

THE WATER  
OF THE WONDROUS ISLES

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82. Theodore Watts, unsigned review,  
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F. S. Ellis congratulated Watts on this review in a letter of 7 December 1897: 'Although, as you remark, Morris was regardless of criticism, he was by no means regardless of intelligent and masterly appreciation such as that contained in your splendidly written article of last Saturday, and that he should not have lived to see it adds another deep regret to the many that we feel at his loss.' Hake and Compton-Ricketts, *Theodore Watts-Dunton*, I, 100-1.

Hitherto, in reviewing Morris's prose poems, we have essayed to give our readers a brief outline of the story of each; but in none of these cases have we ever been able to satisfy ourselves that we were doing justice to what even those who do not like them must call the most original compositions in the imaginative literature of our time. It is not merely that to endeavour to reproduce in colourless language any notion of the beauty of the story was to confront a task as hopeless as that of the gipsy girl whose first effort on being taught to write was to represent by phonetic signs, cut on the bark of a tree, the night-ingale's song; but there is between the incidents of all these stories a certain kinship which the exquisite but quaint verbal texture of the narrative partly conceals. Behind this texture the loveliness of each incident seems at once familiar and unfamiliar, like the face of the

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Persian maiden which, from behind the shifting hues of her 'Periwoven veil,' outshone each new loveliness of each new rival face in the harem. Stripped of this verbal texture, the kinship we are speaking of becomes so apparent that the reader is apt to think the riches of the most inventive of all nineteenth century poets had, like other riches, their limits.

For this reason we do not propose to furnish an outline of the story before us. Moreover, there is another reason for adopting this course: we shall by this abstention secure more space in which to consider the series as a whole. Yet we will confess that, should we succeed in finding a proper place in literary art for a kind of work which is absolutely unique, we shall be more fortunate than we dare hope to be. The time for making such a retrospect seems to have come, for it has been hinted of late that when Morris produced the first of these saga-like narratives, in which material of the most essentially poetical kind is presented in a form which is not that of metre, nor even that of measured prose, his poetical impulse—at least, his metrical impulse—was moving towards a premature death. That this was not so none knows better than the writer of these lines. Two things, however, had come to an end—first, Morris's belief that the producer of artistic poetry can any longer (for the present, at least) look for recognition in this country, and, secondly, his belief that long narratives could be written in metre any more. Not that Morris had even the ordinary share of that sensitiveness to criticism from which poets are apt to suffer. No other poet of our time, and perhaps no poet of any other time, ever took up as he did the purely Olympian attitude towards the literary arena. Of late years he refused to read criticisms of his work at all until he had learnt who was the critic that wrote about him, or rather, by what authority the writer spoke.

Perhaps, however, our use of the words 'artistic poetry' requires a little explanation. The two forces that move in the production of all poetry are (as we said once when comparing, or rather when contrasting, the methods of the troubadours with the methods of the *trouvères*) poetic energy and poetic art. In poets of a great cycle like that of Athens in the time of the dramatists and that of England in the time of Shakespeare, these two forces are seen in something like equipoise. But great cycles are rare. Morris's early work, however, was produced in a most remarkable period in the history of English poetry. Although he was nearly of the same age as Rossetti, he was, at the beginning at least of his poetical career, as much under the

influence of that powerful personality as were any of Rossetti's younger friends. And even after Morris had himself achieved a position equal to Rossetti's own, to see these two together (down at Kelmscott, for instance) was to see a sight indeed. For though Nature moulded Rossetti for a dominant personality, she moulded Morris on the same lines. If among the many classifications into which writers may be grouped there is one which divides them into those whose personalities seem greater than their work, and those whose work seems greater than their personalities, Morris belonged to the former group as surely as did Rossetti himself.

Fine as his works are, they do not seem to represent him to the full, as the works of certain other English writers, both in prose and verse, seem to represent them. Rich, for instance, as was the personality of Charles Dickens, it did not seem to be quite so rich as *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Rich as was the personality of Browning, it did not seem to be quite so rich as *The Ring and the Book*. But notwithstanding all its marvellous variety and power, Morris's work seemed less powerful and less various than Morris himself. Moreover, if Rossetti was wilful, so was Morris. The true realities of life were to him his own delightful, genial, and noble whims, literary, artistic, and social. Those who deny to him sagacity, however—great sagacity—assuredly never knew him. To the impact of only one other personality was his own in the slightest degree plastic: that of Rossetti, and at the beginning of his career this plasticity must have been marked indeed.

