

Rudy Wiebe and W. B. Yeats: Sailing to Danzig and Byzantium

ERVIN BECK

RUDY WIEBE'S FICTION about Canadian indigenes and Mennonites has so identified him with "ethnic literature" that the relationship of his work to canonical English and European literature has been neglected.¹ That is true despite the well known early influence upon him of William Faulkner; his expressed admiration for James Joyce, John dos Passos, Pushkin, Victor Hugo and Tolstoy; and his clearly stated emulation of Vladimir Nabokov: "I want to be better than Nabokov, I want to write the greatest novel in North America."²

One of Wiebe's finest short stories, "Sailing to Danzig," is a case in point.³ Overtly concerned with Mennonite immigrant experience, its title links it with one of the most important poems in English literature, "Sailing to Byzantium" by W. B. Yeats.⁴ The parallels with the poem not only place the story within the great tradition of English letters, but they also clarify an important similarity in their authors' views of the nature and role of literary art in postcolonial culture. With their politics, both Yeats and Wiebe integrate their religious and aesthetic concerns in a broader, more complex view of human experience than is found in other postcolonial literature.

I. An Artifice of Eternity

The speaker in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is an old man, recently arrived in Byzantium, who looks backward to the country he has fled and forward to Byzantium and the personal transformation that he seeks there. He left the old country because it is dominated by young people who seek only the delights of the physical world, including its "sensual music" (line 7), which leads to death. In Byzantium he seeks "monuments of unaging intellect" (8) and "an artifice of eternity" (24). He wants to move

“out of nature” (25) and be transformed into a mechanical singing bird — perhaps a nightingale — made of “hammered gold” and “gold enamelling” (28). The speaker hopes to create by means of his music (that is, poetry) a way to transcend human mortality.

Adam Wiebe, the narrator of Wiebe’s “Sailing to Danzig” is at first a Mennonite boy of 17, and later an adult Mennonite university professor, looking back at his family’s history since 1616 and at himself as he regarded that history when he was younger. As a young man, he is obsessed with recovering the facts of his earliest known progenitor, an Adam Wiebe from Harlingen, Holland, who, as a Mennonite immigrant to Danzig in 1616, served the city marvelously by creating watermains, fortifications, the world’s first cable car, and dikes and canals for drainage. The narrator is equally interested in the more recent experiences of members of his Mennonite father’s family in escaping oppression in Communist Russia. Some of the facts he learns at seventeen years of age in conversation with his father; other information he learns later in life. At this young age, he is surprised by what his parents do not know about the Wiebe family and, even more so, he is dismayed that they show so casual an interest in the facts. His mother, in particular, is inclined to forgive their persecutors in Russia.

Wiebe’s narrator inhabits, at the two different stages of his life, the two countries of Yeats’s speaker. The young man’s fascination with mere historical facts places him in the country of youth, physicality and death. As an older man, however, he begins to appreciate the other territory — “monuments of unaging intellect” — that his mother and father inhabited when he was a youth, although he did not realize it. They expressed their “unaging” response to human suffering and mortality by singing a song.

The song was always initiated by his mother, the forgiving one, and then joined soon after by his more embittered father. The song contains all of the family’s stories, even the ones that the narrator hears after their deaths: “Their voices singing this story which has already taken place but which they will never hear nor speak about” (285). Their duet is a love song: “And my

father across the yard somewhere within earshot would answer her in tenor harmony, their voices floating like lovers hand in hand high in the bright air" (279). Their song also replicates those cables that the first Adam Wiebe suspended over Danzig for its salvation during the Swedish wars. And, finally, the song as cable becomes the means whereby the narrator himself has "sailed through air suspended somehow" (288).

Clearly, the narrator's parents have unselfconsciously arrived at their own "holy city of Byzantium" and have learned to sing their own equivalent of the golden bird's song. The narrator thinks longingly of his parents' song, both because they are now dead and because he himself cannot carry a tune. His parents' actual song now exists only platonically, in his memory, as the final sentence of the story indicates: "Wybe Adam von Harlingen, where are you now? Your cables are gone. Only the memories of songs remain" (289). But, of course, the song is permanently commemorated — and even preserved — in Wiebe's short story, which becomes his own equivalent of the golden bird's song, his own "artifice of eternity."

