PRIMITIAE
ESSAYS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
BY
STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

LIVERPOOL
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON
CONSTABLE & COMPANY LTD
1912
that is mediaeval, it may seem that Morris had
cought nothing of the spirit of the literature
whose legend he was re-telling. It has been
indicated that his attitude towards the deities
was that of classic writers, but his poem betrays a
closer spiritual affinity than this. The delicate
brooding melancholy, which is close to the surface
in much that he wrote at this time, is a true echo
of the darker side of the Hellenic temperament.
It is everywhere perceptible in Jason, inspiring
the lyrics of Orpheus and disturbing the very
happiness of love. One instance of this instinc-
tive sympathy with Greek melancholy is startling.
Pindar, in one of his Olympian Odes, wrote ‘For as
much as man must die, wherefore should one sit
vainly in the dark, through a dull and nameless
age, without lot in noble deeds.’ In Jason
(Bk. iv.) the Lemnian prince promises to go with
the Argonauts, adding,

.neither have I will
To wait again for ruin, sitting still
Among such gifts as grudging fate will give
Even at longest, only while I live.

H. SYBIL KERMODE.

THE FIRST MORRIS

I

MORRIS’s first book begins with a ‘But’—

But knowing now that they would have her speak—

and the odd, abrupt jerk of the epithet might
have been the soft jar of a delicate lever—disturbing
the ‘values’ of poetry—altering its relations
—twitching into a new, sharper perspective the
lines of the country into which, through the
lattice of letters, the mind of the reader had been
accustomed to peer. Now, for a little, the atmos-
phere of earth ebbs away; and across the drained
emptiness the colours leap upon the senses with
the parched, uncanny emphasis of dream. It is
the brittle atmosphere of fever, prismatic but
awry: distance is abolished, details loom relent-
lessly, little noises, unnoticed before—sighs, rust-
ings, the tapping of a pulse, the involuntary
whisperings of loosened hair—waxing and swelling
until their beating fills the brain:

—let the clock tick, tick
To my unhappy pulse that beats right through
My eager body.

183
A binding heat is on all things; and the figures that walk in this airless region seem to move with strangled limbs, as though plucked and stillled by some invisible tension, using the awkward gestures of the overstrung:

But knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,
And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,

She must a little touch it; like one lame
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said:
'O knights and lords . . .'  

And their speech, when it does come, has the same laboured stiffness. They use words with a stumbling intensity, each syllable patient articulated but all the stresses misplaced, with an effect half-childish, as of people who talk with numb lips. Not otherwise would words fall, uttered in an actual void, each a flake of dead sound, congealing as it comes, leaving no echoes or vibrations to ease the entrance of the next:

'O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right, such great lords; still . . .'  

In these sentences, as in the scene itself, there are no planes or modulations: every syllable, down to the slightest, is wrung up to one raw pitch. And this unrelaxing siege of the senses and hectic confusion is heightened further by the intrinsic nature of the words. For each stands for something as bright and solid as the speakers, as palpable as the lips through which they force their way. They trail no audible murmurs to loiter in the memory, and blend and melt and dwindle there; instead, they stamp the page with a pattern that hangs instantly and unremittingly before the mind. The appeal is unsparingly optical:

'Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yes, laid a-dying while very mightily

The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well;
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:

"One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever, which they be
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!"
Yea, yes, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,
At foot of your familiar bed to see

A great God's angel standing, with such dyes,
Not known on earth, on his great wings, and hands,
Held out two ways, light from the inner skies

Showing him well, and making his commands
Seem to be God's commands, moreover, too,
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red . . .'
Thought is a colour, anguish a painted emblem; and even the customary veils and soft remissions of metaphor are abolished, so that the imagery starts into the foreground, and ranks inseparably among the real. Even the strange vocal stress of the utterance helps, curiously, to increase this visual poignancy: for the rigour of the voices, being unvarying, seems to reduce the language to a colourless medium, a lens through which the sight slips unaware. All the duties of comprehension devolve upon the eye: thought has become pure vision.

The effect upon the reader's mind is strange. Dizzied by this ceaseless play upon one nerve—half-dragged and half-excited by the level drilling of the litany-like metre—deprived of all intellectual food yet pierced and lit by vivid apprehensions—it tastes a rare mixture of rapture and quiescence, passes into a state akin to trance. It is a condition that has a real resemblance to the contemplative ecstasy of the mystic. The senses, receiving registrations of such sharpness, seem to be displaying that preternatural activity, that heightened acuteness of perception, which possesses the body at moments of crisis, the signal of an exalted mood. It needs but a touch to complete the illusion, to make it all but reality. The touch is not withheld. A sacring-bell rings sharply, the Grail glimmers through the forest, 'images of wonder' submit the choosing-cloths of doom. The chant of the verse goes on like the voice of a priest. The light that falls on the page

is that of a painted window. On all sides we see none but the strained abrupt gestures of people wrought by a profound spiritual tension. These bowed knights and burdened queens, moving with the awkwardness of anchorites, seem the servers of a mystery too great to be entrusted to their words. It is impossible not to believe that we are the witnesses of a supreme ceremonial. And when, with Galahad, we watch the bright shrivelling and concentration of all visible things—

'As I sat there not moving, less and less
I saw the melted snow that hung in beads
Upon my steel-shoes; less and less I saw
Between the tiles the bunches of small weeds.'—

we feel we are participants too; that for us also the scroll is about to part and the earth to crumple into a sign.

II

As the pages turn and the book progresses, it is true, there are many changes of ostensible motive: The Defence gives place to a battle-piece; love-songs, lonely ballads, lyrics of a sweet helplessness follow; but this sense of mystery, of revelation, endures unchallenged—as implicit in a lost refrain:

Two red roses across the moon;
or in a broken carol:

Ships sail through the heaven
   With red banners dress'd,
Carrying the planets seven
   To see the white breast;
(Mariae Virginitis)

or a portrait:

My lady seems of ivory
   Forehead, straight nose, and cheeks that be
Hollow'd a little mournfully;

or in the picture of Jehane's racked lips, aching
with love, as in the record of Galahad's vigil.
A certain simple cunning in the arrangement of
the book, perhaps, aids the painted quality of its
appeal to secure this high conformity. The
pieces toward the end, that is to say, are certainly
the palest and weakest; and thus the eye, when it
reaches them, comes enriched with the sacramental
colours it has gathered on the way, and weaves
the rose-girdled moons and the wan, meek hands,
and even the burning towers, into one hieratic
vestment and sees them as part of a mystical
heraldry. The dyes from the great wings on the
opening page soak through to the last, giving each
its celestial stain.

And the painted memory of Guenevere's agony,
similarly enduring, helps to purge the sunbright
scenes that follow of their sensuousness. Here,
ostiensibly, in pleasances and bowers, are none
but lovers fevered with desire; yet the hungry
hands and the lips parched for kisses affect us like

the wrung features of ascetics, tortured for holy
ends. The passion that racks Jehane seems by its
very physical fierceness to burn away the sense of
the body and set the spirit free:

No answer through the moonlit night;
   No answer in the cold grey dawn;
No answer when the shaven lawn
   Grew green, and all the roses bright.

Her tired feet look'd cold and thin,
   Her lips were twitch'd, and wretched tears,
Some, as she lay, roll'd past her ears,
   Some fell from off her quivering chin.

Her long throat, stretched to its full length,
   Rose up and fell right brokenly;
As though the unhappy heart was nigh
   Striving to break with all its strength.

To this poor mortal, as to her namesake, 'tort-
tured by vain desire' amidst the floods, passion
comes as cruelly as to Guenevere, confessedly
anguished by remorse. The love that enters here
is always the love that 'hurts and makes afraid
and wastes'; and so, for us, it assumes the aspect
of a flagellant, actually scourging out the desires
of the flesh.

