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Yeats's Byzantium Poems and the Critics, Reconsidered

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In 1962, A. Norman Jeffares published an article, “Yeats’s Byzantine Poems and the Critics,” which ostensibly surveyed the major scholarship and criticism produced up to that time on the two famous pieces. The present essay is intended both to update and to improve upon that earlier article. In the period since 1962, a quite considerable volume of valuable scholarship and criticism on the two poems has been published. Moreover, Jeffares’ article suffered appreciable deficiencies in the first place, digressing at points into its own analyses rather than sustaining a survey of previous studies, manifesting a marked bias in favor of British commentators over American, and committing errors in such basic matters as the spelling of authors’ names and the dating of publications.

The body of secondary material on Yeats’s Byzantium poems is rather astonishing, both in quantity and variety. The effort here will be to classify the more significant articles and portions of books according to nature, approach, or emphasis and to make brief value judgments as well, so that the reader will have some basis for deciding whether a given item might be of interest to him or of worth to his work, scholarly or instructional. Complete publication information for any source mentioned in the text is given in the bibliography at the end of this article.

Perhaps brief or general glosses of the poems would be appropriate for initial discussion. (In this category, as in all others here, critical materials from anthologies or ordinary classroom textbooks are excluded from consideration on the dual basis of their multiplicity and their simplicity.) Probably John Unterecker’s A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats should be the first source mentioned in this classification because of
the intended general nature of the book. Unterecker’s comments on the Byzantium poems are not of the first order in perceptiveness or value, however. Better commentaries of the kind are to be found in some of the slender volumes that offer overall treatments of Yeats as a major modern figure, especially those by William York Tindall, Peter Ure, and A. Norman Jeffares. The gloss in Jeffares’ *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* is, ironically, perhaps the best of that author’s numerous publications on the Byzantium poems. Raymond Cowell’s statement in his book of this sort, *W. B. Yeats*, is not general in nature, incidentally, and so does not fall into this category. The treatments in Jeffares’ lengthy *Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* also are not glosses but rather comprehensive collections of various materials, as will be discussed presently.

More extended paraphrases and professed “close readings” of the texts constitute a class of studies that can be considered next. G. S. Fraser’s “Yeats’s Byzantium,” dealing mainly with the later poem, stands somewhere between a gloss and a paraphrase. Although fairly reasonable in most of its points, Fraser’s article is rather lackluster because of its unoriginal and general nature. A full-scale paraphrase of “Byzantium” is F. A. C. Wilson’s Neo-Platonic exegesis in *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*. Here the poem is treated more as narrative than lyric, and a self-important tone detracts from the ideas, some of which are perceptive, others nonsensical. Two paraphrases of the more difficult poem based on the claim that no knowledge from external sources is needed to understand it are found in David Daiches’ *Poetry and the Modern World* and Robert M. Adams’ article in an issue of *Accent* for 1953. Not surprisingly, these treatments are rather limited in value. A highly formalistic analysis of the earlier poem constitutes a considerable portion of Elder Olson’s “‘Sailing to Byzantium’; Prolegomena to a Poetics of the Lyric,” an article whose reputation exceeds its value. A much more useful running commentary of “Sailing” appears in Donald Stauffer’s *The Nature of Poetry*. A slightly self-conscious close textual reading of the same poem occurs in William York Tindall’s *The Literary Symbol*. Somewhat disappointing paraphrases of both poems—especially disappointing in view of the book’s high quality elsewhere—make a chapter in T. R. Henn’s *The Lonely Tower*. By contrast, Frank Len-
tricchia's close textual readings of both poems in *The Gaiety of Language* are rather interesting and provocative.

Exegeses more imaginative or analytical than paraphrases tend to fall into two main divisions: (1) those that interpret the poems as dealing with the state of the soul or spirit at or after death, and (2) those that see the pieces as symbolic representations of the creative poetic process. For the sake of convenience, these levels of meaning will be called the spiritual interpretation and the aesthetic interpretation, respectively, hereafter. Quarrels about the relative validity of these two interpretative trends make a large part of the critical literature on the poems. One of the earliest articles to assume and assert the spiritual interpretation for both poems was Cleanth Brooks's "The Vision of William Butler Yeats." Although the essay has been frequently reprinted, it is not as cogent as most of Brooks's criticism. More persuasive on "Sailing to Byzantium" is Harry Modean Campbell's piece in *Modern Language Notes*, 1955. On "Byzantium," Denis Donoghue's brief treatment in "On 'The Winding Stair'" is quite explicit in its spiritual emphasis.