II. An Artifice of Postcoloniality

These clear parallels between poem and story gain more complex significance when considered in light of their authors' similar positions in postcolonial discourse. Because Yeats was a member of English "settler" culture in Ireland, his writings are increasingly being studied in relationship to the revolutionary political context within which he worked (that is, not merely within a modernist aesthetic framework). Most postcolonial studies of Wiebe thus far have concerned the conflicted literary consequences of his membership in a minority settler culture in western Canada: Wiebe's people, the Mennonites, were complicit in displacing the indigenes but Wiebe has become one of the most prominent, sympathetic interpreters of indigene experience in Canadian literature.⁵

However, Wiebe writes from a very different postcolonial position in "Sailing to Danzig" — in fact, from a position that has been little studied in criticism thus far. Here he writes about his own people's great oppression and suffering in Russia, stemming from changes begun by the Bolshevik Revolution and

continuing through World War 1 and the Great Depression, during which his ancestors emigrated to western Canada. "Sailing to Danzig" speaks on behalf of what Benita Parry calls an "internally exiled" (47) community and author; that is, it depicts the experience of oppression — whether violent or subtle — by an ethnic group at the hands of centralized authority.⁶ In Russia, as recalled in "Sailing to Danzig," the oppression was both overt and physical. Of course, the short story is set in Canada, where the moral and psychological implications of that suffering are resolved in his parents' experiences and in the narrator's very self-conscious awareness. By writing "Sailing to Danzig," Wiebe both represents and provides the redress that his parents seek, thereby pursuing one of the goals of postcolonial writers around the world.

Wiebe's use of Yeats's poem, of course, replicates a strategy typical of many writers from formerly colonized cultures, who exploit literary works from the mainstream, colonizing culture as vehicles for their own, usually subversive, expression. Common well-known examples include Jean Rhys's use of *Jane Eyre* in *Wild Sargasso Sea*, J. M. Coetzee's use of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in *Foe*, and many Caribbean writers' "appropriations" of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Most such postcolonial texts represent resistant, subversive uses of canonical texts from the colonizing culture. All of them are "re-visionings," from a subaltern perspective, of colonizers' discourse. In Wiebe's own corpus, a more recent example of such subversive mimicry is his story, "The Beautiful Sewers of Paris, Alberta," which re-writes Hugo's *Les Misérables* from a Mennonite postcolonial perspective,⁷ although in a more emulative than resistant manner — as, we will find, is also true of "Sailing to Danzig" in its relationship to "Sailing to Byzantium."

In his poem Yeats, like Wiebe, directly confronts the question of the relationship between the writer's task and the political context out of which he writes. For Yeats, the problem was the colonizing of Ireland by England since 1171, which then erupted in the Irish struggle for independence from England in the early twentieth century, beginning with the Rising of Easter 1916. Although Yeats in his personal life and early literature

was engaged with Irish national and literary liberation politics, he pulled back from such commitment and increasingly wrote poems and plays that, while not unconcerned with politics, nevertheless stressed aesthetic and spiritual solutions rather than political ones. In this he resembled his compatriots James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, who, like Yeats, were expatriates from Ireland during much of their lives — Joyce and Beckett in France, Yeats in London. All tended to feel, along with Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, that Ireland was "the old sow that eats her farrow," that is, the mother country who destroys its artists by demanding that they use their talents for the political liberation of their people.

Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* has been especially influential in shaping Yeats's reputation in postcolonial studies. Said notes that Yeats "stopped short of imagining full political liberation" (287-88), mainly because of the "contradictory" (274) loyalties created by his family's historic position among the Irish Ascendancy. Said regrets, but moves beyond, Yeats's aestheticism, occultism and even his fascism. Believing that culture establishes colonialism as surely as political force does, Said pays Yeats his ultimate compliment by saying that Yeats's lifetime achievement lay in a "cultural decolonization" (288) that harnessed Swift's "devastating anger and genius . . . to lift the burdens of Ireland's colonial afflictions" (287). About Yeats's Byzantium poems Said says only that they are aberrations from his political-cultural quest, insofar as in them Yeats attempts to find personal respite from "age and from what [Yeats] would later call 'the struggle of the fly in marmalade'" (287), that is, the pain of daily existence. Said misses some of the political implications of those poems.