And this strange annihilation of the body by its
own eagerness, an eagerness that mounts into an
ecstasy that consumes all but the pure flame of
desire, is but one part of a larger or a nearer process
of which it may be taken as an emblem. For
throughout this book, in all directions, the very
brightness of the beauty seems to burn away its
earthly body. Just as the concentrated colours of a landscape may be used to stain a window meant to teach the instability of earthly beauty and to cloister up men's minds, so do these vivid courts and gardens seal us in an atmosphere of ritual, their special pagan clarity and brightness appearing not only to testify to the spirit's impassioned exaltation, but also to turn the flowers and vestments into emblems of that supernal beauty, beyond the barriers of sense, only to be attained by their destruction, which is the reward of the frustration of the flesh. It seems so plain that the emotions that sweep us must come from a source superior to aesthetics, transcending knowledge itself. We are certainly not being lulled by mere music: the noise these words make is nothing, a mere tuneless intonation. Nor is it any tale that delights us; nor a useful text; nor the prettiness of conceit. As the green and crimson figures crowd about us the verse that brings them is quite forgotten. It is by the movement of these painted characters, a code superior to language, that the unspeakable message is made clear. We have crossed the bridges that divide symbol from reality and know that they have dissolved as we passed. We are absorbed into the very stuff of metaphor, and inhabit a knowledge above words. The magic that poetry has hitherto practised intermittently, the spell that floats from a lyrical cry or gleams in a solitary phrase, has been caught up and sustained and built into an enduring substance. Poetry at last has

justified our wordless faith in her and fulfilled her elusive pledge; now at last we enter, with Blake, into 'Noah's rainbow, and become the friends and companions of the images of wonder . . .'

III

And then the spell snaps. To turn the last page of Guenevere is to let the little lever slip back—Click!—out we slide, irretrievably, into the old, placid, amiable sunlight and the reassuring conventions. It is a recoil as complete as from moonlight to noonlight—from the lovely delirium of fever to the cool languors of convalescence; it is one of the most astonishing zigzags in letters. With Guenevere we seemed to have crossed the 'perilous seas,' to have pierced their foam finally; with Jason, Morris's next book, we are far on the safe, hither side of them, the ripe, comforting earth, with its fruits and its fatness, banked between us and all questionable things:

And southward is a gentle sea and kind
Nigh landlocked, peopled with all kinds of fish,
And the good land yields all that man can wish.

If Guenevere acts like a drug, stringing the nerves to a state of tingling clairvoyance, then Jason comes as a soothing nepenthe, an opiate compounded of low, flitting colours and lulling tunes and the herbs of gathered tales. It is one of the
longest sleeping-draughts in the language. Instead of the startling utterance of the first book, 'its accent falling in strange unwonted places,' as Pater said, 'with the effect of a great cry,' we have the prolonged sleepy lapping of a metre that flows like a lullaby, like the murmur on a midsummer beach, the very accent of earthly content:

... Then Jason paused and said:
'O Jove, by thy hand may all these be led
To name and wealth, and yet indeed for me,
What happy ending shall I ask from thee?
What helpful friends? What length of quiet years?
What freedom from ill cares and deadly fears?
Do what thou wilt, and none the less believe
That all these things and more shouldst thou receive
If thou wert Jason, I were Jove to-day.'

So the equable iambics flow, whilst the heroes haggie courteously with heaven. For it is no mystic Sangraal that Jason and these Argonauts pursue—they have nothing even of Sir Peter Harpden's earthier love for 'stout blows given,' battle for battle's sake; they fight frankly for solid results, for peace and ease, 'length of quiet years,' 'wealth of happy days'; and they like their voyage to be well guaranteed. In this, as in all else, they are gently in accord. The sharp delineations in the earlier book, the faces so intensely discriminated that they seem to betray the last secrets of the mind, have all been smoothed down and simplified, as though by an actual tide; and character is to be distinguished from character only by the colours of their robes, their blue eyes or their grey—never by traits of temper or desire.

And love itself moves among them, no longer a lord of terrible aspect, but dimpled and pouting, cherubic, a pretty matter of blushes and sighs:

Therewith she made an end; but while she spoke
Came Love unseen and cast his golden yoke
About them both, and sweeter her voice grew,
And softer ever, as betwixt them flew,
With fluttering wings, the new-born strong desire;
And when her eyes met his grey eyes, on fire
With that that burned her, thus with sweet new shame
Her fair face reddened, and there went and came
Delicious tremors through her....

And the like. No sign anywhere of the almost sinister understanding that followed Guenevere's agony through shade after shade, using it, like some Inquisitor acting on behalf of humanity, as a means of obtaining knowledge.

'These early poems,' says Mr. Mackail very beautifully, 'have the evanescent and intangible grace of a new beginning in art, the keen scent and frail beauty of the first blossoms of spring... Such in their time had been the troubled and piercing charm of the Virgilian Eclogues, of the early Florentine or Sienese paintings.' 'When Morris read his first poem, the first he had written in his life,' says another fine critic, himself a poet, who was happy enough to form one of the eager Oxford circle, 'I felt it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new, founded on nothing previous.... Side by side with these utterances, it is good to place Morris's own comment. When the hushed
group of listeners had breathed their applause—
‘Well, if that’s poetry,’ said he, ‘it’s jolly easy
to do.‘

IV

So—who fished the murex up? How was this
first effect produced—so ‘easy,’ so abnormal, so
irrecoverable? And what caused the change?
Criticism, in part the docile registrar, meekly
making definitions and entering results, does like
to be regarded too as a subtle discoverer of
causes—and of causes, often, as she actually
persuades herself, that are cunningly hidden from
the artist. An illusion, perhaps, but it serves to
keep her to the dullest task, makes amends for the
drudgery: for perhaps nothing in all letters—
save, of course, the thrill of the first stroke—is
more absorbing, more exciting, than the spectacle
of the Spirit of Letters (as it seems) duping her
prey, the poor writer, with old baits and ambitions,
playing him softly, till at length she wrings out
just the service she required and he lies neatly
gutted on the bank, performer of a very different
service to the scheme of things from that which
he proposed when first he spread his little fins.
She has Bedford gaol for one man and blindness
for another; tricks a Fitzgerald with loneliness into
whimsical hobbies; turns an angry letter to the
_Times_ into a ten-year book called _Modern Painters_
sets a Blake pursuing phantoms with cries that be-
come happy carols in mid-air. These are random
figures, but are they not typical? From Spenser
(with his politics) to Pater (with his Winckelmann)
they all work with enchanted ink that changes as
it dries; they believe themselves to be writing one
message and quite another reaches us; they leave
the world gratefully in their debt for something
they had neither knowledge nor intention of be-
stowing. Or so at least Criticism—perhaps duped
in her turn?—is delighted to suppose.

Yet certainly this case of Morris, whom we
may know better than the Langlands, not only
warms up the belief with new colour, but actu-
ally increases its attractiveness, screwing up the
dramatic pitch some points further. Mostly, the
Spirit of Letters (or, more strictly, of course,
some obscure daemon in the man himself, the
deep, dim essence of his genius) gets its way:
not often meeting a man strong enough to stand
to his principles without being broken and yet too
simple to be seduced by gallantries. But Morris
—half Berserker, half babe—had both the strength
and the simplicity; and the tale of his life, broadly
scanned, resolves itself into a long wrestle with
his daemon, a match between the comfortable
methods that appealed to his plain mind and the
cryptic plans of this masked power. He won—
we lost; and all his eagerness to share his prize,
and the handsome figure he cut as he received it,
rich consolations though they are, must not pre-
vent us from frankly realising our ill-fortune.
_Guernere_ is the golden, tantalising proof of it.
Wrung from him when he was still dizzy with
youth, before he had found his footing and learned his rights and resources. The Defence of Guenevere is a victory for the forces he was later to subdue. An involuntary cry, it lets his secret slip. It shows the message he was charged to deliver but which he shrank from and smoothly suppressed. Guenevere declares the poet Morris refused to become.

