A Critical Study of the Romances of William Morris
by
Dorothy Blakey
A CRITICAL STUDY of the ROMANCES of WILLIAM MORRIS.

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A CRITICAL STUDY of the ROMANCES of WILLIAM MORRIS.

1. Introduction.

When William Morris died, at the early age of sixty-three, the cause of his death was diagnosed as "simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men." And indeed, when one considers the multifarious interests which he followed throughout his life, one is amazed at his enormous energy and activity both of mind and body. He carried on a flourishing business as a manufacturer of house furnishings; and not only did he design and plan the objects which he produced, but he knew intimately the actual manual processes by which the designs were executed. He was a printer and a book-binder. He was a Socialist, who not only held opinions but enforced them in public lectures and harangues on street corners. He was a painter, and illuminator of manuscripts. He worked constantly for the preservation of the monuments of beauty left us by past ages in their architecture. And yet, in a life so crowded with activity, he found time to be also "a literary man", with a mass of prose and verse to his credit which, from the point of view of mere quantity, would not shame a man who had devoted himself entirely to literature. The complete works of William Morris fill twenty-four large volumes; and it is therefore manifestly impossible for this study of his romances to deal with

them in any detailed fashion. His literary production does, however, fall into certain definite periods; the romances written within these periods have certain characteristics in common and may be discussed as a whole. In the first period come his early poems, published in the volume of 1856 under the title of "The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems", and also the early prose romances which Morris contributed to the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. The second period includes "The Life and Death of Jason" and practically the whole of "The Earthly Paradise". There are indications in the last stories of "The Earthly Paradise", notably in "The Lovers of Gudrun", which point to the interest dominating the third period—that is, the influence of Morris's studies of the Northern Sagas. The third period proper, in which this influence is pre-eminent, comprises "Sigurd the Volsung"; and the connecting link between the third and the last division of Morris's work is found in the prose romances "The House of the Wolfings" and "The Roots of the Mountains", in which the saga influence is still very marked. The fourth period takes in the late prose romances—the fairy tales such as "The Wood beyond the World" and "The Sundering Flood", and also the socialist and prophetic romances, "News from Nowhere" and "The Dream of John Ball". The statements which I shall make about a poem or a story in a particular class may be taken, in general, to apply also to the other work of that period; for to study the romances individually and in detail is impossible in an essay of this length.

I shall discuss first the underlying spirit of Morris's romances. They are bound together by that worship of beauty
which is the dominating force in his life; but there is a distinct change in his idea of beauty from "The Defence of Guenevere" to the "Sundering Flood", and I shall attempt to trace the development of that idea throughout the romances.

In the second place, I shall deal with the subject matter of the romances; and shall discuss the question of William Morris's relation, in the action, the characters, and the setting of his tales, to the romance writers of the Middle Ages. Lastly, I shall discuss the style in the romances are written, pointing out what seem to me its characteristic qualities, and endeavoring to account for any fundamental difference in style in Morris's work at various periods of his development.
II. The Underlying Spirit of the Romances.

At first glance, the work of William Morris seems to stand apart from the literature of his day. When Dickens and George Eliot were devoting themselves to the picturing of the social conditions of England; when Matthew Arnold was striving to awaken in the British Philistines a sense of their own materialism and narrowness; when the religious unrest of the Victorian era resulted on the one hand in the writings of Huxley and Spencer, on the other hand, in the "Apologia pro Vita Sua"; when authors in general were concerned with social, economic, and religious questions, we find William Morris producing romances which have no apparent connection with the life of his time. Their subject matter is mediaeval; their atmosphere remote. It would seem that Morris characterized himself aptly in that oft-quoted phrase, "the idle singer of an empty day."

But a closer study of the romances convinces one that Morris was not simply a teller of pleasant tales, living apart in an artificial world of mediaeval glamor, and shutting his ears to the voice of his own age. For Morris, as for every other writer of that turbulent Victorian era, it was impossible to escape the influence of the religious, social, and economic unrest; and the romances, remote and unreal as they may appear, show very definitely his reaction against that condition of doubt, fluctuation, and restlessness which is mirrored so perfectly in the poetry of Matthew Arnold. More fortunate, however, than Arnold, Morris was endowed by nature with that 

"And will like a dividing spear"
for which Arnold as a poet longed; and he refused to be content with the intellectual barrenness of those"

"Who fluctuate idly without term or scope,
Of whom each strives, nor knows for what he strives".

Morris knew very definitely, even as early as his Oxford days, the object for which he was to struggle, the ideal which was to unify his writings and his life. That ideal was the worship of beauty. For the problems of religion, of politics, of economics, he had but one solution — the pursuit of beauty; and his romances embody that search for the ideal.

The religion of beauty which was the foundation of the work of Morris inevitably suggests those hackneyed lines which express the poetic creed of John Keats:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

And there is indeed a very intimate connection between the fundamental ideas of Keats and those of Morris; not only with respect to the ideas themselves, but also with regard to the way in which those ideas developed. To speak more specifically, we can trace in the poetry of Keats the evolution of his ideal from the love of sensuous beauty to the love of moral and spiritual beauty; similarly, Morris began his poetical work by expressing the beauty of the senses; he passed to the development of that passion for moral truth of which we see the mere beginnings in Keats's later pieces; and, being an intensely practical man as well as an idealist, Morris carried the religion of beauty to its logical conclusion — he tried to make it effective in the daily lives of the people of his age. Let us now examine, in a more detailed fashion, this development of Morris's
idea of beauty, as it is shown in his work.

