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The Image of Byzantium in William Butler Yeats's Poetry.

"I think if I could be given a month of antiquity and leave to spend it where I choose I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato."¹

Although Byzantium is historically the holy city of Eastern Christendom, it is made, in the poems "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium"², a secular city of the poetic imagination. Yeats releases its inhabitants from theological quarrels and civil wars. He rebuilds the city to suit his own ideals and chooses to find his own art reflected in its designs and symbols.

The organizing principle of "Sailing to Byzantium" is easy to discover. It is the principle of contrast which reveals itself on the structural as well as the semantic level of the poem; the rhyme scheme being the most conspicuous realization of this principle. This is because rhyme has the important function of bringing together, linking up and contrasting words. In this way, words are automatically placed in a potential semantic relationship.³

The rhyme pattern in "Sailing to Byzantium" involves, as M. Perloff suggests⁴, two kinds of rhymes: appropriate rhymes and exact rhymes. The former are exemplified by: seas-dies, young-song, young-long, trees-dies; the latter by: song-long, trees-seas, thing-sing, unless-dress, fire-gyre, gyre-desire. The rhyme words of Stanza I revolve round the life-death antinomy. Those who are "young" are traditionally associated with the joy and safety of "song", but here both "young" and "song" are ironically modified by the phrase "all summer long". "All summer" may seem a "long" time to young lovers but,

obviously summer cannot last. The implication is that the "song" of the "young" is transient, unlike the song of the golden bird. In a similar way, the rhyme trees-seas is qualified by the verb "dies".

The rhymes of Stanza II introduce the antinomy between body and soul. The rhyme sing-studying associates the song of the soul with an intellectual activity. This is the process of studying the monuments of civilization. The tension between body and soul, life and art, is revealed in the rhymes: mortal dress-magnificence, paltzy thing-sing.

Stanzas III and IV continue the basic oppositions of the previous ones: "Eyre" and "desire" are opposed to "God's holy fire", "natural thing" to "renaming" and, finally, "gold mosaic of a wall" to "dying animal". They set the natural and mortal against the supernatural and everlasting.

As M. Zerloff has pointed out, the closing couplets of all the four stanzas taken together exhibit an interesting pattern. In the first three, the rhymes involve the syntactic relationship VERB-COMPLEMENTARY NOUN. Each couplet can therefore be read as an independent imperative sentence. Thus:

- I neglect-intellect
- II come-to Byzantium
- III gather me-into the artifice of eternity
- IV Byzantium-come

The four couplet rhymes are related to the narrative movement of the whole poem. The first three define the state of becoming, as the speaker moves towards Byzantium. In the fourth stanza, however, the speaker has arrived at his destination. Thomas Parinson⁵ has argued that in the final version of this poem the protagonist is already in Byzantium and the title of the poem refers to its earlier version. In the light of the analysis of the final couplets, however, this seems hardly possible. Even if the lyrical ego is in the Holy City, he has not yet experienced the process of "gathering into the artifice of eternity". This transformation is the essential aim of his journey. The use of tenses and grammatical forms is another evidence. Imperatives, exclamations and future forms prevail in Stanzas III and IV which refer to Byzantium. Nevertheless, this futurity is more conspicuous in early drafts

of the poem:

Procession on procession, tier on tier
 Saints and apostles in the gold of a wall
 As in God's love will refuse my prayer
 When prostrate on the marble step I fall
 And cry aloud-I sicken with desire
 And fastened to a dying animal
 Cannot endure my life-O gather me
 Into the artifice of eternity.⁶

The principle of contrast governs also the composition of the poem which is symmetrical and consists of two opposing pairs of stanzas. Stanzas I and II are contemplative, whereas Stanzas III and IV involve the invocation to Byzantine sages and the expression of the lyrical ego's wishes. What is more, Stanza I contrasts sharply with Stanza II, and Stanza III is in opposition to Stanza IV.

