

## THE WOOD BEYOND THE WORLD

1895

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### 70. Theodore Watts, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*

2 March 1895, no. 3514, 273-4

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This review pleased Morris, who wrote to thank Watts for his discriminating sympathy; see Introduction, pp. 3-4.

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It is an extremely interesting fact that Mr. Morris in exercising his rare poetical gift has so often of late turned from metrical to unmetrical forms. Though his romances must needs be taken as being in some measure the outcome of his studies in Saga literature, they hold, in conception no less than in execution, a place of their own. If the name 'metreless poem' can properly be given to any form of imaginative literature, these romances are more fully entitled to that name than anything that has gone before. In all poetry an indispensable requisite must be form of some kind, and what form can there be without metre? The measured prose used by Leconte de Lisle and others is as far removed from poetic art as from prose art, and consequently has perhaps no right of existence at all. In English we have between rhyme-measures and measured prose a magnificent rhymeless movement, our decasyllabic blank verse. The tone of this, however, is so elevated that not even Tennyson has been able to reconcile the English ear to 'familiar blank verse.' Hence the want of another medium is often deeply felt.

In the unmeasured 'prose poetry' of De Quincey and Mr. Ruskin the movement is rhetorical, and has, therefore, as little to do with poetry as have the rhetorical movements of 'The Lily and the Bee' of Samuel Warren, or the 'Leaves of Grass' of Walt Whitman. But when, as in Mr. Morris's romances, the form of imaginative literature is imbued

throughout with poetical colour rendered in a perfectly concrete diction—when the sentences (built on the simple method of poetry and not on the complex method of prose) have a cadence in which recognized metrical law has been abandoned, a cadence whose movement is born of the emotions which the words embody—may not such a form of literature be properly called poetry?

This is the question which presents itself to the reader who tries to examine critically the lovely story before him. To enter here upon the question whether a poem without metre can really exist is impossible. Moreover, it has already been discussed in these columns. Yet we may remind the reader that although modern criticism takes form and not matter to be the essence of poetry, it was not so with the old criticism; it was not so with Aristotle, upon whose principles the old criticism was professedly built.

When some years ago we had occasion to compare, or rather to contrast with each other, the two great renderings of the Nibelung story, the *Völsunga Saga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, we came to the conclusion that, owing to its extraordinary unity in the development of *motif*, the old unmetrical version of the story was more completely covered by Aristotle's definition of an epic than was the metrical and more modern one of the Germans. And assuredly, if Aristotle would have given the name of poem to the *Völsunga Saga*, he would never have hesitated to bestow that name on *The House of the Wolfings* or *The Roots of the Mountains*. Intensely poetic and intensely dramatic, moreover, as are the Icelandic Sagas, they are lacking in one of the most delightful qualities of the unmetrical poems of Mr. Morris just mentioned—that delicate sense of beauty in which the author of *The Earthly Paradise* has had no superior even in the epoch which has inaugurated the neo-romantic movement; and this last exquisite story of his must be held to surpass the best of its predecessors in poetical feeling and poetical colour, and to equal them in poetical substance. Here more abundantly than ever we get that marvellously youthful way of confronting the universe which is the special feature of Mr. Morris's genius. It is not easy to realize that it is other than a poet in the heyday of a glorious youth who tells with such gusto this wonderful story, how once upon a time, in the Land of Somewhere, young Golden Walter, on the eve of taking ship for foreign lands, saw a sight which at one moment seemed real and at another a dream—a royal lady of surpassing beauty accompanied by a woman thrall whose loveliness was still more bewitching, and a dwarf whose hideousness was more fascinating still; how he saw them go on

board a strange ship and sail away; how he believed the ship and those who went in her to be real until shortly afterwards he saw the same three in the streets of his native town; how subsequently having taken sail himself, he again saw the same royal lady, the same woman thrall, and the same dwarf; how on landing on a still more remote coast, connected by a mysterious pass with a land of magic, he threaded that pass alone and discovered who the mysterious three really were, and met with adventures among them more wonderful than any of these recorded in the 'Arabian Nights.'

[two long quotations omitted]

With regard to the diction of the above extracts, there are those for whom it will possess great charm, and there are those whom it will repel. Is it legitimate and is it wise for an artist to return up the stream of the literature in which he works in order to preserve some of the best of the old beauties of his language from being swept away by modern innovations? We think the question must be answered in the affirmative. Such recurrences to elder styles are common in all the arts. Sometimes, indeed, they are of great value. It is the commonplace and vulgar mind that clings to the stucco horrors of Pimlico architecture, simply because they are more modern than the architecture of Elizabeth or the architecture of Queen Anne. And so in literature. As time goes on it is inevitable that a language should suffer mutilation, it is inevitable also that good writers should be found who look back to beauties of the language that have been left behind. Spenser did this; so did Shakspeare; so did certain great prose writers of the early years of the nineteenth century. Had it been otherwise, how should we ever have had the prose of Southey, Lamb, Landor, De Quincey, after the degraded state into which the English language sank in the time of L'Estrange? And then, over and above the verbal texture of the book, what about the poetical spirit vitalizing it? Here, indeed, we touch upon a vast question.

