

A Note on Ambiguity in W.B. Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium"

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W.B. Yeats is a poet of great artistic honesty and integrity. In his critical statements he has candidly stated his artistic intentions and preoccupations. For such students of Yeats as have been puzzled by the artistic intentions of the poet in regard to the subject matter of his poetry, he has clarified his stance in his cryptic remark, "I remake myself" in my poetic compositions. Yeats, as every scholar knows it, is paradoxically a very complex and a simple poet. His complexity lies in his reader's bewilderment at the contradictory artistic issues and his simplicity lies in its being a key to the unlocking of some of the ambiguities lurking in some of his poems. In his poetry, sometime he raises an issue which develops logically but the conclusion seems to stultify his explicit poetic statement, because the conclusion of the poem is deliberately made meaningfully ambiguous¹. His "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem of this type of complex simplicity².

"Sailing to Byzantium," approached at the simplistic level, raises diverse issues. For example, it raises the issue at the philosophical level of the validity and desirability of the world of sensuous pleasures, of transience, and of the world of phenomena³. Contrasted with this would be the world of abstraction, permanence, and of art. If we translate these two worlds in terms of the function of poetry or in terms of the poet's thematic commitment, we cannot say whether an artist should direct his poetic energies towards observable reality of life with all its shortcomings, like transience, decay and death but richly endowed with warmth and pleasure while this life lasts or he should escape into a contemplative world of permanence, abstraction and glory, characterized by lack of warmth, lifelessness, fixity and passivity. This dilemma of the artist is created by W.B. Yeats not for critical examination and objective evaluation but for responding to the conflict in his own creative mind.

An unweary reader of Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" may come to the conclusion that the poet rejects the world of transience, sensuous or sensual pleasures, because of its

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transcient nature and is enamoured of the world of unaging intellect and the world of eternity and then is confused at the world of eternity addressing itself to the rejected world of phenomena by making the 'golden bird' on the 'golden bough' sing of "what is past, or passing or to come," i.e. the flux of time, which is an attribute of the world of phenomena. Let's analyse the poem stanza-wise to determine the artistic hesitancy of the poet himself in regard to the polemics that he has posed for himself.

The first stanza begins with the emphatic 'that' in a sentence containing the poetic statement: "that is no country for old men." The sentence has a note of finality, complete detachment and final rejection. The poet declares his separation from 'that country' without any reservation or scope of modification of his assertion. The lines which follow the above sentence ostensibly give a rationale for the rejection of that world. The rationale consists of richly concrete and evocative sensuous images of instinctive life; "the young in one another's arms," "birds in the trees," "the salmon falls," "the mackerel crowded seas," etc., all celebrating sensuous joy, procreativity and multiplication. 'Fish,' 'flesh,' and 'fowl,' on the one hand, "commend all summer long." And on the other hand, they sum up the reality of sensuous pleasure and creativity at the cosmic level, comprising water, earth and air⁴. The energetic rhythm and the succession of sensuous images, culminating in the highly significant and phonetically manipulated impact in the "mackerel crowded seas," convey the fullness and emotionally involved desirability of the world which has been so emphatically rejected in the opening sentence containing the poetic statement. The poet it seems, realizes that he is stultifying his initial poetic assertion and hence in the midst of his vicarious participation in the life and world of sensuous pleasure and fecundity, he quickly deviates into a parenthetical assertion in pointing out the real cause of rejecting the world of sensual existence. The parenthesis is "those dying generations," a phrasal clause which in the scheme of the poetic argument is to be tagged with the first sentence of the stanza. The poet's creativeness, enthusiasm and vicarious participation in the life of the sensual world, under the pressure of the declared poetic statement, have, of necessity, to give in to cold cerebral logic. The argument, thus, proceeds, in order to gain strength and validity, as it were, in general terms in "whatever is begotten, born and dies." The word 'caught' in the last but one line of the first stanza is endowed with richness and subtle complexity of meaning. It indicates the

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involuntary, instinctive participation of those involved in the sensuous, sensual and procreative pleasures, which paradoxically includes the poet himself in an implicit manner. The passive connotation of 'caught', which leaves no room for deliberated choice, in the logic of the poem, can hardly be accepted as a term of denunciation or rejection. The term 'music', with, whatever modifier, always denotes desirability and pleasure. The last line of the stanza is in the nature of an indictment of the world of sensuousness, characterized by transience, by opposing to it an alternative world, which is permanent. But the use of the word 'monuments', with its connotation of fixity and lack of warmth, strikes an ominous, desenting note so far as the poet's initial assertion is concerned. As the poet in his creative enthusiasm, while belittling the world of sensuous pleasure, in fact, praises it, he in the force of his analytical debate in using the word 'monument', unconsciously, hardly rates the world of 'unageing intellect' favourably because of its lacking the very attributes for the possessing of which the world of sensuous pleasures is to be rejected. Thus the complexity of the thematic structure and the resultant ambiguity are already established. Thus the world of "those dying generations" and that of the "unageing intellect". The poet in the next stanza proceeds to the world, alternative to the world of sensuous pleasure. Here it is relevant to remark that Yeats seems to be posing the age old dialectic about the function of the poetic mind-whether a poet should draw upon and address himself to the world of Becoming or he should deal with the world of Being, the world of pure essence and abstraction or of the world of the ideal. This fact is too well known to Yeats' students to need elaboration and is relevant to Yeats' poetry in general and "Sailing to Byzantium" in particular. The debate which had started even before Plato has continued upto our present day.

