

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE STRUCTURE OF VISION IN KEATS' "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE" AND YEATS' "SAILING TO BYZANTIUM"

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Abstract

This paper examines the structure of vision in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium". The paper starts by giving a brief history of the two poets. The essence of this is not to present an exhaustive biography of the poets but to help in highlighting some experiences in their lives that have a direct bearing on this discourse. The paper also tries to explore the meaning of vision and posits that vision and imagination can be used interchangeably. After this, the paper examines how Keats and Yeats explore the issue of vision in the two poems and surmises that though the poets' flight into imagination offers them temporary relief from their sorrow, their problems remain unabated.

Introduction

This paper looks at the structure of vision in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" and Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium". In delving into the structure of vision in both poems, I am going to give a brief history of the two poets. The essence of this is not to present an exhaustible biography of the poets but to help in highlighting some experiences in their lives that have a direct bearing on this discourse.

John Keats (1795 - 1821) was the son of a livery-stable keeper. He was orphaned at an early age and never knew the comfort and security of a settled home. At the age of eight, he was sent to school at Edmonton. His school days were marked more by fighting than academic prowess, and he left in 1810 to be apprenticed to a surgeon. Later, he entered St. Thomas's Hospital as a medical student. He now made the acquaintance with Shelley and the painter Haydon. Keats soon decided to devote himself to poetry. His first volume came out in 1817.

In 1818, Keats set off with his friend Charles Armitage Brown on a long working tour of Scotland, which proved too much for his strength. He was recalled by the news that his brother, Tom, was desperately ill with consumption. While nursing Tom, he sought respite from the emotional stress by writing "Hyperion". Tom died in the December of 1818, and by the Christmas of that year Keats recovered sufficiently from his deep grief to busy himself with the poems that eventually appeared in his wonderful 1820 volume.

The spring, summer and early autumn of 1819 saw the most perfect productions of his genius. During these months, his life was far from happy though he took deep joy in the exercise of poetry. He had fallen in love, but his happiness was short-lived for he recognized that he, too, was consumptive and consequently, marriage was impossible. Soon after the publication of the 1820 volume, he sailed for Italy, accompanied by his friend, Joseph Severn, who nursed him devotedly. After much suffering, he died in Rome and was buried in the protestant cemetery there.

William Butler Yeats was born in Sandymount, Dublin, on 13 June 1865. In London, William was given a formal education of sorts at the Godolphin School in Hammersmith. Although he seems not to have made any spectacular academic progress while at this school he did develop an acute sense of his 'Irishness'. His informal education came much from his father who read to him from Scott, Homer, Chaucer, Balzac and other favourites, and took him to the theatre from time to time. Financial difficulties drove the Yeats' family back to Dublin in 1880 and this was to have a considerable influence on Yeats' development. He was already being encouraged to think of himself as a writer by his father, and the next nine years gave him a fine opportunity to soak his imagination with the Irish folklore, which was to provide the impetus for much of his early poetry. In these years he also learned something of the theories behind the resurgence of Irish Nationalism under Charles Stewart Parnell. Folklore and nationalism gave his poetic ambitions a focal point. In 1885, Yeats moved on from Dublin High School, where he had been sent in 1880, to the Dublin School of Art. Here he met writers and artists with similar views to his own.

His friendship with the almost legendary Nationalist figure John O'Leary helped him a lot. He later moved back to London. Yeats' Irishness was now part of his being. In London, in 1887, his

mother suffered a stroke, which left her an invalid. Yeats felt a dedicated poet when he published his first book of poems *The Wandering Oisín* and other poems in 1889.

He was one of the founding fathers of the Irish Literary Society in London and Dublin. In 1895, he edited a collection of poems titled *A Book of Irish Verses*. In 1897, *The Secret Roses* was published. He was also the founding father of Irish National Theatre Society in 1902. In 1904, the Abbey theatre was opened and he was made its Director in 1906. In 1907, he toured some Italian cities as well as America.

In 1922, his father died and in that year, he became a member of the Irish Senate. In 1923, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He published *A Vision* in 1925 and in 1928 when his term as Senator ended, he refused to stand for re-election due to his poor health. *The Tower* was also published in this year. In 1933, he was given a D. Litt. degree from Oxford University. Between this period and 1938 when he moved to the south of France, he still wrote many works. He took ill in January 1939 and died on the 26th of January, 1939.