The images in "Sailing to Byzantium" that capture Yeats's conflicted feelings about the artist's vocation in the context of a struggle for political liberation are the scarecrow and the golden bird. The country of youth and death in "Sailing to Byzantium" is also Ireland, obsessed with physical and historical troubles. Yeats describes the fate of the poet in such a country:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick. (9-10)

The poet-turned-scarecrow in a politically charged situation has been reduced to mere usefulness — scaring away the crows, or enemies. The price the poet pays in that situation is grotesque ugliness, temporality, quick deterioration and death. Yeats as poet clearly seeks an incarnation as a different kind of creature, as a bird of golden artifice with a song of eternal — not merely passing — value. Here he is closer to “art for art’s sake” than to the Marxist — and often postcolonial — understanding of art for the sake of political liberation.

As a young man, Wiebe’s narrator was also caught up in the cause of his people’s unjust treatment throughout history. Like other intellectuals from formerly colonized cultures who are trying to create an independent identity for themselves and their people, young Wiebe was obsessed with recovering his family’s history, which had been ignored, obscured or even misrepresented in the official accounts of their oppressors. Young Adam’s archaeological project of recovering Wiebe history unearths both significant achievements and horrible oppression. The former consists of the work of the first Adam Wiebe, whose engineering achievements Danzig honored by engraving his portrait on a 1624 depiction of the city. However, he never was made a citizen of Danzig because he was a member of the Mennonite community, to whom citizenship was denied.

The more blatant instances of political oppression of the Wiebe family — replicated in thousands of other Dutch-Prussian-Russian Mennonites — are found in the lives of young Adam’s father, uncle and first cousin. His wealthy, selfish uncle Peter Jacob Wiebe was taken for questioning by Communist authorities in 1936 and then seized again in 1937, never to return. For the narrator’s first cousin Peter Peter Wiebe, “faith became politics” (282) during Wednesday night Bible readings, when he read scripture verses that had subversive implications in his Russian context. He was seized, sentenced for twenty-five years in the Stalin era but released after four years, under Khrushchev. The narrator’s father Abraham Jacob Wiebe did four years of labour in Siberia, as an alternative to military service, and then, penniless, tried to flee Russia during the troubles that followed World War I and the October Revolution. He was finally granted

permission by the Russian authorities to leave Russia, but only with the official designation as a “stateless refugee” (288). Deprived of citizenship — like his distinguished engineer forebear — he exclaims:

“Yeah, yeah . . . that’s the way. It always is. When those Communists hammered on our door in Moscow and told me to get on that train to Germany, they gave me a yellow card. ‘Stateless refugee,’ that’s all it said. A hundred and fifty years in Russia and they send us out, a piece of yellow paper and fill in your own name. ‘Stateless refugee.’” (288)

Such objection to the erasure of subaltern history by oppressive politics is frequent in postcolonial writings — and was one of Yeats’s projects as well. These experiences of Wiebe’s ancestors “are facts, were already becoming facts” (289) to young Wiebe, and contributed to “the marshes and bitter rivers of [his parents’] memories” (288). As an old professor, however, he realized that all the “dubious facts of history” (279) that he had uncovered really “explained nothing” (289), which led to his cherishing his parents’ transcendence by song over his youthful archaeology of history and implied yearning for justice.

For Wiebe’s poetics, it is important to notice that the haunting song his parents sing is unlike the church songs they usually sing. This special song is music only — not words, just a tune: “that wordless sound suspended by her voice, a broadening colour which does not hesitate at sadness or laughter, or break because of anger, unforgiveness, even hatred; it is a sound which slowly, slowly threads brightness . . .” (282). Is it a tune from one of the 500 songs in the Dreiband, the Mennonite hymnal “without notes” (279)? Or is it his mother’s own creation, a composite tune that distills all of the other tunes and all of her people’s sufferings?

