

Perennial Values against Modern Decadence

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 13, No. 1 & 2. (Winter-Spring, 1979). © World Wisdom, Inc.
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BY tradition the arts are a channel of Grace. Their betrayal in our time by the divergent forces of mechanized utility on the one hand and the irrational impulses of aesthetic sentimentalism on the other is symptomatic of a profane humanism that inverts the true order of things. Yet there are signs, now that rational thought and quantitative knowledge are all but exhausted by the struggle of reconciling themselves to their own impotence that the metaphysical alternative has become once again the only real choice. The insoluble problems that confront man now make it all the more imperative that he seeks solutions in a knowledge capable of relating the contingent orders of reality to their source in a Divine Norm—that is say from within the integral spirituality of a sacred tradition. The search to transfigure not only the passage of the active, daily-life but the very materials that lend it substance naturally calls into question the role of the arts in relation to spirituality. The absence of an integral spirituality by no means precludes the possibility of securing from its past expression principles and criteria to guide us beyond the humanist impasse. In as much as the primordial nature of man remains unchanged it is always present awaiting that concord of spirits which alone can effect its rebirth.

This, briefly, is the background against which the editorial policy of the Golgonooza Press was conceived. That the English visionary artist William Blake—rediscovered in recent years to be the prophet of a new age of spiritual and imaginative regeneration—should so perfectly lend a name to the venture can hardly come as a surprise to those familiar with his work. In the complex and at times bewildering topography of his imaginative system Blake placed a divine City of art and crafts called Golgonooza. In general Golgonooza can be said to characterize the spiritual interior of all human endeavor. It is thus the eternal locus of all common experience reached through the practice of art serving contemplative vision. Kathleen Raine, in observing, “not outer, but inner space promises to be the theme of the new age”, was pre-echoed, as it were, by Blake: “travelers to Eternity pass inward to Golgonooza.”

The fact that the industrial West (and all it has engendered globally), has now to reap the bitter harvest sown by its materialist assumptions is due in no small measure to its refusal to acknowledge the interdependence of *making* and *knowing*. The inherent contradictions of a situation in which increasing material wealth (or rather consumption) has led to a physical and mental environment in which man is increasingly displaced seems always to escape the notice of the apologists of “progress” who are liable to envisage work as something less than human

dignity deserves. As inevitably as the materialist assumptions of 17th Century science lead directly to the idea of production for profit, so the divorce of active skill in human manufacture from its basis in contemplative criteria lead to the notion of man as a mere unit in a strictly economic system. Be that as it may, that the modern world recovers a conception of man in which his primordial nature resides in the degree of his divine similitude and that the inner-relatedness of craft, skill, work, art and manufacture be realigned to principles that enable them to express enduring truths is now felt ever more keenly.

At a time when the last vestige of an understanding of Tradition (the loss of which understanding might be said to be at the root of all the ills of the present civilization) has seemingly disappeared in the West two men surfaced, so to say, from the very front of the perennial wisdom. The discernment of René Guénon and A. K. Coomaraswamy in matters pertaining to metaphysical truth came as something of an antidote to the current moral, social, cultural and intellectual beliefs of the modern world.

In his work Guénon points to the traditional alliance of art and science on the basis of their being the application of the same transcendent principles. Both, in being so conceived, “admit of a transposition that would confer on them a real esoteric value.” He goes on to speak of this traditional approach, in its nature symbolic, as permitting the crafts themselves to “serve as the basis of an initiation.” This idea is expanded in his *Initiation and the Crafts* where he expounds the contemplative basis of this initiation as essentially having “for its aim a surpassing of the possibilities of the human individual...such as he is in himself.” This view radically challenges the notion of work as a merely exterior activity that barely if at all touches upon the essential nature of the doer who accomplishes it. Moreover, the traditional view is based upon an altogether more comprehensive and unitive grasp of reality for the initiation effected by the operancy of a skill conceived as the application of metaphysical principles serves to “wake up” the latent possibilities of the individual. This, ultimately, restores to him the conscious realization of his spiritual nature and so actualizes the degrees of his being that go far beyond the continuum of reactions and “events” that he habitually regards as being “himself”.

