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"The Artifice of Eternity": The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium Poems

The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium poems are pivotal poems for Yeats's expression of the relationship between the mortal and the immortal.[1] John Unterecker and Harold Bloom claim a strong connection between The Wanderings of Oisin and "Sailing to Byzantium" and several critics note that there are a significant number of shared preoccupations in these works and "Byzantium."[2] Though images, intimations, and versions of eternity are present throughout many of Yeats's works, from "Ephemera" to "Under Ben Bulben," this article sees The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium poems as fundamentally connected in terms of their sustained rendering of, desire for, and critique of the eternal. Yeats wrote that "Going and returning are the typical eternal motions" as "they characterize the visionary forms of eternal life."[3] In this way, The Wanderings of Oisin and his Byzantium poems become seminal poems that explore "the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity" where each poem stages "the trysting-place" as the key locus of the three poems.[4]

Many critics dismiss the early poem as wishy-washy abstraction,[5] or as a minor imitation of Shelley.[6] But The Wanderings of Oisin is far more than a limited precursor to Yeats's later work. Yeats's early poem explores the intensity of human longing for the eternal despite our time-bound nature, prefiguring his later impassioned though analytical Byzantium poems. Life and eternity come to seem diametrically opposed in Yeats's writing, where poetry is condemned to aspire to but never experience eternity, falling prey, despite its best attempts, to "the gulf between earthly and divine language, and the failure to achieve divine language in poetry."[7] But what has been understated is the extent to which Yeats's poetry actively resists the siren song of eternity. Though critics have dwelt upon how "[t]he aesthetic impact of both of the Byzantium poems is thus tied to their inevitable failure to actualize

atemporality,"[8] this article examines the means by which the poet is compelled towards but finally turns away from the "artifice of eternity" ("Sailing to Byzantium," III. 24).[9]

Shelley, the poet who Yeats claimed had "shaped my life," had been preoccupied with eternity throughout his career.[10] But the difference between the eternity featured in the works of both poets is instructive. Shelley follows in Augustine's footsteps despite rejecting the ultimate a priori of the Christian God; he echoes Augustine's impassioned questioning, from Augustine's sense of being sharing in the mystery of eternity, "aglow with its fire," to his longing to "seize the minds of men."[11] For both Augustine and Shelley, eternity is something separate from the temporal world, but something that we crave and can sense in our mortal lives. Shelley was influenced by the way in which Boethius, Augustine, and Aquinas drew a clear distinction between "eternity" or "atemporality" and "sempiternity" or "everlastingness." For Aquinas, "[t]he primary intrinsic difference of time from eternity is that eternity exists as a simultaneous whole and time doesn't." Existence must "fall short of eternity and be subject to time" which is the proper measure of change.[12] For Shelley, eternity is defined as distinctly different from the sempiternal. Eternity, for Shelley, is "some bright Eternity" (Epipsychidion, 115) to which humans can but aspire.[13]

But Yeats's eternity is more fraught with tension. Though, like Shelley, Yeats was immersed in Plato and fascinated by the idea of opposites (see CWWBY XIII: p. xxx),[14] Yeats took a more mythological approach to eternity than Shelley had, rejecting Shelley's Aquinas-derived unmitigated longing for eternity over existence. If Shelley had suggested the attractions of the mortal in comparison to inhuman perfection of eternity when he contrasted life as a "dome of many-coloured glass" which "stains / The white radiance of eternity," (Adonais 53: 462-63), The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium poems go further into the

implication that eternity, though alluring, may finally fail to satisfy its seeker in all their complex humanity. Though steeped in philosophy, Yeats's will-driven emphasis remains, as Frank Lentricchia claims, "a poetics framed in tragic awareness,"[15] where human heroism can only raise two cheers for an eternity stripped of all that is mortal. In The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium poems, Yeats seems to recall Boethius' distinction between the eternal and the mortal, where Boethius writes: "for it is one thing to be directed through a life without end, the process which Plato assigned to the world, but quite another to hold in one's embrace, as being in the present, the whole of life without end, a power clearly unique to the divine mind."[16] Despite any human longing to move beyond that which is mortal, mortals cannot possess a full appreciation of the eternal, and Oisin, like the speakers of the Byzantium poems, cannot finally slough off mortality and experience eternity as "the possession of one's self, as in a single moment." (quoted in CWWBY V: 52) Instead, Yeats valorizes the poet's attempt, where the struggle towards eternity becomes the ultimate battle of the poet as hero, a battle distinguished by its unwinnable condition. This fires the poetic muscularity of The Wanderings of Oisin and the Byzantium poems. Such tragic awareness permeates Yeats's achievement in The Wanderings of Oisin and goes some way to explaining its significance to Yeats in his late career. It is Oisin's early embrace of life rather than eternity that stubbornly remains in play in the Byzantium poems. Yeats brings together the poet and the hero through failure, where as he describes in "Anima Hominis," "the poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat." (CWWBY V: 12) This philosophy of defeat saw Yeats stage the failure to reach eternity, but stage it in such a way that the final lack of transcendence in the poetry is less the failure of poetry to achieve the eternal than an affirmation of the human world.

