

Yeats Revisited by Kathleen Raine

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Abstract: *It is frequently stated that Yeats is a great poet despite the fact that his mind, tastes and inclinations were dangerously or eccentrically turned to mysterious or mystified matters. It is Kathleen Raine's contention that, far from being too credulous, Yeats was extremely conscious of his advances in this type of knowledge; and that words such as esoteric, occultism, hermetic lore and some others are more often misunderstood. The Academy misreads Yeats in the same way that it has misread Blake or Shelley. That traditional background is not the one which the Academy usually deals with. Yeats did not write his poems to provide material for doctoral theses but to heal and sustain our human condition. Yeats's poems related to the Irish Renaissance are concerned with an Ireland of the Imagination. In Kathleen's opinion, Yeats remains a poet in the traditional sense of the word, not in the modern one. The traditional meaning would account for a speaker of wisdom, truth and the tradition of the Imagination.*

Keywords: *Yeats's poetry; Irish tradition; Kathleen Raine.*

Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) was a poet, critic and essayist as well. Her books on criticism have been translated into several languages. Her main concerns have been William Blake and W.B. Yeats, among other poets in which she perceives the "learning of the imagination". The purpose of this article is to analyze her stance as regards Yeats as an occultist or an esoteric since it is not infrequently stated that Yeats is a great poet despite the fact that his mind, tastes and inclinations were dangerously or eccentrically turned to mysterious or mystified matters.

Just to illustrate this point I mention a review of a biography published in the Literary Supplement of *La Nación* as late as 1997. The author, John Carey, reviews a monumental biography written by Roy Foster (1997) and calls Yeats's non-poetical activities, like those concerned with Irish nationalism and the Dublin Theatre, "distractions". He says that Yeats's ideas about the spiritual superiority of the Celts and about his programme of the Irish theatre are a mess of racism, pastoral primitivism, snob and rationalized desires. The most disturbing passage, however, so far as this article is concerned, is the one in which the reviewer says that Yeats's credulity had no limits; that he had been introduced into mysticism and magic by George Russell; that he (Yeats)

took pills of hashish and imagined he was traveling to the heavenly bodies and regions of secret knowledge.¹ The reviewer remarks that these aspects described by Roy Foster can be more or less humorous but become tedious after some pages.

It is Kathleen Raine's contention that, far from being too credulous, Yeats was extremely conscious of his advances in this type of knowledge; and that words such as esoteric, occultism, hermetic lore and some others are more often misunderstood. Kathleen Raine devoted three substantial books to Yeats. Incidentally, as is frequently the case, these books and articles tell as many things about Yeats as about Raine herself; since she, in a way, went through a spiritual itinerary similar to that of the Irish poet.²

Though I have chosen to comment on Kathleen Raine's *W.B. Yeats and the Learning of Imagination*, it is obvious that the remaining books on Yeats written by her are worthy of close attention as well. Her opening remarks exhibit a stance about Yeats not very far from that already mentioned: she refers to an American Professor, R.P. Blackmur, who speaks about disbelief. Kathleen Raine comments critically: "Academy believed that disbelief is a form, even the ultimate form of wisdom" (Raine 1999, 2). She remembers that Orwell, Auden and other writers had accused Yeats of ignorance of the "leading ideas" of the time. She remarks that University or Academic Studies, heavily influenced by materialism and positivism, show this same kind of prejudices concerning Yeats's knowledge and practices.

As first editor of Blake's prophetic books, Kathleen Raine calls Yeats "Blake's greatest disciple". To understand her insight into Yeats it is necessary a parallel understanding of her insight into Blake. In *Yeats the Initiate*, Raine (1986) had declared her purpose: "to indicate a few of the many threads from the rich texture of Yeats's work; to indicate a few of the many themes in which he embodied the beauty and wisdom of his vision and his learning" (13). In her opinion, the Academy misreads Yeats in the same way that it has misread Blake or Shelley. Yeats's acquaintance with a traditional background is not the one which the Academy usually deals with. Yeats wrote his poems to heal and sustain our human condition. Those related to the Irish Renaissance are concerned with an Ireland of the Imagination. This feature, which was also highly appreciated by Blake himself, must not be taken as synonym of "unreal". It belongs to a different realm: a loyalty to which Yeats terms "loyalty to the vanished kingdom" as the main feature he perceives in the Irish tradition, collected in folk songs and folklore in County Sligo. His fairy world is therefore a mythological inheritance enriched through Blake's Neo-Platonism and also through English translations of Indian texts, some by Rabindranath Tagore and some by Ananda Coomaraswamy.

