

Teresa Gibson

University of Texas Brownsville

"Sailing to Byzantium" and "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop":

Contrasting Views of William Butler Yeats on the Values of Spirit and Flesh

William Butler Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop" offer contrasting views on the relative values of spirit and flesh. The earlier poem "Sailing to Byzantium," like Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," treats the immortality of art and shows Yeats' preference at this time for the serene life of the spirit as opposed to the emotionally turbulent life of the body. The later poem "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop" shows his return to a belief in the importance of fully lived emotional and physical existence, "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" ("The Circus Animal's Desertion" 1.40), having realized like Blake that "Without contraries is no existence" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

Sailing to Byzantium

I

1 That is no country for old men. The young
2 In one another's arms, birds in the trees,
3 ---Those dying generations---at their song,
4 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
5 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
6 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
7 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
8 Monuments of unageing intellect.

II

9 An aged man is but a paltry thing,
10 A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
11 Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing

12 For every tatter in its mortal dress,
13 Nor is there singing school but studying
14 Monuments of its own magnificence;
15 And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
16 To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

17 O sages standing in God's holy fire
18 As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
19 Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
20 And be the singing-masters of my soul.
21 Consume my heart away; sick with desire
22 And fastened to a dying animal
23 It knows not what it is; and gather me
24 Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

25 Once out of nature I shall never take
26 My bodily form from any natural thing,
27 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
28 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
29 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
30 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
31 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
32 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

1927

*Yeats, W. B. (William Butler), 1865-1939: Sailing to Byzantium
[from The Poems (1997), Scribner] 198-199*

"Sailing to Byzantium" consists of four eight line tetrameter stanzas. The first stanza indicates Yeats' environment, modern society, to be "no country for old men" because of its emphasis on youth and the fertility of the body. The images presented emphasize these values: young lovers "in one another's arms," nesting birds, seas crowded with prolific mackerel. "Salmonfalls" fits two purposes since it refers to the salmon's yearly pilgrimage to spawn and swiftly die. All images are summed up in the phrases "dying generations at their song" (a song of sexual fulfillment suggested in part

by the word "generation") and "fish, flesh, or fowl." These are the compound subjects of the verb "commend," in line five which is linked to the "song" of line three and "sensual music" of line seven. A paraphrase of the first two sentences is the following: in modern society the emphasis is on youth, sexuality, and fertility; all life joins together to praise physical existence, that is "Whatever is begotten, born, and dies." The last sentence states that this emphasis on the joys of physical existence causes a lack of appreciation for the kind of art that is spiritual or intellectual, "Monuments of unaging intellect." This stanza begins a use of music as a symbol of all kinds of art. The art of modern society is "sensual music."

In the second stanza, Yeats looks at the options for old men in this society, the problems of pursuing a right course; then he suggests his own course of action. In a world biased toward youth and physical vigor, an old man is simply a scarecrow, "A tattered coat upon a stick" unless he can compensate for his loss of physical beauty and strength with a corresponding beauty and strength of the soul. To suggest the manner of attaining this spiritual beauty and strength he again uses music, "Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress." However, there is no one in this society who can teach him the art of spiritual music since all modern music or art is "sensual music." Therefore, he looks to the past and finds an ideal in the art of Byzantium, an art noted for abstraction, flatness and geometricality. This art takes human and natural forms and presents them two-dimensionally, forms that suggest the subject rather than imitate the actual appearance of it

The third stanza finds Yeats already in a Byzantium of the imagination, looking to the artists of that period to help him learn a new spiritual music. In the first line, Yeats

evokes an image drawn from Byzantine mosaics such as those of the Emperor Justinian or Empress Theodora that show court figures standing unnaturally flat and stiff, staring forward. He calls on these "sages" of the imagination to "be the singing-masters of [his] soul." He wishes them to come to him, "perne in a gyre." an allusion to a theory of the spiral nature of history which Yeats held. He wishes to divorce his soul from his heart or emotions which look with too much desire on the transitory and physical. Besides his emotions are "fastened to a dying animal" (his body). He wishes through the help of the sages to immortalize his spirituality or essence through art--"gather. . . [it] into the artifice of eternity."

