. I was engaged rather in a quarrel at the ethical level with aspects of the writing... sometimes the result of a rage at an apparent (apparent to me) absence... or a dispute with a moral convenience... what seemed to me a flinching on the part of the author, often for very comprehensible reasons... things like that... and it will happen to my own texts at some point. It is a good practice, to turn over the ground of these classic texts. It's unforgivable, of course, for the pantheon has to stand for all sorts of national reasons. But I never belittled a text I treated in this way. It is an honouring.

One illustration of the mingling of tradition and modernity is the part played by the chorus in your work.

The chorus is a very clear statement of intention. It immediately discards the naturalist aesthetic, just as a prologue does. (I have done this in *Bite of the Night*, *The Last Supper*.) It also, in my hands, overturns its own history, for the chorus has always represented the polis, the public, the moral. In my plays (I'm thinking of *Golgo*, *The Last Supper*) it stands for the *new public*, the public of the contemporary hyper-democracy, where instead of standing for good opinion, it is shrill, populist, sloganwielding, and itself a suspicious source of clamour. Do you trust it or not? Again, this is the Catastrophic Theatre's dislocating practice.

In the French production of The Seven Lears,² the chorus was not present on the stage...

Claudine Hunault chose to view the chorus as an aspect of Lear's own unconscious. That is a legitimate interpretation. But the speaking voice is never fascinating only as voice. The voice requires a body. That is a law of the stage, in my view.

2. The play was staged by Claudine Hunault at the Théâtre de La Chamaille, in Nantes, in November 1994.

You often mingle comic or grotesque elements with tragic ones. This is quite perceptible in The Seven Lears for instance. This is something already present in Shakespeare, but you push it a bit further.

I have always had a powerful comic instinct, I have always found to some degree that within the worst tragedy, there is an element of comedy, there is a possibility of seeing it as at least absurd if not funny. As you suggest, Shakespeare knew that very well too: King Lear on the heath is a spectacle of ridicule as well as passion. The highest moment of dramatic experience always contains a potential for humour. It's inevitable.

Isn't there a risk of erasing the metaphysical dimension if there is too much distance?

Yes, certainly there would be, and distance is the last thing you would expect from a dramatist like me. I dislike alienation, I never seek the objectification of an action. What I do ask for is the torrent of confusion that follows on action which might originally have been seen simply as say—a necessity, or excusable because of certain conventions of morality. Look at the oral disorder that surrounds the murder of the Bad Bishop in *Seven Lears*. But why be specific? That confusion (which is not a *dilemma*, incidentally) attaches to all the striking events and it occurs because the politics of situations is complicated by the instinct...

This play is also an example of the way you challenge other rules. You seem to break the linearity of the temporal frame. By juxtaposing different time sequences there are several loci of action on the stage which belong to different temporal frames. What are you aiming at by doing this?

To try to be perfectly truthful, a number of my practices are the result of boredom and impatience. I simply don't find lengthy narratives tolerable. I like long theatrical experiences (I have just finished a text which will require 24 hours playing) but I continually dislocate them, I flood the stage with my own restlessness. The contemporary audience has been well tutored in moving its focus, so much so I wonder how the boulevard play has survived at all... obviously it's a fragment of nostalgia...

The idea given by the French production in Nantes was that every thing takes place in Lear's head, that he is the only living being. Do you agree with this interpretation?

It's not a matter of agreeing with an interpretation. I think a text becomes a public property almost at the moment it leaves the author's

head. It cannot be protected from seizure. However, with regard to this particular seizure, that it functioned as an experience for an audience was clear to me. It possessed great integrity, almost throughout. For my own taste, however, the idea that the narratives occurred inside Lear's head makes the proposition that the real world was a different place and that subsequently this Lear is ill. For me *lie is* illness, certainly in theatre it is illness. It is intoxication, fever, disorder. Thus the world is absolutely real and the actors must believe in every action and every speech. No one at all is crazy. If they are crazy, the audience is let off the pain of its own collusion with this world.

There is however a certain dream-like quality in your play.

However dreamlike it may appear, it is in the real world always. Nothing is impossible in the real world.

Why did you concentrate on the invention, the aeroplane?

The aeroplane is the manifestation of escape. You always have the option of escaping the world if you find it intolerable. That option is suicide, a gift to man, from God or somewhere. But it's the last option. One is forever seeking excuses not to take this option. Lear's flight to the clouds, which he believes may be solid enough to walk on, is a stage on the road to his own extinction.

That explains the way you play with different dimensions of space, the fact that Lear is mostly secluded...

