Yeats’s Two Byzantiums

Penelope Buckley

Yeats—the greatest twentieth-century poet in English—wrote two famous poems about Byzantium and famously discussed Byzantium in his theory of history, A Vision.1 These have all been much discussed by Yeatsians,2 and more recently by a Byzantinist,3 on a general assumption that each poem sees Byzantium as a unified or ideal state, and that the poem itself is either unified or holds internal conflicts in a satisfying tension to express a coherent system of thought. While Yeatsians have emphasized the ideal or symbolic nature of Yeats’s Byzantium, they have largely accepted that his secondary reading and visits to Italy have given it historicity: as G. S. Fraser put it, ‘every detail is right’.4 In discussing the ‘date’ in which each poem is set, they have been equally happy to accept Yeats’s vague positioning of at least one ‘towards the end of the first Christian millennium.’5 They pay close attention to the golden bird in each poem,6 and place its fashioning in the reign of Theophilos,7 yet show no interest in the fact that Theophilos was the last iconoclastic emperor,7 or that his

---

1 Yeats 1937/1938.
2 Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when they were intensively and extensively discussed.
3 Sjösvärd 2014. He discusses a second short poem, Wisdom, but not Byzantium on the grounds that it is too obscure. I am not considering Wisdom because it is so hybrid in its references.
4 Fraser 1970a, 129.
5 One school of thought sets Sailing to Byzantium in the early 6th century, following Yeats’s famous aside in A Vision, Yeats 1937/1938, 279: ‘I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity … I would spend it in Byzantium a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato.’ Others place both poems in the late 10th century because they both contain the golden bird and tree of Theophilos, although Finneran’s choice of c. 900 seems arbitrary (Finneran 1970b, 4), an awkward compromise between Theophilos’s dates (r. 829–842), and Yeats’s vague ‘toward the end of the first Christian millennium’. My own view is that Yeats’s sense of cultural change was more acute than his historical precision – his system in A Vision tweaked his chronology – and that Ricks 2000, 231, was right to see his second indication of period ‘as a piece of number symbolism’.
6 Ellmann 1961, 258, calls it the ‘symbol of the reconciliation of opposites’; Wilson 1958, 238, ‘the purified soul’.
7 I use the term ‘iconoclast’ because it is familiar but, as Brubaker (2010, 323) reminds us, the Byzantines themselves used the term ‘iconomachy’ or image-struggle for the period generally referred to in English as iconoclasm.
golden tree and mechanical singing birds were among the signature features of a cultural shift under iconoclasm away from sacred human images towards the decorative arts, including the mechanical inventions, of the Caliphate. Yeats, for all his vagueness about dates, was more interested in this change than his critics. I will put a case that in both poems Yeats is drawn—at some indeterminate level of awareness—to antithetical Byzantiums, the iconodule and the iconoclast, approaching the second, which he favours, through the portal of the first.

If Yeats’s attraction to his imaginary Byzantiums was ambivalent and antithetical, so were his poetry and his life. The title of his greatest long poem marks the ambivalence: Meditations in Time of Civil War. He was Anglo-Irish, the son of an argumentative painter who thrived in London, and a silent mother who loved the ‘ghost and fairy stories’ of her native Sligo. He was schooled in both Ireland and England. His long passion for the Irish nationalist Maud Gonne made him an activist, yet by temperament he was a dreamer. Yeats was mentor to Synge and helped establish the Abbey Theatre and a national drama. He promoted the ‘Celtic Revival’ and drew on Irish mythology and ghost stories in his poetry and plays, but his great collaborator was Lady Gregory, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat and land-owner. He lived in London and Dublin as well as Galway. He was an autodidact heavily influenced by Plotinus, 

8 Brett 1954, 482–483, gave a full account of the sources for Abbasid influence over this particular automaton, including the visit of Byzantine envoys to the Caliph’s court in Baghdad in 917, where they saw just such a golden tree with mechanical singing birds. Gibbon (1788/1995, 3:52.345; 3.53.392–393) ascribed the tree and birds to a comprehensive palace-construction by Theophilos in direct imitation of the Caliph’s palace. The Byzantine chronographical tradition firmly places the golden tree in which mechanized birds sit singing in the reign of Theophilos: Symeon the Logothete gives one early description, Symeon Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon 130.8 (Wahlgren 2006, 218), and a near-identical account appears in the Bonn Georgius Monachus continuatus Life of Theophilos, 5 (Bekker 1838, 173). Theophanes continuatus 4.21 (Bekker 1838, 793) recounts the melting down of the ‘famous’ golden tree and accompanying lions in the reign of Theophilos’s son, the iconodule Michael II, while The Book of Ceremonies 2.15 (trans. Moffatt and Tall, 569), indicates, in its description of a golden tree and mechanized singing birds as part of an elaborate ceremonial display to foreign dignitaries, that the tree had been reconstructed by the time of Constantine VII.

9 And other references: ‘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 1957, 825.


11 See, among many examples, Wilson’s analysis (1958, 231–243) of Yeats’s ‘Platonic reminiscence’ and eclectic use of symbols in the poem Byzantium. But Yeats himself often referred to these influences in his poetry and prose.