Raine is very conscious of how the thirties assessed Yeats's values and achievements: he had had a nice reputation as a poet not because but in spite of his "ridiculous" ideas. Now, she insists, Yeats was acquainted with a profound knowledge, not the one that is taught in Western Schools. He was familiar with Neo-Platonism through Blake and possessed a substantial lore derived from his contact with the Indian texts, for example the *Upanishads*, which he mentions frequently, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Yeats confesses that along many years he frequented

those mediums who in various poor parts of London instruct artisans or their wives for a few pence upon their relations to their dead. ... then I compared what she [Lady Gregory] had heard in Galway, and I in London, with the visions of Swedenborg, and, after my inadequate notes had been published with Indian belief. [Had not been under the influence of Lady Gregory], I might never have talked with Shri Purohit Swami nor made him translate his Master's travels in Tibet, nor helped him translate the *Upanishads*". (*Selected Criticism* 263)

This is the knowledge of the *Philosophia Perennis*, in which Raine herself participates, very far from the naïve materialism of our age. Golden Age and Iron Age alternate and ancient traditions are the clue to understand Yeats's poem "A Vision", written just before his death. In the critic's opinion, Yeats remains a poet in the traditional sense of the word, not in the modern one. The traditional meaning would account for a speaker of wisdom, truth and the tradition of the imagination; whereas the modern meaning is for her that of a user of words with no authority above the others; the modern poet will be restricted to the concept that materialism is reality.

Yeats shares with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* the lamentation for the passing of those traditional values and with T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* an attempt to rescue them. This is what Yeats expresses poetically:

We were the last romantics – chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of people; whatever most can bless
The mind of man or elevate a rhyme;
But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon the darkening flood. (Raine 1999, 22)

Kathleen Raine comments that "high horse" is Pegasus, now riderless, that is, without a superior force to rule it and that the swan (symbol of the soul) is now drifting in the darkness. Imaginative knowledge belongs to the type that Mozart and Beethoven possessed. It is an immediate, not a discursive knowledge, such as that of love, of a tree, of a waterfall or of a star. This special kind of imagination could be better described with a neologism coined by Henri Corbin, *imaginal*, as the commoner word "imaginative" can distort Raine's intended meaning. In a way similar to that of Coleridge as regards "primary imagination", Yeats wrote in "The Trembling of the Veil":

I know how that revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusk and the child in the womb, and that teaches the birds to make their nest; and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind. (*apud* Raine 1999, 23)

It is not surprising that the young poet supporting these ideas was inclined to study Blake and Swedenborg:

I had an unshakable conviction arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gate would open as they have opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature". (*op. cit.* 24)

English Romantic poets and the Noh Theatre, Dante, the *Arabian Nights*, the Jewish and the Christian kabala, Plato, Plotinus and the oral tradition of Western Ireland constitute a fertile background for Yeats.³ To them the names of Berkeley, Wundt and Pico della Mirandola can be added, and medieval mysticism and alchemy.⁴

In his introduction to the 1928 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats writes:

The other day Lady Gregory said to me 'You are a much better educated man than you were ten years ago and much more powerful in argument'. And I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this change to an incredible experience. (*op.cit.* 25)

Raine remarks that Yeats's sources are Oriental. Orient, for both Yeats and Kathleen Raine herself, does not mean a geographical location but a metaphorical "orientation". It is obvious that her defense of Yeats as regards esoterism implies clarifying the meaning of this term. Luc Benoist, in his book *L'ésotérisme*, writes that for certain Greek philosophers this notion was applied to a type of oral learning which had been transmitted to chosen disciples. This learning may be ascribed to Pythagoras, and, through Plato, arrived in the neo Pythagoreans of Alexandria. Luc Benoist distinguishes three types of esotericism, the subjective, the objective and the essential or metaphysic. He makes clear that esotericism is the internal aspect of religion. What is secret in esotericism becomes a mystery in religion. While religion considers the human being according to his individual and human conditions, esotericism, through initiation, detaches the human being from his human limitations and makes him possible to access to superior states. Cartesian partition between soul and body should be enriched, and is in fact enriched through traditional learning, by a third hierarchy, that of spirit. The organ of the spirit is intellectual intuition or intellect.

