UNRAVELLING THE STRANDS:
YEATS AND BYZANTIUM

By

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In his lectures on ethics, Peter Kreeft, the American philosopher likens the history of art and philosophy to a great conversation, where through the ages, different individuals make different contributions.¹ Some develop new points; others retrace old ones. It is an attractive notion which captures the ways in which certain ideas, fashions, even styles can sometimes slip into obscurity only to be rediscovered by later generations and developed anew; and in this way artists and philosophers engage in an endlessly unfolding conversation through time. So when considering Yeats’ attitudes to Byzantium, one must first examine the context in which his interest in the subject developed and the reasons behind what amounted to a major, almost lifelong preoccupation. In short, one must understand why Yeats took up this unique strand of the great conversation and the full significance of his particular contribution.

And of course, no such interest is ever neutral and in this respect Yeats’ attitudes to Byzantium were no exception. This paper therefore strives to explore firstly the roots of Yeats’ interest in the subject and how this interest tied into his political views.² This paper will then look to explore Yeats own weltanschauung, especially through his idiosyncratic and rather personal views on the role of the artist, the nature of history, and the subject of immortality; and having explored such areas, will then examine the two poems *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Byzantium* with a view to unlocking some of the complex meanings behind those poems and seeing how these meanings in turn illuminate the personal and political aspects of Yeats’ attitudes to Byzantium.

As a consequence, it is thereby necessary to examine many different kinds of histories, sources and disciplines. And so, this paper duly considers a wide range of evidence: from Yeats’ own written accounts to critical evaluations of his work; from political history to cultural history and the history of art and architecture. Ever the autodidact, Yeats had a magpie-like mind and thus uncovering its sources and the complex inter-linkages of its

¹ Peter Kreeft: *What would Socrates do? The History of Moral Thought and Ethics*, Barnes and Noble (2004), lecture 1; Kreeft also references and explores the idea further in *Between Heaven and Hell*, InterVarsity Press, (1982), which is a dialogue between the three historical figures John F Kennedy, Aldous Huxley and C.S. Lewis
² For clarity, this author takes ‘political’ to refer to Yeats’ attitudes to the political order of societies, past and present and more specifically to his aspirations for and reflections on his native Ireland.
various strands, demands an interdisciplinary approach; for it is only through the prism of such approaches that a fuller picture emerges.

There seems little doubt that by the turn of the twentieth century, interest in Byzantium among European intellectuals and artists was notably growing. During the 1893 *Columbian Exhibition* in Chicago, some 1.4 million people visited a chapel designed quite consciously in the Byzantine style by Louis C. Tiffany and only seven years later, the public at the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris were quite taken with first photographic display of Byzantine Monuments. The modernist search for alternatives to representational art which had so dominated the European world for centuries found in Byzantine Art a whole other approach; and this discovery helped give confidence and historical argument to the modernist project.

Many artists of Yeats’ time saw distinct parallels between the move from naturalism to abstraction in the fifth and sixth centuries and the move from impressionism to post-impressionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Artists and critics like Roger Fry, Matthew Prichard and T.E. Hulme in particular were instrumental in bringing the whole subject of Byzantine Art into the modernist discourse. As J.B. Bullen has already shown, Hulme especially was quite influenced by the likes of Riegl and Worringer and developed the idea from Worringer that the search for abstraction came from an artist’s unease with the world; indeed Hulme was of the view that it arose out of a kind of desire ‘to create a certain abstract geometrical shape, which being durable and permanent shall be a refuge from the flux and impermanence of outside nature’.

This was music to the modernist ear. The idea that the Byzantine, like the Modern, focused on producing a response to the chaos of the world and that this response found beauty and

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5 Ibid., p.674

even a kind of spirituality and permanence in abstract forms all helped to create a strong
linkage between the two eras. It also helped establish a kind of artistic precedent for the
experimental and artistic daring that was about to be attempted; and it implied the idea of a
new golden age for Art.\(^7\) Yeats too shared this hope for a new golden age and the idea that it
would one day form out a response to what he saw as the terrible soullessness of the modern,
capitalist world, was one which he held to throughout his life.

