

Platonic Philosophy in the Poetry of Kathleen Raine

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Abstract

This study aims at introducing Kathleen Raine, one of the lesser known English poets of the 20th century, and her poetry in the light of Platonism. Alongside her contemporary, the philosopher Iris Murdoch, Kathleen Raine is regarded as one of the greatest modern exponents of Plato and his sublime philosophy. In this study, the researcher has traced and discussed the Platonic doctrines of recollection and immortality of the soul as they appear in the poetry of Raine. This study endeavors to show the basic views that Raine shares with Plato and demonstrate how Raine has succeeded to revive the spiritual teachings and enlightenments of Plato to enhance the cause of spiritual ideals at a time when such ideals are losing color and tending to perish for good. The researcher believes that the poet has followed the same path as the philosopher though her approach is more imaginative and romantic.

Key words: Kathleen Raine; Platonism; Plato; Philosophy; Recollection; Immortality of the Soul

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INTRODUCTION

In this study, among all the twelve volumes of Raine's poetry, only four pieces have been chosen to represent the Platonic theory of recollection and immortality of the soul.

What we know and how we know is one of the fundamental questions Plato has posed, on which Raine has concentrated in various poems. Raine's preoccupation with this theory of learning is easily traceable; yet it is presented in a new form in each poem. The deadly sleep and the forgetfulness human beings experience are attributed, by Plato, to the limitations of the body. In the tenth book of *The Republic*, Plato tells the story of how the souls, before entering the human body, came across the river Lethe, or forgetfulness and accordingly lost their knowledge of the eternal realm. Raine deems that there is a call for *anamnesis*, the awakening of recollection, which is heard from all natural phenomena. Various circumstances, according to Raine, help us recover from this state; among which is the beauty of nature. Raine in the essay "The Inner Journey of the Poet" (1982) holds that the secret message of all beauty is that we shall remember again (p.37). The beautiful nature as a source of recollection is the main theme of many poems of Raine. There are numerous references made to Plato in the poems, for Raine deems Plato as the pioneer of traditional symbolism. The particular forms in this world, according to Plato, remind us of the absolute ideal Forms we have beheld before arriving to this world of dimensions. For Raine, the forms are the elements of nature, carrying messages from beyond which, as a result, remind us of the eternal memories.

1. THE RECOLLECTION THEORY IN THE TWO POEMS "MESSAGE FROM HOME" AND "THE LEAF"

1.1 Message from Home

The poem "Message from Home" from the collection *The Year One* (1952) is one of the richest poems of Raine with reference to Plato's theories and ideas. At the heart of the poem is Plato's theory of recollection with reference to

William Wordsworth's (1770-1850) poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1804). Raine, following Plato, believed that before we came to this world, our souls had seen and learned everything; therefore we come to this abode of exile not with a blank plate or tabula rasa as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and his followers have tried to show, rather we come like a prince with an entourage of angels of sweet memories and ministries of noble reason with fixed principles and laws.

Raine holds that the closer we are to our home, as in childhood and early youth, the more we can have the beatific visions of our lost Eden. Our surrounding nature is an expressive reflection of the heaven we left behind. In our childhood everything seems to be familiar and agreeable to us before we become alienated from it through our artificial ways of life. Raine herself, when recollecting her childhood, has the same experience as explained by Wordsworth in his Ode, because while she was not still a civilized citizen, she lived near nature, in the open space of cottage life where she felt at home in the lap of meadows and on the side of the lakes, under the wonderful sky night that sings of our sweet dreams.

The main theme of the first stanza of the poem is primarily the ideas mentioned in the preceding paragraph. The poem begins with a question: "Do you remember, when you were first a child,/ Nothing in the world seemed strange to you?" (Raine, 2000, p.99). This yearning for what has been lost is recurrent in many other poems as well. Soon, Raine explains how we have been alienated in the process of growing up. The speaker states that in childhood everything was familiar and known to us. Raine, making a direct reference to the theory of recollection, expresses that you "still kept the knowledge of a former state/ In you retained recollection of cloud and ocean" (Ibid, p.99). All the forms in the world of appearances, as Plato said, are objects of recollection. After all, we have not lost the knowledge we obtained before, we need to study our surroundings more deeply so that we may remember.