Yeats was a deeply committed student of tradition, whose influence leads him to affirm that all religions are one. As a young man he studied at a theosophical society. The teacher was Bohini Chatterjee, who introduced him into the Vedantic tradition. Raine comments that Auden's criticism of Yeats as ignorant of "the leading ideas of his time" exposes his (Auden's) own misunderstanding of what these leading ideas have proved to be, not Marxist materialism but a worldwide spiritual renaissance. Yeats says:

I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality – that the natural and supernatural are knit together, that to escape a dangerous fanaticism we must study a new science; at that moment Europeans may find something attractive in a Christ posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism, not shut off in dead history, but flowing, concrete, phenomenal.

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of being Dante compared to a perfectly proportionate human body. Blake's 'Imagination', what the *Upanishads* have named 'Self': nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but immanent, differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, 'eye of newt and toe of frog'. (*apud* Raine 1999, 35)

Byzantium is therefore a symbol of the highest expression of Christendom. These are Kathleen Raine's words:

The generation of young poets of the 'thirties thought him (Yeats) ignorant because he saw the limitations and dangers of a scientific 'explanation' of the universe; because he used traditional verse forms which include sound and music as integral parts of the language of poetry; and was not left-winged in his politics. (*ibid.* 36)

Yeats himself, a profound student of history from the standpoint of the ancient cosmology – of "sacred history" – created his own symbolic diagram of the 'gyres' and saw the present century not as the dawn of Utopia but as the terminal phase of Western materialist civilization. Together with his Indian teacher Shree Purohit Swami Yeats translated *The Ten Principal Upanishads*. He had got a firm acquaintance with Indian tradition, more or less in the way Raine herself was to become acquainted with it. She considers him one of the great seminal minds of this century and remarks that the language of poetry, far from being something like an ornament, is the language of "an indispensable kind of wisdom" (*ibid.* 36). The following paragraph summarizes Kathleen Raine's appreciation of Yeats as a significant personality without having yet considered, strictly speaking, his poems.

Whereas scientific knowledge is limited to the measurable world, and modern critical writings based on history, sociology and politics, Yeats sought, in the modern world, for all available sources of knowledge of another kind, those immeasurable worlds of meaning, values and truth on which all civilizations before our own have been established. ... (*ibid.* 36).

Byzantium, like William Blake's Jerusalem or St John's New Jerusalem, is an archetype (Lenowski 36). Byzantium is for Yeats the city of Imagination discerned by

the soul. Imagination does not copy Nature but eternity. As if speaking of Ireland's holy books, he has chosen Byzantium at

the moment when Byzantium became Byzantine substituted for formal Roman magnificence, with its glorification of physical power, an architecture that suggests the Sacred City in the Apocalypse of St John. I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even... (*apud* Raine 1999, 42)

The gyres mentioned by Yeats in his poems should be related to the Platonic tradition, in which the Iron Age alternates with the Golden Age. Kathleen Raine goes on to affirm that a poem by Yeats, "Blood and the Moon" summarizes Plato's writings:

For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
Like everything that has the satin of blood,
A property of the living; but no stain
Can come upon the visage of the moon
When it has looked in glory from the cloud. (*apud* Raine 1999, 50)

In *Phaedo* Plato praises Socrates, who by accepting his death makes it clear that wisdom is to be attained in the next world. The following passage from "The Death of Cuchulain" reveals something similar:

There floats out there
The shape that I shall take when I am dead,
My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape,
And it is not a strange shape for the soul
Of a great fighting man? (*op. cit.* 50)