All of this only underscores the fact that over a significant portion of Yeats’ life there was
clearly a strong interest in Byzantine Art and its connections to the Modernist project were
duly noted even at the time. Byzantinism was clearly ‘in the air’ and many writers and artists
influenced others in their praise of this antique style. For example, O.M. Dalton and W.R.
Lethaby were likely aware of the work of Roger Fry as many of the latter’s ideas can be
traced and found in their work;\(^8\) and we know that Yeats read O.M. Dalton’s book on
Byzantine Art.\(^9\) So Yeats, in this way, was clearly reached and touched by the currents of
interest in the subject which flowed through the intellectual world of Modernist Europe.

Yeats’ reading on Byzantium and related topics makes clear his tapping in to the
aforementioned discourse of his time. Indeed we know from Yeats’ wife something of the
various books he devoured on the subject: \textit{The age of Justinian and Theodora} by W.G.
Holmes, \textit{Byzantine Art and Architecture} by O. M. Dalton, and Mrs Arthur Strong’s
\textit{Apotheosis and Afterlife}, are all mentioned by A.N. Jeffares; but there was also Diehl’s
\textit{Manuel D’Art Byzantin}, William Metcalfe’s translation of A.S. Paspates’ \textit{The great palace of
Constantinople} and Josef Strzygowski’s \textit{Origin of Christian Church Art}. And in all of these

\footnote{Nor did the interest in things Byzantine wane—at least not until World War II—and right up until the 1930s, the connections to Modernism held strong. Indeed Byzantine Art which had for many centuries eluded the European tradition reached its apotheosis in the 1931 Exposition Internationale d’Art Byzantin in Paris. For example, the Exposition included a display of four plates freshly excavated at Corinth by the American School of Classical Studies. The pieces at the time were likened unequivocally to the contemporary art of the day with Modigliani, Boudelle and Matisse all duly mentioned, amongst others; and even the approach to the excavations themselves (which took place at Corinth between 1929 and 1940) were arguably as much under the spell of modernism than of intellectual inquiry for its own sake; for more on the subject, see Kostis Kourelis article: : \textit{Byzantium and the Avant-Garde: Excavations at Corinth, 1920s-1930s}, ‘Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens’, Vol. 76, No. 2, April-June 2007, (especially) pp. 391-395}

\footnote{J.B. Bullen: \textit{Byzantinism and Modernism 1900-14}, ‘The Burlington Magazine’ Vol. 141, No. 1160, p. 672}

works, the authors were determined to communicate something of the majesty and artistic importance of the Byzantine world.

Josef Strzygowski’s *Origin of Christian Art* and Mrs Strong’s *Apotheosis and Afterlife* in particular illustrate something of the influence these books had on Yeats and as such form an interesting case study. As Russell Murphy has already ably shown, the phrase ‘A starlit or a moonlit dome’ from the opening line of Yeats’ poem *Byzantium*, arguably owes much of its inspiration to Strzygowski’s speculations on the origins of the domed structure in Near Eastern church architecture.¹⁰

Interestingly, Strzygowski saw the East principally as Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Egypt—in other words the East that, in his view, arguably most influenced Europe—and that Byzantium was, as such, at the centre of East and West. Yeats too held precisely this view.

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¹⁰ Russell Murphy: Josef Strzygowski and Yeats’ “A Starlit or a Moonlit Dome”, College Literature, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1986, pp.106-107
and articulates exactly this point in his later book, *A Vision*.\textsuperscript{11} For Strzygowski, the Santa Sophia though was the ‘supreme monument of Eastern Christianity’ because its architecture—even the design of its central dome over a square plan—was not Roman but in fact Armenian. He thus refers to the example of the dome at *El Khargeh* and notes the star-like carvings found on the structure. Strzygowski even argues that the tomb in pre-Christian times eventually led to this design of the free-standing square structure with the single dome.\textsuperscript{12}

