Yeats William Butler

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Содержание

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WHAT IS 'POPULAR POETRY'?

I think it was a Young Ireland Society that set my mind running on 'popular poetry.' We used to discuss everything that was known to us about Ireland, and especially Irish literature and Irish history. We had no Gaelic, but paid great honour to the Irish poets who wrote in English, and quoted them in our speeches. I could have told you at that time the dates of the birth and death, and quoted the chief poems, of men whose names you have not heard, and perhaps of some whose names I have forgotten. I knew in my heart that the most of them wrote badly, and yet such romance clung about them, such a desire for Irish poetry was in all our minds, that I kept on saying, not only to others but to myself, that most of them wrote well, or all but well. I had read Shelley and Spenser and had tried to mix their styles together in a pastoral play which I have not come to dislike much, and yet I do not think Shelley or Spenser ever moved me as did these poets. I thought one day – I can remember the very day when I thought it – 'If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him, and

we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland. If these poets, who have never ceased to fill the newspapers and the ballad-books with their verses, had a good tradition they would write beautifully and move everybody as they move me.' Then a little later on I thought, 'If they had something else to write about besides political opinions, if more of them would write about the beliefs of the people like Allingham, or about old legends like Ferguson, they would find it easier to get a style.' Then, with a deliberateness that still surprises me, for in my heart of hearts I have never been quite certain that one should be more than an artist, that even patriotism is more than an impure desire in an artist, I set to work to find a style and things to write about that the ballad writers might be the better.

They are no better, I think, and my desire to make them so was, it may be, one of the illusions Nature holds before one, because she knows that the gifts she has to give are not worth troubling about. It is for her sake that we must stir ourselves, but we would not trouble to get out of bed in the morning, or to leave our chairs once we are in them, if she had not her conjuring bag. She wanted a few verses from me, and because it would not have seemed worth while taking so much trouble to see my books lie on a few drawing-room tables, she filled my head with thoughts of making a whole literature, and plucked me out of the Dublin art schools where I should have stayed drawing from the round, and sent me into a library to read bad translations from the Irish, and at last down into Connaught to sit by turf fires. I wanted to

write 'popular poetry' like those Irish poets, for I believed that all good literatures were popular, and even cherished the fancy that the Adelphi melodrama, which I had never seen, might be good literature, and I hated what I called the coteries. I thought that one must write without care, for that was of the coteries, but with a gusty energy that would put all straight if it came out of the right heart. I had a conviction, which indeed I have still, that one's verses should hold, as in a mirror, the colours of one's own climate and scenery in their right proportion; and, when I found my verses too full of the reds and yellows Shelley gathered in Italy, I thought for two days of setting things right, not as I should now by making my rhythms faint and nervous and filling my images with a certain coldness, a certain wintry wildness, but by eating little and sleeping upon a board. I felt indignant with Matthew Arnold because he complained that somebody, who had translated Homer into a ballad measure, had tried to write epic to the tune of Yankee Doodle. It seemed to me that it did not matter what tune one wrote to, so long as that gusty energy came often enough and strongly enough. And I delighted in Victor Hugo's book upon Shakespeare, because he abused critics and coteries and thought that Shakespeare wrote without care or premeditation and to please everybody. I would indeed have had every illusion had I believed in that straightforward logic, as of newspaper articles, which so tickles the ears of the shopkeepers; but I always knew that the line of Nature is crooked, that, though we dig the canal beds as straight as we can, the rivers

run hither and thither in their wildness.

From that day to this I have been busy among the verses and stories that the people make for themselves, but I had been busy a very little while before I knew that what we call popular poetry never came from the people at all. Longfellow, and Campbell, and Mrs. Hemans, and Macaulay in his *Lays*, and Scott in his longer poems are the poets of the middle class, of people who have unlearned the unwritten tradition which binds the unlettered, so long as they are masters of themselves, to the beginning of time and to the foundation of the world, and who have not learned the written tradition which has been established upon the unwritten. I became certain that Burns, whose greatness has been used to justify the littleness of others, was in part a poet of the middle class, because though the farmers he sprang from and lived among had been able to create a little tradition of their own, less a tradition of ideas than of speech, they had been divided by religious and political changes from the images and emotions which had once carried their memories backward thousands of years. Despite his expressive speech which sets him above all other popular poets, he has the triviality of emotion, the poverty of ideas, the imperfect sense of beauty of a poetry whose most typical expression is in Longfellow. Longfellow has his popularity, in the main, because he tells his story or his idea so that one needs nothing but his verses to understand it. No words of his borrow their beauty from those that used them before, and one can get all that there is in story and idea without seeing them,

as if moving before a half-faded curtain embroidered with kings and queens, their loves and battles and their days out hunting, or else with holy letters and images of so great antiquity that nobody can tell the god or goddess they would commend to an unfading memory. Poetry that is not popular poetry presupposes, indeed, more than it says, though we, who cannot know what it is to be disinherited, only understand how much more, when we read it in its most typical expressions, in the *Epipsychidion* of Shelley, or in Spenser's description of the gardens of Adonis, or when we meet the misunderstandings of others. Go down into the street and read to your baker or your candlestick-maker any poem which is not popular poetry. I have heard a baker, who was clever enough with his oven, deny that Tennyson could have known what he was writing when he wrote 'Warming his five wits, the white owl in the belfry sits,' and once when I read out Omar Khayyam to one of the best of candlestick-makers, he said, 'What is the meaning of "we come like water and like wind we go"?' Or go down into the street with some thought whose bare meaning must be plain to everybody; take with you Ben Jonson's 'Beauty like sorrow dwelleth everywhere,' and find out how utterly its enchantment depends on an association of beauty with sorrow which written tradition has from the unwritten, which had it in its turn from ancient religion; or take with you these lines in whose bare meaning also there is nothing to stumble over, and find out what men lose who are not in love with Helen.

'Brightness falls from the air,
Queens have died young and fair,
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.'

I pick my examples at random, for I am writing where I have no books to turn the pages of, but one need not go east of the sun or west of the moon in so simple a matter.

On the other hand, when Walt Whitman writes in seeming defiance of tradition, he needs tradition for his protection, for the butcher and the baker and the candlestick-maker grow merry over him when they meet his work by chance. Nature, which cannot endure emptiness, has made them gather conventions which cannot disguise their low birth though they copy, as from far off, the dress and manners of the well-bred and the well-born. The gatherers mock all expression that is wholly unlike their own, just as little boys in the street mock at strangely-dressed people and at old men who talk to themselves.

There is only one kind of good poetry, for the poetry of the coteries, which presupposes the written tradition, does not differ in kind from the true poetry of the people, which presupposes the unwritten tradition. Both are alike strange and obscure, and unreal to all who have not understanding, and both, instead of that manifest logic, that clear rhetoric of the 'popular poetry,' glimmer with thoughts and images whose 'ancestors were stout and wise,' 'anigh to Paradise' 'ere yet men knew the gift of corn.' It may be that we know as little of their descent as men knew of

'the man born to be a king' when they found him in that cradle marked with the red lion crest, and yet we know somewhere in the heart that they have been sung in temples, in ladies' chambers, and our nerves quiver with a recognition they were shaped to by a thousand emotions. If men did not remember or half remember impossible things, and, it may be, if the worship of sun and moon had not left a faint reverence behind it, what Aran fisher-girl would sing —

'It is late last night the dog was speaking of you; the snipe was speaking of you in her deep marsh. It is you are the lonely bird throughout the woods; and that you may be without a mate until you find me.