Kathleen Raine suggests another possibility of interpretation, although she anticipates that it is very much tentative. According to her, the gorgeous Byzantine iconography placed in Byzantium would provide enough support to the Christian symbol of the Cross, through which Christ defeated death after having descended into Hell. Thus, the poet would be an emblem of the ruler of two kingdoms, of the living and of the dead. Kathleen Raine's insight is exciting: her intellectual honesty avoids imposing her interpretation yet it must be seriously appreciated. She remembers that Gibbon had observed that Byzantine civilization had replaced reason, which had ruled the classical world, with a faith in the miraculous, *i.e.*, the divine intervention in earthly events. Gibbon had scorned this shift. Yeats did not. Yeats himself, considering sculpture, indicates that the Byzantine art was

no representation of a living world but the dream of a somnambulist. Even the drilled pupil of the eye, when the drill is in the hand of some Byzantine worker in ivory, undergoes a somnambulist change for its deep shadow among the faint lines of the tablet, its mechanical circle, where all else is rhythmical and flowing, give to saint or Angel a look of some great bird staring a miracle. (*op. cit.* 53)

Therefore, it is in Byzantium that an interworld has occurred. It is properly speaking the *mundus imaginalis*, the meeting place of the incarnate and the disincarnate, the conscious and the unconscious self. Watching a tablet Yeats says:

To me it seems that He, who among the first Christian communities was little but a ghostly exorcist, had in His assent to a full Divinity made possible this sinking-in upon a supernatural splendour, these walls with their little glimmering cubes of blue and green and gold. (*ibid.*)

Yeats considers art against chaos while admonishing Ireland in “The Statues”, 1938:

We Irish, born into the ancient sect
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face. (*op. cit.* 58)

A city, a statue, an organization, beauty, vision, change the meaning of a building, which ceased to be a mere building and becomes order against chaos. According to Raine Yeats views beauty not as decoration but as the soul of every true civilization. In 1914, Yeats had written the essay “Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places” and the critic comments that Yeats scanned all these fields of knowledge grounded in the concept that not lifeless matter but living spirit is the source of everything. This knowledge was not only derived from the great teachers but also from the “book of people”, *i.e.*, Ireland. In his stay at Sligo, Yeats found that the dead and the fairies and their apparitions were a daily reality for common people. Kathleen says that Catholics were more aware of the miraculous than the more rational Protestants, although this is the creed to which Yeats’s ascendancy belonged. She goes into details into a much illustrating way. It is very well known that the “supreme state” was for Blake Jesus the Imagination, who bears a slight relation to the historical Christ. For Yeats this Blakean Christ was identical to the supreme self of the *Upanishads* and of all Indian doctrines. Like Blake, Yeats rejects some notions supported by Swedenborg, especially Swedenborg’s attempt to establish “proofs” of his theological system. What must be emphasized here is that Yeats was not improvising. On the contrary, he had a deep understanding of these uncommon issues. By 1937, Raine remarks that Yeats was familiar with the Indian more subtle

thought on the nature of the Self. She states that Yeats “did not study Plato and Plotinus, Swedenborg or Blake as episodes in the ‘history of the ideas’ but because he was tracing a continuous tradition of knowledge, uncovering the traces of that ‘vast generalization’ he discerned in the fragmentary portions he assembles” (Raine 1999, 76). Knowledge cannot be discovered but may be revealed. Yeats lived in the humble hope of revelation. Kathleen Raine conjectured that Yeats might have converted to the traditional teaching of the East. This is another fragment of a poem:

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
‘Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
“I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain”

That he might set a rest
A boy’s turbulent days
Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these. (*apud* Raine 1999, 77-78)

Faith and hope are the self-realizing images of the Imagination. In Yeats’s poem “Mohini Chatterjee”, Raine sees a celebration of the love of life energizing Yeats’s whole work and impelling him into the dark in order to discover whether “providence is there too” (*op. cit.* 79). She comments that perhaps neither the Greek philosophers nor the Christian theologians had attained the depth of Indian teachings, finding that the spirit has value in itself and that the purified soul itself is true.

