

Plato's Ideas Overlapped and Transformed in Yeats's Later Poems*

Joon Seog Ko

Abstract: W. B. Yeats overlaps and juxtaposes Plato's ideas with his own poetic images and symbols, exemplifying the universality of Yeats's ideas. Based on Plato's definition of art and beauty, and Daimon, he develops his original notions in the early period. But in using the images and symbols of Plato such as the theory of Form, or that of Idea, the immortality of the souls, the cycles of Ur., and a spindle, he definitively establishes the cycles of reincarnation, the inevitability of love, tolerance, and the cycles of history. He does this in pursuit of his 'ultimate reality.' Therefore, he declares that a completion of ultimate reality, that is, the universal wisdom of mankind, can be reached by contrasting the system of his ideas with Plato's philosophy, when read through the lens of various religious ideas.

Key words: W. B. Yeats, Plato, spindle, the cycle of reincarnation, the theory of Form or Idea

Author: Joonseog Ko is professor in Division of Liberal Majors, Chosun University, 61452, Korea.
E-mail: l204kjs@chosun.ac.kr

제목: 예이츠의 후기시에 중첩과 변이된 플라톤 사상

우리말 요약: 예이츠는 플라톤 사상과 자신의 사상을 시의 이미지와 상징으로 중첩시키거나 병치하여 그의 사상에 보편성을 부여하고 구체화한다. 그는 초기시기에 예술의 개념, 미의 개념, 다이몬(Daimon) 등과 같은 여러 가지 개념들을 플라톤에게서 차용하여 자신만의 독창적인 개념으로 발전시켰다. 그러나 그는 후기시기에 플라톤의 형식의 이론, 혹은 이데아 사상, 영혼불멸사상, 우르(Ur.)의 순환과 방추와 같은 이미지를 사용하여 자신의 윤회사상, 사랑의 필연성, 관용, 역사의 순환 등과 같은 자신의 사상을 명확하게 확립하여, 결국 궁극적 실재의 추구의 시스템을 완성한다. 그래서 그는 초기의 다양한 종교단체의 활동으로 획득된 자신의 사상체계를 그리스 철학, 특히 플라톤 철학에 중첩과 대조를 통해서 세계적 시인으로써 갖춰야할 인류의 보편적 지혜인 궁

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극적 실재의 완성을 성취했다고 선언한다.

주제어: 에이즈, 플라톤, 방추, 운회, 형식이론 혹은 이데아

저자: 고준석은 조선대학교 자유전공학부 조교수이다.

I

W. B. Yeats incorporates the ideas of Plato into his main ideas and concretely develops his poetics on the ultimate reality. Plato had enormous effect on Yeats, and some of Yeats's ideas are modelled on the ideas of Plato. Yeats, attending the Erasmus Smith High School in Dublin, was interested in Plato: "At a meeting of a school debating society he pronounced himself to be on the side of Plato and Socrates" (Ellmann, *M&M* 28). After that, he was introduced to Plato's philosophical books from Lionel Johnson: "in 1893 he [Lionel Johnson] presented him with a copy of the works of Plato and made him read it" (143). "Plato's works stood on the study shelf of his tower home" (Conner 149). And "[i]n the nineteen-twenties and thirties especially, he[Yeats] read fairly widely in Plato, Plotinus, Croce, Whitehead, Russell, Hegel, G. E. Moore, and others, searching out whatever he could find on the relation of the antinomies, on the connection between the sphere of reality and the gyres of illusory appearance, on subjectivism and kindred subjects" (Ellmann, *IY* 216). He was receptive to Plato's ideas, and wove them into his writings, after reading Plato's work throughout his life.