Concentrating poet and hero into a single figure, The Wanderings of Oisin points up the alienation of the modern poet. Cynthia D. Wheatley-Lovoy has noted how "Joyce, like Yeats, could not separate in his own mind the concept of heroism from the struggle of the artist,"[17] with her observation revealing how Yeats's poetics require the constant renewal of struggle, of thesis and antithesis.[18] But David Dwan's insight, "the homelessness which Nietzsche presented as the defining feature of modernity characterises this Fenian émigré,"[19] more closely reveals how solitude and self-division come to define the poet of The Wanderings of Oisin. The animating tension of the poem is how to respond to the schism between the eternal and the mortal worlds. The hostility between St Patrick and Oisin, the former, the avatar of Catholic Ireland, and the latter, a Fenian poet, reveals the complexity of the split. Though both figures are human, in contrast to Niamh's otherworldly presence in the poem, they are divided by their irreconcilable philosophies as the nature of human experience comes into question. Oisin, the quasi-Nietzschean "daring free spirit,"[20] is attracted to but finally unable to enter into immortality as represented by Niamh.[21] Oisin is repelled by St Patrick's Christian beliefs, and it is St Patrick's fascinated antagonism that sets the poem in motion as the saint courts Oisin's tale despite his revulsion from the Fenian's experience.

Oisin, for St Patrick, is an aged man "With a heavy heart and a wandering mind" (I. 2) following three hundred years of "dalliance with a demon thing" (I. 4). The immediate accusation embedded into the description sets up not only opposition but also the impossibility of productive conversation between the two figures. The historical, ideological, and experiential differences between them forces the poem into an ironic approximation of dialogue, where St Patrick and Oisin misunderstand, ignore, and undercut each other's words. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than in St Patrick's prediction that on "the flaming stones, without refuge, the limbs of the Fenians are tost" (III. 213). His censure is

met by Oisin's final resolution in the poem, where he affirms, "I will go" and "dwell in the house of the Fenians, be they in flames or at feast" (III. 223 and 224). William Blake, whom Yeats read with pleasure in these years,[22] wrote: "As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity,"[23] and this creed is recast in Oisin as Patrick sees only "torment and insanity" in Fenian mores where Oisin is "delighted with the enjoyments" of heroic life. If St Patrick and Oisin represent rival types of Irish civilisations, it is the perceived Christian abnegation of life that Oisin rejects in favour of the mortal, and above all, the human life of the hero. Eternity, in its Christian guise, seems something dangerously incompatible with the heroic values that Yeats would laud.

"The frustration of the hero in late Yeats, the fury of the poet at a world unable to sustain heroic virtues, and the bitter reduction of heroism to lust and rage," writes Harold Bloom, "are a richer return to the realms of the wandering Oisin."[24] Yet it is Oisin himself who chooses to leave behind the world of "heroic virtues," a troubling choice that intimates the fascination of what is neither mortal nor heroic. Representing the pull of the eternal in a female lover, Yeats reaches back to Shelley's poetry, which often presents visionary encounter as created by or represented as a woman, such as in Alastor or The Triumph of Life. Though "demon thing" (I. 4) to St Patrick, "passionate Niamh" (I. 18) woos Oisin with no enchantment but her love for his heroic exploits. Aengus's incredulous, even sardonic question, "'Were there no better than my son / That you through all that foam should run?'" (I. 60-61), seems less the reaction of a repressive father than tacit connection with the original title of the poem, [25] The Wanderings of Oisin, and How a Demon Trapped Him.[26] But this implicit judgement is not conclusive, inviting her response:

'I loved no man, though kings besought,

Until the Danaan poets brought
Rhyme that rhymed upon Oisin's name,
And now I am dizzy with the thought
Of all that wisdom and the fame
Of battles broken by his hands,
Of stories builded by his words
That are like coloured Asian birds
At evening in their rainless lands.'

(I. 62-70)

Niamh traces her desire through languidly musical lines. She is poet-wooed, and, like Othello's description of Desdemona, "[s]he loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them" (Othello: 1. 3: 166-67).[27] The battles and the stories seem evanescently beautiful as she describes her vision of their faded and glimmering exoticism. The structural repetition of "broken" and "builded" speak to Oisin's agency in the human world before they dissolve into the final image of exotic birds flying over land. Grown dizzy with her longing, Niamh ignores the tragic impossibility of their union being finally satisfying for either party. Her love, because of her immortality, would remove him from the mortal condition of his heroism. Her eternal and his mutable being must collide within their relationship, where there can be no reconciliation of the mortal and the immortal.

This clash of the mortal and the immortal spheres creates ripples of tension that dominate the poem. Love does not blind Niamh to its dangers. Niamh bids Oisin not to communicate with the phantoms that they see, telling him to "'Vex them no longer'" (I. 148) as the gulf between these states cannot be bridged by communication. Despite Oisin's apparent lack of comprehension of the scale of the division between the two extremes at this early juncture,

Niamh understands this irreconcilable gap but will not give up her human lover. When they arrive at the first island, or the island of "infinite feeling,"[28] Oisin's mortality immediately excites the interest of the inhabitants:

> And when they saw the cloak I wore
> Was dim with mire of a mortal shore,
> They fingered it and gazed on me
> And laughed like murmurs of the sea;
> But Niamh with a swift distress
> Bid them away and hold their peace;

(I. 207-12)

Yeats has the long vowel sounds of the first line dominate the line as he makes "saw" and "wore" sound together, an effect he continues in the second line with the repeated "m" sounds that lull the reader along to the music of the poetry. Such careful treatment of sound prefigures his remark in "The Symbolism of Poetry" that "The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation…that state of perhaps real trance" (CWWBY IV: 117).[29] Their laughter can only be compared to the sea, the inhuman elemental emblem of eternity, where any possible resemblance between the immortals and Oisin is closed down as soon as it is suggested. Niamh's response to the inhabitants' recognition of Oisin's difference reveals her awareness of his exclusion from their immortality. But it is an awareness that Oisin does not share:

> But when I sang of human joy
> A sorrow wrapped each merry face,
> And, Patrick! by your beard, they wept,

(I. 234-36).

