

3. An Immortal Halcyon Life: Formalistic Approach to Byzantium Poems

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Abstract

The spiritual quest towards peace may not happen in all people's life but some. Those experiencing such a journey may not have talked about it directly although they mostly reflect it in their works of art in case there are scholars. William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet and intellectual, experienced such peace and reflected it in his works of art. The so called Byzantium poems-"Sailing to Byzantium," and "Byzantium"- reveal his departure from a mortal world to an everlasting peace. He uses figurative language to describe his reasons for this travel by presenting some facts about the place he is currently living and the ideal place he has been looking for. In this article, the formalistic approach has been applied to scrutinize his two poems to show how he tends to illustrate his quest from a mortal world to an everlasting peace.

Keywords

William Butler Yeats, Byzantium Poems, Formalistic Approach

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Tired of vicissitudes of the sensual life, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), as a writer, looked for an eternal, ever lasting world. In order to attain such a realm, he tried to write poetries in which he could be able to explain how he tried to reach it and what the characteristics of the world he had in his mind were.

The Byzantium poems-“Sailing to Byzantium,” and “Byzantium”- are two of his poems which, as Peter Ure (1967) believes, “... complementary the one to the other are however, unique, and they take their place among Yeats’s most personal utterances,” (p. 67) and seem to explain this attitude. Furthermore, they seem to show why he is dissatisfied with the present situation and where and why he wishes to go to.

In the discussion section, by applying formalistic approach as a way to look into these poems, first “Sailing to Byzantium,” then, “Byzantium,” this paper will present how Yeats’s attitude in finding such a world and characteristics of it can be traced in these texts. By paying close attention to stanza forms, rhythms, rhymes, metaphors, images, allusions, alliterations, and characteristics of different kinds of words which are used by Yeats or the speaker of the poem in these poems, the paper explores the features of the world he is in and the world where he wants to be in and whether or not he is able to reach where he wants to.

The last part is the conclusion of what will be discussed in the discussion section.

Discussion

A) “Sailing to Byzantium”

Sailing to Byzantium

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 unaging intellect.

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.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a 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 the artifice of eternity.

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
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

The poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," comprises four eight-line stanzas which are metered in iambic pentameter and rhymes ABABABCC which is technically called ottava rima. In the six lines of stanza the poet talks about something and in lines seven and eight of stanza he concludes the discussion he has already raised.

The title of the poem starts with the word 'Sailing' which represents a kind of movement which is toward somewhere named 'Byzantium' shown in the following words of the title. Byzantium seems to be a place better than the one where the persona of the poem lives and as A. Norman Jeffares (1984) says, "Byzantium is a holy city, as the capital of eastern Christianity, and as the place where God exists because of the life after death Yeats [the speaker] imagines existing there," (p. 212) because he is eager enough to bear the hardship of sailing and instead resident there, as Yeats himself mentions in *A Vision*, "I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium, a little before Justinian opened St Sophia and closed the academy of Plato..." (qtd. in Jeffares, 1984, p. 212). As clearly discussed, Byzantium is a place for antiquity.

"Sailing to Byzantium," itself as a whole "represents the voyage and is written from the point of view of the uninitiated outsider who leaves the material world for immaterial" (Unterecker, 1965, p. 217). Furthermore, R. K. R. Thornton (2003) believes that, "Yeats's poem about the search for spiritual life is not a

geographical journey but a journey out of nature" (p. 287) because nature is mortal and he wants to be immortal.

The first stanza of the poem opens with the sentence "that is no country for old men" (I.1) in which we can distinguish a contrast between 'that country' where the speaker or persona of the poem lived and is not the place of old men because of the lack of rejuvenation and the country ahead where the persona is going to reach and is the place of old men because there he can rejuvenate himself. 'Old men' signifies mortality, decrepitude, and death. As a result, by mentioning the first sentence the persona persists in the mortality of 'that country'. So, even with focusing on the first sentence, the reader can conspicuously differentiate 'that country,' where the speaker of the poem lived, with its ephemeral, sensuous, passing, temporal, transient, deadly, and lethal characteristics from the country ahead with its immortal, eternal, everlasting, incorruptible, ageless, deathless, perpetual, unchanging characteristics.

