

Chancing on Byzantium

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I

This is no Aegean cruise. Retirees
Of the mind, sunken in panoramas,
Consciences set adrift on karma seas;
The ships that sail to Ultima or Mars
Still serve the masters of the mines and leas,
Dreaming wrecks spread-eagled across the stars —
'Tis not the music of the spheres they seek,
But the lockdown of the hour and week.

II

A philosopher is but the remnants
Of rope and tackle in a fraying maze,
A fiery form that's stripped of sentience,
Shunning disciples and downplaying praise;
Subversion anchored in strict consequence,
A rabble container of castaways
Attaining the rapture of Kingdom Come —
Refugees chancing on Byzantium.

III

At the outer reaches of thought and thing
We find a rare and strange menagerie,
Which, in the dawn's deceitful quickening,
Foregathers a barbarous assembly
Of blinking beasts that make of vanishing
A song of immanent cosmology:
From the heightening void to teeming weir
Snap beak and lock upon the Idea.

IV

Spite eagle, in whom reason's power, may
Phoenix arise from the gleaming symbol
Of riot. Fox outwits owl, but let mole stay
If sharpened pike adds fish to flesh and fowl.
Submerged in decadence and disarray,
Anxiety's vacant study conspires
To raise a glout from knotted sediments,
And burst upstream of shallow consonants.

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Authors' note

Comprising four stanzas of ottava rima, our poem is partly inspired by Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, although no such trifling obstacle could prevent the great Irish reactionary modernist and wannabe politician from getting better. Now that's *late style*. Written in 1926, first published in 1927, and then again in 1928 in the poet's collection *The Tower*, 'Sailing to Byzantium' is probably now as well-anthologised a work as the notorious 'The Second Coming'. Bristling with allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid*, to Orthodox fables about the fall of Byzantium, to James George Frazer, as well as Yeats's own idiosyncratic mystic syncretisms, the poem is a spiritual journey southwards and soulwards, from 'the dying animal' of Yeats's own aging body to 'the artifice of eternity'. And as with Ratty and Mole in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, there's a lot of mucking about on boats.