According to Mrs Strong in her book, star-and-moon-decked canopies referred to the cloth domes used as coverings for the bier in ancient Roman processionals.\textsuperscript{13} The idea here was that such baldacchino-like structures were meant to depict the eventual astral destiny of the soul. Mrs Strong thus refers to a relief found at the site of *Amiernum* and sees it as something from the east which changed the Roman idea of the afterlife; for the soul now had a specific astral destination after death.\textsuperscript{14} Murphy thus argues that it is likely Yeats concluded, that the Dome of Santa Sophia was in fact derived from ancient burial structures and was therefore meant as a kind of dome of the heavens that showed the ultimate destiny of the soul. The idea here is significant. For whereas in the West, the Christians tended to erect buildings that reflected earthly power and glory, in the East and in Byzantium in particular, the Christians saw their buildings as reminders of the body’s decay and the ultimate destination of immortal souls.

And all this has clear implications for the opening lines of *Byzantium*:

\begin{quote}
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains

All that man is,

All mere complexities,

The fury and mire of human veins
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} W.B. Yeats: *A Vision*, New York: Collier (1966), p.275
\textsuperscript{12} Russell Murphy: Josef Strzygowski and Yeats’ “A Starlit or a Moonlit Dome”, College Literature, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1986, p.107
\textsuperscript{13} Mrs Arthur (Eugenie) Strong: *Apotheosis and Afterlife*, London: Constable (1915), pp.175-180
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., pp.175-180
Bearing in mind Strzygowski’s and Mrs Strong’s observations and assertions, one could read Yeats’ opening lines as the description of a decorated architectural structure which symbolises the decay of mortal flesh as against the astral destiny of all immortal souls and hence the dome ‘disdains’ mere mortal flesh. The opening lines thus are less mere description of the light as it falls on the Dome of Santa Sophia, more a complex allusion to architectural and religious history and the significance this holds for the poet.

Yet Yeats’ interest in Byzantine Art can be traced back much farther than the reading material he explored during the nineteen-teens and nineteen-twenties. And although some scholars have criticised Yeats’ early readings on Byzantium as fragmentary and eclectic, there is still much to be garnered from exploring such readings. As early as the late 1880s, when Yeats was still just in his twenties, he was already under the influence of both John Ruskin and William Morris, and indeed especially the latter. Morris was a huge figure in the late nineteenth century and his work held special resonance for Yeats.\textsuperscript{15} And although Yeats was somewhat critical of both Ruskin and Morris’ idealisation of the Gothic, it is clear he nonetheless admired their ideas of community and artistic freedom; what Yeats rejected was simply that it occurred during the medieval period. In his view, if any, it was the Byzantine period which truly embodied such ideals.

Interestingly Strzygowski’s idea of Byzantium being at the centre of East and West can also be found in Morris’ writing though in Morris’ view, Byzantinism had the capacity to absorb other traditions which was something Classicism was incapable of as it sought to be distinct and dominant over its environment.\textsuperscript{16} And Morris even built a kind of East meets West theory of Art where Byzantium was concerned; where the East stood for colour, intricate design and mystery, the West stood for discipline, structure and what he called natural fact. Byzantine Art was, in Morris’ view, a combination of the two. It was the unification between two visions of the world.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} This is not to suggest or prove that Josef Strzygowski was himself directly influenced by William Morris’ writings; though it is, of course, eminently possible this may have been the case.
\textsuperscript{17} There are of course interesting implications here when considering Morris’ views in light of Edward Said’s \textit{Orientalism}—where the East, for example, is often portrayed as passive, colourful, mysterious and absorbing, as opposed to the West which is forthright, assertive and dominant.
Morris clearly rated the achievement of the Byzantine period as equal to the Gothic in that it possessed a similar kind of richness and fullness. He was, in fact, convinced that the fragmentation and separation of Art and religion from daily life really began in fourteenth century Europe and culminated in the modern problems of alienation and soullessness. For Morris, Byzantium was, in fact, a kind of utopia where there was a unity between the spiritual, cultural and daily life of the city and its art was simply a natural, spontaneous expression of this state of affairs. The art they produced according to Morris was truly popular—not in the pejorative sense we think of today—but rather it was of the people, of their culture and of their soul. And in this way, all could participate in its appreciation.

