

***Kathleen Raine: A view from France***

CLAIRE GARNIER-TARDIEU

There will be no Christmas card from Kathleen this year, I thought.

It all started with a card, though. More than twenty years ago. I was working as a foreign language assistant at University College Cardiff while concurrently completing a Masters at Nantes University. A couple of French friends came to visit me, offering a book as a gift: *Adieu prairies heureuses*, the French translation of *Farewell Happy Fields* by François Xavier Jaujard and Diane de Margerie and which had just been awarded the ‘Prix du meilleur livre étranger 1979’, or best foreign book in France in 1979. From that date on, Kathleen Raine won over her French audience.

I read *Adieu prairies heureuses* in its beautiful translation and received a real shock. For the first time in my life, I read a story that I seemed to already know – a very personal account of an individual’s life, indeed, but whose universality makes it familiar to everyone.

When Kathleen Raine tells of a little girl born in 1908 amid the ugliness of a London suburb called Ilford who is sent to a small village near the Border during the first world war where she discovers Paradise, she also tells the story of Childhood itself, and on a more profound level, of lost Eden: ‘Yet Bavington, as I remember it, seems to have stood outside the millrace of history, abiding still within the covenant of God, ‘While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, and summer and winter, shall not cease. Time was cyclic, not linear.’<sup>1</sup>

The magic of Kathleen Raine’s writing evokes a world whose texture of interwoven lives has not been destroyed yet. Of course, we do not all belong to the Border Country; we do not all share the same memories of collecting flowers for the Sunday office or drawing water from the well. But we all share the feeling of wonder at the ‘perpetual welling up of the water’, ‘as if at this spot a mystery were perpetually enacted’.<sup>2</sup> Or the feeling of utter panic at the presence of evil forces when leaving the church plunged in darkness after playing on the harmonium a few tunes from the Hymn book on Sunday evenings, all on one’s own, before reaching the safety of the kitchen: ‘There the wave that had swept me in its course would break and those powers of immeasurable evil ebb into the ocean of outer darkness, as I reached the safety of the lamplight, my aunt Peggy’s human presence, and the table laid ready for the breakfast of a morning not holy: the Sabbath, with its heights and depths of the numinous, was over.’<sup>3</sup>

Later, I would discover and translate for Granit, François-Xavier Jaujard’s publishing house, a collection of essays *Faces of Day and Night*, the existence of which Kathleen had almost forgotten. In this small book, I found beautiful pages prefiguring whole passages of *Farewell Happy Fields*, such as the episode of the bull slaughtering. Here, like the theriomorphic gods Hathor or Mythra, or like the Minotaur in its labyrinth, ‘the evil beast’ which had gored the farmer ‘must yet again be slaughtered’.<sup>4</sup> [...] ‘And, as in a Greek tragedy the king is slain behind the heavy doors of his palace, so we waited for the shot, and knew that the great one of our small world, the creature of power, had once again been slaughtered; the strong by the weak, the great by the small.’<sup>5</sup>

Thus, on reading *Adieu Prairies Heureuses*, one goes far beyond autobiographic memories and far beyond the ordinary order of life ruled by religion – methodism. One learns about the story of the soul leaving Paradise and entering a realm of darkness, perpetually enacting the

<sup>1</sup> *Farewell Happy Fields*, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60.

myth of Kore, and the story of the poet who will then strive at recalling the ‘Happy Fields where joy for ever dwells’.<sup>6</sup>

Kathleen Raine’s autobiography will eventually account for three more books –*The Land Unknown*, *The Lion’s Mouth* and *India Seen Afar*. The goal is clearly to find ‘the inner pattern of our nature, of what was predestined for us through what we are’, ‘my allotted task’<sup>7</sup>; it is to seize again the thread of destiny which is chosen by the soul entering generation in the myth of Er the Pamphelian, in Plato’s *Republic*.

