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### **Singing on the Golden Bough**

Unity of culture in *News From Nowhere* and the poetry of W. B. Yeats

"I will arise and go now," W. B. Yeats wrote in his 1890 poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Yeats and his childhood hero, designer and author William Morris, took journeys away from Victorian modernity to create works that were both functional—serving their individual political aims—and also of at-times astonishing beauty. Morris' *News from Nowhere* takes the form of a journey through an imagined socialist utopia, the residents of which have expressed Morris' own desire to return to his romanticized idea of the Middle Ages on a grand scale, developing a communal society of people cooperatively enjoying work and life. Yeats' early work often includes journeys into the fairyland of peasant lore or around a romantically-wild version of Ireland in an attempt to call upon nationalist sympathies in the decades immediately preceding the Irish Rebellion of the 1910s. For both Morris and Yeats, what T. McAlindon calls "unity of culture" (318), or the reintegration of art into society via the beautification of ordinary things and the inspiration of art by common people, is paramount to their aesthetic and their political aims, to the point where they gloss over inaccuracies in their ideas of the medieval era and Irish peasantry. Both men believed that this unity of culture found its best expression in sixth-century Byzantium, the "mother...of popular art" (McAlindon 315). Because of the political aims in their writing, both have found longevity that their peers did not.

## I William Morris

William Morris, born in 1834, was a man out of his time. He longed for a return to the cooperative spirit of the guilds and feudal system of the Middle Ages, and to the style of architecture which he thought was derived from this spirit. He loathed the fruits of the Industrial Revolution; the "smoke-vomiting chimneys" (Morris 48) of new factories and the devastation of green spaces by urban sprawl contributed to his "hatred of Victorianism [and his] attempt to fight back the insidious pressure of respectability" (Thompson 62). Morris withdrew from modernity into an imaginary Middle Ages. He was inspired by the new scholarship relating to the medieval period, which offered a "reconstruction of a picture of the Middle Ages...as a real *community* of human beings—an organic, pre-capitalist community with values and an art of its own, sharply contrasted with those of Victorian England" (Harris 28). For Morris, the Middle Ages represented a society on the cusp of capitalism but where people were still tied to each other through the feudal system of dependencies and the craft guilds. The people of this society, being pre-industrial, had a much stronger connection to the natural world, which Morris tried to regain in his own time. One such attempt created the firm of Morris & Co., a workshop of furniture design and manufacture run according to the principles of the old medieval guilds: collaboration on design, hand-crafted work, and involvement of the artisan in all stages of production.

Another attempt was *News from Nowhere*, the story of one man's journey into the future and his slow discovery of a utopian vision. One of the most striking aspects of that vision is the degree to which it is built upon medieval foundations, seeming to go back to the Middle Ages, turn around, and continue at its own pace, as if the Renaissance and the ensuing rapid changes to

society had never happened. The factories have been torn down and trees allowed to retake their rightful place, Kensington Gardens have been returned to a wild state, and a particular bridge over the Thames, disgusting to the narrator because of its iron construction, has been replaced with a bridge built of stone, showing "no marks of the grimy sootiness which I was used to on every London building more than a year old" (Morris 48). The people have also given up the elaborate mansions and clothing of the Victorians and returned to a simpler way of living. Morris' narrator, William Guest, says, "I fairly felt as if I were alive in the fourteenth century; a sensation helped out by the costume of the people" (61), which he has earlier described as "somewhat between that of the ancient classical costume and the simpler forms of the fourteenth century garments, though...clearly not an imitation of either." This allows women to be "clothed like women, not upholstered like arm-chairs, as most women of our time are" (53). Again there is the distaste for the trappings of Victorian life that set humanity apart from its natural state.

Structures such as the brick-and-wood guest house Guest stays in are a reaction to the fact that "everywhere, at every turning, Morris and his friends were confronted with the degradation of the human spirit at the hands of industrial capitalism—in the railway stations, slum quarters and bogo-Gothic buildings of Victorian prosperity" (Thompson 27). Morris views the architecture of the Victorians as symptomatic of their disconnect with the natural world and each other, just as the Gothic buildings of the later Middle Ages indicated to both Morris and his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries the high point of the cooperative spirit of the guilds (Harris 16). Morris' ambition in *News from Nowhere* is to extrapolate this cooperative spirit from artisans into a political and economic system.