Lear in my play is not mad, Lear in Shakespeare's play is mad; I try to explain how he came to that madness. His madness could not have been the result simply of pain but of the fact that he had indeed a most subtle mind. He is someone who is burdened, beset by too much perception, too high a level of sensitiveness. It occurred to me that Lear was born intellectual and so great was his sensibility that he attempted to become mad in order to protect himself from the pain of his own perceptions. In my play I study the history of Lear from a child up to his middle years. In the obvious sense, it is not a political play at all because Lear has no political conscience. In fact one could argue that conscience is missing from every text I've written.

Since you also stage your plays, could you tell us something about your work as a director? How do you proceed with your actors for instance?

I must have a certain kind of actor around me. He or she has to above all possess a musical sense for speech, its patterns, its rhythms. My texts contain long, disrupted, doubling-back, speeches. Only a skilled voice-user, an actor with a passion for his own voice, can lead us through these exotic groves of poetic idiom. With these I can lift the text to the power of a musical experience. As for working on the text, I refuse all research or outside material. The work is entirely within the room of the rehearsal. If these actors can imagine, they can play the text. But do they need to understand it? No. Because I don't understand it myself. We are playing with fluid. We try to form it. I am the source but not the knowing source. I have an ego, it goes without saying. How could I have survived 25 years in the English theatre without one? But I claim no knowledge of the world. I do not assert the truth. It's all speculative. And the actor has a massive contribution to make. A director is there to release and to employ that creative energy brought by the actor. But we only look to the text. It is a deep pool, whose meanings emerge only by profound immersion.

I was struck by some recurrent, almost obsessional motives in your work, for instance the motif of the prison. Why do you concentrate on that specific motif?

The gaol horrifies me. I write of my horrors. One practises, one rehearses one's horrors if one is a sincere artist. But yes, things occur again and again. When I have conquered my fears I shall cease to write.

The power of the prison motif seems to lie in its aesthetic and emotional impact rather than in terms of its symbolic and metaphorical significance. Do you agree?

Yes, but we must not separate these things. The emotion is the beginning of politics, is it not? My plays exemplify that. Things are felt and then because the feeling is so vast, rendered into torrents of speech. Fear drives the characters. They speak to live. The same with desire. It compels articulation.

In Scenes from an Execution, why does Galactia the painter want to remain in jail?

She feels she has earned it as a privilege. She appears to be a heroine, an exemplary artist, but in fact there are flaws in her character.

She longs to be persecuted, it's her badge, it's her authority. The more I upset the police force, the greater a hero I must be. Her jailing, her incarceration is a proof of the greatness of her painting.

She is recuperated by the political power.

She is, but instantly her work has subsumed her. She knows this, which is why her final 'yes' is sad, the confession of a lost struggle. She, the name Galactia, is a structure of the state, and the personality Galactia has no function. If she continued to rage she would become a quaint object. She understands that. The play's tragic in that regard, though not a major work of mine, I think. The tragedy comes from her elimination by her own talent.

How do you see the relation between the artist and political power? There is another illustration in The Europeans with the painter on the battle field. To what extent does it apply to your own situation, do you feel that sort of relationship between your work and some kind of political power?

The apparently aesthetic struggles experienced by artists—all serious artists—conceals the political warfare raging underneath it. For form is as political as content. Why are my texts the site of such violence in the critical/managerial world of the theatre? You would think the poetic nature of them would seem innocuous. But the contrary is the case. If theatre is released from its bond, the animal let out of the cage—the bars of which are made of socio-critical responsibility—it might inflame the audience. Now no one wants the audience inflamed. Poetry can't be dealt with. It's fugitive. Naturalism is safe. It's inert. The state (in its modern form, i.e. the press and the media) has invested in a silent theatre, either boulevard or the apparently critical, apparently because socio-critical theatre is only part of the empty clamour of populism. Thus to challenge this is to provoke a savage response.

Do you think that Galactia loses her identity at the end of Scenes from an Execution?

Yes. The work, as all work, has been separated from the artist. And this is inevitable, must and will occur. Either the market or the museum will incorporate it. She herself can only become a legendary figure. These legendary figures litter critical history. So what? They are mummies.

Another important aspect is the relation between sex and politics as exemplified for instance in The Seven Lears and Judith.

