

Three Windows to Plato's Academy: A Study of Kathleen Raine's "A House of Music", "Soliloquies upon Love" and "A Blessing"

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Abstract

This paper investigates the basic and essential views that Kathleen Raine, a great though not fully acknowledged contemporary British poet, shares with Plato through commentaries offered on three of her poems. The influence of Plato on Raine is so great that in reading her poems one cannot help but realize the Platonic doctrines governing them. Raine believed Plato to be the philosopher of arts and the Platonic philosophy to be the necessary basis of all imaginative arts. The researcher hopes that this paper would provide fresh insight into our understanding of the meaning of spirituality in the postmodern world and in this process perhaps cast some light on the long forgotten values: Truth, Beauty and the Good. Raine maintains that truth never becomes out of date; it is always itself and is always there for those who wish to avail themselves of it; it can never lose its validity. Raine believes that certain Platonic themes which do not alter in value should remain and form the themes of modern poetry.

Key words: Plato; Kathleen Raine; Music; Love; Blessing; Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

Raine founded the *Temenos Academy Review* in 1980 and

the Temenos Academy of Integral Studies (1990) with the goal of providing education in traditional philosophy and the arts in the light of sacred and spiritual traditions of the East and the West. The Temenos Academy is Raine's contribution to humanity. She declared its task as to "reverse the premises of a spent materialism" which has been the constant obsession of her mind (Raine, 2008, p. 157). She believed that materialism has falsified everything and it is destroying the concept of the soul. Since the materialists disregard anything immeasurable and unquantifiable, they disregard the immeasurable realities such as the soul. This thought, according to Raine, has led to the collapse of civilization. Raine traces this downfall to some of the materialist doctrines of the 18th and 19th century as well as the occurrence of the world wars which shocked everyone and as she believed, ruined the civilization. For Raine, the traces of perennial philosophy are fading away and in modern educational systems it is only taught to know about and not to learn from such philosophy. Kathleen Raine was a firm believer of Plato and speaks of Platonism as the true religion of every great poet. The Platonic doctrines are resonated throughout her writings. The researcher has already discussed the Platonic theories of recollection and immortality of the soul in the works of Raine (Mohyeddin Ghomshei, 2012). This paper will trace the Platonic views on music, his concept of Forms and the theory of One and many in three poems of Raine.

Plato was among philosophers who believed in the good in music and its power to uplift the soul. He firmly believed that music is not solely a source of entertainment as some would declare. For Plato, music education has direct relation with goodness. The proper music, according to Plato, not only will preserve the harmony of the soul, but it will also cause her enjoyment through this preservation. For this reason, Plato condemned and banned all improper music from his ideal society, as it was dangerous to the psyche. In *Timaeus* Plato discusses

the advantages of music for man and commends music as a cure for the ailments of the soul. Plato, borrowing the idea from Pythagoras (c. 570- c. 490 BC), states that the soul and the universe are related by numerical associations and that the proportions in musical intervals are similar to those with which the soul was created (Plato, 2008, p. 35); consequently, there is a harmony shared by the universe and the soul; likewise, there is a similarity among the true music, the cosmos and the soul. Plato then states that music has the power to correct the discorded soul, for harmony is a structure that is remarkably akin to that of the human soul and hearing it is “for the sake of attunement” and all who listen shall be rejuvenated (ibid., p. 38). This therapeutic effect of music on the soul is discussed in detail with the poem of Raine in the subsequent section.

The theory of One and many, is one of the most inspiring ideas of Plato directly related to his theory of Forms. Plato’s account of things in the world is such that things can be both one and many simultaneously. The One and many argument takes place in the dialogue *Parmenides* where Socrates, Zeno and Parmenides have gathered to read Zeno’s book and exchange views on the subject. For Plato this is a natural coexistence where one depends on the other for its survival.