All these ideas—on Byzantium as the centre of East and West; on the unity of spiritual, cultural and artistic life found there; and on the idea of a popular art—can also be found in Yeats’ writings. Indeed the two authors share so many similar ideas that it is hard to overestimate the sheer extent of Morris’ influence on Yeats in this regard. For instance like Morris, Yeats blamed the demise of genuine popular art on bourgeois capitalism which began during the Renaissance and called for its immediate restoration. In *What is popular poetry?* (an essay Yeats wrote at the turn of the twentieth century) Yeats developed something of a manifesto on this subject and in fact the essay can in a sense be seen as a companion piece to the first two essays in Morris’ *Hopes and Fears for Art* published back in 1882. And fundamental to both is the idea of the artist as integral to society—where the artist does not compose for the elite but rejoices in the expression of that society and its culture through an art for all the people.

The social importance of Art is also similarly expressed by Yeats and Morris. ‘During the formative years of my artistic life’, Yeats wrote in 1930 (the same year he wrote the poem *Byzantium*) ‘I disliked the isolation of the artist. I wished through the drama, through a commingling of verse and dance, through singing that was also speech, through what I called the applied arts of literature, to plunge it back into social life.’\(^\text{18}\) And for both Yeats and Morris, Byzantine Art is the embodiment of such an achievement. In *Art and the Beauty of*  

\(^{18}\) W.B. Yeats: *Explorations*, p.300
the earth, Morris even argues for the collective genius rather than the individual Shakespeare or Michelangelo;\textsuperscript{19} for his is clearly a social as well as artistic vision and Yeats too somewhat engages in the same idea. As Yeats puts it, ‘the image-maker or worker in mosaic who first put Christ on the cross would have as soon claimed as his own a thought which was perhaps put into his mind by Christ himself.’\textsuperscript{20} Here the idea is that the worker is simply a channel for religious beliefs which of course would mirror those of his society; he is but a vessel for things spiritual; for Christ himself. And one could argue that similar such thoughts on the artist as an integral part and voice of society are again echoed in \textit{A Vision} when Yeats speaks of his desire to converse on equal terms with the philosophical mosaic worker in ancient Byzantium.\textsuperscript{21}

In this sense, neither Morris’ nor Yeats’ ideas on art can be easily separated out—either from each other or from their economic, social and even political ideas; for here, the Byzantine artist is not just a model for artistic expression. He is instead part of a vision for society itself; a society unified through its cultural, religious, artistic and political life. Byzantium is thus for Yeats much more than simply a place to escape to—it is bound up with his vision for an ideal world: a world built around the central ideas of a unity of spiritual, cultural and daily life; where artists are more like anonymous yet free vessels through which that culture and its spiritual aspirations flow; a place where art is appreciated by all, kings and peasants alike; with a cosmopolitan culture that absorbs other cultures without losing itself and its fundamental, authentic flavour. And it is even a kind of social utopia where the workers and artists are properly valued and their freedoms respected.

The links here between this vision of ancient Byzantium and the modern Ireland in which Yeats lived are also impossible to ignore. For Yeats quite consciously cited the ancient sagas of Ireland (which Lady Gregory translated) as examples of the kind of aforementioned popular art he had in mind—a popular art connected to the spiritual and cultural life of the nation and which echoed the Byzantine artists’ achievements.\textsuperscript{22} It was as he put it, a literature

\textsuperscript{19} William Morris: Collected Works, XXII, p.32
\textsuperscript{20} W. B. Yeats: \textit{Explorations}, pp.6-7
\textsuperscript{21} W. B. Yeats: \textit{A Vision}, New York: Collier, p.279
\textsuperscript{22} T. McAlindon: \textit{The Idea of Byzantium in William Morris and W. B. Yeats}, Modern Philology, Vol. 64, No. 4 (May 1967), pp.309-311
that ‘never ceased to be folklore even when it was recited in the courts of kings.’ And as such, Yeats’ ideas on Byzantium are clearly also bound up with implicit aspirations for Ireland and what it could be under the right leadership.