Plato, a philosopher who lived in Greece in the 4th century BC, explains in *Symposium* the love of beauty; in *Phaedo* immortality; in *Phiebus* the mean as the ethical ideal; and in *Republic* the ideal nation. His theory of 'Form' is one of his most famous ideas:

Ideas were central to Plato's thinking. They gave life and significance to the world of the senses and made existence purposeful. His best-known exposition of this theory was the "parable of the cave" in the *Republic*. He taught the preexistence of the soul and that knowledge is partly a recollection of a previous life. He believes the human soul was immortal because it was indestructible, and he believed in a world soul and in the existence of a creator who was responsible for the physical universe. Virtue was the harmony or health of the soul, in which the rational part ruled the other parts. (McCready 307-308)

Plato's "a world soul" is Yeats's core image, and the concept of the cycle of Yeats's reincarnation was based on "the preexistence of the soul" and "a recollection of a previous life." Yeats accepts that "the heavenly bodies finally return to their original positions" (Conner 149) in *Republic* and explains the transmigration of the soul and the rise and fall of a history in "The Great Year of the Ancients" in *A Vision*.

From his youth Yeats tried to seek not for an abstract truth but for the ultimate reality. According to a letter that he sent his father on September 12, 1914, he explains what a poet should pursue in his works:

I think with you that the poet seeks truth, not abstract truth, but a kind of vision of reality which satisfies the whole being. It will not be true for one thing unless it satisfies his desires, his most profound desires. Henry More, the seventeenth century Platonist whom I have been reading all summer, argues from the goodness and omnipotence of God that all our deep desires must be satisfied, and that we should reject a philosophy that does not satisfy them. I think the poet reveals truth by revealing those desires. (Ellmann, *IY* 242)

He tries to seek for the reality in his art as "art/ Is but a vision of reality" (*CP* 161).

This study will analyze what effect Plato's ideas had on the ideas of Yeats, and track how they are reflected in Yeats's poems. And it will explore

what reality Yeats contemplates throughout his life as shown in “The Tower,” “Two Songs from a Play,” “Among School Children,” “His Bargain,” and “What Then.”

II

Yeats begins to use more detailed images and symbols than before, after writing the first edition of *A Vision* (1925). As a Nobel Prize winner and Senator, *A Vision*, reflects not only the wisdom of reality but also other themes in *The Tower*: aging and death, the agony and the conflict for old age, love between a man and a woman, the rise and the fall of a history, the cycle of reincarnation, and the cycle of history. He honestly expresses the phenomena which happen to him in poems, trying to escape from a transcendent and ideal world of abstraction. In this way he weaves Plato’s ideas into the images and symbols of his poems.

Yeats directly uses Plato’s name in “The Tower.” He, in the poem, acknowledges his artistic value to be the highest point with the manifestation of “more/ Excited, passionate, fanatical/ Imagination” (*CP* 194), but laments “absurdity” of “decrepit age”. He, reading Plato’s works in his late teens and knowing the ideas of Plato, continues reflecting on these ideas in his 60s. Although writing a history and a tradition of Ireland, Irish legends and folk tales in his first period, he now expounds the Greek philosopher’s ideas. He casts away the Irish Muse to choose Plato as his poetic image:

It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by

A sort of battered kettle at the heel. (*CP* 194)

He declares himself the friend of not the Muse of poetry but Plato and Plotinus. By overcoming his physical decrepitude as “a sort of battered kettle at the heel,” he alludes that he will become a poet and philosopher in the companionship of Plato. However, he, in section 3, writes his “will” and emphasizes the similarity and differences between the immortality of the souls of Plato and his own cycle of reincarnation:

And I declare my faith:
 I mock Plotinus' thought
 And cry in Plato's teeth,
 Death and life were not
 Till man made up the whole,
 Made lock, stock and barrel
 Out of his bitter soul,
 Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
 And further add to that
 That, being dead, we rise,
 Dream and so create
 Translunar Paradise. (*CP* 198)

Albright argues that “Yeats thought of the Greek philosophers as opponents of the flesh and as lovers of bloodless abstraction” (633); Ellmann states that “Yeats used Plato and Plotinus as his whipping boys, and attacked them as ‘all transcendence’” (*IY* 224); Grene that “the shifting register of ‘dream’ in the poems allow for a multidirectional circulation between different apprehensions of reality and imagination” (75). But, I opine that Yeats paradoxically emphasizes the ideas of Plato as “I mock Plotinus' thought/ And cry in Plato's teeth.” Plato urges in *Phaedo* and in *Republic* that although a man's body is extinct, the soul is immortal. Yeats expounds his

ideas of the cycle of reincarnation in *A Vision*. Also, Yeats describes his reincarnation as “being dead, we rise,/ Dream and so create/ Translunar Paradise.”

