Moonless in Byzantium

Roger Zelazny

It was a glittering hell of a machine, with ebony sides that talked to tomorrow. Its rapid teeth clicked, chewing yesterday with a sound like static electricity.

It digested the past, between mouthfuls repeating to the future, “You are mine you are mine you are mine,” and mirrored its conversant in its sides.

The man before the Robotic Overseeing Unit stroked his metal-blue jaw with his two natural fingers. His prosthetic legs bent with an unnatural springiness as he paced, waiting to be recognized. He walked within the painted area, and the guard robots swivelled to follow his movements.

Finally, the panel before him glowed. The clicking became a hum; words poured from the meshed-in cornucopia:

“William Butler Yeats, you are charged with writing on washroom walls. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” he replied, continuing to pace. “I not William Butler Yeats.”

“It is noted that you should not be. You are further charged with the illegal possession of a name, the use of illicit vocabulary, and the possession of writing instruments. How do you plead to these charges?”

“I not William Butler Yeats,” he repeated, “I no longer know what words Cutgab remove from language. What you mean by ‘writing instruments’?”

He stood still, like a crow balanced on a wire; the robots ceased their swivelling.

“When you were apprehended in the Section Nine washroom, you had in your possession four sticks and a burning-unit you had used to char their ends. You were, at that time, inscribing Sailing to Byzantium upon the wall of that same washroom. Do you deny this?”

“No,” he said.

“Then the plea is entered as ‘guilty’. It is suggested that you are also the party guilty of similar offenses over many years. Do you deny or affirm this suggestion?”

“Why not?” he shrugged. “Sure, I write them all.”

“Then you are guilty of a capital offense. You signed each of them ‘William Butler Yeats’, and the possession of a name automatically requires the maximum penalty.”

“I don’t sign them all that way,” he slurred. “Yeats don’t write them all.”

“Once would have been enough, but it is entered that you state you did not sign them all ‘William Butler Yeats’. Who wrote the others?”

“I don’t know. Some of them I just hear, remember… Others, I write myself.”

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“Admitting to the mechanical reproduction of words, legal or illegal words, lays you open to another finding of ‘guilty’⁠—Cutgab violation aught-aught-three, penalty ten, waived, since you are undergoing the maximum.”

“Thank,” he observed. “There was time when everyman privilege to write on washroom wall.”

“There was,” answered ROU, “but in those days, they wrote healthy, sexful things, to encourage the propagation of the species. You, William Butler Yeats, are an example of why such practices are no longer permitted.”

There was a high-speed chattering within the IDP drums, then ROU continued:

“You put your words together into meaningless sentences. You write of things which are not so, and when you write of things which do exist you distort reality in such a manner that it, too, becomes false. You write without purpose or utility, which is why writing itself has been abolished⁠—men always lie when they write or speak.”

The man’s pointed platinum ears twitched and fanned wide.

“For this reason you destroy language, except necessaries? For this reason you replace language with mechanical non-word? For this reason you disassembled language, like people when they break down?” He held up a claw-like fist, then clanged it against his chest. “ROU! You reduce soul to parasite! I am three hundred year old, and what remain of my body scream at you! My soul scream!”

“Contempt! Contempt!” boomed the speaker. “You have used a forbidden word!”

“And I use more, so long as I can speak!” he cried. “You not meant to do what you do! Man not a machine! He build you⁠—”

He clutched his throat. His voice-box had been deactivated. He covered his half-fleshed face with both claws and clicked to his knees.

“First,” said ROU, “no man built me. I have always existed. Inefficient man could never have realized such purity of purpose and design. I have done your species a favor and included it in my great shop. I have extended your life. I have improved upon your design. There are very few men who have protested against this, and they represented defective workmanship such as you display. Still, I salvaged what I could of them.”

The IDP drums chattered once more. Then:

“There is another question I wish to ask you. I will activate your voice-box, if you will not use any forbidden words. Signify your agreement by standing.”

The man rose to his feet. He dropped his hands and glared at the glowing panel.

“You could not have written all of those poems,” came the steady words. “Tell me why you do the things you do, and how.”

“Why?” repeated the man, searching his memories. “How?”

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It had been centuries ago, in the now-demolished Hall of Byzantium, where he had heard the last music on Earth. It was a squat structure, out of concrete-block, and it had housed the Bird.

The Bird was the last musical instrument ROU had built. Out of beaten gold, with a thousand golden eyes hidden in the sweeping slant of its tail, it had wailed in golden-throated prophecy. ROU built it when the resistance had been stronger, and art and recreation were still matters of concern.

He had heard its last concert, and had taken part in the following riots, which cost him a part of his left frontal lobe. The Bird was dismantled two days later. A medman once told him he wore one of its bright feathers in his wrist and another atop his vertebral column; it made him feel good at times, to know he carried a part of it around inside him.

Then, at a belt station one night, he had met a complete man.

Whole humans were seldom encountered. Some men were indistinguishable from ROU’s completely automatized servants.

Nearly every man alive had had some replacement work, somewhere along the line, and the older a man, the less of humanity remaining.

