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Escaping into the Creative Imagination: A Case Study of James J. Guthrie and the Pear Tree Press

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Pear Tree Press

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When the 2012 Summer Olympic Games were held in London, the opening ceremony staged a powerfully stirring and heart-achingly nostalgic drama of England's rapid shift from her agrarian roots to the industrial city. The performance begins with a young choir boy singing the words of William Blake:

And did those feet in ancient time,

Walk upon England's mountains green:

And was the holy Lamb of God,

On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,

Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here,

Among these dark Satanic Mills?

As the song ceases in favor of metal drums beating in unison, the soft grassy knolls are stripped away and the giant tree uprooted, soon to be replaced by the "dark Satanic Mills" of the industrial revolution. Before long, the entire scene has transformed from a rural landscape into towering smoke stacks: the picture of Victorian England. It is within this era of mechanized mass-production and increased pace of urban life that we find James J. Guthrie, the owner and operator of the Pear Tree Press he founded in 1899. The printing press movement gained momentum within the larger arts and crafts movement by the 1890s, and many presses emphasized a revival of medieval design in producing hand-crafted, fine quality books that were simultaneously volumes of text and pieces of art. Many were drawn to the aesthetic of medieval

manuscripts for the "evidence of the skill of the scribe and the imagination of the artist, presented in vivid color by a workman who 'lived amidst beautiful works of handicraft and a nature unspoiled by the sordidness of commercialism.'"[1] This spirit of medieval revivalism pervaded many private presses, as the arts and crafts movement focused upon decorative design and looked to gothic architecture for inspiration. Victorian literary culture was interested in the book as a valuable, aesthetically pleasing material object in itself, and private presses aspired to create no less than the 'Ideal Book,' a work in which art and literature were to be merged.[2]

By the end of the 19th century, there were numerous British private presses, with the most famous undoubtedly being William Morris' Kelmscott Press. Much has been written on Morris, whereas the literature on Guthrie amounts to a handful of biographical notes; therefore, I shall periodically draw from other scholars' writings on Morris in order to gain further insight into the artist-craftsman at work as it relates to Guthrie and his Pear Tree Press. Though born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1874, Guthrie lived in England his entire life with his Press, and The University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Research Center houses a collection totaling 35 boxes of his illustrated works, including prints, drawings, paintings, book plates, and Pear Tree Press publications that he produced over the course of his career until his death in 1952. Interestingly, the period from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th saw the emergence of the modern fantasy novel as we understand it today. Modern fantasy indeed had its roots in 18th century traveler's tales, but it did not shape into a distinct genre until later, with

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[1] Paul Needham, et al, *William Morris and the Art of the Book: With Essays on William Morris as Book Collector*, (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1976), 48.

[2] Curtis Gernard, *Visual Words: Art and the Material Book in Victorian England*, (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 224.

works such as George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and William Morris'

The Well at the World's End (1896), one of his several novels inspired by medieval romances. It

would seem then, that while James Guthrie was publishing limited editions of illustrations and

poetry, such as *The Elf* (1899) and *Frescoes from buried temples* (1918), modern fantasy authors

were producing fictional works that marked a significant transition from the canon of "fairy

poetry" that traces back to the medieval romance. The modern fantasy novel is a work of

imaginative fiction distinctly different from prior works of literature that also include elements of

fairy tales, folklore, and myth, because not only does the form itself transition from epic poetry

and prose to that of a complete novel, but the novel transitions from historically based imaginary

worlds to the fully fledged autonomous worlds of fantasy.[3]

The development of the modern fantasy novel hinged upon the idea of imaginative

invention, and according to Lilla Smee in *Inventing Fantasy: The Prose Romances of William*

Morris, this idea is in actuality a determining characteristic of fantasy, where the setting is in an

autonomous and imaginary world.[4] It follows that modern fantasy authors exercised their own

creative autonomy to transport readers to an imaginary realm, experimenting with traditional

myths, legends, and folklore to invent fantastical elements unique to their invented worlds. It is

my purpose here, then, to utilize the idea of invention within the modern fantasy novel as a lens

through which to examine the elements of James Guthrie's creative autonomy at his Pear Tree

Press, ultimately drawing parallels between fantasy authors' fictional world building and

Guthrie's active creation of a utopian pre-industrial reality through his private press.

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[3] Lilla Julia Smee, *Inventing Fantasy: The Prose Romances of William Morris*, (University of
Sydney: Dept. of English, 2007), 4.

[4] Ibid.

