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YEATS'S PREOCCUPATION WITH SPIRITUALISM AND HIS TWO BYZANTIUM POEMS

At the end of his essay «Yeats, Spiritualism, and Psychical Research» (1975) Professor Arnold Goldman summed up the results of his survey of the so-called «Spiritualist Interlude» in Yeats's life, 1911-16, with the characteristic statement:

Far from being a closed episode which only the most devoted student of Yeats's esoteric interests should pursue... Yeats's encounter with spiritualism and psychical research can bear sustained enquiry. It connects a number of his major interests, and acts as a transforming agent or catalyst, unifying our picture of the man and the poet¹.

Following Goldman's lead, and after partial collaboration with him, the Greek Anglicist Dr. Spyridon Iliopoulos completed in 1985 a detailed study titled «*Out of a Medium's Mouth*»: *Yeats's Art in Relation to Mediumship, Spiritualism, and Psychical Research* (360 pages) which earned him a Ph. D. in English from the University of Warwick, under the supervision of Professor J. R. Mulryne².

Certainly, it is not possible to summarize here the contents of Dr. Iliopoulos's thesis. Suffice it to mention that, in the context implied by his title, Dr. Iliopoulos examines poetry of «mediumistic» nature in Yeats's drama *The Words Upon the Window Pane* and in poems from *Responsibilities* (1914), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), and

1. In *Yeats and the Occult*, edited by George Mills Harper, Yeats Studies Series, London, Macmillan, 1976, p. 128.

2. Spyridon Iliopoulos is Assistant Professor of English in the University of Athens and author of a Greek book on Yeats.

Last Poems (1936-39), paying particular attention to «Ego Dominus Tuus» which, examined in the light cast by Yeats's *Leo Africanus Manuscript*, suggests the process of self-transformation (individuation) in the Jungian sense. Other poems discussed by Dr. Iliopoulos include «To a Shade,» «The Second Coming,» «The Cold Heaven,» «The Magi,» «In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,» «All Souls' Night,» «The Spirit Medium,» «The Apparitions,» and a few others. In these pieces, as the scholar concludes, Yeats

Was able to translate the «truth» that came «out of the medium's mouth» into poetic knowledge, for he acknowledged the metaphorical implications of his mediumistic encounters, and he often imitated *trance-speaking* in his «apocalyptic» and «prophetic» vision (232).

The thesis is completed by four Appendices with transcriptions of the texts found in Yeats's unpublished papers of spiritualist interest (237-352) as recorded on a microfilm kept in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin³.

Impressed by the findings of Dr. Iliopoulos's method of approach, I decided to re-examine in a comparable manner Yeats's two *Byzantium* poems (which he did not discuss at all) with emphasis on the concepts of *individuation* and *Spiritus Mundi*, and on their imagistic dramatization and characteristic vocabulary as these are foreshadowed in their raw form in Yeats's spiritualist papers. My motivation came from my early observation of an imagistic metaphor, present in «The Apparitions» and in «Sailing to Byzantium,» which had intrigued me since my student years. When I recently located the same image in Dr. Iliopoulos's discussion of a late Manuscript by Yeats, I became convinced that the impact of his «Spiritualist Interlude» could be felt in poems composed long after the end of that period (1916), and in particular in his *Byzantium* compositions whose main thematic thrust has to do with Yeats's

3. Appendix A contains records of thirteen séances from 9 May 1912 through 27 December 1916, Iliopoulos's pages 237-288. Appendix B is the *Leo Africanus MS* (289-321). Appendix C contains *The Poet and the Actress* 322-329, and *Clairvoyant Search for Will* 330-339. And Appendix D is the *Note-book of Stainton Moses* 340-352. All page references within parentheses in my essay refer to Iliopoulos's Ph. D. thesis. All italics in quotations are mine, unless otherwise indicated. Dashes indicate missing, or illegible, or crossed-out words in Yeats's records.

function as an artist. This metaphorical image appears in the italicized lines of the refrain in «The Apparitions»:

*Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.*

Its apparent connotation of void, emptiness, absence, plus the sense of fright of «the increasing Night,» obviously suggest Yeats's concern with the «mystery,» the unknown, that follows the end of natural life.

