

Agrégation

ANGLAIS

Kathleen Raine
Collected Poems

Sous la direction de
Andrew Johnston

ellipses

Introduction

Andrew Johnston

*Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence
W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"*

Although to some it may not seem so at first, readers entering the poetic world of Kathleen Raine are entering familiar territory; familiar because the world of nature is our common, primordial experience, and because culturally she consciously places herself within Western tradition. Raine on the programme of the *agrégation* is therefore a great opportunity to reconnect with a long literary lineage and become acquainted with one of the key cultural figures of the twentieth century. In a context of environmental crisis and a growing need to understand anew our relationship to the natural world, as well as to find meaning beyond purely materialist thinking, candidates will also perhaps find in the poetess a voice consonant with our times, as expressed in the title of the recent publication *Kathleen Raine: A Voice for the Twenty-First Century*¹.

A useful beginning would be Kathleen Raine's foreword to the *Collected Poems* (2019) from 2000² (This is the edition of the *agrégation* programme this year, to which the page references in the following chapters correspond). As a conclusion, she writes: "Better to be a little fish in the great ocean than to be a big fish in some literary rock pond"³. This rather amusing comparison is typical of the poetess; showing her usual modesty towards her own literary output, it is a sweeping statement that gives pause for thought. The "great ocean" is the ancient tradition and the

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1. Kathleen Raine. *A Voice for the Twenty-First Century*. C. Garnier-Tardieu and J. Stephens eds. (Peter Lang, 2025).
 2. Kathleen Raine, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine* (2000, Ipswich): vi.
 3. *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2019): vi.

artists who have worked within it, an “ocean” which is ever-renewed in each era, what she calls in the same paragraph her master William Blake’s “Imagination”, synonymous with “The Divine Wisdom”. She goes on to mention her other master, the Irish poet W. B. Yeats who, like Raine, turned to the traditions of the East⁴, notably the Hindu scriptures of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. To the modern reader this can all seem rather odd if not, to many, perhaps off-putting, especially as, like Yeats⁵, she shares the belief that “poetry and religion are the same thing”⁶. Whether we share this vision or not, the candidates need to be clear as to what it means, and therefore to read Raine’s poetry with this in mind and on its own terms, and not through a distorting lens of modern commonly held beliefs, which are, again, and this is not the point, true or not. Putting poetry and religion together is itself an ancient practice and approach to the arts, and is not necessarily to do with religious institutions (which Raine could never embrace), but the sense that both are revelatory of a higher order of reality than what modern secular societies and modern science show: the eternal. This reality, shining through the physical world, is the world’s divine substratum, which in the West we can find in Plato and Neo-Platonism, notably Plotinus and the *Enneads*. It is the philosophical backbone to Raine’s own poetry, which she frequently refers to in her own essays.

However, for a high-level analysis of Raine’s poetry, the philosophy must be seen as a backbone and not in place of the poetry itself. Raine is a poet, not a philosopher, and the differences are considerable⁷, although the ends can perhaps be seen as one, as leading to a revelation of the true nature of things. For Kathleen Raine revelation is through poetry. Dr.

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4. For an extensive account of Kathleen Raine’s physical and spiritual journey to India and its ancient traditions, see the fourth and final volume of her memoirs, *India Seen Afar* (1990, Green Books).
 5. The reference to Yeats is from Yeats’s ‘Introduction’ to *Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, (Chiswick Press for the India Society, 1912): “[In India] A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble”, vi.
 6. *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber, 2019): vi.
 7. See Raine’s essay “On the Symbol”, *Defending Ancient Springs* (Golgonooza Press, 1985): “where philosophy makes distinctions, poetry brings together, creating always wholes and harmonies; the work of the poet is not analysis but synthesis”, 108. Candidates are encouraged to bring out the unity at the heart of Raine’s poetic expression within and across poems.

Joseph Milne, in his 2008 *Temenos* paper⁸, makes the distinction between the philosophical and the poetic modes of apprehension, which it is important to bear in mind. He points out that philosophy may have a lot to say about the nature of beauty, but it does not “manifest the beautiful”. This is the work of the poet. He goes on to say:

Both, alike, would account for everything that is and is not, but the poetic imagination apprehends mythically rather than metaphysically. That is to say the relations between the meanings of all things are accounted for by way of an unfolding narrative, the story of things. In this manner of beholding, the visible world becomes the bearer of invisible things, a presencing of a mystery. We enter here the symbolic discourse of nature—the meaning of the stars, the seas, the river, the rising sun. All things intimate something beyond themselves, but which is still themselves.

This final line is useful in our understanding of how a symbol works in Raine’s writing, and within the wider tradition. The stars, the birds, the sun, the tides all reveal something beyond themselves, but they remain at the same time themselves, they do not take us outside what they are to something else. Our gaze is not diverted. For Kathleen Raine, what they are symbols of is within them and at a deeper level than what is apparent only materially. Being still themselves, they are still present as themselves, and presence, as the chapters of this volume argue, is central to her poetry. It could be said that seeing the deeper metaphysical reality makes them fully, or truly, present to us. Raine sets out in her poetry to make this possible. The notion of mythical imagination is also central, that of an “unfolding narrative”⁹, a symbolic discourse. These sometimes very short narratives can be found in many of Raine’s poems: an elderly woman waking at dawn and watching city life at her window, the speaker dipping a hand into sea water to gather shells, Persephone, the angel by the empty tomb, Orpheus. Although there may not be any literal drama or narrative in some poems as such, in the way a play is drama, an action takes place in response to life, the speaking happens from within the drama of life, the poems address nature. All speech in this sense is

8. Joseph Milne in *Temenos Academy Review* 11, 2008: 42. Dr Milne is a member of the academic board of the Temenos Academy.