The lines underscore how alien human joy seems to the immortals. Its temporary status cannot but grieve the immortal audience, as sorrow "wrapped each merry face," only momentarily distorting their features into an unaccustomed misery. Oisin still experiences time, preventing him from comprehending and sharing in the character and life of the immortals. Augustine writes that: "It is in eternity which is supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, that you are at once before all past time and after all future time," and Oisin has no access to the "unchanging" nature of the immortals.[30] Here, Oisin's instinct to reach out to Patrick, to seek a surprised reaction to the immortals' unimaginable difference from mankind, confirms that despite the obvious antagonism between the pair, both retain the humanity that unites them. Niamh's love for Oisin's poetry will not enable her immortal community to understand the mutability of human emotion, and their failure to empathise fully with his song questions the nature of Niamh's own attraction to Oisin. Any dismay Oisin could have felt at the time dissolves into the frenzy of their immortal dance. In it, Oisin mocks "Time and Fate and Chance," (I. 291) and all that makes him human. Yeats focuses on the irony that mortal Oisin, like "A starlit or a moonlit dome," disdains "All that man is" ("Byzantium, 5 and 6) even as he remains trapped in and more than half in love with his humanity. Oisin ignores the inevitable mutability of his human existence in favour of the siren song of the Island of Joy, but his defiance of mortality cannot be sustained. Self-divided, Oisin is unable to integrate into the immortal world but he is also incapable of rejecting the perfection he views.

Niamh and St Patrick represent two competing ways of viewing eternity, with St Patrick's version seeming dogmatically Christian when pitted against Niamh's more ambiguous presence in the poem,[31]. Niamh's eternity, now obsolete in Patrick's contemporary Christianised world, separates Oisin from his Fenian comrades, and cannot offer him a

community into which he can assimilate. But there is common ground between Niamh and Oisin based on their shared heroic values. These values are entirely rejected by St Patrick, who enjoins the Fenian to "Boast not, nor mourn" (I. 129) his dead comrades. For Oisin, St Patrick and his ilk stand opposed to heroism, to art, and to love:

> We sang the loves and angers without sleep,
> And all the exultant labours of the strong.
> But now lying clerics murder song
> With barren words and flatteries of the weak.

(II. 194-97)

Prefiguring the late poetry of "lust and rage" ("The Spur", 1), the Fenians represent the kind of Irish heritage Yeats frequently claimed as lost in his critical prose.[32] Here Oisin's often melancholic tale breaks into rhetorical strength as he compares the past with the present in a quasi-Nietzschean denunciation of Christianity's celebration of weakness.[33] The memory of the Fenians' vigour and energy sparks his condemnation of the "lying clerics [who] murder song" as Oisin defends his ancient values. Song, poetry itself, is barred by censorious religion. Though Dwan's attention to Yeats's 1893 lecture, "Nationality and Literature" is helpful for considering The Wanderings of Oisin, his sense that Yeats believed in "his epochal distinction between 'epic' and 'lyric' cultures and maintained that Ireland still possessed the social preconditions for epic literature,"[34] does not hold true for The Wanderings of Oisin. Rather, Oisin seems to defend, albeit unsuccessfully, his "epic" culture against St Patrick's already achieved "lyric culture." If Niamh and Oisin's wanderings between immortal islands often seem to offer only "monotone" (II. 232), Patrick and his fellow clerics stand for a repressive and anti-heroic society that Oisin and the immortals on the island of joy rail against in their song:

> …you slaves of God

He rules you with an iron rod,

He holds you with an iron bond,

(I. 331-33)

Strengthened by conflict, The Wanderings of Oisin achieves its highest pitch when Yeats moves to counter one ideology with another. Both versions of eternity, Niamh and Patrick's, cannot command Oisin's entire assent. Yet while Niamh's immortality celebrates the heroic values held by the Fenians, Patrick's godliness demands a servile relationship to God built on self-denial and self-abasement. Yeats whispers the suggestion that the removal of the pagan gods in favour of the Christian model that continued to dominate contemporary Ireland may not have been the better outcome. Yet Yeats does not openly state this proposition, suggesting less, "an eye for an opportunity – a politician's eye, and a politician's sense of timing,"[35] than his preference for the "element of evocation" of the symbol over bald didacticism (CWWBY IV: 114). Neither Niamh's eternity, nor the mortal realm of the Fenians proves sufficient for Oisin, whose divided self yearns for both states. The tragedy of Oisin revolves around the impossibility of such a combination, but Oisin's final triumph is to reject Patrick's version of reality in favour of his own heroic standard. The Wanderings of Oisin creates its own significance from its irreducibly complex vision of the conflict between two irreconcilable principles.

