Art and Death in W.B. Yeats' *The Tower*

"That is no country for old men"

-W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

Age weighed heavily on William Butler Yeats, and his poetry, especially later in his life, reflected that. Yeats' fears around his increasing age drove his poetry to some of the greatest work of his life. As Irish literary critic Thomas Rice Henn notes, there is "no precedent in literary history for a poet who produces his greatest work between the ages of 50 and 75" (qtd in Pruitt 149), yet Yeats managed to pull off such a feat. The line above opens "Sailing to Byzantium", the first poem in Yeats' collection *The Tower*, which he released at 65-years-old, and the poem quickly established itself as one of Yeats' most interesting, well-respected works. The poem begins with an almost bitter observation of the joy the youth experience from physical pleasures, but the speaker's interests lie more in eternal knowledge. The speaker goes on to lament the triviality of an old man and his insignificance in the world unless his soul sings and continues to sing the older he gets, creating a clear responsibility for people as they age. The speaker claims that no school exists to teach him how to sing, however, and "therefore [he has] sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium" ("Sailing" 15-16), an ancient prosperous city at what is now Istanbul. He then moves to asking divine angels to take his soul and free it from its mortal form in an overtly suicidal plea, seeking to find more knowledge in the afterlife that he cannot find in the physical world. The speaker ends by saying that he will not take a natural form ever again, preferring a form like those from Greek art. Once he has taken his new form, he wants to sing to the people of Byzantium of the past, present, and future.

William Butler Yeats (commonly referred to as W.B. Yeats) pursued supernatural, occult ideas his entire life. Despite the strong Catholic Irish tradition and his family's Protestant beliefs, Yeats never identified with either tradition and instead showed a strong interest in Irish folklore and other niche spiritual ideas (Britannica). Yeats established himself and his occult interests early in his life, writing *The Celtic Twilight*, a collection of stories about fairies and other folklore gathered from rural Irish communities, in 1893, and continued this passion into the rest of his work (Britannica). Mere days after his marriage in 1917, his wife "surprised" him by trying automatic writing, a process where mediums attempt to channel spirits to write through them (*A VIsion* 8). Yeats and his wife Georgiana Hyde-Lees found quite a bit of success in this, eventually compiling their findings into a book called *A Vision*. Many critics point out that at this time though, Yeats likely had strong feelings for his long-time love Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult (both of whom had rejected his marriage proposals at least once), and Hyde-Lees, recognizing that her new marriage did not have much strength even on their honeymoon, wanted to try to save it, as well as get some of her own work published, as women at the time could not often get work published unless they were automatic writers (Ludolph). Regardless of the true source of the "metaphors for poetry" Yeats and Hyde-Lees found in automatic writing, Yeats believed them to have come from the spirits of the dead, and this belief drove nearly all of the poetry he wrote for the rest of his life.

The final poem to *The Tower*, "All Souls' Night" bears many similar themes to "Sailing to Byzantium", opening by saying ghosts have a right to come out on All Souls' Night, for death sharpened their palate and now they know to drink from the wine-breath, while the living still drink from the whole wine. The speaker then claims to have "a marvellous things to say" ("All

Souls'" 15), but the living only mock it. The speaker calls many souls he knew through his life, beginning with Horton, a good friend of his who loved strange ideas. The death of his wife devastated Horton though, leading him to think only of his wife, God, and death. Next he calls a woman named Florence Emery, who, fearing the signs of age appearing on her face, moved away to teach at a school far away from anyone she knew. Before her death, she talked about the soul's journey, and how the moon throws it about whenever the sun sets. Finally, the speaker calls MacGregor Mathers, a friend of the speaker despite the speaker finding Mathers untrustworthy and insane. The speaker relates to Mathers' disinterest in romance and sex, for his passion for ghosts, and other strange ideas made him less interested in relationships. The speaker relates to certain aspects of all the souls he calls though, revealing his deep reverence for the dead. Once he has called these souls, the speaker points out the irrelevance of names, and that "The fume of muscatel" ("All Souls'" 83) would satisfy any dead soul. The speaker reiterates that they have truths to tell, even though the living mock it, using much of the same language from the beginning of the poem. The speaker ends the poem by saying that they will hold onto these truths until they die as well. "All Souls' Night" elaborates on the imagery and symbols from "Sailing to Byzantium", bookending *The Tower*, and helping to demonstrate the speaker's aims to die so he can continue to learn and create in the afterlife.

In "Sailing to Byzantium", the speaker immediately creates a focus on age, contrasting young and old people to convey the speaker's discomfort in the world. Even a cursory read-through of the poem shows that age and mortality weigh heavily on the speaker, making him uncomfortable in his body. The first line of the poem, "That is no country for old men" ("Sailing" 1), immediately reveals that the aging speaker feels out of place in the world. The

quick terse nature of the point conveys the harshness the speaker feels as an old man. The point does not even take up a full line, suggesting that the point, along with old men are merely small parts of the world, not worthy of their own place. The speaker quickly leaves the point about old age and shifts to focusing on "The young/In one another's arms" ("Sailing" 1-2), and all other life, "Caught in that sensual music all neglect/Monuments of unageing intellect" ("Sailing" 7-8). The soft consonant sounds in these lines create a somber, sympathetic feeling towards young people, contrasting the speaker to them, as though he looks down on them with nostalgia. The speaker implies that age has made him less interested in love, and more interested in knowledge, which the speaker sees as eternal and more important, separating the speaker from other people because he does not see any way to relate to them.