Furthermore, the persona of the poem continues to complete this contrast by talking more about the images and events of the former country he lived in. the image of "The young" (I.1) who are "in one another's arms" (I.2) shows the passionate world which is transient. "birds" as "dying generation," are "in the trees / at their song." (I. 2-3) "The salmon-falls," (I.4) "the mackerel-crowded seas," (I.4) "Fish, flesh, or fowl," (I.5) and "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies" (I.6) clearly show the mortal world the persona of the poem wants to depart. He believes that all the creatures in his former country "Caught in sensual" (I.7) and because of that they "all neglect monuments of unaging intellect" (I.7-8) and know no spirituality and as a result no immortality. John Unterecker (1965) maintains:

The world he [the poet, persona, or speaker of the poem] leaves, transfixed by the sensual music of its singing birds, is compounded of and celebrates decaying multitudinous bodies. Unlike the golden bird he would be, the "dying generations" (birth and death compressed remarkably into a phrase) of the world's real birds sing hymns to body, hymns which distract "all" from the contemplation of the sort of art which a long can justify an old man's existence, the "monuments of unaging intellect" which can not be produced in modern chaotic times." (pp. 172-73)

Moreover, the rhyming words of the stanza, "young" "trees," "song," "seas," "summer long," and "dies" all clarify the sensual and mortal world because all of the them "neglect" the "unaging intellect."

The second stanza of the poem opens with "An aged man is but a paltry thing" (II. 9) in which we can see the image of "an aged man" who is considered as useless and trivial object in a mortal world. He is nothing but "A tattered coat upon a stick" (II.10) which alludes to the image of scarecrow in sensual world. He does not have any way to get rid of the situation he is trapped into "unless/soul clap its hands and sing," (II.10-11) which means that his immortal or spiritual part helps him to ascend from ephemeral world. It is here that Elizabeth Kimball (2003) states, "singing is some kind of

solution to the problem of an aging body" (paragraph 3). This singing seems essential for "every tatter in its mortal dress" (II.12) who does not want to be a "paltry thing" (II.9).

The persona of the poem believes that in the country ahead there is "singing school" (II.13) where according to Elizabeth Kimball (2003) "... is a place where the soul might learn to transcend the decrepit body" (paragraph 7). It is a country where the "studying" of the "magnificence" of the soul is of high importance. From lines 10 to 14 the speaker brings the words "soul," "hands," "sing," "dress," "singing school," "studying," "monuments," "its," and "magnificence" in which we see the repetition of "S" sound by which he wants to arrange a whispering condition to be able to study the excellence of soul in silence with whole concentration. As a result, he "sailed the seas" (II.15) and chose "the holy city of Byzantium" (II.16) as a place where he could fully know the majesty of his soul. The importance of Byzantium for the speaker is conspicuous here as John Unterecker (1965) says, "A scarecrow, 'A tattered coat upon a stick,' he must sing not of the flesh but rather of the soul, and his singing school must be among those monuments that only perfect civilizations of the past – Byzantium, say- have produced" (p. 173). The importance of the word "holy" in "holy city of Byzantium" can not be ignored because it describes the characteristics of Byzantium as spiritual, for the soul goes there, and immortal because the speaker tries to escape from "dying generation"; As a result, it is meaningless to go to another place where there is death again. Therefore, he departs for somewhere, Byzantium, to be immortal as Virginia Pruitt (2005) says, "Byzantium has also consistently as the source and symbol of supremely beautiful and enduring artifacts," (p. 225). So, by the end of the second stanza, the speaker who recognized himself as an aged man moves from his country and residents in Byzantium to distinguish his soul from his decrepit body as a scarecrow.

Next stanza starts with the word "O" (III.17) which is an invocation by which, as we proceed in the poem, the speaker tries to grasp the attention of "sages [who are] standing in God's holy fire" (III.17) to help him in order that he could be able to detach his eternal spiritual soul from his lethal bodily form. "God's holy fire" is a metaphor for truth the sages have reached by burning their natural and sensual body.

We clearly see the allusion to image of phoenix, a legendary bird which burns its body in flames and completes a circular or spinal turn of "gyre" from birth to death and again to birth which is eternal because of the holiness of fire. At the same time we see another metaphor in which the "sages" like phoenix burned themselves to complete the spinning of the fate of "perne in a gyre" in order to be eternal. That's the reason why the speaker wants them to descend from "The holy fire" and be the savior of "singing-master of my [the speaker's] soul" (III.20).

The images of the third stanza are quite different from those in the first and the second as Helen Hennessy Vendler (1963) maintains, "The tattered coat upon a stick acts as a counterpoise to the sages standing in God's holy fire..." (p. 114) which clearly shows the discrepancy of characteristics of mortal world to immortal.

