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Sailing to (Yeats’) Byzantium

„About Byzantium, W. B. Yeats proclaimed, „That is no country for old men”, and yet very largely we treat the history, the literature, the art of Byzantium as if it were made and experienced by, if not old, then mature people.”¹ The sentence just quoted can be found in A Companion to Byzantium published in 2010. The author misquotes the very first line of a well-known poem written by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939). The first line of the poem Sailing to Byzantium is, of course, That is no country for old men, but it definitely does not refer to Byzantium. Let us take a look at the four stanzas of Yeats’ famous poem.

Sailing to Byzantium

I

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 unageing intellect.

¹ The paper has been prepared with the financial help of the research project OTKA NN 104456.
II

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.

III

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.

IV

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.2

The poem Sailing to Byzantium first appeared in Yeats' October Blast in June 1927, then in 1928 in The Tower, the volume considered by many to be Yeats' greatest collection, later revised by the poet a number of times, and in his Collected Poems in 1929 and 1933.

2 The text is punctuated as in the second (revised) edition (1929) of The Tower.
Sailing to Byzantium is the opening poem of the *The Tower*. „As a kind of proem to the volume, „Sailing to Byzantium” introduces many of the themes that will be developed in further detail in other lyrics, most notably old age and its attendant problems; the relationship between Nature and Art; the relationship between the natural and the supernatural or spiritual.”

Over the years the title (*Sailing to Byzantium*), the first line (*That is no country for old men*) and some of the imagery and some phrases (golden bird, *the artifice of eternity*) gained independent existence. A proof of this statement is the above mentioned misquotation, the American bestseller *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy (2005), a film by Joel and Ethan Coen based on the novel (2007) and several papers, which have very little to do with the poem or the poet, William Yeats. It is also illustrated by the first paragraph of one of the first interpretations of the poem: (I often) „*sail the seas back into the past, and find once more the holy city where great poets have built their long-enduring pyramids and towers. That city*” – i.e. the holy city of poetry, and literature and arts in general – „*is full of voices uttering magic phrases, and some of these float into my ears in muffled music of unimaginable beauty.*” In other words: the metaphorical and metaphysical journey to the holy city of Byzantium is a heavenly voyage, a magnificent adventure to the realm of bliss.

For Richard Ellmann *Sailing to Byzantium* is „*a great hymn to imagination*”, which demonstrates Yeats’ mastery of images and symbols. The majority of the critics and scholars praise it for its perfect structure and its magnificent exaltation of art: the poem sets out to display the superiority and „*durability of great art and the immortality*” of the artist contrasting it with nature and human life. For others it is „*a celebration of the eternal quality of art in contrast to the mutability of nature, and is also an expression of a desire to escape by means of art from nature to the eternal*”. 

In the opening poem of *The Tower* the poet sets off to Byzantium – not to Constantinople and definitely not to Istanbul –, to close the book with the

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poem *Byzantium*, in which he gives an account of what he found in the holy city of Byzantium. When republishing the material of *The Tower* Yeats writes the following to his friend, the writer and artist T. Sturge Moore in a letter (4 October 1930): „Yes, I have decided to call the book *Byzantium*. I enclose the poem from which the name is taken, hoping that it may suggest symbolism for the cover. The poem originates from a criticism of yours. You objected to the last verse of *Sailing to Byzantium* because a bird made by a goldsmith was just as natural as anything else. That showed me that the idea needed exposition.”

Eventually no book was published by Yeats under the title *Byzantium*, and though there was a cover— a clever and subtle cover— showing three ships (one of the three *plenissimis velis*, but *nuda nautarum*) in a harbour between two towers inspired by a mosaic on the wall of the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, the title remained *The Tower*, which, incidentally, is also the title of a poem in the book. The above quotation from the letter illustrates the organic relationship existing between the individual pieces of Yeats’ poetry, even of his whole œuvre.