What is Vision?

Vision, according to the Advanced Learners Dictionary, can be defined as "an idea or picture in your imagination". According to Ogbeide (2006):

All art is creative. Creativity itself is a function of the imagination, which is the power to create abstract objects in the mind, "the inward eye". A basic significance of imagination is its ability to form mental images of what is actually not present (124).

The issue of imagination has drawn the attention of literary theorists, philosophers and psychologist for years. Coleridge, in the famous *Biographia Literaria* (1817), tries to explore the issue of imagination. "The distinction between fancy and imagination was a key element in Coleridge's theory of poetry, as well as in his general theory of the mental process (Abrams 1981:60).

Abrams goes further that before Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, "fancy" and "imagination" had for most parts been used synonymously to denote a faculty of the mind which is different from "reason" and "judgment" and which receives "images" from the senses and records them into new combinations. To Coleridge, fancy is a function of the lower-order faculty. "Fancy has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definitives. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space" (Abrams 1981:60). As for imagination, Coleridge says it

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate, or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead (1817:303).

The import of this quote from Coleridge is that imagination can create, instead of merely reassembling, through "dissolving fixities and definitives" which are the mental images received from the senses and unifying them into a new whole. While fancy is merely mechanical, imagination is vital, it is an organic faculty which does not operate like a machine, but like a living and growing plant. Coleridge adds further that the faculty of imagination assimilates and synthesizes different elements into an organic whole whose different parts cannot survive if they are removed from the whole.

To Blackstone, imagination is that "faculty which represents objects not as they are in themselves but as they are moulded by our thoughts and feelings into an infinite variety of shapes and combination of power (1959:140).

The use of imagination in achieving a structure of vision by Keats and Yeats will be examined in the next section of this paper.

The Structure of Vision in Ode to a Nightingale and Sailing to Byzantium

According to Milnes (1971), Keats got the inspiration to write the poem "Ode to a Nightingale" due to the "continued song of the bird (Nightingale) in the spring of 1819 ... which had built her nest close to the house, and which often threw Keats into a tranquil pleasure".

The poet starts by talking about his pains. He says his 'heart aches' and a kind of sleepy weakness overpowers him as if he had drunk hemlock (a kind of liquid, the type said to have been given to Socrates when he was forced to commit suicide) or he had taken some opiate (a kind of drug):

My heartaches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains.

Immediately, he starts having this drowsy feeling, he forgets everything of the natural world for it was as if he had crossed the mythological river of forgetfulness - lethe - and had been transferred to a world of fantasy. This feeling overcame him because he is happy at the happiness of the nightingale bird whose song he is hearing. The bird is described as 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' which is perched on some 'beechen green trees' and singing of the summer season 'in full-throated ease', because it is happy.

In the second stanza, 'the poet's drink is not hemlock but a wine of unusual power ... (Booth 1966:60). Unlike the previous stanza where the hemlock took him into forgetfulness, the new wine now re-awakens him from his numbness and forgetfulness. It now transports him into the world of the nightingale.

In the third stanza the poet emphasizes that he wishes to fade far away, die ('dissolve') and quietly forget all the travails of the world that the nightingale has never experienced as a bird. The poet touches on some aspects of plaintiveness and self pity by highlighting some of the experiences of man, which the bird has never known. Some of these are the tiredness ('weariness'), the fever and the anxiety involved in everyday living. In this world, the poet continues, 'men sit and hear each other groan while paralysis affects most elderly men. Due to the tension of every day life, the youths get ill and die (This might be an allusion to the death of his brother, Tom):

The weariness, the fever and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

To think, he continues, is to be full of sorrow and 'despairs'. Here in this world, human beings can not keep their beauty till the end of their days nor can loved ones continue to appreciate such beauty till eternity. He writes: "Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/ Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow."

In the fourth stanza, the poet now decides to achieve his higher vision not through wine as was in the second stanza, but now through poetry. Though his brain is still dull and he is still drowsy from the wine he had taken, he could feel how tender the night is as he is already in the world of the nightingale. In the nightingale's world in the forest, 'the queen moon is on her throne', supported by her stars which makes the vision fanciful and illusory but here in the real world, there is no light or beauty except what the heavenly bodies could supply as light:

Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light
Save what from heaven is with the breeze blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy way.