Then, let us look at how Plato and Yeats understand the cycles of souls. Plato explains the ideas of the immortality of the souls thus:

Let us consider it [soul] by asking whether the souls of men who have died are in the nether world or not. There is an ancient tradition, which we remember, that they go there from here and come back here again and are born from the dead. Now if this is true, if the living are born again from the dead, our souls would exist there, would they not? Because they could not be born again if they did not exist, and this would be a sufficient proof that they exist, if it should really be made evident that the living are born only from the dead. But if this is not so, then some other argument would be needed. (Fowler 243-245) (*Phaedo* 70c 131-132)

Plato insists on the immortality of the souls in *Phaedo* saying that a soul lives in this world, and after dying, is reborn in the nether world, and then existing again here. However, Yeats elaborately and systematically explains his idea of the cycle of reincarnation which is different from that of Plato. He explains it in *A Vision*:

. . . the Greatest Year and the Great Years that were its Months became a stream of souls. To the next generation it seemed plain that the Eternal Return, though it remained for the stream as a whole, had ceased for the wise man, for the wise man could withdraw from the circuit. (*V* 247-248)

One must see all things wind up their careers and come round again to the beginning; one must see everything return to itself and so complete by itself the circle allotted to that number; or that unity which encloses an infinity of numbers, contains within itself the instability of the Dead and yet determines the whole movement, its end and its beginning, and is for that reason called the Number and the Perfect Number. (*V* 248)

His transmigration would reincarnate many times that of Plato. He compares the circulation of souls to that of the Greatest Year. As "the Greatest Year" ends one cycle after spending "its Months," souls "wind up their careers and come round again to the beginning." But, a soul, unlike the ideas of Plato, "for the wise man could withdraw from the circuit," ends "the Eternal Return." So, he sings his transmigration: a human was born in this world because of the formation of the universe; having lived a life and having died; "being dead, we rise,/ Dream and so create/ Translunar Paradise." Therefore, Plato asserts the immortality of the souls: a soul continually circulates from here to there, there to here. However, unlike Plato, Yeats suggests the two cases for transmigration: one is the transmigration of a human and the other escapes from it.

Now, let us explore the image of Plato in "Two Songs from a Play." This poem is a song sung by a chorus in the last section of *Resurrection* which depicts the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yeats carefully explores compatibility of the One and the Many:

We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, . . . that these souls, these eternal archetypes, combine into greater units as days and nights into months, months into years, and at last into the final unit that differs in nothing from that which they were at the beginning: everywhere that antinomy of the One and the Many that Plato thought in his *Parmenides* insoluble, though Blake thought it soluble 'at the bottom of the graves'. (*Exploration* 397)

He argues that a soul is an "eternal archetype," and just "as days and nights into months, months into years, and at last into the final unit," it is possible for the One and the Many to coexist with one another. According to the redemption of Jesus Christ, one can only attain salvation from their own sins. Yeats begins this poem with the scene of the Last Supper before Christ's

execution. He contrasts tolerance of Plato with the “Odour of blood” of Christ, and emphasizes love and tolerance:

In pity for man’s darkening thought
 He walked that room and issued thence
 In Galilean turbulence;
 The Babylonian starlight brought
 A fabulous, formless darkness in;
 Odour of blood when Christ was slain
 Made all platonic tolerance vain
 And vain all Doric discipline. (*CP* 213)