A passage from Coomaraswamy’s essay “Asiatic Art” in *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*, takes up this very point that by tradition art is conceived “in the likeness of an eternal canon; the whole apparatus of life...having been conditioned and determined by a point of view according to which even the humblest necessities and acts of life can be referred to their transcendental reasons...every work of art is in this way potentially a ‘support of contemplation’: the formal beauty of the work inviting the spectator to a performance of a spiritual act of his own, of which the physical work has been merely the starting point.”

It would hardly be possible to point to a shorter passage that so fully presents the quintessence of the traditional conception and its relation to the perennial doctrine of man than the succinct mastery of Coomaraswamy’s one paragraph “Foreword” that opens this publication:

Things made by art answer to human needs, or else are luxuries. Human needs are the needs of the whole man, who does not live by bread alone. This means that to tolerate insignificant, i.e. meaningless conveniences, however convenient they may be, is beneath our natural dignity; the whole man needs things well made to serve at one and the same time needs of the active and contemplative life. On the other hand, pleasure taken in things well and truly made is not a need in us [which is] independent of our need for the things themselves, but a part of our very nature; pleasure perfects the operation, but is not its end; the purposes of art are wholly utilitarian in the full sense of the word as it applies to the whole man. We cannot give the name of art to anything irrational.

In his essay “Athena and Hephaistos” Coomaraswamy points out that “the production of anything made by art [is] the exercise of two faculties, respectively imaginative and operative, free and servile [that] correspond to the ‘two in us’, viz. our spiritual or intellectual Self and sensitive psycho-physical Ego, working together. The integration of the work of art will depend upon the extent to which the Ego is able and willing to serve the Self.”

This doctrine of the “two selves” in turn presupposes a somewhat different “creature-hood” for man than that which prevails in the modern West. To dispense with the metaphysical criteria which the sacred traditions propose as the foundation of the primordial image of man is to disfigure Man himself. In his *On the Disfiguration of the Image of Man in the West*, Gilbert Durand traces the series of metaphysical catastrophes that have led man to falling victim to the absurdity of deriving an interpretation of his essential nature from the very technologies and constructions man himself fabricates and which, for that reason, “pass and become outmoded”. This, Durand argues, “loses him among the ruins of historic time [and] puts an even greater distance between his acts and thoughts and the Absolute Principle which could legitimize them.” For traditional man symbol and sacrament are the liturgical means through which “there operates an enlightening gnosis, the Great Knowledge of Order that explains the ‘wherefore’ of all creation and every creature.” In this view not only is “human individuality moulded on and patterned by creative principles” but, as the traditions themselves bear witness, man is *quieted*: his effort is to individuate the “I” on the symbolic model provided by nature’s oneness, the oneness of the Creation... The ethical effort of traditional man is thus aimed at wisdom (the knowing-wisdom which is gnosis), not the domination of the empty “I” over an alienated world, not the heart-rending reduction of things to the “non-sense” of reason! Primordial man is mirrored in traditional man, whose symbolic consciousness recapitulates potentially within the microcosm every level of reality present in the Macrocosm. This unifying consciousness it is the duty of the arts and science to actualize, restoring the common source of both “inner” and “outer”, mental and corporeal worlds.

Blake was almost alone of his time in acknowledging the active power of imagination as a source of such spiritual regeneration. His rejection of the *cogito* as the model or reasoning unification was directly contrary to the philosophic trend—noted by Durand as stemming from the “schizomorphic” dualist structure of Western intelligence—in which the traditional tripartite

division of the soul “was always disguised to give advantage to one part—sooner or later assimilated to ‘reason’.” (Blake’s Spectre, Urizen, was the spirit of satanic reason who, desirous of dominion, sought in self-deceit continually to impose laws according to his power to effect limitations.)

What this philosophic trend disguised was the traditional ascription of the heart as the seat of the active intellect, which “reads the meaning of things behind their images, as the binding link between the corporeal and the mental worlds. For Blake the active intellect was “The Divine Vision”—“Christ in Every Man”: “This World of Imagination is the world of Eternity...[in which] All Things are comprehended in their Eternal Forms in the divine body of the Saviour”, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination.” Blake continually fought the philosophic science of the Enlightenment based on the *cogito* with its doctrine of the mind as a *tabula rasa* and for whom the cognitive status of imagination was allowed to atrophy to a position that befitted its relegation to the “fictional” limbo of the “unreal”.