'You promised me and you said a lie to me, that you would be before me where the sheep are flocked. I gave a whistle and three hundred cries to you; and I found nothing there but a bleating lamb.

'You promised me a thing that was hard for you, a ship of gold under a silver mast; twelve towns and a market in all of them, and a fine white court by the side of the sea.

'You promised me a thing that is not possible; that you would give me gloves of the skin of a fish; that you would give me shoes of the skin of a bird, and a suit of the dearest silk in Ireland.

'My mother said to me not to be talking with you, to-day or to-morrow or on Sunday. It was a bad time she took for telling me that, it was shutting the door after the house was robbed…

'You have taken the east from me, you have taken the west

from me, you have taken what is before me and what is behind me; you have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me, and my fear is great you have taken God from me.'

The Gael of the Scottish islands could not sing his beautiful song over a bride, had he not a memory of the belief that Christ was the only man who measured six feet and not a little more or less, and was perfectly shaped in all other ways, and if he did not remember old symbolical observances —

I bathe thy palms
In showers of wine,
In the cleansing fire,
In the juice of raspberries,
In the milk of honey.

.....

Thou art the joy of all joyous things,
Thou art the light of the beam of the sun,
Thou art the door of the chief of hospitality,
Thou art the surpassing pilot star,
Thou art the step of the deer of the hill,
Thou art the step of the horse of the plain,
Thou art the grace of the sun rising,
Thou art the loveliness of all lovely desires.

The lovely likeness of the Lord
Is in thy pure face,

The loveliest likeness that was upon earth.

I soon learned to cast away one other illusion of 'popular poetry.' I learned from the people themselves, before I learned it from any book, that they cannot separate the idea of an art or a craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere learning from witchcraft, and are fond of words and verses that keep half their secret to themselves. Indeed, it is certain that before the counting-house had created a new class and a new art without breeding and without ancestry, and set this art and this class between the hut and the castle, and between the hut and the cloister, the art of the people was as closely mingled with the art of the coteries as was the speech of the people that delighted in rhythmical animation, in idiom, in images, in words full of far-off suggestion, with the unchanging speech of the poets.

Now I see a new generation in Ireland which discusses Irish literature and history in Young Ireland societies, and societies with newer names, and there are far more than when I was a boy who would make verses for the people. They have the help, too, of a vigorous journalism, and this journalism sometimes urges them to desire the direct logic, the clear rhetoric, of 'popular poetry.' It sees that Ireland has no cultivated minority, and it does not see, though it would cast out all English things, that its literary ideal belongs more to England than to other countries. I have hope that the new writers will not fall into its illusion, for

they write in Irish, and for a people the counting-house has not made forgetful. Among the seven or eight hundred thousand who have had Irish from the cradle, there is, perhaps, nobody who has not enough of the unwritten tradition to know good verses from bad ones, if he have enough mother-wit. Among all that speak English in Australia, in America, in Great Britain, are there many more than the ten thousand the prophet saw, who have enough of the written tradition education has set in room of the unwritten to know good verses from bad ones, even though their mother-wit has made them Ministers of the Crown or what you will? Nor can things be better till that ten thousand have gone hither and thither to preach their faith that 'the imagination is the man himself,' and that the world as imagination sees it is the durable world, and have won men as did the disciples of Him who —

His seventy disciples sent
Against religion and government.

1901.

SPEAKING TO THE PSALTERY

I

I have always known that there was something I disliked about singing, and I naturally dislike print and paper, but now at last I understand why, for I have found something better. I have just heard a poem spoken with so delicate a sense of its rhythm, with so perfect a respect for its meaning, that if I were a wise man and could persuade a few people to learn the art I would never open a book of verses again. A friend, who was here a few minutes ago, has sat with a beautiful stringed instrument upon her knee, her fingers passing over the strings, and has spoken to me some verses from Shelley's *Skylark* and Sir Ector's lamentation over the dead Launcelot out of the *Morte d'Arthur* and some of my own poems. Wherever the rhythm was most delicate, wherever the emotion was most ecstatic, her art was the most beautiful, and yet, although she sometimes spoke to a little tune, it was never singing, as we sing to-day, never anything but speech. A singing note, a word chanted as they chant in churches, would have spoiled everything; nor was it reciting, for she spoke to a notation as definite as that of song, using the instrument, which murmured sweetly and faintly, under the spoken sounds, to give her the changing notes. Another speaker could have repeated

all her effects, except those which came from her own beautiful voice that would have given her fame if the only art that gives the speaking voice its perfect opportunity were as well known among us as it was known in the ancient world.

II

Since I was a boy I have always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp, as I imagined Homer to have spoken his, for it is not natural to enjoy an art only when one is by oneself. Whenever one finds a fine verse one wants to read it to somebody, and it would be much less trouble and much pleasanter if we could all listen, friend by friend, lover by beloved. Images used to rise up before me, as I am sure they have arisen before nearly everybody else who cares for poetry, of wild-eyed men speaking harmoniously to murmuring wires while audiences in many-coloured robes listened, hushed and excited. Whenever I spoke of my desire to anybody they said I should write for music, but when I heard anything sung I did not hear the words, or if I did their natural pronunciation was altered and their natural music was altered, or it was drowned in another music which I did not understand. What was the good of writing a love-song if the singer pronounced love, 'lo-o-o-o-o-ve,' or even if he said 'love,' but did not give it its exact place and weight in the rhythm? Like every other poet, I spoke verses in a kind of chant when I was making them, and sometimes, when I was alone on a country road, I would speak them in a loud chanting voice, and feel that if I dared I would speak them in that way to other people. One day I was walking through a Dublin street with the Visionary I have written about in *The Celtic Twilight*, and he began speaking

his verses out aloud with the confidence of those who have the inner light. He did not mind that people stopped and looked after him even on the far side of the road, but went on through poem after poem. Like myself, he knew nothing of music, but was certain that he had written them to a manner of music, and he had once asked somebody who played on a wind instrument of some kind, and then a violinist, to write out the music and play it. The violinist had played it, or something like it, but had not written it down; but the man with the wind instrument said it could not be played because it contained quarter-tones and would be out of tune. We were not at all convinced by this, and one day, when we were staying with a Galway friend who is a learned musician, I asked him to listen to our verses, and to the way we spoke them. The Visionary found to his surprise that he did not make every poem to a different tune, and to the surprise of the musician that he did make them all to two quite definite tunes, which are, it seems, like very simple Arabic music. It was, perhaps, to some such music, I thought, that Blake sang his *Songs of Innocence* in Mrs. Williams' drawing-room, and perhaps he, too, spoke rather than sang. I, on the other hand, did not often compose to a tune, though I sometimes did, yet always to notes that could be written down and played on my friend's organ, or turned into something like a Gregorian hymn if one sang them in the ordinary way. I varied more than the Visionary, who never forgot his two tunes, one for long and one for short lines, and could not always speak a poem in the same way, but always felt that certain ways were

right, and that I would know one of them if I remembered the way I first spoke the poem. When I got to London I gave the notation, as it had been played on the organ, to the friend who has just gone out, and she spoke it to me, giving my words a new quality by the beauty of her voice.