1. “A HOUSE OF MUSIC”

Since the ages of fables, music has ever been thought to have a divine origin and considered to be a sacred gift of gods. Pythagoras, distant master of Plato, thought the whole creation is filled with harmonies, including man who is the masterwork of creation. Man enjoys the most delicate and most perfect of harmonies; he is the diapason of creation; sin and illness are but a discord that falls upon the harmonies of his mind, and in this case good music can tune up man and relieve him from maladies and maladjustments. This music therapy was used by Pythagoras and recommended by all sages including Plato. Music, for Raine as well as Plato, not only has associations with perennial wisdom, but it is also used to expel diseases of both the body and the soul. Plato in several passages of *Timaeus* has very much insisted on the use of music to cure and harmonize the soul. One of the passages is as follows:

...the hearing of sound was given for the sake of attunement. And attunement, whose movements are naturally akin to the circular motions of our souls, is useful to the man who makes intelligent use of the Muses not for mindless pleasure (which is nowadays taken to be the point of melody), but for the disharmony of the soul’s revolutions that has arisen in us: attunement is an ally, provided by the Muses for the soul in its fight to restore itself to order and harmony. Rhythm also was given for the same purpose by the same benefactors, to support us because for the most part our internal state is inconsistent and graceless. (Plato, 2008, p. 38)

Thus we can see that music serves a therapeutic function

in Plato’s philosophy. Plato was concerned with how music, this mighty instrument, could touch the soul and cure it. The poem entitled “A House of Music” from the collection *The Lost Country* (1971) follows similar ideas about music. The poem was dedicated to Margaret Fay Shaw Campbell (1903-1996) who was a great contemporary musicologist. The first part of the poem is very descriptive; Raine has likened the graceful forms created by the pianist’s fingers to lovely independent beings dancing here and there like spirits and angels; that is why music can people our loneliness even in a prison. Raine, in order to demonstrate the power of music, makes several allusions in this poem; the first is to the last act of the play *King Richard II* (1595) by Shakespeare. One great mission of music according to Plato as well as Raine, metaphorically speaking, is to blame people for breaking rhythms and creating disharmonies and harsh discords. One insightful case is in the act five to which Raine made reference. King Richard II was in prison contemplating his sorrowful situation when he suddenly heard a piece of sweet music and felt how sour that music sounded to his ears. The sweet music reminded him of how sourly he had disordered the string of his own life, being so grossly absorbed in the haunts of state affairs; as a result, he murmurs to himself “I wasted time, and now doth time waste me”; he felt badly hurt by the music and thought that though music usually made a mad man wise and orderly, in his case, music would rather make him mad and crazy (Greenblatt, 1997, p. 1009). However, Raine still believes that the king upon hearing this music could “... mend his state/Sweeten the music of men’s lives/And bring his kingdom under rule” (Raine, 2000, p. 151). Like Plato, Raine insists that music contributes to health and it can correct the lives and manners of men. In her essay “The Use of the Beautiful” (Raine, 1985, p. 161), Raine has a still more clear and insightful example of this edifying, admonishing, and elevating mission of music. She brings the example from Leo Tolstoy’s (1828-1910) *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), explaining how the brute personage of the story had an extreme love for music, yet he felt it so unrelated to the beauty of Beethoven’s music that came to him as a sort of torture. The music revealed to him the many possibilities and opportunities which he had been unaware of and showed him the right way to live. Above all, the music came to him as a kind of revelation and this consciousness was joyous (ibid.). One Platonic analysis and interpretation would be that the beast on hearing the music had recollected a reality latent in him; and furthermore, as the harmonious order is a property of the soul, she is not foreign to it. Here, as in the King Richard II example, Raine is attempting to show the potentials of music.

The second allusion is made to Pythagoras who discovered that there was music in the spacing of the spheres and that the stars and the planets changed place and moved

in concord with mathematical equations which is consistent with musical notes. Raine maintains that "Pythagoras could charm and lull/An ignorant homicidal rage/Awake the powers of the soul" and to modulated harmonies received from eternity (Raine, 2000, p. 151). Here, Raine, adopting the idea from Pythagoras and Plato, echoes the soothing effects of music on the mind and the soul.