As a “song without words,” it is a purely aesthetic statement, lacking denotation. Like Yeats’s golden bird’s song, it seems to fulfill the ideals of the “religion of art” aesthetics of Walter Pater (an influence on early Yeats), who is noted for saying that all art aspires to the medium of music, that is, that art has aesthetic and emotional purpose, not social, moral or political. If so, then the solutions of both Yeats and Wiebe to the problem of political

oppression are unusual in postcolonial discourse, which normally looks for a more material liberation.

However, to say that Wiebe gives a merely aesthetic answer to the question of political oppression needs at least two qualifications: His mother's song-without-words is related somehow to her 500 songs of Christian faith, and she is motivated, in part, by the urge to forgive offenders. Thus Wiebe adds both spiritual and moral "answers" to his aesthetic resolution. These dimensions of the song do bring "Sailing to Danzig" more in line with the resolutions of Wiebe's novels on Canadian indigenes, which are often criticized by postcolonial critics, such as Wayne Tefs and George Woodcock, for offering personal, spiritual solutions for what are essentially material, political problems. Yet, in the elder Wiebe's situation, what other response — other than living a life of resentment — is possible?

Similar qualifications need to be made for Yeats as apparent Aesthete in "Sailing to Byzantium." If the speaker becomes a singing, golden nightingale, the transformation will also have been of the speaker's "soul" (11) and will have emanated from "sages standing in God's holy fire" (17). Both images spring from the deep, mystic spiritualism that was Yeats's lifelong quest and that modernist and formalist critics ignored in claiming this poem and others by Yeats as icons of modernist poetics, which separates art from life.

The last stanza of Yeats's poem hints at the cultural risk involved in creating the kind of elitist art that a golden, mechanical songbird represents. Its only social benefit may be to "keep a drowsy emperor awake" (29), thereby catering to the frivolous interests of the privileged, powerful classes — even to keeping them awake so they can plot more oppression!⁸ At best, Yeats's bird will sing to a younger generation:

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (32)

By 1927, when Yeats first published this poem, English political control of The Irish Free State, or Eire, was "passing" or "past." But the liberation of Northern Ireland, or Ulster, was still "to come," as indeed it remains today. By associating the exquisite

bird's song with history, the poem embodies a trace of political criticism and prophecy, despite the speaker's seeming aestheticism.⁹

"Sailing to Danzig" includes a peculiar equivalent of Yeats's image of art and artist compromised by imperialist sponsors. In addition to Adam Wiebe's parents' song, one other "monument of unaging intellect" is the engineering accomplishment of his ancestor Wybe Adam von Harlingen in seventeenth-century Danzig. The symbolic monument — the Yeatsian icon — is the 1624 copper engraving of Danzig, which includes Wybe Adam's portrait in the upper left corner. The literal monument — his engineering achievement — includes "Wieben Bastion," a "fortification to protect the city from the army of King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden" (287), who threatened Poland beginning in 1617 and especially from 1627 to 1629, when he tried to seize Danzig and the Vistula River in order to bring all of Poland to its knees.

Presumably a pacifist-inclined Mennonite, who emigrated to Danzig with the privilege of exemption from military service, Wybe Adam von Harlingen nevertheless created the military defenses that helped Danzig repel Swedish invaders. That implicit irony is undeveloped in the story, but it corresponds to Yeats's bird singing to keep an emperor awake. In contrast with the cables that emanated from Wieben Bastion and that become the main symbol of the story, the cables of his parents' song seem unencumbered by political compromise, hence a finer image of Rudy Wiebe's own aesthetics than is Yeats's more specifically historical bird's song.¹⁰

Compared to Yeats's speaker, Wiebe's narrator seems more accepting of the possibility that centuries of oppression and suffering can be resolved in music. Perhaps that is because, in Canada — for now, at least; or until the next world war — the oppression of Mennonites has come to an end. Many have assimilated into the Canadian mainstream, as engineers, professors and award-winning writers of full citizenship. Like the narrator's father, who "vowed he would never leave [Canada] of his own free will" (276), they have found a home which they may never need to leave. They have learned how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land.¹¹