The descent and return of souls can be directly ascribed to Yeats’s readings of William Blake. Raine states that no poet knows so well to make the multiple overtones of symbolic images resonate as does Yeats. She adds that the learning of poets differs in kind from that of academic scholars, though they might have been reading the same book. Kathleen Raine frequently ascertains that the sources studied by Yeats are unlikely to be found in any university syllabus. These are John Dee and Paracelsus, Lombroso, and the seventeenth-century Reverend Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle’s *Secret Commonwealth of Eaves, Fauns and Fairies*. But neither the works of Plotinus and Porphyry, nor those of Thomas Taylor, nor the *Baghavad Gita* nor the *Upanishads* have been properly studied according to her.

Poetry, for Yeats, was not an end in itself but a means to the higher dedication of the Adept whose work is “To know in order to serve”. Raine discusses the concept of prophecy which, in terms of materialistic ideology, does not mean foretelling the future

but telling the truth of Imagination. Only by way of metaphor or in Swedenborgian terms, “correspondences”, do perceptions relate to one another and the soul is in-illuminated from the higher regions of the spirit. So Yeats again:

When we act from the personal we tend to bind our consciousness down as to a fiery centre. When, on the other hand, we allow our imagination to expand away from this egoistic mood, we become vehicles for the universal light and merge in the universal mood. (*apud* Raine 1999, 102)

Yeats says on Blake: “The man he seeks of is the inner and not the outer being, the spiritual, not the physical. The highest ideas, the ‘human form divine’”. Thus the prophet is the highest expression of that voice of the ‘God within’ affirmed by old traditions:

The mood of the seer, no longer bound by the particular experiences of the body, spreads into the particular experiences of an ever-widening circle of other lives and beings, for it will more and more grow one with that portion of the mood essence that is common to all that lives. The circle of individuality will widen out until other individualities are contained within it, and their thoughts (...) He who has thus passed into the impersonal portion of his own mind perceives that it is not a mind, but all minds. (*op. cit.* 103)

Yeats evoked this world from a standpoint beyond the ‘gyres’ of history. “A Vision” is concerned with the underlying laws of the rise and fall of civilizations. Between Blake and Yeats, Shelley is to be found, a master of symbolic thought. Natural images are a metaphor through which he evokes the soul’s country.

By way of a conclusion a quotation by Shree Purohit Swami rounds up the general trend of this article:

The wise, mediating on God, concentrating their thought, discovering in the mouth of the cavern, deeper in the cavern, that Self, that ancient Self, difficult to imagine, more difficult to understand, pass beyond joy and sorrow.

The man that, hearing from the Teacher and comprehending, distinguishes nature from the Self, goes to the Source, that man attains joy, lives for ever in that joy. (*apud* Raine 1999, 111)

Notes

- 1 As regards this point James Olney says: “(Yeats)... was undoubtedly sincere when he implied that it was for him a matter of the utmost importance to determine what might be called the ontological relationship between himself, a living man, on the one hand and visionary figures, spirits of the dead, and discarnate demonic beings in general on the other hand.” (587)

- 2 There is further ground for this affinity. Suheil Bushrui says: “It was natural that Kathleen Raine should feel drawn to Yeats’s writings from an early age, infused as she was by the traditions of a Celtic heritage; what the songs and folk-tales of Ireland’s past were to Yeats, the border ballads and ancient Scottish legends were to her.” (148)
- 3 As regards the influence of Noh theatre, see Natalie Crohn Schmitt, 254. As regards the Cabbalistic Tree of Life, assimilated to the Irish sacred Hazel, see Lenowski, 36.
- 4 Robert Schuler discusses Yeats’s relationship with alchemy. He remarks that especially the analogy between alchemist and artist fascinated Yeats. He quotes from Yeats’s and Ellis’s *Introduction to the Works of William Blake* the following: “A ‘correspondence’, for the very reason that it is implicit rather than explicit, says far more than a syllogism or a scientific observation” (51). Incidentally, he thanks Kathleen Raine for her insights into this matter.

Works Cited

Kathleen Raine, Kathleen. *W.B. Yeats and the Learning of Imagination*. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1999.