The constant allusions to myths or legends from the books of her childhood tend to make of Kathleen Raine’s autobiography a fictitious story telling the truth more than a real one could. Places and dates appear intentionally blurred. In *Le décor mythique de la Chartreuse de Parme*,<sup>8</sup> Gilbert Durand explains that in Stendhal’s novel the literary unity is ‘the unity of a destiny, that is of a character in an imaginary world, in a symbolic setting created beforehand’. His idea is that Stendhal used three devices to reinforce the literary character and transform him through action into a hero. The same devices can be found in Kathleen Raine’s autobiography. She is also given a second identity: Jessie, her second Christian name, notably the first name of her mother, considered the one who bestowed the poetical inheritance upon her daughter. Secondly, the circumstantial events of the author’s life are seen as converging on the line of destiny –that of becoming a poet. Finally, the setting itself: Bavington, Ilford, later on Cambridge, London, Sandaig, can be seen as embodying the ‘path of the serpent’ of living in Paradise and being exiled, time after time, the path of desire which is the way of the poet according to Yeats: ‘Only when we are saint or sage, and renounce experience itself, can we, in imagery of the Christian Cabbala, leave the sudden lightning and the path of the serpent and become the Bowman who aims his arrow at the centre of the sun’.<sup>9</sup> ‘What is all the art and poetry of the world’, writes Kathleen Raine, ‘but the record of remembered Paradise and the lament of our exile? We tell one another, we remind one another, we seek ever to re-create, here on earth, what we saw and knew once, elsewhere and for ever’.<sup>10</sup>

The reading of *Adieu Prairies Heureuses* was decisive for me. I can even say it changed the course of my life. Indeed, I immediately decided to write a doctoral thesis on Kathleen Raine’s works and capitalised on the proximity of London and the British Library to start my research. In parallel, I wrote to Kathleen who advised me to contact Jacqueline Genet as a thesis director.

Then, I met her – the first time was in Caen on the occasion of a conference on Irish Poetry where Kathleen gave a lecture on Yeats. There, too, I met Professor Jacqueline Genet and François-Xavier Jaujard, and Diane de Margerie. And I started studying very diligently the other volumes of her autobiography and her poetic works. And I discovered that the poetry formed a whole in perfect concordance with the autobiography.

One cannot talk about Kathleen Raine’s poetry without evoking her wonderful French translator and publisher François-Xavier Jaujard. The son of the French actress, Jeanne Boitel, a member of La Comédie Française, and of Pierre-Aimé Touchard, a famous patron of the arts as the ‘Directeur des Musées de France’, François-Xavier Jaujard who was to die much too young in the nineties, fell literally in love with Kathleen Raine’s poetry. He was the first to recognize its special beauty and metaphysical dimension. He published three books in French *Pierre et Fleur*, *Vivre dans le Temps*, and *Le premier Jour*, at Granit, his own publishing house. His translations were very subtle and inimitable. In 1978, he also published *Sur un Rivage Désert* in a beautiful translation by the French poet Jean Mambrino and Marie-

<sup>6</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>7</sup> *Farewell Happy Fields*, Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Corti, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> *Anima Hominis, Selected Criticism and Prose*, Pan Books, 1980, (first published 1964 by Macmillan,) p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

Béatrice Mesnet. Later on, he discovered a young translator Philippe Giraudon who translated *The Presence* (the book was finally released in 2003 by Verdier). A book of selected poems entitled *Le royaume invisible*, in which some of Jaujard's other translations, such as 'La colline creuse', can be found, was published at *Orphée, La Différence* in 1991.

In 1999, La maison de la poésie in Paris had indeed the great privilege to welcome Kathleen on the occasion of the publication of *Le Monde Vivant de l'Imagination*, a collection of essays, some of them having been published in *Temenos*.