Now Rossetti, even in his earliest days, when he was most entirely captivated by the artless movements of Blake's poetry, was deeply impressed with the idea that imaginative literature, so soon as it passes into metrical form, becomes a fine art, and therefore subject to law. And once when a friend quoted to him the fine saying of the Arabian writer Ibn el Wardi, that 'true art lies in the abandonment of artifice,' his impromptu remarks upon the difference between artifice and art would have made the fortune of any writer on poetics. The older he got the more importance he attached to metrical form. Of this, let us quote one instance out of many. When Rossetti at Kelmscott wrote 'The Cloud Confines,' Morris (who was not in the habit of criticizing the work of his friends) made, on hearing it read, a remark upon the lines:—

War that shatters her slain,  
And peace that grinds them as grain,

And eyes fixed ever in vain  
On the pitiless eyes of Fate.

There was, Morris thought, a certain lack of rightness in speaking of War 'shattering' victims already 'slain.' Also he suggested that the word 'them' in the second line above quoted was ambiguous. 'I suppose,' said Rossetti, 'that you would have me say

Peace that grinds *men* as grain.

That, of course, would have prose accuracy. But when the struggle is between prose accuracy and metrical music, prose accuracy must give way; otherwise why write in verse at all?

The effect of Rossetti's teaching was at that time very great; and although it cannot be said that in his own work he bestowed more than adequate attention upon the artistic side of poetry, his influence may very likely have caused other writers to do so, though Morris was not of these, to be sure. Yet this must be said of Morris's work—that though he, the most rapid of writers, never gave to his lines the *limæ labor* which Tennyson and Rossetti gave to theirs, he was, when he wrote *The Earthly Paradise*, fully impressed with the Rossettian theory that poetry is a fine art and subject to law, though born, like all the other fine arts, of inspiration.

We are speaking of a time which, owing to fluctuations in criticism and in public taste, seems far away, though as a matter of fact it is removed from us only a few years—a time when not only Morris's *Earthly Paradise* was being written, read, and applauded, but when some of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Mr. Swinburne's *Songs before Sunrise*, and Rossetti's sonnets and ballads were filling the air with such music as can never be heard again, for music is no longer, we are told, to be the English poet's quest.

If, as we have said, this idea of paying great attention to the artistic side of poetry did not run to excess in the methods of William Morris, can the same be said of certain other poets—those called in those antediluvian days the 'Pre-Raphaelite' group? Is the poetry, for instance, of O'Shaughnessy anything but an artistic exercise based on a study of Edgar Poe and Mr. Swinburne? The swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction was perhaps necessary—at all events, it came. For a time, however, it moved very slowly; but there are those who think it has of late years moved rapidly enough and far enough.

It would be unseemly here to criticize contemporary criticism, but it may, without intending offence, be said that while the appreciation of

poetry as an energy is as strong as ever in the criticism of the present day, the appreciation of poetry as an art is non-existent, except in one or two quarters which we need not indicate. Compare, for instance, the remarks on accent and quantity in English verse in Crowe's forgotten treatise on versification with the laudatory remarks that we nowadays see lavished upon some line in which both quantity and accent are ignored. But to go no further back than the time when Rossetti's poems were published, compare the critical canons then in vogue with the critical canons of the present day. On account of a single cockney rhyme, the critics of that period would damn a set of verses in which perhaps a measure of poetic energy was not wanting. The critics of to-day fall for the most part into two classes: those who do not know what is meant by a cockney rhyme, and those who love a cockney rhyme.

Imperfect versification, unscannable lines, are now the hall-mark of original genius. If ever we see quoted with approval a line by Mr. William Watson—by far the best metricist among recent poets—it is certain to be one of his few unmetrical lines, certain to be a line where the main stress falls on *the* or *a* or *of*. The one serious fault that the critics could find with Mr. Swinburne's last poem, 'The Story of Balen,' was that the difficulties of the metre were with triumphant ease mastered, that the metre was so fully sustained, the rhyme so faultless, the workmanship so good. Even in Rossetti's time the swing of the pendulum seems to have begun, for at the time when his *Ballads and Sonnets* was being reviewed, he said the Catnach element of English poetry was all that criticism demanded. And this was before the time when Tennyson was disparaged because so fine a master of poetic art must needs be jejune, and when Browning is set far above him, not on account of the richness of Browning's work (and rich, indeed, it is), but because a good number of Browning's lines are only verses from the typographical point of view. To Dante Rossetti Walt Whitman was, as appears by the Allingham letters, a mere mouthing 'Orson.' The *Leaves of Grass* were a subject of 'loathing' to him, as they were to Morris. To the critics of the present time Whitman is a sort of amalgam of Shakspeare, Wordsworth, and Shelley; the musical movements of Wagner are referred to as explaining the metrical movements of 'the master.'

