

Sailing to Byzantium

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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.

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.

W . B . Yeats' Sailing to Byzantium : Interpretation

"Sailing to Byzantium " explores the dichotomies between age and youth , as well as sensuality and spirituality . The speaker is "an aged man " who comes to the realization that youth and sensual life are no longer an option for him , and he commences on spiritual journey to the ideal world of Byzantium . Yeats felt the civilization of Byzantium represented a zenith in art , spirituality ,and philosophy . It seems logical then that in the poem Byzantium symbolizes a place where the spiritless can journey in order to seek out the spiritual . In Byzantium the speaker is able to discard the natural element of his body in favor of the immortal , spiritual element of his soul.

In the opening stanza Yeats introduces a world of youth and sensuality . The conflict of the poem is addressed when the speaker distances himself from this world by stating " That is no country for old men." The speaker feels alien in this natural, youthful landscape . The image of the birds , often a symbol for the soul , are described as " dying generations." Their songs are not immortal and thus they are aligned with the natural world.

The speaker continues his description of the natural world with images of fertility . "Salmon falls " and " mackerel-crowded seas, " are both images of abundance and fertility . Yeats' salmon image is particularly interesting because it suggests both life in abundance , or the natural world , as well as the journey towards death, or the spiritual world. Each year salmon swim upstream in order to reach a place to reproduce. In doing so they both work with , and against nature . Reproduction is of course , natural , but swimming upstream is an act that goes against nature. The motion itself is much like flying , and one is brought back to the idea of the body travelling towards the soul.

The rhyming couplet at the end of the first stanza emphasizes the conflict of the poem . Youth , caught in the "sensual music" of the natural world overlooks the imposing , immortal aspects of art and intellect .

The second stanza introduces the world of the speaker as very different from the " country " of the previous " stanza . An elderly man is described as a scarecrow . This bird image is interesting because it both describes the man physically , and also contributes to the description of the spiritual in the natural world. While youth is represented by singing birds , age is shown by a pathetic scarecrow .

The scarecrow image is transformed into the soul with another motion similar to flight . The clapping of hands and singing evokes more bird imagery , but this time it is associated with the spiritual world .

The speaker concludes that only in an ideal environment , like Byzantium can he learn the songs of the soul . Note the speaker elevates Byzantium to a "holy city " thus deeming it appropriate in the poem to be the center of the spiritual world.

In Byzantium the speaker addresses the " sages " of Byzantium whose image are enclosed inside a holy fire , represented in a gold mosaic . This also is disguised bird image . The sages may remind the reader of Phoenix , an ancient , mythical bird whose body is consumed by fire , only to be born from its own ashes.

The speaker asks the sages to make him immortal like the glorious works of arts in Byzantium . For this to occur his body , or natural element must be destroyed .

The speaker's heart , the home of his once youthful passions , is consumed by cleansing fire along with his body which is described as a "dying animal ". Without body , his soul , like the sage's is held in the 'artifice of eternity "

The speaker renounces the natural world chooses to recreate himself in form of an immortal golden bird. Why does he choose this form? Perhaps because the bird symbolizes the soul and it sings much like the natural birds , the golden bird which exemplifies the art and beauty of Byzantium culture , is immortal.

Placed in a golden tree the speaker has now completely transformed himself into a world of art , unable to decay . In the first stanza the birds of the natural world sing of " whatever is begotten, born , and dies , " and also die themselves at the hands of nature . In the ideal world the speaker sings of " what is past , or passing , or to come , " thereby indicating his immortality.