Some Possible Sources for Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": A Reconsideration

There has been a good deal of work done on the sources of "Sailing to Byzantium,"¹ but it has not made the present essay superfluous. In the main it is my purpose here to refute Archibald A. Hill, who argued in "Method in Source Study: Yeats's Golden Bird of Byzantium as a Test Case" (Texas Studies in Literature and Language 17 (1975): 525-38) that neither Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" nor Andersen's story "The Nightingale" need be accepted as source material for Yeats's poem. My argument is that both are sources for "Sailing to Byzantium," and that Hill is demonstrably wrong in rejecting them as such. I find less reason to take issue with him regarding passages which he does consider to be likely sources, namely some lines from Marvell's "The Garden" and historical accounts of the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus (829-842), although I am less confident than Hill about Marvell, and more confident about a historical account which he would discard, namely that found in the Cambridge Medieval History. I agree with him in rejecting the Grimm fairy tale "The Golden Bird" as a source, but unlike him accept that Yeats's "golden bough" is derived from the Aeneid and Fraser's The Golden Bough. In trying to establish which sources are genuine and which spurious, I shall inevitably, like Hill, concern myself with questions of method. Let me say at once, though, that my preoccupation is less with finding a generally valid methodology than with identifying some, at least, of the sources which underlie Yeats's poem; it is also relevant to add that I cannot attempt to be as all-inclusive as Hill, as I am far less willing to eliminate sources than he. And, last, but not least, I differ from him in not being scientific in my interest but in wishing to consider the use of sources as interesting and important in studying both the operation of a writer's mind and what he has to say.

Hill first considers prose passages relating to Theophilus. One of these comes from Edward Gibbon's Decline and Fall (1898), 6: 76-78.² It is interesting to observe, as Hill does without making much of it, that Yeats bought a copy of the Decline and Fall, and also of the Cambridge Medieval History (Cambridge, 1923), when he won the Nobel Prize in 1923. Hill's second passage is from this second book, 4: 39-40. Finally, Hill informs us about the fact that the Gibbon passage also occurs (with one, seemingly unimportant section omitted) in Edmund Gosse's History of Eighteenth Century Literature, 1660-1780 (1929): 356-57.

Of these three passages, Hill isolates the third as a source. An important reason which he offers for preferring Gosse's quotation from Gibbon to Gibbon's own passage is that in Gosse the passage is isolated from other Byzantine details, so that it would be remembered separately, and not as structure. This may indeed make it likely that Gosse is the source rather than Gibbon, although it still remains conceivable that Yeats had instead:

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— or as well — read the passage in Gibbon himself. Although Hill quotes Gibbon from an 1898 edition, the latter’s *Decline and Fall* had, after all, been a very famous book since its publication in the late eighteenth century, and there is no particularly strong reason for supposing that Yeats would not have been well acquainted with much or all of it before 1923, and that he did not know the Theophilius passage quite independently from its quotation in Gosse’s *History*, which was first published in 1889. In this regard, Hill’s attempts at producing literary reasons in what aims to be a scientific article are less than compelling. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* contains a well-known remark made by Yeats on Stanza IV of “Sailing to Byzantium,” which, together with a similar comment from a 1937 broadcast, is quoted by Hill:

> 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.  

Surely this statement is offered by way of “explanation” or so as to suggest that Yeats is not being merely imaginative. To Hill, however, it is evidence of “half-remembered, probably unorganized, reading.” He goes on to suggest that Yeats “would have been unlikely to find the description of the tree and birds in Gibbon unless he had read more or less systematically, or had hit on chapter 53 by pure chance . . . There is only a span of three years between purchase and the first draft of the poem, not a period great enough to make forgetting very likely. Finally, were Gibbon the direct source, I think it likely that Yeats would have said so, since the identification would be at least mildly prestigious” (533). It is, in fact, entirely possible that Yeats either read Gibbon more or less systematically or hit on chapter 53 by pure chance; he may have read Gibbon before 1923; he may very well have remembered this source without wishing to reveal it — his cryptic comment seems designed to suggest that he does have an authority to back him up but that his poem is nevertheless of his own making.

Hill believes in wielding “Occam’s razor” (530), which means, in effect, that he will not accept a source unless there is a necessity for doing so, and he does his very best to minimize the total number of sources. This sounds nice and easy, but the method clearly does not work. Assuming that it really is significant that the Gosse passage is isolated from other Byzantine details, it is possible to believe that as such it would have stood out for Yeats. But, at the most, this would give something like a prior claim to Gosse: it would not eliminate Gibbon himself as a source. The texts (except for a small section which Hill and I agree in discounting) are identical, and thus entirely inconclusive. This means that we then have to resort to external, literary (or at least non-scientific) considerations as to what Yeats’s reading habits are likely to have been, how literal remarks about his own poetry are, etc.; and I submit that reflections in these areas, although they may establish passage “A” more firmly as a source, will not rule out passage “B.”