9. For Raine’s reflections on myth and its symbolic forms and enactments, “the principle of orientation within which all the parts are related” (133), see the essay “On the Mythological”, *Defending Ancient Springs* (Golgonooza Press, 1985): 123-138.

dramatic. Kathleen Raine's poetry grasps life as a mysterious unfolding story, and the poetic voice speaks as a participant and a supplicant within this drama.

The symbol is both static and dynamic in her poetry. This is worth pointing out in terms of how the symbols work within themselves, and across a whole poem or whole poems. Raine makes the interesting point¹⁰ that William Blake's and Shelley's symbols "move into life, unfold a story", while Yeats's generally "though magnificent, remain static". It can be seen in her own poetry how she implements both of these types of symbolic discourse. She puts Yeats's more static approach down to his seeing what is behind the veil in glimpses, so in more static flashes. This stasis, although not exclusively so, is apparent in "On a Deserted Shore": Narcissus beside the pool, the angel by the tomb, the tableau of the trees and the woman by a burn in the concluding poem. At the same time her poetry is in movement, birds criss-crossing the sky, the unsettling dynamic of the tearing of the veil in the first section to "Three Poems on Illusion".

To gain further insight into this philosophical and mythical background, candidates would do well to become acquainted with the critical corpus written by Raine herself, in particular the 1967 collection of essays *Defending Ancient Springs*, whose title speaks for itself. "On the Use of the Beautiful" is an interesting way in. Having said this, candidates are strongly advised not to become so absorbed in this secondary material by Raine as to risk neglecting the crux of the matter in the examination, the poems themselves, a detailed knowledge of and engagement with the texture of the verse, the prosody, and the intricate web of associations of symbol and metaphor. Interestingly, in this collection of essays, and in her works on William Blake and Yeats, she looks to other poets when considering poetry, and not her own works, about which she says very little. She will move from a study of Shelley, to Edwin Muir, to Coleridge or Saint-John Perse, reflections on the nature of myth and symbol, to point to the common ground shared by all, the *philosophia perennis*, or "perennial philosophy" which has manifested in different forms throughout the ages to express the same fundamental reality of a divine substratum to

10. "On the Mythological", *Defending Ancient Springs* (Golgonooza Press, 1985): 134.

the phenomenal world. When she later turned to India, as Yeats did, she found the same ground in the Vedic thought of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita¹¹.

This inheritance plays an important role in Kathleen Raine's conception of poetry and more broadly of all artistic creation. No artist works in complete isolation from their predecessors, she says, and Raine's poetry must be seen in this wider context. As she observes in the essay "What is the Use of Poetry?":

No one's language is his own, it is a collective inheritance. The poet can only say what the language permits; and language is the speech of the ancestors, not the great poets only (...). In Yeats' "singing school" we must learn to bear all those echoes and resonances by which poets can—or could while the texture of the language held—remind us of those words in other contexts, evoke overtones, weaving an unbroken web of memories, allusions, echoes.¹²

Raine's poetry is made up of countless allusions to places, myth, symbols grounded in long-held associations and correspondences. In the term quoted here from "Sailing to Byzantium" Yeats surely means artists must learn from and absorb the great artistic productions of the past to be able to produce something original themselves. For him, it is not by learning theory only that you learn to sing, nor by disconnecting from the past, but by hearing the songs, the myths of the past, the enduring legacies of humanity's creative endeavours.

Kathleen Raine situates this connection, and the modern disconnection from Tradition, notably in the language of myth in the context of her own life¹³. Again, reading her four volumes of biography can be extremely enriching in this respect, if it sheds light on a close reading of the poems. She began her life in Ilford, Essex, in 1908, a suburban place which was to become for her synonymous with the formlessness and ugliness of modern life, a re-enactment of exile following the Fall of Mankind, the banishment from the Garden. Beside this she puts the country of her mother, Scotland, and the north of England, especially the border

11. cf. the non-dualist philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, in which Brahman, the Absolute and unchanging metaphysical reality, is held to be identical with the individual soul, or Atman. This "non-difference" or unity is apparent in much of Raine's verse.

12. "What is the Use of Poetry?", *That Wondrous Pattern, Essays on Poetry and Poets* (Counterpoint, Berkeley, 2017): 14.

