

*Sailing to Byzantium*⁷

I

That⁸ 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,
 5 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect
 Monuments of unaging intellect.

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
 10 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;
 15 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,⁹
 20 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

25 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 enameling

7. The ancient name of Istanbul, the capital and holy city of Eastern Christendom from the late fourth century until 1453. It was famous for its stylized and formal mosaics; its symbolic, nonnaturalistic art; and its highly developed intellectual life. Yeats repeatedly uses it to symbolize a world of artifice and timelessness, free from the decay and death of the natural and sensual world.

8. Ireland, as an instance of the natural, temporal world.

9. That is, whirl in a coiling motion, so that his soul may merge with its motion as the timeless world invades the cycles of history and nature. "Perne" is Yeats's coinage (from the noun *pim*): to spin around in the kind of spiral pattern that thread makes as it comes off a bobbin or spool.

- To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;¹
 30 Or set upon a golden bough² to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
 1927

Among School Children

I

- I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
 The children learn to cipher and to sing,
 To study reading-books and history,
 5 To cut and sew, be neat in everything
 In the best modern way—the children's eyes
 In momentary wonder stare upon
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man.³

II

- I dream of a Ledaean body,⁴ bent
 10 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
 Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
 That changed some childish day to tragedy—
 Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
 Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
 15 Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
 Into the yolk and white of the one shell.⁵

III

- And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
 I look upon one child or t'other there
 And wonder if she stood so at that age—
 20 For even daughters of the swan can share
 Something of every paddler's heritage—
 And had that color upon cheek or hair,

1. "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver, and artificial birds that sang" [Yeats's note].

2. In Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the sibyl tells Aeneas that he must pluck a golden bough from a nearby tree in order to descend to Hades. Each time Aeneas plucks the one such branch there, an identical one takes its place. 3. At sixty (in 1925), Yeats had been a senator of the Irish Free State.

4. Like that of Helen of Troy, daughter of Leda. The memory dream is of Maud Gonne (see also lines 29–30), with whom Yeats had long been hopelessly in love.

5. In Plato's *Symposium*, the origin of human love is explained by parable: Human beings were once spheres, but Zeus feared their power and cut them in half; now each half longs to be reunited with its missing half. Helen and Pollux were hatched from one of two eggs born to Leda after her union with Zeus in the form of a swan; the other contained Castor and Clytemnestra. According to Yeats in *A Vision*, "from one of [Leda's] eggs came Love and from the other War."

And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

- 25 Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger⁶ fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
30 Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

- What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation⁷ had betrayed,
35 And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
40 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

- Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;⁸
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;⁹
45 World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras¹
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

- Both nuns and mothers worship images,
50 But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,

6. The hand of a fifteenth-century artist. Yeats especially admired Botticelli, and in *A Vision* praises his "deliberate strangeness everywhere [that] gives one an emotion of mystery which is new to painting."

7. Porphyry, a third-century Greek scholar and Neoplatonic philosopher, says "honey of generation" means the "pleasure arising from copulation" that draws souls "downward" to generation.

8. Plato considered the real world an imperfect and illusory copy of the ideal world.

9. Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander the Great, disciplined him with a strap ("taws," line 43). His philosophy, insisting on the interdependence of form and matter, took the real world far more seriously than did Plato's.

1. Greek mathematician and philosopher (580?–500? B.C.E.); one legend describes his godlike golden thighs.

- 55 And that all heavenly glory symbolize—
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

- Labor is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
60 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

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