The second stanza is the logical continuation of the first, presenting the reader with yet more details regarding the contrast between the paradise-like years of childhood in which we are still at one with our true selves and our former state, and the almost infernal present in which we are experiencing a very painful separation and alienation from our spiritual source. Raine refers to our present hell-like state in the first two lines of the second stanza, encapsulating our utter misery in the present time by the visual metaphor of "darkness"- and then contrasts it with the irretrievably lost years of childhood when we still had good and reasonable access to the spiritual source of oneness and bliss. Raine conceives the concept of oneness with our spiritual source in terms that show a beautiful, graceful and peaceful harmony between our childhood or childhood- self and the nature that looks after us in the

fashion of a loving mother.

The third stanza refers to another Platonic theory (One and many) that the source of all creation is one. Plato claimed that there is one self-independent reality from which all life originates so he called this reality, the One. Thus every cell has the signature of that single simple creator whom we call God; similarly, every cell is a treasury of all memories and complexities of higher life. Life itself we can say is a passionate pilgrimage from God's simplicity to the complexity of the universe. So when the pilgrim looks back, everything is familiar and expressive of the story it is going to experience. Raine emphasizes here that the company of nature will take you to the source where you are in the center of all mysteries which are clear, no matter how dark or strange they may seem to be. She reminds us of William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) famous passage in *As You Like It* (1599)

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (Greenblatt, Cohen,
Howard, & Maus, 1997 p.1612).

"Exempt from public haunt" is perhaps, in one sense, a return to one's heart and treasury of wisdom, a place where we can read the book of creation and understand the secrets so clearly written on trees and stones.

In the fourth stanza the speaker urges the reader to "remember your home" as you leave it behind and try to recollect profoundly and you shall see that you are not alone for nothing in your home is strange to you. If you try to remember intensely, then

the first to greet you will be those children playing by the burn,
The otters will swim up to you in the bay,
The wild deer on the moor will run beside you. (Raine, 2000,
p.100).

Raine following Plato believes that we do not know that we have this latent knowledge; that is why we should contemplate deeply and observe nature carefully so that we may recall and come out of this forgetfulness. Raine, in her essay "What is the Use of Poetry" (c.1990), goes so far as to say that the goal of all poetry and art is to remind us of the eternal world and remind us of the Eden in which we once lived.

Raine's dreamy vision is closed by a further insight into the nature of this recollection which is also a consolation from Mother Nature that the exiled son (humanity) has never been left alone, instead every moment he can receive messages from light, wind, waves, rain and birds, all reconfirming the presence of that eternal source which is our real mother. The speaker holds that if you listen to the "winds", "tides" and "night's harmonies" you will recollect all that you knew before you became "estranged from your own being"(Ibid, p.101).

1.2 "The Leaf"

Raine deems that beauty is the border of eternity; it is the window to our lost paradise, a moment contacted with the

timeless and the placeless. Beauty in this world, according to Raine, can remind us of the place we came from; besides, it has the power to connect us with that realm (Raine, 2008, p.61). The poem "The Leaf" from the collection *The Oval Portrait* (1977) conveys a heart-refreshing message that all nature is in direct intimation and communication with us:

What did that small leaf sign
To you, troth its gold
Plight 'twixt you and what unseen
Messengers to the heart
From a fair, simple land? (Raine, 2000, p.225)