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We must now consider whether Occam's method leads to convincing results in the case of the passage from the *Cambridge Medieval History*. I do not think that it does. Let me briefly compare the Gibbon-Gosse passage with that from the *History*.

The Gibbon-Gosse passage speaks of the luxury of the *emperor* Theophilus. He copies out the model of a palace constructed by the caliph of Baghdad, and surpasses it. Amongst other things, he built five *churches*, one of which was crowned with three *domes*. The roof reposed on columns of *marble*, and the walls were encrusted with *marbles*. Elaborate use was made of precious materials, such as *gold*, *silver*, and gems; *mosaics* were used for decoration. Theophilus employed *artists*, "but the taste of *Athens* would have despised their frivolous and costly labours: a *golden tree*, with its leaves and branches, which sheltered a multitude of *birds* warbling their *artificial* notes... ."

There is little, here, which can actually be related specifically to "Sailing to Byzantium." I have italicized such words as seem to me to be relevant to our purpose, and all of which occur in the actual passage. Some of them are more applicable to "Byzantium," where we have reference to a *cathedral*, though not to *churches*, mentioned soon after the *Emperor*. The poem also speaks of a *dome*, and of *marbles* on the dancing floor (although there is otherwise no insistence on the presence of marble).

As "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium" are closely related, there is room for the argument that if influence on the one poem can be established it may be assumed to exist in the other instance also, and that this process works equally strongly for both poems. And, if for the moment we equate a church with a cathedral, the order in the passage and "Byzantium" is strikingly similar, i.e. *emperor - cathedral - dome - marble*. Hill and I agree that the order of parallels is in itself a significant factor, and also the number of them, whenever the question of borrowing is considered. However, I am less willing than he to be principled about these matters. I do not profess to know just to what extent the order is significant, or how many items need to be involved. Hill produces an interesting example, when he refers to a modern play in which a character describes another's clothing as "gear, tackle and trim" (531). As he points out, this is of course a borrowing from Hopkins. I submit, however, that the order is insignificant. The choice of these three nouns is so extraordinary that we would identify the selection as Hopkins's no matter the order. Indeed, this would probably still be so if one of the nouns were left out. If, however, a character were described as wearing "trousers, a shirt, socks and shoes," and it so happened that exactly this number of words, in this order, were also found in some famous poet, I would not *a priori* assume that borrowing has taken place.

Disregarding for the moment the question of sequence, we find in both the Gibbon-Gosse passage and "Sailing to Byzantium" an *emperor*; a *Greek* sigma (and *Athens*) in the one case and *Grecian* goldsmiths in the other; references to *gold*, and to *mosaics*. There is a *golden tree* in the one passage and reference to a *golden bough* in the other. Although Yeats does not actually speak of a *bird* (let alone *birds*) it is obviously implied
that such a creature would sit upon the golden bough; “warbling” is perhaps sufficiently close to singing; and as Yeats’s bird is associated with “the artifice of eternity” it is likely that it, too, would produce artificial notes.

Yet, although there is a general resemblance between the passages, one also feels a degree of discomfort about some of the individual parallels. For example, “Greek” is not the same as “Grecian”; references to “gold” do not mean much by themselves; a “golden tree” is not the same as a “golden bough”; I compare “warbling” to “singing” while Yeats actually has “sing,” etc. It is likely enough that Yeats knew the Gibbon-Gosse passage, but, at least as far as “Sailing to Byzantium” on its own is concerned, one would feel happier if one could find closer parallels, and possibly more of them.

This appears to be the case if we consider the passage from the Cambridge Medieval History. This is so interesting that it is worth quoting in full, again with the most telling words in italics:

Lastly, Theophilus was a great builder. He loved pomp and splendour and all that might enhance the prestige of his throne. On two occasions, in 831 and 837, he bedazzled Constantinople by the magnificence of his triumphs. He added to the beauty of the imperial palace by wonderful buildings, in which he plainly sought to rival the glories of Baghdad. Around the new throne-room, the Triconchus, to which the Sigma terrace led, he raised numerous sumptuous pavilions, glorious with many coloured marbles, and glittering with golden mosaics.