I particularly enjoy the first one of the collection: 'Unlearning the best education', in which Kathleen Raine writes again on her life in connection with the world of arts and wisdom. Once more she asserts the power of the Imagination, a matter of unlearning rather than learning: 'I have unlearned in the course of my long life more than most people have been given the opportunity to learn. Childhood has nothing to unlearn, and in that initial wisdom I was unusually fortunate.'<sup>11</sup>

On that evening, all her French friends were present and there were five of us to pay homage to her : Basarab Nicolescu, master of ceremonies, himself a great physicist and lover of poetry, President of the CIRET<sup>12</sup> who discovered Kathleen Raine's work through her Blakian studies; Diane de Margerie, a novelist, and Kathleen's best prose translator, Christine Jordis, who wrote a beautiful chapter on Kathleen in a book called *Le Paysage et l'amour*, and long articles in *Le Monde* every time a new translation would appear; Peter Brook, whose profound vision has transformed the theatre, and who so beautifully explained how Kathleen's work is a "song of innocence and experience", and myself who mentioned India as a spiritual homecoming.

Jean-Yves Masson, Jacqueline Genet, both fine translators of Yeats, Philippe Giraudon, Marie-Beatrice Mesnet, Jean Mambrino, one of the best French poets of our –nobody was missing. Some people came with flowers, others with tears of joy. On that magical evening, which was a sort of farewell to France, in a crowded amphitheatre, Kathleen delivered a message which started:

Ladies and Gentlemen, and friends who have honoured me by coming to welcome me this evening, I feel that I have made the short journey (as it is now), not from the earth of England to that of France, but from the so-called 'real world' to the France of the Imagination, the 'realm of gold' (to use the word of the poet Keats) that I have most loved.

Then she evoked her childhood holidays in Le Pouldu where she discovered in a cave by the sea the words 'here I was happy', supposedly engraved by the poet Dowson, her later visits to Brittany and the 'forêt de Brocéliande', to the Luxembourg Gardens under the tutelage of Germain d'Hangest,<sup>13</sup> her first literary mentor, the importance of surrealism, which kept the spirit alive, surrealism which David Gasoyne was the first to introduce to his country, at the early age of seventeen. She mentioned the names of some of her Cambridge contemporaries who lived in Paris, such as the painter Julian Trevelyan who received visits from Malcom Lowry or Humphrey Jennings. Then she talked of her visits to Caen University, where she was awarded an honorary Doctorate, but would not mention she was also made Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by The French Secretary of Culture Jack Lang. She recalled her later visits

<sup>11</sup> 'Unlearning the best education', 'Apprendre à désapprendre', *Le monde vivant de l'imagination*, collection transdisciplinarité, Editions du Rocher, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Centre International de Recherches Transdisciplinaires.

<sup>13</sup> A well-known 'Inspecteur général de l'Education Nationale' at the time, and a severe character according to his reputation.

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to Paris to take part in the Annual Conference of Université St Jean de Jerusalem founded by Henry Corbin. And she ended her speech with a wish: 'It has been a great joy to be with you tonight, once more in Paris, city of Imagination built by so many great artists, musicians, writers, and men and women of the theatre, the western world's capital city of the arts to this day. Long may Paris remain so!'

One may say that France brought Kathleen Raine the audience she sometimes lacked in her own country. Perhaps too, she made us able to remember and live up to a certain idea of our country and more generally of our humanity.

I remember the house in Paulton's square, whose façade was covered by a huge jasmine plant, and the small, carefully-tended garden at the back full of simple flowers, and the room full of books, and Kathleen saying with a smile: 'I have read too many books!', and the cat Daisy Belle, who never missed a stroke of its mistress when she sat back down in her armchair after bringing tea and cakes, or in the evenings, a glass of sherry. I will remember you, Kathleen, and your beautiful blue eyes bringing to the surface of life a whole universe, 'those bright arrivals of the travelling light'.<sup>14</sup>

No card, but for me your words will be forever tangible.

Claire Garnier-Tardieu  
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Claire Garnier-Tardieu is a University Professor at the IUFM of Paris (Postgraduate School of Education). She lectures on Foreign language teaching at La Sorbonne and La Sorbonne Nouvelle. She wrote a Doctoral thesis on Kathleen Raine's autobiography and poetry and translated some of her prose work.

<sup>14</sup> 'Light over water', *The Presence*.