III

Then we began to wander through the wood of error; we tried speaking through music in the ordinary way under I know not whose evil influence, until we got to hate the two competing tunes and rhythms that were so often at discord with one another, the tune and rhythm of the verse and the tune and rhythm of the music. Then we tried, persuaded by somebody who thought quarter-tones and less intervals the especial mark of speech as distinct from singing, to write out what we did in wavy lines. On finding something like these lines in Tibetan music, we became so confident that we covered a large piece of pasteboard, which now blows up my fire in the morning, with a notation in wavy lines as a demonstration for a lecture; but at last Mr. Dolmetsch put us back to our first thought. He made us a beautiful instrument half psaltery half lyre which contains, I understand, all the chromatic intervals within the range of the speaking voice; and he taught us to regulate our speech by the ordinary musical notes.

Some of the notations he taught us – those in which there is no lilt, no recurring pattern of sounds – are like this notation for a song out of the first Act of *The Countess Cathleen*.

It is written in the old C clef, which is, I am told, the most reasonable way to write it, for it would be below the stave on the treble clef or above it on the bass clef. The central line of the

stave corresponds to the middle C of the piano; the first note of the poem is therefore D. The marks of long and short over the syllables are not marks of scansion, but show the syllables one makes the voice hurry or linger over.

One needs, of course, a far less complicated notation than a singer, and one is even permitted slight modifications of the fixed note when dramatic expression demands it and the instrument is not sounding. The notation which regulates the general form of the sound leaves it free to add a complexity of dramatic expression from its own incommunicable genius which compensates the lover of speech for the lack of complex musical expression. Ordinary speech is formless, and its variety is like the variety which separates bad prose from the regulated speech of Milton, or anything that is formless and void from anything that has form and beauty. The orator, the speaker who has some little of the great tradition of his craft, differs from the debater very largely because he understands how to assume that subtle monotony of voice which runs through the nerves like fire.

Even when one is speaking to a single note sounded faintly on the Psaltery, if one is sufficiently practised to speak on it without thinking about it one can get an endless variety of expression. All art is, indeed, a monotony in external things for the sake of an interior variety, a sacrifice of gross effects to subtle effects, an asceticism of the imagination. But this new art, new in modern life I mean, will have to train its hearers as well as its speakers, for it takes time to surrender gladly the gross efforts one is

accustomed to, and one may well find mere monotony at first where one soon learns to find a variety as incalculable as in the outline of faces or in the expression of eyes. Modern acting and recitation have taught us to fix our attention on the gross effects till we have come to think gesture and the intonation that copies the accidental surface of life more important than the rhythm; and yet we understand theoretically that it is precisely this rhythm that separates good writing from bad, that is the glimmer, the fragrance, the spirit of all intense literature. I do not say that we should speak our plays to musical notes, for dramatic verse will need its own method, and I have hitherto experimented with short lyric poems alone; but I am certain that, if people would listen for a while to lyrical verse spoken to notes, they would soon find it impossible to listen without indignation to verse as it is spoken in our leading theatres. They would get a subtlety of hearing that would demand new effects from actors and even from public speakers, and they might, it may be, begin even to notice one another's voices till poetry and rhythm had come nearer to common life.

I cannot tell what changes this new art is to go through, or to what greatness or littleness of fortune; but I can imagine little stories in prose with their dialogues in metre going pleasantly to the strings. I am not certain that I shall not see some Order naming itself from the Golden Violet of the Troubadours or the like, and having among its members none but well-taught and well-mannered speakers who will keep the new art from

disrepute. They will know how to keep from singing notes and from prosaic lifeless intonations, and they will always understand, however far they push their experiments, that poetry and not music is their object; and they will have by heart, like the Irish *File*, so many poems and notations that they will never have to bend their heads over the book to the ruin of dramatic expression and of that wild air the bard had always about him in my boyish imagination. They will go here and there speaking their verses and their little stories wherever they can find a score or two of poetical-minded people in a big room, or a couple of poetical-minded friends sitting by the hearth, and poets will write them poems and little stories to the confounding of print and paper. I, at any rate, from this out mean to write all my longer poems for the stage, and all my shorter ones for the Psaltery, if only some strong angel keep me to my good resolutions.

1902.

MAGIC

I

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are —

(1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

I often think I would put this belief in magic from me if I could, for I have come to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness, that comes from the slow perishing

through the centuries of a quality of mind that made this belief and its evidences common over the world.

II

Some ten or twelve years ago, a man with whom I have since quarrelled for sound reasons, a very singular man who had given his life to studies other men despised, asked me and an acquaintance, who is now dead, to witness a magical work. He lived a little way from London, and on the way my acquaintance told me that he did not believe in magic, but that a novel of Bulwer Lytton's had taken such a hold upon his imagination that he was going to give much of his time and all his thought to magic. He longed to believe in it, and had studied, though not learnedly, geomancy, astrology, chiromancy, and much cabalistic symbolism, and yet doubted if the soul outlived the body. He awaited the magical work full of scepticism. He expected nothing more than an air of romance, an illusion as of the stage, that might capture the consenting imagination for an hour. The evoker of spirits and his beautiful wife received us in a little house, on the edge of some kind of garden or park belonging to an eccentric rich man, whose curiosities he arranged and dusted, and he made his evocation in a long room that had a raised place on the floor at one end, a kind of dais, but was furnished meagrely and cheaply. I sat with my acquaintance in the middle of the room, and the evoker of spirits on the dais, and his wife between us and him. He held a wooden mace in his hand, and turning to a tablet of many-coloured squares, with a number on each of the

squares, that stood near him on a chair, he repeated a form of words. Almost at once my imagination began to move of itself and to bring before me vivid images that, though never too vivid to be imagination, as I had always understood it, had yet a motion of their own, a life I could not change or shape. I remember seeing a number of white figures, and wondering whether their mitred heads had been suggested by the mitred head of the mace, and then, of a sudden, the image of my acquaintance in the midst of them. I told what I had seen, and the evoker of spirits cried in a deep voice, 'Let him be blotted out,' and as he said it the image of my acquaintance vanished, and the evoker of spirits or his wife saw a man dressed in black with a curious square cap standing among the white figures. It was my acquaintance, the seeress said, as he had been in a past life, the life that had moulded his present, and that life would now unfold before us. I too seemed to see the man with a strange vividness. The story unfolded itself chiefly before the mind's eye of the seeress, but sometimes I saw what she described before I heard her description. She thought the man in black was perhaps a Fleming of the sixteenth century, and I could see him pass along narrow streets till he came to a narrow door with some rusty ironwork above it. He went in, and wishing to find out how far we had one vision among us, I kept silent when I saw a dead body lying upon the table within the door. The seeress described him going down a long hall and up into what she called a pulpit, and beginning to speak. She said, 'He is a clergyman, I can hear his words. They sound like Low