The following images from Guthrie's collection exemplify the visual richness and variety of subject matter within his drawings and illustrations. His work is both fluid and precise, with great attention to line and proportion, and throughout the collection he continuously combines text, illustration, and color in creative ways. His book plate designs evoke the typeface and interlacing patterns of medieval manuscripts, clearly observed in this print that advertises a variety of text designs by the Pear Tree Press. His drawings are often incomplete or partial sketches, evidence of experimentation with various figural or decorative designs. This image, for example, depicts two tree-like figures that appear to be interacting with one another, but could perhaps also be two variations of one idea. Here, too, one can observe Guthrie's experimentation with the rendering of facial profiles as well as the composition of a figure surrounded by natural forms.[5]

While Guthrie's collection displays stylistic continuity and repeated motifs, the overall variety of subject matter and design lends itself to a kind of artistry best described as inventive. The hundreds of works belonging to this collection provide visual evidence of his vibrant and imaginative experimentation, blurring the line between artist, printmaker, and inventor. In fact, John Russell Taylor in *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain* describes Guthrie as an

> "all-round artist-craftsman," who "[invented] a 'proportional system of typographical composition', and [experimented] with a kind of intaglio printing from elaborately worked plates finished off with color applied by hand, differently in each copy, after the manner of Blake's illuminated books." [6]

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[5] One can view these drawings and sketches as drafts or idea experimentation for Guthrie's official print designs and book plates, as there is much continuity between these works and his Pear Tree Press publications.

[6] John Russell Taylor, *The Art Nouveau Book in Britain*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), 117.

Fantasy authors at this time similarly took on the role of inventors, albeit in the fictional realm, as the invention of fantasy worlds involved "original assimilation and synthesis of a number of pre-existing literary, historical and social paradigms."[7] According to Parsons et al. in J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the 1930s Birth of Modern Fantasy, "Tolkien conceived *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) in the 1930s as an elegy to an England past, and as a response to modernity. He built the novel upon a detailed fantasy world of his invention."[8] "Inventio" in medieval rhetoric, understood as discovery or finding, refers to the technique for justifying and ordering an idea; it involves "borrowing and assimilating" one's own structures with that of other constructs or paradigms that fit into the artist's vision of their creation.[9] For Tolkien this was the creation of Middle Earth, and for Guthrie it was the design of text and illustration of a fine quality hand printed book, as he clearly synthesized medieval design elements with elements of nature, folklore, and poetry. Perhaps Guthrie was drawing from different pre-existing models than those consistent to fantasy authors, but both affirm the activity of inventio, of original assimilation.

Additionally, fantasy authors often reinterpreted many aspects of the Middle Ages, that created an idealized image rather than the reality of them, which ultimately created a sense of otherness.[10] Fantasy novels do not give us factual information of what life was truly like in the

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[7] Smee, 1.

[8] Deke Parsons, et al, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the 1930s Birth of Modern Fantasy*, (The Claremont Graduate University, 2013), 1.

[9] Jane Chance, *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader,* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 4.

[10] Smee, 2-3.

Middle Ages, but a romanticized version of what we imagine it might have been, with the addition of fantastical elements. William Morris, for example, constructed invented worlds with a Romantic imagination, conveying his desire to rebirth the romantic landscapes of medieval literature.[11] Guthrie's Pear Tree Press (and by extension the fine press movement) in its emulation of the medieval craft guilds does not present such a romantic landscape of the medieval craftsman's daily life, but offers an "idealized image" of the autonomous craftsman at work. It follows, then, that Guthrie's book design experimentation corresponds with modern fantasy author's imaginative world building if one views it in terms of invention. He produced singular hand-crafted books, designed with a focus upon visual and aesthetic appeal as material objects while modern fantasy authors constructed realms of fantasy within literary texts, sharing the common process of creative invention. This common factor also shares a common influence from the Romantic period, as Guthrie drew inspiration directly from the Romantic poets, and modern fantasy in part evolved from Romantic literature.

The Romantic poets and the private press movement emphasized the natural world and poetic imagination, and this is especially true for the Pear Tree Press. Guthrie published primarily collections of poems, whether it was William Blake's *Songs of Innocence,* or his own *The Wild Garden: Verses for Children.* Furthermore, the idea of *poetic genius* within Romantic literature conceptualizes this inspiration from nature and emotion as it manifests in the form of poetry, in contrast to the neoclassical emphasis upon logic and reason. *The Complete Works, Poetry, and Prose, of the Rev. Edward Young* in 1854, for example, defined *poetic genius* as the spontaneous artistic and literary imagination in opposition to the scientific one, where genius

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[11] Ibid, 45.

"may wander wild," and "[have] a creative power."[12] The *poetic genius* is thus as intrinsic to

Guthrie's body work as it was to the Romantics, and it conceptualizes his artistic and

autonomous creativity as fueled by nature through his imaginative poems and illustrations.