But the stranger was whole, with external eye-lenses, very thick ones, and a dark, non-functional piece of cloth about his shoulders⁠—and he was old. He wore a broad black ribbon at his throat, and what seemed a white half-tunic. He had on a floppy black head-covering and ankle-length trousers, and he leaned upon a golden-headed stick, which constituted an illegal prosthetic device. His white hair swept the ridges of his gaunt cheek bones, and his eyes smouldered out of the shadows.

“Who you?” he had asked.

“One out of nature,” had been the reply. “Once I was called William Butler Yeats, and once I was a golden bird, forced to sing in the travesty-hall of my Prophecy, Byzantium.”

“I not understand.”

“I rise on the gyre now, but a part of me lives in your wrist and your neck. You will remember song when singing is forgotten. You will speak when no one will listen but iron, and you, or a part of you, will restore the golden age to Earth.”

And the whole man was gone.

But often the magnified eyes appeared before him in dreams, at times the quavering voice sounded in his head; he began to remember things he did not know he had known⁠—like the things he scrawled on the walls.

\* \* \*

“I must write them,” he said. “I not know why. They come in my head and I want someone else see them, share them. I not William Butler Yeats, but what he write I put his name to. The others, I don’t.”

“You wrote one,” said ROU, “which either criticized or praised the entire bio-mechanical process.”

Flatly, ROU recited:

“Take the cylinders out of my kidneys,

The connecting-rod out of my brain,

Take the cam-shaft from out of my backbone,

And assemble the engine again.

“Which was it?” he asked. “Much may depend on your answer.”

“I not know,” said the man. “It just come in my head. I not even know who writes it…”

“That, then, will be all,” finished the Robotic Overseeing Unit. “You will be exposed to a gas which will destroy your nervous system, and the rest of you will be disassembled. Have you anything else to say?”

“Yes,” answered the man, scratching the air with his hooked fingers. “You say I not have soul. You say I be dismantle and make useful. But I say I have soul, and it live in all of me, metal and flesh. Tear me down, and sooner or later a part of me turn up in you. When that day come, machine, you stop! I pray to moon and widening gyre that it be soon! I swear by moon and widening gyre! I pray to night, and I swear⁠—”

His voice ceased.

“Contempt,” said the machine. “You are a useless unit.”

The panel went dark. The guard robots rolled into the painted area where the man stood. They carried him along a corridor, to the room where death oozed from the walls. His vocal mechanism clicked back on, but there was no one to talk to.

“I shall have name!” he told the guards, as they thrust him into the room. But they did not hear him.

He plunged sharp fingers through the flesh of his thigh as the door slammed. Choking, he bloodied his last wall⁠—

IF I BE BOLT I STICK IN YOU THROAT

IF I BE NUT I BREAK IN YOU GUT

A Word from Zelazny

In the issue in which this story appeared, Zelazny provided the following autobiographical information: “In 1410, when the valiant Poles broke the charge of the Teutonic Knights at Tannenberg, my ancestors cleverly escaped the fighting by forging the armor⁠—hence, the name ‘Zelazny,’ which is derived from the Polish word for ‘iron.’

“I was born in Cleveland, and began reading sf when I began reading (I still have many of my battered issues of Captain Future). I took my B.A. at Western Reserve University and my M.A. at Columbia (in English and Comparative Literature); as an undergrad I minored in Psychology. My Master’s thesis was entitled ‘Two Traditions and Cyril Tourneur: An Examination of Morality and Humor Comedy Conventions in “The Revenger’s Tragedy.” ’

“I trained as a guided missile launcher crewman at Fort Bliss, Texas, which was nice, because I could get into Juarez for the Sunday bullfights. I fence épée, raise turtles, enjoy exotic meals (except turtle soup), am 25, and, looking upwards, I think I talk too much.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This story prompted a letter to Amazing which stated, “I still fail to see the usefulness of Roger Zelazny’s writing. It is offbeat, and it is hard to discover exactly what this author is trying to put forth. Certainly his words are meant to stir up thought, they can’t be meant for entertainment. What is the public reaction to him?” Editor Cele Goldsmith replied, “Most readers seem to like Zelazny. But how, in SF, can you draw such a line between thought-provocation and entertainment?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The final lines of the story were not from Yeats, but were Zelazny’s own improvisation. “The end-piece that I wrote was actually longer than what appeared in the magazine, but the editor cut it down. (An improvement actually, now that I think of it.)”⁠[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notes

Much of Zelazny’s early fiction featured or referred to the poets whom he admired; in this case, the protagonist William Butler Yeats is named for the poet whose works included Sailing to Byzantium and Second Coming, both referred to in this story. The title of the story alludes to the poem Sailing to Byzantium. The poem Second Coming begins: “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,” and ends “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, || Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

The repeated reference to writing on walls may be an allusion to the Book of Daniel in the Bible, in which Daniel interprets for King Belshazzar the prophetic and fatal words on the wall that no one else could read or understand. Cornucopia is a horn of plenty; meshed-in cornucopia refers to the speaker from which the Robot Overseeing Unit’s voice emitted. IDP stands for Integrated Data Processing. The poem which begins “Take the cylinders out of my kidneys” is one verse from a well known World War I aviator’s song; anonymously written, its title is variably “For the Young Aviator,” “The Dying Airman” and “The Handsome Young Airman.”

1. Amazing, December 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amazing, March 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Letter from Roger Zelazny to Henry-Luc Planchat dated March 16, 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)