In the fifth stanza, the poet specifies the many beautiful things that remain unseen after the special vision allowed by flood of imaginative light in the forest dim. (Booth 1966:64). He cannot discern which flowers grow there but in the darkness he could guess what scent the season has endowed every plant with. In his fertile imagination, he could guess what grass, thickets and wild fruit trees are available. The 'white hawthorn' (a prickly bush or small tree with white or pink flowers and small dark berries) and eglantine, fading violets and the musk rose already surrounded by a 'murmurous haunt of flies' due to the wine that can be derived from it; can all be felt by the poet in the world of fantasy he has found himself. This Keats' ability to commune with the invisible world

shows that "Keats has a firm common sense of imagination, seeming to be at home in it as if it were literally of this world and not of another" (Enright 1903: 327).

In the sixth stanza, the poet is still in his embalmed darkness but he could still hear the song of the nightingale. The poet reveals that many - a - time he has 'been half in love with 'easeful death' which has been called many mild names by some other poets who had written on death. He feels like dying at that point in time for there is no better time to die than at that period when he is happy in the higher plane; in the world of vision he had taken a flight to. He feels like ceasing 'upon the midnight with no pain' while the nightingale is still singing its melodious song:

To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While though art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

Keats wonders rhetorically if he will still be able to hear the song of the nightingale when he is dead or whether he would be able to hear the requiem the bird sings when he is in his grave: "Still wouldst thou sing and I have ears in vain-/ To thy high requiem become a sod."

In the seventh stanza, the poet now talks about the immortality of the nightingale. The poet, here, in my view, is not referring to the particular nightingale singing but to the specie nightingale. He says the bird is not meant for death as no generation of men has succeeded in threading it down. The song he is hearing that night, he continues, is the same type of sweet songs that was heard in 'ancient days by both the high and the low'; perhaps it is the same song that Ruth, who was sad because of her banishment to an alien land heard and was comforted. This same melodious song of the nightingale had done many other wonderful things such as creating a path upon seas in many fairy tales:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery land forlorn.

In the eighth and last stanza of the poem, the poet is brought back from the world of vision to his real self: 'Forlorn', this word, like a bell, brings him back from his imaginative world to his real self. The numbness and world of fancy leaves him, for the world of fantasy can not cheat so well as it is famed to do because it is a 'deceiving elf:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

He continues by bidding farewell to the bird as the song of the bird continues to fade as it passes the meadows ('field'), over the non-flowing stream, up the hillside and now could be heard faintly in the far-off valley:

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley - glades:

In the last two lines of the stanza, the poet wonders if what he has just experienced is a vision or a waking dream, for the music of the nightingale and the vision and fancy associated with it is gone. He now wonders whether he should wake or sleep as he realizes that the flight into a world of higher vision is temporal in nature.

Keats' suffusion with the imaginative world can be seen in his letter to a friend, Benjamin Bailey, in 1817. He asks him:

.... Have you never by being surprised with an old melody — in a
delicious place - by a delicious voice, felt over again your very
speculations and

surmises at the time it first operated in your soul - do you not remember forming to yourself the singers face more beautiful that it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so - even then you are were mounted on the wings of imagination so high that the prototype must be here after- that delicious face you will see - what a time!" (347).

Writing on Keats' ode, Ogbeide (2006:125-126), asserts that his "ode is a vision of what he would like human life to be - a summary of the expression of desire, longings and aspirations stimulated by his pains and experiences which his letters reflect."

As for Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium', it is the symbolic voyage of an ageing man in search of a congenial spiritual climate. In understanding this work of Yeats, one needs to go back a bit to his life and times. The poem was written in September, 1926 when Yeats was sixty-one. He had become ill and had left Ireland because he had "become disgusted with the rancour of its political life, and depressed through consciousness of his declining physical powers". (Partridge 1976: 114).

The poet starts the poem by stating: "*That* is no country for old men." The 'that' in the poem is a reference to Ireland, which he no longer finds bearable to live in. In the words of Partridge (1976: 116), "the opposition of body and soul was however, uppermost in his mind, and Yeats said that he wrote the poem to recover his spirits. Neither for the elderly lover nor the creative artist did Ireland seem a wholesome place to live in". This is because what "appealed to Yeats was his political and literary ideals of a 'Celtic Ireland' which would be free from all English influences." (Cowell 1969: 15).