Though we state thus pointedly the case, we are not saying which school of criticism deserves the more respect. We merely record an interesting and suggestive fact of literary history. If in poetical criticism

the wisdom of one generation is the folly of the next, it is the same in everything man says and in everything he does, so whimsical a creature has the arch-humorist Nature set at the top of the animal kingdom. As to what has brought about all these changes, we have no time to inquire into that. The causes are many, no doubt, and among them must be mentioned the passion for prose fiction. Novels bring the reader much nearer to real life than poetry, or at least they seem to do this, and they can achieve what is called 'modernity.' To achieve the same kind of closeness of touch which is within the compass of prose fiction is apparently the aim of the kind of poets who take for their motto this same word 'modernity.'

The great master of modernity in all poetic art is, of course, Villon, and priceless are his pictures of life in old France. And in a certain sense Rossetti is answerable for the new poetry of 'modernity,' inasmuch as he introduced Villon. But unluckily Villon thought that 'modernity,' to be true, has to be ugly. Had Villon given us the beautiful, the pictorial side of the France of his period—its courage, for instance, its chivalry, its pageantry—he would have lost his touch of modernity, for it is the beauty of this world which is perennial and immortal, the ugliness which is accidental and modern. And, after all, the modernity of Villon is in some degree retrieved by the beauty of his poetic art.

But neither at Villon's Helicon, the thieves' kitchen, nor in the cockney music-hall, whence poor 'Arry and 'Arriet have been driven by the invasion of the contemporary bard, can be found an atmosphere which the true poet can breathe. And as to the great poets, such a word as 'modernity' to them is meaningless. To them when at work one epoch is as modern as another. It is with the elemental in man's life that they deal, and not with the accidental. Priam's prayer to Achilles is more true, and therefore more modern as well as more truly ancient, than anything that 'Dan Leno' or even 'Little Tich' can teach the poet's soul. To Shakspeare, Cleopatra was as modern a woman as Mrs. Ford, and he could have delineated a woman of the palæolithic period, had he known that there ever had been such women, as truly as he painted Mrs. Ford and Cleopatra.

Once, many years ago, Morris was inveigled into seeing and hearing the great poet-singer Stead, whose rhythms have had such a great effect upon the 'art poetic,' the author of 'The Perfect Cure' and 'It's Daddy This and Daddy That,' and other brilliant lyrics. A friend with whom Morris had been spending the evening, and who had been

talking about poetic energy and poetic art in relation to the chilly reception accorded to *Sigurd*, persuaded him—much against his will—to turn in for a few seconds to see Mr. Stead, whose performance consisted in singing a song, the burden of which was ‘I’m a perfect cure,’ while he leaped up into the air without bending his legs and twirled round like a dervish. ‘What made you bring me to see this d—d tomfoolery?’ Morris grumbled; and on being told that it was to give him an example of poetic energy at its tensest without poetic art, he grumbled still more and shouldered his way out. If Morris were now alive—and all England will sigh, ‘Ah, would he were!’—he would confess, with his customary emphasis, that the poet had nothing of the slightest importance to learn even from the rhythms of Mr. Stead, marked as they were by terpsichorean pauses that were beyond the powers of the ‘Great Vance,’ and even of Mr. Chevalier himself.

But apart altogether from the operation of the influences we have been glancing at, Morris, after the publication of *Sigurd*, came to the conclusion that, even should the pendulum take another turn in favour of poetic art, the time for writing long narratives in verse was gone by for ever. He was far too good a critic not to know that all the qualities of a great epic are to be found in *Sigurd*. It has the eagerness of the *Iliad*, it has the romance and the picturesqueness of the *Odyssey*; while the noble rhythmic movement in which it is written is handled with the skill of a master of metre. But the critics did not appreciate it. It made no impression on the public. He was far too good a critic also not to know that, as regards narrative poetry, the modern poet works under very different conditions from those which governed him in past times. If an epic as grand as the *Iliad* and as picturesque as the *Odyssey* were written now, it would find but few readers. In the same way that the richness of stage trappings has in England destroyed the drama as a flexible form, so the flexibility of narrative poetry has been destroyed by the detailed realism of prose fiction. In a word, epics and long metrical narratives are no longer possible. Tennyson shared this view of Morris’s, for once when a friend, in talking of *The Idylls of the King*, called the group an epic, he said, ‘It is not an epic; the day is past for epics.’

There was a deal of acute insight shown in Poe’s remark that there are, properly speaking, no such things as long poems—poems that cannot be read through at a single sitting—and that what we call epics are simply a succession of short poems. This being so, ‘brevity,’ which was always ‘the soul of wit,’ has now become the soul of poetry too.