One of the earliest statements of the aesthetic interpretation for both poems is Howard Baker's "Domes of Byzantium," fairly persuasive for its time. Stauffer's commentary, already mentioned, assumes the aesthetic view of "Sailing," while Richard Ellmann in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Helen Hennessy Vendler in *Yeats's VISION and the Late Plays*, and Richard Finneran in *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems* all urge the aesthetic level of meaning for both poems. Ellmann's treatment is fairly convincing, but Vendler and Finneran lose their reader's respect by overstating their position. In his *Reader's Guide*, Unterecker suggests the spiritual interpretation for the earlier poem but urges the aesthetic for the later one.

Probably one dimension of these famous poems' richness lies in the fact that they can actually be interpreted in both ways at once. Some analyses have suggested that the two levels of meaning are simultaneously valid and parallel or, even further than that, interrelated and interdependent. In an article in *Études Anglaises* (1963), L. C. Parks stresses the possibility of such dual interpretation for "Sailing to Byzantium." Ellmann in *The Identity of Yeats* and Harold Bloom in *Yeats* posit the
legitimacy of the two interrelated meanings in “Byzantium,” Ellmann a good deal more cogently than Bloom. In his W. B. Yeats, Tindall stresses the possibility of reading both poems on both levels at once.

The largest single category of secondary materials on the Byzantium poems is constituted by source studies of various kinds. The pieces in this large category can—and no doubt should—be divided into several subcategories. Four such subclasses suggest themselves: (1) general studies of various kinds of sources for imagery in the two poems, (2) attempts to identify more specifically possible sources for the central golden bird image (with the golden tree image associated by implication), (3) other more specific studies, either of particular images or certain major sources of influence, and (4) studies that deal with probable sources or analogues in Yeats’s own earlier thought and work.

In the first of these categories, Jeffares’ article in the Review of English Studies (1946) must be mentioned at the outset. Although the article covers other areas and is far from definitive in any area, it was one of the earlier pieces to consider possible sources and has come to be cited so often as to hold some status as a seminal work. It is not, however, as well-written or informative as such citations would seem to suggest. Considerably more complete and useful, though rather awkwardly organized, is the collection of materials on the poems in the same author’s encyclopedic Commentary on the Collected Poems. Perhaps the most valuable study dealing with a variety of sources for a variety of images in the poems is the essay “Byzantium” by D. J. Gordon and Ian Fletcher. Far inferior in its suggestions of possible sources for various images—predominantly printed sources in this case—is Frederick L. Gwynn’s article in an issue of Philological Quarterly for 1952.

Studies dealing with probable sources for the famous golden bird image are quite numerous. All four general studies just mentioned devote some attention to that image, while many studies dwell on it almost exclusively. Some works in this category seek to establish the most likely sources in Yeats’s reading. Olson and Jeffares, in his RES article, give some attention to this matter. In a brief note in the Classical Journal for 1945, James Notopoulos considered possible classical and foreign-
language sources for the image in "Sailing to Byzantium"; sub-
sequently, Notopoulos took the same line of inquiry even fur-
ther as part of a longer article in a 1959 issue of the same
periodical. In the meantime, however, Thomas Dume, whose
doctoral dissertation was a study of Yeats's library, published in
*Modern Language Notes* (1952) the most persuasive sugges-
tions for printed sources of the image in both poems. The stud-
ies mentioned thus far examine mainly sources mentioning the
fact that reportedly there were artificial golden birds that sang
in an artificial golden tree in the court of a historical Byzantine
emperor. A different kind of source for the golden bird in
Yeats's reading is suggested by A. Davenport in "W. B. Yeats
and the Upanishads." This article also suggests the same source
for some of the moon imagery, incidentally. In 1960 in *English
Studies*, Ernest Schanzer suggested still another kind of literary
source for the golden bird in "Sailing" when he noted the parallel
between Yeats's image and the artificial songbird in Ander-
sen's fairy tale "The Emperor's Nightingale." The possibility
of this line of influence was also suggested by Robert Phillips,
though not so persuasively, in an *Explicator* note in 1963.