The Wanderings of Oisin marks an early centre of exploration of what would become a career-long fascination with the opposing principles of eternity and mortality. The static world of the eternal opposes "[t]he fury and the mire of human veins" ("Byzantium," 8) and Oisin's voyage through the three immortal islands with Niamh exposes them as repetitive and artificial in human eyes. Yeats's summary, "Oisin needs an interpriter [sic]. There are three incompatable [sic] things which man is always seeking——infinite feeling, infinite battle,

infinite repose—hence the three islands,"[36] explicitly states the incongruity of mortal existence and eternal life of which the poem only hints. But Oisin prompted more questions about than it offered answers to the vexed question of the mortal and the immortal. Desire for eternity wrenches Oisin out of the mortal world while his experience of the immortal islands leaves him powerless, bereft of his Fenian identity and companions. But Yeats never presents Oisin's choice to follow Niamh and enter into "the abode where the eternal are" (Shelley, Adonais 55: 495) as incomprehensible or wholly wrong. Nor is his decision, to declare his faith in the Fenian mortal values that he hopes will endure after death, viewed as a mistake. Though the mortal and the immortal are incompatible, this knowledge does not prevent the poet's doomed struggle for, coupled with resistance to, eternity. Yet the poet, whose desire for a purified version of the immortal is both courted and opposed despite its potential to destroy all that is human, invites such doom. The poet, as Yeats writes, suffers from an unquenchable longing for something beyond the fallen world, while remaining unwilling or unable to relinquish entirely the mortal realm in favour of eternity.[37] All that remains is the longing, despite the impossibility and undesirability of its fulfilment.

"Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" are two of the strongest poems that grow out of The Wanderings of Oisin to form a continuing exploration of opposing ideas of eternity. A Vision, written contemporaneously to the Byzantium poems, is a ""earnest and slippery work" (CWWBY XIII: p. xxiv) that offers a significant supplement to much of Yeats's work. In A Vision, Yeats claims that if offered a month in antiquity, he would choose to "spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato." (CWWBY XIII: 158) This assertion follows a meditation on A.D. 1 to A.D. 1050 that illuminates the two poems in the light of eternity. Yeats writes of man in this period that:

> He had discovered, or half-discovered, that the world is round and one of many like it, but now he must believe that the sky is but a tent spread above a level floor, and—that he may be stirred into a frenzy of anxiety and so to moral transformation—blot out the knowledge or half-knowledge that he has lived many times, and think that all eternity depends upon a moment's decision, and Heaven itself—transformation finished—must appear so vague and motionless that it seems but a concession to human weakness.

(CWWBY XIII: 155)

Humanity, according to Yeats's description, moves from discovery of knowledge to belief, and such belief diminishes heaven from perfected eternity to a "vague and motionless" image that upholds rather than corrects human weakness. The struggle between knowledge and belief forms a vital part of the Byzantium poems which attempt to view "Heaven itself" through the idea of Byzantium, where Yeats's speakers try to image their longings but find "vague and motionless" humanized visions of eternity rather than eternity itself. Following the 1925 edition of A Vision, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" form a dialogue on the poet's complex yearning for and resistance to eternity. Despite arguments that would semantically divide the two poems,[38] the poems interact through imagery, themes, and their increasingly incantatory tones as each seeks to discover a means for writing eternity. But, just as Aquinas had pointed the ultimate unknowability of the eternal for mortals by virtue of their living in time and lacking God's unlimited understanding,[39] Yeats, as Warwick Gould writes, saw that: "[t]he sensing in the body, for an instant, of the soul's eternal self-possession was a matter of miracle, not of vision."[40] The eternal might not be comprehensible nor even visible to the poet. Thus, in "Sailing to Byzantium," Yeats plays a game of high stakes. His poem performs the strained and difficult task of discerning the level of control that the poet can lay claim to in both the mortal and the eternal realms:

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.

("Sailing to Byzantium," I. 1-8)

Opening with a sweeping assertion, the speaker gestures dismissively at a country that he claims can offer nothing to the ageing man. The scene is immediately set for the struggle that he will have in departing from the world of nature. The speaker juxtaposes age against youth with the organisation of the first line making their closeness poignantly suggestive of both their tantalising proximity and their untraversable distance. Despite such insistent condemnation of his unfitting country, the speaker is "fastened [not only] to a dying animal," ("Sailing to Byzantium," III. 22) but to nature in all her incarnations. The quality of the description also betrays rather more sympathy for nature than an explicit condemnation of its unthinking denizens. According to the speaker, the dying generations exist in a trap, but there is an almost nostalgic quality to the description. The speaker's recoil from nature mingles with a sense of attraction. The smoothly sensuous "f" sounds of "Fish, flesh, or fowl" create a euphony that betrays the seductive quality of these "dying generations," even against the will of the speaker. As if to break free from the spell of the sensual song, Yeats uses the final couplet of his ottava rima stanza to return tartly to his rejection of mortal life: "Caught in that sensual music all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect." This stanza, as A. Alvarez writes, moves with a "living subtlety, [animating] the tension between rage and generosity,

impotence and desire, between, often, an attitude and truthfulness."[41] The draw of the sensual, despite its instinctual, anti-intellectual status, does not lessen as Yeats amplifies rather than solves the tension that Alvarez senses. Unlike Oisin, the speaker is not enchanted by any romantic possibilies in the form of an otherworldly female, but by the possibility of an ascetic existence. But it is an existence for which the speaker can only manage two cheers as life's sensuality retains its allure. The speaker represses the loss, and moves ahead with his choice to enter Byzantium.

"Byzantium" opens in total contrast to its earlier companion poem. Instead of a rejection of nature, in "Byzantium," the starlit or moonlit dome rejects man:

> The unpurged images of day recede;
> The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
> Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
> After great cathedral gong;
> A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
> All that man is,
> All mere complexities,
> The fury and the mire of human veins.