This is not mere hyperbole. Much of Jason’s mildness is directly the result of Morris’s increased powers of craftsmanship and his increased mastery of life;—and the special quality of Guenevere, the rare, high note that makes it magical, did steal into it, as we are now to see, quite without Morris’s consent, even without his knowledge, actually invalidating his deliberate design. It may sound fantastic, but it is simply true, that he was one of the few readers of the book who failed to understand its significance. It is a matter of record that he never liked it; that he deliberately destroyed a bundle of contemporary verse, veined with the same quality; that he consented to the publication of a second edition with extreme reluctance and only on condition that he was allowed to revise and reshape it;—and it is in these deliberate, cool adjustments that we may find, I think, the final proof of his illusion and our first real clue to its kind. The alterations, happily for us, failed to reach the printer; but some of them were

1 It was accident again, it seems, that intervened and saved us. And it is worth noticing, too, that even the shivering abruptness of

recently discovered, and these have now been reproduced, by Miss May Morris, among her discreet and charming Editorial Notes to the newly complete edition.1 One set, typical of all, may be submitted here. They relate to The Chapel in Lyonesse. Of the verses below, those on the left give Sir Galahad’s speech as it was originally written (and as it still appears in the current editions); those on the right are the stanzas into which Morris, seventeen years later, no longer at the mercy of mere instincts, carefully re-cut them:

So I went a little space
From out the chapel, bathed my face
In the stream that runs space
By the churchyard wall.

So I went a little space
From out the chapel, bathed my face
Amid the stream that runs space
By the churchyard wall.

There I plucked a faint wild rose,
Hard by where the linden grows,
Sighting over silver rows
Of the lilies tall.

There in my rest I plucked a rose
Where the lime a garden blows
And winds run through the trembling rows
Of lilies slim and tall.

I laid the flower across his mouth;  
The sparkling drops seem'd good for drouth;  
He smiled, turn'd round towards the south,  
    Held up a golden tress.

I bore him water for his drouth,  
I laid the flower beside his mouth,  
He smiled, turned round towards the south,  
    Held up a golden tress.

It would be difficult, with fewer strokes, to dispel the early fascination more completely. First come the melodic amendments—a general smoothening and tidying of the rhythm: a short line padded with an extra syllable (‘amid’ for ‘in’), a stiff line (‘Hard by where the linden grows’) oiled and curved and given the conventional wave; the joints between syllable and syllable nicely softened and salved, until all the old numb naïveté and ache of the accent has been quite worked away, and with it all sense of spiritual tension and distress. Next, neatly coincident, but carrying the work of suave destruction into still subtler crevices, come the soft changes in the scene. The erasure of ‘faint’ and ‘wild’ instantly cools the light fever in the first effect; the new decorative slimmness of the lilies makes them a mere ornament; and the introduction of the ‘garden,’ the substitution of the benignant ‘limes’ for the shuddering ‘lindens,’ safely lowers the whole dream-landscape into something as contented and subdued as the orchard-close at Kelmscott. Remains now, of the first hectic picture, nothing but the queer morbid stain of the flower on the dead man's mouth; and the last stanza smoothly assuages it. The rose is gently displaced, the half-mystical gesture which laid it there is turned into an amiable act of knightly ministration. We are left with a graceful description of a credible incident—a picture by the popular artist who painted *The Knight Errant* in place of one by the young master of *Lorenzo and Isabella*.

It is a curious bit of restoration, and, at first, unmistakably disconcerting: it seems to throw a doubt upon the authenticity of the spell; if the stumbling tension in the voices, for instance, which seemed to hint at an unspeakable burden, was merely a result of the workman's awkwardness, are we not hoaxing ourselves rather absurdly when we allow it to thrill us so profoundly? Nor may we use those seventeen years as a shield. Morris's hands had gained strength in the interval, they could carry out his plans more completely—but that was all; there seems no doubt that the picture on the right was the one he always wanted to paint, that it was upon a graceful description of a credible incident that he believed himself to be engaged, and that even when the lines were actively shrilling and sharpening beneath his fingers into the shapes we know, he still felt he was producing work of a blameless virility. For this we have his own certificate. Asked, in the early days, whom he thought his work most resembled: 'Why, Browning, I suppose,' said he, surprised; and when some rapt disciple besought him to expound the inner meaning of the symbol

*Three red roses across the moon,*
he blurted out indignantly, 'But it's the knight's coat-of-arms of course!' These are remarkable assertions. No other reader, we may be sure, ever connected that mesmeric rune with clanking steel; or realised that the book was to be regarded as a new series of *Dramatic Lyrics*. Victorian literature was a various mother, but few of her children were less alike than Pippa and the two Jehanes, or Blougram and Sir Bors; and the contrast between the spurring idiom that describes the first, a spangled riot of mad neologisms, pouring helter-skelter from all sorts of newly-picked pockets—the novelist's jargon fired into ecstasy—and the primitive epithets, laboriously strung, that spell out the portraits of the others, is barely wide enough to measure the difference between the temper of the curiosities that created them.

Yet, Morris was perfectly sincere in his ascription; he offered it in absolute good faith. With a little adjustment, indeed, by looking at them afresh from a certain angle, it is possible even for us to decipher a sort of buried Browning motive at the back of many of these pieces, glimmering to the surface, as we peer, much as an old fresco will gleam through later washes. Approach *The Defence* retrospectively—looking at it, not in square isolation, but down the long, slanting, resonant aisle of Morris's later activities—his hearty socialism, his ringling sagas, his clattering looms and printing-presses and solid furniture—and you do begin to see the old sturdy intention

linking up, collecting special patches of colour and salient corners, shaking off as irrelevances the queer angles and tints that we took for the main design. The name-poem itself begins to change: Guenevere's plea displays a simple logic, the logic falls into place as part of a well-set stage-scene climbing up to a conventional curtain—the clapping of releasing horse-hoofs 'off'; and the distraught images that held the sight before fall back, emptied of moment, revealed as minor details that bad drawing had swollen out of scale. In *Sir Peter Harpdon's End*, again, it is no longer the strange, feverish, chattering keen of the countess;

``Come face to face,
O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
I know not what, at any rate come now
From one of the many places where you are,
Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings
Or sitting on the altar strange with gems
Or high up in the dustiness of the apse—
Let us go You and I a long way off
To the little damp dark Poitevin church.
While you sit on the coffin in the dark
Will I lie down my face on the bare stone...''

that rings and drones most insistently in our ears. It is drowned by the sound of the arbalets, the hot hammer-and-tongs-work beneath the walls, and by Clisson's noble snarl:

``You filthy beast, stand back and let him go,
Or by God's eyes I'll choke you!''

From all the Froissart poems a similar new manliness looks out. One even sees a sunny purpose
at the back of the dubious films of Geffray *Luste Noire*. Its base is a composition as frank and genial as anything in Froissart, its colour-scheme the ruby and the gold of wine and noon-day sun:

We rode a soft pace on that day while spies
Got news about Sir Geffray; the red wine
Under the roadside bush was clear; the flies,
The dragon-flies I mind me most, did shine
In brighter arms than ever I put on.

It was only some lurking obstinacy in brush or brain that turned these happy colours into the hues of a poisoned dream, into the red of the frozen blood-pools and the sick yellow of the charnel flames; and that twisted the very wine-cup itself and the bright armour and even the act of drinking into a sinister device:

'I saw you drink red wine
Once at a feast: how slowly it sank in,
As though your heart felt some wild fate might twine
Within that cup and slay you for a sin.