Hence we can see how closely Raine is following the ancient traditions on the nature of music. Music is an essential part of the structure of the world, and of man, whether virtuous or vicious. Moreover, this is the reason Raine chose the title for the poem; this world is a house of music. The poem closes up with the idea that the divine music, in tune with Beauty, Good and the Truth, has penetrated even the heart of demonic creatures. Here, Raine gives an example of Caliban, the antagonist in the play *The Tempest* (1610) by William Shakespeare, and shows how he could hear the angelic voices in a dream; the voices by which "all who listen are attuned" (ibid.).

2. "SOLILOQUIES UPON LOVE"

The poem entitled "Soliloquies upon Love" from the collection *The Hollow Hill* (1965) is one of the deepest and most condensed expressions of Raine's Platonic ideas, impassioned with her unquenchable yearnings for reunion with her long lost cupid and heavenly home. Raine herself was conscious that she was a Platonist while interpreting the Platonic ideas and imageries. As an introduction to this collection of poetry, Raine has quoted a paragraph of *The Republic*, where Plato first describes his famous allegory of the cave. These soliloquies, though seemingly in far different horizons, remind us of the famous soliloquy of *Hamlet* where Shakespeare lamented man's anxieties and tribulations in this abode of exile, where one even dares not leave for the fear of the unknown and unaccustomed that may come when we have "shuffled off this mortal coil" (Shakespeare, 2002, p. 87).

Raine is very clear in her ideas in this poem, boldly revealing her mystical standpoints about destiny and free will, One and many, God and creation. Taking the Platonic theory of One and many, Raine reaffirms that the One (God) is the source of all that exists which also comprehends the many. In fact, the many, the whole world of phenomena, is just a manifestation of His Oneness. So the many is an integrated part of Him, and as a result, without the One cannot be the comprehensive. God created the infinite worlds of multiplicity, and predestined all that were going to be, from eternity to eternity.

We (all humans) are the many; besides, we are conscious of a power within us which allows us to choose between offerings. This consciousness is the source of our responsibility, but choice is God's fate. Our free will is a part of our predestined story. This is a very intelligent solution to the chronic arguments for predestination or free will. The dichotomy between unity and multiplicity

is also dissolved in the light of a profound look into the mystery. Whereas unity is original and absolute, multiplicity is but subsidiary and relative. The One and the many are one; look deep into the many and you shall find it One. Likewise, the knower is the known and the known is the knower, and knowledge itself is none but the knower and the known. Raine, following Plato, in her essay "The Beautiful and the Holy" stated that "knower and known, creator and creation, are not two universes but One and indivisible" (Raine, 1982, p. 182).

It is in the light of this wonderful idea that "all chance is direction, all discord is harmony" (ibid.), we can sum up the infinitely long story of all creation into a very lovely short story: Once upon a time of eternity there was a most beautiful prince (God) who looked at himself in the mirror of non-existence, and fell in love with himself. He was the lover, the beloved, and he was nothing but love. He was the knower, the knowledge and the known. The universe or you could say the infinite number of possible universes, came into being just because the absolute Beauty rose to the roof of being to show himself. Thus, there is one and only one event that constitutes the whole story of creation; that is the eternal event of love making. Every other event is somehow related to this universal love making which is eternal union. Separation and immeasurable absence called the hell and purgatory are but illusions or Maya. On this strong and steady underlying Platonic basis, Raine has built beautiful castles and palaces of her poetry. Love is a comprehensive concept that has combined all contrasts; it is light, as well as darkness; sight as well as blindness; likewise, love is temporal and eternal, abstract and corporeal; it is the very image of heaven and hell. We hear this mysterious story here and there in the lyric poems of Raine, but it is best depicted in the present poem:

It is my lot to watch the receding of a star
Whose sole light a great darkness first made known.
I am a point whose line is cast so far
From here to there, from then to now
That I can tell of love's outer spaces,
And of a stillness that upholds
All who come there, and seem to fall no more,
But learn that as love's light, so is its darkness. (Raine, 2000, p. 143)

This is one of the main themes of Raine's poetry that darkness is essential for perception of light, as stillness is necessary to understand motion; that is why there is so much light in love and so much darkness; so much rest and so much restlessness. Plato much elaborates on this matter in *Phaedo* arguing that "all things come to be in this way, opposites from opposites". Furthermore, Plato argues that there are two processes between each pair; from one to the other and from the other to the first (Cahn, 1985, p. 76). Thus we can see that the opposites are in urgent need of one another.