("Byzantium," 1-8)

The city locks out the speaker, as the dome "disdains / All that man is." The terse four-syllable line hints at a veiled conflict. For the dome to reject everything human forces the speaker either to repudiate his humanity or to struggle against eternity itself. Like Oisin, the speaker can fit in neither camp, and eternity possesses more power than charm in this opening stanza. There is a note of incredulity in the speaker's report that the dome disdains "All that man is" [emphasis added], and the shortened lines underscore the subtle shockwaves that

vibrate through the poem. If the poet is to retain his power, he must reject that which rejects him, and embrace his mortality. But such rejection is rendered sotto voce. While there is no overt rebellion against the tyranny of the eternal, he sets the stage for an ambiguous exploration of poetic power.

The longing for eternity in "Sailing to Byzantium" becomes increasingly pressing as the poem progresses. The mingling of desire with a sense of certainty imbues its second stanza with an almost incantatory prayer-like tone, supplemented by the repetitive structure of ottava rima:

> 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.

("Sailing to Byzantium," II. 9-16)

The declamatory first two lines are broken by the tantalising addition of "unless" at the end of the second line, which follows on to a description of a trance-like state where soul is definitively separated from body. But despite the speaker's claim, nature has not been transcended: the soul must "sing," in a gesture separated from the song of the "dying generations" (I. 3) by degree, not type. The soul, with its imaginary hands and mortal dress, witnesses the impotence of the mortal poet to image eternity: there are no means by which the poet can express the ineffable other than through images drawn from nature. Elizabeth

Bergmann Loizeaux writes,"Yeats responded to his country's turmoil, as he did to the uncertainty of life in old age, with a compensating desire for the permanence and stability of monuments."[42] The longing to be overwhelmed by the eternal so as to replace all that is mortal within the speaker seems almost overpowering. Yet even here, such desire does not become an unqualified feeling. The Wanderings of Oisin, with its protagonist trapped in a liminal state, offers a compelling parallel to the intermediary location of the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium." In the later poem, as in Oisin's version of the immortal realms, to surrender to Byzantium's beauty is to lose one's humanity, and the speaker does not attempt to disguise this danger. The soul must struggle to make up for the "tatters" in its mortal dress, but the cost is to leave behind the mutable world, despite being unable to image forth a fully formed vision of eternity. The final two lines show Yeats use the ottava rima structure to make the journey seem inevitable, where the rhyme brings together Yeats's choice "to come" with "Byzantium," where the "therefore" smacks of underscoring the rationality of the decision made by the poet. But Yeats has arrived at rather entered into the city. Eternity remains the desired destination of rather than the achieved theme of the poem. Despite the palpable longing, art has not affected an escape from nature. Art can merely envision an alternative rendering of nature. Longing for escape without actual freedom is the poem's reluctant theme.

"Byzantium," which contains a similar formulation of ambiguity in its first stanza, begins its second stanza in a methodical manner.

> Before me floats an image, man or shade,
> Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
> For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
> May unwind the winding path;

A mouth that has no moisture and no breath

Breathless mouths may summon;

I hail the superhuman;

I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

("Byzantium," 9-16)

The speaker carefully classifies his phantasmagorical vision, anatomising that which he sees to his audience. Though this may be a poetic imagining as witnessed by its description as "more image than a shade," he does not seem to control its appearance. The striking independence of the vision renders the role of the poet difficult. The speaker employs his poetic taxonomy but he must watch the torturous struggle between death and life suffered by an image without controlling its transformation into the eternal. The mirroring used in: "A mouth that has no moisture and no breath / Breathless mouths may summon" reinforces the image as a carefully constructed entity, but one that almost escapes the mortal poet's understanding. Breathless mouths can only be summoned by their likeness, but this state is not viewed as an advantage over the mortal in these lines. The negatives underscore that the superhuman lacks humanity rather than vice versa. Like Oisin's inability to connect with the laughing immortals of The Wanderings of Oisin, the speaker is locked out from all that he perceives. The movement to the superhuman seems compelled rather than sought as the poet addresses or praises it rather than controls its presence. The tyrannical superhuman brooks no human authority.

The longing to yield to the supernatural increases in urgency as "Sailing to Byzantium" progresses, reaching a climax in its penultimate stanza. Despite earlier ambiguities, the speaker urges himself ahead. Desire for the eternal becomes created by and creative of the poem despite its questionable status.

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.

("Sailing to Byzantium," III. 17-24)

The poetry seems carried away by the intense quality of its desire as the apostrophe to the sages pleads for a longed-for transformation. The tone of invocation begins immediately in the stanza. The speaker summons the sages to perform his bidding, and directs them to be "the singing-masters of my soul," where he retains a power and agency over his desire. The speaker has not escaped the fertile world of nature despite his professed desire. His return to the singing metaphor, established at the start of the poem as part of the "sensual music," (I. 7) betrays his continued humanity and fidelity to the mortal, despite the longing that saturates the lines. The desire to be transfigured, to be swept into "the artifice of eternity," contains within it the pained implication that mortality cannot be so easily renounced. Helen Vendler views "[h]is prayer" as one that "mistakenly assumes that if the dying animal were to be permitted to die, and if the heart were to be 'consumed away' by the sages' fire, the 'me' that would remain, stripped of heart and body, would be worth saving. But the heart-less and body-less 'me' is not, and never can be, the authentic Yeatsian self."[43] Seeing Yeats as wishing for an unqualified entrance to eternity misses the moments of pained hesitation and ambiguity in the poetry, suggesting that the poem had campaigned for something that it only belatedly begun to understand as flawed. Nicholas Meihuizen's rejoinder asks, "But was

there ever a possibility that [the poem] did" long for what Vendler claims,[44] and the answer must be no. The stanza is a controlled and articulated cry that yearns to be removed from nature despite how it does not wholly despise its failure to affect its desire. The poem's order, structure, and desire depend upon this qualified yet continued wish.