If it is not true to say that in order to arrest the reader’s attention nowadays the story has to be developed from the inside, in the Browning way, it is true that the story has now to be flashed upon the reader’s mind in scenes, much in the same way that Kean used to make his audience ‘read Shakspeare by flashes of lightning.’

Morris was put into this predicament: he was a narrative poet pure and simple, and poetical narratives on the old lines had become impossible. Some new form must be found; but where to find one? A friend suggested a plan which he had himself adopted—a plan in some way akin to that of the old *cantefable*, that of telling the story by sudden and short dramatic pictures enlinked by brief prose statements of the situation after the manner of stage directions. Morris saw the convenience of this method, but it was quite foreign to his genius. Moreover, he saw, as most of those who have thought over the matter see, that these poetic forms of ours, whose vitality has lasted ever since the rhymed romance measures conquered and killed off the scansion by alliterative bars natural to the English genius, must come to an end at last—must certainly be worn out some day. And as to decasyllabic blank verse, although in his first volume Morris showed that he had a true ear for it, he got at last to dislike it so intensely that he used to say with an angry laugh, ‘I wish that an Act of Parliament could be passed prohibiting the use of blank verse for the next fifty years.’ But, then, what other form is there left in which to embody *motifs* of a remote and an exceedingly poetical kind—those which alone Morris loved? Walt Whitman’s hybrid medium he detested even more than Rossetti did; and as regards the prose of our time, this also he considered as absolutely unsuitable for the embodiment of poetic *motifs*. If ever there was a born storyteller, it was Morris. In metrical language or in language without metre, in tapestries, in book illuminations, and even, as Rossetti used to say, in ‘samplers,’ he must be telling stories. One poet friend of his, on account of those additions to ‘Peter Harpdon’s End’ which still remain unpublished, advised him for years to write poetical plays, another advised him to write novels. But to write plays he must work in that very blank-verse medium that he now detested. To write novels he must engage himself with the hideous Victorian framework in which the modern dramatic picture has to be set; he must contemplate the ‘sorrow and shame’ of wall-papers without a dash of sage green in them, chairs and tables smelling of french polish and Tottenham Court Road, mirrors tricked out in Brixton millinery. For he knew full well that although as poet he could deal with the

elemental only in human life, as a writer of prose fiction he would have to deal with the accidental and the temporary too, and hideous indeed to him were the accidental and the temporary of the present time. Was it not inevitable, therefore, that he should turn to his beloved Icelandic sagas for models? No doubt his passion for archaisms was apt to run away with him; but to say, as many are saying now, that it was in a mere spirit of whim that Morris essayed to write stories of a purely poetical *motif* in a diction that is at once concrete and archaic is to talk nonsense, and unjust nonsense. To try them by the critical canons by which we should try prose fiction of the most romantic type—of even so romantic a type as 'Undine'\*—would be a great mistake and a great injustice. Although written without metre they have all the qualities of poems save those of metre alone. The atmosphere is entirely poetic; so is every incident, so is the diction—concrete, picturesque beyond that of most poets.

\* The German romance by La Motte Fouqué.

## THE SUNDERING FLOOD

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### 83. Unsigned review, *Academy*

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When William Morris wrote this story he seems to have had in his mind the England of Arthur and Lancelot—a dim, half-known country with here and there a walled town or a knight's castle, and the ground still uncultivated, the woods masterless 'and abounding in antres vast' and goblin-haunted hollows. He offers a curiously romantic map of this fanciful territory as it might have been conceived by the monk dwelling in the House of the Black Canons at Abingdon 'who gathered this tale.' It is the picture of such a vision as could well be entertained by a man of the experience of William Morris, who might easily dream his favourite Cotswolds into 'the Great Mountains' of the story, and add thereto torrents and steadings, and eke it out from that other chamber of remembrance where lay his early days in Essex and Epping Forest, and his knowledge of the broad lower Thames. The family likeness in his ideal landscapes excuses, if it does not justify, this theory of their origin.

Most charitable would it be, also, to assume that he had dreamed his local colour, for the circumstances are jumbled together from many centuries. In the country are abbeys, grey village churches, and friars, and as the last did not arrive in England till the reign of Henry III., they seem to indicate the date very exactly. But instead of being under a Norman king and a feudal system, the country is broken up into a number of independent communities very much as if Ithaca had intruded itself into mediæval England. Here are dales governed by their motes, towns which seem to be republics, one district at least ruled by a baron, and that Game Laws or Foresters' Rights exist there is no word to signify. On the whole, therefore, it will be sufficient to warn off