

KATHLEEN RAINE AND LORAN HURNSCOT: AN ASTONISHING SYNCHRONICITY

THIRTY YEARS AGO I fell in love with a book *A Prison A Paradise* (Victor Gollancz, 1958) by Loran Hurnscot. A colleague of mine who lost a daughter to cancer said this book had helped her live her last year, fraught with pain and suffering, peacefully and courageously. When I expressed an interest in the book, he gifted me with his British version, keeping for himself his daughter's copy. The book is a stunning diary. Volume One chronicles the author's doomed marriage and simultaneous love affair, the latter encouraged by her husband dying from consumption. It reminded me of the best of D.H. Lawrence's writing, not only for its frank treatment of human sexuality and love but also for its delicately lyrical descriptions of the English countryside, both its flora and weather.

Volume Two begins after her husband died, leaving her poor and causing her lover to abandon her. It charts her spiritual search, one that journeys into several different, unfulfilling philosophies until she succumbs to despair, finally deciding to take her own life. She knew of a river in Yorkshire, which narrowed to three feet or so, into which the suicidal threw themselves, only to be swept under into limestone caves never to be found again. She settled her personal affairs, disguised herself so as not to be recognized and traveled by train to the river. She was poised upon the bank's rocks about to end her life when the sheer evil of the place overwhelmed her, at the same time vividly aware of the sorrowful presence of past suicides. Hurnscot writes,

I cried hopelessly for a long while. I looked again at the water, and thought of the Dial in my bag, that I meant to swallow to deaden consciousness. A tremendous "NO" rose within me? outside me? I don't know. 'I can't do it-I'm held back-I know beyond all doubt that it is absolutely wrong.' (APAP, p.198)

She says that it was God who prevented her death. She prays, 'I'm in Your hands... You stopped me. You must show me what to do.' (APAP, p. 198) It was the earnest beginning of her spiritual journey. My colleague (now deceased) had considered Loran Hurnscot as great as Lady Julian of Norwich and predicted that she would someday be recognized as such. His great lament was that except for what was contained within the pages of *A Prison A Paradise*, he knew nothing about the true identity of Loran Hurnscot; her name was a pseudonym. I too was as intrigued, but my research yielded nothing. The only clues we had to go on were those that the poet Kathleen Raine revealed to us in her introduction to *APAP*. She says the author wished to remain unknown, for she lived her life according to the Taoist maxim: "Keep your life hidden."

I fell into the habit of reading *A Prison A Paradise* at least once a year. I was not drawn so much to the first diary but to the second one because it addressed her search for meaning; to borrow Carl Jung's phrase, her book could be called 'A Modern Woman in Search of Soul'. I identified with Hurnscot's interest in Ouspensky, Kierkegaard, Jung, Buddhism and Taoism, having read and studied each when I was in my 20s. For a time, she thought (as I had, as a disaffected Christian) she would

find her spiritual home in the East, but it turned out to be a temporary waiting station: when she discovered Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*, she wept with joy and understood that she found her spiritual home within her own western tradition.

Once while browsing in a used book store here in Boston, I noticed a three volume autobiography by Kathleen Raine. I knew Raine to be one of the world's pre-eminent William Blake scholars; I also knew she was a respected poet although I had not yet sampled her verse (I now have and greatly admire her spare, lucid poetry). Holding the small, attractive volumes in my hand, I decided to purchase them with the hope that she might drop a hint about the identity of Loran Hurnscot. I vividly remember reading the second volume, *The Land Unknown*, (pp. 87-91), when Raine began referring to her dear friend Gay Taylor, *aka* Loran Hurnscot. My heart began to pound: at last I knew her identity! Loran Hurnscot (an anagram of what she believed were her two besetting sins, sloth and rancour) was Gay Taylor, wife of Hal Taylor the founder of the Golden Cockerel Press, for publishing beautiful hand-printed books. When I informed my colleague Joe, he sped to the local library and took out all three volumes. I remember being so happy to be able to make him happy because *A Prison A Paradise* meant so much to his daughter and to him.

In 1994 a Henry Miller scholar living in France contacted me about my book, *Thomas Merton In Search of His Soul, A Jungian Perspective*. Ever since I had read *The Seven Storey Mountain* in high school, I explained to him, Merton had served as my

spiritual mentor. He asked me who else had influenced my spiritual life. I shared with him my enthusiasm for Loran Hurnscot, and he asked to borrow my copy to read. I wouldn't part with it. However, it just so happened (!) that he knew Kathleen Raine and wrote to her. Possessing no copies herself of *APAP*, she suggested he start a book search since the book was now quite rare. Feeling bad that he wasn't able to find a copy, I relented and lent mine to him. I never heard from him again. Through Alibris I was able to locate the British version of *APAP* (there is also an American version published in 1958, by Viking). One good thing, however, came of my loss of *APAP*: I now had the London address of Kathleen Raine. Although I am shy by nature, I decided to be bold and write to her to request more information about Gay Taylor. The eminent poet was most gracious by swiftly replying to my query, saying that she always welcomed any inquiry about Gay Taylor whom she considered one of her great, if not her greatest friend. She offered me information about who her husband and lover were, as well as a portrait of her life as a spiritual seeker. She said that although Gay never joined any church, since she considered herself not one of God's sheep but one of his goats, she often sought empty churches where she prayed in solitude. Gay was a great believer in intercessory prayer, and she would write down on a list the names of those she prayed for. Kathleen Raine was very much touched to find upon Gay's death, her own name among the list of names.