The journey begins with the statement, "That is no country for old men". Aging people remind the young about the inevitable end of every living creature. The rule saying that "whatever is begotten, born, must die" governs the world of sensual reality. Youth is only a part of the life cycle in the same way as summer is an element in the sequence of the four seasons. The elements of nature are dynamic; nature itself illustrates the process of constant change: young people fall in love, old people die, earthly birds sing about mortality and transience. The opening lines of the poem are full of powerful suggestions of natural life, the life of generation; the salmon carrying the suggestion of sexual vigour and of physical beauty. Furthermore, salmon are the symbol of strength in Celtic literature and therefore particularly appropriate to represent the country of the young. The picture of nature in this stanza, vivid and diversified, is at the same time consistent in that all its creatures are to die.

Alliteration helps to emphasize this unity: "fish, flesh, fowl" and "begotten, born" can serve as examples. Another dimension of earthly reality is presented in Stanza II: The "young, in one another's arms" find, in Stanza III, their negative equivalent in "an aged man" who is "but a paltzy thing, a tattered coat upon a stick."

Similarly, the sensual music of Stanza I is contrasted with the soul clapping its hands and singing (Stanza II). In early drafts of these two stanzas, the opposition is also evident: "the young that travel singing of their loves" (the third draft of Stanza I) and "an aged man" whom nature "has cast like a shoe" (the first draft of Stanza II)

Stanza III introduces the image of Byzantium—the Holy City. The sages with wise faces taken from the Golden mosaics of Ravenna St. Apollinare Nuovo, Hagia Sophia, Sicily and Rome, live there peacefully contemplating life and death, mortality and eternity, and stand above these sorrows of life. They guard the holy fire which is eternal as is the power of art. Byzantium is an intellectual paradise. Biological activity governed by sensual desire is here transformed into intellectual contemplation. This is the paradise in which labour and beauty are one, where beauty is self-begotten, the artificial paradise of a poet deeply disturbed by the conflict of soul and sense, of the timeless world of art and the sensual world of change. The man sailing towards Byzantium must get rid of his body, physicality and sensuality ("consume my heart away") in order to develop intellect-only then may he be admitted to the Holy City. The man will find inspiration in "God's holy fire", he will experience catharsis—purification through art. Artistic creation will be the source of liberty. Liberated from his sensuality he will become an everlasting work of art. His immortality, however, is an artifact—it cannot be obtained painlessly. The happiness of creation is inevitably accompanied by suffering. ⁸ The wisdom of the dead revealed in "Sailing to Byzantium" is therefore not the mystery of immortality itself but the mystery of the development of personality. The artist in "Sailing to Byzantium" is not less interested in life but more capable of contemplating it once he has been transformed into a singing bird made of gold. The poem is written in four ottava rima stanzas. Regular, far from colloquial speech, the ottava rima matches the image of Byzantine perfection of art.

The image of Byzantium presented in the poem includes the symbolic Golden bird. This artificial bird stands for the intellectual joy of eternity as contrasted with the instinctive joy of human life exemplified by earthly birds.

The Golden bird is static as opposed to the dynamic image of natural birds. It is made of gold and thus possesses the quality of the precious, the everlasting. The golden bough upon which the bird is set and which is the emblem of immortality introduced to literature by Virgil (Aeneid, Book VI) or possibly by a Gaelic myth, appears in the picture by J. Turner "The Golden Bough" (1834).⁹ The Byzantine bird possesses the knowledge of the past and the future. It sings of "what is past, passing, or to come". But the bird, the work of Byzantine goldsmiths, made from gold and precious stones, is an artificial thing like H. Ch. Andersen's Nightingale.

After the poem had been written, Sturge Moore criticized the last stanza. He argued that the Golden bird was a captive of nature being compelled to sing of "what is past, passing, or to come"—the syntactic analogue of "whatever is begotten, born, must die". Moore's criticism that the antithesis of the birds of the mortal generations and the Golden bird was imperfect was one of the reasons for writing the second poem entitled "Byzantium". The absolute difference, as of different orders of reality, between the image and the real thing, was the crucial point upon which the first Byzantium poem had, according to Moore, failed. It was so important to the poet that he did his work again, making the distinction more absolute, seeking a more perfect image to convey the quality of pure art.