III. A Different Postcolonial Poetics

In one regard, the symbiotic relationship between “Sailing to Danzig” and “Sailing to Byzantium” implies an emergent paradigm in postcolonial literature. Wiebe uses as his model a poem by a postcolonial writer from two generations earlier and emulates it more than he subverts it. Although this is probably not the beginning of such re-writing or mimicry in postcolonial literature, it does represent a phenomenon that is not often studied or even observed in postcolonial criticism. Where are other examples of one postcolonial author re-writing the work of another — especially in the works of authors who represent the second generation removed from the extensive decolonizations of the 1960s?¹²

The postcolonial positions of both Wiebe and Yeats also diverge from the more revolutionary stances of other major writers in the postcolonial canon. Although both writers take fully into account the oppression and sufferings of their people, both write literature that is closer to the art for art’s sake associated with the western elitist tradition than to the art for liberation’s sake usually found in postcolonial discourse. That may be due to the more established, conflicted positions of both men — Yeats as the member of a privileged Protestant minority and Wiebe as member of a settler minority who are indebted for safe haven to the majority English culture.

For both writers, material redress of historic wrongs needs to be tempered by other concerns, namely religion and aesthetics. Since both Yeats and Wiebe are engaged in projects of cultural decolonization — by creating a unique literature for their previously silent or silenced people — their work does not represent a betrayal of the revolution but, rather, a different route to liberation. Postcolonial studies tend to ignore or deprecate both religion and art as adequate responses to political oppression.¹³

In mainstream postcolonial discourse the positions of Yeats and Wiebe seem reactionary to some critics. However, if, like Ihab Hassan, we acknowledge “a certain piety . . . conforming to a standard model, a kind of cast-iron dye” (334) in postcolonial discussions today — especially those that exclude or denigrate the spiritual — the poem by Yeats and the story by Wiebe may

not represent a diluted postcolonialism but, rather, a richer, more complex postcoloniality, since both authors acknowledge a wider range of human experience.

NOTES

- 1 The great exception, of course, is the influence of the Bible on Wiebe's writings, as shown, for example, by the work of Penny Van Toorn and, most recently, Marie Vautier, whose study of "New World Myth" (77-81) analyzes the biblical frame of reference in the narrator of Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People*.
- 2 Wiebe's references to most of these authors come from his fictional writings, but there is no reason to doubt his admiration of them. See "The Beautiful Sewers" and "The Blind River Contradictions" in *River of Stone* (39, 335). His reference to Nabokov is cited by Tefs (155).
- 3 The materials of "Sailing to Danzig" have become the basis of Wiebe's recent novel, *Sweeter than All the World*.
- 4 First given a periodical publication in 1927, then used in 1928 as the first poem in *The Tower*, a collection that is generally regarded as representing the culmination of Yeats's poetic powers. One other allusion to Yeats, taken from "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop," is found in Wiebe's novel *My Lovely Enemy*: "Live in a heavenly mansion, not in some foul sty" (69). Wiebe's use of the quotation is emulative, since both his novel and Yeats's poem affirm the union of the sexual and the spiritual in the Incarnation.
- 5 For an extended account of Wiebe's complex and sometimes contradictory relationship to postcolonialism, see my essay, "Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe." Most criticism written today about Wiebe's representation of Canadian Indians assumes postcolonial norms. The major studies of Wiebe's depiction of Canadian indigenes are Terry Goldie's *Fear and Temptation* and Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin's *Decolonising Fictions*. Brydon and Tiffin see in *The Temptations of Big Bear* Wiebe's ability to create "alternative views from within, at least as far as a sympathetic outsider ever can" (134). And Goldie regards Wiebe's work (with Patrick White's) as "arguably the most resonant literature on the indigene" (192). Tony Tremblay even says that the tendency for Canadian literature to become "consciously postcolonial" is due "in large part to Rudy Wiebe's cultural programme of re-imagining the West" (159).
- 6 Gramsci was an early theorist who saw that colonization could be "not only international but domestic" (cited in Brennan, 45) and not only physical but also psychological, resulting in assimilation to centralized norms — "domination by consent," as he put it (cited in Ashcroft, et al, 116-17). Gramsci's thinking allows postcolonial discourse to include the experience of minority groups who abandon their separatist stance through the influence of subtle but powerful forces of cultural assimilation. More recently, Linda Hutcheon has referred to the "double sense of postcolonialism" (78) that minority immigrant groups experience — earlier, of oppression in the homeland they have fled; later, of marginalization in their country of refuge. Just as postcolonial thinking has become a fruitful paradigm for considering Canadian literature in general — even though Canadians have not endured intense physical suffering under political oppression — so postcolonial discourse can also be productive in considering the experience of minority ethnic groups in relation to the hegemonic culture that surrounds them.