13. Kathleen Raine, *Autobiographies* (Skoob Books Publishing, London, 1991), containing *Farewell Happy Fields*, *The Land Unknown* and *The Lion's Mouth*.

country of Northumberland and the village of Bavington where she spent some of her childhood years. This place, along with Martindale in the north of England where she took refuge during the war years, were a rediscovered Edenic country, a reconnection which then became another disconnection in the 1920's positivist Cambridge where she studied botany and zoology at Girton College, a testimony to her passion for the natural world, while poetry itself was not for her something to be studied in an academic environment. This wariness of an academia steeped in materialistic, positivist thinking accounts for Kathleen Raine's remaining somewhat on the margins of the literary establishment all throughout her life, although she enjoyed considerable recognition from some quarters, including France. On 5th June 1987, she was honoured with the title of *Docteur Honoris Causa* from the University of Caen, in 1994 that of *Officier des Arts et des Lettres*, in 2000 *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*, and that same year from Queen Elizabeth II, the award of *Commander of the Order of the British Empire*. Her links with France and French culture were strong¹⁴, shown in her love of Proust, Saint-John Perse, her translations of Balzac, her regular visits to France, including to the British Council, the Sorbonne and the Maison de la Poésie, her winning the *Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger* of 1979 for *Adieu Prairies Heureuses*, which is the translation of the first volume of her memoirs, *Farewell Happy Fields* (1973).

Yet being on the edges of the literary establishment does not mean she has not drawn from it and is not a child of her times. Just as candidates will find Romantic resonance in her verse, so will they find the fluidity of the free verse of her early contemporaries, the Modernists, but with her own reservations and her own colouring. The Modernists were often attempting to reflect in their verse and prose structure, as Virginia Woolf did in her fiction, something of the fragmentation, even the chaos, of the early twentieth century. A poetry of fragmentation is evident in "On a Deserted Shore", but on a backdrop of symbolic and mythical unity. For her, beauty, as she puts it in the essay "On the Use of the Beautiful", is "a unification"¹⁵. She relates this to what she calls "lyric form", and its loss in Eliot's world of the "entre deux guerres". Lyricism in this sense should primarily be regarded as the verse's musical quality, what she means, when talking of James Joyce's gift, by "his natural ear for verbal music",

14. See "Letter to Pierre Emmanuel", *The Lost Country* (1971), *Collected Poems* (2019): 153.

15. "On the Use of the Beautiful", *Defending Ancient Springs* (Golgonooza Press, 1985): 174.

so connected to the root meaning of the word, the musical instrument the lyre. It is more this meaning of “lyric”, or “lyrical”, than the other meaning more commonly given today, as “directly expressing the poet’s own thoughts and sentiments”¹⁶, which is not the primary characteristic of Raine’s verse, preferring as she does the impersonal and the universal to “sentiment”. This musicality is for her a reflection of the underlying harmony to reality. The impersonal song-like quality of her verse is particularly apparent in the incantatory poems on the programme. At the same time she espouses free verse, giving to her expression its fluidity, its natural organic quality, in accordance with her subject matter of the natural world. Yet for her there is an underlying order, or pattern to manifest reality, and this is echoed in her frequent use of more traditional forms, notably the iamb, in trimeters, tetrameters and pentameters. It is what in this same essay she calls in Yeats his adherence to “formal verse” because of his Platonic view of poetry.

The selection of poems for the examination focusses on one collection in particular, *The Year One*. This marks a turning point in her life and literary career, in that it coincides with her meeting Gavin Maxwell whose love she will later lose, and looking in her research to the poet and engraver William Blake (1757-1827) who would become her Master, both spiritually and poetically. It is Blake from the Romantic period who clearly gave Raine guidance thanks to what he calls the “golden string”¹⁷, the common thread to be found and followed across the artistic and religious works of the world’s cultures, linked by a shared distilled wisdom, the “perennial philosophy”. She can in fact be regarded in many ways as a modern Romantic, in her orientation to nature as the gateway to the transcendent rather than religion as such, in her sense of exile in an industrialised, mechanised world, all rich parallels for candidates to explore when situating the poetess in the wider context of her poetic influences. In this collection she develops a more assured poetic voice imbued with wisdom. *The Year One* includes extensive poems such as “Northumbrian Sequence” and “Three Poems on Illusion”, containing autobiographical elements from childhood and her student days integrated into a reflection on the self’s relationship with the natural world, on exile

16. Oxford English Dictionary.

17. *Jerusalem. The Emanation of the Giant Albion*: “I give you the end of a golden string,/ Only wind it into a ball:/It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate,/Built in Jerusalem’s wall”, William Blake, *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom; new revised edition (Anchor Books, 1988): 231.

and glimpses of a greater order beneath the thin film of appearances we take as reality. The reader will find numerous different poetic forms in this collection, for example incantatory “spell” poems, in which the speaker calls, through anaphora, on the elemental powers and the powers inherent in song and sleep to take away sorrow (“Spell Against Sorrow”), and in which love speaks as the sustaining power of the universe (“Amo Ergo Sum”). Quite differently, Raine includes the short poem “Message” comprised of seven lines, capturing the intensity of the moment when a child is called on to look into the speaker’s eyes and see the depth of his or her self. “The Company”, typically, takes a particular moment in life, in this instance the night before in the speaker’s room, to evoke the many spiritual entities gathered in her presence, as she meditates on their origin and their nature.