In "Byzantium" the system of tensions is more complex. The most interesting clue to it is given in the 1930 Diary: "Subject for a poem, April 30th (...). Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking mummy. Flames at the street corners where the soul is purified, birds of hammered gold singing in the golden boughs offering their hearts to the walling dead that they may carry them to paradise." ¹⁰

The antinomies and basic symbols of "Sailing to Byzantium" reappear in "Byzantium" but in a different context. Both the setting and the point of view have shifted radically. "Sailing to Byzantium" represents a voyage and is written from the point of view of the uninitiated outsider who leaves the material world for the immaterial one. The journey is a

metaphorical movement in horizontal space-it symbolizes the changing state of mind of the speaker.

"Byzantium", on the other hand, is written from the point of view of the initiate who watches the initiated, unpurged spirits arriving from beyond the "gong-tormented sea" which separates Byzantine reality from the flesh-and-blood reality of the world of nature. The speaker has arrived in the Holy City and tries to define its character.

Byzantium is the city of the mind, the emperor here is the intellect. The drunken soldiery of the emperor-the senses-are dead, and the speaker is in a world empty of perception, a world of pure form. The mind is withdrawing completely from physical experience. This is indicated by such verbs as: to recede, to be dead, and nouns such as "night-walker's song, night resonance."

The image of the senses as the soldiers of the intellect and the absence of "night resonance" serve to indicate a state beyond sleep, a state of pure intellectuality.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement fit
Flames that no fagot feeds, nor steel has lit;
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,¹¹

"Fagot" and "steel" suggest martyrdom or the devastation of a countryside by the soldiery (the Emperor's drunken soldiery), but the flames of the mosaics are born of spiritual intensity and they have the purifying function. The spiritual fire resolves the "complexities of fury and mire". This phrase appears four times in the poem like a thread running through the fabric of "Byzantium".

These "complexities", which stand for physical existence (the mire of human veins, "complexities of mire and blood", "complexities of fury"), are "disdained", "scorned" and, finally, "broken" by the Emperor's smithies. The lyrical ego chooses the life of intellectual contemplation.

Basic symbols of "Sailing to Byzantium" reappear in "Byzantium". These are the Emperor's golden bird, the purifying fire, and the symbol of the Holy City itself. Other symbols, which "Byzantium" introduces, are, however, entirely new.

"Hades 'hobbin'" of Stanza II may be interpreted as the soul which comes from the underworld and eventually returns and stays there until its rebirth. In life it winds up the "mummy-cloth" of experience; a funeral term is used because in the poem life is regarded as a surrender of the soul's freedom and therefore as a kind of imprisonment or death.

I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

The reference here is to the condition of the unpurged soul. It is death-in-life because the unpurged soul is experiencing the dying of its past life remembered, and it is life-in-death because a purged soul has a new life, emerging from dying. On returning to Hades the soul unwinds the cloth like a hobbin unwinding the thread. The earthly experience is therefore not continued.

The final image of the "dolphin-torn and gong-tormented" sea brings in two more symbols: a dolphin, regarded by many critics¹² as a phallic symbol, coheres with the usual symbolic value of the sea, namely, life and sex. A gong can be associated with a clock striking the hours or with bells tolling upon one's death. The "gong-tormented" sea is therefore the sea tormented with the flow of time measured by the gong and leading to death as the ultimate point.

The sea of life appearing, in the last stanza, as the flood is opposed to the formal, ceremonious art of Byzantium, the art of the goldsmith, hammered work linked with the idea of breaking. This is the natural opposition of water and fire.