That said, the subject of Yeats’ political stances on and within Ireland is a complex one. Although an Anglo-Irish Protestant, the Yeats family were hardly part of the ruling class and if anything were more on the fringes of the ascendency. And yet neither was Yeats ever really fully part of the Catholic Nationalists who ultimately replaced the dashed hopes and political failures of the Parnellites and which ultimately culminated in the 1916 Easter Rising. Yeats thus maintained throughout his life this sense of being an outsider looking in; of separateness and distinctiveness. Even when he was appointed a Senator by William Cosgrave in the newly created Irish Free State, he was seen as a somewhat unusual figure, sometimes too learned and too obscure; sometimes lacking correct knowledge of proper procedure; sometimes although undeniably eloquent, somewhat old-fashioned and idealistic.

The Seanad was in part founded in order to give representation to groups within Irish society who mightn’t otherwise have gotten elected and the Southern Irish Unionists were one such group who were commonly referred to (ironically) as ‘Independents’. And yet, although Yeats joined this group within the Seanad, he had little in common with them. Nor did they even support independence for Ireland, though Yeats clearly did. So why did he join them? In a fascinating article on Yeats’ time in the Seanad, David Fitzpatrick argues that he identified with them as a class of people who had shared certain privileges and a way of life that included leisure; and that Yeats saw leisure as interlinked with a life of contemplation and reflection. It is a convincing argument especially when one bears in mind how Yeats, as a younger man, had ardently read and admired Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* and wished for his class to represent such high ideals. And in this regard, he was of course bitterly disappointed. Where he had hoped to find fellow Anglo-Irishmen aspiring to

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23 W.B. Yeats: Explorations, p. 5
25 Fahmy Farag argues a similar point in his article: *Yeats and the Politics of A Vision*, The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies (1975), pp.9-26
the legacies of Burke, Swift, Berkeley and Goldsmith, he instead found an insular, bigoted and largely ignorant group, insecure and paranoid about their future in the new Free State.26

Yet nor did Catholic Nationalist Ireland fare much better; for although he admired the likes of Kevin O’Higgins, whom he saw as a strong and heroic figure, he quickly became concerned, and later deeply disenchanted with what he saw as the new Government’s provincialism, over-dependence on the Catholic Church and their generally ignorant prejudices. In particular, he was a staunch defender of the independence of boards, of judiciary and of the press and indeed Yeats believed passionately in freedom of speech—all points that clashed directly with the new Catholic agenda. He also fought quite hard for what he saw as a society that needed to respect minorities and his famous oration on divorce (‘We are not a petty people’) was indicative of this. Yet the speech was deeply damaging to Yeats’ political aspirations and had the effect of alienating him further from both the Catholic Nationalists who were against divorce, and the Protestant Unionists who just wanted to keep their head down, and hold on to what dwindling power they still had. In the end, Yeats ended up as he always had been: an outsider, independent and alone; of the fray yet somehow above the fray.

But where does this leave Yeats’ ideas on Byzantium and his aspirations for his native Ireland? To begin with, Yeats conceived of an Irishness somewhat bound up with idealism and somehow resistant to the utilitarianism and empiricism that were such hallmarks of the modern industrialised world. Ireland, for him, seemed to represent a special, mysterious place which had, at that time, yet to undergo the enormous transformations that had already engulfed Western Europe. Somehow, it was a place that had largely skipped the industrial revolution and its philosophical accoutrements and thereby had retained something of its ancient character; a place still unspoilt and as yet un-ravaged by the modern capitalist project. This was, in part, what attracted Yeats so much to the world of fairies and folklore; for it was a link back to an ancient past, pre-dating not only English occupation but even Christianity itself and therein possessed an authenticity and mysteriousness few other nations could match. Therefore, at least part of the attraction to Byzantium was that it presented a unique model for the kind of place Ireland could become. A place where imagination reigned and