Next comes the 1973 extended poem of mourning following Gavin Maxwell’s death, “On a Deserted Shore”. The programme focusses on the Latin epigraph, the opening poem, and twenty-two sections of the total of one hundred and thirty, ending on a closing poem. It is a poetry of fragments, of elegiac verse, whose poetic voice moves from grieving, lamentation, to celebration in glimpses of a higher order of reality, a voice in which the deceased beloved is seen firstly as absence and then as a presence dissolved in the wild landscape of sea, bird, stone. A challenge will be to see the underlying symbolic and stylistic unity in a poetry of fragmentation.

Two poems, “Light over Water” and “The Presence” have been taken from the 1987 collection *The Presence*. From the epiphanic moment of rain drops falling on a stream and catching the sunlight, the poetic voice reflects on the nature of a transcendent presence manifesting in time and memory. “The Presence” sees the speaker adopting a position resonant of her romantic ancestors as she listens to the blackbird’s song transcending the ages as the ever-new embodiment of presence.

The corpus also includes four poems from the poetess’s final collection of new poems, *Living with Mystery*, published in 1992, near the time of the founding of the *Temenos Academy* in London, devoted to the arts of the Imagination, both showing how active and creative Raine was in her early eighties. There is a meditative, serene, autumnal tone to much of the collection, which includes poems inspired by her growing interest in Indian spirituality (“Memory of Sarnath”, “Head of Parvati”, “Karma”, “Prayer to the Lord Shiva”), poems of a deeply personal nature, on old

age, to her grandmother (“Autumnal”), a return to her perennial themes and myths (“Lost Paradise: Persephone Remembers”). The long poem “All This” is a meditation on the place in time we find ourselves in, giving a panoramic view of all the miraculous human achievements in the arts and civilisation, alongside the tragedy of existence. “London Dawn” is the poetic instance as urban dweller, awakening to a new day, observing the city come to life. It is typical in its simple localised beginning, widening out in a philosophical depth with mythical foundations. “Poppy-Flower” is the shortest poem taken from the collection, of twelve lines, again taking the simplicity of a poppy flower opening at her door to wonder at its delicate beauty alongside that day’s terrible earthquake in Persia. “Fire” is an extended poem in two parts, beginning again with the local, the domestic; the speaker watching the flames in her hearth, and reflecting on the millenia of natural and cosmic processes needed to create the glowing embers. Candidates will see how this device of beginning in the immediate, the local and widening out is a common trait in much of the poems included in the programme.

The chapters in this volume offer to candidates a wide-ranging approach to the poems under study, sometimes focussing on several poems under a common theme or themes, at other times giving a detailed commentary on an individual poem. Each contributor has his or her reading which might not in all respects correspond to another’s. Rather than try to harmonise interpretations, we have preferred to leave each to his or her approach, thereby showing the richness of multiple perspectives. Candidates themselves can see there is no one reading, and are free to offer their own, as long as it is grounded in a detailed analysis of the text.

Symbols, archetypes and myths clearly play a central role in Kathleen Raine’s poetry. Olivier Hercend, in his chapter “Symboles, archétypes et mandalas : le fonctionnement de l’analogie dans la poésie de Kathleen Raine”, considers the recurring elemental images in the poetry, as well as types or archetypes in characters from myth. He looks at how they all work as a fluid system of analogy, in order for candidates to see what he calls an underlying “dynamique poétique”. Céline Madsen-Boyer in “Le principe monomythique dans la poésie de l’imagicienne Kathleen Raine” studies the poetess’s recurrent images and symbols as the three stages of separation, initiation and rebirth in the monomyth as articulated by Joseph Campbell. Sara Greaves in “Looking for the maternal side of language in Kathleen Raine’s ‘Three Poems on Illusion’”, studies the three parts of the poem as a symbolic groping towards poetic forms to

render a prenatal and early infant apprehension of the world. The reader witnesses the porousness of the self, the disintegration of boundaries, a self dissolved in a fusional relationship to things, in a pre-lapsarian world.

Some chapters can be seen together as addressing the fundamental **notions of “presence” and from a related perspective, “dwelling”**, in Kathleen Raine’s poetry. The polysemy of “presence” is apparent throughout the corpus, as the divine substratum to visible reality, the presence of a person, of a bird, of a spirit, a raindrop, and of course its opposite “absence” which can paradoxically be present or manifest presence. In his chapter “‘Here and Now’: Presence in Kathleen Raine’s poetry”, Adrian Grafe considers aspects of fleeting presence in the light of the thinking of the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien. The poetry itself in this chapter is seen as an act of presence, a celebration of being, involving a dialectic of proximity and distance. Adrian Grafe looks at movement as intrinsic to presence, and presence bringing up the question of absence. In her chapter “La notion de présence dans la poésie de Kathleen Raine : lecture de deux poèmes, « Light Over Water » et « The Presence »”, Cécile Cerf gives a close reading of the two poems from the 1987 collection *The Presence*. She considers “Light over Water” as a meditation in three movements, each of the three stanzas articulating a different perspective on time in response to the epiphanic vision of sunlight caught by raindrops falling on a stream. “The Presence” is seen as a hymn to and dialogue with presence from the perspective of the ageing poet. In her chapter “The transformative powers of dwelling in the poetry of Kathleen Raine”, Isabelle Keller-Privat considers Kathleen Raine’s conception of home in multiple ways. Home is in relation to the past, it rises up in the present, it is the presence of the past in the present. It is also how we are dwelled *in* by poetic language. Dwelling is furthermore seen as the dissolving of boundaries again, including those of the self, to find a wider home.

