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Creation, Imagination and Metapoetry in “Kubla Khan” – An Essay on the Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Paradigmatic Poem

Introduction

Kubla Khan is one of the best-known works by the famous romantic English poet Samuel Taylor. Many interpretations of the poem are possible, different critics have represented completely different opinions about the message of the work in the past more than 200 years. The aim of the present essay is to approach the poem from one of the numerous points of view, within the frameworks of an in-depth analysis

One of the possible interpretations is *meta-poetry*; that is, poetry written about poetry itself. But before we attempt to explore in detail what motifs seem to support that that the poem is a kind of meta-poetic self-confession, it is worth having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was written, and what comments the author himself later added to it. Henceforth we attempt to summarize what biographical motivations played what roles in the creation of the poem, before we start the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs referring to the meta-poetic character of the work.

Possible Biographical Motivations

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem called *Kubla Khan* in the autumn of 1797, allegedly in a farmhouse near Exmoor, but since it was published only in 1816, it seems to be probable that the author revised it several times before the publication. Coleridge himself claimed that the poem was inspired by an opium-induced dream, as it is implicitly referred to in the secondary title of the poem: *A Vision in a Dream*. Furthermore, it is also supposed that the imagery of the poem is partly inspired by Marco Polo’s reports about his journey to China and the description of the area called “Shangdu” (which is identical with the poem’s spot called Xanadu), where Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan really used to have a palace in the 13th century. The description by Marco Polo was included in [Samuel Purchas](#)'s book entitled *Pilgrimage* (Vol. XI, 231).

As Samuel Coleridge himself writes in his note to the poem:

“In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage...”

Since the poet himself commented on the composition of the work, it is really probable that he wrote, or at least started to write it under the influence of drugs, or the vision described in the poem was originally really caused by intoxication.

True, Coleridge commented on his own poem after it had been published, he himself gave no explicit interpretation about the message of the work. That is why the poem is debated by many critics, whether it is just a kind of visionary poetry without any kind of previously planned message, just in order to cause aesthetic pleasure to the reader, or although the author himself left no kind of explicit interpretation, there was an underlying conception behind the creation of the mysterious lines, and there is really a kind of very well-developed message under the surface.

From here, as mentioned above, after having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was supposedly composed, we will make an attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a poetic interpretation of poetry, art, and the assignment of the poet himself.

A Possible Interpretation of “Kubla Khan”

The poem is divided into three paragraphs by the author. It starts with the description of a wonderful palace built by Mongolian and Chinese ruler Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a really existing geographical area situated in China. However strange it sounds, a loose historical background is observable behind the dream-like vision set into poetry, since the Khan was a real historical personality, and the palace described in the overture of the poem really existed in some form. Outside the visionary palace a holy river, the Alph is flowing into the dark, “sunless sea”, as Coleridge writes. Then the poem continues with the description of the “fertile grounds” near the palace, and it also turns out that the building is surrounded by ancient forests and hills. To sum it up, the first paragraph describes a historical, but at the same time seemingly supernatural and mythical, majestic world, dominated by Kubla Khan and his “pleasure dome”. This world seems to be a static picture where everything is

unchanged, like a timeless, painting-life place, where the dimension of time does not exist, or at least it cannot be observed, a kind of empire of eternity. It must be mentioned that in the first paragraph the poetic speaker describes the sight as a spectator from outside, he is not an active character, is not present in the world where the dream-like settings exist.

However, in the second paragraph of the poem a drastic, dramatic change of view can be observed:

*“But oh ! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover !
A savage place ! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover !...”*

That is, a little further from the fairy-tale like, majestic and idyllic palace of the Khan the speaker describes a hell-like, mysterious and ominous environment, “a savage place”, which is beyond the boundaries of the area that is dominated by Kubla and his “pleasure dome”. Pagan-like, supernatural forces appear in the poem, breaking out from the depth, disturbing the idyll of the world outlined in the first paragraph. A source of a fountain is described that feeds a river that floods through trees and rocks, and this river finally inundates Kubla’s gardens. As the last lines of the second paragraph describe:

*“And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!”*

That is, as the water inundates Kubla Khan’s wonderful domain, the ruler hears voices, “ancestral voices”, supposedly the voice of the spirits of his ancestors, who remind him that the flood is just a kind of prognostication, and he will soon have to face war against something or someone. Summarising it, the second paragraph is a kind of contrast to the first, in which the destruction, the annihilation of the idyllic and seemingly perfect land described by the first paragraph is outlined. However perfect and visionary the domain of Kubla Khan was, it was destroyed by a flood, probably motivated by mysterious, supernatural forces that might have been envious of the Khan’s power, as he was a mortal human, despite what he had possessed and what he had achieved, he could not reach as much power as certain supernatural forces, maybe gods who punished him for having wanted too much.