The life’s work of Henry Corbin was largely a labor of restoring to the West an understanding of the primordial, metaphysical basis of the imaginative faculty. This he did by recourse to those masters of Islamic gnosis under which the doctrine of imagination reached its peak of subtlety and clarity as a means of spiritual illumination. The West owes an enormous debt to Corbin for this work of recovery and reaffirmation of the subtle realm of the *Imaginal*, the primary and objective world of spiritual presences whose “reality is more irrefutable and more coherent than that of the empirical world.”

At a time of widespread disillusion in which the erosion of all cultural values has followed upon the erroneous assumptions of “artistic freedom”, to turn to a text such as Corbin’s *Mundus Imaginalis: or the Imaginary and the Imaginal*, is to discover the whole subject with new eyes. What becomes clear from Corbin’s text is the necessity for imagination to be adequately situated within the supportive context of a sacred cosmology if it is to escape completely the irrational promptings of individual fancy (the “unreal” prolongations of the Ego—Blake’s “Spirit of Abstraction and Improvidence”). It is, Corbin’s thesis insists, modern man’s “agnostic reflex” that bars him from recovering the imaginative faculty as a means of breaking “through the mutual isolation of consciousness and its object, of thought and being.” Moreover, the impotence sustained by this “agnostic reflex” impoverishes the reality, of this world—“the civilization of the image”—“for instead of being lifted to the level of the world to which it belongs, instead of being invested with a *symbolic function* that would lead to inner meaning, the image tends to be reduced simply to the level of sensible perception and thus to be definitely degraded.” This arbitrary limitation of reality is due to the disappearance of the imaginal realm, which is precisely the spiritual reality, “the ‘where’ of all things” in “the physical universe...intelligible only to a mode of existence whose *act of being* is an expression of its *presence*” in the intermediary structure of a sacred cosmology. This reduction of the cognitive domain in Western consciousness has led to a whole vocabulary of “‘figments’ of the mind, of ‘imaginings’—to wit

Utopian fantasies”: the materialist surrogate! So much so that “might one not have to say then that the greater the success of this reduction, the more people lose their sense of the *imaginal* and the more they are condemned to producing nothing but *fiction*?” Blake wrote: “If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination, approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought he would...leave mortal things...then would he arise from his Grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy.”

As Elémire Zolla explains in his *Uses of Imagination and the Decline of the West*, it was Coleridge who “set out to painstakingly explain what Blake had announced about the ‘Vegetable Glass of Nature’ that mirrors the permanent reality of each object; they and only they can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of Self intuition” (he wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* II, 67), “who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol.” Along with the metaphysical, cosmogonic and spiritual status of imagination, this failure of symbolic consciousness is traced with unerring insight in Zolla’s paper. From the 18th Century cult of the day-dream through Goethe’s attempts to bring back to life archetypal perception through cognizance of natural forms, to the triumph of art as “a mere mimesis of empirical reality” by 19th Century patronage; from Ruskin to the avant-garde of the moderns, through Poe’s prophetic words—“once taste is gone nothing can survive”—the passage to the “shattered dream of the West” is mapped. Zolla concludes, “The perversion of taste makes it impossible to gently go back to beauty, nature and life, to the gateway of metaphysical dreams. It may even be a mistake to try to teach metaphysical truths when taste is absent, which alone can raise the alarm when the border between imagination and fancy is being crossed.”

What remains of the proper use of imagination now that it is “under a ban in the West today”? Zolla adds one more name to show that the traditional idea of imagination had reappeared in Moscow between the wars as it had in the 17th Century Isfahan studied by Corbin: “Pavel Florensky, a mathematician, a scientist who made discoveries in chemistry and physics, an Orthodox priest, and a metaphysician martyred around 1939.”

The border between fancy and imagination forms the starting point of Florensky’s *On the Ikon*. In naturalist art “ascending images” are mechanically constructed from temporal appearances whereas the “descending images” or symbols of true art are an incarnation of superior reality. “The temptation is to substitute fantasies for spiritual images, to take for ideas the dreams that fascinate and trouble the soul as soon as a new way is opened out before it. Thus the spirits of the age labour to retain consciousness within the limits of this world.”