The final stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" prefigures the third stanza of "Byzantium." Its governing image is a vision of the poet in eternity, and the poet's form is a golden bird:

> 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.

("Sailing to Byzantium," IV. 25-32)

Almost a boast, the strut of the lines belies the diminishment of the poet, and it is the image of the golden bird that forms the crux of T. Sturge Moore's complaint against the poem as he sees the image of the bird as just as natural as "a man's body."[45] That Yeats considers Sturge Moore's analysis valid seems "amazing" to Daniel Albright,[46] however, the image of the bird, the symbol selected by Yeats for the poet, is entirely within the realm of the natural. While artificial, it is not a part of "the artifice of eternity;" (III. 24) it is man-made and time bound. The final stanza fails to offer the climax the poem seems to be leading towards, as the poet still cannot imagine himself outside nature. Yeats's desires oppose one another. Even as he longs for eternity, the mortal urge to live lingers, as Richard Ellmann claims: "half of the

poet's mind rejects the escape from life for which the other half longs."[47] Nowhere is this split psyche more apparent than in the image of the golden bird. Though Peter Knox-Shaw views it as "the all-embracing vision of the bard who 'present, past, and future sees',"[48] there is less majesty than subservience implicit in the image. Crooning sweet songs to please his owner, Yeats's eyes are wide open as he paints the poet in eternity as an entertainer, anticipating Derek Mahon's sardonic characterisation of the poet as a "grinning disc-jockey."[49] There is no possibility for anything beyond the actual other than disillusioned, not wholly committed to, though deeply felt, desire. Yeats forces his symbols of eternity to rest upon images formed by the perception of the senses. Oisin learns from experience that eternity is no place for the human poet, but the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" learns the same truth through art.

The role of the poet in eternity is disturbing in its subtle attenuation of the scope of the artist. If Oisin ended up "[a] creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry," (III. 192) "Sailing to Byzantium" magnifies the horror of age by imagining a static reality of servitude as the only escape from the passage of time. Drawing on Oisin's decrepitude to produce an image of a still more barren reality, Yeats makes the poet of "Sailing to Byzantium" much more subservient than Oisin had ever been. "The golden bird in 'Sailing to Byzantium'," writes Daniel Albright, is even more "rigid, servile, an objective puppet; and if it contains any sort of divinity that divinity can effortlessly change into triviality."[50] The bird's task, "to keep a drowsy Emperor awake" (IV. 29) is a world away from the exalted image of the poet and poetry that we find in Yeats's critical prose (see, for example, CWWBY IV: 117). The poet in eternity sees the scope of his art diminished to reportage. Yeats has not envisioned the poet outside of nature, as the worlds remain "interdependent."[51] The poet continues to require, even crave, the mutable world, and could say, with Oisin, "[p]ut the staff

in my hands; for I go to the Fenians" (III. 201). Yeats alludes to Shelley indicate his recoil from and attraction to his symbol. Yeats invokes the Romantic poet, defender of the primacy of the poet, as George Bornstein points out when he demonstrates the verbal echo of Hellas in the final lines of the poem.[52] Shelley's Hassan describes Ahasuerus as one who,

> …looks forth
> A life of unconsumed thought which pierces
> The present, and the past, and the to-come.

(Hellas, 146-48).

The reference to Hellas invites comparison between Ahasuerus and the golden bird, leading to an implicit self-condemnation of "Sailing to Byzantium"'s degraded vision of the poet's role. In Yeats's re-imagining of the poet, who sings "Of what is past, or passing, or to come," (IV. 32) there is no sense that the poet can legislate or perform an active role, as Shelley had asserted in A Defence of Poetry (Major Works, 701). In the preceding stanza, Yeats begged to have his heart consumed and this consumption of his heart, the site of human desire and feeling, guarantees his passivity, unlike Ahasuerus, whose thought is "unconsumed." Shelley's Ahasuerus "pierces / The present, and the past, and the to-come," (Hellas, 147-48) [emphasis added] with the verb implying action. Yeats's choice of verb, "to sing" does not imply any level of active control over the speaker's surroundings. "For all its splendour," writes George Bornstein, "'Sailing to Byzantium' lacks the decisive mental action of Yeats' Greater Romantic Lyrics."[53] The ambiguity that suffuses the poem forces the reader to conclude that Yeats's attitude towards eternity was never unmitigated longing.

Yeats faces the figure of the inhuman bird in "Byzantium," and he processes his summoned image with the same meticulous method as in the preceding stanza of the same poem:

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,

More miracle than bird or handiwork,

Planted on the star-lit golden bough,

Can like the cocks of Hades crow,

Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud

In glory of changeless metal

Common bird or petal

And all complexities of mire or blood.

("Byzantium," 17-24)

The almost exaggerated precision of the first two lines undercuts the heavy use of supernatural imagery. The speaker applies a stringent and ordered method of classification onto his vision. He describes Byzantium, moving the city beyond symbolism, and into the realm of a palpable poetic reality. Rendering it a real, if dreamlike, city quietly insists on the mortal world as the speaker keeps a firm grasp on the actual even as he explores the supernatural. The poet's role has shifted considerably since "Sailing to Byzantium." While the embittered bird can "scorn aloud" the natural, it is no longer a metaphor for the poet. This "miracle" of a golden bird scorns "all complexities of mire and blood," forcing the reader to note, for the second time in the poem, that the speaker too, as a mortal in the eternal city of Byzantium, is similarly scorned and rejected. While the vision compels him, its hold is not complete as the speaker retains the autonomy necessary to order the poem. No longer a matter of desire, Yeats presents a power struggle between the mortal speaker and images of eternity, a battle that continues to rage in the background of the poem.