In the much earlier poem «A Coat», from *Responsibilities*, the coat metaphor had been used more directly and, admittedly, with less artistic sophistication:

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;

None of this directness, or simplicity, is found in the repetition of the coat metaphor in stanza II of «Sailing to Byzantium» where its artistic sophistication is even more impressive than in the already mentioned one in «The Apparitions»:

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

That in all three poems Yeats used the coat metaphor while alluding to him *métier* as a poet nobody would question. Now, in the MS of a book the Poet was writing shortly before his death⁴, we find a paragraph which makes us realise Yeats's final disenchantment with the spiritualist doctrine of survival, that is, what he had poetically worded in «The Apparitions.»

The first apparition was the passage of *a coat upon a coat-hanger* slowly across room —it was extraordinarily terrifying (221).

4. As quoted by Alfred Norman Jeffares in *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*, London, Macmillan, 1968, 502.

Of course, this is «the disembodied horror» of the scarecrow image, as Richard Ellmann had aptly called it⁵. Yeats wrote this confessional statement some eleven months before his death in 1939. Now, if we turn to his unpublished papers of spiritualist interest, we find his record of a séance he had had with Peters (on 30 October 1912) in which the medium (Peters), while in trance, gave a precise description of the Poet's appearance, character, and deportment. Peters went on saying about Yeats that

...he lived out of his own country, he had great influence, direct and indirect, he wrote what caused much dust, had had disturbed but not constructed an impersonal, not a personal, influence, his influence will not be lasting, had tried to get back before, for his work was incomplete, *an old-fashioned coat*, his influence was still on today,... (266, my italics).

This telling metaphor about Yeats's not-yet-completed work (in 1912) as «an old-fashioned coat» antedates the coat metaphor in «A Coat» and, of course, the use of the same image-metaphor in «Sailing to Byzantium» (1927) and in «The Apparitions» (c. 1936) plus its reappearance in the death-dream Yeats had after his illness in Majorca (as recorded in the late book MS). Obviously, there is a connexion among these five (at least) uses of the same image since 1912.

If we dismiss the repetition of this image as a merely artistic obsession of Yeats, we do, I believe, a great injustice to an imaginative and original poet of Yeats's calibre. On the contrary, if we accept it as evidence of his lasting preoccupation with spiritualist phenomena, and of their impact on his poetic utterance—as Arnold Goldman has suggested—then we do justice to both: Yeats the Spiritualist, and Yeats the Artist.

A careful examination of the records of the séances Yeats had attended, and of his other papers of spiritualist interest—even without the aid of a computer, or of a concordance sorting out their contents *in toto*—reveals that certain images, specific ideas, traditional symbols, occurrences, plus mediumistic diction and séance atmosphere found in them, are repeated in subtler, distilled, refined forms in his Byzantium compositions, *in all nine of their combined octets*. This discovery urges us to attempt a re-examination of the nature of Yeats's *voice* in them, and of the fabric of his *vision* in both.

5. *The Identity of Yeats*, London, Faber and Faber, 1964, 204.

We know that Yeats's overall poetic vision differed substantially from the panoramic vistas in the visions of his two cherished poets, Blake and Shelley. Even John Keats's vision, as described by Yeats in his spiritualist Manuscript «The Poet and the Actress,» though quite positive, indicates Yeats's emphasis on Keats's typically Romantic vision:

Keats, for instance, who gave us the vision *only*.
... Keats,... creates the vision of luxury and of
Greece and alters the history and direction of our
poetry (326).