In the third, last paragraph of the poem the speaker continues to describe what happened after the palace was destructed by the flood, he claims that:

*“The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves ;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice !”*

That is, the shadow of the dome was reflected by the water, and in vain it got destroyed, some kind of wonderful sight emerged from the water, and in some form the palace (and possibly the ruler himself) re-created itself (and himself) in another dimension of existence.

Finally, suddenly the poetic speaker shifts into first person singular, starts to narrate in a much more personal voice, appears as not a simple narrator, but as a kind of character of the poem. As Coleridge writes: “In a vision once I saw...”, that is, the speaker acknowledges in a way that all that he described in the first two paragraphs was a kind of poetic vision, as was the “Abyssinian maid” playing a dulcimer mentioned in the further lines of the poem. The speaker claims that if he had the capability to recall the music played by the mysterious maid, than he would be able to reconstruct Kubla Khan’s visionary palace from mere music, and he would be able to become as enormous and powerful as Kubla Khan himself. The very last lines of the poem:

*“And all should cry, Beware ! Beware !
His flashing eyes, his floating hair !
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.”*

That is, it is described how powerful and fearful the poetic speaker himself would become if the were able to reconstruct the palace and gain the power of Kubla Khan. A possible interpretation is that he could even become one with Kubla Khan in some kind of supernatural, timeless dimension, he himself could become the mythical ruler.

Concluding Remarks – Meta-poetry in the Poem

The poetic speaker himself could become much more than he is in mortal, human reality, and if we attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a work about the creative power of poets, we might even risk the statement that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (and all other great poets in his world view) are all Kubla Khans, who have the power to create and dominate within the world of imagination. Since the poem itself is a mixture of dream and vision, as the author himself claimed, everything is possible in the world described in it. Although Kubla Khan is the powerful ruler of a seemingly perfect and dream-like world, he has to face the destruction of his domain, but somehow all of it resurrects in a new form. Poets, who are all creators and rulers of their own imaginary worlds, may have to face the destruction of what is important to them. But on the other hand, if they are real artist, they have the power the re-create their own worlds, their own works of art, even if they are destructed time by time. But no matter how many times one's imaginary world is destructed, the eternal power of art is somehow outside the dimension of time, and poets must be able to possess this kind of power. The destruction of Kubla Khan's palace and the flood can also be interpreted as the destructive power of time that shows no mercy towards anything mortal. But since the Khan / the poet (?) is a man of exceptional artistic abilities, he has the power and the courage to fight against time and resurrect from total destruction and finally reach a kind of eternity via his creative power and works of art.

Since the search for eternity and the cult of geniuses were amongst the key characteristics of the period of the Romantics, Coleridge's poem may be read as a kind of *romantic guideline* for poets, a meta-poetic work that reminds artists that eternity can be reached if they are really talented enough and brave enough to fight against the destructive power of time and human mortality, not merely as a vision-dream-like poem that perhaps causes aesthetical pleasure to the all-time reader, but its real message is hard or even impossible to decode.

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: *Kubla Khan*

Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

*A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

*But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.*

*It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!*

*A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

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The Motif of Death in William Butler Yeats's Poetry after 1920

Introduction

William Butler Yeats the well-known Irish poet wrote more and more about death (not only about the possibility of his own personal death) in the late period of his life, after 1920.

The motif of human mortality appears in many poems from the late period of his poetry. The aim of the present essay is to select and analyse a few pieces from among his most important works, supporting the statement that death, passing of life and destruction together with it became a key motif in his late poems. But before we start the in-depth analysis of separate poems by the author, it is worth having a glance at the general tendencies and changes that are characteristic of Yeats's poetry, mainly after 1920.

