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A Note on Gold in Frost and Yeats

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Abstract: A great deal of scholarship has been devoted to well-known symbols such as nature in Robert Frost or W. B. Yeats's golden bird of Byzantium, though no study to my knowledge has singled out the term 'gold' itself for closer scrutiny. This brief note attempts to articulate the meaning and function of gold in two famous twentieth century poems, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay."

フロストとイエーツの"gold"に関する注解

ロバート・フロストの自然や W.B. イエーツのビザンティウムの黄金の鳥といったよく知られたシンボルに関しては，これまで多くの研究がなされてきた。とはいえ，gold という語を取り上げ綿密に考察した研究は，私の知る限り行なわれていない。この小論では，イエーツの"Sailing to Byzantium"とフロストの"Nothing Gold Can Stay"という，20 世紀に書かれた有名なこの二つの詩における"gold"という言葉の「意味」と「機能」を明らかにしてみたい。

Key words: [Yeats, William Butler] [Frost, Robert] [Twentieth Century English Poetry]

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As the price of gold hits new highs day after day on world markets, the un-invested observer might be forgiven for wondering why. Why such extraordinary demand for the yellow metal? What value does it hold, and of what importance is it to human society? For gold has few industrial uses, and its chief application lies in the production of jewelry and colorful ornaments. And yet for thousands of years gold has held a special place in the vaults and imaginations of individuals, nations, and banks. It is believed to hold its value at times when the values of other things such as paper currencies are falling. Due to its unique physical properties, it is also thought to be incorruptible, unchanging and immutable in a world that is just the opposite. This essay is not concerned with the monetary function of gold, nor so much with its physical nature, but with the idea of gold as it was used by two of the twentieth century's most renowned poets, W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost. I would like to look in particular at two of their best-known poems, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay," in which a clear understanding of the meaning of gold is

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helpful for a better understanding of these poems.

Gold is an amazing metal. Relative to other metals, it is soft and malleable, and can easily be worked into almost any desired shape. It is so malleable, in fact, that a single gram can be beaten into a square metre of leaf as thin as paper. The famous Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Japan（金閣寺）is literally covered in gold that has been flattened in this way. Gold has a bright yellow luster that it maintains in almost any conditions, since it does not oxidize in air or water. Gold is so soft that it is usually alloyed with other metals to give it greater hardness or resilience. For these reasons-its color, malleability and resistance to corrosion-gold has been used for thousands of years in the manufacture of coinage, artworks, jewelry and other ornamentation.

For thousands of years gold has also had a strongly positive symbolic power that is unequalled by almost any other natural substance. Gold is power, wealth, sunlight and permanence. We speak of a "golden age," a "golden ratio," and celebrate a "golden wedding anniversary." The highest achievement in the greatest world sporting event is the gold medal. A most valued rule is the "golden rule," and one of those rules is that "silence is golden." Here in Japan we celebrate a "golden week," a rare opportunity in the busy year to rest, travel, and enjoy life. In all of these ideas and expressions, gold is the ideal, second to none. It is easy to imagine how gold entered the world of poetry, so brightly has it shone in the human imagination.

Yeats used the term gold often in his verse. The *Concordance to the Poems* contains sixty-five references to gold and another sixty-four to its adjective form, 'golden' (330-331). Gold can be merely a colour or a form of money, but often it aspires to something more. For instance, in "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," gold is associated with the sun, and it is seen as an image of perfection:

> Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
> Enwrought with golden and silver light,
> The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
> Of night and light and the half light, . . . (*CP* 81)

Silver here is a lesser light, the light of the moon. The association of gold with the sun is derived from mythology, for the chemical symbol Au comes from the Latin word aurum, meaning gold, and from the same source comes Aurora, goddess of the dawn. She is ever-young, and the first to awake, so she brings the light of day with her chariot in which she crosses the sky ahead of the sun.

Aurora was also the origin for the name "Order of the Golden Dawn," the Hermetic society in which Yeats became a prominent member. Among its teachings was the ancient art of alchemy, the turning of base metals into gold. Golden Dawn members were not concerned with producing any actual gold, however, but with the transformation of the individual, from "the dross of matter into the pure spirit of the perfected man," as Richard

Ellmann put it (96). Gold is now completely separated from any material form or monetary value and identified with the highest form of spirituality. This is the same transformation that will take place in "Sailing to Byzantium":

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
--- Those dying generations --- at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect. (*CP* 217)

This stanza represents one of Yeats's best-known celebrations of the natural world, and of Ireland. I cannot agree with Norman Jeffares who wrote that " 'Sailing to Byzantium' in its final form is a rejection of the sensual music of Ireland, of the young, of love" (97). It seems to me more the most poignant longing for those very things, an anguished cry expressing a passionate desire that cannot be fulfilled. The spurned lover is bitter, but the anger and resentment are directed inwards.

