

DECONSTRUCTING PLATONIC CONCEPT OF LOVE IN YEATS'S POETRY

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Abstract

W.B. Yeats developed his philosophy of mysticism under various influences both Eastern and Western; modern and ancient. Yeats deconstructs the view that state of unity of body and soul can be achieved by renouncing the worldly desires and purifying the heart sick with desire. Yeats aestheticizes Plotinus's ideas and re-employs them in his poetry of later phase. Yeats's poetry instead of reflecting contemporary concerns delineates his direct apprehension of the world as experienced through the senses. But instead of reproducing a servile copy of their concepts, he twisted his universe in his own way, producing somewhat an altered version of mysticism, to suit to his own world in a better way. The poet propounds the view that physical love and spiritual love are opposite as well as parallel at the same time. The paper underscores the need for wholesome and complete union of the body and the soul for harmonious human life.

Keywords: Mysticism, Neo-Plutonian, Mystical Marriage, Theosophical Society, Byzantium.

In the early stage, Yeats's development as a poet and mystic was immensely influenced by the Romantic poets like William Blake and P.B. Shelley, and in the latter phase, his mystic philosophy was predominantly shaped by the reading of Thomas Taylor Plotinus. Yeats derived "the images of swan, fountain, cave, and tower" from Shelley (Ross 548). Apart from Plotinus, Yeats's mystic philosophy was shaped by Plato and his bipartite universe that consists of the transcendental world of Ideas. Both Platonism and Neo-Platonism emphasize the view that the truth lies in the transcendental realm, and the sense realm as inhabited by humankind is mere an image in the mirror. In the latter half of his life, the artistic excellence as achieved by Yeats may be credited to a spiritual experience that he underwent. In company of his wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees Yeats experienced mystical encounters during their experiments with automatic writing, and this made him cultivate a theory describing the cyclic nature of reality and individual identity which he documents in *A Vision* (1937). Apart from his interest in Romantic writers, his involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the influence of three women, namely Helena Blavatsky, leader of Theosophical Society, Maud Gonne, life-long beloved, and his wife Georgie Hyde Lees also immensely shaped Yeats's mystical interests and mind. Maud Gonne, symbol of love, formed a 'mystical marriage' with him and Georgie introduced him with philosophy of Plotinus through her automatic writing sessions. The poet radically moved away from the writing under the dominant influence of the Romantic tradition to compose poems, typical of Modernism that confronts and

conveys the concept of a converting cosmos. In context of love, Yeats aestheticizes Plotinus's ideas and re-employs them in his poetry of later phase. Besides, in developing the theme of ecstasy and spatiality, he also evinces a keen interest in Eastern and South-Eastern forms of mysticism.

In the early twentieth century, despite the profound mood of dejection and a sense of loss on account of some uncanny events like Maud Gonne's marriage with Mac Bride and divorce, and massacre following the Easter Rebellion, a sense of renewal and regeneration lies at the root of Yeats's cyclic view of life and history. The poet came to realize that when an era comes to climax or to an end, another era advents, and this transformation constitutes an endless circle. For Yeats, art is a form of revelation of an ideal reality and the role of an artist is to act as mediator between the celestial and experiential world. With the time, Yeats's poetic art took on more a more critical pronouncements and philosophical dimensions. Yeats's passion for beauty as reflected in his poems is rooted in his own "experience and sensation rather than of speculation" (Yeats, *Uncollected Prose* 132). Yeats's affirmation of such a romantic notion seems to be a product of his belief that the poetry of "primary emotions" springs from "the common experiences and duties of life" (Yeats, *Letters* 315). Yeats's poetry instead of reflecting contemporary concerns delineates his direct apprehension of the world as experienced through the senses.

Yeats continued to be a mystic throughout his poetic career but the mature form of his mysticism is

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reflected in the later poetry as he derived the foundation and force of his mysticism from the philosophy of Plotinus, transcribing his certain concepts into his own in *A Vision*. Yeats developed a complex spiritual cosmology on the basis of his reading of both Plato and Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism, involving three foundational elements: the One, the Intelligence/Divine mind and the Soul. But instead of reproducing a servile copy of their concepts, he twisted his universe in his own way, producing somewhat an altered version of mysticism, to suit to his own world in a better way. Yeats “did not believe that the world is scattered into particular things; rather he maintained that the manifold of the world constitute but one unity. Again, he said that there were no different worlds: no scientific world, no philosophical world and no poetic world; but there was only one world” (Sarker 71).

In “Sailing to Byzantium,” the poet laments that the young ones engrossed in carnal cravings disregard fail to appreciate the product of youthful days and ageless spirit and intellect”...The young/ In one another's arms, birds in the trees,/ Those dying generations-at their song!” (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 163) suggest the pleasant atmosphere where young ones while enjoying life are oblivious of the fact that they are living in the mortal and mechanized world. In the old age, the speaker frustrated with the romantic, mortal world undertakes a spiritual voyage. The city of Byzantium symbolizes oneness and the transcendental world. In this poem, Yeats foregrounds his philosophy of mysticism, using the binary of old age and passionate youth. In the poem, sailing to the city of Byzantium, symbolic of spiritualism and the ultimate reality, is opposed to earthly pleasures in the human world. It is assumed that the state of unity as symbolized by the city of Byzantium can be achieved by renouncing the worldly desires and purifying the heart sick with desire. But Yeats’s mystical vision lies not in discarding all earthly desires; rather he suggests that a mystical state can be achieved as an aesthetic transformation reflected through the symbol of golden bird. Having the state of ecstasy in the mystical or spiritual voyage is amount to repudiation of the instinctive corporeal cravings as the ‘sailing’ as metaphor represents this symbolic journey of the human soul. This poem deals with “the restless entrapment of the human spirit in an imperfect material world” (Young 16). Yeats seeks “spiritual redemption through the timelessness of art” (Ross 214) and Yeats’s perfection of art “stands timeless” (Henn 64). The poet creates the binaries of the old age and the passionate youth beyond temporality and spatiality to achieve unity in the artistic space.