General Changes in the Poetic Style of W. B. Yeats's Late Poems

Yeats is considered to be one of the most significant poets writing in English by many literary critics. In the beginning of his poetic career he wrote his poems mainly in classical verse forms. He is considered to be one of the latest romantic and one of the first modernist authors at the same time. His earlier poems are "conventionally poetic", as it can easily be proven by examining his first volumes. His early poetry is considered late-romantic in many senses, since it is largely based on Irish folklore and Celtic Myths. Nevertheless, in his three volumes titled *In the Seven Woods*, *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities* that are from the middle period of his poetic lifework he uses a more direct approach to his themes and writes in a much more personal voice. The experience of getting old is a determining motif in the last twenty years of his poetry; for example, in his poem called *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, he describes what inspired his late works:

*"Now that my ladders gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart"*

In his works after 1920 Yeats deals much more with contemporary problems than topics deriving from myths and folklore, and he mentions his son and his daughters in his late poems more and more frequently.

Some literary critics also state that the author spanned the transition from the 19th century into the 20th century and he created a kind of bridge between romanticism and modernism. All in all, nearly all of literary critics agree that Yeats's poetic world view derived from a wide range of sources, just to mention a few from among them, Hinduism, Christianity, Voodooism, Romanticism and Modernism, many social and political trends, etc. Such a mixture of ideas served as the basis of his late poetry as well. W. H. Auden criticized his late works as the "deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India". Yeats did not trust in human intellectuality anymore in his last twenty years, he rather turned to a kind of mysticism and conceived his otherwise very straightforward and deep thoughts in visions, imaginary worlds and timeless pictures. His volume published in 1925, titled simply 'A Vision' illustrates his delusion of cold intellectuality in a very spectacular way. A kind of dramatic transformation can be observed in the change of his style. His last poetry volumes (The Tower – 1928; The Winding Stairs – 1929; and New Poems – 1938) contained some of the most significant images of the twentieth-century poetry, and his Last Poems are considered the best pieces of his lifework.

Although the signs of anti-democracy and the sympathy with Fascism and other political extremities are observable in some of Yeats's late works, his last lines undeniably visualize the rise of Christianity and the coming of a better world after the total destruction of the frail and delusory mortal human world.

As for the motif of death in his poetry, from his late period maybe two poems deserve special attention: Sailing to Byzantium, as a vision of his personal death, and The Second Coming as a kind of vision about the decline and the collective death of the European civilisation. Henceforth we will make an attempt to discuss the two poems mentioned above in detail, focusing on the motif of death and destruction as the key motifs of Yeats's poetry after 1920.

Sailing to Byzantium – Yeat's Vision of Death and Afterlife

Sailing to Byzantium is one of W. B. Yeats's best-known poems, first published in 1928, in the poetry volume titled The Tower. The poem consists of four stanzas, each one is made up of eight ten-syllable lines. It is the description of the poetic speaker's imaginary journey to Byzantium, the capital of the ancient South-Roman Empire, a kind of homeland of eternity in the poem. It is a kind of vision about what can happen to an elderly artist after his death, whether or not he can achieve the dream of probably all artists in the world, eternity. Many critics parallel this one of Yeats's poems and John Keats's classical romantic poem called

Ode on a Grecian Urn, since both of them are based on the contrast of human mortality and eternity that may be reached by becoming one with art.

The first stanza of the poem is an introduction in which the poetic speaker describes the mortal world and his former life which he is soon to leave for the sake of another, probably much better and higher form of existence. The speaker describes his mortal life as a land that he does not like and has no more place within it. „That is no country for old men...”, writes Yeats immediately in the first line, as a kind of delusion of the whole mortal existence.

*’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.’*

Yeats depicts his whole existence as a kind of seemingly happy, but superficial and declining world in which the circulation of life and death is permanent, but everything must die and nearly nothing represents an eternal value; besides, the “monuments of unaging intellect” are not respected at all, they are “neglected” in the “sensual music”; that is, it is much easier for everyone to think of momentary joys and enjoy life as long as possible instead of thinking about what is valuable and what is not, what is worth dealing with and what is not. Physical joys are much more important than intellectual values, and the poet is disappointed at this kind of world view in his old age. It is also possible that Yeats described not only the human existence in general, but the situation of his own Ireland and his own age. As it can be read in Encyclopedia Britannica:

"[The poem] is grounded in literal meaning as well, for in 1924 the ailing Yeats left Ireland, 'no country for old men,' to view Byzantine mosaics in Italy"

The second stanza of the poem describes the aged man as “a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick”; that is, as a pitiful and helpless creature who has no more power and is subjected to the ignorant and unfair world. According to the poetic speaker, the only chance of an old man to rise up from his pitiful situation is to create artefacts and trying to redeem himself with the power of poetry from his mortality. But in order to be able to do so, an old man has to “learn”

a kind of magical song from the monuments mentioned in the first stanza. That is why the elderly poet confesses that, as he writes at the end of the stanza:

*“And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
to the holy city of Byzantium.”*

That is, the elderly poet finally arrives at Byzantium, the holy place where it becomes possible to get rid of his tired, mortal human body and liberate his soul, and finally become one with his own art, gaining a kind of eternity and immortality. Concerning Byzantium, Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

“For Yeats, ancient Byzantium was the purest embodiment of transfiguration into the timelessness of art” (Britannica). While Byzantium has historically been known to be the art and cultural successor of Rome, the speaker also refers to this place as a “holy city”.

The third stanza describes the poetic speaker’s vision after he finally arrived at Byzantium. He asks “the sages”, the wise men of Byzantium to come down to him from God’s “holy fire” and become the “singing masters of his soul”, and he begs to them to liberate his soul from his dying body at the same time. The “holy fire” represents the supernatural and timeless character of Byzantium, the power through which one can liberate himself from his or her mortal constraints and enter into a higher form of existence. It can be seen as a metaphor similar to the Purgatory in the Holy Bible, in which the soul is cleansed, in this case not unconditionally from its sins, but from everything that bound it to its former world, making it capable of reaching eternity. The motif of the fire can also be treated as a similar motif to the fire of the Phoenix, a mythical bird that is consumed by fires time and again, but always resurrects from its own ashes. The poetic speaker also wants to be annihilated on the one hand, but on the other hand he wants to gain the capability of resurrection in another dimension of existence. He is “fastened to a dying animal”, his own mortal and tired human body, and he evidently has to break out of it if he really wants to belong to the supernatural existence, the eternity of Byzantium. Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

“The old man of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ imagined the city’s power as being able to ‘gather him into the artifice of eternity’ – representative of or embodying all knowledge, linked like a perfect machine at the centre of time.”

The fourth stanza is a kind of continuation of the poetic speaker's prayer for being granted the capability of reaching a higher form of existence. He expresses his desire that once he was finally transformed by the "holy fire", he would never like to return into any kind of "natural form", but would rather become a kind of mechanic golden bird that is able to entertain "the drowsy Emperor" (of Byzantium) "keeping him awake", singing about "what is past, passing or to come". That is, he wants to become something that is able to sing the song of time itself, some kind of embodiment of eternity against human mortality, even if it is something lifeless, something mechanical, as if he wanted to somehow unite the features of organic, biological (and necessarily mortal) life with the features of timelessness, eternity and majesty, but if it is not possible to achieve in a form similar to organic life, then let it be mechanic and inorganic. The motifs of "hammered gold" and the "Grecian goldsmiths" strongly resemble to the imagery of Keats's Ode on a Grecian Urn, as mentioned above. The ancient land of Greece and Byzantium appears in both poem as some kind of embodiment of a higher form of life, existence and culture that survive human mortality, but only artists can reach this kind of existence via their works of art, which is in Yeats's case is mainly poetry, whereas in Keats's case all manifestations of art are covered. Furthermore, in the last stanza Yeats identifies himself as a kind of seer who can see the events of the past, sees through the events of the present and is also capable of predicting the events of the future; but since he is in possession of the state of eternity, time is already only a relative category for him.

To sum it up, *Sailing to Byzantium* is one of the most significant pieces of William Butler Yeats's poetry after 1920. It is one of the key poems as for the motif of death in his poetic work from the examined period. Although the poetic speaker, as an elderly man, predicts his death in a certain way, it is not simply the prediction of physical death, but the vision of an artist about what is possible after death and how it is possible to escape from death and complete destruction. In the poem Yeats does not see his personal death in the future as something that must be feared of, but as a kind of possibility to leave a frail and valueless world at which the elderly poet is already disappointed in order to enter a new reality dominated by perfection and eternity, where only the chosen ones, that is, only artists can reach after their death, becoming one with their works of art. As an artist, Yeats optimistically thinks that his death will not be the death of a simple mortal human, but he will finally become one of the chosen ones who can experience a higher form of existence beyond the mortal human world and finally enter the gates of Byzantium, the holy city where artists can unite with their art, as a kind of reward for their lifelong work in the mortal earth.

