

**Yayın Geliş Tarihi:** 14.02.2019

**Yayın Onay Tarihi:** 04.05.2019

**DOI No:** 10.35343/kosbed.526940

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## **W.B. Yeats ve T.S. Eliot'un Erken Dönem Şiirlerinde Platonik Öğeler**

*Platonic Elements in the Earlier Poetry of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot*

### **Özet**

Hem W.B. Yeats hem de T.S. Eliot, yaşadığımız dünyayı tek açıklanabilir gerçeklik olarak gören burjuva ideolojisine karşı modernist bir tepki olarak, görünen fiziksel dünyanın ötesinde bir mutlak gerçeklik olduğuna inanmışlar ve bu gerçekliğin arayışı içinde olmuşlardır. Bu çalışma, şairlerin bu ruhani aydınlanma çabalarının, şiirlerini, maddi dünya ve Formlar ya da Idealar dünyası arasında ayırm yapan Platonizm ile nasıl bir ilişki içine soktuğunu araştırmaktadır. Yeats ve Eliot mutlak gerçekliğe ulaşmak için farklı yollar izleseler de, manevi çabaları her ikisini de zamanın, mekanın ve benliğin ötesine bakmaya yönlendirmiştir. Bu yüzden, bu makale Yeats ve Eliot'un zamanı, mekanı ve benliği ele alış biçimlerindeki Platonik yansımaları analiz etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Platonizm, mutlak gerçeklik, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot.

**JEL Kodları:** Y3, Y8.

### **Abstract**

As a modernist reaction to bourgeois ideology which perceive the given world as the only explainable reality, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot both search for a spiritual reality, the Absolute, beyond this material world. This research aims to inquire how their yearning for a spiritual illumination connects the poetry of Yeats and Eliot with Platonism which makes a separation between the material world and a world of Forms or Ideas. Yeats and Eliot try to reach the Absolute in their own particular ways, and their spiritual efforts lead them to look beyond the limitations of time, space and ego. This paper thus analyzes the Platonic resonances in Yeats's and Eliot's handling of time, space and ego.

**Keywords:** Platonism, the Absolute, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot.

**JEL Codes:** Y3, Y8.

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## Introduction

The idea that there is an Absolute, a spiritual reality beyond the material world, underlies both W.B. Yeats's and T.S. Eliot's perception of reality and, accordingly, their poetry. Through their poetry, Yeats and Eliot endeavor to reach a spiritual awakening and illumination of consciousness. As Heather Martin argues, in search for a coherent, but personal metaphysics Yeats spent his life trying to understand the nature of the spirit, and welcomed the opportunity to glimpse another facet of it (1986: 3). In similar terms, Eliot renounced the privilege of the material world over the spiritual realm, and as Kenneth Asher argues, "despite the skepticism and cultural despair, manifested a hankering after the Absolute" (1998: 160). Actually, looking from the modernist perspective, the primary motive of Yeats and Eliot was to reach an alternative framework against the bourgeois ideology, which "effectively denuded the given world of such absolutes, thereby elevating the given [world] to the status of comprehensive reality" (Habib, 1999: 130).

The exploration for the Absolute associates the work of Yeats and Eliot somehow with Platonism. Platonism is specified with its teachings about the separation of the intelligible and sensible worlds, the existence of transcendent Forms or Ideas beyond space and time which correspond to universals and ethical standards, and immortality of the human soul (Gersh, 2006: ix). In Rafey Habib's words, in all philosophies which use Platonism as a basis, whether orthodox Christian theology, Romanticism, Hegelianism, French symbolism, or the thought of Schopenhauer and Baudelaire, there is a refusal to view the immediately given world as ultimately real (1999: 130). In a similar vein, Platonic elements are noticeable in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot. Brian Arkins explains that "Yeats came to the Platonism, as it were, backwards, beginning with late nineteenth century versions, proceeding to the Cambridge Platonists about 1914, and reaching Plato..., pure and unadulterated, only in the last two decades of life, the 1920's and 30's" (1994: 279). Eliot's poetic career, on the other hand, "strangely replicates Plato's own progression from dramatized dialogue to a more monological commitment to the Real: the earlier verse is dialogical and skeptical; *Four Quartets* is affirmatory and declarative" (Brown, 1994: 298). This paper thus aims to look into the Platonic elements in selected poems of Yeats and Eliot in order to reflect their efforts to reach openness to the absolute spiritual reality and to go beyond the restraints of time, space and consciousness. In this context, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), "Byzantium" (1930) and Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) and "Four Quartets" (first published as a series in 1944) will be analyzed.