Dutch.' Then after a little silence, 'No, I am wrong. I can see the listeners; he is a doctor lecturing among his pupils.' I said, 'Do you see anything near the door?' and she said, 'Yes, I see a subject for dissection.' Then we saw him go out again into the narrow streets, I following the story of the seeress, sometimes merely following her words, but sometimes seeing for myself. My acquaintance saw nothing; I think he was forbidden to see, it being his own life, and I think could not in any case. His imagination had no will of its own. Presently the man in black went into a house with two gables facing the road, and up some stairs into a room where a hump-backed woman gave him a key; and then along a corridor, and down some stairs into a large cellar full of retorts and strange vessels of all kinds. Here he seemed to stay a long while, and one saw him eating bread that he took down from a shelf. The evoker of spirits and the seeress began to speculate about the man's character and habits, and decided, from a visionary impression, that his mind was absorbed in naturalism, but that his imagination had been excited by stories of the marvels wrought by magic in past times, and that he was trying to copy them by naturalistic means. Presently one of them saw him go to a vessel that stood over a slow fire, and take out of the vessel a thing wrapped up in numberless cloths, which he partly unwrapped, showing at length what looked like the image of a man made by somebody who could not model. The evoker of spirits said that the man in black was trying to make flesh by chemical means, and though he had not succeeded, his brooding

had drawn so many evil spirits about him, that the image was partly alive. He could see it moving a little where it lay upon a table. At that moment I heard something like little squeals, but kept silent, as when I saw the dead body. In a moment more the seeress said, 'I hear little squeals.' Then the evoker of spirits heard them, but said, 'They are not squeals; he is pouring a red liquid out of a retort through a slit in the cloth; the slit is over the mouth of the image and the liquid is gurgling in rather a curious way.' Weeks seemed to pass by hurriedly, and somebody saw the man still busy in his cellar. Then more weeks seemed to pass, and now we saw him lying sick in a room up-stairs, and a man in a conical cap standing beside him. We could see the image too. It was in the cellar, but now it could move feebly about the floor. I saw fainter images of the image passing continually from where it crawled to the man in his bed, and I asked the evoker of spirits what they were. He said, 'They are the images of his terror.' Presently the man in the conical cap began to speak, but who heard him I cannot remember. He made the sick man get out of bed and walk, leaning upon him, and in much terror till they came to the cellar. There the man in the conical cap made some symbol over the image, which fell back as if asleep, and putting a knife into the other's hand he said, 'I have taken from it the magical life, but you must take from it the life you gave.' Somebody saw the sick man stoop and sever the head of the image from its body, and then fall as if he had given himself a mortal wound, for he had filled it with his own life. And then

the vision changed and fluttered, and he was lying sick again in the room up-stairs. He seemed to lie there a long time with the man in the conical cap watching beside him, and then, I cannot remember how, the evoker of spirits discovered that though he would in part recover, he would never be well, and that the story had got abroad in the town and shattered his good name. His pupils had left him and men avoided him. He was accursed. He was a magician.

The story was finished, and I looked at my acquaintance. He was white and awestruck. He said, as nearly as I can remember, 'All my life I have seen myself in dreams making a man by some means like that. When I was a child I was always thinking out contrivances for galvanizing a corpse into life.' Presently he said, 'Perhaps my bad health in this life comes from that experiment.' I asked if he had read *Frankenstein*, and he answered that he had. He was the only one of us who had, and he had taken no part in the vision.

III

Then I asked to have some past life of mine revealed, and a new evocation was made before the tablet full of little squares. I cannot remember so well who saw this or that detail, for now I was interested in little but the vision itself. I had come to a conclusion about the method. I knew that the vision may be in part common to several people.

A man in chain armour passed through a castle door, and the seeress noticed with surprise the bareness and rudeness of castle rooms. There was nothing of the magnificence or the pageantry she had expected. The man came to a large hall and to a little chapel opening out of it, where a ceremony was taking place. There were six girls dressed in white, who took from the altar some yellow object – I thought it was gold, for though, like my acquaintance, I was told not to see, I could not help seeing. Somebody else thought that it was yellow flowers, and I think the girls, though I cannot remember clearly, laid it between the man's hands. He went out after a time, and as he passed through the great hall one of us, I forget whom, noticed that he passed over two gravestones. Then the vision became broken, but presently he stood in a monk's habit among men-at-arms in the middle of a village reading from a parchment. He was calling villagers about him, and presently he and they and the men-at-arms took ship for some long voyage. The vision became broken again, and when we

could see clearly they had come to what seemed the Holy Land. They had begun some kind of sacred labour among palm-trees. The common men among them stood idle, but the gentlemen carried large stones, bringing them from certain directions, from the cardinal points I think, with a ceremonious formality. The evoker of spirits said they must be making some kind of masonic house. His mind, like the minds of so many students of these hidden things, was always running on masonry and discovering it in strange places.

We broke the vision that we might have supper, breaking it with some form of words which I forget. When supper had ended the seeress cried out that while we had been eating they had been building, and they had built not a masonic house but a great stone cross. And now they had all gone away but the man who had been in chain armour and two monks we had not noticed before. He was standing against the cross, his feet upon two stone rests a little above the ground, and his arms spread out. He seemed to stand there all day, but when night came he went to a little cell, that was beside two other cells. I think they were like the cells I have seen in the Aran Islands, but I cannot be certain. Many days seemed to pass, and all day every day he stood upon the cross, and we never saw anybody there but him and the two monks. Many years seemed to pass, making the vision flutter like a drift of leaves before our eyes, and he grew old and white-haired, and we saw the two monks, old and white-haired, holding him upon the cross. I asked the evoker of spirits why the man stood there,

and before he had time to answer I saw two people, a man and a woman, rising like a dream within a dream, before the eyes of the man upon the cross. The evoker of spirits saw them too, and said that one of them held up his arms and they were without hands. I thought of the two gravestones the man in chain mail had passed over in the great hall when he came out of the chapel, and asked the evoker of spirits if the knight was undergoing a penance for violence, and while I was asking him, and he was saying that it might be so but he did not know, the vision, having completed its circle, vanished.

It had not, so far as I could see, the personal significance of the other vision, but it was certainly strange and beautiful, though I alone seemed to see its beauty. Who was it that made the story, if it were but a story? I did not, and the seeress did not, and the evoker of spirits did not and could not. It arose in three minds, for I cannot remember my acquaintance taking any part, and it rose without confusion, and without labour, except the labour of keeping the mind's eye awake, and more swiftly than any pen could have written it out. It may be, as Blake said of one of his poems, that the author was in eternity. In coming years I was to see and hear of many such visions, and though I was not to be convinced, though half convinced once or twice, that they were old lives, in an ordinary sense of the word life, I was to learn that they have almost always some quite definite relation to dominant moods and moulding events in this life. They are, perhaps, in most cases, though the vision I have but just described was not, it

seems, among the cases, symbolical histories of these moods and events, or rather symbolical shadows of the impulses that have made them, messages as it were out of the ancestral being of the questioner.

At the time these two visions meant little more to me, if I can remember my feeling at the time, than a proof of the supremacy of imagination, of the power of many minds to become one, overpowering one another by spoken words and by unspoken thought till they have become a single intense, unhesitating energy. One mind was doubtless the master, I thought, but all the minds gave a little, creating or revealing for a moment what I must call a supernatural artist.