Raine believes that all nature is the holy scripture of God which we have to read and follow, but man being too much busy with superficial things in the world, can hardly get the message. The doctrine of recollection is placed at the center of the poem. The leaf is a symbol of all nature and beautiful objects; above all, it bears some message with it, it reminds us of the place we have come from. Raine in her essay "Poetry in Relation to Traditional Wisdom" (1957) states that "the poetic secret is to find in nature the images that correspond to the already and forever existing landscape of the eternal world" (p.25) and also that "it is the task of poets to hold up before the soul images of its own nature, and these magical signs, presented to us, awaken what Plato calls recollection, the soul's self-awareness, a process at once healing and enlightening" (Ibid, p.29). There are magical signs in nature that can help overcome the soul's forgetfulness. Wordsworth has said that "Poet is a man speaking to man" (Abrams et al., 2000, p.246), Raine gives a deeper meaning to such expressions. She maintains that a true poet is a human being purified of all that is not man and of all that is not essential to being a man; as a result, such pure man can speak to man's souls. Yet, in much modern poetry, a business man dressed in all sorts of self interest is speaking to a man of the same quality; however, a true poet contacts not the crust yet the core of the other man, that is why a poet can be a reminder of the soul's true nature.

Raine, in the second stanza, claims that beauty is a physician; it cures the blind eyes of love, so love ever remains with beauty as a sign of gratitude.

You for a leaf-fall forgot
Old age, loneliness,
Body's weary frame,
Crippled hands, failing sense,
Unkind world and its pains. (Raine, 2000, p.225)

Here, the role of beauty as a source of recollection to bring back health and peace, not only to a person but to the whole society, has been greatly emphasized by Raine.

2. IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN THE TWO POEMS "TWO INVOCATIONS OF DEATH" AND "NORTHUMBRIAN SEQUENCE"

2.1 Two Invocations of Death

The epic of the soul is at the heart of Raine's poetry. Raine, following Plato, constantly reminds us that we are not the corporeal body nor are we mortal, rather we are free from all limitations of the material realm.

The poem entitled "Two Invocations of Death" from the collection *The Year One* (1952) opens with a philosophical repentance which is not of sin, offence or misdeed, but a repentance of materiality and dimensions of time and body. The speaker repents of her "hand and feet" that for forty years (the poet had been forty at the time) have claimed to be an integrated part of her being, and similarly she repents of "all flesh and bone", "heart and liver", "hair and skin" and she invokes Death to rid her, moreover to relieve her from all that she is not (Raine, 2000, p.79). Plato in *Phaedo* states that humans are made of two parts; the body which resembles the mortal and the soul which resembles the divine (Cahn, 1985, p.85). Here, Raine has used the Platonic idea that the body is heavy and earthy, therefore she implores death, the one solution to get rid of the body, to help her. Raine is fully assured of immortality and has no fear of death as a destructive force. Emily Dickinson (1830- 1886), the well-known poet of death and immortality, in the following short poem has established a dialogue between death and the soul, depicting the same idea that the soul is not going to be destroyed by death because it is just a garment that the soul throws at death, turns back and goes her way.

Death is a dialogue between
The Spirit and the Dust.
"Dissolve" says Death - The Spirit "Sir
I have another Trust" -

Death doubts it - Argues from the Ground -
The Spirit turns away
Just laying off for evidence
An Overcoat of Clay. (Johnson, 1960, p.456)

Dickinson, here, following a long tradition of death images in literature and philosophy has created a dialogue to convince death of its futile effort to subdue the soul to the general law of corruption and annihilation. It seems as if Raine has resumed the same dialogue to give further proof of the independence of the soul from all that is corporeal.

Raine in her poem has not only repented from the corporeal body, but from all "forms of thought", "habit of the mind" and all the memories of the stolen hours, because none of them have any substantial participation in the eternal truth of her soul. Even concepts such as sin and sorrow are nothing but fantasies and the soul

outsours all such concepts. Plato believed that the body even acts as a barrier to the truth and therefore we must escape from it. He asserted that “while we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association from the body or join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself frees us” (Cahn, 1985, p.73). Here Plato is showing us the right path to reach the truth by liberating ourselves from the body and its desires. He emphasizes that the body, ‘this overcoat of clay’, is the greatest veil to our eternal knowledge and memories and our secular attachments are the greatest impediments to that realm of light. So the farther we get from corporeal passions, the closer we get to the Piarian Spring of truth.