In the fourth stanza he asserts that this art will not emphasize the physical but will deal in matters apart from the turbulence of life. His art, the "bodily form" of his work, will never dwell on natural things like the art of Keats' Grecian Urn. Instead his art will abstract essence from living things, such as the monastic superiors of Robert Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi desired and show "no more of body than shows soul." He takes the form of a gold bird artistically formed and decorated "with gold enameling" to link up again with the theme of music. His art (music) will not be current or deal in physical reality. He will stand apart from the turbulence of life and sing about about things of a timeless nature, "past, passing or to come," not to people of his own particular time but "to keep a drowsy Emperor awake" or "to lords and ladies of Byzantium." In a sense Yeats has done what he suggested he would do in his poem. He has put his spiritual essence in his art, his poetry (often identified with music because of their similarities). His body is departed, but a spiritual immortality is his as he continues to sing through his work, not just to a particular generation about particular problems but to all generations about subjects

which are timeless. This poem would appear to be appropriate to an older man; Yeats was in fact sixty-two when he composed it. It comes as a surprise when one finds a later poem written when Yeats was sixty-seven which asserts the necessary interdependence of soul and body.

Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop

1 I met the Bishop on the road
2 And much said he and I.
3 'Those breasts are flat and fallen now
4 Those veins must soon be dry;
5 Live in a heavenly mansion,
6 Not in some foul sty.'

7 'Fair and foul are near of kin,
8 And fair needs foul,' I cried.
9 'My friends are gone, but that's a truth
10 Nor grave nor bed denied,
11 Learned in bodily lowliness
12 And in the heart's pride.

13 'A woman can be proud and stiff
14 When on love intent;
15 But Love has pitched his mansion in
16 The place of excrement;
17 For nothing can be sole or whole
18 That has not been rent.'

Yeats, W. B. (William Butler), 1865-1939: VI. *Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop* [from *The Poems* (1997), Scribner] 264-265

"Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" is a short poem-- three six-line stanzas in length; these lines vary between tetrameter and trimeter and rhyme abcbdb, rather like ballad meter. The first stanza places Crazy Jane and the Bishop in a chance meeting on a road. The Bishop rebukes Crazy Jane for her life and urges her to make amends. After all her body is old now, her "breasts... flat and fallen...." Presently her body will die: her

"veins...be dry." She should ignore her body and emphasize her soul such as was suggested in the previous poem. The refined spirit freed from the dross of matter "lives in a heavenly mansion" while the spirit tied to the flesh lives "in a foul sty." The word "foul" suggests the corruptibility and lowliness of the body, especially an aged one, while "sty" being a place where pigs live suggests the animal nature of the body and its sexuality.

Crazy Jane answers back in the last two stanzas. She notes the kinship and interdependence of soul "Fair" and body "foul." She's old; therefore, her "friends are gone," "a truth" she can't deny because of her acquaintance with death "grave" and sickness "bed." But her experience with both physical reality, "bodily lowliness" and spirituality or intellectuality, "heart's pride" have given her insight--she is "learned." The third stanza asserts that one has to undergo what some may see as a humiliating, lowly experience--the sex act in order to be a fulfilled person. Ideal love can only be sought through physical experience. A woman or perhaps any person "too proud and stiff" to surrender to his or her sexuality forfeits fulfillment both of body and soul. The element of sexuality most distressing to the fastidious, the placement of sex organs near or in organs of excrement" is stressed here. The final two lines--"For nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent." are richly suggestive. "Sole" refers to oneness or the integration of the personality achieved only by bringing together both spiritual and physical selves in one's sexuality; the word also puns on soul, one finds fulfillment for one's soul through physical experience. "Whole" works in a similar manner, referring primarily to the wholeness or fulfillment of a being and punning on hole, the female sexual organ. Both soul ("sole") and body (hole) come to fulfillment in sexuality.

Paradoxically wholeness is obtained by being "rent" literally the tearing of the hymen, and symbolically sexual experience in general.

Like the fool in Shakespearean plays, Crazy Jane is wiser than her apparent betters, here the supposedly wise man of the Church, the Bishop. Interestingly the views presented by Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" are refinement of the Bishop's view that one should detach one's soul from the lowly and transient body. "Sailing to Byzantium" is an excellent poem, but Yeats obviously did not stop learning at sixty-two. In a letter of his old age he wrote, "I shall be a sinful man to the end and think upon my deathbed of all the nights I wasted in my youth" (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature Revised* Vol.2, 1565)