

**BOATS AGAINST THE CURRENT — W. B. YEATS
(*SAILING TO BYZANTIUM AND BEYOND*)**

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The present study aims to investigate the journey taken in W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" as a time voyage both backwards and forwards whereby a circle of completion is attained. Completion being the fulfilment of meaning, an achievement of answers that are of paramount importance to the traveller. Additionally, the paper features chiefly an analysis of the questions of what motivates the choice of destination and why sailing has been selected as a method of time-travelling. A juxtaposition is offered between the poem in question and other literary works by writers contemporary to and preceding Yeats.

Key words: Yeats, journeying, nostalgia, time

The present paper is a manifestation of an attempt to investigate William Butler Yeats's poem *Sailing to Byzantium* and prove that the journey taken there is a journey of self-embellishment that happens in time and is headed for the future but has to go through the past first. An observation is made of the motivation for travel, the destination, and the means of transport. Additionally, the literary trip described by Yeats is juxtaposed to works of other writers who exploit the topic of travelling in time and space, and use aquatic symbolism, as also a journey to themselves. This study will also take a somewhat hermeneutical approach with the help of Bergson and Ricoeur to unveil the epistemology and metaphysics of journeying. The research is further motivated by the lack, to the best of my knowledge, of a similar investigation. This poem has been subjected to numerous discussions including some which explore its connection with Romanticism. Thus, George Bornstein compares Yeats's to Blake's speakers who "seek to move beyond nature into a more permanent world of spirit or intellect or art" (Bornstein 2006: 25). Also noteworthy is Sean Pryor's research which traces the drafts of this work which demonstrate a more detailed account of the journey in earlier

versions and comments on the poetry of paradise in it (Pryor 2011: 90-91). As fascinating as these may be, they do not employ the present critical approach, they do not focus on the swing of the movement, metaphorically speaking, and they do not use a broad comparative spectrum of other literary works. This lends, I hope, some originality to the current undertaking.

When talking about a journey the questions ‘where?’ and ‘why?’ are not only among the first to appear but they are also of paramount importance. The poem’s title answers the first one – the destination is Byzantium and the means of getting there is sailing. More precisely, the focus is on ‘the holy city of Byzantium’ also known as Constantinople or modern-day Istanbul. The fact that the lyrical speaker uses the old name of this city suggests that he is or wants to be, to use Robert Plant’s words, ‘a traveller of both time and space’ (Akkerman 2014: 91).

Alasdair Macrae makes an observation as to the question ‘where?’ – he comments: ‘for all his endless travelling, a mere handful of poems have locations outside Ireland, and then mainly in Byzantium’ (Macrae 1995: 187). This confirms the poet’s infatuation with the topos which has given birth, as is later revealed, to this piece of poetry aptly characterized by Harold Bloom as “the dramatic lyric of internalized quest” (Bloom 1972: 5). Yeats’s biographer mentions one of the poet’s travels in 1907 when, on tour in Italy, he visited Ravenna which affected his Byzantium-related poems (Macrae 1995: 72). Ravenna had considerable importance in the Mediterranean world and “contains some of the most spectacular works of art and architecture to have survived from late antiquity” (Deliyannis 2010: 1). Among these is the basilica of S. Apollinare Nuova that the poet visited in 1907 (Yeats 1997: 503) and which boasts mosaics heavily influenced by Byzantine tradition as the links between Ravenna and Constantinople were not only political but extended to other areas such as art and architecture (Deliyannis 2010: 9, 15-16). An interesting parallel may be drawn between Yeats’s perception of these mosaics and the art of photography, the emergence of which unfolded to a significant extent during Yeats’s lifetime. A mosaic is an image that can resemble and stand for, among other things, some event or a person, irrespective of their character – historic, religious, or mythical. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a mosaic is “made by inlaying small pieces of variously coloured material to form pictures or patterns”¹ and this is similar to the technology of analogue photography which uses many small light-sensitive

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mosaic>

particles on a surface comprising the big picture. As curious as this common feature is, there is one more important for the present discussion. It is the impression that an image leaves and how one perceives it. Roland Barthes comments that a photograph involves a new type of consciousness – “an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then” (Barthes in Pietrzak 2011: 24). To add to this, Henry Bergson deems that we imagine “perception to be a kind of photographic view of things,” we take a “photograph which would then be developed in the brain-matter by some unknown chemical and psychical process of elaboration” (Bergson 1991: 38). Viewing Yeats in Ravenna in the light of the first statement, one might guess that the poet felt that spatial immediacy in the conjunction of what was his here-now and there-then evoked by the available mosaics. On the other hand, using Bergson’s contribution, one may see Yeats’s perception of someone else’s perception portrayed in a mosaic as a photograph, developed in his brain with idiosyncratic ekphrastic hues, that played an important role in the poet’s perception of the Byzantine world.

Another enriching viewpoint can be found in Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925). The poet writes:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity... I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato. I think I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions... I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one... The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design... the work of many that seemed the work of one...