An interesting interpretation has been offered by Robert Szukal¹³. According to his view, the spirits approach Byzantium "astraddle" the mire and blood of the sensual physical world symbolized by the dolphins. The "mire and blood" is not rejected but it is organized. The golden smithies of the Emperor are the tools, that is the concepts, which the intellect uses to organize experience. Byzantine floor mosaics provide a kind of schematisation of reality over which flows a massed and disorganized sea of sense-impressions which are ordered by the pattern on the dancing floor. The mosaics, with

their formal geometrical patterns, impose a second order of measurement and proportion upon the stream of natural life. The "marbles of the dancing floor", which stand for coldness and durability of as well as pattern, share with the smiles the ability to "break" the flood.

Consequently, according to R. Snukal, life is presented in the poem as the sea of sense impressions symbolized by the dolphins, commented by the ever-active gong-the form-imposing intellect. The conclusion is that the role of art is to order our perceptions of the world and order our universe. This art that we are able to create and order our universe, this is the essence of Yeats's belief in imagination.

The symbols of "Byzantium" are, as we have seen, very closely associated with the symbolic system of the Neoplatonists. This system was fixed and rigid. The sea always symbolized life; man consistently thought of himself as a beggar dressed in the rags of mortality; after death the soul often accompanied by a mystic escort of dolphins, crossed the sea to heaven, the Isles of the Blessed.

Basic differences between the two poems are reflected not only in the use of symbols but in the rhyme pattern as well. According to M. Perloff, in the opening stanza of "Byzantium", the rhyme recede-bed refers to the dissolution of the daytime world and, by implication, the dissolution of life. The second rhyme song-gong presents some difficulties, for the meaning of "gong" has been variously interpreted. P. A. Wilson¹⁵ points out that in the Orphic mysteries, well-known to Yeats, the soul's descent into Hades was symbolized by the beating of a gong and that in Kabbalistic philosophy the stroke of midnight means the hour of death. Consequently, the "gong" is opposed to "song" which, in turn, refers to the violence and sensuality of life.

P. R. Henn¹⁶ argues, on the other hand, that the gong symbolizes "barbarous clangour" and the "fury and the fire of human veins". This interpretation coheres with the last line of the poem where the "gong" is clearly associated with life.

The first rhyme of Stanzelli's Golden bough-crow, takes the reader back to the artificial golden bird whose form the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" wishes to assume.

Thus, "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem of contrast between youth and old age, eternity and mortality, art and nature. These oppositions culminate in a general one: the sphere of life, culture, eternity and the steady perfect movement of the sages "game in a gyre" constitutes the sphere of Sacrum which is set against the sphere of Profanum, the transient world of mortality and the senses. M. Perloff¹⁷ has observed that the central antithesis of the poem is reflected in rhymes. In "Sailing to Byzantium", the majority of rhymes involve semantic disparity, whereas in

"Byzantium" rhymes that have semantic congruity outnumber those that have semantic disparity. "Byzantium" is a poem of harmonies rather than of contrasts; epiphora (lines 9-10 and 17-18), anaphora (lines 6-7 and 31-32) and rhymes that involve semantic congruity help to intensify and to co-ordinate the images in the poem in order to create a single, uniform image of the Empire of the Intellect. These devices are supported by frequent use of word repetition within the lines (images, complexities, flames, shade, blood, mire, golden, fury, break are the words most frequently repeated).

The focus of attention in "Byzantium" is no longer on the poignancy of the contrast between nature and art, Profanum and Sacrum. The strategy of the poem is to establish a paradoxical vitality of the dead, more alive than the living. The ageing artist's desperate effort to reconcile the growing power of imagination with the "decay of body" resulted in an attempt to attain the quality of an immortal work of art. In search of Byzantine ideal artifacts he renounced his physical nature. This was really "life-in-death and death-in-life".

In his book Romantic Image, F. Kermode quotes the words of William Blake as the best gloss on Yeats's Byzantium poems: "This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity, it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite and Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation is Finite and Temporal. (...) In Eternity one Thing never changes into another Thing. Each Identity is Eternal." 19

References.