Instead, the speaker relates more to the dead than the living, evident in "All Souls' Night", the final poem in *The Tower*. Throughout the poem, the speaker writes about the different souls he calls upon on All Souls' Night, a night where ghosts have a right to enter the world. He opens the poem by talking about a man named Horton, who became stricken with grief after his wife died. The speaker introduces Horton by writing that "He loved strange thought/And knew that sweet extremity of pride/That's called platonic love." ("All Souls'" 21-23). The speaker intentionally notes first that Horton "loved strange thought" and knew platonic love even before mentioning his wife to show that Horton, like the speaker, had interests beyond romance and sex, a sentiment noted at the start of "Sailing to Byzantium", showing that the speaker can relate to Horton. MacGregor Mathers, another soul the speaker calls upon, also presents qualities the speaker relates to. The speaker notes that even though he thought that Mathers was a dishonest man, they were still friends. After introducing him, the speaker notes

that loneliness drove Mathers mad, “For meditations upon unknown thought/Make human intercourse grow less and less” (“All Souls’” 74-75). Similar to the speaker, Mathers had no real interest in sex and romance, which drove him mad, but more interestingly, he had no interest because of his focus on “unknown thought”. Like the speaker from “Sailing to Byzantium”, Mathers apparently gave up romance in favor of pursuing knowledge and thinking about new ideas. At the end of the Mather’s section in the poem, the speaker explicitly notes that Mathers is a ghost, reiterating the idea that the speaker relates more to the dead than the living.

Because the speaker feels more connected to the dead than the living, the speaker would prefer to die and join those he does relate to, an idea clearly expressed in “Sailing to Byzantium”. Alongside the theme of discomfort around life and youth, the poem also contains reflections on the speaker’s own age, and how it affects him. The second stanza continues the speaker’s discomfort, opening with the line, “An aged man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat upon a stick” (“Sailing” 9-10). A similar sentiment to the first line of the first stanza, the second stanza opens with an abrupt observation of the insignificance of the elderly. The harsh sounds of the lines create an angry bitter tone, indicating that the speaker’s discontent with the point, showing that he sees no more use for his body, as age has made him obsolete. In the third stanza, the speaker takes the ideas from his reflections in the beginning of the poem and asks God’s angels to “Consume [his] heart away; sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal” (“Sailing” 21-22). The speaker acknowledges his mortality, wishing to die, as his aging body only traps his soul. The speaker’s thoughts on mortality culminate in the third stanza, where he finally spells out his discontent in his body, and his desire for his heart to move on to another plane, as it has learned everything it can from the material world.

As noted by some critics on Yeats, the speaker's desire to die demonstrates the interesting idea that dying will grant them immortality. More than normal immortality though, the speaker appears to seek immortality by shedding their humanity. Virginia Pruitt, a professor at Washburn University, notes that "'Sailing to Byzantium' delineates the pursuit of an intellectual, or, if you will, spiritual, passion in order to efface the physical infirmities of old age" (Pruitt 150), showing that speaker's already established aim to avoid the the problems that come with old age, but goes on to point out that the speaker's process includes "the suppression of the emotions associated with the heart" (Pruitt 150). Kenneth Burke, a well known 20th century writer and critic, echoes a similar idea, relating the speaker's ideas to the poet John Keats: "there is in Yeats an intensification of Keats' vision of immortalization, not as a person, but by conversion into a fabricated thing" (qtd in Campbell 585). The idea of the speaker losing their humanity to gain immortality hints at a broader spiritual idea that the speaker has and reflects Yeats' belief in the afterlife and the spirits that wrote to him through his wife that inspired *The Tower* and other works of his.

The speaker's goal extends beyond their dream of immortality however, and the speaker reveals their true goal through a few key metaphors across the poems, the first being the title "Sailing to Byzantium" itself. Initially, given the morbid language of the poem, Byzantium appears as a metaphor for heaven or at least the afterlife. The founders of Byzantium built the ancient city on fertile ground, and its strategic location to both the Greeks and Romans resulted in a prosperous economy and a long life for the city (Wasson), so the assumption makes sense, at least on the surface. The introduction to *A Vision*, a philosophy book also written by Yeats helps to elaborate on the allusion, however. In the introduction, Yeats, while discussing his work

before The Tower, writes that "Browning's Paracelsus did not obtain the secret until he had written his spiritual history at the bidding of his Byzantine teacher" (A Vision 9). Paracelsus, a Swiss physician from the 16th century, rejected traditional education and medicine, seeking education from everywhere, believing that truth exists in all places and ignoring it neglects vast amounts of truth (Hargrave). The multiple mentions to Byzantium compare Paracelsus' pursuit to the speaker's, especially considering that The Tower was Yeat's first collection after writing *A Vision*, revealing the speaker's goal in life: to find eternal truth. By making "Sailing to Byzantium" the opening poem to The Tower, the speaker establishes this journey immediately, coloring the entire collection with it.