The ontology of the iconic image proceeds from the spiritual world and is the vision of a *presence of superior reality*. “The celestial vision is manifested as a ‘token of covenant’, like the rainbow after the blessing of rain, it is a memorial, the most excellent image, and, since it expresses the first fruits of heavenly gifts to our consciousness and to all life, it is also the promise and disclosure of eternity. This vision is more real and more objective than earthly objects. It is the still centre of material creativity; it is the crystal core around which, according to

its laws of crystallization, earthly experience crystallizes—to become in the finished form a symbol of the spiritual world.”

The fundamental characteristic of icon painting, says Florensky, is the metaphysics of light: “Every manifest thing is light—that is to say everything that is manifested or more precisely, the basis of every experience. But it also means that every existing thing is light, and what does not exist is not manifested, is not a reality. Darkness is sterile...which means that it is placed outside God. In God is every existing thing, every perfect reality; but what is placed outside God is the darkness of Hades, is nothing, is non-being.”

This description of the metaphysics of light, so foreign to the assumptions of material science yet so essential in attesting the subtle genesis of every manifestation of quantitative reality as it is rooted in the supra-quantitative cause of its being, brings us to the imaginative vision of the Welsh poet Vernon Watkins. In the absence of a common universe of spiritual discourse between the artist and his audience, by the authenticity of his intuition and the integrity of his vision the poet may yet serve to awaken the soul to its affinity with the metaphysical realm. It was Aquinas who said that we fail to see the Real not because of absence of illumination but because of its very superabundance. This realization might be said to be the starting point of Watkins’ inspired vision, a vision whose primary symbol is that of white light—the primal essence of light prior to its refraction into the multiple colors of the “spectrum” of all particular things. Just as white light is the pre-existing ground of a world made perceptible by the “shadow” of individual consciousness, so the symbols that comprise the fabric of the poet’s vision rest upon an intuition that penetrates to the heart of particular things as a participation of the divine essence.

In the introduction to his *The Breaking of the Wave*, a posthumous collection of some twenty-eight poems dating from 1937 to 1965, Watkins defends the infrequent repetition of theme and symbol in his poems as “reinforcement of the individual will, even a statement of faith, and that is sacred. Unless there is a constant and a recurrence, there is no depth in the matrix.” In this collection the beautiful sonnet “The Path of Light” gives characteristic expression to Watkins’ sense of the numinous, pre-temporal essence in which not only is the natural world prefigured but, by implication, its consubstantiality with the wellsprings of imaginative vision is itself affirmed.

Light comes from stillness, and the leaves are made
Where a beam kills time’s origin and scheme,
Leaving pure terror, till they wind and gleam,
Twice-born, of marvel, sleeping in light’s shade.
Then to the fair, bright, gentle, savage head
Delight coils upward, bursting from the stem.
Men see not this, for light is blinding them,
Which flies, outrunning time, yet has not fled.

Whether leaves move in wind or, windless, stay,
Light's ancient path revives them. Let the flight
Of birds make one leaf fall, the others play.
That leaf which nourished and was graced with light
Changes no atom, and through senseless night
Moves, in its burial, on the selfsame way.

Two makers of pictorial images who have been the subjects of tributes by Kathleen Raine are David Jones and Cecil Collins, both of whom with Watkins and indeed Kathleen Raine herself, fall outside the modern movement in the arts in as much as they have consciously rejected its aesthetic assumptions. It is worthy of note that all four are able to transfigure the very materials of their art to a level in keeping with the spirit it serves.

For David Jones the invading barbarism of the modern world was nothing less than the disappearance of European Christendom with its accompanying severance of our cultural roots. In *David Jones and the Actually Loved and Known* Kathleen Raine points to Jones' underlying concern that the disappearance of "the mythus", something rooted in all the ways of feeling and living and doing and being that belong to a particular culture" amounts to a deprivation of the sort of creature we judge man to be. For Jones, a Catholic Thomist who followed Aristotle in his definition of art as a virtue of the practical intelligence, man (*homo faber*) was at all times and from his remotest beginnings "the supreme utilist and the only sacramentalist". Not only an awareness of the incarnational nature of history but a deep sense of the numinous in the everyday world informs both the paintings and poetry of David Jones. In particular and as a result of his abiding concern to grasp the interrelation of the utile and the sacramental, Jones was led to a rare understanding of the dichotomous position of the artist in our time and how this implies the betrayal of man himself in the sorts of work demanded of him by the megalopolitan technocracy of modern civilization.