IV

Some years afterwards I was staying with some friends in Paris. I had got up before breakfast and gone out to buy a newspaper. I had noticed the servant, a girl who had come from the country some years before, laying the table for breakfast. As I had passed her I had been telling myself one of those long foolish tales which one tells only to oneself. If something had happened that had not happened, I would have hurt my arm, I thought. I saw myself with my arm in a sling in the middle of some childish adventures. I returned with the newspaper and met my host and hostess in the door. The moment they saw me they cried out, 'Why, the *bonne* has just told us you had your arm in a sling. We thought something must have happened to you last night, that you had been run over maybe' – or some such words. I had been dining out at the other end of Paris, and had come in after everybody had gone to bed. I had cast my imagination so strongly upon the servant that she had seen it, and with what had appeared to be more than the mind's eye.

One afternoon, about the same time, I was thinking very intently of a certain fellow-student for whom I had a message, which I hesitated about writing. In a couple of days I got a letter from a place some hundreds of miles away where that student was. On the afternoon when I had been thinking so intently I had suddenly appeared there amid a crowd of people in a hotel and as

seeming solid as if in the flesh. My fellow-student had seen me, but no one else, and had asked me to come again when the people had gone. I had vanished, but had come again in the middle of the night and given the message. I myself had no knowledge of casting an imagination upon one so far away.

I could tell of stranger images, of stranger enchantments, of stranger imaginations, cast consciously or unconsciously over as great distances by friends or by myself, were it not that the greater energies of the mind seldom break forth but when the deeps are loosened. They break forth amid events too private or too sacred for public speech, or seem themselves, I know not why, to belong to hidden things. I have written of these breakings forth, these loosenings of the deep, with some care and some detail, but I shall keep my record shut. After all, one can but bear witness less to convince him who won't believe than to protect him who does, as Blake puts it, enduring unbelief and misbelief and ridicule as best one may. I shall be content to show that past times have believed as I do, by quoting Joseph Glanvil's description of the Scholar Gipsy. Joseph Glanvil is dead, and will not mind unbelief and misbelief and ridicule.

The Scholar Gipsy, too, is dead, unless indeed perfectly wise magicians can live till it please them to die, and he is wandering somewhere, even if one cannot see him, as Arnold imagined, 'at some lone ale-house in the Berkshire moors, on the warm ingle-bench,' or 'crossing the stripling Thames at Bablock Hithe,' 'trailing his fingers in the cool stream,' or 'giving store of flowers

– the frail-leaf'd white anemone, dark hare-bells drenched with dew of summer eves,' to the girls 'who from the distant hamlets come to dance around the Fyfield elm in May,' or 'sitting upon the river bank o'ergrown,' living on through time 'with a free onward impulse.' This is Joseph Glanvil's story —

There was very lately a lad in the University of Oxford who, being of very pregnant and ready parts and yet wanting the encouragement of preferment, was by his poverty forced to leave his studies there, and to cast himself upon the wide world for a livelihood. Now his necessities growing daily on him, and wanting the help of friends to relieve him, he was at last forced to join himself to a company of vagabond gipsies, whom occasionally he met with, and to follow their trade for a maintenance… After he had been a pretty while well exercised in the trade, there chanced to ride by a couple of scholars, who had formerly been of his acquaintance. The scholar had quickly spied out these old friends among the gipsies, and their amazement to see him among such society had well-nigh discovered him; but by a sign he prevented them owning him before that crew, and taking one of them aside privately, desired him with his friend to go to an inn, not far distant, promising there to come to them. They accordingly went thither and he follows: after their first salutation his friends inquire how he came to lead so odd a life as that was, and so joined himself into such a beggarly company. The scholar gipsy having given them an account of the necessity which drove him to that kind of life, told them that the people

he went with were not such impostors as they were taken for, but that they had a traditional kind of learning among them and could do wonders by the power of imagination, and that himself had learned much of their art and improved it further than themselves could. And to evince the truth of what he told them, he said he'd remove into another room, leaving them to discourse together; and upon his return tell them the sense of what they had talked of; which accordingly he performed, giving them a full account of what had passed between them in his absence. The scholars being amazed at so unexpected a discovery, earnestly desired him to unriddle the mystery. In which he gave them satisfaction, by telling them that what he did was by the power of imagination, his phantasy leading theirs; and that himself had dictated to them the discourse they had held together while he was from them; that there were warrantable ways of heightening the imagination to that pitch as to bend another's, and that when he had compassed the whole secret, some parts of which he was yet ignorant of, he intended to leave their company and give the world an account of what he had learned.

If all who have described events like this have not dreamed, we should rewrite our histories, for all men, certainly all imaginative men, must be for ever casting forth enchantments, glamours, illusions; and all men, especially tranquil men who have no powerful egotistic life, must be continually passing under their power. Our most elaborate thoughts, elaborate purposes, precise emotions, are often, as I think, not really ours, but have on a

sudden come up, as it were, out of hell or down out of heaven. The historian should remember, should he not? angels and devils not less than kings and soldiers, and plotters and thinkers. What matter if the angel or devil, as indeed certain old writers believed, first wrapped itself with an organized shape in some man's imagination? what matter 'if God himself only acts or is in existing beings or men,' as Blake believed? we must none the less admit that invisible beings, far wandering influences, shapes that may have floated from a hermit of the wilderness, brood over council-chambers and studies and battle-fields. We should never be certain that it was not some woman treading in the wine-press who began that subtle change in men's minds, that powerful movement of thought and imagination about which so many Germans have written; or that the passion, because of which so many countries were given to the sword, did not begin in the mind of some shepherd boy, lighting up his eyes for a moment before it ran upon its way.

V

We cannot doubt that barbaric people receive such influences more visibly and obviously, and in all likelihood more easily and fully than we do, for our life in cities, which deafens or kills the passive meditative life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our souls less sensitive. Our souls that were once naked to the winds of heaven are now thickly clad, and have learned to build a house and light a fire upon its hearth, and shut to the doors and windows. The winds can, indeed, make us draw near to the fire, or can even lift the carpet and whistle under the door, but they could do worse out on the plains long ago. A certain learned man, quoted by Mr. Lang in his *Making of Religion*, contends that the memories of primitive man and his thoughts of distant places must have had the intensity of hallucination, because there was nothing in his mind to draw his attention away from them – an explanation that does not seem to me complete – and Mr. Lang goes on to quote certain travellers to prove that savages live always on the edges of vision. One Laplander who wished to become a Christian, and thought visions but heathenish, confessed to a traveller, to whom he had given a minute account of many distant events, read doubtless in that traveller's mind, 'that he knew not how to make use of his eyes, since things altogether distant were present to them.' I myself could find in one district in Galway but one

man who had not seen what I can but call spirits, and he was in his dotage. 'There is no man mowing a meadow but sees them at one time or another,' said a man in a different district.

If I can unintentionally cast a glamour, an enchantment, over persons of our own time who have lived for years in great cities, there is no reason to doubt that men could cast intentionally a far stronger enchantment, a far stronger glamour, over the more sensitive people of ancient times, or that men can still do so where the old order of life remains unbroken. Why should not the Scholar Gipsy cast his spell over his friends? Why should not St. Patrick, or he of whom the story was first told, pass his enemies, he and all his clerics, as a herd of deer? Why should not enchanters like him in the *Morte d'Arthur* make troops of horse seem but grey stones? Why should not the Roman soldiers, though they came of a civilization which was ceasing to be sensitive to these things, have trembled for a moment before the enchantments of the Druids of Mona? Why should not the Jesuit father, or the Count Saint Germain, or whoever the tale was first told of, have really seemed to leave the city in a coach and four by all the Twelve Gates at once? Why should not Moses and the enchanters of Pharaoh have made their staffs as the medicine men of many primitive peoples make their pieces of old rope seem like devouring serpents? Why should not that mediæval enchanter have made summer and all its blossoms seem to break forth in middle winter?