I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword
That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,
Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford
For caught-up breathings: like a dying sigh...'

Beardsley rather than Browning, you would say; yet with the example of that restored *Chapel* in front of us it is easy to see how Morris, once his hand was in, would have planed away these twisted aberrations and left the tale as smooth as Edward's beard.

Indeed, there is a danger of our sympathies swinging us too far. The later Morris, all bearded and blithe, radiating legends and hammering down his husky dogmas ('Poetry is *wommy-rot*,' was one of these; and another, more deliberate, 'Half-a-dozen stanzas of ballad poetry are worth a cart-load of the whining introspective pieces of to-day'), makes such an entirely satisfying and wholesome figure that the reader may easily be swept off his feet and bullied out of his first priceless impression. Readers have yielded thus; nay, Criticism herself has been coerced! 'The life of our mediæval ancestors,' says one distinguished writer, too close a friend of Morris to resist him, 'The life of our mediæval ancestors is here depicted with a sympathy and insight perhaps unparalleled.'

Even Mr. Andrew Lang was carried away: 'We found Froissart's people alive again in Morris's poems,' he was once persuaded to attest, 'and we knew better what thoughts and emotions lay in the secret of their hearts than we could from the bright superficial pages of Froissart.'

But we must resist the infection; we are not going to be hectored. If the figures Froissart carved seem to move again in these pages it is with the rude marks and blunders of the mediæval chisel still on their faces and limbs—a race of locomotory effigies, tombs as men walking. The
influence of Browning does break into these poems, but it is in the shape of a shattered fierceness, in flakes of raw colour, in lines of a sudden physical violence—such as:

   A wicked smile
   Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,
   A long way out she thrust her chin—

which might be a strip torn from a portrait of Ottima—producing an effect as different from the wide glow of their source as the splintered sunlight showering through a thick underwood is unlike the serene spreading radiance outside. From Malory and Froissart young Morris meant, without doubt, to take a certain knightly directness of narrative and stories that rang as they moved. What he actually seized was the numbness that clogs the limbs of his characters, the incoherence of their attitudes and their rigidity—the very qualities that make them move like men locked in a trance. He sought a simple sturdiness and obtained a queer somnambulism. Similarly with Browning. He intended to borrow virility and the heat of human passion. The sudden tensions he took merely filled the air with a monastic fever, heightened the unreality they were meant to dispel. He mixed his colours carefully, applied them in all confidence,—but somewhere between palette and picture they were doctored, something distorted the brush-marks as they dried.

It smacks most prodigiously of sorcery; but we are close on the explanation now. When we turn to consider the effect of the other great influence that is supposed to be projected on these pages we find, it is true, what looks, at first, like yet another of these uncanny perversions. 'To my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, painter, I dedicate these poems,' is the inscription on the fly-leaf of Guenevere; and we are assured that over Morris, at the time, the dominion of Rossetti was supreme. 'He became not only a pupil, but a servant. Once when Burne-Jones complained that the designs he made in Rossetti's manner seemed better than his own original work, Morris answered with some vehemence: 'I have got beyond all that: I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can.' Yet when we turn to look on the resemblance—whither has it fled? Technically, the two poets occupy antipodes. Such verse as this, for instance:

   What thing unto mine ear
   Wouldst thou convey—what secret thing,
   O wandering water ever whispering?
   Surely thy speech shall be of her.
   Thou water, O thou whispering wanderer,
   What message doest thou bring?

—a whorl of fluted sound, that uses the last silken subtleties of onomatopoeia, so perfectly characteristic of Rossetti—might be used to illustrate precisely those arts of expression which Morris was quite abnormally incapable of employing. Rossetti loved the very 'feel' of language, fingered words with a caressing passion, braiding their echoes like moss. To Morris they were simply so
many little blocks, each bearing a coloured sign, which he proceeded to arrange in rows, unit by unit, until they were built into recognised shapes. All the delicious collusions of which words are capable—the soft cocoons they can spin, out of sound and association, until the legible, logical line has disappeared in a mist of gold—were qualities he never understood. It is curious to compare Morris’s Portrait of My Lady (‘My lady seems of ivory’) with Rossetti’s companion-piece (A Portrait): the first a patient catalogue of features, cut like a cameo, fitted together like the leaded panes of a window; Rossetti’s insidiously evading all outlines and junctures, sliding deliciously through graded elisions, using only the words that hover on the dusky verges of language—moth-like words, twilight words, words that bring dusk on their wings—all the gliding idiom of reverie:

In painting her I shivered her face
1Mid mystic trees where light falls in
Hardly at all; a covert place
Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.

It is to make a whispering-gallery of verse, a corridor of stealing echoes and lost sighs. And even when they both enter the border-land of the ballads, where they might be thought to approach one another most nearly, the two men remain marvellously unlike. The bridge that would join Rapunzel and Rose Mary must leap a full kingdom of emotions. The Welshman’s work, all jerks and emphasis, is as Teutonic as black letter, and as crabbed; as Gothic as a castle on the Rhine. The Italian’s is as Celtic as a mountain stream: its stanzas slide as easily as a string of opals, the picture mirrored in the heart of each has a magical purity, and yet when all is done, when the last has slipped by, the legend lies along the memory like a vapour, mixing and melting like a cloud.

Another and yet deeper difference may be noted here: Rossetti’s poem is written by a master of narrative; Rapunzel is the work of a man who suffered all his life from an utter inability to tell a tale. This is contrary to current opinion of course: it was primarily as a teller of tales that Morris insisted upon being regarded; he believed himself to be the story-teller born; and all his books, from The Earthly Paradise to The Sundering Flood, could be catalogued in a way that would make them seem credible stout witnesses to that faith. But his gifts were really as unlike Chaucer’s (whom he loved to regard as his archetype) as Browning’s; and from either of the two main ways of telling a story he was constitutionally barred. There are nine-and-ninety ways of spinning yarns indeed; but though the species are so many, the types are strictly two. On the one hand the art of narrative may concern itself with recounting the progress and evolution of that invisible element, a blend of hints and hopes and possibilities and surprises, which is roughly called the plot; the abstract and impalpable core round which the characters and tangible situations successively cluster. On the other hand it may betray this evolution by presenting, in turn, the only part of its physical envelope which is capable of sympathising with its changes—by holding up, that is to say, the little features of men’s minds in which the invisible fluctuations are legibly reflected. But Morris was spoiled for the first (and oldest) of these methods by that curious incapacity of his for dealing with anything abstract or intangible of which we have already seen the signs in these Rossetti comparisons, and which will be more fully demonstrated in a moment. And for the second (which was Browning’s and most novelists’) he was even more completely disqualified by his queer lack of any psychological gift whatever—the defect which made him seem, all his life, notwithstanding his determined hilarity, so oddly unhuman and isolated, which made one of his dearest friends say
VI

What did Morris take from Rossetti, then, and where did he bury his booty? He took things of one special kind—and the contents of the cache, when we discover and open it, flash a keen light on the whole range of his pillagings. There are three poems in The Defence of Guenevere whose titles, themes, and accessories are all lifted bodily from Rossetti. They are The Blue Closet, The Tune of the Seven Towers, and King Arthur's Tomb. But it is not in any index to Rossetti's poems that you will find these names. They are the titles of three of his early pictures—pictures which Morris purchased, studied intently, and then repeated in verse.