The second stanza opens with the poet's self-pitying regret at or loss of what he has so emphatically rejected in the first stanza. "An aged man is but a paltry thing/ a tattered coat upon a stick," is a frank and honest confession of the truth of reality. This has logically led some critics of Yeats to assert that the poem is about the curse of old age and looks forward of its corroboration of the same idea in "Among School Children." But this assertion does not hold water because the poet, instead of dilating upon "the paltry thing," hastens to the qualifying statement contained in the argument beginning with 'unless'. The argument which proceeds from 'unless' to the end of the third stanza is convincingly presented in the

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narration of the purificatory process of the soul so that it qualifies to the world of art. This process has again been taken up by Yeats in his other poem, “Byzantium”, which has rightly been regarded as complimentary to the poem under consideration. The poet’s argument for sailing ‘to the holy city of Byzantium’ (i.e. the world of art, of permanence, of abstraction, of Being) centres around to the purification of the crudities of the world of Becoming which attach to the creative mind: “consume my heart away sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal.” The argument naturally leads to the poet’s wish, “gather me into the artifice of eternity.” Here at a climax of his poetic conclusion, the poet uses, unconsciously though, the word ‘artifice’. This word means both the artifacts, denoting, permanence, as well as artificial, denoting lack of all those attributes which characterize a thing with ‘livingness’ and naturalness.

The disgust with “sick with desire” and “fastened to a dying animal”, denoting rejection of youthful passion and its transience, to be devoutly wished and be replaced by the world of ‘the artifice of eternity’, is carried on into the last stanza of the poem. The poet in the rush of his argument declares,

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing.

It is ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ which have been troubling the poet’s creative mind. The rejection of this element from the repertoire of the creative mind has a sense of conclusiveness as indicated in the lines quoted above.

But the lines containing the praise of the world of the “artifice of eternity” in the last stanza, though emphasizing permanence, contain passive syntactic patterns, like ‘hammered gold and gold enamelling’. The passive phrase and the repetition of ‘gold’ have innuendos, ominous to the poet’s direction of argument. They tend to insinuate at this world’s being characterized by passivity, lack of warmth and monotonous repetitiveness. The grammatical patterns characterizing this world bring out the poet’s hesitation and skepticism about his whole argument in the poem. The sensuous music of the first stanza is so firmly echoing that the poet compulsively makes the golden bird on the golden bough sing of “what is passed, or passing or to come”. The golden bird of the world of eternity and hence of passivity and

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fixity, can hardly be expected to sing about the world of flix, “dying generation” and all that the first six lines of the first stanza stand for.

The concluding line of the poem is in the nature of stultifying the progression of the argument about the poetic statement made in the opening of the poem. Either we can say that the poem ends at a note of ambiguity because the world of eternity joyously sings of the world which has been rejected or else the poet is uncertain about the feasibility of the dichotomy between the worlds of Becoming and Being. The dilemma, in fact, has been the staple of Yeats’ corpus of poetic composition.

By way of conclusion we can say that Yeats in this poem poses a problem for himself as a poet and for all the literary theorists who have been concerned with the issue of the function of poetry and the role of a poet is expected to play. Yeats in an intensely dramatic manner tries to debate this issue by splitting his poetic self in favour of the world of Becoming and the world of Being. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that the world of Being and the world of Becoming, as far as poetic composition is concerned, are interdependent. It cannot be gainsaid that inspite of Yeats’ concern with the ideal, the abstract and the world of Being, his predilection for a preferential status to the world of Becoming is firmly established in this poem. This aspect has been more emphatically asserted by Yeats in his ‘Byzantium’ conclusion that the world of Being and the world of Becoming, as far as poetic composition is concerned, are interdependent. This aspect has been more emphatically asserted by Yeats in his ‘Byzantium’ where the world of Being, affirming Yeats’ belief that the world of art must depend upon the world of phenomena.

NOTES

1. See Richard Ellmann for noting ambiguity in “sailing to Byzantium,” resulting from the poetic mask and imagery. Richard Ellmann, Yeats, The Man and the Masks, Faber and Faber, London, 1948.
2. Richard Ellmann, in his The Identity of Yeats (Macmillan, London, 1954, p.165) has rightly noted that Yeats puts the conflict of Byzantium in “Sailing to Byzantium,” ‘more bluntly in an early draft than in the completed poem.’ The lines in the first stanza of the early draft are as follows:

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Fish, Flesh and Fowl, all spring and summer long
Extol what is begotten, born and dies
And man has made no monument to extol
The unborn, undying generation unbegotten soul.

3. R. Frechet in his article “Yeats and The English Poet” has convincingly brought out the inadequacy of the world of art or imagination as a compensation for the loss of the world of the senses. See, D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds., W.B. Yeats: Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats (Ibaden University Press, Ibaden, Nigeria, 1965), pp.217-219.
4. Quoted, Frank Kermode, “Poetry as Image,” in Raymond Cornell, ed., Critics on Yeats (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1971), p.43.