Aside from the reference to Byzantium though, the speaker also mentions singing repeatedly in the poem and collection, establishing what the speaker intends to do once they find the eternal truths they seek. References to singing, as well as dancing, appear in the entirety of *The Tower*, beginning in the second stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium", where the speaker regrets that no schools exist to teach him to sing, and "therefore, [they] have sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium" ("Sailing" 15-16). Knowing that sailing to Byzantium refers to the speaker's pursuit of knowledge and truth, this line reveals that when one sings, they profess their knowledge and the truth. When the speaker says that "A man is but a paltry thing,/ A tattered coat on a stick, unless/ Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/ For every tatter in its mortal dress" ("Sailing" 9-12), he refers to the soul using its experience gained with age, the tatters in its coat, to tell people the truth it has learned. The speaker quite explicitly ties a person's value to their knowledge. As the soul gets older, it needs to sing louder, because it has more experiences to share, to aid others in the pursuit of knowledge. Establishing their

responsibility to share their knowledge, the speaker shifts their role Paracelsus to the Byzantine teacher Yeats referenced in *A Vision*, indicating the speaker's desire to teach new pupils.

The third and fourth stanzas of "Sailing to Byzantium" support the interpretations of these symbols, more explicitly stating the speaker's intentions to continue telling the truth they learn. The speaker seeks to sing louder and louder, and dying only progresses the speaker in his journey. The third stanza conveys this alongside the speaker's desire to die, evident from the start of the stanza where he refers to God's aforementioned angels not as angels, but as "sages" ("Sailing" 17). A sage still connotes divine, holy imagery like an angel, but also invokes wisdom. The speaker sees the angels who he asks to take his soul from his body as wise and experienced, and seeks to learn from them. Shortly after, the speaker asks the sages to "be the singing-masters of [his] soul" ("Sailing" 20). Because singing typically bears a more positive connotation, the speaker makes his death seem more like another step in his life, allowing him to learn more and to use the sages as the vehicle through which he will continue to sing. The speaker's goals do not stop at learning more, however; once out of the world, the speaker says that he may "set upon a golden bough to sing/ To lords and ladies of Byzantium/ Of what is past, or passing, or to come" ("Sailing" 30-32). The speaker does not just seek knowledge, he seeks to find meaning in gaining knowledge and conveying it to others. Therefore, even in death, his soul does not derive value from just learning, but from singing, conveying the experiences, ideas, and knowledge he has gained.

"All Souls' Night" reiterates the speaker's idea that the dead have more experience and intelligence, furthering the speaker's reverence for the dead and desire to die himself. Released as the epilogue to *A Vision* and as the last poem in *The Tower*, "All Souls' Night" sums up many

of the ideas in the collection, offering the final notes for the reader. The speaker opens the poem explaining that a ghost may come out on All Souls' Night, for "His element is so fine/Being sharpened by his death/To drink from the wine-breath/While our gross palates drink from the whole wine" ("All Souls'" 7-10). The speaker takes care to note the dead's superiority over the living, using the analogy of drinking wine as an example. Many wine experts agree that allowing wine to sit in the air for some time before drinking it—or letting it "breathe"—enhances the wine, releasing some of the flavor and aroma ("Allowing Wine"), and the speaker's point that the dead know this while the living do not makes the argument that the dead know more than the living. The speaker reuses the same metaphor towards the end of the poem, but modifies it slightly, claiming that "No living man can drink from the whole wine" ("All Souls'" 85). This line elaborates on the metaphor from before, pointing out that the dead know more not because of the living's ignorance, but because of the living's inability to know fully, explaining why the speaker so desperately seeks death.

The strong imagery and metaphors that Yeats infused through his poems engaged me more than any other aspect of his poems. Yeats' symbolism largely made him well-regarded and famous and they did an incredible job of capturing my imagination and immersing me in the ideas that the speaker conveyed. Reading his poetry reminded me of the experience of watching a more abstract film or TV show, like *Twin Peaks* or *Donnie Darko*; the powerful imagery, even though it may seem disconnected, engrossed me with the clear emotions it sought to convey. The imagery in these poems weaves a beautiful picture of the speaker's thoughts, fears and desires, allowing me to understand, even though I do not believe in many of the ideas the speaker presents.

The speaker presents a lot of strange ideas surrounding the afterlife and how they plan to continue growing as a spirit, and while I could not necessarily believe in this idea, the way the speaker presented their ideas gave me a clear world that I could understand and relate to. Even though I could not stand in solidarity with the speaker's beliefs, I do not think the poems sought to make me do that. Rather, the speaker presents these ideas through poetry to enable the reader to understand him, as people would simply laugh off his ideas if he said them directly, an idea reflected in "All Souls' Night". I think these poems represent a deeply personal struggle within the speaker, not commentary on an outside world or group. The speaker uses the complexities and intricacies of poetry to convey difficult, strange, and unpopular ideas in a way such that he can be, at the very least, understood.

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