

## BYZANTIUM - W.B. Yeats

Byzantium was written as a sequel to Sailing to Byzantium. It was written after a lapse of about four years from the date of his composing the poem, Sailing to Byzantium. Yeats wrote his Byzantium in Italy after his Malta fiasco. In the interval between Sailing to Byzantium and Byzantium, the poet had further more developed intellectually. Byzantium, therefore, is an improvement upon the earlier composition, Sailing to Byzantium, from the thought point of view. Like the former poem, in this poem too, Byzantium is not the historical city of the Roman Empire, known for its mosaic work and gold enamelling art and culture, but the country of the mind, a transcendental place outside Time and Space, a symbol for paradise as well as purgation.

Yeats's first notes of the poem are recorded in his 1930 diary, under the heading, 'Subject for a Poem', and are dated April 30, 1930. Some of them read: "Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking summer flames at the street corners where the soul is purified birds of hammered gold singing in the golden trees, in the harbours, obviating their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to paradise".

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looking for a theme that might benefit my years!" As stated by Prof. Stock, "At the end of The Tower and two Byzantium poems eternity is winning after a fashion, for he writes as an aging man preparing to leave the world of Selves."

According to Prof. Bullough, Byzantium is "a vision of the city from the inside where the soul is envisaged first as a walking mummy and then as the Emperor's golden bird, whose glory of chargeless metal is contrasted with the complexities of mind and blood!" Here Byzantium is a purgatory as well as a paradise, a place of cleansing flames:

"Flames that no faggots feed, nor ~~slow~~ <sup>Steel has lit,</sup>  
nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flames!"

So the poem is about the soul and its purification. The theme of the poem, broadly speaking, is the leaving of the world of flesh in search of wisdom. The poet rejects, or is forced by old age to reject, the life of sensual muck, of bigness and bearing, a world of procreation, which, because it is so, is also a world of that continually dies; unwilling to be an old scavenger or a dying animal, he seeks to make his soul in its final form; the metaphor he chooses for this is a golden bird singing in Byzantium upon its golden branch. This bird is the soul; unlike the birds of the first stanza is no longer subject to death; it is a poet's soul that sings to lords and ladies; it is an artifact ~~and therefore~~ (such a form as Greekian goldsmiths make) and therefore,



further displays Yeats's use of complex and rich imagery and symbols, and the conflict between the real and the ideal aspect, between the natural and the supernatural, between the young and the old aspect of life.

Byzantium was a sequel to Sailing to Byzantium and written in 1930, four years after its sister poem. Yeats was wearied of old age, and had recovered from illness. These Byzantium poems were prompted by his knowledge and study of the actual Byzantine art, his desire to escape from this world which was unfit for the old to a world of permanent art and culture, from a physical world to a spiritual and intellectual world. Whether prompted by history or by vision, W. B. Yeats writes: "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 — I think that in early Byzantium, may be never before or since in recorded history, religion, aesthetic and practical life were one."

On December 1929, Yeats was close to death from Malta fever. "I warmed my self back into life," he tells us, "with Byzantium and Veronica's Napkin."