After her elaborate repentance, in the second part of the poem the speaker tends to the why and wherefore. She states that the soul is a stranger in this world; besides, the soul has not come from a place and she has nothing to do with “time”, “sorrow”, “sun”, “moon” or the “wind”. All the various realms of phenomena, according to Raine and Plato, are only stimulations to remind the soul of her lost home, her lost delight and of her lost beginning, and as the recollections of the homeland are revived, the soul cries “Oh my lost love/ I have seen you fly/ Away like a bird” and wondering how long she must bear this abode of exile asks “Shall I find at last/ My lost beginning?” (Raine, 2000, p.81).

2.2 “Northumbrian Sequence”

Another poem with a similar theme is “Northumbrian Sequence” from the collection *The Year One* (1952). Raine spent her early childhood in Northumberland which was a place of utmost happiness for her. Raine, following the Romantic poets, believed that in childhood there is some access to that “Lost Eden”, yet this access is rather short; besides, we are then confronted with the hostile world which makes us forgetful and as a result leaves us with a sense of exile. Raine claims that it has been this sense of exile from infancy that first awakened the poetic instinct in her- this longing for Eden. Unlike the Romantics, for Raine the state of paradise is not only in childhood, but it is when “outer and inner reality are at one; when the world is in harmony with imagination” (Raine, 1991, p.48). Raine also believes that there even exist children who have not experienced this state. The memory of Raine’s short residence in Northumberland has not passed and it is still with her.

“Northumbrian Sequence” is one of the longest poems of Raine that represents almost all her basic ideas on the Perennial Philosophy. It consists of six parts, each developing the theme further until it reaches a climax on the final return of the bird of spirit to its eternal nest. The sequence of the six parts of the poem has been entitled the “Northumbrian Sequence” which refers to the following words attributed to an ealdorman in the Venerable Bede’s

(673-735) *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (AD 731):

So seems the life of man, O king, as a sparrow’s flight through the hall when you are sitting at meat in winter-tide, the fire on the hearth, the icy rainstorm without.

The sparrow flies in at one door and tarries for a moment in the light and heat of the hearth-fire, then flies forth into the darkness whence it came. (Bede, 1907, p.98)

Raine has prefaced the above quotation, a précis of a longer passage in Bede’s book, to give the gist of what she is going to expatiate on in her poem. The quotation is a universal theme in world literature both east and west, but it probably came to Bede through the teachings of Plato or Plotinus. It is the story of man’s life on earth which is symbolically depicted as a bird suddenly entering from a window to a hall, pausing for some moments and flying out of the other window back to the unseen. In this poem we read the story in a more detailed elaboration alongside mystical insights offered by Raine.

We can compare the whole poem to a great symphony of the soul. In the first movement the speaker is discussing her past memories even before the entrance of the bird to the hall. This movement is a very calm and serene adagio. The poem is opened most beautifully with the speaker’s recollections of her beginning which was before the world began and before a “bird ever sang”: “I was never still/ I turned upon the axis of my joy,/ I was the lonely dancer on the hill” (Raine, 2000, p.61). This is a time when man was one with his creator and there was none but him, drinking the wine of beauty and joy from his own being. But that same lonely joy and dance, that same feeling of refinement, freshness and liveliness was the source of creation of all the wonders of the world. Here, Raine refers to the doctrine of One and many arguing that the source of all creation is One and the many was produced by that One; also, the colors of the rainbow, “[t]he intricacy of the flower”, “[t]he fossil forest” all originated from the soul (Ibid, p.61).

The second movement continues the story in a more expressive imagery. The soul which is one with her lord is praising him with her “mute mouth of the night” for his graces and beauties. This praise brings the soul into an ecstatic bridal dance of mysteries that sets the house of Pentheus of sorrows afire; besides, it gives light to the whole world. In the third movement the speaker resumes the story of the eternal flight of the soul-dove with such tremendous speed that distances between the stars are overleaped by the eyebeams of the soul. The spirit of life comprehends the bird from all sides, from within and without and through “snow drifts” and “salt wane” of the tremulous ocean of life dash against the flying bird, “strong winds buffeted by and blizzard, still follow the way that leads through storm to rest” (Ibid, p.63). Nothing can impede the soul from the journey for which she has eternal yearning. According to Plato, the soul is imprisoned by

the body on earth yet she has longings to return to her previous state and with death this is accomplished.