For example, in Chapter VI, Guest is astonished to find that the people of this utopia have no concept of buying and selling. Dick, his guide, says that paying for goods and services

"seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom" (50). When Guest sees a pipe he admires at a market, he is encouraged to take it, along with a new pouch of tobacco, for nothing at all. The narrator is later told by Hammond, an old man, that "the reward of labour" is "the reward of creation" (122), rather than money or goods; one merely creates what one wants and takes what one needs, and the distribution magically works itself out. This style of labor and distribution is the antithesis of the Victorian capitalist system, where workers produce shoddy goods for a shoddy wage with which they buy more shoddy goods. For Morris, the contrast stems from what Jennifer Harris terms the "freedom and joy in labour" (16) that the inhabitants of Nowhere—and the medieval artisans—have. This freedom leads to the mindset necessary to make the beautiful architecture and objects that characterize Nowhere, which encourage a happier populace. Society and art are thus integrated in a way that had been lost after the Renaissance, when the rise of the individual over the collective effort (emblemized by Shakespeare's and Spenser's achievements) ensured that artists were separated from the common people (McAlindon 316). "Unity of culture" is found with the recombination of the two.

And yet Nowhere is not a mere imitation of medieval workmanship; Harris writes that the architecture of Nowhere "reflects its own times and is produced under the conditions responsible for the greatness of medieval architecture" (16). The entire world, while colored significantly by Morris' preoccupation with medieval architecture and means of production, still manages to have its own character. Nowhere is not altogether hostile to technology; Roger the weaver does "a little with machine printing and composing" (58), and another one of Dick's friends says that while "this is not an age of inventions...we are now content to use such of [the last epoch's] inventions as we find handy" (Morris 192). Morris, always viewing himself as an artist, recognizes the need to go beyond history and make a unique stamp on the world instead of

blindly copying the achievements of earlier ages. The people of Nowhere, putting this principle in action, leave behind the feudal system of medieval Europe and the class system of Morris' own day. No one is set above anyone else by birth or by money, and all those that Morris' narrator meets are united in their purpose to live happily by being engaged in "genuinely amusing work" (68). William Butler Yeats would in later decades aspire to such a reinvention of traditional stories.

## II W. B. Yeats

Yeats was born in 1865, a generation after Morris. Yeats' father, John, a painter in the Pre-Raphaelite style, inculcated his son with the ideals of the Brotherhood. Morris was one of Yeats' childhood heroes, and "Yeats, as he admitted, learned from Morris that 'unity of being'...was dependant on unity of culture" (McAlindon 318). Though rejecting the Ruskin-Morris socialist interpretation of Gothic architecture, Yeats, like the Pre-Raphaelites, believed that popular art should express a cultural unity that had been lost with the rise of giants of individualism such as Shakespeare and Spenser. One of his greatest annoyances was the debasement of popular art by Victorian middle class affection for artifice and disregard for popular oral and written traditions (307-8).

Yeats followed in Morris' footsteps most notably in his rejection of Victorian life for something older and more primitive. Yeats' retreat, however, was not into the Middle Ages but to the folklore of the Irish peasantry; Mary Helen Thuente describes it as "the antidote for nineteenth-century England" (6). Yeats himself makes specific reference to the plagues of modernity early on in career with "Innisfree," writing:

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
 I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
 While I stand on the roadway, or on pavements grey,  
 I hear it in the deep heart's core. (9-12)

The "grey" roads stick out in sharp contrast to the lushness with which Yeats has earlier described his childhood island haunt, and the phrasing used, are made to seem almost ephemeral, while the natural simplicity of Innisfree continues on indefinitely in "the heart's core."

Other retreats include those into the supernatural and historical realms. In 1886's "The Stolen Child," the child in question is carried off by fairies "to the waters and the wild...From a world more full of weeping than he can understand" (53-55), while in 1892's "Who Goes with Fergus?", the poet asks,

Who will go drive with Fergus [ancient Irish king] now,  
 And pierce the deep wood's woven shade,  
 And dance upon the level shore?  
 Young man, lift up your russet brow,  
 And lift your tender eyelids, maid,  
 And brood on hopes and fear no more. (1-6)

Niamh calls in "The Hosting of the Sidhe" (1893): "Away, come away: / Empty your heart of its mortal dream" (4-5). Many of the poems in Yeats' first three collections are thus concerned with journeys away from the confusing and painful morass of Victorian life—or even life, the "mortal dream," in general—into an older, simpler world. Characters such as Fergus and Niamh perform the same function as Dick in *News from Nowhere*, guiding the Victorian Irishman or -woman into a wholly natural, Irish world. The Irishness of these characters and settings is of paramount importance to the idea that they are not only calls away from the modern world, but also calls to

action—to reclaim the image of the Irishman from the English idea of a "sentimental, superstitious buffoon" (Thunete 9) or a poor, illiterate drunkard and develop a more flattering image in the context of a national literature.