Still further to emphasize the beauty of his palace, he adorned it with admirable specimens of the goldsmith’s art. In the great hall of the Magnaurs was a plane-tree made of gold shading the imperial throne, on the branches of which golden birds were perched; at the foot of the throne were lions couchant of gold, and on either hand golden griffins stood sentinel; opposite was set up a golden organ, adorned with enamels and precious stones. These masterpieces of splendour and luxury were at the same time marvels of mechanical skill. On audience-days, when foreign ambassadors entered the hall, the birds in the plane-tree fluttered and sang, the griffins sat up on their pedestals, the lions arose, lashed the air with their tails, and gave forth metallic roars.

I do not suggest that, by comparison, the Gibbon-Gosse passage can be dispensed with. We can be sure, after all, that Yeats had ready access to that. His use of the Cambridge History does not exclude reliance on the Gibbon-Gosse passage. And in that there are one or two interesting things which the Cambridge History does not include. This is certainly so if we consider “Byzantium” as part of the picture; but we must remember, too, that “Greek” and “artificial” (close to Yeats’s “Grecian” and “artifice”) are found in Gibbon-Gosse but not in the Cambridge History.

Yet, if we were to use “Occam’s razor” with some audacity, we should aim it at Gibbon-Gosse, not the passage in the History, and it really is incomprehensible why Hill should wish to proceed in the opposite di-
rection. Not everything in the *History* may upon inspection appear as compelling as it seems at first sight. Still, while *Constantinople* is not the same word, it surely gives the idea of Yeats's *Byzantium*; similarly *imperial* is readily associated with *emperor*. The *marbles* are found in "Byzantium." The phrase *golden mosaics* turns up almost literally in Yeats's *gold mosaics*. Without listing all possible parallels in Yeats's poem, I should like to draw attention in particular to the fact that his use of *goldsmiths* no doubt derives from *goldsmith's*; the *History* offers the idea of a combination of *gold* and *enamelling* which Yeats applies to his bird (though not, admittedly, the *History's* organ); and that in the *History* there are no "warbling" birds but birds which *sang* (closer to Yeats's use of the verb *sing*).

Although I am not a scientist, I should suggest that on any calculation of the mathematical odds the *History* passage is likely to be a source unless something yet more potent can be found to oust its claims, and the Gibbon-Gosse passage does not seem to be of that kind. Furthermore, I propose that we do not take Yeats's "I have read somewhere . . ." very seriously: what is more significant is that we know that Yeats bought the *History* in 1923, and therefore close parallels in a poem written just a few years later should not strike us as surprising.

It is necessary to consider these passages with some care because they do have a degree of overlap with Andersen's "The Nightingale," and, if we are to determine whether that is a source, contrary to Hill's view, we cannot consider it in isolation from the historical material. It will be obvious from my procedure so far that in pressing Andersen's claims I am not trying to minimize those of the historical passages. But we have already seen that a close comparison of the two main likely historical sources, Gibbon-Gosse and the *History*, certainly does not support Hill's claim that the latter can be rejected, while we would commit ourselves to his sort of fallacious reasoning if we argued that therefore that is the only source. The fact that source A is more striking than source B does not eliminate source B, for in that case source B might still corroborate source A in the poet's mind. And if B contained something similar to the poem while that similarity is not found in A, the claims of B would be enhanced. Nor would it do to see things only in these terms: it is crucially important to see just *how* striking a resemblance is, and to try to ascertain whether it is at all likely that the poet read what we suppose to have been a source. For example, if Yeats bought a copy of the *History* in 1923 he may well have wished to read in it, then or soon afterwards, rather than put it on a shelf. If, as Hill proposes, Yeats met the Gibbon passage in Gosse long before 1923, it would seem the more logical for Yeats to have read the relevant passage in the *History* when he bought it.