In few other poems does Yeats achieve such a crescendo of self-mockery and self-loathing:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
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.

It is worth noting that though the poem is entitled 'Sailing to Byzantium', "we hear nothing of the literal maritime voyage," as Sean Pryor points out (92). The journey is more a process of transformation, the alchemic transformation of body into spirit, or base metal into gold:

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.
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.

Here is the first mention of ‘gold.’ The “gold mosaic” may describe “the mosaics of the apostles against their golden ground in the Battistero degli Ortodossi at Ravenna,” but I think the specific location or reference is less important here than to simply recognize that this is meant to be the eternal world of Art, and the sages have been called upon to carry the soul into “the artifice of eternity” (Gordon and Fletcher 84-85).

The final stanza then includes two uses of the term gold and two variations:

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
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.

The alchemical transmutation of base metal into gold, or body into spirit, is complete, but gold has been changed from “any natural thing” into a purely spiritual essence, permanent and immortal. The repetition of ‘gold’ emphasizes the success of the alchemical process. The clearest proof that “Sailing to Byzantium” is ultimately a celebration of nature and the mortal world, however, is the subject of the golden bird/poet’s song. It sings of “what is past, or passing, or to come.” This is the world of time, from which the bird/poet has just escaped. Just as humans have always longed for the immortal world of the Gods, the Gods (as in Homer) cast an envious eye upon the human world of change.

It is intriguing to speculate whether Frost had Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” in mind when he penned “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” for the very title seems a reply to Yeats. At the very least, we can be sure that Frost was familiar with the famous Yeats poem, for in his play, *A Masque of Reason* (1945), he alludes “in one playful phrase – ‘the gold enameled nightingales / Are singing’ – to both Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ and T. S. Eliot’s’ ‘Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (Meyers 80). But if Yeats was reassuring himself that there was permanence in gold and in art, Frost seemed to be saying, ‘nothing is permanent, not even gold.’ Frost also begins his poem with a look at nature:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour. (*Poetry* 222-223)

Frost’s use of the term gold in the first line is wonderfully ambiguous, carrying multiple meanings and possibilities. It is first of all a colour: the hue of new leaves in early spring is a remarkable golden tinge. (Indeed, I had not actually *seen* this extraordinary phenomenon until I had read Frost.) The golden colour is short-lived, however, for the leaves soon turn to various greens, marking the end of spring and the beginning of summer. A few months later they turn to gold again, "Then leaf subsides to leaf" before falling to the ground in autumn. Gold also carries the meaning of precious or valuable, so the first buds and flowers of spring are precious and beautiful, especially because they don't last long. Gold might also refer to something made of gold, an ornament such a golden bird, though there is no suggestion of what object Frost might have had in mind.

Then Frost introduces man and history into the natural world:

> Then leaf subsides to leaf.
> So Eden sank to grief,
> So dawn goes down to day.
> Nothing gold can stay.

Not even paradise can remain. Nothing of any value stands before the inexorable march of time. Although Frost does not mention art, the unmistakable implication of that lonely word "Nothing" is that the artist's pretentions to immortality through art are destined to pass. Eight short lines in Frost comprehensively summarize all of human, and natural, history.

Frost is often thought of as a nature poet, and certainly his poetry is full of the imagery of nature, but there is a darkness in his attitude that cannot be found in Yeats. As Robert French writes, "it seems as if the earth is hostile to the delicacy and beauty that humans value, so soon do the destructive processes [of nature] exert their powers" (158). All that humans value is encapsulated in "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by that one word, gold. Thus if "Sailing to Byzantium" is in part a nature poem that celebrates the beauty of nature and natural processes, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is deeply ambivalent about nature, which is beautiful but also cruel and destructive.

Both poems discussed here are concerned with nature-its beauty and its transience, and both express a deep mournfulness about the human condition, the ineluctable processes of change, decay and death. Both poems introduce gold as an important counterpoint or resistance within this dialectic, primarily for its widely acknowledged quality of permanence. Gold is used in its wide range of meanings, from a colour to a thing of value to a spiritual essence. But whereas Yeats bestows immortality upon his golden bird and upon art, his creation, offering us an avenue of escape through alchemical transformation into a realm of spirituality, Frost's outlook is decidedly more nihilistic. In this way, Yeats is still the modern romantic poet who clings to a theistic world-view while Frost has become postmodern. Nature is beautiful but there are no utopias.

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