The dissolving boundaries of the self, and presence bound up with absence, and growing out of absence, are to be found in “On a Deserted Shore”. In his chapter “Glimpses of another order: a poetics of fragmentation in Kathleen Raine’s ‘On a Deserted Shore’”, Andrew Johnston follows the voice of the poetic instance as it moves from dismemberment and grief to moments of a vision of the underlying unity at the heart of the manifest world, in which the deceased beloved is revealed in his universal dimension, thus abolishing the apparent absence. In her chapter “Les hiérophanies chez Kathleen Raine, la permanence du sacré et de la

dimension verticale : une poésie mystique de la joie, de la lumière, de l'ascension et de la Présence", Céline Madsen-Boyer explores Kathleen Raine's recovering a sense of the sacred absent in modernity, moving from incarnation as exile to a vertical dimension in imagery of birds and angels in a movement towards unity.

Other chapters bring to light the **horizontal, earthly, and geographical grounding of Raine's vision as the foundation for a vertical dimension of transcendence**. In her chapter "Les Nords dans « Northumbrian Sequence » de Kathleen Raine", Claire Hélié highlights the specifically northern character to her poetry, Raine as a poetess of the north (be it England or Scotland). The north-south divide allows for the portrayal of further oppositions within the poetry. Yann Tholoniât in "Kathleen Raine : « la nature est un temple » (*temenos*)" looks at the numinous in its earthly manifestation in natural phenomena as *acheiropoieta*, that is, not created by humans, "poetry" born of nature itself, subsequently represented verbally by the poetess. The study elaborates on Raine's vision through considerations of Charles Baudelaire and William Blake. Annick Johnson in "La Transcendance dans l'œuvre poétique de Kathleen Raine" outlines the main philosophical currents and literary influences in Raine's poetry as expressed in the details of her vision of nature that both opens up to and separates us from spiritual realities. The chapter underlines the poetess's openness to the numinous, and her absence of certainties in the face of mystery.

Useful sources

In 1981, Kathleen Raine founded the yearly journal *Temenos*, to give voice to the “arts of the Imagination”. This was followed in 1991 by the creation of *The Temenos Academy*, under the patronage of HRH the Prince of Wales. Candidates are encouraged to visit the site: <https://www.temenosacademy.org/>



Here they will find the programme for the year’s talks and courses of study, and an archive of talks and online lecture papers. Under the tab “Publications” *The Temenos Academy* makes available many books including essays and poetry by Kathleen Raine, and very early publications such as the *Temenos* journal, and its successor today, *The Temenos Academy Review*. References appear to these journals and other publications in some of the chapters of the present volume.

For an extensive bibliography to Kathleen Raine, readers can go to the following link on the site of the *Société des Anglicistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur*: <https://saesfrance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/agr-gation-externe-section-langues-vivantes-trang-res-anglais-programme-de-la-session-2025-16595.pdf> (consulted 17/05/2025)



In addition to Kathleen Raine’s own poetic works, literary criticism, memoirs, prefaces to others’ work, and translations, they will find links to online conferences, in particular the filmed papers given during the international Tribute to Kathleen Raine in the Sorbonne on 24th and 25th March 2022. The conference was opened by a video made especially for the event by HRH the Prince of Wales. Prince Charles was a close acquaintance of the poetess, they met and corresponded, and as he says in the video, he found in her an affirmation of the principles he has long believed in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGt4Dap303Q> (consulted 17/05/2025)



My sincerest thanks go to all the contributors to this volume of essays, and to Claire Garnier-Tardieu for her unfailing support, and devotion to the work of Kathleen Raine over the years. I also wish to express my deepest gratitude to my friend Dr Joseph Milne who first introduced me to the work of the poetess, and to the person and her poetry readings in the early days of the Temenos Academy in London.

Partie I

**Symbols, archetypes
and myths**

Symboles, archétypes et mandalas : le fonctionnement de l'analogie dans la poésie de Kathleen Raine

Olivier Hercend

Introduction

Dans une conférence consacrée à « Yeats et la cité sainte de Byzance », arguant que le grand poète irlandais a transformé cette cité, par l'imaginaire, en symbole d'un passé devenu intemporel, Kathleen Raine affirme que Yeats suivait une « loi des correspondances qui, dans toute œuvre véritable, unit l'image sensible et les mondes invisibles qu'elle manifeste.¹ » Cette notion, ce système de lois de correspondances, entre le sensible et une forme d'arrière-monde qu'il manifeste, est fondamentale pour comprendre la philosophie et la poésie de Raine elle-même.

En effet, dès la première lecture, on trouve ses textes emplies de figures récurrentes. Des oiseaux dessinent leurs trajectoires dans le ciel, des flammes s'élèvent et retombent, des astres dansent au firmament. Ces images élémentaires se doublent d'une galerie de personnages ou plutôt de rôles, de schémas davantage idéaux qu'individuels : l'incarnation du cycle hiver-printemps, qu'elle soit nommée Coré ou Perséphone ; les êtres-miroirs, Narcisse ou Echo ; les êtres vieillissants, qu'ils s'incarnent dans des rois anciens ou en la personne même de la poétesse au seuil de ses dernières années. Autant d'intersections qui semblent dessiner ensemble un motif complexe et mouvant, motif fascinant, certes, mais où il paraît bien facile de se perdre.