Keats's vision, however, was entirely founded on classical literature (read in translation) and admiration of Greek art (seen in museums). Keats had had no supernatural, or *paranatural*, revelation of what Greece really was at her period of cultural glory. Now, Yeats's Byzantium poems are not so much lyrical effusions praising in verse Constantinople and her Empire at her time of highest cultural and spiritual glory—specific references to relevant details are missing from both—as they are visual dramatizations of the *process* of attaining artistic perfection, and of the special *status* (secular and spiritual) of the Poet who has attained excellence. Yeats's vision does not recreate historical landscapes, great monuments and palaces, folkloric or religious rites, cultural festivals or typical activities of Byzantium's inhabitants. Yeats does not muse on pictorial details like Keats's. Unlike him in his «Ode on a Grecian Urn,» for instance, Yeats refers only to «nightwalkers» singing and «drunken soldiery» sleeping—two images that are hardly characteristic of Constantinople's imperial majesty and historical manifestation. The sight that the Poet sees and describes in rather vague terms is one seen by «the mind's eye,» as Yeats had written in the book *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. It is not a photographic representation of actual reality in Justinian's time or in the Poet's.

Key imagistic features in the beginning and very end of «Byzantium» —«great cathedral gong,... dome,» plus «that gong-tormented sea»— are poetic endproducts of mediumistic utterances found (in seminal form) in Yeats's Leo Africanus Manuscript, where we read about his «other side» that «the spirit world (is) a reflection of ours» (268), that over there «all was one, all was harmony... a Greek cross— a city where there were many churches all one big church...» (269). The «one big church» intimates the Cathedral of God's Wisdom (Santa Sophia), the «great cathedral» in the poem «Byzantium.»

In the same MS Leo speaks about himself as a spirit and specifies, «I am of those who, feeling their imperfections, risk losing our identity by plunging into the *human sea*» (318). Now Leo's «human sea» and Yeats's «gong-tormented sea» in «Byzantium» are metonymies of mankind. And in the last stanza we have a synecdoche of the sea in the sentence «The smithies break the *flood*.» The initially strange and obscure meaning of this statement becomes quite clear if we read *break* to mean *tame* (as in the expression *to break a horse*). This sentence then means: the artists tame the human multitudes to turn them into entities that can be transferred to «the other side»—to eternity; and this is one of the main preoccupations of the Artist in the Age of Modernism to which Yeats certainly belongs.

Speaking through the medium, Leo's spirit also mentioned the following very significant details involving Yeats: Leo «had been with the Poet since childhood;» various spirits «wanted to use Yeats's hand and brain» —i.e., what characterized him as a writer— certain «controls (spirits) select names from the recorded or unrecorded memories of the world» (241, séance of 9 May 1912). In the séance of 5 June 1912 Leo's spirit stated: «I am lingering to teach you to write plays in a scientific way.» In the séance of 22 July 1915 Leo asked Yeats to write him a letter with «his doubts» which Leo would answer through his «influence» on the Poet who would then record Leo's responses —something that was actually done in the MS— In a séance of 27 December 1916 Leo stated that the Poet «would write through me,» something implying «automatic writing,» which is another mediumistic phenomenon as well as a very direct admission of a creative collaboration of Leo and Yeats.

Of greater significance, however, are Leo's references to the nature and constitution of *Spiritus Mundi*, of Leo's part in it, and, by implication, of Yeats's relation to it. For instance, the spirits that wanted to help the Poet with his writing were part of *Spiritus Mundi*. Speaking of his life as a «shade» and of his encounters with other spirits and living persons, Leo stated: «These animal spirits are but— of what he [Henry More] called the “spiritus mundi”» (311). And he elaborated further down: «The Spiritus Mundi is— the place of —and of all things that have been or yet shall be, and all things ... serpents and animal forms...» (312). Also, «our images return to you and not only in dreams» (313); «I could be overpowered by this memory of mind— i.e., Spiritus Mundi —that gathers images about it...» (314)— verbal details that are ostensibly present in both Byzantium poems. Finally, «we are the