Literary criticism is also aware of the fact that the poet organized his volumes with meticulous care: „the arrangement of the poems in (...) The Tower is far from chronological. *Sailing to Byzantium*, (...) with which it begins, was written after *Among School Children*, (...) which is located two-thirds of the way through the book. In between there are poems dating as far back as 1919, and the volume ends with *All Souls’ Night*, 1920. (...) In *Sailing to Byzantium*, at the beginning of the book, the speaker has abandoned the sensual land of „dying generations” and is asking the „sages standing in God’s holy fire” to emerge from it and be his singing-masters. (...) (H)e was calling forth sages to teach him; throughout *All Souls’ Night* he is calling up ghosts to hear him. Pupil has become master.”

„Certainly from the time of the Collected Edition of 1908, when Yeats told his publisher that chronology would have to be abandoned in favour of theme, he kept constantly in mind the fact that one day a final, cohesive Complete Works would be assembled. Manipulating almost everything he touched to this end, he fought hard to make life and work a grand, organic whole.”

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Sailing to (Yeats') Byzantium

This organic oeuvre included the Dublin theatre and politics, travel experiences, illness, occultism and mysticism, and the Irish tradition: Celtic mythology and the Irish independence movement as well as English literature, Shakespeare and Shelley, the Irish literature written in English, Swift, and first and foremost William Blake, whose works Yeats published in 1893. Working on the three-volume edition he recognised the importance of the author’s literary remains for the publisher as well as for literary history. This recognition made him keep till the end of his days everything that can be related to his literary work: his extensive correspondence, his diaries, manuscripts, literary ideas and plans, proofs and the earlier versions of his published works.

It is not only the conscious building of his oeuvre but his choice of words and the richness of thought as well that make his work and certain parts of it difficult to understand. The following phrase from the third stanza of Sailing to Byzantium can stand here as an illustration: *perne in a gyre*. (The phrase was coined by Yeats in his *Demon and Beast* written in 1918.) The first word (*perne*) is a *hapax legomenon*, the second one (*gyre*) is a central concept in Yeats’ system of thoughts on the history of mankind (*the System*), on which he himself wrote a book he kept changing and developing (*A Vision*), and which was also dealt with by the Yeatsian scholarship.

In many cases it was Yeats himself who provided guidelines for the interpretation of his works, especially his poems. Let us take a look at a few explanations given by the poet himself.

An entry from Yeats’ diary dated 30 April 1930 runs as follows:

„Subject for a poem. *Describe Byzantium as it is in the system*” (that is in the *System* constructed in his *A Vision*) „towards the end of the first Christian millenium.” From this point two variations of the text is known. The first one: „*The worn ascetics on the walls contrasted with their (?) splendour. A walking mummy. A spiritual refinement and perfection amid a rigid world. A sigh of wind autumn leaves in the streets. The divine born amidst natural decay.*” In ink of a different colour, hence – as Bradford says – presumably at a later time, Yeats cancelled the passage (...) and wrote over it: „*A walking mummy, flames at the street corners where the soul is purified,*\footnote{See the comprehensive studies and a Guide to further reading (416-428) in HOLDEMAN, D. – LEVITAS, B. (eds): *W. B. Yeats in Context*. Cambridge 2010.}
birds of hammered gold singing in the golden trees, in the harbour (dolphins) offering their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to Paradise. These subjects have been in my head for some time, especially the last.”15 The poem written about this subject is Byzantium, the closing poem of The Tower.

In the case of Sailing to Byzantium such a subject is not known. We do have, however, some references to the birth of the poem and to the phases of the textual evolution. In a letter dated on 5 September 1926 Yeats wrote to his confidante and friend, Mrs Shakespear: “There have been constant interruptions – the last time I wrote a poem about Byzantium to recover my spirits.”16 A few weeks later in a letter of October 1926 Yeats wrote: “I have just finished a poem in which a poet of the Middle Ages besought the saints „in their holy fire” to send their ecstasy.”17 Without this statement nobody would guess that the speaker (i.e. the narrator of the poem) is an Irish poet from the Hibernia of the Middle Ages. The second point of interest is the word ecstasy, which I am sure we are to understand as a theological term in Greek: ἐκστασις, when the soul leaves the body and begins its journey towards God.