In the poem “Leda and Swan,” Yeats narrates a story of a “mystic marriage” between the human and the divine which raises the sexual act to the divine level, equating Leda with Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. The images of “the great wings beating still/ Above the staggering girl” and “the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill/ He holds her helpless breast upon his breast” (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 182) suggest sensuality allied with brutality. Leda seems to be helpless against the over-powering Swan. Though Leda is depicted delicate and weak against the strong Swan, she does not try to disengage herself from the clutches of Swan, and she seems to be enjoying the sexual union as in this situation. The Images of “And how can body, laid in that white rush/But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?” (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 182) suggest that Leda experiences a “strange” pleasure as the sexual union with the god provides her divine pleasure hitherto not experienced by her. The sexual union between a mortal and god suggests spiritual aspect of the bodily love.

In “Among School Children” (1927), Yeats depicts the dancer united with her dance in the ‘Unity of Being,’ or the mystical unity accomplished through the recollection of love. As physical human embodiment of the ultimate beauty, Maud Gonne is presented to the old man beyond temporality, encompassing all her life stages:

I dream of a Ledaean 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---
Or else, to alter Plato’s parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.
(*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 183)

Thus, Maud Gonne turns into a form of love that resides in the transcendental world and it is “the memory of Love that brings this mystical moment to the old man” (Tülüce 61-62). His spiritual experience transcends the physical image of the body to access the state of union in eternity. In the state of union, dualism and binaries of the dance and dancer; the seeker and the sought become blurred or invisible within the ‘Divine Mind’. The beloved emerges as a symbol of perfect love in the way the city of Byzantium becomes a symbol of eternal reality in the poetic production of Yeats. As the embodiment of an ultimate human reality, the beloved is beyond the deadening impact of time and tide. The lines: “Labour is blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure soul” (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 185) suggest that the poet does not undermine the role of the body to placate the soul. In sexual union, both the body and the soul of both the partners are considered on

equalitarian terms. Virtues of beauty and wholeness are not a product of isolation; rather indivisible part of in nature. The body and soul cannot be separated in the way dance cannot be separated from dancer and a leaf or flower from the trunk. Similarly, humans cannot be oblivious of sadness and ecstasy rather they exist in harmony in human life.

Yeats seems to believe in the hatha Yoga' that offers possibility of transforming the physical body into the divine. The interaction between body and soul is functioned or transcended by sexual intercourse to reach a unity with God. In "Crazy Jane", Jane is depicted as a bold woman who can speak on "matters of great importance-ethical, metaphysical and ontological-such as bodily and spiritual love, man's relation to God and the nature of being" (Dabic 176). In "Tantric philosophy, in sexual union, man and woman transfigure each other's images into the masculine and feminine characters of God...the man seeks the divine Self as present in his wife. In "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgement," Yeats writes, "Love is all Unsatisfied/ That cannot take the whole Body and soul"/And that is what Jane said" (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 219).

Jane evidently considers both body and soul to be equally important in the process of integration or union of love. The apparent duality of things is merged into the union of Shiva and Shakti: two aspects of the self, as proposed by Jane. In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," Jane and Jack are dramatized as beasts in their pursuits of erotic ecstasy. The lines "Fair and foul are near of kin.\ And fair need foul" (*The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 221) suggest the importance of erotic dimension within the spiritual realm. For the realization of a mystical experience and true love, corporeal cravings though are often considered low should be merged with the spiritual need; otherwise, true love is not fulfilled. Jane raises the erotic to the spiritual level realm. Yeats perceives sex as "the supreme trope and guiding philosophical metaphor" (Butler 68). Soul and body are complementary; one cannot be complete without other. These poems emphasize the need for a complete union of body and soul.

The foregoing discussion foregrounds Yeats's concept of love which is primarily based on the Post-Platonic view of the spiritual love that represents the union of body and soul. Yeats's response to love in this phase is not emotional but philosophical or spiritual one, for love him now the subject of exploration; a plane from where he can rise above to expand his philosophical attitude rather than slipping into the fairyland. The poet extends the view that the soul blossoms when the two opposite sexes labour through sexual intercourse to produce

children. In sexual union, both the body and the soul of both the partners are considered on equalitarian terms. Body and soul cannot be separated in the way dance cannot be separated from dancer and a leaf or flower from the trunk. These poems illustrate the view that life and love blossom only when the body and the soul mingle in equal and harmonious proportions. The poet extends the view that physical love and spiritual love are opposite as well as parallel at the same time. These poems emphasize the need for wholesome and complete union of the body and the soul as the rejection of any one is denial of human life.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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