(Yeats 1997: 441-442)

So, it is clear that Yeats held this phase of Byzantine civilization in high esteem. What is more, he was after answers that he believed could be received from someone in this period. Thus, it is possible to conclude that since the poet had such a disposition, his poetic projection in *Sailing to Byzantium* is an expression of these inclinations and desire to have his questions resolved. In fact, the poem itself speaks of this. The first stanza gives an account of the destination and in the second part one reads:

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.
(emphasis added)

Such a sad observation of what one becomes with old age which may have been the result of Yeats's beginning to feel old as the poem was written in 1926 (Bloom 1972: 344) when he was in the beginning of his sixties. This remark is followed by the conjunction *unless* which ushers in a more positive outlook for the elderly. To be more precise, the lyrical voice speaks of a soul clapping its hands and taking up a song but there is no singing school so one is left with the inspiration from studying the city's monuments. The last two lines show that this appears to be a journey of spiritual enlightenment. What is more, in a BBC broadcast from 1927, Yeats confirms the above suggestion by expressing his high regard for the value of a particular fragment from the past:

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"... Byzantium was [once] the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolise the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city.

(Yeats 1997: 503)

In the following stanza one finds the lyrical speaker's direct appeal:

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.

The acquisition of singing faculties, symbolising how art has the power to liberate one from the chains of mortality, appears to be a

prerequisite for the speaker's being freed from his body – this “tattered coat upon a stick,” this “dying animal.” This liberation is desired by the lyrical hero, it seems, so that he may reach a more comprehensive grasp of his own life's continuity. In his work “Oneself as Another”, Ricoeur comments that one's life “cannot be grasped as a singular totality,” one can “never hope it to be successful, complete” because “there is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning,” and one's death will be “recounted only in the stories of those who survive [one]” (Ricoeur 1992: 160). He also adds “I am always moving toward my death, and this prevents me from ever grasping it as a narrative end” (160). It seems, however, that Yeats's poetic projection is trying to achieve some sense of an ending and even of life's continuation. The old man has questions unanswerable in the present, which resemble a barrier that does not let his boat beat on into the future, so he travels the sea of time to quench the thirst for answers in order to move toward the future which is his death and transfiguration. The latter is made evident in the last stanza:

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.

All this has some mystical sound to it that seems in harmony with Heidegger's claim that “Poetry seems an unreality and a dream when set against the tangible and loud reality in which, as we think, we feel at home.” (Heidegger in Pietrzak 2011: 32) Yes, it looks like a dream but it does not appear that the poet felt at home in the tangible reality since he let his projection reach this cherished destination with a one-way ticket. What supports this suggestion is a letter from 1928 in which Yeats comments ‘Once out of Irish bitterness I can find some measure of sweetness and of light... already new poems are floating in my head, bird songs of an old man, joy in the passing moment, emotion without the bitterness of memory’ (CL Intalex 5079 in Armstrong 2013: 47). Additionally, the desired transfiguration places the speaker's upgraded self out of any natural form and into a goldsmith-wrought shape that is still animate. It has the faculty of singing and some omniscience since the songs are to be “of what is past, or passing, or to come.” Pietrzak comments that “the speaker

gains the position of the intermediary between the sphere of divinity and the world of men, accepting the role that... Heidegger allots to the poet whom he locates between gods and men” (67). Also important are the abundant bodily references which seem quite in accordance with Bergson’s idea of the body being “an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past” (Bergson 1991: 78). It is one of the marks of the hero’s movement in time.

Approaching other aspects of the stanza, this envisioned transition from life to what is beyond it could be read as self-consolation, his desired version of what comes next, helping him proceed less anxiously. Ricoeur remarks that “the narratives provided by literature serve to soften the sting of anguish in the face of the unknown... by giving it in imagination the shape of this or that death... Thus fiction has a role to play in the apprenticeship of dying” (Ricoeur 1992: 162). And in the particular case not only dying but also living after that.

It should also be considered that since this piece was composed in the 1920s, it could have been born by its time. Some believe that Modernism “includes the compensatory idea that art can transcend the present” (Whitworth in Pietrzak 2011: 4). While this concept can be found in modernist writings among which *Sailing to Byzantium* that “creates the golden bird image which, set beyond the present, can bestow an ordering song on the disjointed world” (p. 4), it should not be held as exclusive to Modernism as it appears in works from other literary periods such as Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

Moving on, it is curious to speculate why the poet has conceived to use seafaring and not travelling by train or some other way of transportation. A possible explanation could be Brian Levy’s take on water: ‘Of all the elemental forces, the aquatic is perhaps the most densely charged with significance and symbolism, since its domain extends from the most minor everyday drop to the deepest ocean, and its practical functions have always been of the greatest importance...’ (Levy in Classen 2018: xiii). Classen takes matters further in saying that water has “a power of divine dimension” and goes on to discuss the abundance of aquatic symbolism in the Bible (Classen 2018: xiii). This, of course, might have had influence on Yeats’s choice, despite his not being a subscriber to “orthodox religion, as our mothers had taught it,” to use his own words (Yeats in Macrae 1995: 35). Additionally, Mechthild sees water as “clearly a transitional element, a means to cross over” (Mechthild in Classen 2018: xxv), which is quite in accordance with the idea of traveling in time and in

space. It is probable that these qualities of water have made the poet take the reader on a boat trip.