In another letter to Mrs Shakespear written on 27 October 1927 Yeats says: „When I went to London I had just finished a poem in which I appeal to the saints in „the holy fire” to send death on” (down?) “their ecstasy”, and later he also mentions that the source of the image of the sages standing in God’s holy fire could have been – unconsciously – Blake’s illustration to Dante’s Divine Comedy (Purgatorio, canto 27).18

As for the the golden bird, which is not actually mentioned in the poem, an Avis interlinearis, Yeats gives us two slightly different references. The first one is Yeats’ note in his Collected Poems:19 „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.”20 The second one is a radio recording from 1937: I speak of a bird by Grecian goldsmiths. There is a record of a tree of gold with artificial birds which sang. The tree was somewhere in the Royal Palace of Byzantium. I use it as

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17 Cf. Jeffares (n. 16) 214.
19 Also see Jeffares (n. 16) 215 for bibliographical notes.
a symbol of the intellectual joy of eternity, as contrasted with the instinctive joy of human life."

We do know, of course, that he is talking about the marvels of the so-called throne of Solomon in the palace of Magnaura in Constantinople. Georgius Syncellus writes about it in his *Chronicle*, Constantinus Porphyrogennetos in his *De cerimoniiis aulae Byzantinae* (2,15: καὶ τὰ ὀρνεά τὰ ἐν τῷ σέντζω, ὀμοίως καὶ τὰ ἐν τοῖς δενδρεσι, ἄδειν ἑναρμονίως), and finally Liudprand, bishop of Cremona in his *Antapodosis* (6,5): *Aerea sed deaurata quaedam arbor ante imperatoris sedile stabat, cuius ramos itidem aereae diversi generis deaurataeque aves replebant, quae secundum species suas diversarum avium voces emittebant.* The question is where Yeats learnt about the attractions of the imperial reception hall. After a long and heated argument it is agreed that his sources must have been Edward Gibbon and the relevant chapters of the *Cambridge Medieval History*. The two books were purchased by Yeats in January 1924; with the money received with the Nobel Prize for poetry he could afford to purchase a small working library which included *The Cambridge Medieval History* and Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – „in a good edition”, he wrote in a letter (13 January 1924) to his *patrona* and friend, Lady Gregory.

Yeats’ concept of Byzantium was not, however, based on the books mentioned above. His interest in Byzantine art had been aroused decades earlier by his contemporary poets, e.g. Oscar Wilde. His interest turned into passion and into poetical subject matter due to the Byzantine churches and mosaics he tracked down in the company of his connoisseur friends.

„*Could any visionary of those days,*” – he asks in the second edition of *A Vision* (AV B 1937. 280) – „*passing through the Church named with so un-theological a grace* ‘The Holy Wisdom’, *can even a visionary of today*” (i.e. himself) „*wandering among the mosaics at Ravenna or in Sicily, fail to recognise some one image seen under his closed eyelids?”

Yeats has never been to Constantinople, and he may never have wanted to go there. What he did want was Byzantium. He visited Ravenna in 1907

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21 Yeats, W. B: My own Poetry. BBC 3 July 1937; citation by Empson (n. 8) 69.
23 Du Me, T. L.: Yeats’ Golden Tree and Birds in the Byzantium Poems. *Modern Language Notes* 67 (1952) 404-407, but also see what Hill (n. 7) 529 says about Edmund Gosse (Yeats’ friend) and his History of Eighteen Century Literature (1660-1780) with Note 11.
24 Cf. Empson (n. 8) 81.
and saw the mosaics in the church of San Apollinare Nuovo. In the mid-twenties he went to Sicily (and Rome), where he saw the Byzantine mosaics of Monreale and the Capella Palatina at Palermo. On Byzantine mosaics, churches and early Byzantium he writes the following in the second edition of A Vision – with a remarkable thought on the language of Byzantine literature.