1. Kathleen Raine, *W.B. Yeats ou le pouvoir de l'imagination*, Paris, Hermann, 2002, p. 70.

La question dans le présent chapitre sera donc de proposer une perspective sur cet étrange système sous-jacent : non pas une clé de lecture pour tel ou tel symbole, mais plutôt quelques explications sur le fonctionnement de l'analogie en général dans la poésie de Kathleen Raine. Il s'agira également de réfléchir sur la façon dont ces liens entre symboles peuvent être analysés dans le cadre d'un commentaire ou d'une dissertation, pour aller au-delà des banalités sur le sens du feu ou de l'oiseau, et les intégrer plutôt à une dynamique poétique qui les relie et les transcende.

Car c'est cela qui fait leur valeur : non pas leur sens isolé, mais les liens qui les unissent entre eux et en font des révélateurs d'autre chose qu'eux-mêmes, leur participation à un mouvement plus général. Si d'autres poètes voient dans ces correspondances un simple effet rhétorique, une fonction cachée du langage ou même de la psyché humaine, née du besoin pour l'homme de ramener l'inconnu au connu, Raine soutient au contraire que l'acte stylistique et mental de la métaphore, du « ceci pour cela », possède une source ontologique : qu'il y a dans les choses mêmes des « lois de correspondances », dont les hommes se souviennent inconsciemment et que les poètes leur font redécouvrir par la magie révélatrice de l'imagination.

Avant d'entrer dans le détail de cette pensée, un certain nombre de précisions s'imposent quant au vocabulaire. Premièrement, dans le cadre de la pensée de Raine, le mot « symbole » doit être pris au sens fort : il n'est pas un équivalent de la métaphore, qui n'est qu'une figure de langage, mais indique un lien primaire entre le représentant et le représenté, hors de la seule vision poétique. Ensuite, plusieurs autres concepts se rapportent à cette dimension symbolique : on a vu plus haut que Raine pouvait parler de « correspondances », entre autres, mais les plus fréquents sont sans doute ceux d'archétype et de mandala. Ces deux notions ont en outre cela d'intéressant qu'elles relient Raine à la pensée psychanalytique de Carl Gustav (C.G.) Jung.

Au sein de la psychanalyse jungienne, les archétypes sont des figures qui apparaissent dans les mythes collectifs et les rêves individuels, sous des noms différents mais avec des fonctions semblables.² En effet, ils

2. Voir notamment C. G. Jung, "Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious", *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 15-51.

trouvent leur source dans ce que Jung appelle l'inconscient collectif, une strate primaire de la psyché qui est commune à tous les humains. Ces thèmes sont ensuite réélaborés différemment selon les contextes : les mêmes figures seront habillées et cultivées par chacun au gré de son éducation et des mœurs de son temps, mais possèdent dans le fond une énergie commune, que Jung rapporte souvent à la notion de « mana ». Ainsi, la déesse du printemps, ou l'oiseau qui renaît de ses cendres, traversent les époques et les cultures. Dans son ouvrage sur le poète et graveur William Blake, Raine remarque que celui-ci concevait déjà des « images toujours-existantes » que « L'œil Imaginatif de Chacun perçoit selon sa situation », ce qu'elle n'hésite pas à appeler un « monde collectif archétypal.³ »

Le mandala quant à lui est un schéma ou un diagramme, le plus souvent encadré par une forme de cercle (puisque « mandala » en sanskrit signifie « cercle »), représentant le système cosmique et les diverses connexions qui s'y établissent entre le matériel et le spirituel. On en trouve de très nombreuses versions dans le bouddhisme et l'hindouisme, et les traditions ésotériques ont très souvent leurs propres diagrammes (L'Arbre de Vie et ses dix sefirot dans la Kabbale par exemple). Si les archétypes sont des sortes de points nodaux, persistants, le mandala représente leurs devenir et leurs possibilités de permutations au sein d'une cosmologie. Y sont inscrits les cycles des saisons, des époques et même des ères – de l'édénique Âge d'Or à l'époque présente, et peut-être jusqu'à l'avenir du monde.

Or, si Jung voit dans ces motifs des images de la psyché humaine, Raine elle va plus loin. Comme elle l'affirme dans son essai « The Inner Journey of the Poet », elle est intéressée par Jung mais pas jungienne, en particulier parce qu'elle croit en la vérité de l'« Image Divine » (« God-Image ») et qu'il existe entre Jung et elle un désaccord métaphysique.⁴ Pour elle, les symboles ne sont pas le fruit de notre subjectivité mais une modalité de notre rapport au monde, quelque chose d'objectif et d'inscrit à même les choses. L'Imagination est un pouvoir qui nous connecte à une facette non matérialiste de la réalité. Et cette pensée ontologique (c'est-à-dire

3. Kathleen Raine, *William Blake*, Londres, Thames and Hudson, 1980, p. 1 : « Blake himself writes of 'ever Existent images' which may be seen by 'the Imaginative Eye of Every one according to the situation he holds'—a collective archetypal world ». Je traduis.