It is unerringly typical. It may be said at once that Morris took, and could take, nothing from his poets but their pictures. As incapable as a child of 'fundamental brainwork,' he could only seize what he saw: thought itself had to be made sensible before he could grasp it; he was one of those (perhaps a more numerous race than we realise) who reason in pictures, who cannot absorb an idea until it is made into an ideogram,—and all that was abstract in Rossetti's work, all that was intellectually, speculatively, ethereal, psychological, flowed through his more primitive fingers like an empty wind. But, for this incapacity (which has in it perhaps the germ of a wise instinct, a refusal to see validity in anything that cannot take a vivid form—a recognition of Keats's law of truth and beauty) he was compensated by the possession of an inordinate sensual avidity—and of an insatiable power, in especial, of suckling sense-impressions through the eye and storing them with absolute security. This, indeed, may be called his distinguishing gift, the deciding element in his personality. It was upon its exercise that all his later activities were based; it both fed their scope and ruled their direction. It furnished him (as we shall see) with his philosophy both of art and of life; it gave him his fecundity and his facility as a designer; it was the source of all his desires and ideals; it was the fountain that fed the chains of still pools he called his 'tales.' And it was certainly by its alchemy that the new magic in Guenevere was acquired. For it enabled him to pillage all the poets without plagiarising them, to copy Keats and Coleridge and Browning and Tennyson, as well as Malory and Froissart and

1 His biographer tells us, as 'characteristic of his extraordinary eye and extraordinary memory,' that he saw the Church of Minster in Thanet when he was eight years old, and that 'fifty years later, never having seen the church in the interval, he described it in detail from that recollection.' We are also told how, in the days of the Firm, when they were manufacturing big church windows in premises dis-proportionately cramped, this amazing eye and memory for colours enabled him to achieve the impossible: he could pass all the parts of a large window one by one before the light and never lose sight of the general tone of the colours or of the relation of one part to another.
Chaucer, without uttering one audible echo, and to
give to a simple cento of their work the effect of
being 'something entirely new, founded on nothing
previous.' Whenever their verse crystallised into
vision it caught in his mind; all the rest—music,
metaphysic, intellectual vehicle—poured past un-
heeded. He stole the little landscapes reflected in
the foam that hung and shook from the leaping
fountain of Shelley's work; but of the spirit that
tossed and sustained it, even of the living water
itself, he captured, he could capture, nothing.
He took the castles that rose—all too rarely—on
the clouds that Coleridge's intellect drew out
of the air; and left the irresolute wrack behind.
He stripped the frescoes from the walls of
Tennyson's *Palace of Art* and turned them back
into reality; but the moral strains to which the
Palace uprose, the polite conversations about the
infinities conducted inside it, all drained, not unde-
sirably, away. The description did not even need
to be direct. It might be merely the remote end
of a metaphor: he could still snap it neatly away,
lop it free from its stem, leaving nothing of the
thought or emotion that gave birth to it except
the ineradicable physical stains on its texture.
He saw similes as solid things; and such a casual
touch as this, a side-glance through the shattered
lines of one of Rossetti's thickening dramas—

'But else, 'twas at the dead of noon,
Absolute silence; all,
From the raised bridge and guarded sconce
To green-clad places of pleasance
Where the long lake was white with swans'—

provides him with a place he can enter and
explore and afterwards patiently plan out for
us (with an effect how different!) in such a careful
inventory as this:

Midways of a wallèd garden,
In the happy poplar land,
Did an ancient castle stand,
With an old knight for a warden.

Across the moat the fresh west wind
In very little ripples went;
The way the heavy aspens bent
Towards it, was a thing to mind.

The painted drawbridge over it
Went up and down with gilded chains.
'Twas pleasant in the summer rains
Within the bridge-house there to sit.

There were five swans that never did eat
The water weeds, for ladies came
Each day, and young knights did the same,
And gave them cakes and bread for meat.

They had a house of painted wood,
A red roof gold-spliced over it
Wherein upon their eggs to sit
Week after week. . . .

It is a country as actual to him as Essex—for
it is constructed only of such materials as his
five senses had encountered; of anything in
the fabric of the original region which they
could not touch and test, he had remained quite
unaware. 'My business in life,' he wrote in one
of the earnest letters of his youth, 'is the em-
bodyment of dreams in one form or another.'
Had he written 'other men's dreams' it would
have been the perfect definition of his work.
is his laborious way of indicating an interval. Objects that might have seemed solid enough already he must make still more tangible. When he borrows, from a picture of Rossetti's, that stricken gesture of fingers pressed to face, of which the painter was so fond, and bestows it upon Guenevere:

Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

he must make it yet more physical, adding:

_As though she had had there a shameful blow,

confirming the bodily act, not by showing us its governing emotion, but with a picture of a second action, heavier and grosser and more violent than the first. And more than once, when he copies a painted image of the Christ to embody the idea of divinity, he must carry even this solidification a strange stage further, turning the painted lips into real ones and the graven image into still more mortal flesh—practising anthropomorphism twice over:

_O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
I know not what; at any rate come now
From one of many places where you are,
Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings
Or sitting on the altar strange with gems
Or high up in the dustiness of the apo.
So I may keep you there, your solemn face
And long hair even-flowing on each side
Until you love me well enough to speak,
And give me comfort; yes, till over your chin,
And eleven red beard the great tears roll down . . .

—the addition of the bodily elements, it may be
noted once more, actually dissolving the sense of reality it was meant to secure, hurrying us into the circle of hallucination.

VII

And always, oddly aiding this process, there was his callous indifference to mere words. This illiteracy helped him doubly. For one thing it enabled him to plunge clean through the paper and seize the actual object described. When you or I or any other reader or writer sees such a scrap of essential poetry as this:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
All garlanded with carven imageries,
Of fruits and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded #mcuon blush'd with blood of queens and kings,
—we gain a joy inseparable from these particular epithets, drawn up in just these ranks; and the ripe, muffled padding, as of velvet feet, which the d's and m's make up and down the lines (dyes, dim, splendid, deep-damask'd, diamonded, device), and the double meanings which merge and blend, with such a sumptuous deepening of the general richness, in such luxuriously ambiguous words as diamonded and damask, all melt into the glow of the picture itself—perhaps even blur it a little, so that its details grow dim, as they would in reality,

fainting into one warm, delicious suffusion. But all that mattered to Morris, all he perceived and enjoyed, was the stained glass window itself and the intricate carving. Just as, in his later life, when he was making such windows in reality, he could pick up in swift succession each of the tiny panes in a big rose window and carry all their relations massed clearly in his mind, so here he caught out of the words the exact casement Keats thought of—valuing the description solely for the fullness and clearness, for the completeness with which it supplied him with this luxurious raw material. And, as with Keats, so with all the other great describers, through whose visions, as a voluptuous undergraduate, he went greedily foraging for physical sensations. 'He understood Tennyson's greatness in a manner that we [his fellow-undergraduates], who were mostly absorbed by the language, could not share,' says Canon Dixon: 'he understood it as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them. It was this substantial view that afterwards led him to admire ballads, real ballads, so highly.'... For 'admire,' read 'enjoy.'

And this child-like indifference to 'the language' aided his pilferings still further by making it practically impossible to follow up and identify his spoil. All the traceable epithets and idioms, the clinging cadences and lucky turns of speech, that twined round the original image, seeming an essential part of its tissue, tumbled off as he tore
it away. He retained nothing but the visible object, brushed clear of all the music that conjured it: the poem was melted down and carried off as virgin vision. That very casement of Madeline’s, one now recollects, was one of the objects he utilised. The coloured light that splashes these pages of **Guerinere** drew much of its splendour from these dyes: yet in all that stanza of Keats there is not one cardinal word that Morris himself ever used. He thrust through the writing to the solid substance itself, to the gules and the traceried stone, stacked these in the Aladdin’s cave of his memory, a pirate’s hoard of similar loot, where the solid residuum of all the world’s romances—Gothic, Arabian, Norse—lay stored indistinguishably with sense-impres-
sions gathered in Essex and Oxford and Bruges—figures from missals, designs from old Herbals, faces from smooth Flemish portraits, carvings and colours from stained church windows and tombs; and then, when the time came to use it, sat down before it, wedged where it lay, and to the mechanical beat of some simple borrowed metre, set ticking at his elbow like a metronome, strung his monosyllables stolidly together, like a man making a copy in mosaic, till he had mapped it out all afresh:

Because it seemed a dwelling for a queen  
No belfry for the swinging of great bells,  
No bolt or stone that ever crush’d the green  
Shades, amber and rose walls, no root that tells  
Of the Norse torches burning up the roofs  
On the flower-carven marble could I see....

