

Byzantium: City of Death

Hypothesis

Yeats' poems: "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" have formed the way that we see Byzantium today

Sources/Limitations of Study

The primary sources that are most important in this examination of Byzantium are the poems themselves: "Byzantium," and "Sailing to Byzantium," by W.B. Yeats. Through a close critical examination of these two poems, a vision of the Byzantines can be formed, whether it is accurate or not remains to be seen.

Sailing to Byzantium

I

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

II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

III

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

IV

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come

-W.B. Yeats

Byzantium

The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

-W.B. Yeats

Secondary

Cameron, Averil. *The Byzantines*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006. N. pag. Print.

<http://www.mrbauld.com/yeats1bz.html>

<http://www.mrbauld.com/yeats2bz.html>

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0477348/>

Perspectives/Awareness of Perspectives not taken

Many people associate the word “Byzantine” with something that is complicated, or having to do with money and the complicated Byzantine banking system. This association is not explored.

Discussion

...But Byzantium is hard to grasp, and “The Byzantines even more so.” The text does not start out with defining Byzantium, but by identifying some key points of confusion:

- “How significant was the supposed separation of the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire in AD 395?”
- “Did Byzantium begin with the reign of Constantine the Great (proclaimed Emperor at York, 25 July AD 306), or with the dedication of Constantinople (AD 330) or later, perhaps in the sixth century or the seventh?”
- “Was Byzantium a society, a state or an empire?”
- “What were its geographical limits at any one period?”
- “Who were its inhabitants, how were they defined and what did they think of themselves?”

(*The Byzantines*, 1)

Later in the same chapter the mystery surrounding Byzantium is further described: “to most Europeans...the very word, Byzantium, suggests something exotic and (probably) bureaucratic and even corrupt...In the western European popular consciousness mention of Byzantium attracts two main responses: either it is still thought of as irrelevant and backward, the precursor of the Ottoman Empire and somehow implicated in the religious and political problems of the

contemporary Balkans, or else it seems in some mysterious way powerfully attractive, associated as it is with icons and spirituality or with the revival of religion in post-Communist Europe” (*The Byzantines*, 3)

The more we learn about Byzantium, the more confusing it becomes. We find out that even though the city was called Constantinople, we still call them Byzantines, but they called themselves Romans, and on top of that they spoke Greek!

William butler Yeats took the unknown and transformed into a reality of his own. An examination of the poems, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Byzantium* can give us an inside look into the imagination of Yeats, who takes a historical empire and turns it into a city of death.

Evidence

A. Close Textual Reading of “Sailing to Byzantium”

The poem starts with the words: “That is no country for old men.” Automatically the mind is drawn to the movie of the same name. Certainly the movie title is an allusion to the poem, but in contemporary society the movie will undoubtedly be more recognizable and familiar than Yeats’ poem. imdb.com tells us that the tagline for the movie is: “There are no clean getaways.” This statement, as well as the plot of the movie: “violence and mayhem ensue after a hunter stumbles upon some dead bodies, a stash of heroin and more than \$2 million in cash near the Rio Grande” give us a third-hand look at Byzantium’s reputation. The movie genre is described as: crime, drama, thriller and western; the movie keywords are: “Money,” “killer,” “murder,” “sheriff” and “tragedy.” The poem itself is about a getaway, an escape from a world perhaps of money, killers and tragedy, and for certain a world of “birds in the trees” and “mackerel-crowded seas.”

Still in the first stanza, Yeats refers to “those dying generations,” presumably the “old men.” The referral to Byzantium as a place to die may have influenced the seemingly prevalent view of Byzantium as a fallen Empire. It is known more for its downfall than for its many years of life. This pause in time that Yeats describes as “sensual music” and “unaging intellect” is representative of the contemporary view of the lost and romantic empire, frozen in time.

The second stanza reveals Yeats’ image of Byzantium as having a magical quality that can go against the hands of time. In Byzantium, “an aged man” can escape his mortality by the soul clapping its hands and singing louder. The speaker of the poem has therefore decided to sail to Byzantium.

Stanza three is full of imagery. The speaker describes his destination with rich words such as “gold mosaic,” “holy fire,” “desire,” and “artifice of eternity.” Gold mosaics induce the reader to imagine architectural riches. The words “artifice of eternity” brings to mind yet again the everlasting quality that Yeats’ uses to describe Byzantium: unchanging and everlasting.

The speaker of the poem confirms his wish to become immortal in the final stanza by rejecting the natural form in favour of “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make.” This form of gold exists in “what is past, or passing or to come.”

Also noteworthy in “Sailing to Byzantium” is the fact that the speaker of the poem never reaches his destination, that is, he stops documenting before his experience in Byzantium. Perhaps the next poem, “Byzantium” is a continuation of his journey.

A whole poem later, presumably the same speaker finally arrives at Byzantium. The speaker does not seem to view Byzantium as a geographical area as much as a concept or a state of mind. While in Byzantium, the speaker encounters some sort of ghost, which he calls a superman, but also “death-in-life and life-in-death.” The third stanza echoes the second in that they explain the reality of the city as experienced by the speaker of the poem. One possible interpretation of their entrance to the city is death. The speaker is not longer alive, therefore he can cast off his natural form to embrace changeless metal and reject “all the complexities of mire or blood.” This explanation portrays Byzantium in a new way.

Byzantium is not a living city, but the destination of the dead. The holy fire has stripped the speaker of his mortal qualities, and left him without a reality.

The fourth stanza reinforces the immortality of the dead empire (referred to as city by Yeats) by drawing our attention to the “agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.” The flames do not seem to be fed by anything, and yet they are continuous.

Finally the last stanza reinforces the idea of Byzantium as the destination of souls after death. The arrival of “spirit after spirit” causes the smithies to keep working, to give each soul a golden (or immortal) body as their natural bodies are cast away.

B. Question: What do you think of when you hear the word “Byzantium?”

Subject 1: I think of like a kingdom from the Middle East with lots of horses and stuff, kind of like Arabian Nights...

Subject 2: Umm, maybe like ancient Egypt?

Subject 3: Not a clue, I’ve never heard that word before.

Subject 4: Kind of a magical, mysterious kingdom, maybe with ghosts and demons.

Subject 5: Wasn’t Byzantium the city that became Constantinople, but then that became Istanbul?

Subject 6: I think of Greece, of Grecian architecture and culture. It’s also an adjective, meaning complicated.

Subject 7: I think Byzantium is kind of like a Valhalla was for the Vikings, like a place where you go after you die.

Subject 8: I think of a ghost city.

Subject 9: hmm... maybe a kingdom with lots of treasures

Subject 10: Byzantium could be an era of history, I think Greek, like “The Byzantium Era.”

After these 10 interviews, I decided to examine the poems “Sailing to Byzantium,” and “Byzantium,” by W.B. Yeats. I had also contemplated studying the banking system, if that had come up more in the interviews, but the magical image seemed to appear more in my extremely small sample of the population.

Relation/significance to contemporary society or education

It's always important to be aware of the twists and turns our history can have, and its interpretation. Sometimes we have views of certain subjects that come from completely unrelated sources or ideas. The Byzantines are one example of this, which makes them an ideal resource to examine.

Conclusions

Because the Byzantines are a society that our culture knows little about, it allows us to create our own images of the society, which makes it more appealing to us. The mysterious elements of this forgotten society evidently inspired Yeats to create his own interpretation of this society, one which has influenced the current view of Byzantium as an empire, but also as a literary concept. The poem does not answer any of the questions posed in Cameron's introduction, but instead adds to the questions and confusion surrounding the elusive empire.