A few scholars and critics have noted parallels of one kind
or another between Yeats's avian image in "Sailing to Byzan-
tium" and the nightingale in Keats's famous ode, although the
case for actual influence is never made very convincingly.
Keats as an actual source is perhaps most strongly posited by
Schanzer in the article just mentioned. Other than that, the
similarities or differences between the two bird symbols, espe-
cially as these relate to Yeats's romanticism, are discussed brief-
ly by R. Fréchet in "Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium' and Keats's
'Ode to a Nightingale,' " Malcolm Magaw in "Yeats and Keats:
The Poetics of Romanticism," and James Land Jones in "Keats
and Yeats: 'Artificers of the Great Moment.' "

A number of other commentators have suggested that Yeats's
golden bird, "set upon a golden bough," may be an intentional
allusion to the body of material in James George Frazer's epoch-
making anthropological study. In my article "The Golden Bird
on The Golden Bough," I argue in effect that Frazer's work
may be almost as much a source for Yeats's symbol as it is the
referent for a mere allusion. In relation to another body of
mythology, both Jay Jernigan in "The Phoenix as Thematic
Symbol in Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ and ‘Miraculous Birds, Another and the Same’ suggest that the legendary bird of supernatural self-renewal may well have been still another intentional analogue or conscious source for Yeats’s famous avian figure.

Three works of major importance and value consider other kinds of sources for imagery and meaning in the Byzantium poems. In the chapter of The Whole Mystery of Art devoted predominantly to these poems, Giorgio Melchiori conducts an exhaustive examination of various sorts of visual sources for the poems’ symbology, especially architectural. In fact, the final portion of Melchiori’s chapter might well be termed the definitive study of dome imagery in the poems. In “The Hidden Aspect of ‘Sailing to Byzantium,’” already cited under another heading, L. C. Parks carries out a scholarly and informative analysis of occult and symbolist materials and sources relevant to the earlier poem. Finally, in an issue of Modern Philology for 1967, T. McAlindon sets forth a carefully documented and thoroughly persuasive case for the influence of William Morris and his works upon the ideas and meanings—especially socio-aesthetic ones—in Yeats’s Byzantium poems.

The final subclass of source studies is constituted by those dealing largely with elements in the Byzantium poems from Yeats’s own earlier thought and work. Other than analyses that relate the poems to the system in A Vision, the significant works in this group have all been mentioned already in the discussions of other categories. Henner’s paraphrase is sprinkled with references to Yeats’s earlier ideas and images, for example. The pieces by Melchiori and by Gordon and Fletcher also treat incisively the impingement of earlier Yeatsian materials upon the two poems. And my “Golden Bird on The Golden Bough” considers multiple interrelationships between patterns of imagery and thought in previous works by Yeats and similar patterns in the poems on Byzantium.

The number of significant studies relating the Byzantium poems to source materials in A Vision is somewhat larger. One of the earliest and best known of these, Cleanth Brooks’s article cited earlier, associates both poems’ imagery and meaning with the system. A less well-known analysis that interprets both poems in terms of the system appears in Raymond Tschumi’s
Thought in Twentieth-Century English Poetry. Peter Ure's *Towards a Mythology* also—though much more briefly—links each poem with *A Vision*, especially with Phase 15 of the Great Wheel. But the second poem, "Byzantium," rather clearly lends itself more readily to interpretations related to the system than does "Sailing." Ure, for example, in his thin general volume, *Yeats*, finds in Book III, "The Soul in Judgment," source materials for only the later poem. And in her book on Yeats, A. G. Stock concisely draws quite similar conclusions about the same poem in relation to *A Vision*. In a more extended and somewhat overwritten treatment, which amounts to a highly specialized paraphrase of the poem, Helen Hennessy Vendler equates the Holy City with Phase 15 while simultaneously insisting that the poem is about the creation of a work of art. Still another extended examination of "Byzantium" is Harold Bloom's. As always in his lengthy book, Bloom finds Yeatsian sources in Blake and Shelley, but in the case of "Byzantium" he also acknowledges the relevance of material from *A Vision*.