May we not learn some day to rewrite our histories, when they

touch upon these things too?

Men who are imaginative writers to-day may well have preferred to influence the imagination of others more directly in past times. Instead of learning their craft with paper and a pen they may have sat for hours imagining themselves to be stocks and stones and beasts of the wood, till the images were so vivid that the passers-by became but a part of the imagination of the dreamer, and wept or laughed or ran away as he would have them. Have not poetry and music arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers-by? These very words, a chief part of all praises of music or poetry, still cry to us their origin. And just as the musician or the poet enchants and charms and binds with a spell his own mind when he would enchant the mind of others, so did the enchanter create or reveal for himself as well as for others the supernatural artist or genius, the seeming transitory mind made out of many minds, whose work I saw, or thought I saw, in that suburban house. He kept the doors too, as it seems, of those less transitory minds, the genius of the family, the genius of the tribe, or it may be, when he was mighty-souled enough, the genius of the world. Our history speaks of opinions and discoveries, but in ancient times when, as I think, men had their eyes ever upon those doors, history spoke of commandments and revelations. They looked as carefully and as patiently towards Sinai and its thunders as we look towards parliaments and laboratories. We are always

praising men in whom the individual life has come to perfection, but they were always praising the one mind, their foundation of all perfection.

VI

I once saw a young Irish woman, fresh from a convent school, cast into a profound trance, though not by a method known to any hypnotist. In her waking state she thought the apple of Eve was the kind of apple you can buy at the greengrocer's, but in her trance she saw the Tree of Life with ever-sighing souls moving in its branches instead of sap, and among its leaves all the fowl of the air, and on its highest bough one white fowl bearing a crown. When I went home I took from the shelf a translation of *The Book of Concealed Mystery*, an old Jewish book, and cutting the pages came upon this passage, which I cannot think I had ever read: 'The Tree, … is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and of Evil … in its branches the birds lodge and build their nests, the souls and the angels have their place.'

I once saw a young Church of Ireland man, a bank clerk in the west of Ireland, thrown in a like trance. I have no doubt that he, too, was quite certain that the apple of Eve was a greengrocer's apple, and yet he saw the tree and heard the souls sighing through its branches, and saw apples with human faces, and laying his ear to an apple heard a sound as of fighting hosts within. Presently he strayed from the tree and came to the edge of Eden, and there he found himself not by the wilderness he had learned of at the Sunday-school, but upon the summit of a great mountain, of a mountain 'two miles high.' The whole summit, in contradiction

to all that would have seemed probable to his waking mind, was a great walled garden. Some years afterwards I found a mediæval diagram, which pictured Eden as a walled garden upon a high mountain.

Where did these intricate symbols come from? Neither I nor the one or two people present or the seers had ever seen, I am convinced, the description in *The Book of Concealed Mystery*, or the mediæval diagram. Remember that the images appeared in a moment perfect in all their complexity. If one can imagine that the seers or that I myself or another had indeed read of these images and forgotten it, that the supernatural artist's knowledge of what was in our buried memories accounted for these visions, there are numberless other visions to account for. One cannot go on believing in improbable knowledge for ever. For instance, I find in my diary that on December 27, 1897, a seer, to whom I had given a certain old Irish symbol, saw Brigit, the goddess, holding out 'a glittering and wriggling serpent,' and yet I feel certain that neither I nor he knew anything of her association with the serpent until *Carmina Gadelica* was published a few months ago. And an old Irish woman who can neither read nor write has described to me a woman dressed like Dian, with helmet, and short skirt and sandals, and what seemed to be buskins. Why, too, among all the countless stories of visions that I have gathered in Ireland, or that a friend has gathered for me, are there none that mix the dress of different periods? The seers when they are but speaking from tradition will mix everything together, and speak

of Finn mac Cool going to the Assizes at Cork. Almost every one who has ever busied himself with such matters has come, in trance or dream, upon some new and strange symbol or event, which he has afterwards found in some work he had never read or heard of. Examples like this are as yet too little classified, too little analyzed, to convince the stranger, but some of them are proof enough for those they have happened to, proof that there is a memory of nature that reveals events and symbols of distant centuries. Mystics of many countries and many centuries have spoken of this memory; and the honest men and charlatans, who keep the magical traditions which will some day be studied as a part of folk-lore, base most that is of importance in their claims upon this memory. I have read of it in 'Paracelsus' and in some Indian book that describes the people of past days as still living within it, 'Thinking the thought and doing the deed.' And I have found it in the prophetic books of William Blake, who calls its images 'the bright sculptures of Los's Halls'; and says that all events, 'all love stories,' renew themselves from those images. It is perhaps well that so few believe in it, for if many did many would go out of parliaments and universities and libraries and run into the wilderness to so waste the body, and to so hush the unquiet mind that, still living, they might pass the doors the dead pass daily; for who among the wise would trouble himself with making laws or in writing history or in weighing the earth if the things of eternity seemed ready to hand?

VII

I find in my diary of magical events for 1899 that I awoke at 3 A.M. out of a nightmare, and imagined one symbol to prevent its recurrence, and imagined another, a simple geometrical form, which calls up dreams of luxuriant vegetable life, that I might have pleasant dreams. I imagined it faintly, being very sleepy, and went to sleep. I had confused dreams which seemed to have no relation with the symbol. I awoke about eight, having for the time forgotten both nightmare and symbol. Presently I dozed off again and began half to dream and half to see, as one does between sleep and waking, enormous flowers and grapes. I awoke and recognized that what I had dreamed or seen was the kind of thing appropriate to the symbol before I remembered having used it. I find another record, though made some time after the event, of having imagined over the head of a person, who was a little of a seer, a combined symbol of elemental air and elemental water. This person, who did not know what symbol I was using, saw a pigeon flying with a lobster in his bill. I find that on December 13, 1898, I used a certain star-shaped symbol with a seeress, getting her to look at it intently before she began seeing. She saw a rough stone house, and in the middle of the house the skull of a horse. I find that I had used the same symbol a few days before with a seer, and that he had seen a rough stone house, and in the middle of the house

something under a cloth marked with the Hammer of Thor. He had lifted the cloth and discovered a skeleton of gold with teeth of diamonds, and eyes of some unknown dim precious stones. I had made a note to this last vision, pointing out that we had been using a Solar symbol a little earlier. Solar symbols often call up visions of gold and precious stones. I do not give these examples to prove my arguments, but to illustrate them. I know that my examples will awaken in all who have not met the like, or who are not on other grounds inclined towards my arguments, a most natural incredulity. It was long before I myself would admit an inherent power in symbols, for it long seemed to me that one could account for everything by the power of one imagination over another, telepathy as it is called with that separation of knowledge and life, of word and emotion, which is the sterility of scientific speech. The symbol seemed powerful, I thought, merely because we thought it powerful, and we would do just as well without it. In those days I used symbols made with some ingenuity instead of merely imagining them. I used to give them to the person I was experimenting with, and tell him to hold them to his forehead without looking at them; and sometimes I made a mistake. I learned from these mistakes that if I did not myself imagine the symbol, in which case he would have a mixed vision, it was the symbol I gave by mistake that produced the vision. Then I met with a seer who could say to me, 'I have a vision of a square pond, but I can see your thought, and you expect me to see an oblong pond,' or, 'The symbol you are imagining has made me

see a woman holding a crystal, but it was a moonlight sea I should have seen.' I discovered that the symbol hardly ever failed to call up its typical scene, its typical event, its typical person, but that I could practically never call up, no matter how vividly I imagined it, the particular scene, the particular event, the particular person I had in my own mind, and that when I could, the two visions rose side by side.