1. W. B. Yeats, A Vision (London, 1956) p. 279.
2. "Sailing to Byzantium" comes from the collection The Tower (1928), and "Byzantium" from The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933).
3. R. Wellek, A. Warren, Theory of Literature (New York 1949) p. 161: On the relationship between rhyme and meaning in Yeats' s poetry, see: W. Perloff, Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats (The Hague, Paris, 1970).
4. W. Perloff, op.cit. pp. 130-131.
5. M. Parkinsohn, W. B. Yeats, The Later Poetry (Los Angeles, 1964) p. 54.
6. In the discussion that follows all references are to Curtis Bradford's arrangement of the notebook drafts. See: C. Bradford, Yeats's Byzantium Poems: A Study of Their Development, in: J. Unterecker (ed), Yeats, A Collection of Critical Essays, The stanza reproduced here is the first version of stanza III.
7. J. M. Rohman, Problem przestizeni artystycznego, in: "Panfletnik Literacki" 1976, fascicle 1, pp. 213-226.
8. For the discussion of this problem, see: F. Kermode, Chapter I The Artist in Isolation, in: Romantic Image (London, 1961) pp. 1-30.
9. W. Perloff points out, the first draft of Stanza IV had "golden leaves" instead of "bough". Yeats transmuted the "golden leaves" into "the golden bough", an image with more specific mythological reference.
10. W. B. Yeats, The Diary 1930, quoted by: P. R. Henn, in: The Lonely Tower, Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1965) p. 228.
11. All the quotations from Yeats' s poems will come from the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London, 1965).
12. See, e. g., E. Malins, A Preface to Yeats (London, 1974) p. 63.
13. R. Szwed, High Talk, The Philosophical poetry of W. B. Yeats (Cambridge, 1973) pp. 122-123.
14. Neoplatonism was the 3rd-century mixture of Platonic ideas with Oriental mysticism.
15. P. A. Wilson, W. B. Yeats and Tradition (London, 1955) pp. 233-234.
16. T. R. Henn, The Lonely Tower, Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1965) p. 230.

17. The problem of the opposition Sacrum-Profanum was studied by R. Michalowska, Wizja przestizeni w liryce staropolskiej, in: Przestizeni i literatura, ed. M. Gzowski and J. Okopien-Szwajska (Gdańsk, 1978).
18. W. Perloff, op.cit.
19. Quoted by: F. Kermode, in: Romantic Image (London, 1961) p. 30.

Streszczenie.

Treścią artykułu jest funkcja symbolu Świętego Wiatra-Bizancjum w "wierszach bizantyjskich" W. B. Yeatsa: "Podróż do Bizancjum" ze zbioru Wieża (1929) i "Bizancjum" ze zbioru Kracina schodów i inne wiersze (1933).

Pierwszy z omawianych utworów przedstawia młodocięstwo i doznawanie życia w wiecznym, naturę-sztuce. Kulminacją tych opozycji stanowi kontrast święta sztuki i niesmiertelności-sfery Sacrum-i święta zmysłowego, ziemskiego-sfery Profanum. Bizancjum jest tu imperium intelektu, symbolizuje życie duchowe przeciwstawione zmysłowemu. Podróż do Bizancjum jest próbą osiągnięcia przez artystę niesmiertelności jaką posiadają dzieła sztuki, uwolnienia się z cielesnych ograniczeń przez rozwinięcie intelektu-elementu wieczności.

Również wiersz "Bizancjum" jest symbolicznie wyrażonym pragnieniem wyjścia poza ludzką naturę poprzez intelekt i sztukę. Głównym problemem nie jest tu jednak kontrast materialnego i wiecznego świata lecz paradoksalna żywotność biantyjskich zmartwych-nadprzyrodzoność jest tu "śmiercią w życiu i życiem w śmierci". Bizancjum jest więc znów niematerialnym rajem intelektu i sztuki. Z tej perspektywy poematów liryczny spogląda na pozostawione za sobą zawieszności ziemskiego życia.