The scene depicts what happened after Christ was executed on the Cross. Christ feels “pity for man’s darkening thought” because of his infinite love for man. As Christ was baptized in Nazareth of Galilee, all Galileans think of him as a neighbor. So, knowing him to be executed by the Romans, they raise “turbulence” for him. The Babylonian astrologers know that carrying out Christ’s execution, the Romans “brought/ A fabulous, formless darkness” in the world. Plato explains the relationship between the law and virtue in *Laws*:

[T]he good man, since he is moderate and just, is happy and blessed whether he is great and strong or small and weak, whether he is rich or not . . . For the things said to be good by the many are not correctly so described . . . To speak plainly, I say that the things said to be bad are good for unjust man and bad for just men, while the good things are really good for good men, but bad for bad men. (*Laws* 660e2-661d3) (Bobonich 89)

Though they have learned and kept Plato’s ideas on law and virtue for centuries, the Romans contradict his virtue, and law, when they execute Jesus Christ. Yeats laments that they are seized with “a fabulous, formless darkness” and make “platonic tolerance” vain by doing such a stupid thing. Therefore, Yeats emphasizes what a human needs to know for a reality in

platonic tolerance.

Yeats, in "Among School Children," uses "Plato's parable" to describe love between himself and Maud Gonne. He compares Maud Gonne, his lover, to Leda, and their love to the parable of Plato:

I dream of a Leaden body, bent
 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
 Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
 That changed some childish day to tragedy—
 Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
 Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
 Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
 Into the yolk and white of the one shell. (*CP* 216)

He commemorates his love Maud Gonne by comparing theirs to their love between Zeus and Leda, making it a motif of the poem. He paints his unrequited love for her as "a harsh reproof" and "tragedy". He compares their loves to the parable of Plato. Plato explains love between a man and a woman in *Symposium*. The comic dramatist Aristophanes says that there were a man, a woman, and the union of the two, or androgyny in the beginning of the Universe:

In the first place, let me treat of the nature of man and what has happened to it; for the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word "androgynous" is only preserved as a term of reproach. In the second, the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members, and the remainder to correspond. He could walk upright as men now do, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he

could also roll over and over at a great pace, turning on his four hands and four feet, eight in all, like tumbles going over and over with their legs in the air; this was when he wanted to run fast. Now the sexes were three, and such as I have described them; because the sun, moon, and earth are three; and the man was originally the child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon, which is made up of sun and the earth, and they were all round and moved round and round like their parents. (Jowett 179)

‘Androgyny’ was stuck with their backs to one another; their shape was a spherical shape. As a man is a son of the sun, a woman that of the earth, and the union of the two that of the moon, they have great powers and abilities. Because of this, they fall into arrogance. As “you might divide an egg with a hair” (180), Zeus divides Androgyny with a man and a woman with his lightning in order to teach them modesty. Yeats, using a platonic parable, compares his love with Maud Gonno to “the yolk and white of the one shell” (*CP* 216). He explains the love between a man and a woman to pursue the harmony of both sexes. Because “Love is the search for lost unity” (*A William Butler Yeats Encyclopedia* 308). He regards her as finding opposite sex for his lost sex.

Yeats also sings of Plato’s theory of ‘Form’ in section 6 of the poem. “Plato taught that the physical world, mutable and corruptible, was only a humble shadow, an undignified copy of a world of ideal Forms” (Albright 670). Yeats evokes Plato’s Ideas and thinks that it is “nothing” (Ellmann, *M&M* 255-256) for him to achieve everything:

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
 Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;

 Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird. (*CP* 217)

As “the greatest men are owls, scarecrows, by the time their fame has come” (Jeffares 253), he lastly curses old age. He tells us his achievement in old age as “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird,” and emphasizes the ultimate reality of humans.

