

Sailing to byzantium: adrift on perfection



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In his poem “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats rejects his perceptions of the sensual mortal world and fondly imagines a paradise of intellectual intransience in Byzantium. The impermanence of human life is recounted, for Yeats who himself is a part of the “dying generation” (Yeats Ln 3) creates a bittersweet tone underlying the depictions of vitality and youth in the poem. Derisive words indicative of death are strategically placed to cause the literal “music” (Yeats Ln 7) of life to be interrupted, and yet the music is described as “sensual” (Yeats Ln 7). It is exactly this quality that lures Yeats back to the world of human condition that he himself cannot escape. In purposefully creating this poem into “the artifice of eternity” (Yeats Ln 24) that will stand as a monument of his own “unageing intellect” (Yeats Ln 8), Yeats attempts to create his own golden future. This is impossible however, for his intellect succumbs to the very appeals of his senses that alienate him from the “young in one another’s arm” (Yeats Ln1-2) and the “song” (Yeats Ln 3) of the “birds in the trees” (Yeats Ln 2). The narrator is not able to deliberately release the unexplained complexities within himself that have kept him “sick with desire” (Yeats Ln 21), but instead focuses his attentions on the failure of his own physical body, for he repeatedly fixates on the image of his intellect “fastened to a dying animal” (Yeats Ln 22). In this “paltry” (Yeats Ln 9) condition, he is now able to project his illusions of perfect yet impossible visions upon this text to illuminate himself in the grandiose context of transformed “magnificence” (Yeats Ln 14) — His transcendence into all that makes Byzantium the sacred center of intellectualism. In the first stanza, Yeats depicts a world in which a distance exists between himself and the present reality of his mortal existence. In his “mortal dress” (Yeats Ln 12), Yeats exists as a ragged old man who has nothing to offer the corporeal

world with his physical body. In an effort to escape to a place of intellectualism that will not restrain him as his earthly “country [not] for old men” (Yeats In 1) does, the poem physically progresses as Yeats’ journey to Eternity occurs. He is the sole creator of Byzantium, for his experience in this city merely exists in his own imaginings. The reader’s perception of truth is simply a reflection of Yeats’ fabricated truth, and is therefore rendered unreliable. Yeats yearns for the timeless and undying form, and the words he uses to diametrically oppose his two lives the one he has of ephemeral importance and the one he wants of everlasting art and intellect— exist in the very language he uses. The cycle of human life is recorded in words comprised of either one or two syllables. This creates short, choppy phrases that produce a harmony that is staccato in nature. Yeats recounts the song of “dying generations” (Yeats In 3) and immediately goes on to describe the “Fish, flesh, or fowl [that] commend all summer long” (Yeats In 5) whereas in describing Eternity he honors his conceptions using polysyllabic vocabulary as can be observed in the line “monuments of unageing intellect” (Yeats In 8). The sensual tones flow effortlessly across the tongue, whereas in describing the reality of his present state, Yeats joins words in union that create a rough, irregular tone. The disjointed, staccato meter produces an urgency that can only be explained in the “sick... desire” (Yeats In 21) for Yeats to escape his mortal life. The music is what connects the two very different worlds of intellect and sensory, and through the structure of the poem can the reader sense Yeats’ longing for Eternity. It is this ache that determines his word choice, for it is the sound that is produced from the sustained notes of polysyllabic words of passion and “desire” that resonate throughout the poem— not the author’s depiction of Byzantium itself. Yeats

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separates himself from the physical world, and yet his soul cannot penetrate the life of Byzantium for which it lusts, for “ out of nature” (Yeats In 25) Yeats must fall and death must occur in order for Eternity to become his reality. Yeats rejects his natural shape, and yet in attaining the form achieved in living in Eternity, his “ monument of unageing intellect” becomes undying and his “ golden bough to sing” remains fixed and unchanging. Yeats is unable to be transformed by the city, for it is Byzantium’s very charm that prevents him from existing with the human conditions that are responsible for creating the intellect that Yeats now strives to preserve. Only Yeats, in a moment of artistic vision, can speak to his ‘ reality’ of Byzantium, for the lack of metaphorical and literal progression would cause the reader, a member of the sensual world, to reject the lifeless “ gold mosaic” of unfeeling, dead words. Yeats endeavors to be a “ hammered gold and gold enamel[ed]” (Yeats In 28) bird pleasantly amusing an Emperor, and yet the realities of existing in Eternity are that a drowsy Emperor will forever remain drowsy and not ever be excitable, as will the song Yeats sings be forever unchanging and static. Yeats shuns his mortal world because of the rejection he faces as an ageing man, and yet in Byzantium, Yeats only imagines his paradise to be a place in which he will be able to successfully appeal to the senses of others. The poem culminates in a situation in which Yeats receives attention from the ladies of Byzantium, and yet it is by alluring the senses of these ladies and the lords and the Emperor of Byzantium that Yeats imagines himself to be of a form that is not a “ monument of unageing intellect” (Yeats In 8), but simply a golden, evocative form now physically capable of engaging the sensory appeals of others. Yeats finds himself in fully functioning form, singing in full “ golden” tunes not unlike the mortal “ young

