

Disappointing Utopian Vision of W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"

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Abstract

Most of the critical literature and readings of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", both form or content wise, focus on the aesthetic, spiritual or symbolic aspects of the poem, with occasional allusions to the biography of the writer. This research, apart from the allusive imagery and symbolic structure, presents a more critical view of the text. It attempts to highlight self-contradictory and irreconcilable outcome as well as paradoxical representations of both imagined spaces that have rarely been considered or examined. This article, therefore, analyzes the inconsistencies resulting from readers' expectations that stem from the outcomes of such mythical vision and what is unfolding by the end of the poem. The research shows that the speaker's disillusionment with his society, the fantasy of the body transcendence and the spatiotemporal idealization of Byzantium are based on false premises and fail the expectation of readers. These inconsistencies, the research argues, are the manifestation of the poet's desideratum for an immediate and perennial consolation of the suffering from life at old age and resort to the pleasure of art and beauty.

Keywords: Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium", aesthetics, inconsistencies

1. Introduction

Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is extensively appreciated for its inventive, evocative, and spiritual spirit. Secondary materials reviewing and commenting on the work tend to fall into imaginative, analytical, spiritual, and aesthetic interpretations (Note 1). A brief of the poem (written sometime in 1926) would be appropriate for initial discussion. The poem begins with speaker feeling that the country in which he resides in is no place for elderly people like himself. It is only welcoming youth: these young are lying in one another's arms; trees are full of singing birds and fish in the water. With no intellectual or spiritual concerns all are caught in the pathways and cycles of decaying nature.

An old man in this world is nothing but vile and useless, and is deprived of the sensual joys of youth, a thing just like a scarecrow and inexorably going to death unless his soul can clap its hands and sing to escape this repugnant state. To do so, he must release himself from the mortal body he is tied to. Hence the poem introduces a metaphoric journey to learn how to relish old age and wisdom, uniting his passion for immortality with the body form he desires. His journey is to Byzantium, the ancient utopian and artistic excellence Greek city or the later Constantinople or the present Istanbul (for the context of the poem still part of the European artistic and intellectual culture), in search for ideal spirituality in art and life with a religious ethos. His transformation combines the mystery of religion with the mystery of art. There, the speaker addresses wise men and saints, spinning in a spiral of holy fire, for his heart to be stripped of a young man's desire and necessitate his transformation to enter the "artifice of eternity" i.e., the eternal nature of art.

Perhaps the advent of industrialization and the unprecedented changes of society in conflict with the ideal 'Golden Age' peace and harmony is at work in the poem. This had the most significant effect on Yeats and the poem's tension is, perhaps, only the poet's desire to escape into an imaginary and personal haven. This is expressed through mixing and the convergence of historical-cultural and mythical elements to generate a narrative that represent an alternative to reality. The present article is intended to produce value judgments about the repudiated state of the old man and the future transformation without undermining the poem's richness, and its spiritual and aesthetic meaning written by the Nobel Laureate. This is through the polarization of opposites the speaker employs to describe the present and the future experiences.

2. Young Versus Old

To begin with, the speaker has raised an unsettling question of why he no longer belonged to his country, "that is

no country for old men” (1). This as the country is only good for the youth and that old men are treated as insignificant, as he says. Possibly this reflects Yeats anxiety about the future of Ireland. This as “Yeats believed that the nature of the Irish nation and its people were changing and for the worse” (McKenna, p. 76). Perhaps it is a personal concern and skepticism about the future. He once wrote, “life is a perpetual preparation for what never happens” (Kelly, 2003, p. 133). Or that is a natural endowment as he believed that growing old necessitates suffering. For him suffering is inspiring and “is so vital to creation”, Yeats asked if “a poet, when he is growing old, will ask himself if he cannot keep his mask and his vision without new bitterness, new disappointment” (Doody, 2018, p. 154).