*A priori*, then, there is absolutely nothing against the assumption that, even if all the parallels which we find in the historical material occurred also in Andersen, his fairy story could still be a source. If we find anything unique to Andersen and Yeats, Andersen's claim would be the stronger. And the first thing to determine, of course, is whether Years was familiar with the story.
Predictably, Yeats on the one hand admits that he knew the stories when he was a boy, yet on the other hand largely disclaims any memory of them in later life. As Hill says, there had been, prior to his writing, at least three people to suggest that "The Nightingale" was a source for "Sailing to Byzantium." One of these, to whose work I feel Hill should have paid more attention, is Ernest Schanzel, who wrote "Sailing to Byzantium, Keats and Andersen" for English Studies 41 (1960): 376-80. Schanzel tells us how Yeats in his Reveries over Childhood and Youth (1914) mentions that as a child he read in the boys' papers "endless stories I have forgotten as I have forgotten Grimm's Fairy Tales that I read at Sligo, and all of Hans Andersen except the 'Ugly Duckling' which my mother had read to me and my sisters. I remember vaguely, that I liked Hans Andersen better than Grimm because he was less homely, but even he never gave me the knights and dragons and beautiful ladies that I longed for. I have remembered nothing that I read, but only those things that I heard or saw." Schanzel then continues: "Since Yeats claims to have forgotten all except what he heard or saw, it is worth pointing out that in the most popular translation of Andersen's tales available during Yeats's childhood, that made by Dr. Dulcken and published in 1864, the frontispiece shows the nightingale (but here the natural bird) perched on his golden stick and singing to Chinese lords and ladies, while the Emperor reclines on his throne, with his eyes closed as if asleep." The reference to this illustration is certainly important, and not just because Yeats claims to have remembered what he saw (in contrast to what he had read). If there was no difference between the illustration and the text, we might simply discard Yeats's protestation, or at least we could in that case not rely on it. As it is, it is still not necessary to believe that he did not recall the text, but Yeats's own comment inevitably draws attention to an illustration which, most interestingly, contains things which are not, or at least not inescapably, in the story. When the nightingale first sings to the Chinese Emperor at court, Andersen mentions ladies, but not lords. The Emperor is described as simply sitting, not reclining. Nor are his eyes closed — indeed, Andersen points out that tears came into his eyes and ran down over his cheeks. Thus the illustration by itself — which Yeats could not have denied remembering — gives us the image of a bird sitting on a golden perch (admittedly not a bough, as in Yeats), singing to an Emperor who is drowsy, and to lords and ladies. What Hill, in rejecting Andersen as a source, fails to realize is that here there are at once several things parallel to the situation in Yeats's poem. There are a number of things found in Yeats, Andersen, and the historical sources: a bird, singing to an Emperor, on a golden bough (or perch). What only Yeats and the illustration have in common, though, is that the Emperor is drowsy, and that there are lords and ladies present. Before I explore the literary parallels in Yeats's poem and Andersen's story, I should first like to say more about Yeats's acquaintance with
Andersen's work in general, as on the whole critics have paid very little
attention to that matter.
Schanzer does point out that Yeats appears indebted to Andersen in at
least one other poem, namely "Among School Children," which appears to
allude, in stanza 3, to "The Ugly Duckling." Many of the Yeats-Andersen
resemblances are recurrent but difficult to pin down firmly, which is not to
say that they are not real.
Like Andersen, Yeats seems to have been obsessed with swans. "The
Ugly Duckling" does appear to be a relevant source in this regard, but it is
surely not the only one. Even titles alone seem to draw attention to this
resemblance: for example Andersen's "The Wild Swans" and Yeats's "The
Wild Swans at Coole." One of Andersen's stories about swans is
extraordinarily intriguing for its possible influence on Yeats, namely "The
Swan's Nest." It begins as follows:

Between the Baltic and the North Sea there lies an old swan's nest,
wherein swans are born and have been born that shall never die.
In olden times a flock of swans flew over the Alps to the green plains
around Milan, where it was delightful to dwell: this flight of swans men
called the Lombards.
Another flock, with shining plumage and honest eyes, soared
southward to Byzantium; the swans established themselves there close
by the Emperor's throne, and spread their wings over him as shields to
protect him . . .

I quote from p. 691 of The Complete Illustrated Stories of Hans Christian
Andersen, translated by H.W. Dulcken, a 1983 facsimile edition
(published by Chancellor Press) of Stories for the Household (1889). This
book, more elaborate than the one Schanzer refers to, is one which Yeats
may very well have known, and it, too, contains an illustration,
accompanying "The Nightingale," of the Emperor with his court and bird,
very similar (though in black and white) to the one described by Schanzer.
There is no knowing when Yeats first grew interested in Byzantium, but it
may have been when he first read "The Swan's Nest" as a child. It hardly
needs stressing that Andersen's network of association, in which swans, the
Emperor, and Byzantium are all linked, was highly congenial to Yeats.6
An inescapable reference to Andersen occurs in "A Coat":

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

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It is interesting that Yeats made this poem (written in 1912) part of *Responsibilities*, which was published in the same year (1914) as the *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* in which Yeats claimed, with reference to Andersen, that he remembered nothing of what he had read as a youth. For it is difficult to see how he wants us to avoid thinking of Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes” in reading this poem, and one might in fact suggest that is not to easy to understand “A Coat” without having Andersen’s story in mind (Dulcken 60-64).