26 David Fitzpatrick: Yeats in the Senate, Studia Hibernica (1972), pp.7-26
courtly values were encouraged; where mystery was celebrated, not pooh-poohed; where spiritual, cultural and daily life were re-united into one glorious whole; where freedom of speech and artistic endeavour were protected; and where the elitism and inequality of the bourgeois world was replaced by a kind of super-civilised utopia where the greatest expressions of an ancient culture were appreciated by all. In this sense, there is a definite poignancy when one considers Yeats, as an ageing Senator of the new Free State, writing of sailing to Byzantium; for in a sense he was writing both out of idealism for what his country could become but also out of undeniable regret and perhaps even a tinge of bitterness for what it was instead, clearly fast becoming.

Yeats’ politics have of course come under severe criticism, especially his seeming support for various discredited movements, including (most notoriously) Fascism.\textsuperscript{27} Yet as Fahmy Farag successfully shows, Yeats’ dabbling in these various causes requires careful examination as it was not always what it appeared to be.\textsuperscript{28} As he argues, Yeats’ politics grew somewhat out of his aesthetic sense; and for this reason balance and opposites were often major considerations. Thus where Yeats saw a movement or a cause, he almost immediately considered its opposite. The transient made him consider the permanent; the mortal, the immortal; the contemporary, the ancient; and the familiar, the remote. And so the membership list of the organisations which Yeats joined or associated with in his life is both bewildering and baffling—the IRA, the Fenians, the Parnellites, the Fascists, the Anarchists, the Blue-Shirts, the Pacifists, to name but a few—unless, that is, one considers this aesthetic dimension to his political thought.

In a sense, what Yeats was really after was nothing less than a spiritual regeneration of his native land and he saw Byzantium as a model for how this might come about. Or to put this in terms of the Yeatsian aesthetic Farag describes: Byzantium was quite simply everything modern society wasn’t; indeed it was modern society’s opposite. In this way, Yeats used whatever movement or political cause which came along as an opportunity to somehow bring about his cultural, spiritual and social renaissance—to bring his countrymen one step closer

\textsuperscript{27} Although Yeats was initially attracted to certain ideas found in Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, he later turned against them; and there is much evidence from his letters to documents such as ‘The Genealogical Tree of Revolution’ which Yeats penned later in life and which underlines his clear opposition to Fascism.

to Byzantium. When he inevitably grew discouraged or disillusioned, he typically abandoned the movement and then searched for another. As Frank O’Connor puts it: ‘All his blunderings in religion, philosophy and politics were part of a quest for that ‘religion of the whole world’; for some ancient unity which he believed had once existed and he saw in the development of civilisation the breaking up into smaller and smaller fragments of what had once been complete …’

Even with *A Vision* which Yeats laboured over for many years and which represents a much more systematic expression of his world-view, Yeats still only intermittently and tentatively embraced it following its publication. And perhaps this is partly due to Farag’s argument that no sooner when Yeats would express something, would he be found exploring its opposite. Perhaps it is also bound up with what O’Connor describes as simply an endless search which never quite found a point of destination or of rest. Yet despite this, *A Vision* has an added interest, for it articulates Yeats’ clearly very personal views on important subjects such as history, the subject of immortality and the fate of the soul. It is a fascinating and slightly obscure document; yet there are extraordinary, imaginative perspectives to be appreciated. For example, Yeats imagines history as part of a giant wheel where each cycle takes 26,000 years; and within this, there are other cycles which Yeats describes as akin to lunar or solar months of the principal cycle; and in addition to this, each millennium is also a part of the main cycle. Within all of this complexity, Yeats devises what he calls phases of history and maps them out accordingly on a giant wheel-chart. Yeats also had the concept of two principal forces at work in the universe: what he called the primary and the antithetical. The former was a dark, primal force; the latter represented ideal beauty. And between these two forces lay the soul which was pulled towards the source of each by two giant gyres spinning on their axis. The ideal phase in history—where the soul was pulled by one of the gyres close to the source of the antithetical—was what Yeats described as Phase 15; and this exactly coincided, according to his time wheel, with Byzantium in the year 1000AD.