In *The Liturgical Parenthesis of David Jones*, Thomas Dilworth illuminates Jones' poetic method in a study of the "liturgical analogues—deriving from pagan initiation and fertility rites, Hebrew ritual, and Christian worship"—in *In Parenthesis*, his long semi-documentary poem of the First World War. Dilworth explains how, in this work, "the ritual intentions of pagans and Jews harmonize with, and are subsumed by, the liturgy that celebrates the redemptive acts of Christ and makes present their effects. But Christianity does not, for Jones, preclude the validity of the other ritual traditions as, in themselves, significant of the metaphysical possibilities inherent in human life. Liturgy endows life with meaning by uniting in a dramatized hypothesis the ordinary experiences of life with the fullness of belief and desire...David Jones evokes liturgy partly to emphasize the ritual character of military life, which does not always exclude religious significance...moreover, martial and religious rituals sometimes sacramentalize ordinary human acts in analogous ways. In some instances, therefore, military life implicitly reflects and recalls aspects of the eternal economy to which religious liturgy explicitly testifies."

The painter Cecil Collins, while sharing Jones' concern to move beyond the mere "mimesis of empirical reality", instead of the latter's visual sense of the incarnational nature of time and place, works from the imaginative premise of painting as a "theatre of the Soul". In this he follows Blake who wrote of Painting, Music and Poetry as the three ways of conversing with Paradise. In *Cecil Collins: Painter of Paradise* Kathleen Raine explores, from a position of long acquaintance, real affinity and deep affection, the visionary world of Collins' art peopled with a succession of Holy Fools (the eternal virginity of the Spirit), Angels, the archetypal feminine figure of the Muse and the visionary landscape of imaginative space—"the soul's native country". This invisible world "does not belong to nature, nor can it be known or measured in natural terms, being of another order, differing from the natural order not in degree but in kind...the most real of all worlds."

Collins, "England's sole mystical painter", has generally avoided—evaded—the canonic and doctrinal influences of orthodox tradition, being "a painter of the sacred but not a religious painter". For him the symbolic failure of the cult images of our time is an indication of the absence of the spiritual reality that once inspired them. "He believes that it is no longer possible to find a canonic entry into the eternal world, and his work is a lyrical penetration of that world." He shares with Blake "the rare gift of embodying imaginative forms which owe nothing to nature" so that when, as now, the historic tradition, the symbolic terms of the Church, no longer mediate "those visions which inspired their originators, it is perhaps only through such works as his that we can again experience the freshness, the numinous, awe-inspiring reality of the sacred."

Thus Kathleen Raine exemplifies, no less than the other authors we have quoted, the idea of Golgonooza's editorial policy of publishing works that seek to establish a rapport between the irreducible values of the perennial wisdom and the modern artist. In this last, it goes without saying, we do not envisage a special sort of sensibility more or less isolated and refined for its own sake, but the truly "common man" whose spiritual integrity demands that he *be* what he *does*; "a conformity of knower and known, without distinction, in one act of being", to return to Coomaraswamy's "Asiatic Art". "The Whole Business of Man is The Arts, & All Things Common", wrote Blake.

By means of the chosen quotations we have tried to give the reader some idea of the main axis on which Golgonooza's editorial initiative turns. One end of that axis reaches to the centre of very different civilizational and cultural criteria than those of the modern West. The other end rightfully belongs in the hearts, hands and minds of those who wish to align themselves to principles free of the impoverishment of an overstimulated aesthetic appetite and its twin the tyranny of dehumanized labor. In recognizing the depleted consciousness of the modern decadence, Golgonooza affirms the analogical wisdom as the tool of spiritual regeneration in the belief that that affirmation may yet serve, albeit in isolated instances, to collect the soul.

Although a shadow betrays an absence of light, it is not blind optimism that realizes even a shadow possesses something of its cause.

Although all the above quotations are taken from Golgonooza publications it should not be assumed that all titles are currently available. A list of current titles can always be obtained by writing to Golgonooza Press, 3 Cambridge Drive, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP2 9EP, England.