The fourth stanza of "Byzantium" departs from his earlier ordering pattern, and the speaker's control over the presentation of Byzantium seems to slip as he describes the supernatural machinery of the city:

> At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
> Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
> Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
> Where blood-begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,
> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

("Byzantium," 25-32)

The effort to express the ineffable sends the poem into spirals of negative description for two lines: "Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit, / Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame" [emphasis added]. The threefold repetition of negative structures seem ritualistic, supporting Nels Pearson's claim that "the poem's effort to communicate the eternal within time by combining proclamation and enigma, revelation and ambiguity, bears deep similarities to the process of signalling and postponing revelation that drives Biblical language."[54] Compelling, painful, and transcendent, the lines emphasise an awful power, but one that is curiously impotent in the mortal world. "Byzantium" is heavy with a ritual that no longer involves the speaker's assent, yet the ritual cannot entirely control him. Personality remains here, as elsewhere, "all-important" and "the only bulwark against the abstraction and specialisation, against the isolation of modern life."[55] Though this realm is ruled by a supernatural power, the final line "An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve" recalls the speaker's ambiguous response to the disdain of the starlit or moonlit dome. There is a quiet

disbelief in the lines that mingles with the overt awe. The natural world retains a resistant power of its own in spite of the potency of the supernatural, a power that the speaker keeps stubbornly present in the lines.

The final stanza begins in frenzy as Yeats whips himself into an ecstatic vision of Byzantium:

> Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
> Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
> The golden smithies of the Emperor!
> Marbles of the dancing floor
> Break bitter furies of complexity,
> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

("Byzantium," 33-40)

The two exclamations of the first three lines emphasise profusion. In contrast to "Sailing to Byzantium," where Yeats sought "singing-masters of my soul" (III. 20), the spirits are greeted by smithies that physically "break bitter furies of complexity." In the same way that the golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium" remains part of nature, the spirits require the "mire and blood" of the dolphins to deliver them to Byzantium. The interdependence of the natural and the eternal remains, and the task required of the golden smithies seems to be endless. Conflict and violence not only remain part of the poem, but form its closing image. Profusion, fecundity, and renewal reign as the images endlessly proliferate and the sea draws its dangerous power from violent struggle. Yeats offers no final reconciliation as conflict remains the condition of creation, and the poet remains human and significantly untransfigured.

The Wanderings of Oisin is central to an understanding of the relationship between the mortal and the eternal in Yeats's Byzantium poems. In each of the three poems, time is not, as Plato has it in Timaeus, "a moving image of eternity,"[56] but eternity becomes something that humanity, in their time-bound state, cannot comprehend. Heaven seems, as Yeats writes in A Vision (1925), curiously inert as it is perceived as a "vague and motionless" (CWWBY XIII: 155) state. "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium", though written at a later stage of Yeats's career, reveal how important The Wanderings of Oisin came to be in Yeats's poetic development as they continue to experiment with the same struggle between the human and the superhuman realms. The "intensity, solitude, defeat" of the artist are inevitable,[57] but there is a victory of sorts won from the poet's deliberate inability to commit to any version of the eternal that precludes his own power and humanity. Yeats, as James Olney aptly states, "conceived of a system that embraced all things human but that also transcended all things human."[58] As such, Yeats's poetry runs the gamut between versions of desire that express a longing for resolution even as they retain their resistance to any single pure state of being, if any such state is possible. The Wanderings of Oisin, "Sailing to Byzantium," and "Byzantium" bear witness to the validity of Lentricchia's claim that "[t]he lure of transcendence was always tempting, but honesty forced Yeats to accept a finite world which, though a prison, was the stuff of poetry."[59] More than a prison, the finite world was also home, and a home that Yeats never entirely rejected.

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[1] Michael J. Sidnell, "The Allegory of Yeats's The Wanderings of Oisin," Colby Library Quarterly 15.2 (1979): 139-40 (137-151).

[2] Harold Bloom views "Sailing to Byzantium" as strongly related to The Wanderings of Oisin. Harold Bloom, Yeats (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970), 348; John Unterecker, *A Reader's* Guide to William Butler Yeats (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), 51. Also, see, for example,