Studies of the early drafts and variant manuscripts or typescripts of the Byzantium pieces constitute a small but significant collection of contributions to scholarship on the poems. With access to the draft manuscripts of "Sailing to Byzantium" Jeffares initiated this line of investigation with one portion of his *RES* article, but the results are relatively inconsequential in comparison to later achievements. By all odds the two major accomplishments in this vein are Curtis Bradford's *PMLA* article (1960) and the treatment in Jon Stallworthy's *Between the Lines*. Both analyses are comprehensive and highly enlightening. However, of the two (each treating both poems), Bradford's essay, especially in its revised version, must be designated the more down-to-earth and well ordered. The title of William Empson's "The Variants for the Byzantium Poems" is seriously misleading. Although the article alludes to the variants from place to place, it concerns itself with diverse other matters, usually to slight advantage for the reader. Finally, the consideration of drafts for "Byzantium" in Cowell's book is so sketchy and lackluster that its publication after the work of Bradford and Stallworthy is an oddity.

Another class of studies is formed by those that examine various kinds of verbal patterning in the two poems. Here, as
elsewhere, Jeffares has tried his hand at what others have done more successfully. In the closing portion of his ESA article, he looks briefly at elements of opposition and intentional repetition in the poems. He develops this same kind of thing more fully in “Notes on Pattern in the Byzantine Poems of W. B. Yeats,” though hardly with impressive results. More than a decade earlier, David I. Masson had published two articles on sound patterns in “Byzantium”—one quite short and one quite long—within the same year, 1953. Strangely, the short note makes some quite astute observations within a limited space while the lengthier piece is unduly strained, overly elaborate, and poorly organized. In a brief rejoinder entitled “Word and Sound in Yeats’s Byzantium,” Denis Davison points out three areas of inconsistency in Masson’s longer article. J. A. Venter’s later “Phonic Patterning in Sailing to Byzantium” is little more than a jumble of linguistic theory and jargon. Without question, the major achievement thus far in this category is the chapter on the Byzantium poems in Marjorie Perloff’s Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats. If its arguments are as valid as they seem, this somewhat technical study brings to light a dimension of the poet’s genius previously unacknowledged.

A penultimate category of criticism on the Byzantium poems can be made of the unusual or bizarre exegeses that have appeared from time to time. A main subclass within this group consists of commentaries that attempt to stand the poems on their heads—that is, to fly in the face of most accepted interpretations by suggesting that the two pieces reflect a wish in Yeats to embrace the this-worldly life of flesh and physicality rather than to escape or reject it. The most extended and consistent—if not always convincing—essay of this kind is Anne Kostelanetz’s “Irony in Yeats’s Byzantium Poems.” Briefer commentaries more or less in the same vein are offered by Graham Hough in The Last Romantics, Alfred Alvarez in Stewards of Excellence, J. Bronowski in The Poet’s Defence, and Raymond Cowell in W. B. Yeats.

Almost certainly the most off-beat full-scale interpretation of “Sailing” is Ruth Elizabeth Sullivan’s attempt at a Freudian analysis in “Backward to Byzantium.” Another strained effort is Morris Beja’s attempt to draw meaningful parallels between the same poem and a popular science fiction movie in “2001:
Odyssey to Byzantium.” In his book on Yeats and Blake, Hazard Adams labels both poems “tragic,” contending that they “dramatize their own failure as visionary documents.” Morton Irving Seiden’s book on myth and related materials in Yeats’s work goes well beyond the mere fusion of aesthetic and spiritual interpretations by arguing that the later poem is many poems in one. By contrast, in a little known but interesting piece of rambling commentary, James Stephens suggests that “Byzantium” is but the second of three versions of “the poem,” the third and final version of which Yeats did not live to write. A thoroughly ostentatious article by William Empson in the Review of English Literature (1960) attempts to force non-symbolic and humorously ironic readings upon the two clearly serious and highly symbolic poems. Also, Empson’s references to Yeats’s central symbol as a “clockwork dickey-bird” seem as ludicrous as Bloom’s biased suggestion that a key source for the image is Shelley’s “gaudy mock-bird.”