That story tells us about an Emperor who is very fond of new clothes, having a coat for every hour of the day. Two cheats offer to weave him clothes from the finest stuff any one could imagine, with “the wonderful quality that they became invisible to any one who was unfit for the office he held, or was incorrigibly stupid.” As no one wants to look bad or stupid, everyone claims that the Emperor’s new dress is splendid, and when he goes out on procession the chamberlains who are to carry the train stoop down towards the floor, just as if they are picking up the mantle; then they pretend to hold something up in the air. Everyone watching the procession praises the new clothes, until an innocent little child cries out: “But he has nothing on!” This phrase is at length repeated by the whole people, and “That touched the Emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought within himself, ‘I must go through with the procession.’ And the chamberlains held on tighter than ever, and carried the train which did not exist at all.”

In the poem, Yeats presents himself as a cheat who made for his song a coat which, while seemingly fine, consists in fact of nothing. (We are to remember that Yeats wrote the poem when he wore a new, aggressive mask.) It cannot, therefore, cover the song’s essential nakedness. Others should have realized this when viewing it, but being “incorrigibly stupid” (“fools”) they decide to wear it in public as though they had made it (this element of imitation is absent from the Andersen story). The song, being exposed like the Emperor, is exhorted to show something like his courage in walking naked.

It seems to me a serious mistake in Hill’s article that he does not consider the influence of Andersen on Yeats beyond that of “The Nightingale”; but neither does he investigate that story at all thoroughly.

Hill offers a “summary” of the Andersen story which almost seems designed not to bring out the very real parallels offered both by the illustration mentioned by Schanzer (whose article Hill knew) and the text in Dulcken.

Moreover, Hill produces a very peculiar comparative list to summarize his findings. He sees “Yeats” and “Theophilus’ palace” as having in common exactly the following attributes: “Grecian goldsmiths/make/artificial bird/of gold/to sing/on a golden bough/to an emperor/of Byzantium,” and he then sees Andersen as the odd man out in the italicized items of the list “emperor of Japan/sends/artificial bird/set with gems/to sing/on a silk cushion/to an emperor/of China” (531). But this procedure is not in accord with the evidence. For one thing,
the historical passages are not nearly as close to Yeats as Hill makes out. Hill believes that it is the Gibbon-Gosse passage on which Yeats is dependent, not that from the Cambridge History. But although Gibbon-Gosse has "Greek" (not "Grecian"), it does not have "goldsmiths," which appears to be derived from the History. If Hill means that Yeats was influenced by the combination of Gibbon-Gosse and the History, he should say so. But this is not the only difficulty. The phrase "artificial bird" (which does not even occur in Yeats himself, although it is implied) occurs only — and repeatedly — in Andersen. Hill is in error to think that Andersen's bird is "set with gems" rather than made "of gold": if he had carefully read the story in Dulcken (341-49), he would have seen the nightingale referred to as a "golden bird" (348). None of the texts under consideration other than Yeats mentions a "golden bough." Although the image is possibly implied in the historical passages, it is not mentioned, and I believe that Yeats ultimately derives the expression from the Aeneid, and more immediately from Fraser's The Golden Bough: his point is, obviously, that the bird, in sitting on a golden bough, will have access to profound mythological knowledge, and therefore can sing with authority "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." Hill misleads us by claiming that the nightingale in Andersen sits "on a silk cushion" to sing to the emperor. This is true only in a very literal sense of the artificial bird: but it is the real nightingale who sings to the drowsy emperor of the illustration, and in doing so sits on "a golden perch" (344). The fact that in Andersen the emperor is Chinese, not Byzantine, seems to me as trivial as the fact that it is the emperor of Japan who sends him the artificial bird.

Upon inspection, therefore, even such a listing as Hill's does not rule out Andersen by any means, and Andersen is much closer to both Yeats and the historical sources than he supposes. Hill does try, to some very slight extent, to come to grips with what he sees as possible links unique to Yeats and Andersen. He observes that the Yeats bird sings to the lords and ladies present with the emperor, while Andersen's likewise sings to the court: but Hill dismisses this as "a result of normal development of a similar situation" (533). In this way, of course, a great many other parallels, which Hill does not admit the existence of, could be similarly brushed aside.

Let me now summarize, and analyze, the Andersen story to illustrate what I believe to be very genuine parallels between it and Yeats's poem.

