

## Yeats's SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

"Sailing to Byzantium" embodies a number of Yeats's most enduring tropes: the old man as scarecrow, the cycles of history as the gyre, the pristine and preserved world of Byzantium as escape. In the final stanza of the poem, and the speaker asks implicitly to be made into an artificial bird that might sing of past, present, and future. Much has been made of this bird aspiration, starting with Yeats's own note that he had "read somewhere" about mechanical birds in Byzantium, and continuing with critics' examinations of Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's Nightingale" and the nightingales of Keats and Shelley and Yeats's decision to include a story about a human-headed bird in a collection of Irish folktales. In this last example, Stanley Holberg attempts to separate singer and song, or artist and art—another famous problem for readers of Yeats—and concludes that the song is the separate and more important of the dichotomy, as it gives the speaker "a singing-power that will transcend its form" (115). Holberg, like other critics, focuses on the symbolism of Byzantium and its bird, what John Untereckers calls "a total experience shaped, through art, into a form less perishable than flesh" (5). Thus most explications have tended to dodge the real hollowness of the speaker's solution, despite its obvious ironies: Byzantium is a dead culture; the speaker is no more than a wind-up toy, albeit an expensive one; and structurally, the poem itself is an elaborate artifice.

One way to examine the ironic failure of Byzantium—a shorthand for the saving power of art and artifice—is to study the ways that the word "singing" (and its forms) works in the poem. I contend that "singing" behaves differently from the rest of the poem and constitutes a problem for both reader and poem. In syntactical twists, audio and rhythmic qualities, and richness of association, "singing" steps away from the lushness of Byzantium.

"Singing" occurs most often in the second stanza, where there is twisted if classic Yeatsian syntax. The poet calls himself a "paltry" old man, "unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress" (9–12). Presumably singing is some kind of solution to the problem of an aging body. The "unless" suggests that singing would make a healthy difference. However, the sentence does not end with this conditional; instead, it turns further away, beginning the next clause with "nor": "Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence" (13–14). Perhaps my difficulty here is simply with Yeats's insistence on using small grammatical words in unorthodox ways and eliminating others completely. The editors of *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* tell us that the line is to be understood as "but for studying monuments" (162). Somehow, then, singing school incorporates activities other than literal singing—singing one's own praises, perhaps. As a problem, this syntax is more a reader's issue than a poet's, and

it is solvable; still, the poem seems to need this elision to keep to its rigid structure, and that suggests a strained artificiality.

My next concern is auditory: The sound of the word "singing" is thin compared to the other sounds of the poem. Many lines in the poem resonate with long vowels and sonorant consonants, such as "[t]he salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas" (4) and "lords and ladies of Byzantium" (31). The alliteration with the *l* and *m* sounds fall on stressed syllables; the sounds glide into one another effortlessly. The series "what is past, or passing, or to come" (32), at the end of stanza four, parallels the series in stanza one, "[w]hatever is begotten, born, and dies" (6). Whether in the country of living or in Byzantium, the richness of sound suggests a richness of experience for the inhabitants; it is not that experience is all perfect, for there is death even in stanza one, but that experience is varied and worthwhile. In contrast, "sing" hangs at the end of line 30 comparatively weakly, even though it is a stressed syllable: the handmade bird is "set upon a golden bough to sing / To lord and ladies" (30–31). It rhymes with "thing" (26), a word that is weak in meaning. It also rhymes with the even weaker stressed syllable, a mere grammatical suffix, of "enamelling" (28). This short *i* sound of "sing" is the same vowel found three times in "discipline," and a "singing-master," I must admit, is not an appealing figure to me. I imagine the sort of strict, disciplined teacher who takes all joy out of his subject. Marjorie Perloff, who argues that rhyme words for Yeats "are automatically placed in potential semantic relationship," calls this pairing of "singing" and "studying" a "synonym rhyme" (128). We can indeed see that "singing" is not a synonym for glorifying life, but for picking over it with the precision of a scientist.

These technical issues also reflect a problem with the role of "singing" in the poem's philosophical framework. Compared to Byzantium, the gyre, and even the scarecrow image, "singing school" lacks rich associations. It resembles an allegory in a moralistic children's book more than a symbol of Yeats, who picked over his symbols like a Zen gardener arranging blades of grass. I am not suggesting that Yeats failed to create a trope that lives up to the rest of the poem; in fact, this is where the problem of the symbol is the problem of the poet.

Clearly, "singing school" is a place where the soul might learn to transcend the decrepit body. In stanza one, the "young" are "caught in that sensual music" (7); they do not actually sing, adding to the notion that singing is a technical, disciplined alternative to a lost, spontaneous experience of the natural world. We know that music lessons for children are often stilted and artificial, yet a child who sings without self-consciousness is completely absorbed in the act of making music. This definition would indicate that this singing school for the soul is not much of a solution, just as "studying monuments" or exalting in the past is not a solution either. "[B]e the singing-masters of my soul," Yeats

demands of the “sages” of Byzantium. The desire seems naive or shortsighted, as though the sages could offer no more than scales and breathing exercises, not a real education for eternity. As soon as he asks for singing lessons, the promise and beauty of Byzantium is lost.

The tragedy is that the poet’s “bodily form” (26) will not be one of these lords, but only the singing bird. For all this finely crafted form, “singing” is the weakest part of the structure, and it is this singing—regardless of the theme of the song—that highlights the tragedy. The preservation that the poet desires is impossible, despite the elaborate workings of a poem that sing of the elaborate art and theology of Byzantium. Perhaps we must realize that we, intense devourers of poetry ourselves, too wish there were solace in artifice: in rhyme, in connotation, in meter. Yeats is gone: the problem is ours.

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#### De la Mare’s DING DONG BELL

Walter De la Mare’s *penseroso*, *adagio* graveyard piece *Ding Dong Bell*<sup>1</sup> (1924) is a fourfold work, and it may be seen (though not very obviously) to conform to the four-seasons and four-elements stereotype.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 1 (“Lichen”) looks out (from a railway platform) onto a pastoral *spring* landscape: lambs, swallows feeding nestlings, and a profusion of bloom. The “young lady” (the speaker) is going along with the soft *west* wind, as she is traveling by rail from “Gloucestershire” (33) to London.

Chapter 2 (“Benighted”) early on gives us the phrase: “Honeysuckle, bracken, a hint of hay, and the faint aromatic scent of summer lanes saturated the air” (50). The wind, of course, is from the *south*.

Chapter 3 (“Strangers and Pilgrims”) is *autumnal*. The verger’s cottage is “at this season” [. . .] like a mound of flowers” (67). We catch a glimpse of seeding grass and a dusty road, and hear “the sweet and sorrowful cry of the