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist. At first I tried to distinguish between symbols and symbols, between what I called inherent symbols and arbitrary symbols, but the distinction has come to mean little or nothing. Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe, because the great memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the great memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret, it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or of devils. The symbols are of all kinds, for everything in heaven or earth has its association, momentous or trivial, in the great memory, and one never knows what forgotten events may have plunged it, like the toadstool and the ragweed, into the great passions. Knowledgeable men and women in Ireland sometimes distinguish between the simples that work cures by some medical property in the herb, and those

that do their work by magic. Such magical simples as the husk of the flax, water out of the fork of an elm-tree, do their work, as I think, by awaking in the depths of the mind where it mingles with the great mind, and is enlarged by the great memory, some curative energy, some hypnotic command. They are not what we call faith cures, for they have been much used and successfully, the traditions of all lands affirm, over children and over animals, and to me they seem the only medicine that could have been committed safely to ancient hands. To pluck the wrong leaf would have been to go uncured, but, if one had eaten it, one might have been poisoned.

VIII

I have now described that belief in magic which has set me all but unwilling among those lean and fierce minds who are at war with their time, who cannot accept the days as they pass, simply and gladly; and I look at what I have written with some alarm, for I have told more of the ancient secret than many among my fellow-students think it right to tell. I have come to believe so many strange things because of experience, that I see little reason to doubt the truth of many things that are beyond my experience; and it may be that there are beings who watch over that ancient secret, as all tradition affirms, and resent, and perhaps avenge, too fluent speech. They say in the Aran Islands that if you speak overmuch of the things of Faery your tongue becomes like a stone, and it seems to me, though doubtless naturalistic reason would call it Auto-suggestion or the like, that I have often felt my tongue become just so heavy and clumsy. More than once, too, as I wrote this very essay I have become uneasy, and have torn up some paragraph, not for any literary reason, but because some incident or some symbol that would perhaps have meant nothing to the reader, seemed, I know not why, to belong to hidden things. Yet I must write or be of no account to any cause, good or evil; I must commit what merchandise of wisdom I have to this ship of written speech, and after all, I have many a time watched it put out to sea with not less alarm when all the speech was rhyme. We

who write, we who bear witness, must often hear our hearts cry out against us, complaining because of their hidden things, and I know not but he who speaks of wisdom may not sometimes in the change that is coming upon the world, have to fear the anger of the people of Faery, whose country is the heart of the world – 'The Land of the Living Heart.' Who can keep always to the little pathway between speech and silence, where one meets none but discreet revelations? And surely, at whatever risk, we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory? Can there be anything so important as to cry out that what we call romance, poetry, intellectual beauty, is the only signal that the supreme Enchanter, or some one in His councils, is speaking of what has been, and shall be again, in the consummation of time?

1901.

THE HAPPIEST OF THE POETS

I

Rossetti in one of his letters numbers his favourite colours in the order of his favour, and throughout his work one feels that he loved form and colour for themselves and apart from what they represent. One feels sometimes that he desired a world of essences, of unmixed powers, of impossible purities. It is as though the last judgment had already begun in his mind and that the essences and powers, which the divine hand had mixed into one another to make the loam of life, fell asunder at his touch. If he painted a flame or a blue distance, he painted as though he had seen the flame out of whose heart all flames had been taken, or the blue of the abyss that was before all life; and if he painted a woman's face he painted it in some moment of intensity when the ecstasy of the lover and of the saint are alike, and desire becomes wisdom without ceasing to be desire. He listens to the cry of the flesh till it becomes proud and passes beyond the world where some immense desire that the intellect cannot understand mixes with the desire of a body's warmth and softness. His genius like Shelley's can hardly stir but to the rejection of nature, whose delight is profusion, but never intensity, and like Shelley's it follows the Star of the Magi, the Morning and Evening Star,

the mother of impossible hope, although it follows through deep woods, where the Star glimmers among dew-drenched boughs and not through 'a wind-swept valley of the Apennine.' Men like him cannot be happy as we understand happiness, for to be happy one must delight like nature in mere profusion, in mere abundance, in making and doing things, and if one sets an image of the perfect before one it must be the image that draws her perpetually, the image of a perfect fulness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise. One's emotion must never break the bonds of life, one's hands must never labour to loosen the silver cord, one's ears must never strain to catch the sound of Michael's trumpet. That is to say, one must not be among those that would have prayed in old times in some chapel of the Star, but among those who would have prayed under the shadow of the Green Tree, and on the wet stones of the Well, among the worshippers of natural abundance.

II

I do not think it was accident, so subtle are the threads that lead the soul, that made William Morris, who seems to me the one perfectly happy and fortunate poet of modern times, celebrate the Green Tree and the goddess Habundia, and wells and enchanted waters in so many books. In *The Well at the World's End* green trees and enchanted waters are shown to us, as they were understood by old writers, who thought that the generation of all things was through water; for when the water that gives a long and a fortunate life and that can be found by none but such a one as all women love is found at last, the Dry Tree, the image of the ruined land, becomes green. To him indeed as to older writers Well and Tree are all but images of the one thing, of an 'energy' that is not the less 'eternal delight' because it is half of the body. He never wrote, and could not have written, of a man or woman who was not of the kin of Well or Tree. Long before he had named either he had made his 'Wanderers' follow a dream indeed, but a dream of natural happiness, and all the people of all his poems and stories from the confused beginning of his art in *The Hollow Land* to its end in *The Sundering Flood*, are full of the heavy sweetness of this dream. He wrote indeed of nothing but of the quest of the Grail, but it was the Heathen Grail that gave every man his chosen food, and not the Grail of Malory or Wagner; and he came at last to praise, as other men have praised

the martyrs of religion or of passion, men with lucky eyes and men whom all women love.

We know so little of man and of the world that we cannot be certain that the same invisible hands, that gave him an imagination preoccupied with good fortune, gave him also health and wealth, and the power to create beautiful things without labour, that he might honour the Green Tree. It pleases me to imagine the copper mine which brought, as Mr. Mackail has told, so much unforeseen wealth and in so astonishing a way, as no less miraculous than the three arrows in *The Sundering Flood*. No mighty poet in his misery dead could have delighted enough to make us delight in men 'who knew no vain desire of foolish fame,' but who thought the dance upon 'the stubble field' and 'the battle with the earth' better than 'the bitter war' 'where right and wrong are mixed together.' 'Oh the trees, the trees!' he wrote in one of his early letters, and it was his work to make us, who had been taught to sympathize with the unhappy till we had grown morbid, to sympathize with men and women who turned everything into happiness because they had in them something of the abundance of the beechen boughs or of the bursting wheat-ear. He alone, I think, has told the story of Alcestis with perfect sympathy for Admetus, with so perfect a sympathy that he cannot persuade himself that one so happy died at all; and he, unlike all other poets, has delighted to tell us that the men after his own heart, the men of his *News from Nowhere*, sorrowed but a little while over unhappy love. He cannot even think of nobility and

happiness apart, for all his people are like his men of Burg Dale who lived 'in much plenty and ease of life, though not delicately or desiring things out of measure. They wrought with their hands and wearied themselves; and they rested from their toil and feasted and were merry; to-morrow was not a burden to them, nor yesterday a thing which they would fain forget; life shamed them not nor did death make them afraid. As for the Dale wherein they dwelt, it was indeed most fair and lovely and they deemed it the Blessing of the earth, and they trod the flowery grass beside its rippled stream amidst the green tree-boughs proudly and joyfully with goodly bodies and merry hearts.'