## Analysis

Yeats and Eliot both recognize that there is a gap between the Absolute, the divine world and the physical existence, the given world. A search for a spiritual reality results from the perception of this gap, which is the phase before any kind of spiritual illumination. Eliot puts forward this observation in "The Waste Land" where he depicts the urban world and an ordinary humdrum reality in various fragmented experiences. Platonism envisages a transcendental reality, the immortality of the soul and reincarnation whereas there is no prospect of reincarnation or regeneration following

death in the world of "The Waste Land". The speaker reflects this situation in the first part of the poem by referring to the infertility of the land:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
 And the dead tree gives no shelter. (326)

In the Waste Land, death is an end in itself as implied with the subversion of the fertility myth, that is, the burial of the death does not promise regeneration any more. In the Platonic sense, the Waste Land is the world of people who are in dark and in the world of shadows, or in the speaker's words, the world of "a heap of broken images" beyond which there is not an ultimate reality.

The world of the Waste Land does not offer the notion of "an ideal city transcending the sensual agora of the shadow-realm of the world's 'cave'" (Brown, 1994: 306). As the poem proceeds, the speaker depicts the Waste Land as following:

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had done so many. (63)

The city is portrayed as unreal because it is illusory from a Platonic perspective, being a world of shadows. The picture of the inhabitants is also shadowy under the fog as they are in a death-in-life situation by being trapped in the world of sordid images where they can see only their own shadows.

The depiction of the physical world and its inhabitants in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" also evokes a world of shadows:

That is no country for old men. The young  
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
 -Those dying generations- at their song,  
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
 Monuments of unageing intellect. (204)

Unlike Eliot's "Unreal City", Yeats's portrayal is more pleasing with the images of vitality like "salmon-falls", "mackerel- crowded seas", "fish", "flesh and flow". Yet, this world is not far from being unreal because it is distanced from the ultimate reality as well. Its inhabitants are trapped in the world of images and they fail to perceive the

"monuments of the unaging intellect", which can be interpreted as the immortal otherworld. The birds sing for and celebrate decaying bodies because death is an end in itself in this world as in the Waste Land.

Still, in the lines above, Yeats goes one step further than Eliot by appreciating the existence of a mysterious immortal world of intellect beyond the physical sensual world. In "The Waste Land", Eliot does not specify a spiritual otherworld, but he just establishes a ground to reveal the spiritual dryness in his contemporary world, which can be counted as an earlier step to an awakening and illumination of the spiritual consciousness. Thus he discloses only one pole of the Platonic dichotomy, that is, the intelligible and sensible world. He later changes his perspective from the material world to the spiritual Absolute in "Four Quartets". After his entry into the Church of England, Eliot willed to believe that there really is a Center, a shared Center, whether it is named or unnamed, recognized or unrecognized, acknowledged or ignored. His focus changes from reconstructing a shared reference point to glimpsing a universal pattern (Brooker, 1993: 89).

Although Yeats and Eliot both appreciate the existence of an ultimate reality, the Absolute, their perceptions and representations of it differ in particular points. In "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats identifies the Absolute reality with Byzantium. In the following lines, the poetic persona explains his reasons to set off to Byzantium:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
 For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
 Nor is there singing school but studying  
 Monuments of its own magnificence;  
 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
 To the holy city of Byzantium. (204)

The stanza proceeds through the Platonic dichotomies of body and soul. Byzantium is specified as "holy" since it stands for the soul and what is the -Platonic- stable and orderly as opposed to the poetic persona's material world that stands for the body doomed to decaying and fading. Stephen Gersh states that two further dualities identified as forming part of the common understanding of Platonism are those of causing and caused and of intellectual and non-intellectual (2006: x). Accordingly, the speaker articulates his desire to move beyond the physical world since he cannot reach the monuments of "unaging intellect" in this world. Being aware of his physical decay, he compares himself to a scarecrow. He can overcome the limitations and sufferings of the physical existence only through his spiritual effort embodied in his desire to sail to Byzantium where, he believes, contains the monuments of unaging intellect. The sailing activity is also a Platonic archetype, that is, a sea journey to the eternal afterlife.

In "Byzantium", Yeats offers a clearer picture of the Absolute. As William Pratt puts it, "'Sailing to Byzantium' had been more about nature than about eternity, and in the

later poem ['Byzantium'], he sets out more determinedly than in any other poem to picture paradise as he imagined it, in the form like the historical Byzantium" (1996: 83). Therefore, the Byzantium image is enhanced in "Byzantium":

The unpurged images of day recede;  
 The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;  
 Night resonance recedes, night walkers' song  
 After great cathedral gong;  
 A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains  
 All that man is,  
 All mere complexities,  
 The fury and the mire of human veins. (260)

In this stanza, the speaker portrays a night scene in the city, "a dream landscape magical in its mood of moonlit silence" (Pratt, 1996: 83). Night here offers a threshold to go beyond the physical world and all worldly efforts. F. Foster underlines that the gong imagery also reinforces the Platonic associations by being the reminiscent of the gong beaten as the soul descents to Hades (2005: 402).