To make *APAP* better known, I have searched for copies of the book (I have found four) to share with friends. I

sent a copy to my New Zealand friend Pauline Grogan, a former nun and the author of a remarkable autobiography *Beyond the Veil*. She shared it with her friend Professor Richard Whitfield of England. He had been an antibiotic chemist and science teacher becoming successively a University Lecturer at Cambridge, Dean of Social Sciences and Humanities at Aston University and, from 1993 to 1997, Warden of St Georges House, Windsor Castle. Initially, Richard did not seem unduly impressed by the diary; he feared getting bogged down in the first diary but warmed to early forays into the second. He wrote me concerning this, and I encouraged him to read carefully the second diary: I said to him, 'It's a spiritual masterpiece.'

After further reading, he decided it was indeed a remarkable diary of one of God's goats; he also wanted to know more about Hurnscot. I gave him Kathleen Raine's address and phone number (from the letterhead of her letters to me), and I encouraged him to contact Kathleen Raine. To his surprise, Kathleen was delighted to receive his tentative 'cold' phone call. In conversation, she revealed to him that she was in possession of Gay Taylor's papers, including diaries, letters, and articles. When Richard told me this, I immediately wrote to the poet and asked her if it were possible for me to have the papers. I explained that my intent was to spread the news about Gay Taylor and that eventually I would deposit her papers in a university here in America. She wrote to me,

I have a whole boxful of her letters to her close and lifelong friend the writer Malachy Whittaker. They corresponded at great length. I have no letters from Gay myself; I

probably had a few but did not keep letters, and our relation (sic) was in any case conversational rather than by letter... The work awaits you if you want it and I think you are right in feeling that Gay was a great soul and that her life should be written, though where you would now find the material...

At 94 years old, Raine is in the process of securing her own literary legacy and was pleased to find someone like myself who respected and was interested in Gay Taylor's. A trip to London was out of the question because of a family emergency so I asked Richard Whitfield if he would pick up the papers for me. At first, he was reluctant but his kindness won out, and he traveled to Raine's London home where he had a 90 minute interview with the poet and carried out the boxes of Gay Taylor's archives and secured them in the boot of his car. The next step was somehow to get this treasure trove to me. Again, Richard's kindness solved the problem: he decided to come to America with the papers! I am now in possession of Gay Taylor's papers. It is indeed a treasure trove. Not only do I have her letters to short story writer Malachi Whittaker, but I also have her last diaries, which are astonishing in their charting of her spiritual way. I have also her book reviews, those she wrote for a Women's monthly paper under the name of Scorpio. I also have the original typescript of *A Prison A Paradise* and the letters of correspondence between her and her publisher Victor Gollancz. Without doubt on my part, Gay Taylor is one of the twentieth century's important spiritual commentators. She herself is a mystic who experienced God's love through infused contemplation. Kathleen Raine writes,

There is no mistaking the authentic note that

comes only from lived experience; she writes of the discovery of the divine life with the sureness of Teresa, Julian, and Guyon, and with a like humility.

Her late diary indicates that Gay, who loved her dear friend Kathleen Raine, was not pleased with her introduction to the book. But she kept silent. Her objection was that that her name should not have been mentioned in the same breath as saints, Gay Taylor being herself one of God's goats. She also felt that perhaps such a "pretentious" appreciation of her as a mystic impeded the sale of the book in 1958-59. Later, she wrote that perhaps her book was not for now but for another time. I believe her time is now.

Inside a week after Doctor Whitfield picked up Gay Taylor's letters on October 7th 2002, Kathleen Raine received a phone call from a novelist on behalf of a well known English publishing house. An astonishing synchronicity, for under consideration is a reprint of *A Prison A Paradise*. Finally, I felt vindicated (as would my colleague if he were alive), for there are people like myself in England who feel as I do about the importance Gay Taylor's spiritual memoir. As I was reading Gay Taylor's letters, I found the following:

Perhaps I had better keep the strangest part of my life entirely to myself. The thing of surviving and overcoming suffering may be of some use to others- I did mean that book (APAP) for the despairing...

Obviously *A Prison A Paradise* spoke to the soul of my colleague's daughter who as a cancer victim had looked into the abyss. Loran was there, however, to offer her hope. Perhaps the time is indeed ripe for a reissue of *A Prison A Paradise*. The fourteenth century had not

realized that they had a great mystic living among them. Same is true of our time: Gay Taylor lived through two world wars; she suffered rejection and despair and nearly killed herself; however, she found herself listening to the still, small voice within her and followed it to Divinity who graced her with the gift of infused contemplation, her beloved form of prayer which she described as her 'sunflower' experience. She writes,

Oct 4th. Mist and cold, after yesterday's Indian summer. It was one of the perfect days—the high tide of this present time. I went out for a walk, then picked blackberries on Periton Hill, in that far clump at the edge of the downs. For a long time I sat out on the crumbling turf, sheltered from the wind, with the blue distances below, and warm sun lying over this lovely autumn land. And suddenly I was swept out of myself—knowing, knowing, knowing. Feeling the love of God burning through creation, and an ecstasy of bliss pouring through my spirit and down into every nerve. I'm ashamed to put it down in these halting words. For it was ecstasy—that indissoluble mingling of fire and light that the mystics know. There was a scalding sun in my breast – the 'kingdom of God within' – that rushed out to that All-Beauty; its weak rays met those encompassing ones and the bliss of heaven filled me. (APAP, pp. 201-202)

The above passage is a description of what Gay Taylor called her 'sunflower' prayer. My heart lifted when in her diary she mentions reading Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island*:

Aug 7th. Read Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island* in the train coming back. Yes, he knows: he says that such prayer [a reference to her 'sunflower' prayer], desires no witness, not even that of our own souls. (APAP, p.302)

Thomas Merton, Kathleen Raine, and Loran Hurnscot: such an astonishing synchronicity.