III

I think of his men as with broad brows and golden beards and mild eyes and tranquil speech, and of his good women as like 'The Bride' in whose face Rossetti saw and painted for once the abundance of earth and not the half-hidden light of his star. They are not in love with love for its own sake, with a love that is apart from the world or at enmity with it, as Swinburne imagines Mary Stuart and as all men have imagined Helen. They do not seek in love that ecstasy, which Shelley's nightingale called death, that extremity of life in which life seems to pass away like the Phœnix in flame of its own lighting, but rather a gentle self-surrender that would lose more than half its sweetness if it lost the savour of coming days. They are good house-wives; they sit often at the embroidery frame, and they have wisdom in flocks and herds and they are before all fruitful mothers. It seems at times as if their love was less a passion for one man out of the world than submission to the hazard of destiny, and the hope of motherhood and the innocent desire of the body. They accept changes and chances of life as gladly as they accept spring and summer and autumn and winter, and because they have sat under the shadow of the Green Tree and drunk the Waters of Abundance out of their hollow hands, the barren blossoms do not seem to them the most beautiful. When Habundia takes the shape of Birdalone she comes first as a young naked girl standing among great trees, and

then as an old carline, Birdalone in stately old age. And when she praises Birdalone's naked body, and speaks of the desire it shall awaken, praise and desire are innocent because they would not break the links that chain the days to one another. The desire seems not other than the desire of the bird for its mate in the heart of the wood, and we listen to that joyous praise as though a bird watching its plumage in still water had begun to sing in its joy, or as if we heard hawk praising hawk in the middle air, and because it is the praise of one made for all noble life and not for pleasure only, it seems, though it is the praise of the body, that it is the noblest praise.

Birdalone has never seen her image but in 'a broad latten-dish,' so the wood woman must tell her of her body and praise it.

'Thus it is with thee; thou standest before me a tall and slim maiden, somewhat thin as befitteth thy seventeen summers; where thy flesh is bare of wont, as thy throat and thine arms and thy legs from the middle down, it is tanned a beauteous colour, but otherwhere it is even as fair a white, wholesome and clean as if the golden sunlight which fulfilleth the promise of the earth were playing therein… Delicate and clean-made is the little trench that goeth from thy mouth to thy lips, and sweet it is, and there is more might in it than in sweet words spoken. Thy lips they are of the finest fashion, yet rather thin than full; and some would not have it so; but I would, whereas I see therein a sign of thy valiancy and friendliness. Surely he who did thy carven chin had a mind to a master work and did no less. Great was

the deftness of thine imaginer, and he would have all folk who see thee wonder at thy deep thinking and thy carefulness and thy kindness. Ah, maiden! is it so that thy thoughts are ever deep and solemn? Yet at least I know it of thee that they be hale and true and sweet.

'My friend, when thou hast a mirror, some of all this shalt thou see, but not all; and when thou hast a lover some deal wilt thou hear, but not all. But now thy she-friend may tell it thee all, if she have eyes to see it, as have I; whereas no man could say so much of thee before the mere love should overtake him, and turn his speech into the folly of love and the madness of desire.'

All his good women, whether it is Danaë in her tower, or that woman in *The Wood beyond the World* who can make the withered flowers in her girdle grow young again by the touch of her hand, are of the kin of the wood woman. All his bad women too and his half-bad women are of her kin. The evils their enchantments make are a disordered abundance like that of weedy places and they are cruel as wild creatures are cruel and they have unbridled desires. One finds these evils in their typical shape in that isle of the Wondrous Isles, where the wicked witch has her pleasure-house and her prison, and in that 'isle of the old and the young,' where until her enchantment is broken second childhood watches over children who never grow old and who seem to the bystander who knows their story 'like images' or like 'the rabbits on the grass.' It is as though Nature spoke through him at all times in the mood that is upon her when she is

opening the apple-blossom or reddening the apple or thickening the shadow of the boughs, and that the men and women of his verse and of his stories are all the ministers of her mood.

IV

When I was a child I often heard my elders talking of an old turreted house where an old great-uncle of mine lived, and of its gardens and its long pond where there was an island with tame eagles; and one day somebody read me some verses and said they made him think of that old house where he had been very happy. The verses ran in my head for years and became to me the best description of happiness in the world, and I am not certain that I know a better even now. They were those first dozen verses of *Golden Wings* that begin —

> 'Midways of a walled garden
> In the happy poplar land
> Did an ancient castle stand,
> With an old knight for a warden.
>
> Many scarlet bricks there were
> In its walls, and old grey stone;
> Over which red apples shone
> At the right time of the year.
>
> On the bricks the green moss grew,
> Yellow lichen on the stone,
> Over which red apples shone;
> Little war that castle knew.'

When William Morris describes a house of any kind, and makes his description poetical, it is always, I think, some house that he would have liked to have lived in, and I remember him saying about the time when he was writing of that great house of the Wolfings, 'I decorate modern houses for people, but the house that would please me would be some great room where one talked to one's friends in one corner and eat in another and slept in another and worked in another.' Indeed all he writes seems to me like the make-believe of a child who is remaking the world, not always in the same way, but always after its own heart; and so unlike all other modern writers he makes his poetry out of unending pictures of a happiness that is often what a child might imagine, and always a happiness that sets mind and body at ease. Now it is a picture of some great room full of merriment, now of the wine-press, now of the golden threshing-floor, now of an old mill among apple-trees, now of cool water after the heat of the sun, now of some well-sheltered, well-tilled place among woods or mountains, where men and women live happily, knowing of nothing that is too far off or too great for the affections. He has but one story to tell us, how some man or woman lost and found again the happiness that is always half of the body; and even when they are wandering from it, leaves must fall over them, and flowers make fragrances about them, and warm winds fan them, and birds sing to them, for being of Habundia's kin they must not forget the shadow of her Green Tree even for a moment, and the waters of her Well must be always wet upon their sandals. His

poetry often wearies us as the unbroken green of July wearies us, for there is something in us, some bitterness because of the Fall it may be, that takes a little from the sweetness of Eve's apple after the first mouthful; but he who did all things gladly and easily, who never knew the curse of labour, found it always as sweet as it was in Eve's mouth. All kinds of associations have gathered about the pleasant things of the world and half taken the pleasure out of them for the greater number of men, but he saw them as when they came from the Divine Hand. I often see him in my mind as I saw him once at Hammersmith holding up a glass of claret towards the light and saying, 'Why do people say it is prosaic to get inspiration out of wine? Is it not the sunlight and the sap in the leaves? Are not grapes made by the sunlight and the sap?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.