Andersen opens his story with one of the very contrasts which lies at the heart of Yeats's poem. That is the contrast between the artificial world of the court and that of nature. The Chinese Emperor's palace is entirely made of porcelain, and in his garden silver bells are tied to the costliest of the flowers. But the garden becomes a forest if one walks further, and here there are real trees and real birds, as in Yeats's first stanza, or at least there is a nightingale which sings (cf. Yeats's "birds in the trees . . . at their song" in the first stanza). It may be an accident that the first person mentioned as listening to the nightingale is a fisherman and that Yeats makes mention of salmon-falls and mackerel-crowded seas. But, outside Yeats, it is, in all the passages we have considered, only in Andersen that we find
the contrast between a real bird with a real listener on the one hand and an artificial bird at a largely artificial court on the other.

The Emperor learns about the nightingale from a book which informs him that it is the best thing in his great empire, and he commands that it shall sing before him that evening. All the world knows the nightingale, but not the people at court, except a little girl in the kitchen, who assists in finding the bird, which turns out to be "a little grey bird up in the boughs." (The word boughs, found at this place [343], may by itself be insignificant, but the accompanying illustration shows the nightingale on a real branch, and this visual fact, at least, Yeats is likely to have remembered.) The bird is invited to sing before the Emperor that evening, although its song sounds best in the green wood. While there are no actual mosaics in the palace, Andersen conjures up something similar in describing what world the nightingale is coming to: "The walls and the flooring, which were of porcelain, gleamed in the rays of thousands of golden lamps" (344). The nightingale is placed on a golden perch in the midst of a great hall where the Emperor sat (the illustration shows him as reclining, with his eyes closed, as he listens to the song of the bird). The Emperor is deeply affected by the song of this real bird. This of course is a contrast with the situation in Yeats, where in stanza 1 others hear real birds, but the Emperor, in stanza 4, listens to an artificial bird. That, too, however, is to come in Andersen. The real nightingale is a great success at court, where the ladies who listen to it (as do lords, in the illustration) try to imitate it by gurgling; eventually, a box sent by the Emperor of Japan reaches the Chinese Emperor, with an artificial nightingale in it. This new nightingale replaces the real one; it sings repeatedly before the court, and the playmaster points out to the "ladies and gentlemen" (346) there that it is better than the real bird.

The artificial bird receives a place on a silken cushion close to the Emperor's bed. But one evening, when the bird is singing its best and the emperor is lying in bed listening to it, the music suddenly stops. A watchmaker discovers that it is worn, and from then on it sings only once a year.

Five years later, the Emperor lies on his deathbed. Afraid of death, he calls for music and instructs the artificial nightingale to sing. Instead, however, there suddenly sounds from the window the most lovely song: it comes from the little live Nightingale, sitting outside on a spray. It sings in natural fashion; Death departs, and the Emperor falls into a sweet slumber. Here we have an ironic contrast with Yeats's situation in stanza 4, of which the poet no doubt wishes us to be aware. In Yeats's poem, the artificial nightingale keeps the Emperor awake — as presumably the real nightingale had done in Andersen when it first sang; in Andersen, the artificial bird is associated with death, not life after death, and it is the real bird which makes the Emperor sleep and thus revives him. Yeats's point in the poem as a whole seems deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, he would no doubt like to go into eternity like an artificial bird. On the other hand, the Andersen story, and Yeats's own language, as in that curious "the artifice of eternity," cannot fail to make us aware of the merits of a live
bird — the birds in the trees of the first stanza. In Andersen, this live bird proceeds to sing of good and of evil, of those who are happy and those who suffer. It is not clear whether Yeats prefers such a bird to the artificial bird of his final stanza, which is to sing “Of what is past, or passing, or to come.” But it does seem clear that he is constantly in close touch with Andersen’s story, and that we can understand the nature of his concerns better if we are aware of the many parallels, or indeed parallel contrasts.

I believe that there not only are many similarities to Andersen’s story in Yeats’s poem, and many points of comparison even where Yeats is deliberately different, but also that a study of these two works of art shows us much more about the creative workings of Yeats’s mind, and his attitudes, than do the historical sources. Those no doubt provided material from which Yeats could select some things; but he was not meaningfully influenced by them, and did not creatively transform them, as in the case of Andersen’s “Nightingale.” This is why it is so crucially important to understand that that story was indeed a source, and to comprehend both the similarities and the differences correctly. It should be realized, in source study, that at times a difference, provided it invites comparison, is as important as an exact similarity — important in not only establishing the source as much as does a similarity, but also in helping us to understand the mind of an imaginative, thinking author.

For that reason it is with sadness that one learns that Hill rejects Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” as a source. I believe that, by contrast, Schanzer is right in thinking “that the evocation of Andersen’s story in Yeats’s memory was assisted by another literary influence which haunts the poem, that of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’” (377).