In "Four Quartets" Eliot goes beyond this barren, deadly and shady physical world of "The Waste Land" and searches for a kind of Platonic opposition of it. The first quartet, "The Burnt Norton", opens in a rose garden inhabited by birds and children. In this respect, it goes against the nightmarish depiction of the Waste Land, as the speaker says, "[n]ot here/ not here the darkness, in this twittering world" (182). Unlike the experience in "The Waste Land", Eliot now focuses on the fact that there is a deeper reality beyond the physical world, and the speaker of the poem seems to be in a state of spiritual effort trying to reach this reality. Yet this is not an easy task at all. As David Perkins emphasizes, it returns in separate passages to experiences of psychological depression and religious darkness (1987: 28).

In both "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets" there is a quest motif which is yet treated differently. "The Waste Land" includes references to the heroic quest of the Fisher King. Nevertheless, this quest ends in failure since the hero fails to see any spiritual reality beyond his temporal world. Thus he decides to establish a worldly order:

I sat upon the shore  
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
 Shall I at least set my lands in order? (71)

On the other hand, in "Four Quartets" the spiritual journey is not abortive unlike that of the Fisher King. Obviously, in some parts of the poem, there are still references to a life which is the reminiscent of the world and people of the Waste Land. For instance, in the third part of the first quartet, "Burnt Norton", the speaker says:

Here is a place of disaffection  
 Time before and time after

In a dim light: neither daylight

Investing form with lucid stillness". (182)

These lines emphasize the Platonic dichotomy between the dark and the light and thus the speaker's in-between situation in his spiritual efforts. However, unlike "The Waste Land", the dark and depressive state of mind of the speaker "impels toward the spiritual and eternal" (Perkins, 1987: p. 29).

Yeats's and Eliot's treatment of time and space contribute to the Platonic view of their poems. Platonism projects the immortality of the soul and reincarnation which invokes a cyclical understanding of time creating a binary opposition between what is temporal and eternal. This opposition is clearly observable in the poetry of Yeats and Eliot. In the poems referred to above, the speakers' efforts to reach an absolute spiritual reality lead to a desire to escape from the limitations of the linear time. For instance, in "Sailing to Byzantium", the speaker's yearning to leave his sensual and death-ridden country which is not for old men is possible only through a cyclical perception of time, as he also implies in the following lines:

Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium

Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (205)

In "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats provides a sense of cyclical and eternal time and reincarnation by means of gyre and fire imagery:

O sages standing in God's holy fire

As in the gold mosaic of a wall,

Come from the holy fire, perne in gyre,

And be the singing-masters of my soul.

Consume my heart away; sick with desire

And fastened to a dying animal

It knows not what it is; and gather me

Into artifice of eternity. (204)

The speaker hopes to reach eternity being led by the sages of Byzantium who stand in God's holy fire to be purged of impurities and return to the Absolute through a gyre. Moreover, in "Byzantium", Yeats employs the imagery of dancer and dancing as a means to exceed the borders of time and space and create a sense of eternity:

Dying into a dance,

An agony of trance,

An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. (261)

As Terri Mester suggests through dancer image, reincarnation becomes the central image of the Byzantium since during trancelike action of dancing, the soul escapes the wheels of endless becoming (1997: 47).

Like Yeats, Eliot sets out to evoke the cyclical time, especially in "Four Quartets". In "The Wasteland", there is an emphasis on the linear time which has an end in itself and does not promise any eternal reality. In "Four Quartets", however, the cyclical perception of time promises to link worldly moments to the eternal. "Burnt Norton" opens with speculations about the nature of time:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable. (179)

Here the speaker argues that past, present and future are inseparable from each other so that time is not a linear entity, an idea which foregrounds the eternal. The speaker develops this idea further:

Time past and time future  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present. (179)  
  
The opening of the second quartet, "East Coker", includes reflections on time as well:  
In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended. (185)

The speaker speculates that time is a cycle of birth and death, creation and destruction. Death and destruction is linked to the linear time whereas birth and creation invokes the cyclical time. In the third quartet, "Dry Salvages", there are references to river and sea: "The river is within us, the sea is all about us" (193). As Mary Ann Gillies comments, the movement of the river into the sea stands for the merging of personal time into eternal time (1996: 56).