To that end, Yeats repudiated the "artificial, middle-class tradition" of the Irish ballad writers of the mid-nineteenth-century, writers such as Young Irelanders William Allingham or Samuel Ferguson, and "set out to know the Irish peasantry for himself by reading the folklore collected among them earlier in the century and going out among them and collecting their folklore" (Thunete 31). Yeats rather egotistically implies as much in "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892):

Nor may I less by counted one  
 With Davis, Magnan, Ferguson,  
 Because, to him who ponders well,  
 My rhymes more than their rhyming tell  
 Of things discovered in the deep...  
 For the elemental creatures go  
 About my table to and fro... (17-24)

"Elemental creatures" aside, Yeats did quite a lot to combat the overly-sentimental work of previous Irish poets and to educate the Irish about their folklore. He edited such anthologies as 1887's *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*, and, with the help and financial backing of Lady Augusta Gregory, founded the Abbey Theatre, which styled itself the Irish National Theatre, in 1904. For Yeats, it was important that Irish art be inspired by the common Irish people, and subjects not confined to the popular pastoral romances of the day (such as those with which he began his career). Thus, his poems from this period are filled with references from the Celtic oral tradition: for example, "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1897) is a retelling of an ancient myth in which Aengus, once visited by a fairy, cannot rest until he beholds her again and for all

time. "Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland" bursts with Irish symbolism; the trope of the young woman, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, as Ireland is one of many that Yeats returns to over the course of his early work. In this, Yeats demonstrates his enthusiasm for Morris' ideal of unity of culture: the high art of the poet is reintegrated with "lowly" peasant culture.

However, like Morris and his Middle Ages, Yeats was not quite honest with himself or his readers about the Irish peasant. While he claimed to draw upon a folk tradition of heroic Celtic kings and fantastic fairies, the images that come to mind today when one thinks of Cuchulain or Niamh were actually developed by Yeats and his contemporaries. In addition, the peasant from whose oral tradition these figures supposedly come from was in essence a manufactured product. The Irish Literary Revival was the "period that the Irish peasant was fundamentally 'created' and characterized for posterity" (Hirsch "Irish Peasant" 1116) when Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Synge, and their ilk "aestheticized" (1117) a diverse group of rural Irish people into one monolithic, romantic "peasant," a word that was all but unknown in the places where the people the Revivalists were writing about came from; they referred to themselves as "the people" (1123). Despite acts such as John Synge's four-month sojourn in the Aran Islands, a gulf as big as that between Morris and the Middle Ages existed between these upper-class Anglo-Irish writers and the peasants they wrote about. Inevitably, their writings would not be true to life. And yet after centuries of English domination—under which the Irish language and almost any sense of Irish culture were stamped out as thoroughly as possible—any literature paying attention to Ireland and Irish subjects, even if the details weren't quite right, was perhaps the fan needed to make sure the fire of independence remained alive.

### III Byzantium

Perhaps the most interesting connection between Morris and Yeats is their similar views of Byzantium. For Morris, the city of Justinian's reign in the sixth century AD represented the height of the decorative arts and "the most meaningful and creative phase in the cyclical history of civilization" (McAlindon 316). It is where unity of culture is fully flowered, and unlike the Middle Ages, there is not even the seed of either individualism or capitalism to taint the collective, cooperative effort of groups of workers producing beautiful things. In addition, Byzantium combined decorative influences from both the West and the East, particularly the classic forms of the Greco-Romans infused with the "mystery" from Persia, as well as influences from the Goths, the Dacians, the Assyrians, and just about any major group that had ever existed in Europe or Central Asia right up to the birth of modern Europe. Morris believed that the Middle Ages still expressed this integrating urge to a significant extent, and indeed that much of the products of the age were the result of the mixture that had gone on in Byzantium, and he spent his entire career attempting to return to this state of complete symbiosis (314-317). Morris expressed these views in a series of lectures in the 1880s.

According to McAlindon, the gifts from Byzantium that Morris most focused on were the "holy tree" and the "holy fire" (315), being intrigued by their mysterious origins and the way they symbolized life and creation, a theme he may have picked up from his studies of Norse myth and literature (Spatt 370). Morris references trees frequently in *News from Nowhere*, often commenting on how they have retaken spots that had been built over in Victorian times, such as when Dick says, "[Walthamstow is] a very jolly place, now that the trees have had time to grow again since the great clearing of houses in 1955" (55).