However, the theme of age is a recurring theme throughout his poetry. Yeats wrote a series of poems where the generation gap and conflict between youth and old is illustrated and express his resentment of old age. For example, as early as his mid-twenties, Yeats wrote “The Old Pensioner” (1890); “When You Are Old” (1892); and “The Folly of Being Comforted” (1902). The preoccupation runs through his later poems like “The Wild Swans at Coole” (1917); “Among School Children” (1928); “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1933) and “An Acre of Grass” (1936) among others and continued into “The Spur” (1938) published the year before he died. Despite this, Yeats’s philosophy towards the subject undergoes a powerful transformation and his verse develops a new approach. This, for example, can be recognized from the mood in “Sailing to Byzantium” in contrast and compared to the earlier poems. This shift can be linked to the poet’s personal experience. Particularly, in the early poems, he considers that one source of poetic creativity is, in fact, sexual energy. In “The Lover Pleads with His Friend for Old Friends” published in 1899, the three wild women characters might be destructive, but potentially natural and creative forces. At this stage, Yeats saw no conflict between emotional and sensual sources and urges expressed in later poems. Years later, he had no woman in his life, he wrote, “I was tortured by sexual desire and disappointed love” (Hynes, p. 576). On another occasion, at the ceremony of awarding him the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm in 1923, Yeats pointed to the young man engraved on the medal he received that he too “was good-looking once like that young man” (Bornstein, 2012, p. 47). Accordingly, his later writings, which are classified as the period of his maturity, including “Sailing to Byzantium” have been influenced by the regret of his destiny and the emotional pain of disappointed love. That is to contend that his disappointment in “Sailing to Byzantium” has little to do with the youth indulging themselves but rather a man who could not compromise with his advancement into age.

In the context of the poem, there is no proof of the speaker’s declarative statement that old men are treated as trivial things in his country and the contention he has seems proofless. Diatribe against the country, both of time and space, seems to express the personal feeling of the speaker only. The youth are deprived of a chance of a hearing to refute this claim, so readers are invited to judge the youth from the perspective of the speaker only. Moreover, the speaker does not attempt to fit in the country or undergo certain adjustment similar to his transformation and journey and turns his efforts solely to escaping it. Any description on youth of his country, then, is inevitably biased. Besides, there is no guarantee of him being welcomed in Byzantium he takes refuge in either, despite his feeling to be in the right place.

The central contention of the speaker is that the young ignore and fail to participate in intellectual and artistic endeavors. For him, beauty, knowledge, and truth cannot be learned from the kind of activities his countrymen practice. His objection to the youth is that they neglect “monuments of unageing intellect” (8) and “those dying generations” are indulged “at their song” only (3). Surprisingly, and despite the uniquely mature tone, when the speaker is transformed, he will be singing “to lords and ladies” of Byzantium himself (31). He willingly and without being entreated sings in Byzantium but he has denied the youth of his country this sort of singing neither for guiding nor entertaining. Truly, the speaker’s intention, is not mere entertainment but an eternal song of “what is past, or passing, or to come” (32). However, it indicates that the audience of Byzantium and similar to his place of origin who has journeyed away from, needs to be reminded/taught of their lack of inhibitions. Perhaps his country’s class of young, with their youthful exuberance, is very much different from “lords and ladies” of Byzantium. Especially as Yeats’s admiration for the aristocracy and social hierarchy is not unknown (Battaglia, 1986). For Yeats, social hierarchy is what combines and connects culture (May, 1988, p. 19). Perhaps it was for a similar reason he makes them “singing-masters” of his soul like the sages who transformed him (20).

3. Scarecrow Versus Bird

The speaker attempts to break free from his society through finding an alternative source to give meaning to life and a different way of looking at the world. The outcome is a product in the image of a bird drawn from the rich Grecian artistic source. This ideal image or craft is meant to assimilate beauty and art. The new form acts like a representational art, one with the subject matter of experience in life and deep observations of the human condition. The objective is to attract the attention of citizens of Byzantium to learn and appreciate his knowledge,

wisdom, and experience. The imaginative golden bird is unchangeable symbol of ideal beauty and form which is born out of divine and classical art. Yeats was fascinated with symbols and their functions. He wrote: "Religious and visionary people, monks and nuns, and medicine-men and opium-eaters, see symbols in their trances; for religious and visionary thought is thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection" (Yeats, 1997, p. 356). This is indeed the artistic and adventurous soul of the speaker of the poem.