For something like three hundred years have Euphuism, the love of being didactic, and prose rhetoric been eating into English poetry. The greatest poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suffered grievously from Euphuism; even Shakspeare was, at one time of his life, in danger of being ruined by it.

As to the didactic element, the idea that the primary function of poetry was the enunciation of thoughts was at the bottom of the aridity of the eighteenth century; and even the great Romantic revival

did not fully cure English poetry of this tendency. The love of preaching ate into the wings of Shelley. It threatened even Keats at the outset of his career. It made of Wordsworth a writer of quintessential prose who could occasionally take a glorious spring into poetry. It could not, of course, ruin Coleridge, but its effect upon him was so disastrous that his truly precious work is confined to about half a dozen poems. And as to Euphuism and rhetoric, without discussing their destructive effect upon the poets of our own time, we may say that Euphuism is the one fault of Tennyson, and that whenever Rossetti and Mr. Swinburne pass out of the region of pure poetry, the one passes into the region of Euphuism, the other into that of rhetoric. It was left to our own time to produce the one poet of the nineteenth century upon whom Euphuism, the didactic spirit, and rhetoric have exercised no influence whatever; that is to say, the one poet whose work is poetry and nothing else. Of all our writers Mr. Morris is, save in his unfortunate polemical chants, the most purely romantic. His genius is in very truth that

Lady of the Mere,

Sole-sitting by the shores of old Romance,

who is the real owner of the fountain of youth. At the age of sixty or thereabouts, he is still pouring out his lovely things, more full of the glory of youth, more full of romantic adventure and romantic love, than any of the beautiful poems in his first volume. By the side of this exhaustless creator of youthful and lovely things, the youngest of the poets who have just appeared above the horizon seems faded and jaded.

What then is his position among the poets of our time? Within a dozen years the poetical firmament of Europe has suffered a great change. The deaths of Rossetti, Hugo, Matthew Arnold, Browning, Tennyson, and finally Leconte de Lisle have left a gap in the world of letters as vast as that which followed the deaths of Keats, Shelley, Byron, Scott, Goethe, and Coleridge between 1821 and 1834. If poetry is to hold the place it has hitherto held in pure literature, what are now the greatest names in the world of letters, not only of England and America, but of Europe? With regard to certain prominent European writers, such as Tolstoi, Mr. Ruskin, Ibsen, Zola, Mr. Meredith, these, having come to the front as *prosateurs* (though the last mentioned is also a poet, and a very original one), are not perhaps to be ranked alongside the poets. For whatever may come to pass in another century or two, the poet in our own time is still, as he has always hitherto been, the protagonist in the arena of pure literature.

With regard to France, admirable as are some (indeed many) of the contemporary French writers, there is no one, not even M. de Hérédia, who can be placed in the front rank. In France as in England, and in England as in old Greece, it is not the number of lines, but the accent of those lines, which makes a poet a major or minor. Still, quantity of good work is of course a most important part of the question, and if so admirable an artist as M. de Hérédia should live to write three or four times the number of lines that he has at present written, there will be a Frenchman in the foremost ranks of contemporary poetry.

In intellectual grip of a subject, and in certain other equipments common both to the poet and the prose writer, M. de Hérédia is in his own way equal to the late Leconte de Lisle in another way. Indeed, while Leconte de Lisle's style is undeniably hard and cold, notwithstanding the spacious form he adopts, the style of M. de Hérédia has as much of the warmth and flexibility of life as can perhaps be got into the sonnet of octave and sestet. And if France has no living writer to be set in the front rank, the same must certainly be said in regard to Italy. That the two leading poets of the world are Englishmen—Mr. Swinburne and Mr. Morris—is recognized by all criticism that is worthy of the name. But were there ever two great poets so unlike each other?

## 71. Unsigned review, *Spectator*

July 1895, lxxv, 52-3

Morris wrote to the editor to deny the suggestion of allegorical intention; see Introduction, p.3.