"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. I think I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even. (...) I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. 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, absorbed in their subject-matter and the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image" (AV B 1937. 279f.): Byzantium. In his notes for lectures given in the United States in 1932 Yeats says about his imaginary Byzantium: "In my later poems I have called it Byzantium, that city where the saints showed their wasted forms upon a background of gold mosaic, and an artificial bird sang upon a tree of gold in the presence of the emperor." In other words: the holy city of Byzantium is Yeats’ symbol of artistic magnificence and unchanging permanence ("artifice of eternity" or – for a better understanding – artificium aeternitatis in Latin, κτῆμα τε καὶ ποίημα ἐξ αἰεί in Greek).

What is more important than the sources and the memories of the circumstances of the birth of the poem is how Yeats turned what he had experienced and what he had read into poetical material, abstraction, images and symbols by depersonalisation and deconcretisation. "In revision" the poem Sailing to Byzantium "became subtler, more intense, and more objective; the final


26 Citation by EMPSON (n. 8) 81.
version now embodies generalized antitheses of youth and age, body and mind, nature and art."\(^{27}\) The poet’s "best comment on his poem (...) is contained in a paragraph Yeats wrote for a broadcast of his poems in 1931 (BBC Belfast, 8 Sept. 1931), which was not included in the final version of the script: Now 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 the thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called Sailing to Byzantium. When Irishmen were illuminating the Books of Kells (in the eighth century) and making the jewelled croziers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilisation and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to that city."\(^{28}\)

Now that we have tried to understand the poem with the guidance of the poet and with the help of the notes, remarks and interpretations of the learned literary critics, researchers and scholars,\(^{29}\) let us turn our attention to the manuscripts of the poem for further help.

As mentioned above, Yeats consciously kept all the material related to his work. For Yeats writing was never an easy task, but "unnatural labour". He was – as it is generally known – a very slow writer, revising all the time. It was not only creative work that he found hard, but the actual writing as well, which was physically tedious for him. He did not allow his manuscripts to be transcribed by secretaries but usually dictated them from his manuscript, then he worked on the typescript revising, correcting, changing or completely rewriting the text. When he had achieved the result he wanted he again dictated the text to a secretary or later in his life to his wife.

Yeats wrote in bound or looseleaf books. However, he did not use the sheets in order but moved from place to place in the book, which means that the order of drafts or versions cannot be established by the order in which they occur in the book. He worked on pairs of facing pages starting on the right-hand one. Having filled that page he would move over to the left-hand one and continued his corrections there using arrows to indicate the exact place he was referring to. When he was satisfied with the text he added his initials (WBY) or signed it and added the date. After typescripting the manuscript he would file the sheets in a file envelope. After his death the original drafts were preserved by his widow, Mrs. Yeats, who is probably also responsible for


\(^{28}\) Jeffares (n. 16) 213.

\(^{29}\) One of the latest (and the most poetical) interpretations is Helen Vendler’s Antechamber and Afterlife: Byzantium and the Delphic Oracle, the second chapter in her Our Secret Discipline. Yeats and Lyric Form. Oxford 2007. 27–61.
the numbers written in a foreign hand found on certain pages. The principle behind the arrangement is also noticeable: the pagination or the numbering is often based on the lines and verses of the published version of the poem rather than on chronology. With the permission of the widow the literary remains of the poet could be researched by many. In the research, transcription, publishing and interpretation of the manuscripts of *Sailing to Byzantium* four scholars carried out outstanding work: Norman Jeffares in the forties, Curtis Bradford and Jon Stallworthy, who in the sixties worked simultaneously on the manuscripts and whose respective readings and conclusions were widely accepted and used in the interpretation of Yeats’ work, and finally and almost conclusively, Richard Finneran.