The soliloquies abound in allusions to classical literature which give liveliness to the poem, and insight

into the maze of understanding. The allusions do not add any new concept, nor do they complicate the main idea, but kindle candles on the way to light the path; they are employed to somehow express the inexpressible story of man's life. The poem is divided into six unequal parts. The first section opens with a deterministic theory which is itself divided into four stanzas. The idea expressed is that the possibility of life, "beginning, middle and ending" is only one (Raine, 2000, p. 142); likewise, we are not confronted with two offerings to choose between. All we can do is to know more about our infinite journey from rare people who seem to have returned from "the land from whose bourn no traveler returns" (ibid.). No one knows how and from where they receive such secret tidings. We have been told that "we shall see the pattern hereafter/Know the causes and meaning of what now we endure and are" (ibid.). Apparently, we seem to make choices, from wisdom or folly, but our choice is also an integrated part of our life and world. We are, according to Raine, not the knower or the one who feels, but the known, the thing felt and imagined. All the possibilities that seem to be in the realm of many are included in the single possibility or choice of the One. The section ends in a wondrous imagery of light and darkness.

The second section opens outright with probably the most important theory of Plato; the most controversial concept of pristine pattern we have been entrusted with when we descended into this abode of exile. We neither have earned this pattern from the contemplation of nature, nor from the experiences acquired in the course of our developing here. This pattern is our most precious pearl which is worth the whole world; likewise, it is this inner pattern that leads us to Beauty, Good and the Truth; also, it is this star to our wondering bark on the sea of life, this treasure, this greatest gain we received at the loss of our paradise. But still we have gained for the pattern deeply inscribed in our heart; it recompenses all our sorrows and outsoars all our joys. This is the pattern and form we imitate to achieve perfection which is also the source of all creativity, all inspiration and all our dreams. The section is closed with the following assertion and question that:

Destiny is but one,
And when it is accomplished, all is done.
Is this dark center end or beginning of the way I have come?
(ibid., p. 144)

The assertion is Raine's theory of a predominating destiny, and the question can be answered in the light of her belief in eternity and infinity where every moment and every point can be the beginning and the end. The third section is all one continuous flow; a mystical river running down in a jungle peopled with mythical personalities. The poet sings here of the abundant graces, beauties, wonders of wit and ingenuity which pass unnoticed. The poet seems to be giving a commentary on the well-known sonnet of

Wordsworth (1770-1850) which opens as follows "The world is too much with us". Raine maintains that we have lost our sense of wonder; the same wonder that is the beginning of knowledge; yet, our body is a living miracle that provides all that is needed for love. We make love to be away from all imperfection, however, we cannot possess love; rather we are all possessed by love, beauty and all its general laws of attraction that we have been pulled down to the earth.

The fourth section resumes the soul's journey in this world of commotion and clang where the lonely soul even as Christian in John Bunyan's (1628-1688) *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) trudges on in full clash with hindrances and encumbrances until passing from this poor village to a wondrous grand city where she finally meets her dear familiar companion. When the passionate pilgrim meets Jesus on the cross, all her heavy burden falls from her back, all her sorrows end, as if a resurrection-day has come. She is beside herself with joy; a joy that ever remembers not the sorrows of the past, nor does she remember the realm of dimension, the prison of the body and the bounds of time. She finds herself, once again on the verdant peaceful shores. She walks with her companion, her long lost cupid, without legs and sees without eyes and feels the palpitations of joy without a carnal heart, yet all this resurrection seems to be but a dream, for in a moment the grave closes and "Hades' prison gape" and then shuts its chasm. The allusion is to the story of Persephone, daughter of Diana, who is roaming freely in on the meadows, when suddenly the earth opens up and Pluto (Hades), king of the underworld comes out in his chariot, snaps Persephone and returns to the underworld and the chasm is patched up. The soul is imprisoned again in the body, but her memory preserves her faith in "what was, is and is to come" (Raine, 2000, p.146).