Plato's theory of Form regards the material world which we can see as not real, but an image or an illusion of reality. His Form is an archetype of all sorts of things, and has properties we recognize not with our eyes but with our reason, or Logos. He divides the world into two realities: the apparent world which consistently changes and the unseen world of Forms which cannot change. The theory of Forms can be explained using the example of a bed:

Similarly, in Book X of the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes three types of thing to which the word “[bed]” can be given — a painting of a bed, a bed created by a carpenter, and the Form — and he holds that they constitute a series of increasing reality. The painter does not make a real bed, but only an image of a bed, and the product of the carpenter is not completely real either. It is only the Form that is really real [596e-597a] (Kraut 11)

There are three kinds of bed: first, a real bed as the product of divine craftsmanship; second, “a bed created by a carpenter”; third, “a painting of a bed” drawn by a painter or an imitator. The bed which an artist, such as a painter, draws, and the bed which a maker, such as a carpenter, makes are not a bed for Form but only “an image of a bed” or “the product”. A painter and a carpenter can make things which we can see around us and we can know by their feeling. But they do not make the “actual real thing”, or “the real bed” (Waterfield 346). A carpenter is a craftsman of a bed, a painter imitator, but the true maker of bed, God. “God has produced only that one real bed. The restriction to only one might have been his own

choice, or it might just be impossible for him to make more than one. But God never has, and never could, create two or more such beds” (347). Like this, Plato regards a bed which God created as a reality. It is called a bed of Form, or a bed of Idea. Therefore Yeats explains that we cannot see a bed of Form with our eyes, but can only recognize it with a reason, or logos.

Yeats accepts Plato’s Idea, or Form, and explains his theory of reality. He incorporates Plato’s Idea into *A Vision*. “A phaseless sphere” is “an undivided reality” (*V* 247) and “the first time ... the Platonic doctrine of imitation.” Here, “an undivided reality” is his ultimate reality and is similar to Plato’s Idea:

So far the Ideas had been everything, the individual nothing; beauty and truth alone had mattered to Plato and Socrates. (*V* 247)

Yeats, like Plotinus, seeks for Ideas which reside not in all things but in each individual. He uses the double cone, or vortex and describes the cycle of humans or history in order to explain the Idea of Plato. A human can achieve his ultimate reality by resulting in functioning *Four Faculties* and *Four Principles* in his life and arriving at “a phaseless sphere”. Therefore Yeats, in the poem, compares his love for Maud Gonne to the parable of Plato and emphasizes his inevitable love. And he also suggests how to arrive at the ultimate reality through this Idea.

In “His Bargain”, Yeats describes love between a man and a woman using Plato’s spindle. It is a very difficult poem. Ur.’s experiences in the nether world in *Republic* provides the basis of the poem in that a man meets his antithetical woman. A poetic narrator begins to ask a rhetorical question “What set it whirling round?”:

Who talks of Plato's spindle;
 What set it whirling round?
 Eternity may dwindle,
 Time is unwound,
 Dan and Jerry Lout
 Change their loves about.

However they may take it,
 Before the thread began
 I made, and may not break it
 When the last thread has run,
 A bargain with that hair
 And all the windings there. (CP 263-264)

Knowing what Plato's spindle is and how it functions, we can understand the poem well. Yeats uses it to explain the cycle of life or love between a man and a woman. Plato elaborately explains his spindle in *Republic*:

The spindle's stem and book are made of adamant, while its whorl consists of various substances, including adamant. In appearance, the whorl basically looks whorls here on earth, but, given Er's description, one is bound to picture it as if there was first a large hollow whorl, with its insides completely scooped out, and with a second, smaller one lying snugly inside it (like those jars which fit into one another), and then, on the same arrangement, a third whorl, a fourth one, and finally four others. For he said that there were eight concentric whorls in all, and that their circular rims, looked at from above, formed a solid surface, as if there were just a single whorl attached to the stem, which was driven right through the middle of the eighth whorl. (Waterfield 374)

The spindle consists of an axis, a loop, and a whorl. The whole spindle rotates in the same direction. It maintains a steady speed because of the weight of whorl, draws out thread, and makes to wind thread on a spool. The whorl interknobs as eight dishes have a shape. They overlap each other

and seven circles rotate in the opposite direction against the whole. Like this, the spindle is a tool which rotates and draws out thread.