David A. Ross, Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 173.
[3] The Works of William Blake, ed. Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, 3 vols. (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893; New York: AMS Press, 1979), 1: 401. Quoted in The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume XIII, A Vision, The Original 1925 Version, ed. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper (New York: Scribner, 2008), 331 n.62.
[4] W. B. Yeats, "Poetry and Tradition," W. B Yeats: Early Essays, Volume Four, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), IV: 186. Hereafter CWWBY IV.
[5] A. Norman Jeffares, The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 18.
[6] George Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1970), 13.
[7] Sean Pryor, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and the Poetry of Paradise (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 53.
[8] Nels Pearson, "Postponement and Prophecy: Northrop Frye and 'The Great Code' of Yeats's 'Byzantium'," University of Toronto Quarterly, 84.1 (2015): 24 (19-33); Helen Regueiro, The Limits of Imagination: Wordsworth, Yeats, and Stevens (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1976), 129-32.
[9] W. B. Yeats, The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957). All poetry by W. B. Yeats will be quoted from this edition and line number rather than page numbers provided.
[10] W. B. Yeats, "Prometheus Unbound," W. B. Yeats: Later Essays, ed. William H. O'Donnell with assistance from Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (New York: Charles Scribners's Sons, 1994), V: 12. Hereafter CWWBY V.
[11] Saint Augustine, 'Book XI', Confessions, trans. with introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 9. 260 and 11. 262.
[12] Thomas Aquinas, 'Passage 22: Eternity and Time', Selected Philosophical Writings, selected and translated by Timothy McDermott, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 213.
[13] Percy Bysshe Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 98.
[14] W. B. Yeats, "Editors' Introduction," The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume XIII, A Vision, The Original 1925 Version, ed. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper (New York: Scribner, 2008), p. xxx. Hereafter CWWBY XIII.
[15] Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1968), 62.
[16] Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. with introduction and notes by P. G. Walsh, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), V. vi. 111.
[17] Cynthia D. Wheatley-Lovoy "'The Silver Laughter of Wisdom': Joyce, Yeats, and Heroic Farce," South Atlantic Review 58.4 (1993): 24 (19-37).
[18] See also Michael J. Sidnell, *Yeats's Poetry and Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996), p. xiii.
[19] David Dwan, "That ancient sect: Yeats, Hegel, and the possibility of Epic in Ireland," Irish Studies Review 12.2 (2004): 209 (201-211), DOI: 10.1080/0967088042000228969
[20] Larrissy notes Yeats's attraction to this in connection with "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory." Edward Larrissy, Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 128.
[21] For Yeats's passion for Nietzsche, "that strong enchanter," see W. B. Yeats, The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume Three, 1901-1904, ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 3. 284.

[22] See George Bornstein, Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago, 1976), 34-35.
[23] William Blake, "Plates 6 and 7," The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, *Blake's Poetry and* Designs, selected and edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York, NY: Norton, 1979), 88.
[24] Bloom, Yeats, 105.
[25] See David Lynch in Chapter 3 of his book, Yeats: The Poetics of the Self (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 1979)
[26] W. B. Yeats, note preceding The Wanderings of Oisin, 1.
[27] William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice, The Complete Works: Compact Edition, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery and introd. Stanley Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999), 825.
[28] W. B. Yeats, The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume One, 1865-1895, ed. John Kelly, associated ed. Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1. 141.
[29] W. B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume IV, Early Essays, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), 117. Hereafter CWWBY IV.
[30] Saint Augustine, 'Book XI, Part 13', Confessions, trans. with introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 9. 260 and 11. 262.
[31] Warwick Gould notes that some reviewers, as late as 1923, responded to "ancient perceived insults to the Catholic faith" made in The Wanderings of Oisin. See Warwick Gould, "'Satan Smut & Co': Yeats and the Suppression of Evil Literature in the Early Yeats of the Free State," Yeats Annual No. 21, Special Issue, Yeats's Legacies, ed. Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 155 (123-212) https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0135
[32] "We were to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world." CWWBY IV: 182.
[33] "What is more harmful than any vice?—Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity..." Friedrich Nietzsche, The Anti-Christ, 2, Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ, trans. with an introduction and commentary, R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 116.
[34] Dwan, 201.
[35] Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats," In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats, 1865-1939, ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (London: Macmillan, 1965), 219
[36] Yeats, Letters, 1. 141.
[37] "I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lightning, in the humility of the brutes." See Yeats, "Anima Hominis," CWWBY V: 14.
[38] See Marjorie Perloff, Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats (The Hague; Paris: Mouton, 1970), 122; F. L. Gwynn, "Yeats's Byzantium and Its Sources," Philological Quarterly 32 (1953): 9-21.
[39] Aquinas, 'Passage 22: Eternity and Time', 213.
[40] Gould, 196-97.
[41] A. Alvarez, The Shaping Spirit: Studies in Modern English and American Poets (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 34.
[42] Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, Yeats and the Visual Arts (New York, NY: Syracuse UP, 2003), 146.

[43] Helen Vendler, Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 34.
[44] Nicholas Meihuizen, "Yeats, Vendler, and Byzantium," Irish University Review 44.2 (2014): 246 (234–253).
[45]"Your Sailing to Byzantium, magnificent as the first three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies." Letter 16 April, 1930, W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937, ed. Ursula Bridge (London: Routledge, 1953), 162.
[46] Daniel Albright, *The Myth Against Myth: A Study of Yeats's Imagination in Old Age* (London: Oxford UP, 1972), 57.
[47] Richard Ellmann, "The Continuity of Yeats," Yeats: Poems, 1919-1935, 99.
[48] Peter Knox-Shaw, "Prescient Nightingales and the Last Line of 'Sailing to Byzantium'," Notes and Queries 63.2 (2016): 291 (291-292).
[49] Derek Mahon, "I am Raftery," Collected Poems (Loughcrew, Meath: The Gallery Press, 1999), 51.
[50] Albright, The Myth Against Myth, 56.
[51] Hughes Murphy, 101.
[52] Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley, 101.
[53] Bornstein, Transformations of Romanticism, 82.
[54] Nels Pearson, "Postponement and Prophecy: Northrop Frye and 'The Great Code' of Yeats's 'Byzantium'," University of Toronto Quarterly, 84.1 (2015): 21 (19-33).
[55] A. Norman Jeffares, The Circus Animals: Essays on W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1970), 75.
[56] Plato, Timaeus and Critias, trans. with an introd. and appendix by Desmond Lee ([1977] London: Penguin, 1987), 51.
[57] Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (London: Peter Owen, 1966), 9.
[58] James Olney, The Rhizome and the Flower: The Perennial Philosophy of Yeats and Jung (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: U of California P, 1980), 223.
[59] Lentricchia, 76.