And there you have another of these occult, potent transformations accomplished!

**VIII**

And how much more than these elfin refrac-
tions does this diagnosis of the process not explain! It explains the blind gait of the words, that seemed to be stumbling and groping beneath the burden of a meaning too inordinate for speech, but that are now seen to be palmed by nothing more dreadful than inexperience; and the vivid incoherence of the narrative—distressed, as we thought, by the same wordless desire—clotting and huddling tensely into those hieroglyphs of knights and queens and painted moons—a system of signs profounder and more elemental than language—is seen to be only the result of a kind of incomplete larceny. Made out of a solid crust of massed images, fused by none of the solving vapours of narrative, verse of this vivid sort was bound to present a surface full of fissures, scored with gaps in the thought, unbridged by abstrac-
tions, across which the reader’s mind has to fling itself, desperately leaping from picture to picture—actually experiencing, as well as seeming to watch, the galvanic conduct of a mind fevered by strong vision. Nor was it less innocently inevitable, nor less unconscious and unsought, that the strained figures stooping in these pictures should seem weighted with a sacramental purpose or to
move with the rigour of ecstacies; for it was out
of missals that many of them came, it was from
painted books and devout pictures that the faces
of these adulterous queens and spell-bound lovers
were taken, and in their angularity alone, if in
nothing deeper, they bear the marks of the
fashions and vigils that stiffened the monkish
fingers that made them. The white face of
Jehane and the rigid sword-grip of Sir Guy might
well recall the lips and hands of anchorites, for it
was the hands of anchorites that carved them on
old tombs.

And finally, whilst their parched speech was due
to one kind of inexperience—to Morris's own
primitive technique, and their constricted gestures
to another, an earlier innocence and awkwardness;
whilst the sense of subtle spiritual strain is directly
the result of a simple boyish liking for bright
pictures, and the effect of an uncannily intimate
comprehension of recondite sexual moods to a
naive contentment with art instead of life; so the
lapidary brightness of the result, that seemed to
testify so surely to a state of abnormal, almost
nightmare, apprehensiveness, is but the outcome
of an honest zeal for a sort of sunny solidity.
The more muscally young Morris pressed upon
his medium, delighting in its growing distinctness,
the more fiercely did it start up from the page
and accost us with the brittle colours of delirium.
Just as those contemporary P.R.B. pictures, painted
by the band of hearty youths who were his friends,
were strung up to the intensity of parables, in-
vested with a kind of hushed holiness, by a mere
dogged attention to detail, a pedestrian transcrip-
tion of every stem and stain and stone, so do
these graphic lyrics seem to grow more breathless
and mystical the more precisely and materialisti-
cally they were made. One of the best of those
pictures, burdened (as it seems) with presage, is
that simple gardening bonfire scene, painted by
the happy young athlete Millais, known as
'Autumn Leaves.' By a process not dissimilar,
in a spirit just as joyous, this book of borrowed
brightness, this heap of garnered spoil, was in-
vested with the same piercing iridescence, seemed
to wear 'the evanescent and intangible grace of a
new beginning in art,' and, in spite of its actual
autumnal sensuousness, seems to thrill and tingle
with the tidings of a strange new spiritual spring.

IX

Is the whole thing, then, one immense, amazing
'spoof,' and are we, the solemn readers, with our
reverential ecstacies, no better than a row of
mawkish gulls? By the Heels of Apollo—no!
Who are we to say that the work a man's hand
does in defiance of his neatly-framed intentions
is not obeying far profounder laws than any that
could be codified by that prim bureaucrat his
brain? Consider the cold scientific character
of the verses thus involuntarily made. Com-
posed of clamped metaphors, a solid crust of
imagery, might they not be expected, on that account alone, to contain a keener, purer magic than poetry that is mostly matrix, a bed and vehicle for single gems? Though we scarcely ever admit it, checked by a rather winning sort of shame, afraid of being found too trivial, it is actually for the sake of these concentrated pictures, these little pools of vision, that we treasure and ponder poetry as we do; and when we chip off, to use as amulets, such crystals as

Brightness falls from the air:

or

Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity;

or

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands form;

choosing always a token for the eye, never a mere tune for the ear or an abstract text for the mind, we are making admission of our dim belief in their special virtue, our recognition that they are a kind of quintessence. Sunbright epitomes at their lowest, at their best they are crystallisations, formed in some intenser fire of energy, of perceptions too pure and fine for the standard statements of reasoned thought; and to handle them, even apart from their setting, is to receive and be adjusted to the power that flowed up to this supreme point in the poem. They are the bright precipitates of the poet's mood, coins that concentrate the wealth of a landscape,

bearing much the relation to the rest of the poem that the poem itself does towards the spreading spaces of the poet's life. Condensations of condensations—is it too much to imagine that poetry compact of them, built solely of images, may be, if not actually a superior summary, a final and yet finer concentration, then at least quite delectably free from alloy, a strangely precious new manner of writing? Admit even that and you grant Guenevere legitimacy; it falls purely into place, clear descendant of Christabel, immensely, unexpectedly, de race! To talk of this schoolboy as creating a superb ultimate symbol—taking from Froissart the pure essence of our chivalry, and the focus of another faith from Malory—the minted emblems of our simpler moods from the ballads and of our more complex desires from Shelley, Coleridge, Keats—and then welding all together into one inclusive major-myth, would doubtless be to fling a theory too far—a stupid, academic weakness; but to fail to see in the later course of verse a steady struggle to gain exactly this condition of pure symbol, to rid itself of all the old alloys of message or injunction, is to be cynical and unscientific both: a deadlier fault than pedantry. Put it, roughly, that what was once the mere body of verse, good to carry counsel, is now regarded as its soul; that its old burdens are now looked on as a pedestal; then the modern cry is 'Dissolve the pedestal.' Relieved long ago of her earliest office, that of a vessel for lore, knowledge, messages—a
wire for the old simple stem. Young poets before Morris had studied their predecessors; some even had decided on this sort of filtration, but none had done both so unconsciously and illiterately, with such a complete absence of limiting theory. Morris alone, with his simple boy's heart and his giant frame, with no care for philosophy and little ear for music, had blessed innocence enough to walk unscathed to the treasure and then the strength to crush it into one pattern. A cleverer giant would have turned aside to argue, a more sophisticated one would have been seduced by wise or useful alloys; a less lusty simpleton would have but gathered the perfect anthology. Morris turned his anthology into an alphabet, using each of its items as a letter. He sent his great voice pealing out in a song that used solid poems for its notes. He walked the waves without noticing them, intent only on the pretty colours in the spray; and he picked these up because he wanted them, and bound them together in a bow, and carved corridors and chambers in the heart of them, all because he was as a little child. No, when we felt we were 'entering Noah's rainbow and being made companions of the images of wonder,' we were not being so absurdly deceived. An abstract of earlier art, a distillation of old dreams, Guenevere does hang above the ranging tides of verse, a chord of essential colour, at once a completion and a pledge.