Yeats, taking his cue from Morris, placed Byzantium at Phase Fifteen of his arcane system of categorizing beauty, history, and personality, delineated in *A Vision* and the essay "Dove or Swan." Phase Fifteen is the phase of "perfect beauty" and complete unity of purpose (for workers to work together to create great art) and of the natural and supernatural (307). The tree motif shows up as early as 1982 in his poetry, who, in "The Two Trees," writes:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,  
The holy tree is growing there;  
From joy the holy branches start,  
And all the trembling flowers they bear. (1-4)

Like in Morris' lectures, the holy tree here symbolizes creation; its fruit gives "the stars...merry light" (6) and "The shaking of its leafy head / Has...made my lips and music wed, / Murmuring a wizard song for thee" (9-12). The tree creates love between the poet and his beloved (Yeats and Maud Gonne), or at least by the poet *for* his beloved. The tree-as-symbol of creation probably attracted Yeats because of his Symbolist leanings; it is a universal symbol, one that can call up associations with life and creation instantly. And yet, should the poet's beloved "gaze...in the bitter glass" (21), she will see another tree, made of "broken boughs and blackened leaves" (28) among which fly "ravens of unresting thought" (34). This dead tree was "Made when God slept in times of old" (32)—possibly a reference to the time before Byzantium, or perhaps what Yeats feels has happened to the tree of life in modern times.

Yeats continues his association of women, trees, and new life in 1919's "A Prayer for My Daughter," wherein he wishes that his year-old child

May...become a flourishing hidden tree...  
O may she live like some green laurel  
Rooted in one dear perpetual place. (41-48)

The hidden laurel he wishes his child to be is presumably the same "holy tree" of "The Two Trees" and of Byzantium; one is rooted in "joy," the other in its "dear perpetual place," but they are both capable of creating love, whether it be between the poet and his beloved or the daughter and her future mate.

Yeats seems to leave off of the Byzantium connections for several years before returning heavily to it 1927's "Sailing to Byzantium" and 1932's "Byzantium." In "Sailing," the journey motif returns, albeit only in line fifteen, as do both the holy tree and holy fire. In Part III, Yeats asks the

Sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire...  
and be the singing-masters of my soul...  
...and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity. (17-24)

Yeats is almost certainly asking to be immortalized by the artisans who built the Byzantine mosaics that Morris so admired. They are the "sages" referred to here, mystical and faceless like the artisans of old.

Oddly for a man once so concerned with connections to nature, Yeats ends the poem by resolving: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make..." (25-27). Perhaps the simplest explanation is that Yeats hates the idea of growing old and having an active mind "fastened to a dying animal" (22); he would like to co-opt the Byzantine artisans into creating something for him that never changes and never lets him down, as he feels his aging body is doing. Yeats also wishes to be "set upon a golden bough to sing" (29), the golden bough almost undoubtedly being that of the holy tree of life. Both bird and bough return in "Byzantium," when the golden bird "scorn[s] aloud / In glory

of changeless metal / Common bird or petal / And all complexities of mire or blood" (21-24).

Yeats has returned to his earlier desire of retreating from the world around him, though his retreat has matured from fairy tales into the mysticism of ancient Byzantium, matching the increase in chaos that the world had seen in the thirty years since he left the fairy stories behind.

#### IV Conclusions

Neither Morris nor Yeats worked in a vacuum. Morris aligned himself with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters, writers, and philosophers from his days at Oxford. The Brotherhood shared Morris' reverence of the Middle Ages and his desire to return in some fashion to them; Thompson writes that "The medieval dream was built into their everyday life" (48). A glance at practically any painting by Rossetti or Burne-Jones will confirm their obsession with the medieval period. They even took the name of their organization from an idea that the Renaissance painter Raphael, one of several Italians who reintroduced such things as perspective and individual artisanship into Western art, had destroyed the qualities of simplicity and anonymity which made medieval painting great. However, Thompson also writes that the work of the Pre-Raphaelites "seems tainted by the evasion of life" (55), and that

They thought of themselves as revolutionaries, who intended to bring back a world of feeling and meaning to the visual arts...they sought to create great Art with their backs turned on the world. 'Dream' [as in "Pre-Raphaelite Dream"] is not an affectation: it is a precise description of the character of the movement. They desired to paint Visions: but the result was 'dream,' a world of compensation, in which the frustrations and repressions...of their lives found release. (60)

Thompson says that the "turning away" the Pre-Raphaelites engaged in produced works of little value. However, he believes that Morris broke free of this self-imposed mediocrity by going

beyond mere imitation of the medievals into a concentration on larger socio-political goals which he hoped to implement in his own time.

In the eyes of certain critics, Yeats underwent a similar "saving." According to Mary Thunete, "Ireland and its literary traditions rescued Yeats from the imitative romanticism of his early work" (6). Yeats is also the only one of the Irish Literary Revivalists to have survived the ensuing century since their period of activity so spectacularly. This is certainly due to the extraordinary length of Yeats' career and the multiple transformations his style underwent throughout the course of it, but perhaps also because, with the influence from Morris, he spoke best to the Irish desire for a unified culture, distinct from the stratified English culture imposed upon them.

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