It is difficult to see how the two sources could not have been associated in Yeats’s mind. The fact that he knew both is surely significant. It is unlikely that he could have thought of the one without thinking of the other, as the two have several striking similarities — most obviously, of course, in both presenting an image of a nightingale singing somewhere in the trees. (Both Keats and Andersen are at first quite vague concerning the location of the bird.) Yeats, despite his protestation that he was amongst the last Romantics, was heavily influenced by earlier Romantic poets. Blake and Shelley were the most important of these, as we know for example from Harold Bloom, but Keats’s influence is hardly negligible, and it seems almost superfluous on the part of Schanzer to list a number of specific parallels. In “Sailing to Byzantium,” it might be argued, the Blake image which is so conspicuous in the image of the soul clapping its hands (stanza 2) makes the association between that poet and Keats one on which it does not appear necessary to speculate. Whether or not Yeats thought of Andersen before thinking of Keats, in relation to this poem, is not easy to establish, but it is safe to assume that to him Andersen would have been an author who could quite easily be fitted into the tradition of nineteenth century English Romanticism. This is not merely a matter of such obvious elements as escapism from a painful “realistic” world into one of nature, art, the imagination, or immortality; we even see it in the less
striking concern with the world of the noble and the beggarman with which Yeats was frequently preoccupied, and which leads all three authors to present a bird singing to an Emperor, though only Keats and Andersen associate the nightingale with humble people as well (in Keats, the "emperor and clown" phrase of stanza 7 is relevant, and in Andersen the nightingale is known to the fisherman and the little girl in the kitchen before it appears at court).

A quick and reasonably effective way to suggest the principal parallels between Keats's poem and Yeats's is to list them (without distortion) in such a way as Hill employs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keats</th>
<th>Yeats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart is painful</td>
<td>Heart is painful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul sings</td>
<td>Soul sings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul merges with bird</td>
<td>Soul merges with bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird is amongst boughs</td>
<td>Bird is amongst boughs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird is immortal</td>
<td>Bird is immortal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird sings at night</td>
<td>Bird sings at night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird sings to Emperor</td>
<td>Bird sings to Emperor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These similarities are most easily seen if Keats's poem is considered in its totality, and Yeats's especially from about the middle of stanza 3 on, where he asks the "sages" to consume his heart away, which is "sick with desire," just as Keats declares at the beginning of the Ode that his heart aches. (In both cases, this because the poets keenly identify themselves with the birds.) The progression of ideas at the end of Yeats's poem is not difficult to trace in Keats's. Both poets want to escape from a world in which men die. Thus, when Yeats talks about his heart as "fastened to a dying animal," he looks back to the beginning of his poem, where he had complained that he was not at home, as an old man, with "The young/ In one another's arms." Here he had spoken of them as "dying generations." Significantly, Keats in stanza 3, mentions a world "Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,/Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." There is a marked verbal resemblance between Yeats's

The young

In one another's arms, birds in the trees
--Those dying generations — at their song;

and Keats's

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

(Stanza 7)

The repetition of generations, particularly, in so brief a space, and in combination with other words which are so similar, cannot be accidental.

But let me return to similarities in the sequence of ideas. The wish to escape leads Keats to say (stanza 4):
Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! ... 

As in Yeats, the merging of the bird is to occur through the world of art and of the soul. When Keats exclaims: "Already with thee!," he is not, of course, speaking literally: he can join the bird as an artist whose imagination, and thus his soul, can fly to the bird with viewless (i.e. abstract, unseeable) wings.

However, the idea of "viewless wings" fits in also, most beautifully, with the fact that Keats physically cannot see the bird, for, as in Yeats’s last stanza, it sings at night. More significantly, both poets associate the world of art/imagination/soul with an “immortal Bird.” Keats’s use of the phrase is arresting, for in saying, “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” he may mean: “You are not a mortal creature,” just like the bird which belongs to Yeats’s “artifice of eternity,” or “You should not die, although you will.” This last idea is in Yeats only present explicitly at the beginning of the poem, where birds are described as “dying generations,” and implicitly inasmuch as Yeats in his last stanza seems to allude to a situation which at the end Keats and Andersen have in common, whereby the presence of the “real” earth asserts itself again. Yeats’s bird clearly will be eternal, or so he seemingly makes out; Keats’s idea of an “immortal Bird” is immediately paradoxical in that we know that it was not this particular bird which sang in ancient days “to emperor and clown.”

As in the case of the Andersen story, Yeats is constantly in close touch with his source, at times directly indebted to it for similarities, at times departing from it in a way which makes the presence of the source no less obvious. And again, comparison with the source allows us to get better insight into both Yeats’s creativity and his meaning.