Many truths have been lighted up and shown to the world by the torch-light of allegory. Macaulay says that the *Pilgrim's Progress* is the only work of its kind which possesses a strong human interest, and that other allegories only amuse the fancy, and that even in Spenser's *Faery Queen* the allegory is pursued beyond the bounds of tediousness. 'We

become sick of cardinal virtues and deadly sins, and long for the society of plain men and women.' It was the shadowy author of the *Visions Concerning Piers Plowman*, who saw the world as it were 'a fair field full of folk,' wherein some were working and wandering, setting, sowing, and ploughing 'full hard,' while others wasted in gluttony and vice the goods that the workers had stored together. In those old visions, as two centuries later in *The Faery Queen*, we find virtues and vices personified in human forms, and labelled 'Fals-semblant' and 'Lady Meed,' so that we may have no doubt of their true characters. The writers of allegories in modern days are more reticent; we are not even given a key whereby to unlock the painted doors, we are merely invited to enter, and we must find out for ourselves the parentage and lineage of the heroes and heroines. There are probably many people who read an allegory as they read a fairy-tale, without seeking for hidden meanings, and, read in such simple fashion, *The Wood Beyond the World* is a delightful tale of adventure set in a mediæval setting, wherein a youth called Golden Walter leaves his home and sallies forth to strange lands, trusting to his good sword and ready wit to win his way through whatsoever may befall him. At the outset of his voyage he sees a vision:—

So Walter stood idly watching the said ship, and as he looked, lo! folk passing him toward the gangway. These were three; first came a dwarf, dark-brown of hue and hideous, with long arms and ears exceeding great, and dog-teeth that stuck out like the fangs of a wild beast. He was clad in a rich coat of yellow silk, and bore in his hand a crooked bow, and was girt with a broad sax. After him came a maiden, young by seeming of scarce twenty summers; fair of face as a flower; grey-eyed, brown-haired, with lips full and red, slim and gentle of body. Simple was her array, of a short and strait green gown so that on her right ankle was clear to see an iron ring. Last of the three was a lady, tall and stately, so radiant of visage and glorious of raiment, that it were hard to say what like she was; for scarce might the eye gaze steadily upon her exceeding beauty; yet must every son of Adam who found himself anigh her, lift up his eyes again after he had dropped them and look again on her, and yet again, and yet again.

The three disappear in a ship which displays a green banner with the device of a 'grim wolf ramping up against a maiden,' and Walter determines to seek for them. He and his comrades sail on in their good ship until they come to an unknown shore—happily not so inhospitable a shore as the seekers for the Earthly Paradise fared upon—and here Walter espies a cleft in the rocky boundary, and, leaving his friends, pursues his way in search of the creatures of his vision. He at last en-

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counters the hideous Dwarf; then the Maid with the iron anklet, with whom he enters into a compact of friendship; and lastly, the fascinating Lady, who welcomes him to the Golden House. There is a beautiful description of the house:—

So an hour before sunset he saw something white and gay gleaming through the boles of the oak-trees, and presently there was clear before him a most goodly house builded of white marble, carved all about with knots and imagery and the carven folk were all painted of their lively colours, whether it were their raiment or their flesh, and the housings wherein they stood all done with gold and fair hues. Gay were the windows of the house; and there was a pillared porch before the great door, with images betwixt the pillars both of men and beasts: and when Walter looked up to the roof of the house, he saw that it gleamed and shone; for all the tiles were of yellow metal, which he deemed to be of very gold.

How Walter kills a lion, and is beguiled by the beautiful Lady, frees the Maid, and escapes with her, and the tragic end of the King's Son, the Lady, and the Dwarf, is told in a delightfully poetical fashion. The description of the Lady in the magic wood and bower of pleasance, reminds us of Vivien:<sup>1</sup>

A robe  
Of samite without price, that more exprest  
Than hid her, clung about her lissome limbs,  
In colour like the satin shining palm  
Or sallovs in the windy gleams of March.

Perhaps the scene in the folk-mote of the Bear-people when the Maid claims succession to their queenship, and gives a sign of her power by the revival of her faded flower-chaplets, is the best in the book. 'Lo, then! as she spake, the faded flowers that hung about her gathered life and grew fresh again; the woodbine round her neck and her sleek shoulders knit itself together and embraced her freshly, and cast its scent about her face. The lilies that girded her loins lifted up their heads, and the gold of their tassels fell upon her; the eye-bright grew clean blue again upon her smock; the eglantine found its bloom again, and then began to shed the leaves thereof upon her feet; the meadow-sweet wreathed amongst it made clear the sweetness of her legs, and the mouse-ear studded her raiment as with gems. There she stood amidst of the blossoms, like a great orient pearl against the fret-work of the goldsmiths, and the breeze that came up the valley from behind bore the sweetness of her

<sup>1</sup> The wily and malignant character in Tennyson's 1859 Idyll 'Merlin and Vivien'.