The fifth section is the poet's comment of the wild shore. She considers the return to the realm of body a gift from her beloved. The gift is the "calligraphy of inscrutable life" (ibid., p. 147), a record of universal *logos* or wisdom has been inscribed on his heart. All art is but imitation of that *logos*. The soul can read the spirals of harmony from the books of her heart. She can enjoy music, admire Greek's white temples and adore the beatific, fortunate face of Helen. The sense of pleasure and enjoyment is nothing but a feeling and identity between the objects and the portrait within; most wonderful, miraculous, serpentine and strange. Things are beautiful as they are in accord with the primal record of the *logos* writer. This is all we know and what we know is actually what is known eternally in the *logos*.

The last section is a vision of the wonders that are to come; a portrait of the world where "all is transparent, light runs through light" (ibid.). The happy ending of the divine comedy of creation is the end of soul's journey

when, after a long separation, the soul or the Psyche is reunited with her beloved Cupid, and as Shakespeare has said in *The Twelfth Night* (1601) "Journeys end in lovers meeting" (Greenblatt, 1997, p. 1783).

We can sum up that the whole poem is a firm belief in a designer for the creation, an underlying order in the universe and immortality of the soul accompanied by a delightful yearning for returning Home and reunion with the eternal beloved.

3. "A BLESSING"

One of the essential ideas appearing in the poetry of Raine is Plato's theory of Forms which claims that the apparent world, with all its innumerable creatures, is nothing but transient shadows of the eternal world. The metaphor of shadow takes a variety of other images in the works of poets. One very common image is the metaphor of veil and window; when things hide God, they are veils. This image is very common among Persian mystic poets; for them, God is making love with himself in the guise of lover pairs like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Nizami's (1141-1209) Leyli and Majnun among others. Yet, in reality, he was making love with himself and Romeo and Juliet and the other pairs were nothing but names. Raine believes that God speaks to men under different veils and He may say different things to people according to how they look at that veil:

Some think me wise,
Generous and kind-
May that image bless
Your need, your distress.

Others see a destroyer-
May that dread aspect
You hate and fear
Warn from the abyss

I am a mask of God
Among his myriadfold
Who turns to you my face
Who am no-one, no-where. (Raine, 2000, p. 338)

This short poem is unique in communicating this deep mystic idea in such simple insightful words; a mere condensed composition of poetry narrating a long story in human life. The veil is indeed more than revealing a secret; rather, it is a master key that opens so many prison doors.

The poem is consisted of three short four-lined stanzas; the first two speak of two contrasting views people may have when they see the poet. Those who see wisdom and love that are two constructive elements and those who read dreadful destructive messages from her. The poet, free from all selfish considerations, prays for both groups to get a blessing from their optimistic or pessimistic views; the first group to get blessing from approaching the good things they see and the other to abstain from the evil things they feel.

The great wisdom or insight is in the last stanza where the reader realizes that the poet's face is nothing but a mask on the face of God. The reason Raine has entitled the poem "A Blessing" is because when you are dealing with God, you will always get a blessing, no matter what you find in His mask. One clear good example of this enigmatic event is the fact that you get a blessing from a comedy drama as well as a tragedy drama, for behind both there is a Shakespeare who has nothing but blessings to offer you.

CONCLUSION

This paper was devoted to the appreciation and introduction of Kathleen Raine, a robust pupil of Plato and a great protagonist of Plato's divine ideals, yet it can hardly do justice even to the confined area of philosophical ideas of Plato in the literary works of Kathleen Raine. Three poems out of the twelve volumes of Raine's poetry were only discussed. Nowadays poet-prophets like Raine are rather strangers known only to limited circles of elites and true intellectuals. Therefore, it seems that the elites should, availing themselves of the rich tradition of such rare poets, help all humanity to regain their lost paradise of dedication to Beauty, Truth and the Good, and it is hoped that this brief paper could be considered a short step towards reviving the cherished ideals of Platonism, without which the world would tend towards a self-centered, selfish materialism which denies all patterns and criteria and would re-establish a confirmed hell of barbarity even in the midst of heaven of science and technology. Raine sees the only remedy in defending and reviving our mainsprings of Platonic wisdom.

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