The variety of subject matter and design throughout Guthrie's collection reflects his

inspiration from the Romantics in addition to his ambitions as a printmaker. According to

Alistair McCleery, "Guthrie's guiding light was William Blake, who also attempted to retain his

artistic integrity by taking over all publishing functions himself."[13] He pushed himself well

beyond the mainstream of printing culture, and "was doing everything to a book beyond putting

on the binding, and he thought little of those who attempted less."[14] Furthermore, Guthrie's

personal philosophy in founding the Pear Tree Press apart from commercial printing fostered an

individual artistic integrity. He himself stated, "It was, in fact, apparent to me that the artist

suffered chiefly from dependence upon others whose aims were as far as possible from those

which ought to be his."[15] As James Guthrie clearly pursued an enterprise dependent upon the

imagination and individual experimentation, his tendency to favor Romantic poetry comes as no

surprise, for the Romantics reacted against the Enlightenment's regard for rational thinking just

as the private press movement arguably countered the industrial revolution. One can view the

private press as a Romantic endeavor, a revival of medieval craftsmanship, bookmaking, and

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[12] Edward Young and John Doran, *The Complete Works, Poetry and Prose, of the Rev. Edward Young, LL.D.,* (London, W. Tegg & Co., 1854), 560.

[13] Alistair McCleery, "Pear Tree Press," In *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1881-1965*, vol. 112 ed. Jonathan Rose and Patricia Anderson (Gale: Dictionary of Literary Biography, 1991), 248.

[14] Robin Guthrie, Biographical Notes.

[15] McCleery, 248.

beautiful things, that drew upon a romanticized vision of a pre-industrial past.[16] Guthrie's

collection certainly confirms this and illuminates his personal philosophy of the book maker as

possessing creative autonomy, where one has complete freedom "to print as an adventurer" and

places no bounds upon the imagination.

The modern fantasy novel finds roots in Romanticism as well, for "fairies consistently

functioned as a symbolic point of contention in defining 'nature' and 'imagination', with 'fairy

poetry' functioning as a perfect segue for Romanticism.[17] Just as Romantic period writers

gleaned inspiration from early fantasy literature, modern fantasy authors built upon and

transitioned from this continued use of myth and folklore, harnessing an imaginative invention to

do so. Within this same historical moment, Guthrie was also looking to the Romantic poets as

artistic inspiration for his work at the press, channeling a similar inventive spirit. The common

factors of creative invention and Romantic era influence thus far unite Guthrie's Pear Tree Press

and the modern fantasy genre, but even further, common elements of nature, folklore, and myth

encapsulate much of the substance of their work, but to what end? This not only reflects the

medievalism of the late 19th century, but also a clear interest in a pre-industrial past. Worlds of

fantasy and the hand-crafted book both give access to cultural roots and pre-industrial ways of

life, in spite of it being a romanticized version. Both venerate the past: the Press, actively and

practically through the material object, and modern fantasy novels imaginatively and idyllically

through their invented worlds.[18] They too are both "expressions of Romantic pastoral

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[16] Smee, 7.

[17] Jacquilyn Weeks and Romana Huk, *Fairies, Fairy Tales, and the Development of British Poetics,* (University of Notre Dame: 2011), 50.

[18] Smee, 8.

medievalism, that explore a desire to reconnect with nature, the past, and a simpler mode of being."[19] While the modern fantasy novel achieved this through the creation of a world entirely separate from modern reality, Guthrie's ideals at his Pear Tree Press allowed him to retain the quality of the hand-crafted, a focus upon the material design of the book as a physical object in opposition to the industrialized world.[20] His Pear Tree Press was reactionary, an effort to retain autonomy over one's artistic work within the homogenizing effects of commercial production. Guthrie's creative experimentation in his designs provided an escape from this, just as fantasy novels accordingly offer an escape to a seemingly simpler way of life. Even today we observe the widespread popularity of epic fantasy sagas, and the enduring presence of works such as *The Lord of the Rings.* While Guthrie's Pear Tree Press died with him, and with it his uniquely small-scale and hand-crafted enterprise so contrary to the fast-paced reality of modern life, his collection of works remains preserved within the UK Special Collections archives, ready to transport one into the world Guthrie invented for himself. This is the immeasurable value of James Guthrie's collection: it offers us a tangible interaction with what fantasy novels can access only through the imagination, satisfying a longing for such invented worlds, for an escape from the modern condition into a reality where the labor of human craft was pleasurable for the detailed beauty of its product and the creative autonomy of its maker. To recall the young choir boy from London's opening ceremony, singing William Blake's final verse:

<div style="text-align:center">I will not cease from Mental Fight,</div>

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[19] Ibid, 3.

[20] This suggests further research into the medieval paratextuality of the fine printed book and the construction of an idealized past through textual artifacts as it relates to Victorian England's social identity.

Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:

Till we have built Jerusalem,

In Englands green & pleasant Land.

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