fragrance all over the man-mote.' The whole scene in the Doom-ring, with its circle of rough men, its ancient centre figure, and its tribunal of hewn stone, suggests pagan rites, but the language in which the Maid accuses the Bear-folk of want of faith, is distinctly scriptural. Almost we hear her declaiming 'Ye hypocrites; ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?' We read the fairy-tale with a grateful consciousness that Imagination is still alive, and passing us by clad in quaint garments of a bygone fashion, when we spy the serpent in this Eden; and then we are once more haunted by the shadow of the story with a purpose. It is borne in upon us that the Lady who raises false lions in the path, and allures the King's Son and the Merchant's Son with her honied words and false kisses, is a worse sorceress than Medea or Circe; she is the Lady Meed of Langland's vision; she personifies Capital itself, just as the Maid whom she holds captive personifies Labour. Mr. Morris preaches his Socialism in the most seductive and poetical form, and he ends his story in a Utopia where Labour and the Merchant's Son, whom we imagine to be the ideal Englishman, are the sovereign powers, after Aristocracy, in the person of the King's Son, has been made to assume the likeness of the Merchant's Son and then scotched, and Capital with her creature, the bloated aristocrat, has also come to a bad end. Capital spreads her nets in vain before the Merchant's Son; she tempts him with pleasure and luxury; she speaks fairly to Labour before him, but in secret she plots her downfall and ruin, and allows her creature the Dwarf to torment her. The Maid tells Walter of the wisdom she learned of 'the old woman [by whom we conclude is meant Nature] perfected betwixt the stripes of her mistress;' and Mr. Morris would have us remember, in the fable of the faded flowers, how it is Labour's doing that the deserts blossom like the rose, the fields are tilled, and the rivers are compelled to water the land, though he fails to tell us how Labour accomplishes all this without the help of Capital, unless we are led to infer that Labour, in claiming the succession to the queenship, claims also to appropriate the accumulations that constitute Capital. It is, of course, unfair to drive an allegory too far home; but we confess to being a little puzzled by the suggestions of Mr. Morris's Socialism. It is evident that he wishes to portray the downfall of some great power that cannot endure a new state of things, and as she will not accept the emancipation of Labour, or her thrall's alliance with the dominant power, thereby gives herself the death-blow. To our mind, there is a little obscurity about the Dwarf and his place in the fable; he says himself that he is what the Lady has

made him, and we conclude that he personifies the evil result of the ill-used power of Capital, and that he is slain with his own weapon, his power being taken from him by the new popular form of government and placed in the hands of Labour.

The old theory of equality is one to which we gladly subscribe, but we cannot forget the everyday fact that in each pan of milk the cream rises to the top, and that intellect and health, and what Mr. William Watson would call the 'poorer virtues,' such as thrift and foresight and prudence, are not distributed equally among men, and that always there will be spendthrifts and accumulators, those who sow and those who reap, those who are born to rule and those who are born to serve. The story of *The Wood beyond the World*, taken as a fairy-tale, is poetical and highly imaginative, but if we are compelled to look into its teaching we are reminded of the mirror in which we now see life darkly, and of an ancient mirror in which the faces look somewhat distorted, though the frame is quaintly set and enriched with jewels; we are delighted when the poet forgets his philosophy, and at no time is his idealism wearisome, nor are we deluged with 'cardinal virtues and deadly sins.'

## BEOWULF

1895

72. Theodore Watts, unsigned review,  
*Athenaeum*

10 August 1895, no. 3537, 181-2

We can well imagine that this translation of *Beowulf* into rhymeless alliterative lines will seem uncouth to the general reader whose ear is familiar only with the quantitative scansion of classic movements and the accentual prosody of modern rhyme and blank verse. But if the business of the translator of an ancient poem is to pour the old wine into the new bottles with as little loss as possible of its original aroma, Mr. Morris's efforts have been crowned with entire success.

The archaic atmosphere of an old poem is, of course, the result of its verbal texture no less than of its informing temper, and the antiquated English and antiquated movements of Mr. Morris bring his readers far nearer to the original than any later form could have done. With regard to the metre, the most poetically minded of the commentators on the poem, Mr. Stopford A. Brooke, has some excellent words upon the extreme difficulty of translating *Beowulf*:

Translations of poetry are never much good, but at least they should always endeavour to have the musical movement of poetry, and to obey the laws of the verse they translate. A translation made in any one of our existing rhyming metres seemed to me as much out of the question as a prose translation. None of these metres resemble those of Anglo-Saxon poetry; and, moreover, their associations would modernize the old English thought. An Anglo-Saxon king in modern Court dress would not look more odd and miserable than an Anglo-Saxon poem in a modern rhyming metre.

We have frequently said that the only modern poet who could translate *Beowulf* was the author of *Sigurd*, the one great epic of the