Yeats's true purpose, however, and what he has journeyed for is not spiritual truth as his speaker claims, rather an aesthetic function and motive embodying Yeats's fascination with mystic beauty of art and culture. Despite readers' expectation of an ending featuring the speaker to be revered for his wisdom, there is hardly any spiritual state the soul has been exchanged for. Eventually and after the voyage across the ocean, the body is swapped into an immortal work of art as he believes the artificial bird does not fade and weaken over time. Yeats wrote "I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called "Sailing to Byzantium" (O'Neill, 2004, p. 137). After all, Yeats believed the city represents a perfect union of aesthetic and spiritual energies. Although he did not travel to Istanbul, but still he was fascinated by the old culture of the city Byzantium. Again, the journey and its outcome seem to be a personal fascination with a culture and disappointment with another. Yeats is questioning social and cultural structure in his former country, in favor of the culture of Byzantium. Yeats wrote, "I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic, and practical life were one" (Foster, 203, p. 288). For him the aesthetic function of art is more important than anything else as it becomes clear from the comparison between the scarecrow and the golden bird.

Somehow, the central golden bird image (or symbol), with its untarnishing quality, and its true function is problematic, and few points should be made here. The image of the bird is set in contrast to the image of the scarecrow. Perhaps we contend that Yeats's urban world of Byzantium was the dividing point for a scarecrow, or that a function of scarecrow was diametrically opposite to the principal purposes which motivated Yeats's fleeing his former country. That is to say, they are two conflicting symbols in function, one attracting and one scaring away. The scarecrow's function of scaring birds is opposite to Yeats's intention to place his bird on the tree permanently. Clearly, the scarecrow, here, represents loss of the aesthetics value in everyday life of his countrymen that his journey is proposed to compensate for. Yeats shows a strong antagonism both to the image and the function of scarecrow (Note 2). In his analogy of the scarecrow showing how an old man can be mere pathos, the speaker says, "an aged man is but a paltry thing... a tattered coat upon a stick," (9-10). Consequently, he pleads the divine to become nothing "but such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make ... of hammered gold and gold enamelling" (27-28, Note 3). It warrants questioning if the analogy showing a hollow image of a worn-out scarecrow vs. the durable Grecian art is convincing and how different their function is. Considering that both still show physical appearance, are artificial and less of disembodied spirits.

Firstly, Yeats has ignored, in his search of the ideal and fleeing the temporal world, that similar to the bird symbol, scarecrows carry artistic spirit, utility, and cultural and historical values. Scarecrows were utilized in Egypt and Japan as far as 3000 years ago. In some cultures, scarecrows were "believed to have had the power to scare away evil forces beside animals and birds" (Król, 2019). Scarecrows have also been source of creative and innovative designs. Various scarecrow compositions invoke imagination and display aesthetics scenery and affects. Although birds and unlike scarecrows, have long been spiritual symbols, but the bird here is only artificial and mechanical. So, the sharp contrast between the two and the speaker's delight of one and discomfort of the other is not fully satisfactory.

Secondly, in effect, and apart from the aesthetic pleasure, the artificial bird here is more or less like a scarecrow. The sharp distinction between the artistic and golden bird and the distorted and repulsive image of the scarecrow is merely superficial. The speaker thinks he is not a wasted body perched on a bough and that he could escape the death and decay of the natural world. However, and despite that his crave immortality might have been granted but no spirituality intertwined with it. This as his main function is to help the drowsy emperor being kept awake. Yeats wrote that "I have read somewhere that in the emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang" (Pasco, 2002, p. 17). His allusion is to the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus. Evidently and after all, readers are caught between the discrepancy of his illusive status placing himself at the center of Byzantium against the harsh reality, being no more than a piece of golden art. This is contrary to the purpose and objective of his journey announced at the beginning of the poem.

4. Freedom Versus Imprisonment

The speaker wishes to continue his soul alive by untying it with the weak and failing human flesh. This is a

prerequisite for this transformation and spiritual transcendence. While readers attempt to fully live the poet's rich imagination and rejoice his form of artistic immortality, the outcome of the journey poses few challenges and contradictions. Especially the religious spirit of the holy city, 'God's holy fire' (17), presents a grand introduction but with a surprise ending and an unexpected conclusion. The speaker attempts to convince readers that he experiences fulfilling his desired sensual and intellectual pleasure, but his comfort in time and space is false and stirs formidable difficulties for readers.