4. Kathleen Raine, « The Inner Journey of the Poet » (1976), *That Wondrous Pattern, essays on Poetry and Poets*, Berkeley, Counterpoint, 2017, p. 95. Je traduis.

centrée sur l'être, sur ce que les choses « sont »), se déploie à travers ses poèmes et ses essais. La métaphore n'est pas qu'une façon de parler. Pour être « vraie », elle doit correspondre à un ordre de l'univers, et c'est cet ordre sous-jacent que Raine s'emploie à faire ressortir et à expliciter.

Nous allons voir comment cela informe la poésie de Raine. D'abord comment ses poèmes se bâtissent majoritairement sur des expériences simples et quotidiennes du monde, qui sont reliées par l'acte poétique à une harmonie supérieure. En effet, chaque expérience, même la plus primaire, est une façon de participer à un ordre transcendant, pour peu que l'on sorte de la perspective matérialiste et autocentrée vers laquelle nous oriente la culture moderne, pour retrouver ce qui nous lie au cosmos.

Ce cosmos, Raine ne le considère pas comme une entité au repos : au contraire, les motifs et les figures sont tous en réalité les étapes de mouvements, parfois immensément lents comme ceux des étoiles dans le ciel, ou immensément rapides comme ceux de la lumière, qui débordent l'expérience humaine. La poésie doit alors affronter le paradoxe de ces formes qui semblent, à nos yeux, intemporelles, alors que même les montagnes sont un processus tectonique en cours.

Et c'est face à ces paradoxes pour la raison et le matérialisme que la poésie acquiert son importance décisive : elle exprime dans la langue humaine les forces et les figures qui nous dépassent, via la force visionnaire des poètes, dont les symboles unissent notre existence bornée et éphémère à ce plan supérieur qui nous entoure.

Il est primordial de prendre au sérieux cette conception, que l'on y adhère ou non, pour comprendre le fonctionnement des poèmes de Raine, car ils chantent le passage d'un ordre à un autre, la connexion qui unit l'intime au cosmique, et notre existence sur des plans distincts : mortels et isolés d'un côté, et de l'autre emplis par l'univers tout entier.

Du banal au métaphysique : le saut de la poésie

Un premier élément qui peut sembler très secondaire, face à l'immensité métaphysique de certains questionnements, est au contraire fondamental, et doit toujours être gardé à l'esprit. La poésie de Raine s'appuie presque toujours sur des expériences d'une grande simplicité, même enfantines, à partir desquelles se déploient les visions plus larges. Une remarque

qu'elle inclut dans son essai de 1943 « The Writing of Poems », longtemps avant d'avoir atteint la notoriété, éclaire bien cette facette de sa poésie – outre qu'elle rend l'autrice franchement sympathique : parlant de la vie de poète, elle écarte le besoin d'être payé pour ce seul travail, car, à ses yeux, « presque n'importe quel type de vie » peut préparer à la poésie, et l'acte d'écriture lui-même prend peu de temps.⁵ Pour Raine, la poésie se trouve partout, à condition d'avoir l'esprit pour la voir. Aussi, ses poèmes sont pleins de scènes quotidiennes, de petits bonheurs et de moments méditatifs, qu'il est important dans tout commentaire de texte de bien faire ressortir comme bases.

À ce titre, les premiers vers du poème « Shells » sont éloquents : ils décrivent ce loisir enfantin qui consiste à aller mettre les pieds dans l'eau sur la plage, pour plonger les mains sous les vaguelettes et pêcher des coquillages. Et aussitôt la poésie du moment pénètre le poème comme une révélation : sur cette plage où elle joue, la voix poétique se découvre soudain face à une forme d'éternité. Le sable, la mer, les coquillages, n'habitent pas, comme elle, un monde fini d'années et de jours, mais une temporalité qui se compte en « myriades d'années » (autrement dit en millénaires).⁶

De la même façon, le poème « London Dawn », issu du recueil *Living With Mystery*, esquisse une scène intime et quotidienne : une femme, sans doute âgée, a du mal à dormir, et fait des cauchemars qui la réveillent à l'aube. Pour se calmer, elle se tient à sa fenêtre et regarde s'affairer ses voisins.⁷ L'image en évoque bien d'autres, on pensera peut-être à Clarissa Dalloway, dans le roman *Mrs Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf : plusieurs fois au cours de sa longue journée, celle-ci s'arrête pour jeter un œil à sa fenêtre, où elle aperçoit une vieille dame qui regarde elle-aussi la vie qui l'entoure. Dans « London Dawn », c'est en exprimant le contraste entre la banalité de ce quotidien et la violence paroxystique de ses rêves que la voix poétique entame une réflexion plus large, sur la dualité de l'existence humaine.