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in one another's arms" (Yeats In 1-2) presumably making love. In finally receiving the attention he has been alienated from since the very first stanza, Yeats finds himself "coming" (Yeats In 19) but protected by the "holy fire" (Yeats In 19). In Byzantium, hiding behind the call for lasting intellectualism, Yeats make his body unnatural relative to his former physical self, for in the human world, Yeats likens his body to that of a "dying animal" (Yeats In 22). "Once out of nature I shall never take my bodily form from any natural thing" (Yeats In 25-26) he declares, and so in images of himself in Byzantium does he envision his exterior to be physically hardened by his precious metal enameling. He transforms himself into a bird known for its golden sheen, and thus acquires a type of superficial elegance that is not a part of the intellectual appeal he once claimed to hold as his utmost priority. In this transformation does Yeats' craving for the decadence of grandeur that appeals to the very physical senses make itself manifest, for he strives to become what as a "tattered" (Yeats In 12) old man he lacks. Now he is free to compete with the music that the young lovers make, for in Byzantium, Yeats merely reinvents himself and proceeds to envision Eternity as the sensory world he once rejected. His body and soul are interconnected in Byzantium, and he calls to be physically "gathered" (Yeats In 23) for his mind "knows not what [his body] is" (Yeats In 23). Like a virgin, his body is at the mercy of the entity that 'gathers' him, and he is taken into the sexually charged "artifice of eternity" (Yeats In 24) where he later "comes" (Yeats In 32). His own song is now enough to rouse the senses of the Emperor of Byzantium as well as compete with the lovers' song. Yeats carefully chooses the words which he sings, for in specifying "what is past, or passing or to come" (Yeats In 32), Yeats uses the words "past" and "

passing” to create a lulling effect that can only be countered by the ending staccato pulse of the word “ come.” The poem culminates in this very moment, for in Yeats’ literal coming, his future is a symbolic orgasm which secures his ability to be sexually satisfied. It is as a sexually capable being that Yeats is able to secure his place in Eternity, the haven of intellectualism, and yet in gaining this fertility, he figuratively gains reproductive abilities that he is incapable of using. The dead irony of the situation is that while Yeats “ sailed the seas” (Yeats In 15) and quite literally ‘ came’ in Byzantium, he is unable to release his manifest ideas that produce the intellect he wishes to preserve. In Byzantium he is set upon becoming an everlasting beauty of great thought, and yet by singing a never changing song, he will forever exist as an archaic machine of past pleasantries. In order to continually “ keep a drowsy Emperor awake” (Yeats In 29), change must persist, and yet change is the very quality that has not only created an aging Yeats, but has also condemned him to the human life cycle. Yeats recounts the mortal life where “ whatever is begotten, born and dies” (Yeats In 6), for it is in Yeats’ mortal life that he has become a part of “ those dying generations” (Yeats In 3). In describing Byzantium in polysyllabic phrases, Yeats creates a long, soothing tone that echoes in the music created and referred to throughout the poem^{2E} He falls victim to this music in the same way the human world he wants to escape from does, for they too are “ caught in that sensual music [where] all neglect monuments of unageing intellect” (Yeats In 7-8). In describing that which he previously heralded as the problem of the human condition, he outlines his own failure in successfully being transformed by Byzantium, for he is unable to reject the very senses he idealizes. He appeals to the “ sages standing in God’s holy

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fire” (Yeats In 17) as one would call to a muse for inspiration and creativity, and yet despite these sages becoming the “singing-masters of [his] soul” (Yeats In 20), the thoughts he gains from them can only be contained within his internal flames. This lack of expression causes his thoughts to “consume his heart away” (Yeats In 21), and yet his mind, pregnant with thought, is still unable to release the complexities that exist within him. Like a “perne in a gyre” (Yeats In 19) his mind is spinning around and around constantly, yet Yeats is simply a bird of “unnatural” form, producing a harmony that although may be melodious, will forever remain sterile in its ingenuity and vision. In gaining an eternity in time, Yeats is locked mechanically into the “artifice of eternity” (Yeats In 24), and Byzantium exists more as a physical process of transformation than as a “holy city” (Yeats In 16) of complete intelligence. Yeats rejects the mortal, fertile world for refusing him the opportunity to symbolically ‘reproduce’ his art, and yet he gains virility in the intellectually sterile city of Byzantium. By the end of the poem, the tension builds between the need for the reproduction of creative expression and its impossibility, and the everlasting sense of time is strictly divided into the “past... passing” (Yeats In 32) and the implied future. Byzantium cannot eternalize Yeats’ genius, for the reader must envision a city so basic that the very complexities that exist as a mere byproduct of the human condition fail to exist, and it is this very anomaly that reflects in the absurdity of the old man Yeats’ desire in quite literally “Sailing to Byzantium.” Yeats is faced with the biggest paradox, for he wishes to become the form that is essential to perfect art, yet despises the very senses without whose perceptions, perfect art could not exist. Work Cited: Yeats, William Butler. “Sailing to Byzantium”. 1926.