And sweeping out of and surpassing this narrow technical legitimacy, this proof of the book's place

receptacle, almost physical, in which precepts could be pleasantly preserved. Poetry only lately completed another stage of her enfranchisement by transferring bodily to the new faculty of Fiction her other duty of teller of tales; and now, in our own time, the chief task has become to remove the last film and trace of rhetoric, to thin away the old appeal to the ear, until at last even the tune may become optical, intellectual, too fine for the slower sense of sound, and the vase is finally dissolved. It was of this purification of 'the lyrical cry,' this attempt to shake metaphor clear of its moral and capture the foam without the wave, that Rossetti used to dream when he spoke of 'a condensed and hinted beauty'; and it was towards this too that Verlaine with his lures, and the 'Symbolists' with their elaborate machinery, and the lamenting voices that are still pleading sadly for beauty in Ireland, and the calamitous young dreamers, poor Dowson and Thompson, who sought an earlier heraldry still in our London, and used religion as a rosary to summon dreams beyond her reach—were all in their fashion subtly working. Some of these men came after our schoolboy, but their debt to him is well marked: without Morris, another Yeats. But from those who went before him he is distinguished by his amazing innocence of all intellectual tactics, by his beautiful inability to make the subtle mistake of the Symbolists and substitute a philosophy of letters for one of life, a ladder in place of the pedestal, a silver
in letters, there now comes the sense of a larger validity, a profounder conformity, a fulfilment of something more lasting than a literary tradition. The ultimate basis of all these queer involuntary virtues, as we have seen, is just the fact that the book is the work of a boy writing with the creative energy of a man; and it is this union of the strong decisiveness of manhood with the special dreams and limitations of youth that gives it a right to rank as something more definitive than a link in a chain of development. The Defence of Guenevere will retain its magic, one suggests, even after its descendants have carried poetry on into clearer kingdoms. For The Defence fulfils demands that are immune from development, recurrent as the spring, as stable as the body's need of food. It is the perfect embodiment of the dim desires of adolescence; it is a clear and ringing definition of the longings and the dreams which come before articulation, which had hitherto seemed bound up with dumbness, bone of its bone, dissolving always at the touch of that experience which brings the trick of words, the craft and equipment of speech. Feeding his own desires with his more than adult energy, this glorious undergraduate made a volume that might very well be called The Book of Youth, a complete response to all those 'romantic' appetites which every clean-drawn stripling feels, but which none is able to expound. Nor is it likely that the formula which Morris manufactured will prove a temporary solace, soon outmoded. It was in the arts of all the centuries that he sought his special spoil, and he ransacked the romance of every clime. Youth hounding him on pitilessly, his great body answering nobly, he hammered out a kind of Volapük, discovered the common element in eastern tales and northern sagas, and wrote out the answer he wanted in a kind of universal language, a picture-esperanto that may very well prove specially impregnable to time.

Youth lashed him on—and it was this fell urgency, finally, that forced him to crush and concentrate as never again, and to give this book the poignancy that makes even maturity regard it as his masterpiece. Youth is full of fears, sees dangers in dulity; youth dreads the dark, and hungers for a reassuring vehemence. In the strength of young Morris's grip at this time there is a little of the violence of terror. He dreaded and he longed, as young men do, the unknown couched in the blackness all about them: he clutched all he touched and riveted his gains, making every step a conquest. It was in this concentrated way that Guenevere was written, in a narrow circle as of torch-light in a forest. And it was the sunny end of these tremors and fears, it was the passing of all the special tortures which Youth applies to its vassals, that finally dissolved the fruitful spell.—Here, indeed, we do reach something genuinely discomfitting. Guenevere is beautiful because it was written in a kind of darkness; Jason is dull because it was born in the sun.
Our rainbow, it seems, required a background of storm. These colours owe their brightness to heart's-blood.

X

For The Defence of Guenevere, compared with The Life and Death of Jason, was really written on the rack. 'It was an anxious and a difficult time,' says his biographer of the undergraduate years when some of the best of it was done: Morris grew 'moody and irritable, brooded much by himself, and lost a good deal of his old sweetness and affection of manner.' He was suffering immoderately from all the maladies of youth—its violence and vagueness, its energy and innocence, its healthy hunger for physical beauty and its haunting sense that beauty was a sin. With more than a grown man's vitality, he knew far less of the actual world than the everyday urchin. Built on the lines of a Berserker, he regarded the Heir of Redclyffe as a thoroughly practical model and guide. His body was a cage of burning energies that could find no adequate outlet, and as they prowled and stormed and tore him he blamed himself for a fancied weakness of character. 'The instability of character which he found, or thought he found, in his own character became for the time acute ... he was subject to strange fluctuations of mood.' Destined for the Church, he had deeply wounded his mother by deciding not to take orders and by solemnly dedicating himself to architecture instead. And now, duly articulated, Rossetti strode tyrannously into his life, ordered him to become a painter, and he had to wound her again by obeying. He was a rebel who wanted only to do right; one duty defeated another, and desire warred with both; art took the place of reality, and he tried to spend his huge strength in the shadow-kingdom he had made out of pictures and poems and old tales. He overworked desperately, almost hysterically. He was desperately, cruelly, in love. And all about him, a beautiful wall between him and the real nineteenth century, blocking the normal channels of relief, lay the lackadaisically earnest Oxford of the fifties, an Oxford as adolescent as himself, and the capital of a solemn, sentimental, profoundly inexperienced England. Socially and intellectually the hour and the atmosphere exactly matched and heightened the exaggerated fevers and abysmal glooms of youth. Fresh conditions were being tested by a formula that had suddenly grown hollow and unreal, and energetic minds sailed out into a noble emptiness, an exalted indignation or sorrow that they failed to see was at bottom only an unconscious cowardice and shirking. There were melodramatic oppositions everywhere. You were scientist or saint. Ruskin and Carlyle stalked and darkly prophesied. Reality was turned into a menace, something to be scolded and shunned. The sun of a setting religion, burning through the strange, new clouds of factory-
smoke that were beginning to drift over England, turned them into a sinister pall.

Now compare these hectic personal conditions with Morris's mode of life a little later. The Defence was published in 1858; The Life and Death of Jason ten years later. In the interval he had married, had built himself a house, had laid out his life like a garden, and had settled down into a snug social philosophy. This philosophy was as simple as his mind. 'People, be good,' was the pith of young Ruskin's first and following sermons: Morris's whole ethic was even simpler: 'People, be happy.' That is the precept, framed precisely so, that reappears again and again in his familiar letters; it was the boyish core to all his grown-up efforts and creeds. 'People, be happy—so that I can be happy too,' was the centre of his socialism; 'Art is man's expression of his joy in labour,' was his comfortable theory of his own task of creation. As for the nature of this felicity, the kind of thing that constituted human happiness, this had been defined for him beyond escape, beautifully coloured and balanced, by the life we have seen him living. To an extent far greater than is commonly admitted, most men unconsciously manufacture their working philosophy, and their practical ambitions and ideals, out of chance pictures and memories, haunting scraps of description heard in their childhood, that take secret root and slowly collect mental adjuncts; but for a man like Morris—so specially incapable of abstract speculation, hedged about in

an unreal hush by his father's wealth, and abnormally capable of turning descriptions into solid kingdoms, where he could pace and live contentedly—it was inevitable that his philosophy, his view of life, his sense of its possibilities and perfections, should be formed out of books and pictures, out of exactly the material which we saw him crushing together to make into his first poetry. To speak of him, as the fashion is now, as a medievalist born,¹ a strayed soul from the thirteenth century, is pretty perhaps, but, surely, sentimental and unsound; he was in essence but a mass of undetermined energy surging with predilections for pure Comeliness, Symmetry, Law, and if he had been born, like Burne-Jones, in a Birmingham thoroughfare, and sent to a nail factory or brassfounder's, he might have used his great strength and sound instincts to straighten up the social tangle into which machinery at first plunged us; or at least have wrought reality into a pattern in the shape of modern books and plays. But he was bred in a moated grange, islanded out of the glamour, on that queer, unreal, middle kingdom which middle-class wealth alone can make,—diligently detached from the town on the one hand, yet having no share in the immemorial feudal mechanism of the soil on the other; he was educated on Gothic architecture, ancient peace, romances and missals, a course sustained, by happy accident, through his solitary school-