In this journey from the earth to eternity, the bird of the soul covers a full arch of descending and ascending, paying no attention to the “gossamer desire [that] floats out to guide” (Raine, 2000, p.62). Raine has regarded all the chains and fetters like ambition, avarice, and self-conceit which have imprisoned millions of men of weak resolution, as spider webs that entrap only poor flies and flimsy insects. Surely a man with noble ideals should not get caught in such debased desires.

The fourth movement is a vivid description of the soul’s experience through all the phenomena called life; “The wind” and “the storm beats on my window-pane”, “the night” and “day”, “fear” and “pain”, the people rising and falling through history descending in succession, dead and alive all communicate with the soul while it is bound in human form with all its delights and sufferings, with all its light and darkness. In the fifth movement, the imagery of dreaming and awakening is the main picture. The soul is dreaming a wondrous dream of all splendors and commotions of life, an adventure so romantic and sweet that she is reluctant to submit herself to awakening. Yet

The invading world must break the dream
So heavy is the weight of sky,
So violent the water’s flow
So vast the hills that would be born,
Beyond the utterance of bird
The mountain voice that would be sung,
The world of wild that would be man-
The dream has overflowed the tree. (Ibid, p.67)

The awakening is caused by a no longer bearable invasion of experiences and feelings. Just as when the sleeper feels choked beneath a thick quilt and has no way out but to awake. The awakening is a necessity; the soul is forced out of the narrow world for the “vast hills that would be born” (Ibid). The birth of every new child has a pressure over the pilgrim soul to leave and make room for newcomers. Caravans after caravans of being are being born into the realm of form; therefore, caravans after caravans must exit into the higher realm of formlessness; the dream must yield to the Noah’s flood.

The sixth movement is indeed a bitter-sweet farewell to the realm of earth, dimension and time. The destination willy-nilly draws the soul towards new horizons. This inevitable farewell has been referred to by many poets of the west as well as the east, depicting life as a preparation for death. The fact that we return to God is the best consolation for the mourning soul that confronts a light which seems to be darkening for its very intensification. Plato argues the same idea in *Phaedo* that all life, men should strive to liberate their soul from the body and that “man train[s] himself in life to live in a state as close to death as possible” (Cahn, 1985, p.74). After all, life is a preparation for death.

This movement comes to a finale in the following lines

that in various images speaks of the soul’s passage from form to formlessness:

Spirit, freed from the form into which you flowed,
Prisoned merlin of the groaning tree,
The self you were in nature falls away
All at once into dust, as the bird-heart homes.
Dark into dark, spirit into spirit flies,
Home, with not one dear image in heart. (Raine, 2000, p.69)

It shows that the story of ‘dust thou are, and into dust thou shall return’, as recited by churchmen at the death of a Christian, is the story of the body and not of the soul, for the bird is flying out of the window leaving the room and all the enticements and dear images thereof. What greater joy and delight could be for a prisoner than to achieve a prison-break?

CONCLUSION

In a world where the idea of materialism and absurdity is ruthlessly dominating by constant collective propagation, Raine has endeavoured to enhance the cause of spirituality and to revive once more the ideal teachings of Plato. Many essays of Raine and numerous insightful poems of hers are guiding lights to the path of spirituality and theism. Kathleen Raine’s poetry deserves fresh attention in these lights to show how her standpoint on definition of poetry in full accord with those of Shelley and Sidney can elevate modern poetry to purpose and significance. Plato aimed at transforming the human thought. His tradition has provided a spiritual nourishment of high quality and a whole host of inspirations and invaluable challenges for poets, artists as well as for common readers with common sense. Raine and her academy (Temenos) also aim at continuing Plato’s tradition to bring about a spiritual Renaissance in modern times in respect to arts and poetry. Achievement of such a Renaissance maybe regarded as one kind of response to certain spiritual problems in this chaotic world.

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