Having attempted to make an analysis of the presence of the poet's personal death in Yeats's poetry via examining *Sailing to Byzantium*, henceforth we will make an attempt to discover the motif of collective death in his lifework, via the analyses of his poem *The Second Coming*.

The Second Coming – The Vision of Collective Death

The Second Coming was first published in November 1920, in *The Dial*, and afterwards in Yeats's poetic volume titled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Strong religious symbolism is used in the poem in order to pinpoint the decline of the European culture and visualise the prediction of the collective death of the western culture or the whole humanity. It is based on a belief that civilisation is nearing to a turning point around the second millennium, the second coming of Jesus Christ, according to the Holy Bible.

The poem was supposedly written as a kind of aftermath of the First World War, and also strongly inspired by the French and German revolutions, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

*“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...”*

The poem, as we can see, starts with an in-medias-res-like overture, a vision-like description of what is in process at the (timeless) moments of the poetic narration. The first passage of the poem is not else but a series of chaotic, ominous pictures, according to which nothing is the same as used to be, something has drastically changed and the world is breaking into pieces, is sinking into anarchy. It is to be mentioned that Yeats uses the word “gyre” in the first line of the poem, a word that is also used in *Sailing to Byzantium* and several of Yeats's poems. According to Yeats's own explanation, by “gyre” he means two conical spirals, one of them situated within the other. The term is to express Yeats's theory of history, which is present in his 1925 poetic value titled *A Vision*.

In the beginning of the second passage the speaker of the poem stops and establishes the following:

“Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming!”

Yeats speaks about some revelation that turns out to be the Second Coming. Then the series of chaotic and ominous scenes is continuing, a sphinx or sphinx-like beast is outlined within the lines of the poem:

*“...somewhere in the sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds....”*

As Yeats himself claimed it, the notion of such a beast had long captivated his mind even before he wrote *The Second Coming*, around 1904, but later he finally wrote it down in his poem. Literary critic Yvor Winters writes about the poem:

“...we must face the fact that Yeats' attitude toward the beast is different from ours: we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying – he is Yeats' judgment upon all that we regard as civilized. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality.”

That is, the beast described in the poem can be interpreted as a kind of executioner of human civilization who comes to punish instead of Jesus Christ, and the Second Coming, as the title says, is his arrival to earth. A creature that will cause the total destruction of humanity, but in order that a higher form of existence can evolve after everything frail and mortal has perished.

Yeats himself writes in his notes to the poem:

“The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion.”

The poem is closed down with a question:

*“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”*

That is, maybe even the poetic speaker himself does not really know what is coming and what will really happen, but evidently something that must happen out of human will. All in all, it is evidently a kind of vision of complete destruction and collective death, but similar to *Sailing to Byzantium*, a kind of optimistic end is possible even after collective death. If everything mortal is destroyed, perhaps a new world can evolve after the old one is finally judged, punished and annihilated. Annihilation is the precondition of a new beginning, and just like in the case of his own death, he also hopes for a better and higher form of existence after the collective death of the whole humanity.

Interestingly, an article was published in the near past, in *New York Times* that paralleled the imagery of the poem and the permanent wars in the Middle East. That is, it is possible that the prediction of Yeats from 1920 seems to become reality in some way, at least partly, if it is interpreted as the prediction of a destructing war that once will break out in the Middle East; namely in the ancient land of the Holy Bible where Jesus Christ was once born.

Concluding Remarks

Although many of the motifs of death appear in several poems of William Butler Yeats after 1920, in the last period of his oeuvre, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Second Coming* are amongst the best known and the most salient poems in which death and destruction appear as key motifs. As the poet started growing old, death and passing became more and more important topics for him in his poetry. But he did not treat death – at least not in all of his poems – as simply the end of life, but as a necessary prerequisite to a new beginning, the gate to a new existence that might be much higher and much better than the mortal, human existence in which all of us have to live and the constraints of which all of us have to face everyday. As a poet, he believed in the idea that man can break out of the constraints of human existence – body, mortality, old age, frailty, weakness, the barriers of time and place, etc. – and gain the capability of entering a new, supernatural world via the power of art. As a matter of fact, Yeats is not at all the first poet who writes down his thoughts about how one can reach immortality through arts, but as one of the most significant poets of the twentieth centuries, he writes about it in a very original and eloquent manner, setting an example to

other poets and artists about the power of arts and talent that can even overcome death and passing, if one strongly believes in it.