Firstly, although readers expect the cheeriest of outcomes of the transcendence, we see that he has become a bird perched on a bough, a dead frame, less free than the birds in his former home. His main, and only function is to serenading ladies and gentlemen and attending sleepy emperors of Byzantium. This is in direct contrast to the proclaimed aim of his journey. Secondly, the problem is that his elaborate structure and its underpinning perception is meant for eternity. Unlike the many and most likely malleable generations to come he does not progress or change the form. His new form has resulted in losing his capacity for decision and action, as he has confined himself inside this domain having no access with and to the outside world. Thirdly, the principal question that should be asked is how pragmatic and more pertinently, how effective is this for the years to come. What if by time he is also unwelcomed in his new home? Especially the experience of the world that he has with him is for the past as he never moves forward unlike people around him. That is with little or no future experience to share with his audience and thereof nothing compelling the youth to be enthralled to, and do not necessarily value communicative art which the design embodies and represents. Yeats was under the influence of the Romantics, namely Shelley and Blake, in developing his philosophy of the role of poets in the social sphere. Such philosophy by Yeats was previously endorsed by Shelley who once maintained: "poets are the true legislators of the world" (Merritt, 1971, p. 175). Further, Yeats seems to have ignored that societies are in continuous cycle of change. He underestimates the challenge that the coming generation might not retain the same vision, artistic values, and models for artistic expressions of the past periods. Yeats might have believed that aesthetic taste or 'taste of art' has a universal standard, that is not susceptible to change. The shape (image) he has chosen is based on the assumption that the audience will be fascinated by it as by the artistic and culture behind it and will stand the test of time. Nevertheless, aspects of popular taste for art come into being and dissolve themselves being the upshot of many influences similar to culture, morals, and other public standards. Despite attempts to recognize standards of taste, aesthetic value is not congenital and remains utterly individual. For David Hume, "aesthetic responses, such as the intuition of beauty, are not perceptions of qualities in objects, but are subjective, i.e., in the subject. Beauty is literally in the eye of the beholder and not in external objects" (Carroll, 1984, p. 182). For Kant the "basis of a judgment of taste is a merely subjective representation and that the only merely subjective representations are feelings of pleasure or displeasure" (Watkins, 2011, p. 315). Likewise, T. J. Clark writes "art is one historical process among other acts, event, and structures—it is a series of actions in but also on history" (Clark, 1982, p. 252). Taste and the beautiful are highly subjective, and people perceive them differently. Eventually and if the golden bird image will not survive the onslaught of time, the speaker might become a public scarecrow, as nothing but an old image, that the speaker run from in his country and not even a simulacrum of a soul.

5. Conclusion

The poem's pessimism and deep anxiety are linked with its particularly turbulent era, politically and culturally. This research is calling into question the vision and the metaphorical journey that Yeats's speaker creates, which poses a set of challenges and contradictions. It argues that the speaker's quest is not an utterly yearning for a spiritual world of immortality and that renouncing his culture in favour of that of Byzantium is built on false premises. Further the dichotomies between old and young, the scarecrow and the artificial bird, do not have viable bases. Yeats's attempt to emphasize the timelessness of the soul through art is fleeting. Despite the speaker's self-displacement from his country, his presence and value in the new space are neither acknowledged nor welcomed. Hence, the artistic body as a medium that presumably transcends history does not guarantee his soul to endure in Byzantium.

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Notes

Note 1. Reference can be made to Norman, Jeffares, A. (1946 Jan). The Byzantine Poems of W. B. Yeats. *Review of English Studies*, OS 22, 44–52. Reprinted in Finneran, pp. 17–27; and Allen, James Lovic (1973 June). Yeats's Byzantium Poems and the Critics, Reconsidered. *Colby Library Quarterly*, 10(2), 57–71.

Note 2. Similarly, in his “Among School Children” poem and elsewhere, Yeats described his diminished status as a “kind of old scarecrow”.

Note 3. One possible source for the analogy of a man changing clothes and the soul changing bodies is from the Hindu tradition and scriptures.

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