It can be easy to dismiss such fantastical imaginings as poppycock. Yet regardless of its veracity, it gives crucial insight into an extraordinarily dynamic vision not only of the world, and its history, but also the fate of the human soul and the endless forces pulling upon it in one direction or another. In this sense, Yeats’ championing of Byzantium and all that it represented for him as a point in human history, can hardly be called an exclusively political one; but is surely also bound up with a highly personal and idiosyncratic view on the fate and evolution of the human soul through history. In light of such views, Byzantium forms just a single part of a weltanschauung that articulates a unique perspective on all of human history and its ultimately cyclical fate.

These more personal aspects of Yeats attitudes to Byzantium are also borne out in looking at the first draft of Yeats’ poem *Sailing to Byzantium*—indeed the original title for this first draft was *Toward Byzantium*—and here Yeats emphasizes his personal travel to the ancient city. Stallworthy, according to William Empson, argues that the poem had its genesis in a page of personal reflections written earlier that year—reflections that are very intimate in tone.\(^{31}\) And indeed the tone in this first draft is undoubtedly private and confessional and it is only in the second draft that Yeats attempts to introduce greater distance between his own personal thoughts and feelings on Byzantium and the reader. Thus in this second draft, Yeats invents and introduces the character of Tieg—who in a sense stands in place of Yeats and thereby brings some necessary distance—with the idea that Tieg is some medieval, possibly Irish poet, making this trip from Ireland to Byzantium, and thereby echoing some of Ireland’s history as a place of saints and scholars during the pre-medieval and early medieval period. It also, of course, echoes the links (political as well as personal) Yeats clearly saw between ancient Ireland and ancient Byzantium. Thus, Yeats, in this second draft, duly emphasizes these more ancient qualities of Byzantium and speaks in a more generalised way about the city.\(^ {32}\)

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\(^{31}\) William Empson: *Yeats and Byzantium*, Grand Street, Summer (1982), Vol.1, pp.67-95

But Yeats was somehow unhappy with this version and decided to revert back in the third and final draft to the poet as Yeats himself; yet in this final draft, Yeats finds a balance between the intimate, confessional note of the first draft and the more distant, generalised, antique note of the second. And in some respects, this is what gives the poem its shimmering tension between the aesthetic opposites described earlier; it is personal, yet somehow impersonal; modern, yet ancient; specific, yet general. And these dual qualities can be found within the very metaphors and images Yeats employs. For example, the image of the golden bird fashioned by the Grecian goldsmiths, has elicited a vast amount of interpretation, such is its bristling ambiguity. William Empson, for instance, argues that it may be simply rooted in old Victorian toys which he recalls seeing as a child when visiting his aunt, and is thus bound up with personal nostalgia for Yeats;\textsuperscript{33} Norman Jeffares see it as connected to Liudprand’s description of the artistic and mechanical fairyland and the tree with the singing birds created by the Byzantine artist Leon, which Liudprand saw when he visited the city and as such Yeats’ image is a reference to artistic craft;\textsuperscript{34} whereas Charles A. Raines argues that the bird is both animate and inanimate—the former when it sings to the Emperor and the latter when it is considered as simply a work of art—and is thus a metaphor for the combination of bodily form and spiritual existence;\textsuperscript{35} and Simon O. Lesser regards Yeats’ supposed desire to

\textsuperscript{33} William Empson: \textit{Yeats and Byzantium}, Grand Street, Summer (1982), Vol. 1, pp.67-95
\textsuperscript{34} A.N. Jeffares, \textit{The Byzantine Poems of Yeats}, The Review of English Studies (1946), pp.44-52
become a mechanical singing bird as bitter and sarcastic in tone, as the poet surely understands the absurdity and impossibility of such a form of immortality.\textsuperscript{36}