¹ 'The love of the Middle Ages was born in him,' says Mr. Mackail.
days in Savernake; and it was out of the lovely elements thus provided that he sheathed his desires and gave them the dogmatic body that we know. He came to believe that the essential nature of man was something as simple and courteous, as calm and contented, as decoratively lusty, as the smooth figures he found, made proud and perfect by Time or tender craftsmen, in the pictures he accumulated in his Aladdin's cave; he felt that all the rest was but accident and distortion, and that the modern world had but to shake itself in order to shed the shabby husks it had acquired and step out in the old stately simplicity. Perhaps he was right. The faces mirrored in the arts, down the ages, may indeed be the divine archetypes, clear projections of the ideals we all dimly desire, and to which we will therefore one day assuredly attain. But the point to be recognised now is that his belief was based on no study or knowledge of actual human nature or human history, that it was born out of mirrors, three removes from reality, in a cavern more phantasmal than Plato's. And thus, when he spoke of happiness, it was a specially pellucid sort of happiness that he meant. His idea of human felicity was something rainless and rhythmical, strong without restlessness, refined but never subtle: a Lotosland peopled by Lancelots who had taken pastoral lessons in Arcadia. It seems ironic, perhaps, that such an immaterial fabric should solidify into something so sensuous; but that was inevitable: it was sensuously gathered, as we have seen, and was bound to result in a kind of radiant materialism. But the irony grows almost hilariously mocking when we discover, as we now have to do, that it was the purely poetic source of this conception of life that spoiled the poetry produced in its name. Yet that is what we are forced in honesty to face.

For the poetry that flowered in the soft sun of such a system was bound to be smooth and mild. It had to be doubly indulgent: a source of simple happiness to the reader on the one hand, a joyous pastime for the writer on the other. Morris wanted to write poetry, for his own content, but to do it serenely he had to feel it was contenting other people too, that it was performing a soothing social service; and he found this justification in the fancied power of verse to soften the harsh outlines of the only unearthly Power he was forced to admit into his mental kingdom. His own child-like terror of Death was one of his most conspicuous traits; and in poetry he pretended that he found a double panacea—a power to act, first as opiate, softening the fears of the living, and then as preservative, embalming and renewing the dead. These were the duties he liked to feel The Earthly Paradise was fulfilling: of a lullaby drowning the dread approaching footsteps, and of a spell to recall the departed:

Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives,
Alcestis rises from the shades;
Verse calls them forth; 'tis verse that gives
Immortal youth to mortal widows.
Then, soothed by this sophistry, he could turn contented to his task and indulge himself still further. To have lashed himself, fought for a strange poignancy, struggled and burned in the throes of creative desire, would have been to have broken the precepts of his own kingdom absurdly; to write smoothly and easily, to make versification a sunny aid to his enjoyment of the visible world and the untroubled play of his senses (which was the secret sum of his desires) was established as his honest duty. And so he sent Jason and his Wanderers gathering loot for him, founding Kelmscots even fairer than his own,—tasting through their lips the royal wines and fruits that lay beyond his physical reach; and he invented a way of making of verses that should interfere not at all with the directer joys of the day—a smiling mixture of tapestry-work and low music. Surely no poet ever wrote so much with such a small outlay of fatigue. 'All that talk about inspiration is nonsense, I tell you flat,' he used to say. 'If a man can't turn out an epic while working at a loom he had better give up the job.' He never re-wrote, never filed or hammered or compressed. He simply sat down in a roomful of friends and drove ahead, reams at a time,—breaking off, as often as not, as his manuscripts show, in the middle of a line,—filling in those odd hours of the day that might otherwise have lacked their need of fun. The act of creation for him was simply a jolly recreation: he would not allow it to become anything more. He resolutely refused to enter those dark inner chambers of the mind where the last efforts of the imagination take place in torment, and the supreme revelations are received. He never wrought himself into a fever or indulged in any spiritual wrestlings; rather, he used his art as a source of relief, to relax the pressure of real life. He dug, he dyed, he fished,—he cooked and carved and printed; he built a working-model of his mediæval utopia, copying the contents of his cave in actual stone and timber, and lived therein, with due upcariousness, the life assigned to one of his own ruddy and broad-browed heroes; and then, when the day was done, or his arms were tired, he simply sat down with his pen, brought the sun back, and soaked his happy senses all afresh:

So there they lay until the second dawn
Broke fair and fresh o'er glittering glade and lawn;
Then Jason rose, and did on him a fair
Blue woollen tunic, such as folk do wear
On the Magnesian cliffs, and at his thigh
An iron-hilted sword hung carefully;
And on his head he had a russet hood;
And in his hand two spears of cornel wood . . .
And so stepped forth into the sunny morn.

The deduction seems difficult to avoid. The flatness and diffuseness of Jason are the marks of his new jovial materialism, the measure of his devotion, both in his work and outside it, to the creature comforts of the earth. His happiness was the price of our betrayal. It might be urged, indeed, that the work done on this ample scale,
these lyrics as large as life and stories that spread like a plain, are meat only for men as gigantic as himself, too big for our precious modern appetite, with its pigmy craving for quintessences and epitomes; that the time will come when we too will prefer tapestries to tiny pictures, and epics to little edgy tales. And there is more than mercy in the view. If The Defence of Guenevere is the book of youth, then The Earthly Paradise and his endless tales in prose may perhaps be called the reading for mankind’s middle age. But we are manikins still, we have not yet reached our maturity; and to grow we must be fed. *Jason* for us lacks vitality; *Guenevere* spurs and stings; — and so Morris too, whom we had grown to think of as the radiant exception, whom Mr. Yeats has called ‘the happiest of the poets,’ joins with Keats the consumptive and Shelley the outcast, with Blind Harry and Homer and Milton, and all the countless maimed ministers of song, to remind us that birth involves travail, and service crucifixion, that the Grail is only granted to those who have suffered vigils and fastings, and that he who would bring us a little nearer to an earthly paradise must wander in the wilderness himself. ‘Art is the expression of man’s joy,’ — but the labour involves laceration. He who would save our lives must lose his own.

But do not let us end too sadly! That large deduction, it is true, is damping; we would all so much rather believe that poetry is just printed song, purified laughter; and Morris’s own teach-
semi-tones, he is worshipped by the folk he most abhorred; and in a dim, green twilight, a numb anaemic purgatory, his memory sits listening to their praise. ... And so we can end with honest laughter after all.

Dixon Scott.

HUMOUR IN THE POETS AND PARODISTS OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

1

The last quality one associates with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats is that of humour. None but a Philistine would demand from a poet what he does not profess to offer; but it is not forbidden and it may be illuminating to probe a little into the causes of the deficiency in these poets. First, one may note that in general they are revolutionaries; and he who tilts at systems long established in the public favour must at least open his campaign seriously; dynasties are not overthrown by laughing assailants. The characteristic of the revolutionary is intensity; and this is the quality common to these writers; they are protagonists, intent and unsparing of themselves. They live in an epoch of earnestness, when urgent affairs are toward. Humour, like Chaucer's eagle in the House of Fame, surveys life unruflled and records its impressions without heat; it is not often a dynamic power; it may oil wheels, but it does not drive machinery. In