It is also worth mentioning that although the strong artistic self-awareness is apparent in several of Yeats's poems written before his death, as in the two works discussed above, he did not call himself in each of his works a prophet or artist. In his last poems written not long before his death he does not deal with afterlife so much, but as an old man, reconciles himself to the fact that he must die, just like others.

As he writes in one of his short, haiku-like final poems that was allegedly written down as his own prospective epitaph:

*“Cast a cold eye
on life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!”*

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**Reading “Birthday Letters” –
A Personal Essay on Intertextual and Personal Relations Depicted in Ted
Hughes’s Poem “Wuthering Heights”**

The poem called *Wuthering Heights* by English Ted Hughes was published in the volume *Birthday Letters* in 1998. The last poetry volume of the author is a kind of correspondence to his dead wife, American poet Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in 1963. *Wuthering Heights* is one of the 88 poems addressing, in fact, Sylvia Plath’s spirit after her death. That is why it may not be so hazardous in the case of such a personal and biographically motivated collection of poems to state that the poetic speaker of the texts is not fictional, but *he* is in essence identical to Ted Hughes, the author’s biographical self.

Wuthering Heights by Ted Hughes shows many characteristics of intertextuality, because it is also partly based on the novel by Emily Brontë; furthermore, Sylvia Plath herself also wrote a poem under the same title, and Hughes’s final volume of poetry is also partly treated by literary critics as the mixture of the two author’s poetry, an explicit personal and poetic dialogue between them and their literary works, since *Wuthering Heights* is not the only poem within the volume that has the same title as one of Sylvia Plath’s poems.

The poem opens with a simple statement: “*Walter was guide.*”, then it turns out very early to the reader that the poem is, in fact, a kind of narrative text, recording an event from the common life of Hughes and Plath, narrating it from the point of view of Hughes. As the text goes on, it becomes clear that the poetic speaker is remembering his and his wife’s journey to the Yorkshire moors, the land where Emily Brontë’s romantic novel takes place and where Brontë herself grows up. The setting is the ruin of a house, probable the ruin of *the* house that is documented as *Wuthering Heights* in Brontë’s novel. The event narrated in the poem probably took place in reality and it is not only the product of Hughes’s poetic imagination, that is why it can be stated that the writing of the poem (as the majority of the poems included in *Birthday Letters*) had strong biographical motivations. Hughes’s speaker speaks to *Sylvia Plath directly*, that is why the poem shows similarities to a letter, a monologue, or to a conversation of which only one party can be read / heard by the reader. The speaker compares the addressee to novelist Emily Brontë herself and meditates on what her life was like in the moor before she died and what motivations she may have had to write her immortal novel *Wuthering Heights*. He supposes that Plath, as a female author and fellow poet, had the same

ambitions and the same feelings as Brontë had had once, when they visited the scene of the novel. “*Weren’t you twice as ambitious as Emily?*”, asks Hughes’s speaker from his dead wife.

The alter ego of Sylvia Plath described and spoken to in the poem seems to be a young, energetic and ambitious woman author who is meditating at the birthplace of her literary predecessor (?) and, at the same time, at the scene of her world-renowned novel. The scene of the poem is a group of ruins, “*among the burned out, worn-out remains of failed efforts and failed hopes*”. These lines probably refer to Emily Brontë’s tragic personal faith, since she died at young age and became an appreciated, canonised author only after her death. According to Hughes, his wife probably did not want to have the same destiny as Emily Brontë, on the contrary, she wanted to become and appreciated woman author in her life. (Examining the biographical data of Plath, it seems to be completely true, she always wanted to spasmodically become a professional writer.) “*The future had invested in you*”, claims Hughes’s speaker in the text, acknowledging that he himself knew that time that his wife was a really talented poet, just like he himself, and had the chance to become one of the greatest poets writing in English language in the 20th century. He also remembers how quickly Plath became inspired and with what a heave she wrote her poems. Comparing to Emily Brontë, Sylvia is described in the poem as a strong, decisive, ambitious representative of the literature of the present, whereas Brontë appears as a ghost-like, bitter, shadowy figure representing the past. The poem narrates that Plath had a great chance to achieve what Brontë had never managed to achieve in her life as a woman author, under the social circumstances and oppression over women intellectuals in the 19th century. Not only two biographical people, two woman authors are contrasted by Hughes’s poetic speaker, but also two ages, the literatures and the circumstances of the 19th and the 20th centuries, the present and past.