Wiebe tends to be highly critical of his own people, especially in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, which can be read as supporting a kind of assimilation. In that regard, he is complicit with hegemonic forces in Canada that have changed his people's culture radically in the last several generations. However, the last two chapters of *The Blue Mountains of China* are very critical of Mennonites who have assimilated to mainstream Canadian cultural norms. This aspect of Wiebe's postcoloniality has not yet been well studied, although I deal with it in sections of my essays, "Postcolonial Complexity in the Writings of Rudy Wiebe" and "The Politics of Rudy Wiebe in *The Blue Mountains of China*." As a university professor telling the story, the narrator of "Sailing to Danzig" betrays his cultural assimilation both by his mainstream profession and by the implied surprise with which he (a presumed pacifist) views his parents resolving through their song the injustices they have experienced.

- 7 First published in *The Road Home*. Edmonton: Reidmore, 1992.
- 8 The city of Byzantium was, for Yeats, an imaginary symbolic construct based on his visit to sites of Byzantine mosaics at Ravenna and Palermo and his reading of books on Byzantine history. In his *A Vision*, Yeats said that he saw in Byzantium an ideal cultural integration, where "religion, aesthetic and practical life was one" (Jeffares 211-16). One "practical" side of Byzantium that Yeats ignored was that it was also a political empire sustained by wars, threatened by rebellions and bloodied by palace intrigue. From a postcolonial point of view, Byzantium co-opted art to vindicate its hegemonic religion and political programs and pogroms.
- 9 The prophetic — as opposed to merely descriptive — nature of the bird's song is suggested by Yeats's apparent echo of William Blake: "Hear the voice of the Bard, / Who present, past and future sees" (Jeffares 216).
- 10 Another classic instance of art compromised by politics is the culinary artistry of Babette in Isak Dinesen's story, "Babette's Feast." In France, she must create her expensive gourmet meals for the socially elite clientele who gather at Café Anglais — the same people who kill her husband and children during the communal uprising. The feast that she prepares for the villagers during her self-imposed exile after the uprising serves the moral, social and spiritual needs of her humble guests and is free of political compromise.
- 11 However, the more conservative Mennonites in Canada and, especially, in Central and South America continue to resist assimilation. Those in Central and South America continue to migrate farther south, and Mennonites in the former Russian Empire continue to migrate to Germany and North America.
- 12 A place to begin might be the writings of David Dabydeen, a second-generation West Indian writer in England, who told his interviewer, Kwame Dawes: "Whereas our writers had to rewrite the 'masterscripts' of Europe, my interest now, from another generation, is to rewrite or respond to our ancestral writers . . . Brathwaite, Selvon, Harris, etc." (210).
- 13 This stance derives from the materialist assumptions of most postcolonial thinking and its consequent insistence on the material redress of oppression. For a recent critique of postcolonialism for ignoring spiritual experience, see Ihab Hassan, who faults postcolonial discourse for insisting that "we are all culturally constructed, socially produced"; that "there are no universals"; and that "materialist philosophies best suit postcolonial studies" (335-36). "Shockingly," he adds, "I want to plead for spirit" (340). See also Edward Said, who, in his "anti-clerical and secular zeal" once brusquely dismissed the "theocratic alternative" proposed by a Muslim student in his audience (369-70).

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