Jefferson sums up his research on *Sailing to Byzantium* in his *New Commentary* (1984): „*This poem was written in the autumn of 1926; the two typescripts (there are seventeen other MS sheets) are dated 26 Sept. 1926.*” The first statement cannot be proved, and the typescripts dated 26 September 1926 are not identical with the final version of the poem, as the 26 September 1926 version of the poem – a typewritten version without the handwritten variations and corrections on the sheet, but for lines 13-16 – goes as follows:

**Towards Byzantium**

All in this land – my Maker that is play
Or else asleep upon His Mother’s knees,
Others, that as the mountain people say
Are at their hunting and their gallantries
Under the hills as in our fathers’ day
The changing colours of the hills and seas
All the men know or think they know, being young,
Cry that my tale is told my story sung.

I therefore travel towards Byzantium
Among these sun-brown pleasant mariners
Another dozen days and we shall come
Under the jetty and the marble stair

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31 Jeffares (n. 16) 211.
And after to unwinking wisdom's home
The marvel of the world and gardens where
Transfiguration of the intellect
Can cure this ageing body of defect.

But now these pleasant dark-skinned mariners
Carry me towards that great Byzantium
Where all is ancient, singing at the oars
That I may look in the great churches dome
On gold-embedded saints and emperors
After the mirroring waters and the foam
Where the dark drowsy fins a moment rise
Of fish that carry souls to Paradise.

O saints that stand amid God's sacred fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall
Consume this heart and make it what you were
It faints upon the road sick with desire
But fastened to this dying animal
Or send the dolphins back, and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity

The sensuous dream being past I shall not take
A guttering form of nature's fashioning
But rather that the Grecian smithies make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
At the Emperor's order for his lady's sake
And set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past or passing or to come.
A substantial part of Yeats’ manuscripts got in the possession of the National Library of Ireland, where it is now accessible for research. Parallel with the critical edition of the oeuvre the manuscript material is also being published. The manuscripts of The Tower (1928) were published in 2007. In a new edition of Yeats’ collected poems The Tower (without Byzantium) is 34 pages long, while the manuscript materials take up 670 pages: on the left hand side we can find the black and white photographs of the manuscripts, typescripts and proof-pages, on the right the transcriptions by Richard Finneran, with reading suggestions in the notes at the bottom of the page.

The manuscript material of the 32-line Sailing to Byzantium is 48 pages long and contains 24 photographs and 24 pages of transcription. The number of uncertainties is the highest on the pages containing the earliest versions, where the later typescript and poem do not help us with the reading. Nevertheless, methodically comparing the current transcription to the earlier, influential readings of Bradford and Stallworthy, there are several mistakes to be found, which are not to be discussed here. Let it suffice to point out that looking at the typescript we will find that on the 26th September 1926 the poem was not finished and that originally it seems to have consisted of five stanzas. In both Bradford’s and Stallworthy’s transcription this version, similarly to the later versions, consists of four stanzas, i.e. 32 lines.

With the help of the facsimile edition and the transcription of the manuscript material it is possible to study the poem in statu nascendi and thus to understand Yeats’ art and the poem Sailing to Byzantium more thoroughly. At the same time the nature of the manuscript material poses a great challenge for textual criticism as the traditional apparatus criticus would be overburdened by the high number of possible readings. In my opinion in the course of the critical edition the versions and variations presenting a significant stage should be published separately, and with an apparatus. Another option would be a digital edition presenting the versions in the established or assumed chronological order of the certain items (referred to as fragments in scholarly literature). These methods and devices can be experimented with and tried on a relatively short, 32-line text, and would be good progymnasmata in the study and editing Byzantine texts, especially chronicles or parts of them.

Finneran – Curtis – Saddlemeyer (n. 3).