L'intérêt de ce procédé est double. D'un côté, il permet d'ancrer le sublime de la révélation poétique, qui touche parfois jusqu'au cosmos, en la rapportant à l'échelle humaine. Comme ces figures humaines minuscules

5. Kathleen Raine, "The Writing of Poems" (1943), *That Wondrous Pattern*, p. 55. Je traduis.

6. Shells, v. 2-5. *Collected Poems*, Londres: Faber & Faber, 2019, p. 94.

7. London Dawn, v. 9-12. *Collected Poems*, p. 311-312.

que les peintres rajoutent à un paysage de montagne ou à une étude marine, ces expériences créent un effet d'échelle et une attache émotionnelle. Ils mettent en lumière l'humilité et la précarité de notre existence matérielle : comme le rappelle l'épigraphe de la « Suite Northumbrienne », la vie humaine n'est que le vol d'un moineau, comparée à l'infini.⁸

Mais ils soulignent également que cette échelle humaine est inextricablement liée à d'autres plans d'existence. Comme le rappelle Claire Garnier-Tardieu dans *Le voyage poétique de Kathleen Raine*, la jeune Kathleen Raine a longtemps été passionnée de biologie, inspectant au microscope les incessants mouvements de l'infiniment petit, et découvrant ses interactions constantes avec nos vies.⁹ Des poèmes comme « Spell to Bring Lost Creatures Home¹⁰ » ou « Message from Home¹¹ » dans le recueil *The Year One* insistent sur cette harmonie primordiale, unissant les hommes à leurs « frères » de la Création, y compris les moins évolués. Leurs cycles se combinent aux nôtres, comme les voix graves et aiguës (qui sont de fréquences plus ou moins grandes) se combinent dans un chœur. Pour citer l'essai « What is the Use of Poetry? », « la poésie sous sa forme la plus simple est semblable au chant des oiseaux, même au stridulement des criquets, qui ne fait qu'affirmer notre présence, que dire « nous voici, ceci est notre voix dans le chœur.¹² » »

En termes purement techniques, donc, il est important de suivre le cheminement de Raine, en évitant de se pencher trop vite sur la signification métaphysique de telle ou telle image. Un enfant qui cueille une fleur ou ramasse un coquillage est un événement en soi, qui s'inscrit comme tout autre dans le grand cycle du cosmos. Il s'agit de lui laisser également sa place dans la pensée, de le poser comme tel, avant de lui attribuer une signification autre. Sans cela, on risque d'écraser la dualité, d'aplatir l'image, et de rater la beauté au point même où Raine la fait vibrer.

8. Northumbrian Sequence, I. *Collected Poems*, p. 61-69.

9. Claire Garnier-Tardieu, *Le voyage poétique de Kathleen Raine*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, p. 67.

10. *Collected Poems*, p. 73-74.

11. *Collected Poems*, p. 99-101.

12. Kathleen Raine, "What is the Use of Poetry?", *That Wondrous Pattern*, p. 29. Je traduis.

Une participation commune à l'univers

Si la poésie de Raine peut faire jaillir le lyrisme de n'importe quelle scène, même la plus banale, c'est qu'il naît de l'écart entre nos vies matérielles et un potentiel contenu dans notre expérience, que trop souvent nous perdons de vue. La transcendance est alors une question de perspective : sommes-nous prêts à aller plus loin que notre prise quotidienne sur les choses, pour les connaître plus intimement, et les laisser nous révéler tout ce qu'elles recèlent ?

Ainsi, le poème « Spell of Creation¹³ » prend la structure d'un chiasme : la voix poétique y plonge au cœur d'une fleur pour y trouver une graine, et voit contenue dans cette graine un arbre, puis un bois, puis de ce bois fait jaillir le feu et ainsi de suite (v. 1-4), pour revenir dans le vers final d'abord à la graine, puis enfin à la fleur. On verra là une forme de mise en abyme poétique, que l'on retrouve à l'œuvre dans toute la poésie de Raine – on a déjà parlé des millénaires contenus dans un coquillage et dans le sable d'une plage. Mais pour atteindre la perspective où la fleur, la graine et le bois s'enchaînent ainsi, il faut, selon la poétesse, passer sur un autre plan d'existence.

C'est ce qu'explique l'essai « On the Symbol » : « le langage de l'analogie symbolique n'est possible que si l'on assume qu'il existe de fait plusieurs plans¹⁴ » et que la poésie est évocation d'un plan avec le langage d'un autre plan, et non pas simple expression de soi. En effet, dans le même essai, Raine affirme l'étroitesse du monde vu selon la perspective du « soi » : l'existence matérialiste mène selon elle à s'enfermer dans des mondes divergents, reliés par les seuls impératifs du positivisme. Elle s'appuie notamment sur son expérience de Cambridge, pour affirmer la cécité et l'isolement auxquels mène un esprit scientifique incapable de poésie, insensible à la puissance d'une expression comme « *she walks in beauty* » ou à la forme de transcendance contenue dans le visage humain.¹⁵

À cet isolement de l'esprit raisonnable, elle oppose les capacités imaginatives. Comme l'exprime Brian Keeble dans l'introduction au recueil d'essais *That Wondrous Pattern*, l'Imagination (avec un I majuscule,

13. *Collected Poems*, p. 74-75.

14. Kathleen Raine, "On the Symbol", *That Wondrous Pattern*, p. 119 : « The language of symbolic analogy is only possible upon the assumption that multiple planes do in fact exist ». Je traduis.

15. *Ibid*, p. 86.