In addition to this one must also bear in mind the direct personal experiences Yeats had of Byzantine Art; and in this way, his response to the artistic world of Byzantium is surely somewhat more personal in nature. There was, for example the trip he very likely took to the San Apollinaire Nuovo at Ravenna in 1907; and indeed Norman Jeffares even argues that the ‘Sages standing in God’s holy fire’ of the third stanza of Sailing to Byzantium, refers directly to the 26 martyred saints found in the lowest of the three rows of mosaics, which Yeats must have seen at the San Apollinaire Nuovo.\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{mosaics.png}
\caption{Mosaics of the Holy Martyrs at San Apollinaire Nuovo}
\end{figure}

And of course, in 1924, just before the writing of \textit{Sailing to Byzantium}, Yeats visited Sicily and saw the Byzantine mosaics at Monreale and Capella Palatina at Palermo. Indeed Yeats’

\textsuperscript{36} Simon O. Lesser: \textit{Sailing to Byzantium: Another voyage, Another Reading}, College English, (1967), Vol. 28(4), pp.291-296; 301-310  
biographer at the time relates how he saw Yeats in Rome in February 1925: ‘There was a week of sight-seeing and as in Sicily, he followed the enchantment of mosaics and glass which compared with the ‘hammered gold and gold enamelling’ that he had seen at Ravenna 17 years before when visiting Italy with Lady Gregory.’\(^{38}\) And so, in this way, one can see how the poems are also fuelled by the personal experiences of visiting these masterpieces of Byzantine Art and Architecture.

And yet \textit{Sailing to Byzantium} is of course quite a different poem from \textit{Byzantium} and to some extent at least, is a response to criticism Yeats received over \textit{Sailing to Byzantium} from Sturge Moore.\(^{39}\) Here the Byzantium Yeats describes is altogether different for it is written from the point of view of the initiate (the soul, already in eternity) looking at the uninitiated arrive; it hence describes a Byzantium, with its drunken soldiery, in decline.\(^{40}\) But although there has been some debate as to which historical period Yeats may have had in mind when

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\(^{39}\) William Empson: \textit{Yeats and Byzantium}, Grand Street, Summer (1982), Vol. 1, pp.67-95

\(^{40}\) Diana Arben Ben-Merre makes a similar point in her article: \textit{The Poet-Laureate and the Golden Bird: A Note on Yeats’ Byzantium Poems}
setting the poem (especially Bradford and Finneran for instance), the crucial point is really the soul’s withering commentary on the inadequacies and ultimate destiny of mortal flesh. And so, in this way, Byzantium is just a vehicle for Yeats to probe themes which occupied him throughout his life. In this way, Byzantium is less a particular place in time for Yeats, less even an idealised imaginary place, but more simply a useful vehicle through which the poet can imaginatively explore persistent concerns.

And as Richard Ellmann points out, one must be careful in ascribing too much to the possible sources—physical, and historical—for Yeats’ poems; for one must keep firmly in one’s mind the sheer imaginative achievement they represent and although they undoubtedly refer in complex ways to certain objects and happenings—historical and otherwise—they are only touchstones for the point at which Yeats’ imagination takes off. To put this in another way: Yeats uses Byzantium entirely for his own, imaginative and poetic agenda, and shapes it to his own. And to make matters even more complicated, these ends often change, from time to time, circumstance to circumstance, and poem to poem.

Indeed, although as we have seen it is possible to identify the differing strands of Yeats’ attitudes to Byzantium—political, personal and otherwise—they are so interlinked and so interconnected, that is a mistake to regard them as truly distinct. Much like the weavings of a rope, they support and shape each other and to disentangle them altogether undoes their true situation and full meaning. As Yeats himself puts it:

\[ O \text{ chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,} \]
\[ O \text{ body swayed to music, O brightening glance} \]
\[ \text{How can we know the dancer from the dance} \]

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41 Richard Ellmann: *Yeats without Analogue*, The Kenyan Review
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