unconscious, as you say, or as I prefer to say, your animal spirits formed from the will, and moulded by the images of Spiritus Mundi» (319). Leo also repeated his earlier claim (289), «I am your opposite, your antithesis... your Interlocutor,» and explained what he meant by offering Jesus Christ as example since Christ was «the Interlocutor of the Pagan World... and thereby *summoned*» (319). Let us recall that the verb *to summon* is used in an analogous context in stanza II of «Byzantium,» whereas in stanza III of «Sailing to Byzantium» the Poet's summoning of the «sages» is implied in his imperative request to them. Remember also that these revelatory statements by Leo cover séances of the years 1912 through 1916, and the degree of their importance increases chronologically —another suggestion of a *process*, a development, of some kind.

Employing Jungian notions and terminology, Dr. Iliopoulos quite soundly makes much of this Leo-Yeats affinity or even identification. He elaborately explains that Leo helps the Poet transcend his *ego-personality* (143), that he becomes his Mask, like the Daemon in *The Player Queen* (1907) and the thought in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. In the latter «the images coming “before the mind's eye” emerge from the Great Memory,» that is, from Jung's *collective unconscious*, or Leo's Spiritus Mundi. Moreover, discussing the theme in «Ego Dominus Tuus» Dr. Iliopoulos understands it as «the primal myth of the Quest for the totality of being “by the help of an image” —the transforming symbol of the Friend» (155), which in Yeats's case is Leo, his Daemon.

Speaking of the same poem, Arnold Goldamn explains that the Interlocutor «Ille ... summons his double, opposite, anti-self ... walking in the moon,» that is, in the unconscious (156). Dr. Iliopoulos then explains the process of the Poet's rebirth as «collective man» (160), and his desire to achieve *permanence* as expressed symbolically by the «stony faces» (i.e., Dante) and other stone figures featured in various poems about persons and even in «Lapis Lazuli.» This strange kind of rebirth is certainly echoed in the Poet's desire to reappear as an *objet d'art* in «Sailing to Byzantium.» The Greek scholar also explains that the process of summoning «the mysterious one» —in several poems by Yeats, as in Jung's theory— prepares the way for the Poet's liberation from the *enantiodromia* (ἐναντιοδρόμια) that is, from his running for ever between two opposites, like Ille-Hic, or Leo-Yeats (164).

Discussing the significance of a «loud report» that was heard during a quarrel between Freud and Jung, Dr. Iliopoulos explains it in Jungian terms as «a catalytic exteriorisation phaenomenon caused by

a father-son conflict» (146) analogous to the Leo-Yeats antithesis and, I would add, not very different from the loud sound of the gong that opens and closes the poem «Byzantium». In that composition «the cocks in Hades» must surely imply Hermes *Psychopompos* (Ψυχοπομπός), guide of souls, whose traditional symbol is the cock; and that explains, perhaps in two removes, the function of Leo's spirit as a guide to Yeats during the latter's «translation» to the «other side». All of the above directly or indirectly refer to Yeats's maturation process and his final status as an individuated human and artistic entity.

Discussing the function and meaning of *images* in Yeats's later verse, the Greek Anglicist refers to Jolande Jacobi's *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C.G. Jung* (1959), and concludes: «Like myth, the process of self-transformation is best expressed in symbols and *images* which cannot be translated into a discursive language» (166). I believe that this is also true of Yeats's language in his Byzantium poems. Let me explain.