This is the hardest aspect of my work to discuss. The body, both as totem and object of sexual possession, dominates every play. These bodies are frequently dismembered. Pieces are collected, lost again. They travel the world. They are used as authority, and consequently they are trodden into obscurity in an attempt to abolish their mystical power. Leaving aside Judith, we could speak of Helen of Troy. The play deals with her return to Sparta, she becomes an object of contempt, she is constantly punished by the state. The body is a symbol of liberty, of disorder. Free sexuality, the liberty of desire is a threat to political power, to the order of the state. The human body is the object of all political power. It is the control of each body that is the object of the state. This control extends particularly to sexuality. Desire is the great enemy of order. In the state of criminality and moral decay that exists in England for example, it's not surprising that the government talks of the family as the sole solution to this crisis, because the family is anti-sex, it is the domestication of sexuality, the control of sexuality. In the same way as the sexuality of the body is the enemy of order, the body as a consecrated object is also a totem for authority, the tomb of Lenin for instance. When Khrushchev wished to destroy Stalin's reputation with the soviet public in 1953, it was Stalin's body that he destroyed. So for me as a historian and as a poet, the body will always be the main focus of my work.

More specifically, how do you use the motif of the dismembered body, what significance do you attribute to it?

I cannot pretend to know. I perhaps do not wish to know the source of this kind of imagery, which as you indicate, is frequent, nearly obsessive. It's a fetishism, but more than a fetishism. It extends to the level of the political metaphor in many plays. There is the hand of Trotsky's engine driver in *Fair Slaughter*, and an even earlier example, the corpse of the Unknown Warrior in *The Love of a Good Man*. The whole body is the object of Bradshaw's search in *Victory* and in *The Castle*, Skinner, the lover of female flesh, is bound to the corpse of a male, to be borne about her whole life long. There are aspects of my work I prefer to maintain a silence about, for superstitious reasons.

There is also a tension between sexual desire and the political “superego” that lies behind—that is, the will to carry out a political project. There are also divided selves at that level.

What happens in my play *Judith* is that the woman has a mission, to seduce, but she has no control of her body and its seductive power. She is seduced by her own seduction. A theatre is at its most exciting when nothing is stable, nothing is known. When I write a play, I do not know what I am writing, I don't accept that when two people meet, they have a project which they understand. Stanislavski, Brecht say when two meet, both possess a project, a plan That is not my experience of life at all. What is interesting is that individuals do not know what the result of their seduction will be. Thus a political intention is denied by the ungovernable chaos of sexuality.

I was struck by differences in the way you handle language. Some of your plays are fairly easy to read, but others such as Ten Dilemmas in the Life of a God for instance are much more difficult: the lack of punctuation and the highly rhythmic poetic quality of your style makes reading a challenging task.

Yes, on the one hand, because there is a literary quality in these plays and their content is complex. But on the other, no, because always I find that to stand with other actors and simply read the text out loud, is to illuminate them at once. They are for speaking, after all. As for the punctuation and bold print, these are my own emphases, and not incumbent on any performer to reproduce. *Ten Dilemmas* is rather a simple play, about the passion of a man and a woman who find no physical means of expression. This passion they refuse to allow to die, as many would, believing it a misunderstanding of the body. They become outcasts from the ordered world, much as Starhemberg and Katrin do in *The Europeans*. This delicacy of sentiment requires a form such as I give it. It insists on its own poetry.

Don' t you think these devices render the meaning of your plays a bit obscure?

Obscure? Yes. I have never denied obscurity. But that is to open the entire question of the theatre experience again. Why should the theatre not be obscure? Is life so dazzling in its clarity? And if it is not, as indeed it is not, is it an artist's job to clarify it? What are we? The health service, you see, many think artists *are* the health service. We have to grow up.

You have been called a “modern allegorist”: would you agree with that statement and if you do, how do you conciliate allegory and obscurity, two terms that seem to me antinomic?

I don't see that I am an allegorist. Perhaps I do not understand allegory, but my stories are not pretexts for other stories. How could they be when I am so rarely in control of my own story?

You seem to favour extreme, paroxysmic situations such as the one you develop in Victory. You also exploit all the possibilities of language, even the excesses of language. Would you say that your theatre is an exploration of the limits?

Yes. And only the limits interest me, and only the limits seem to me the landscape of theatre itself. The actor must live at the limits, his courage in inhabiting that terrible territory is his claim on his own mystical power. The live actor, as opposed to the film or television actor, is an extremist. The cold blast of his solitude, his bravery in confronting himself in situations of horror, and his success in finding another to endure it with him, is the profoundest hope of the art form.

More specifically why this violent use of language? What purpose does it serve?

Sometimes it is violent. Sometimes it is tranquil. The two states coexist. But the violence of the tone is only a reflection of the passion of the character to discover his or her freedom in a world which is insufficiently gratifying for modern man... which is in fact, shrunk. This cry of violence is a cry for more authentic experience than is available, not only from society, but possibly—horror of horrors—from life *itself*.



“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.*

Françoise Kischinevsky teaches at the IUFM of Réunion. This interview took place on March 21, 1995 at Kathleen Raine’s London residence.



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.