The environment described in the poem, the whole gloomy landscape of the Yorkshire moors, the wild and romantic scene of the dramatic novel *Wuthering Heights* gives a very dark and ominous atmosphere to the whole poem. Intertextuality also shows very spectacular and demonstrative power inside the poem, recalling and borrowing the atmosphere and impressiveness of Emily Brontë’s novel (and as mentioned above, also intertextually referring to Sylvia Plath’s poem having the same title, and having a similarly strong, obscure and dark atmosphere.)

Towards the end of the poem Hughes / the poetic speaker even explicitly refers to Emily Brontë’s spirit, supposing that she was envious of Plath’s poetic ambitions there, that time: “*What would stern / Dour Emily have mode of your frisky glances / And your huge hope? (...)*”

And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words, / Peered from the broken mullions / And was stilled. (...)". That is, Hughes's speaker meditates in the poem what Brontë's ghost (who was evidently *there* might have thought about Plath and her ambitions as the poet of the future and aliveness. Similarly to the novel *Wuthering Heights*, Hughes consciously presents a ghost in his remembrance / meditation-like poem in order to create the same gothic, oppressive, dark atmosphere for the reader – seemingly nothing happens on the surface, but it may be stated that in the deep structure of the poem ominous powers are hiding and waiting for the emergence.

There may be another possible interpretation of the poem that is far beyond the supposition that it is a mere remembrance, a letter- and / or dramatic monologue-like poem written by Hughes to his dead wife, just for the sake of remembrance or dialogue with Plath. It must be mentioned that it is very characteristic of the poems published in the volume *Birthday Letters* that they are very suggestive, ponderous works of art with strong subjectivity of the speaker within them, opening several possible layers of interpretation, apart from mere biographical facts or events recorded within them. It is common knowledge that the marriage of the two poets ended tragically, and – mainly due to the nervous disease of Sylvia Plath – they lived a scandalous, dissonant and extremely passionate life, and Plath had several attempted suicides before her final one causing her death. Hughes may have selected the title for his poem in order to deliberately refer to the contradictions and passionate character of his and Plath's marriage before Sylvia's death, because *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is also a story about a contradictory, extremely passionate love, having a very tragic ending. It might not be a very exaggerated assumption to suppose that Ted Hughes deliberately wanted to parallelise his and Sylvia Plath's contradictory, passionate and tragic love relationship with the romantic relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw narrated in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* – expressing that he and Sylvia had their own "private *Wuthering Heights*", and their personal, emotional life was very similar with the strong, extreme emotions resulting in bitterness and tragedies. As it is well-known, in the novel Catherine Earnshaw also dies, and Heathcliff becomes an extremely bitter and vengeful, nearly demonic man, taking a lifelong revenge on the whole Earnshaw family for the loss of his love. It is an interesting biographical fact that although Hughes himself married again some years later following the tragedy, he could never work up the death of Plath. Reading his oeuvre, The traces of guilty conscience and sense of responsibility are also observable in his poetry written after Plath's death – the letter-like poems published in *Birthday Letters*, a few months before Hughes death, can be considered as the peak of Hughes's confessional poetry about his

relationship with Plath and its contradictions, these 88 poems including *Wuthering Heights*, the poem analysed in the present essay, are the most explicit and confessional pieces of Hughes's poetry, exploring his own personal attitude towards Plath's suicide. Therefore, it can also be stated that the poetry and the private life of two individuals are mixed within the poetic world created by *Birthday Letters*, the poem called *Wuthering Heights* among them. Perhaps due to the strongly personal tone of the poems, as mentioned above, it is also hard to decide on whether the poem analysed is to be considered as a *letter*; that is, a mainly written piece of text, or rather a sort of poetic / dramatic *monologue* addressing (the ghost of?) Sylvia Plath; that is, a piece of text that can also be a manifestation of *spoken poetry* of full value that does not only exist in a written form, and is not only to be *read*.

Wuthering Heights might be considered as one of the most impressive pieces within the volume *Birthday Letters*. It refers to two other pieces of literature with the means of intertextuality; offering several possible layers of interpretations, as mentioned above, far beyond the biographical background of the author, despite the fact it is definitely a personal, confession-like work of poetry in which the poetic speaker and the biographical self of the author can be considered to be nearly identical. The poem ends up with a gloomy, multi-layered and obscure closure, raising a sense of *unfinishedness* in the reader's mind, probably consciously increasing the suggestive aesthetic power of the text. The unfinished character of the text also gives several possibilities of interpretation of different depths, making the reader be involved in the world of the poems, completing the details that are only implicitly referred to inside it.