There in the country, Yeats continues, 'the young are in one another's arm and the birds sing without anyone caring for old people. The birds are described as a 'dying generations' whose songs all things of nature such as 'the salmon-falls, the mackerel - crowded sea fish, flesh, fowl enjoy all through summer:

Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon - falls, the mackerel - crowded seas,
Fish, flesh or fowl, commend all summer long

The stanza ends with the poet stating a truism that human beings always neglect arts which he described as 'Monuments of unageing intellect' whenever they hear the 'sensual music' of the bird.

The second stanza continues with the poet's feelings that an old man is nothing but a 'paltry' thing whose existence is no more than that of a scarecrow - 'A tattered coat upon a sick'. Thus he must not sing of the flesh but rather of the soul. His 'singing school' must be among those monuments that only perfect civilization of the past have produced hence he decides to spiritually escape to Byzantium:

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.

One question worth asking is, why is Byzantium so attractive to Yeats? Perhaps a passage from his book *The Vision* (1925), as cited by Unterreter (1959: 172), will help in defining the appeal that Byzantium holds for him:

I think if I could be given a month of Antiquity and leave to spend it where I chose, I would spend it in Byzantium... I think that in early Byzantium, may be never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers ... spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of a whole people.

Though accounts of Yeats' life revealed that he never visited Constantinople where the Byzantium Arts can be found, he nevertheless researched into Byzantine Arts through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, W. G. Holmes's *The Age of Justinian and Theodora* and G. Finlay's *History of the Byzantine Empire*. He cherished so much the 6th century AD, which was the period of perfect integration of Byzantium's culture, through art, religion and government. "It is this world Yeats would sail, a world in which artist, 'almost impersonal' manages to reflect as to produce an art that will have the impact, of a single image". (Unterecker 1959: 172). In CowellPs (1969: 77), view, "This interests and reading were part of his search for what he now called 'unity of being', a state in which art and life interpenetrated each other and which he thought he saw in Byzantine culture". Keats believed 'that only beautiful things should be painted, and that only ancient things and the stuff of dreams are beautiful (Cowell 1969: 4).

In the third stanza of the poem, the poet starts by invoking the saints and sages of history; the martyrs in golden form in the mosaic frieze of Ravenna. He gets this inspiration from Mosaic art due to his visit to Palermo and Ravenna in 1907. He invokes these gods to come down ('perne in a gyre') and be the source of his song. He wants this ethereal song of the mosaic arts as distinct from the sensual song of mortal birds:

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.

As from the fourth line of the stanza, he expresses his desire for the 'singing master' to consume away his heart which is full of desires and embedded in a mortal, so that returning to the fire, they will gather him into a piece of artwork which is an 'artifice of eternity'.

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.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet expresses that at last 'out of nature' and no longer in the human form, he wishes never to take his 'form' from any natural thing again; he renounces all physical incarnation. The only form in which he wants to be reincarnated is the form which a Grecian goldsmith makes. Unlike the Grecian Urn, which Keats cherishes in his 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', Yeats wants to be turned to a bird made of 'hammered gold and gold enamelling'. Thus he can become an imperishable thing - the golden bird - the work of art which cannot decay unlike the dying generation of real birds. On his own 'golden boughs', he will be able to sing and bring relaxation to 'drowsy emperors' and the 'lords and ladies of Byzantium'. According to Partridge, "This might be an allusion to Andersen's *The Emperor's Nightingale*" (1976: 177). He hopes to sing of the 'past, the present and the future'.

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.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Keats and Yeats explored the structure of vision. One can see that in both *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Sailing to Byzantium*, both poets want to escape to a higher plane through imagination. As for Keats, he escapes by means of the song of the nightingale while Yeats wants to be like the ageless Byzantium arts. But one question also worth asking is whether the visions offered them permanent escape from their problems. The answer is no. It only offered a temporary flight from reality. That was why Keats asked at the end, 'Was it a vision or a waking dream?'. According to Cowell (1969), "The question which Keats asked in his *Ode to a Nightingale* about imagination... was one that continued to exercise Yeats' mental and emotional power..." (76).

Thus, it is not surprising that Yeats' escape to a higher plane too did not solve the problem of his country, Ireland.

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