The «otherworldly» utterances in «Byzantium» suggest that *image(s)* does not mean «photographic representations of reality,» or even the Platonic *eidolon*, εἶδωλον, but are used as a means of expressing «what cannot be translated into discursive language.» The words *image(s)*, *shade*, and *spirit(s)* appear in all five stanzas of the poem describing Yeats's composite vision of that simultaneously real and metaphorical location, along with clusters of imagery pertaining to the «other side»: Hades, mummy cloth, cocks, dolphins, spirits etc.; while all stanzas contain successive descriptions and statements which, apart from the esotericism of their allusions and symbols, strain the comprehension of the reader because they do not sound at all like the clear speech of an articulate person in a normal state of mind. To me the voice we hear in this poem suggests the voice of a person in *trance*, the voice of a medium communicating to us knowledge and lore from this and from the «other side,» now, in the past, and at all times. To put it differently, the voice speaks of things which, according to Leo Africanus' communications to Yeats, constitute the concept of Spiritus Mundi, and imply the self-transformation of the Poet to deserve union with it.

Actually, Dr. Iliopoulos reminds us that Yeats adopted the persona of a medium in several poems in *Responsibilities* (16), considered himself a dramatist and a «spiritualist» in his MS «The Poet and the Actress» (39), and that in «The Second Coming» his method

of trance-mediumship provides the poet with a mechanism that

allows him to present a prophecy whose fulfilment is neither welcomed nor rejected by the poem... (185).

By analogy, we may say that in «Byzantium» Yeats adopted a trance-mediumship mechanism and created a dreamy atmosphere which enabled him to describe an oneiric vision without the risk of sounding naive, or exclusively dependent on lore whose validity would be questioned by serious or sceptical intellectuals of his day and age. Also, since he wanted to emphasize his personal involvement in the context of his Byzantium pieces —this is quite apparent in «Sailing to Byzantium,» while in «Byzantium» the same is underscored in the beginning of the second octet, «Before me floats an image»— his use of trance-mediumship utterances and «other side» imagery secured both goals: Yeats's presence in the two poems, and retention of his credibility as an artist in the Age of Modernism.

To further support my claim that Yeats's *vision* in both Byzantium pieces largely originated from his spiritualistic experiences of 1914-16, I shall cite a passage describing the behaviour of a female medium as recorded by Yeats in his Leo Africanus MS:

Suddenly her voice changed and another personality spoke through her of my most personal affairs and changed— — — more than ever *the vision and dream and I would bring a closer relation between this world and the next than ever before* (293)

This striking statement, I believe, explains the *nature* of Yeats's *vision* in the Byzantium poems. Another characteristic feature in «Sailing to Byzantium» is the notion and corresponding image of the spiral movement of the widening gyre. I already mentioned Yeats's command to the «sages» (stanza III) to «perne in a gyre» and «consume my heart away,» that is, to absorb him, after possessing him, into their perennially winding movement in time and space: to give him immortality as an artist. In Jungian psychology, Dr. Iliopoulos reminds us, such a symbolic *rebirth* must be preceded by a *psychic rape*; and the latter's symbolic representation is graphically shown by means of a circular, or rather spiral, movement which suggests the archetypal symbol of *psychic wholeness*, i.e., the *mandala* that appears in several later poems by Yeats, for instance in the opening lines of «The Second Coming»

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

and in the «gyre» of «Sailing to Byzantium», whereas in «Byzantium» the same image is subtly transformed into the symbol-ridden image which, nonetheless, communicates Yeats's desire to be «translated» from this world to the «other side»:

For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy cloth
May unwind the winding path;

Psychic wholeness, however, in Yeats's Leo Africanus MS is suggested by Leo's repeated assertions that he has been with the Poet since his birth, that he is his «opposite,» his complementary contrary mind, and that thus «each would become more complete» (289). Also, in «The Poet and the Actress» Manuscript, the Poet, that is, Yeats now posing as his «opposite,» Leo, explains the necessity of violent conflicts in the artist's soul:

Those who try to create beautiful things without this *battle in the soul* are mere imitators, because we can only become conscious of a thing by comparing it with its *opposite*.... We need in both a *violent antithesis*,... (327).