The final class of materials to be considered is composed of studies like the present one—examinations or surveys of scholarly and critical treatments of the poems. Jeffares’ ESA article, of course, falls into this category. It was preceded, however, by the relevant materials in George Brandon Saul’s Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats’s Poems. Reasonably thorough for its time, Saul’s work is seriously obsolescent by now. Along with an extensive listing of biographical facts, source materials, and parallels, portions of Jeffares’ Commentary provide some up-to-date guides to scholarship and criticism on the poems. As in the ESA article, however, many valuable studies are left unmentioned. A different kind of overview of existing criticism is attempted in the casebook on the poems edited by Richard Finneran. Finneran’s introductory essay, however, instead of being a discussion of important commentaries, as it probably should be, is an analysis of the poems in its own right, and not a completely satisfactory one at that. Furthermore, because he mixes some of the best treatments with a number of mediocre and even dubious ones, the product of Finneran’s editorial efforts is quite uneven. A survey more comprehensive than the present essay is my non-selective annotated bibliography of scholarship and criticism on the Byzantium poems from 1935 to 1970, a work which appears in the Bulletin of the New York...
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Public Library in 1973. Finally, one essay concerned with the application of a particular brand of criticism to one of the poems is Simon O. Lesser's belligerent attack in *College English* (1967) upon Olson's formalistic approach to "Sailing to Byzantium."

What essays and commentaries *should* be included in a casebook or critical collection on the Byzantium poems? Considerations of problems with republication rights aside, that question is not difficult to answer. To provide both a general gloss and some emphasis upon the possibility of combining the spiritual and aesthetic levels of interpretation, the treatment in William York Tindall's *W. B. Yeats* ought to be included. For an effective paraphrase or close reading of "Sailing" which is simultaneously a good statement of the aesthetic interpretation, the materials from Stauffer's *The Nature of Poetry* should be used. Ellmann's commentary from *The Identity of Yeats* could be included both as one of the better readings of the more difficult poem, "Byzantium," and for its meaningful interrelation of the aesthetic and spiritual interpretations. Probably Harry Modean Campbell's brief essay should be incorporated as a convincing argument for the spiritual level of analysis. And for its review of previous comments on the subject as well as for its own more likely suggestions, maybe Dume's note should be added to cover the matter of likely printed sources for the golden bird and tree image. Beyond that, the *maybe's* and *probably's* virtually fall away. Both for their inherent value and for their provision of a reasonable cross-section of the significant kinds of studies that have been done, the following commentaries certainly ought to be included: Gordon and Fletcher on sources, imagery, and meaning in general; Melchiori on visual sources, especially architectural and dome imagery; Parks on occult sources, symbolism, and import; McAlindon on the influence of Morris' thought upon Yeats's conceptualization of Byzantium as a powerful symbol; Bradford on the evolution of the poems through their various drafts, and Perloff on the interrelationships between rhymes and meanings in the poems. Anyone who carefully studies these commentaries and analyses will inevitably come away from them with a greatly deepened understanding of Yeats and his celebrated pair of poems. What is more, he will also experience a strongly felt sense of having been brought
to that understanding by the perceptions and presentations of scholarly writers thoroughly serious and sincere about both their subject and the genuine edification of their audience.

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Ironies and Dualities in *A Shropshire Lad*

By Gordon B. Lea

In his discussion of "trouble" in the poetry of A. E. Housman, William R. Brashear speaks of the "unmitigated anguish" of the poet's vision.¹ But his explanation ignores an important aspect of Housman's art—namely, Housman's use of irony. For ironies and dualities, verbal, formal, thematic, and situational, seem always to underlie Housman's pejoristic world view, especially in *A Shropshire Lad*.² These engaging discrepancies occasionally accentuate the bleakness of Housman's vision, but more frequently they relieve it, and, as a result, a poetry whose sentiments ought to depress us actually delights us. It is perhaps a failure to understand these extraordinary contrarieties that prompts some critics to condemn the Shropshire cycle for what they consider are its inconsistencies. A careful study of A

² All Housman quotations are from *The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* (New York, 1965).