There is one other possible source that we need to consider with some care here. Hill offers the following lines from Marvell’s “The Garden” as a source for Yeats’s poem, “italicizing the suspected parallels” as they were by the first discoverer of this source, F.L. Gwynn.8

Casting the body’s vest aside
My soul into the boughs does glide
There like a bird, it sits and sings
Then wets, then combs its silver wings.9

Hill lists the parallels this way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marvell</th>
<th>Yeats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My soul casts aside</td>
<td>I shall leave nature and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>its body</td>
<td>natural body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul moves to a bough</td>
<td>Soul becomes a bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soul is like a bird</td>
<td>Soul is set on a bough</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[13]
I certainly do not wish to suggest that Yeats could not possibly have had these lines in mind. However, the parallels are less immediate and exact than Hill’s table suggests. At the end of the Yeats poem, the soul is not mentioned. This does not necessarily matter, but it is difficult to see why Yeats could not have derived the whole idea of a soul which is like a singing bird on a bough from Keats rather than Marvell, and in this respect it must be stressed that from a general literary point of view Keats is, in time and in tradition, a great deal closer to Yeats than Marvell is. And there is a difference between a golden bird and a bird with silver wings. As Yeats is a poet with a very intense visual imagination, he is more likely to have remembered Andersen’s bird than Marvell’s. Even in a strictly verbal sense Marvell is not as significantly close to Yeats as Gwynn and Hill think; for example, the word “boughs” is used by Keats, too (stanza 5).

Yet, despite some reservations and the fact that there hardly appears to be something which Marvell could uniquely have provided to Yeats, the cumulative effect of the possible parallels is such as to make it very possible — indeed, fairly probable — that Marvell’s lines, too, were an influence. And there is absolutely nothing implausible about the suggestion that Yeats would readily have associated, imaginatively and otherwise, the lines from the Marvell poem, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” and Andersen’s story. These form a fitting, powerful combination. What I wish to resist most strongly, though, is the proposition that we must accept Marvell as a source in preference to Keats and Andersen.

While there is a great deal that could be put forward in any extensive consideration of possible “Byzantine” sources, we can feel quite sure that one of the main sources underlying the poem in its association of Byzantium with a mechanical bird singing to an emperor is the Cambridge Medieval History, supplemented, in some details otherwise hard to account for, by Gibbon’s Decline and Fall. Again, there is nothing very surprising about Yeats’s having been influenced by both of these sources, or about his having combined them with the more literary impact derived from Marvell, Keats, and Andersen.

Furthermore, although the historical sources do matter, the literary ones are, amongst the ones we have considered, by far the more important ones. In contrast with the former category, the literary sources appear to have affected Yeats profoundly, prompting him not only to imitate, but also to re-fashion, re-imagine, re-create, re-define and re-value the experiences offered by his literary predecessors. That is why it is so important to be aware just who those predecessors were.
NOTES


2. Unless otherwise mentioned, the place of publication of each book is London. Hill gives, in his article, very elaborate bibliographical information about the items which we both discuss.


5. Schanzel, 376. I have examined the story in every version available to me which Yeats could have seen, in the naive hope of finding a unique one with clinching verbal parallels. In fact Schanzel’s reference to a possible visual source is highly revealing, and the language in Dulcken’s translation seems as close to Yeats as any of the others could be argued to be.

6. I have no wish, of course, to argue that Yeats’s interest in Byzantium would have been derived exclusively from Andersen. Certainly references to Byzantium/Constantinople are frequent in the Danish author. See for example “In a Thousand Years” in Dulcken (446); Chapter VI of The Story of My Life, where Andersen refers to Constantinople (not Byzantium) as a place he visited (772). But nowhere else is Byzantium associated with swans and the Emperor. Yet Yeats was greatly preoccupied with all three.


8. “Yeats’ Byzantium and Its Sources,” Philological Quarterly 32 (1953): 9-21. See, for a discussion of the Marvell parallel, particularly the end of Gwynn’s article. In general, I must agree with Hill that Gwynn is fanciful about the question of Yeats’s sources. Thus his claim that Yeats used the Grimm fairy tale “The Golden Bird” is all too typical of Gwynn’s approach: he just does not produce any solid evidence for this belief, and I do not think that there is any. (See for example the version in The Complete Illustrated
9. There is an obvious difficulty in the punctuation of these lines, which I quote as they stand in Hill, who does not mention the edition. At the least, the sense demands a semi-colon after “glide.” For a more satisfactory version, see H.M. Margoliouth, ed., The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, Vol. I (1971): 52.