Yeats's assertion here may well justify and explain the use of the words *fury*, *complexity*, and *gong-tormented* in three of the five octets of «Byzantium.» Moreover, the word *opposite* in the Leo MS is a Jungian term related to the process of self-transformation or individuation that we have already discussed as Jungian psychologists and theorists of literature understand and apply it. We may say, then, that Yeats's individuation process is *imagistically* presented in his Byzantium and several other poems by means of the spiral-movement imagery, and that it is seminally intimated in his papers of spiritualistic experiences and related interests. In «Sailing to Byzantium» we have some mentions of elements that constitute his concept of Spiritus Mundi, whereas in «Byzantium» we have a plethora of such elements, especially of those suggesting the figurative bridging of the gap between the world we perceive as real, and the timeless and spaceless cosmos of Spiritus Mundi (i.e., spirits, images, symbols of the «next» world).

Spiritualist notions also explain the rather intriguing desire of the Poet—as expressed in the final stanza of «Sailing to Byzantium»—to be reborn «once out of nature,» not in «the bodily form» of a living creature of our world, but as a golden work of art that would both

delight and keep wakeful an Emperor and his nobles, or would function as an oracle «of what is past, or passing, or to come» —in other words, of what defines and constitutes Spiritus Mundi, in addition to what we said about the Jungian interpretation of such symbols of lasting existence or *permanence*. Certainly, we are also amply aware of Yeats's fear of death and of the "unknown" that lurks beyond it (231).

Now, in the Leo Africanus MS we read that shades (spitits that are part of Spiritus Mundi) speak to the living through mediums (291) and can take various forms (309). Citing scholarly studies by Hirschberg (216) and Webster (233)⁶, and referring to Yeats's statement «that all joyous or creative life is a *re-birth as something not oneself*,...»⁷ Dr. Iliopoulos explains that «the medium is a vehicle of what is past, or passing, or to come» —because the medium is in touch with Spiritus Mundi (216)— as he discusses Yeats's later poem «The Spirit Medium,» which contains some expressions and images (e.g., perning in a band, those begotten or unbegotten, an old-ghost's thoughts are lightning) that bring to mind echoes from his earlier poems involving Byzantium.

Although some of the details discussed here are found in the Poet's volumes *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918) and *A Vision* (1925, 1938), I believe I have offered a good deal of *new* and *specific* information that can be found only in the papers Yeats kept, or collected, during his hitherto inadequately-examined «Spiritualist Interlude.» These additional and little-known data allow us to understand how he adopted a poetic *knowledge* and *voice* which enabled him to articulate his esoteric poetic *vision*. If this body of evidence is convincing, we may affirm that the voice we hear in «Sailing to Byzantium» and «Byzantium» is the voice of a person in trance-mediumship utterance, and that the fabric of Yeats's vision is not woven with threads of occult readings and half-digested cultural information, but is rather a poetic dramatization of *telling* and real-life experiences during 1911-16 which acted seminally and, in this case, catalytically on the development and increased sophistication of his mature artistic idiom.

6. Stuart Hirschberg, «An Encounter with the Supernatural in Yeats's "The Spirit Medium"», *Yeats and the Occult*, 312. And Brenda S. Webster, *Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study*, London, Macmillan, 1974, 236.

7. As quoted by Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. London, Faber and Faber, 1961, p. 177.

Thus, «Sailing to Byzantium» remains a poem about Yeats's maturation process as a poet, with the clarification, however, that this process implies *psychic wholeness* and transcendence of this world to approach the Spiritus Mundi. And «Byzantium» remains a poem of his having attained the completeness that enabled him to become part of Spiritus Mundi—not simply of his having gained the shores of a culturally-perfect but largely symbolic city. The substitution of a Jungian exegetical apparatus for the Platonic one of older critics⁸, evidently does justice to both, Yeats the Spiritualist and Yeats the Artist, not just to one of them.

8. For instance, in his scholarly but quite dated treatise *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*. New York. The Macmillan Company, 1958, 231-243, F.A.C. Wilson explains the Byzantium poems in the light of Platonic philosophy, in complete ignorance of the existence of Yeats's spiritualist papers.