Of course, Yeats is by no means a pioneer in employing water symbolism as it is present in the works of Coleridge, Tennyson, Arnold, Arthur Rimbaud, and George Eliot. It is available in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Tennyson's *Ulysses*, Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre (The Drunken Boat)*, and Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. This is to say that, on the one hand, this imagery is not restricted to either prose or poetry. On the other hand, it does away with a potential suggestion coming from Yeats's belonging to an insular ethnicity whose main means of transport to foreign lands has been ships. France is obviously not an island and yet her Rimbaud has made avail of a similar matter.

In the case of Coleridge the reader is presented with an Ancient Mariner who tells his story of crime and punishment as an act of penance. Each time he recounts his life-changing sea voyage, he recalls the past and his listener is taken back in time, accompanying the sailor in the vicissitudes along the way and the katharsis at the end leading to a certain moral. It is similar to *Sailing to Byzantium* in that it takes one back in time on a sea journey which provides a kind of enlightenment but it is different in the essence of the enlightenment because in the Mariner's story it has a more universal character, whereas in Yeats's poem, it is deeply personal and devoid of strictly biblical symbolism.

With George Eliot, water is an omnipresent character that propels not only Dorlcote Mill but also the action of the entire narrative as almost everything happens by the river. It is where Maggie grows up, where she meets her lover, and where she dies with her brother. In discussing this book, one writer comments that the flow of water is "a poetical image of the flow of life from the present to an unknown future which is in itself an image of the unknown self that is to be unveiled and revealed..." (Boucher-Rivalain 2019: 233). This feature of water symbolism is namely what Eliot's and Yeats's works share.

Tennyson, on the other hand, portrays the old Ulysses who has arrived home but does not want to be an "idle king." (l. 1) He "cannot rest from travel" (l. 6) and wants to sail "beyond the sunset" (l. 60) in search for "a newer world." (l. 57) So, Tennyson's Ulysses comes close to the Yeatsian speaker by being old and unsatisfied which leads to an attempt to move forward by sailing.

When it comes to Arnold, in his *Dover Beach* some scholars see the poet's "search for an ontologically stable ground of existence" (Rowland, 2014: 94). The reader hears the words of one who is contemplating a

beautiful nocturnal landscape and in his thoughts triggered by the sea in front of him, he considers how Sophocles once witnessed a similar “eternal note of sadness” (l. 14), “the eternal ebb and flow of human misery” (ll. 17-18). Thus, the sea is employed yet again as a kind of a runway for time-traveling machines, used because the hero is seeking something better in a different time.

As for Rimbaud, his poem narrates an explosion of experiences from the perspective of a vessel drunk on bitterness and in need of consolation. The lyrical voice of this boat is disillusioned because such comfort is unattainable and hence its desire to be liberated by being disembodied and engulfed by the sea. Rimbaud writes “O let my keel burst! O let me go into the sea!” (Rimbaud 2005: 135) It is in the use of water as a means of reaching liberation that *Le bateau ivre* resembles *Sailing to Byzantium*.

It may be the case that, as Larissy notes, “another side of being a last Romantic is to display frequent nostalgia for a lost organic society” (Yeats 1997: xxvii). A reputable dictionary defines nostalgia as homesickness or an excessively sentimental yearning for return *to* or *of* some past period or irrevocable condition². Both definitions seem applicable as the latter is self-explanatory and the former is suitable for Yeats’s poem, if one interprets home not as a building but as a place where one feels *at home* – safe, comfortable, and satisfied. Further, enriching is Woody Allen’s take on nostalgia in his film *Midnight in Paris* (2011). One of his characters calls it “golden-age thinking” and “denial of the painful present” while the protagonist, who is a writer, explains that nostalgia exists as “the present is always going to seem unsatisfying because life itself is unsatisfying” (Allen: 10-11, 78). All this gives additional support to the suggestions this paper makes and adds a sense of universality as regards the nature of the longings voiced by the Yeatsian hero who has sailed on his sailboat named *Desire* and got off at his *Elysian Fields* stop – the Holy City of Byzantium. He is not the only one to have been tossed in the sea of life, sore with disappointment but unyielding in his search of fulfilment – be it in the form of pursuing a great white whale, catching a big marlin, or desiring to reach a safe haven where one can get answers to all of his questions. In these pursuits people oftentimes step back – whether of their own accord or pushed by life – and then they search for explanation or strength to venture again. This “swinging” seems not only inherent to all but it also resembles the movement of a pendulum that signifies the advance of time which is possible namely because it goes back every time before it goes forward

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>

probably, to conclude with the eloquent mysticism of someone else's words as endings are often declared from without, until "one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 2013: 683).

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