The speaker persistently wants the sages to aid him to change the attitude of his heart which is interwoven into the dying natural world which, he believes, is nothing and help him to be immortal or “artifice of eternity” (III.24). It is obvious that the speaker is escaping from death and whatever causes death, as Virginia Pruitt (2005) mentions:

In “sailing to Byzantium” Yeats intimates the vulnerability of the very artifact, that, within the poem, symbolizes immutability. This vulnerability, unlike the biological vulnerability of the “dying animal,” has been imposed not by times but rather by human aggressiveness expressed through inevitable cycles of warfare. Viewed thus, the speaker/poet appears, in an ironic sense, to be a counterpart of the apparently inviolable Byzantium golden bird, whose death has merely been deferred. (p. 226)

That's why the speaker as a mortal creature wants to be "golden bird" which is immortal.

In the opening line of the fourth stanza the speaker persistently talks about his desire to get away from the natural or mortal world, “Once out of nature,” (IV.25) but he does not stop and continues to complete his trajectory by never returning to his former mortal position once he divorced, “I shall never take / my bodily form from any natural thing,” (IV.25-6). It is here that Peter Ure (1967) asserts, “In Byzantium, the soul casting off the body of old age and rejecting the sensual profusion of life, travels and becomes itself a work of art” (p. 68); that's what the speaker has in his mind and tries to be.

But what he wants to be is ‘a work of art’ or a ‘golden bird’ out of all sufferings, ‘hammered,’ he welcomes in order to grasp the attention of others to be able to do what he has in his mind. What Louis MacNeice (1967) believes the speaker has in his mind is that, “... the poet [speaker] expressed a wish to go on singing but as a golden bird, that is, to be himself a work of art, and so immortal” (p. 120). For the speaker, ‘singing’ is of high importance. Again, at the end of the poem we see how the speaker wants to ‘sing,’ as a bird, to people the passage of time, “what is past, or passing, or to come” (IV.32). A. G. Stock (1964) believes that “The bird on the golden bough, ..., was the form of the poet’s [speaker’s] own soul. It was the same golden bough that Aeneas carried to the underworld, and thus Byzantium is the world beyond life” (p. 203) where is a utopia for the speaker.

We notice the desire of the speaker to escape from the physical world which, he believes, withers both the body and the soul simultaneously, because both of them are entrapped in the lethal characteristics of the mortal world. This strife of the speaker is not ignored by John Unterecker (1965) who says:

At last “out of nature,” he can renounce all physical incarnation. He can be the imperishable thing itself, the golden bird -the very work of art- beyond decay, and so unlike the dying generations of real birds who perform similar song in stanza one (who sing “whatever is begotten, born, and die” but who must themselves perish). On his golden bough, he will have become himself one of those monuments he had so admired. (p. 173)

As a result, it is in Byzantium he can achieve what he has in mind.

B) "Byzantium"

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.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit 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.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,

Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

It is a lyric poem with the rhyme scheme of AABBCDDC. The title of the poem, "Byzantium" refers to the place where, as it was discussed in the discussion part of the article on "Sailing to Byzantium," the speaker or persona of the poem desires to go in order to be able to purify his soul and be immortal. He is in Byzantium now and whatever he is talking about happens in it.

The first stanza of the poem opens with the line, "The unpurged images of day recede," (I.1) in which according to Louis MacNeice (1967) "... antithesis recurs; the unpurged images of day recede' and give place to the eternal (presumably purged) images of the night" (p. 126). So, the role of 'purged images of the night' in the poem is considerable. When night comes, "the Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed," (I.2) we notice a contemptuous scene in which according to F. A. C. Wilson (1960), "In 'Byzantium' he [the speaker] uses drunken soldiers and prostitutes as emblems for two sexes ensnared by the tensions of time," (p. 289) and entrapped in physicality.

The speaker continues with warning of the nearness of death by using 'cathedral gong' as a symbol for this warning and after that the quietness of night breaks, and regeneration occurs. One can conspicuously, according to F. A. C. Wilson (1960), notice that,

In 'Byzantium' we have a perfect symbol for the regenerate condition in that city where the 'drunken soldiery' and 'night-walkers' (symbol for the unpurified sexes) are removed from view; where the mind tends always to be fixed on God; where the soul learns that it is master of its own destiny, and can choose rebirth or escape from the time-world at its own discretion; where imperfect souls suffer purification through flame and the sea of lime and space is denied ingress. (p. 305)