In addition to the treatment of time and space, their perception of the self is also related to spiritual efforts of Yeats and Eliot to reach the realm of the Absolute. In "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium", Yeats tries to achieve impersonality and overcomes the burden of the ego. Byzantium promises Yeats a space where he can find impersonality, which he explains as following:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I choose, I would spend in Byzantium...I think... the painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people. (qtd. in Unterecker, 1996: 172)

Thus setting his poems in Byzantium, Yeats tries to reflect "the mood of eternity" (Rubinstein, 2007: 78). In "Sailing to Byzantium", the speaker invokes the sages of Byzantium in order to

Consume [his] heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather [him]  
Into the artifice of eternity". (204)

The speaker identifies his bodily form with that of a dying animal and he wants to overreach it. In other words, as Ernest Rubinstein clarifies, Yeats desires redemption from the pervasive tensions between body and soul (2007: 77). By the same token, the speaker reflects his desire to be transformed into a golden bird:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing. (25)

The speaker hopes to capture the eternity in the form of a work of art. Actually, these lines imply a Neo-Platonic search rather than a Platonic one. In Plato's ideology, the work of art is the imitation of the worlds of shadows. Thus, it is the imitation of the imitation, and the artist is only an imitator. However, in the Neo-Platonic thought, the artist might bypass the world of sensory appearances, and achieve a direct access to the true (Harland, 1999: 10).

In "Byzantium", Yeats provides a similar idea in relation to the function of the art and artist:

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,  
More miracle than bird or handiwork,  
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,  
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud  
In glory of changeless metal  
Common bird or petal  
And all complexities of mire or blood. (260)

As seen in these lines again, only the work of art, here embodied as a golden bird, can capture the eternity "in glory of changeless metal". Therefore, the golden bird is superior to a "common bird".

The dance imagery in "Byzantium" is also presented as a form to overcome the limitations of consciousness. As Mester argues as well, "dancing is linked to the desire for a mystical, ecstatic wholeness, and the dancers become anonymous soul purging themselves of the 'fury and mire of human veins' by dancing on the Emperor's marble

tiles in Byzantium" (1997: 28). In the poem, "blood-begotten spirits come" to dance on the mosaic pavement, and they leave their immortality behind, "[d]ying into a dance", and "[m]arbles of the dancing floor/Break bitter furies of complexity" (261). For Yeats, the dancer is the supreme embodiment of unity of being because "it is impossible to dissociate, split or distinguish between the dancer's body and soul, the dancer and the dance, or sense and spirit in general" (Mester, 1997: 32).

In "Four Quartets", there is a similar exploration to go beyond the restrictions of consciousness in order to reach the spiritual wholeness. Yet, Eliot's approach is different than that of Yeats due to his Christian outlook. "[f]or Platonist, mysticism is about the soul's withdrawal and ascent; for the Christian it is about the soul's response to God's descent and condescension in the Incarnation" (Jain, 2004: 238). In Eliot's vision, spiritual awakening is possible only through complete destruction and humiliation of the self. In "Burnt Norton", the speaker wants seek to "[d]escend lower, descend only/ Into the world of perpetual solitude" (182). One should first detach himself from the temporal world and accepts his ignorance as the speaker also expresses in "East Coker":

In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession. (189)

The ego is overcome by humiliation of the self before God's greatness and accepting the folly of human beings, as the speaker in "East Coker" reflects further:

Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.  
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.  
The houses are all gone under the sea.  
The dancers are all gone under the hill. (190)

The speaker realizes the transience of the physical world, and this understanding leads him to humility and to give himself up. He accepts that humility is the only wisdom.

Thus while dancing is a means to get rid of the burdens of the physical existence for Yeats, another means for Eliot is praying as reflected in "Little Gidding":

If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,

At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying. (201)

Praying is the way of self-surrender and getting rid of the ego. As in dancing, one goes beyond the linguistic realm and the soul and body become one.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Yeats and Eliot try to reach the Absolute, a transcendental beyond, especially in their later poetry. They first identify the gap between the Absolute and the physical world. In Byzantium poems, Yeats situates the spiritual Absolute beyond this material world in Byzantium. Eliot follows an ontological quest from "The Wasteland" to "Four Quartets". He focuses on the world of people who live in the shadow of images in "The Waste Land". Yet, in "Four Quartets", he catches a glimpse of the Absolute, particularly from a Christian point of view. All in all, Yeats and Eliot attempt to overcome the restraints of time, space and consciousness through their spiritual efforts by using various Platonic elements.

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