Yeats uses the spindle as an image of the love between a man and a woman. As the spindle rotates and draws out thread, he expands a love between a man and a woman into the creation and change of the Universe, and suggests it as an inevitable fate. So, “eternity may dwindle,/ Time is unwound” means that a human is born in this world, and also eternity and time are the symbols of a man and a woman. Ellmann argues: as “eternity dwindles into mere repetitiousness and the infidelity of ordinary lovers seems part of the natural order of things, the poet sets up his fidelity to his own beloved as beyond all such whirling” (*JY* 279). The poetic narrator emphasizes that “before the thread began,” he loved his lover, and “when the last thread has run,” he maintains a virtuous life for her. Here, the thread symbolizes a fate of a human, and the “hair” means his lover. Yeats contrasts the transmigration of souls with that of love, and overlap the two lover’s love into the creation and change of the Universe and the transmigration of souls. Moreover, he uses Plato’s parable as the base of the poem and makes the audience appreciate his imagination and inspiration.

Yeats also uses Plato’s image in “What Then.” Yeats calls Plato’s ghost to this world and sings his past life until the present in “the one-way dialogue” (Greene 191):

‘The work is done,’ grown old he thought,
 ‘According to my boyish plan;
 Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
 Something to perfection brought;’
But louder sang that ghost, ‘What then?’ (CP 302)

He insists that it is “a melancholy biographical poem” (*L* 895). The poem represents “an inner voice mocking the vanity of earthly endeavors” (Albright

798-783) in a refrain. He casts doubt upon “[the] brilliant achievements and successes” (Ellmann, *IY* 203). Though he is boastful of his achievements and successes to Plato’s ghost, the ghost says “nothing” to them. “Something to perfection brought” in this world is just a trivial job. Moreover, he emphasizes that like Plato’s accomplishment, his arts in this world will disappear or will become extinct over time.

III

Using Plato’s ideas in the images and symbols of poems, Yeats elaborately systematized his ideas in the later period. He begins to read Plato’s works in his late teens and twenties and was more fascinated with Plato’s ideas in his later period. He partly accepts a world soul and the theory of Idea of Plato and used them to give shape to his ideas in his early period. However, he is partly receptive to Plato’s ideas such as the theory of Idea, or the theory of Forms, the allegory of the cave, the immortality of the souls, virtue, a love between a man and a woman, and Ur.’s experiences in the nether world.

Yeats uses Plato and Plato’s ideas in poetic words, which becomes his core poetics in *The Tower*. He, in “The Tower”, depicts not Irish folk tales and myths but Plato’s ideas and sets up his ideas of the transmigration of souls, or Saṃsāra, similar to Plato’s ideas of the immortality of the souls. Plato’s souls consistently rotate here and there and are immortalized. Yeats’s souls rotate between two worlds and reincarnate, and only some souls are free from the cycle of reincarnation. He, in “Two Songs from a Play,” as the Romans execute Jesus Christ, casts doubt on whether the Romans practice Plato’s love and virtue or not and evokes “platonic tolerance.” He, in “Among School Children,” uses the parable of Plato into his poetic image

and brings to mind his love with Maud Gonne, and thinks that their love is an inevitable love and a fated love. Also, he emphasizes the ultimate reality by using Plato's Idea in his poetic image. He, in "His Bargain," overlaps the myth of Plato's Ur. into the cycles of reincarnation and a love between a man and a woman, and describes it in the symbolic images. He, in "What Then," suggests his accomplishment and works are nothing by using Plato's ghost, and emphasizes a human's ultimate reality.

Yeats has woven Plato and Plato's ideas into his imagery: the transmigration of the souls, an aging and a death, a love between a man and a woman, the cycle of history, the immortality of the souls, virtue and love, Idea, or Form; by doing so, Yeats has embodied his theory of the ultimate reality, with the ultimate reality being realized here and there in his work.

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