Beside all of these processes, the unpurged images such as 'man,' 'Complexities,' and 'the fury and the mire of human veins' and instead the purged images, as we see in the following stanza, such as '... image, man or shade, /shade more than man, more image than a shade' (II. 9-10) come into being and as Helen Hennessy Vendler (1963) states, "...we conclude that these images do not have even the shadowy humanity of the spirits of Hades, but rather are dehumanized 'bobbins' without moisture or breath" (pp. 114-15). These 'breath mouths,' as 'superhuman,' are purified souls which after their death in their natural and mortal life gain their immortal life from their own natural death. This antithesis, "death-in-life and life-in-death" (II.16) according to A. G. Stock (1964) shows that, "among those complex gyres and counter-gyres, 'each one living the other's death, dying the other's life,' the illumination of one form of being is always the darkness of another," (p. 204) which acts as a cycle to complete itself.

In the third stanza the image of golden bird which is the symbol of purified soul on the golden bough, referring to the death-world of immortality, scorns whatever belongs to the natural world. Here, as Helen Hennessy Vendler (1963) mentions:

The golden bird (who is probably the golden nightingale of "Sailing to Byzantium") scorns aloud the "Common bird or petal / and all complexities of mire or blood," like the floating superhuman image, the golden nightingale is refined almost beyond recognition; just as the image was "shade more than man, more-image than a shade," so the nightingale is "more miracle than bird or handiwork. (p. 115)

What the speaker tries to emphasize in this stanza, according to Wilson (1960) is, "... the soul, imaged as a golden bird, reaches beatitude or the apex of the tree of life and there by the symbol of cock crow announces its desire to be reborn into the time-world (or, the poem goes on, if it is 'embittered' against the 'moon' of generation, 'scorns' the time-world altogether)" (p. 236) because this 'time-world' is ephemeral.

The fourth stanza presents a purgatorial image of flames which purifies all souls and spirits without even "sing[ing] a sleeve". This holy fire purges all objects, keeps no fury and agony. It is here and with the help of these 'purgatorial flames' that the "unpurged images of day" turn into the "purged images of night at midnight, as Wilson (1960) states," midnight is Yeats's [speaker's] symbol for the hour of death, in 'Byzantium' where souls enter the purgatorial flames at this moment," (p. 286) and try to be purified.

In the beginning line of the last stanza an image of a dolphin is presented which is a symbol of soul in movement from one place and state to another. Here, the sages or "golden smithies of the Emperor" (V.35) destroy all the problems and "furies of complexities" (V.37) which work as a barrier for the purification of the soul. Helen Hennessy Vendler (1963) believes that:

In the final stanza of "Byzantium," the things so carefully separated begin to interact. No longer is the city an entity remotely disdaining the mire of days unpurged images. The two are plunged into each other as a wave of fire confronts a wave of mire and blood. The sacred dolphins, bearing the blood-begotten spirits, inhabit the unpurged medium; the flood sweeps against the fire of smithies and is broken by them, but returns with renewed force. The marbles of the pavement shatter the "bitter furies of complexity" but no victory is final, as the violent clashes continue. Suddenly, in a dazzling syntactical victory, the resolution, so unforeseeable, is accomplished: The two kinds of images, purged and unpurged, are not hostile but symbiotic. The unpurged images *beget* the purged images; blood begets spirits. There is even a hint that the begetting is accomplished by the violent shock wave of flood and fire, at the moment of crisis. (p. 117)

This is a process of completion from defection.

c) From “sailing to Byzantium” to “Byzantium”

As it was discussed the poet or speaker of Byzantium poems is tired of sensual life and seeks for an immortal place named Byzantium. He starts a voyage to go there in order to be purged of all natural filthies and when he inhabits there he finds the ‘purgatorial flames’ on the ‘Emperors’ as a means of purification he looked for.

Conclusion

It was argued in this paper that a spiritual movement of the speaker of Byzantium poems- “sailing to Byzantium,” and “Byzantium” – occurred from sensual world to eternal world. This sailing as M.H. Abrams (1999) believes, “... is exhibited as making and justifying the choice of a way of life,” (p. 147). The life which the speaker or persona of these poems looks for is not a natural life which ends in death but a spiritual life which ends in eternity. He is tired of his life in the former country, with its entire vicissitudes, which ends in a Delphic fruitlessness. As a result, he spiritually escapes from that country, his former country he lived in, to gain an everlasting existence in the country ahead or Byzantium. For him, Byzantium with its ‘purgatorial flames’ acts as a sieve which keeps “all complexities of fury” in itself and lets the souls purge.

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