Within the frameworks of the present essay, certainly, we do not have the chance to discuss Ted Hughes's poetic lifework in detail, but focusing on the poem called *Wuthering Heights* we may have managed to get an overview about the probably most prominent piece of Hughes's lifework, his final poetry volume entitled *Birthday Letters*. Furthermore, we may also see how a love with a tragic ending can produce wonderful pieces of poetry, and how a personal tragedy like the love of Hughes and Plath, the two maybe greatest English-speaking poets of the 20th century could serve as a background to great and valuable poetry volume, constituting a part of world literature. Moreover, parallelising the real events of Hughes and Plath's biography and the story narrated in Emily Brontë's novel, it may also become clear that literature is not always so far from life – as it is often said by people of letters, it is not always literature that imitates reality, but on the contrary – reality may also imitate literature, and although such cases can be very tragic, at least it may become clear that literature is not, should not be something completely abstract and unintelligible. On the contrary, literature is

about, is based on our everyday human life, serving as an inherent constituent part of our own reality.

TED HUGHES: *Wuthering Heights*

*Walter was guide. His mother's cousin
Inherited some Brontë soup dishes.
He felt sorry for them. Writers
Were pathetic people. Hiding from it
And making it up. But your transatlantic elation
Elated him. He effervesced
Like his rhubarb wine a bit too long:
A vintage of legends and gossip
About those poor lasses. Then,
After the Rectory, after the chaise longue
Where Emily died, and the midget hand-made books,
The elvish lacework, the dwarfish fairy-work shoes,
It was the track from Stanbury. That climb
A mile beyond expectation, into
Emily's private Eden. The moor
Lifted and opened its dark flower
For you too. That was satisfactory.
Wilder, maybe, than ever Emily ever knew it.
With wet feet and nothing on her head
She trudged that climbing side towards friends –
Probably. Dark redoubt
On the skyline above. It was all
Novel and exhilarating to you.
The book becoming a map. “Wuthering Heights”.
Withering into perspective. We got there
And it was all gaze. The open moor,
Gamma rays and decomposing starlight
Had repossessed it*

*With a kind of blackening smoulder. The centuries
Of door-bolted comfort finally amounted
To a forsaken quarry. The roofs'
Deadfall slabs were flaking, but mostly in place,
Beams and purlins softening. So hard
To imagine the life that had lit
Such a sodden, raw-stone cramp of refuge.
The floors were a rubble of stone and sheep droppings,
Doorframes, windowframes –
Gone to make picnickers' fires or evaporated.
Only the stonework – black. The sky – blue.
And the moor-wind flickering.
(indentation) The incomings,
The outgoings – how would you take up now
The clench of that struggle? The leakage
Of earnings off a few sickly bullocks
And a scatter of crazed sheep. Being cornered
Kept folk here. Was that crumble of wall
Remembering a try at a garden? Two trees
Planted for company, for a child to play under,
And to have something to stare at. Sycamores –
The girth and spread of valley twenty-year-olds,
They were probably ninety.
(indentation) You breathed it all in
With jealous, emulous sniffings. Weren't you
Twice as ambitious as Emily? Odd
To watch you, such a brisk pedant
Of your globe-circling aspirations,
Among those burned-out, worn-out remains
Of failed efforts, failed hopes –
Iron beliefs, iron necessities,
Iron bondage, already
Crumbling back to the wild stone.
(indentation) You perched*

*In one of the two trees
Just where the snapshot shows you.
Doing as Emily never did. You
Had all the liberties, having life.
The future had invested in you –
As you might say of a jewel
So brilliantly faceted, refracting
Every tint, where Emily had stared
Like a dying prisoner.
And a poem unfurled from you
Like a loose frond of hair from your nape
To be clipped and kept in a book. What would stern
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances
And your huge hope? Your huge
Mortgage of hope. The moor-wind
Came with its empty eyes to look at you,
And the clouds gazed sidelong, going elsewhere,
The heath-grass, fidgeting in its fever,
Took idiot notice of you. And the stone,
Reaching to touch your hand, found you real
And warm, and lucent, like that earlier one.
And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,
Peered from the broken mullions
And was stilled. Or was suddenly aflame
With the scorch of doubled envy. Only
Gradually quenched in understanding.*