The early poems of Morris — "The Defence of Guenevere", "Jason", and "The Earthly Paradise" — embody chiefly his delight in the beauty which appeals to the senses, in the loveliness of color and of sound. And it is very natural that these poems should be chiefly occupied with the transcription of things actually seen, either with the physical sight, or by the power of the imagination; for at that period of his life Morris was dominated by the ideas of Rossetti, to whom painting was the greatest of all arts. "If a man has any poetry in him," he said, "he should paint, for it has all been said and written and they have scarcely begun to paint it." Under his influence Morris did indeed try to make himself into a painter, and with some measure of success: his "Queen Guenevere" is said to be "one of the finest of all Pre-Raphaelite pictures and equal in merit to his poem, the "Defence of Guenevere"."

When Morris's natural bent toward poetry reasserted itself, he looked at objects with a painter's eye; he saw the "picturesque" aspect of things, their beauty of form and color. And he saw that beauty with intense vividness: it is recorded of him that fifty years after the event he described accurately a church which he had once visited as a boy. Indeed his distinguishing gift, according to Dixon Scott, is the "power of sucking up sense-impressions through the eyes and storing them up with

# Quoted in Mackail's Life. Page 110.

with absolute security." Hence his early work is primarily a series of pictures: even in the "Defence of Guenevere" volume, which has been so often cited as an example of that interest in abnormal psychology which appears nowhere else in the work of Morris -- even here, it seems to me, it is chiefly the pictures which attract him. It is not that he is interested primarily in the thoughts which pass through the minds of his characters--he wants to give a vivid picture of the outward and visible aspect of those people, which symbolizes the thought within: and his characters formulate their ideas, not in abstract language, but in pictures also. For instance, in the poem which gives the title to this volume, it is not the argument that Guenevere advances in her own defence which we remember, but such a picture as --

"... say no rash word
Against me, being so beautiful: my eyes,
Wept all away to grey, may bring some sword
To drown you in your blood; see my breast rise,
Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,

Yea also at my full heart's strong command,
See through my long throat how the words go up In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

The shadow lies like wine within a cup Of marvellously colour'd gold; yea now
This little wind is rising, look you up,

And wonder how the light is falling so Within my moving tresses."

And again, when Guenevere realizes that she has sinned, it is not an analysis of her state of mind that Morris gives us, but

a physical picture:

"...the grey downs bare
Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere.

At first she said no word, but lay quite still,
Only her mouth was open, and her eyes
Gazed wretchedly about from hill to hill;
As though she asked, not with so much surprise
As tired disgust, what made them stand up there
So cold and grey. After, a spasm took
Her face, and all her frame; she caught her hair,
All her hair, in both hands, terribly she shook,

And rose till she was sitting in the bed,
Set her teeth hard, and shut her eyes and seem'd
As though she would have torn it from her head,
Nathless she dropp'd it, lay down, as she deem'd

It matter'd not whatever she might do -- "

And not only are the characters of the poems presented to us in
a series of pictures instead of by psychological analysis, but
they themselves are endowed by Morris with his own intense vivid-
ness of imagination: they speak in pictures. The Lady Alice
de la Berde is told of her lover's death, and speaks thus:

"Christ! I have been a many times to church,
And, ever since my mother taught me prayers,
Have used them daily, but today I wish
To pray another way; come face to face,
O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
I know not what; at any rate come now
From one of many places where you are,
Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings,
Or sitting on the altar strange with gems,
Or high up in the dustiness of the apse;
Let us go You and I, a long way off,
To the little damp, dark Poitevin church;
While you sit on the coffin in the dark,
Will I lie down, my face on the bare stone
Between your feet, and chatter anything
I have heard long ago, what matters it
So I may keep you there, your solemn face
And long hair even-flowing on each side,
Until you love me well enough to speak;
And give me comfort; yea, till o'er your chin.

#King Arthur's Tomb.
And cloven red beard the great tears roll down
In pity for my misery, and I die,
Kissed over by you."

This same intensity of vision which translates thoughts and desires into pictures is exemplified again and again in Morris's first poems; "the great God's angel" with the "strange choosing cloths" is called up before one's mind by the power of Guenevere's imagination; or again, the speaker in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" can say:

"Over those bones I sat and pored for hours,
And thought, and dream'd, and still I scarce could see
The small white bones that lay upon the flowers,
But evermore I saw the lady."

—and by a description, clear-edged and vivid in detail, he shows us that he really did see her with the eye of the imagination.

Allied with this delight in the beauty of color and form which is so marked in these early poems, is the love of melody in verse or prose which was always characteristic of Morris. The surge and swing of "Sigurd"; the late prose romances, with their unfailing beauty of rhythm, their unremitting care for the "shape and ring of sentences"; prove conclusively that Morris never lost his sense of the music of words; but in these later pieces he is more concerned with what he is saying than with the manner in which it is phrased. Never again, after "The Defence of Guenevere", did Morris write poems solely for their melody—poems in which the thought is secondary and the music is everything. Very many of the pieces in that

#* Sir Peter Harpdon's End.

#Joseph Conrad: Preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus".
first volume are incomprehensible unless one regards them as experiments in sound and rhythm. In such poems as "The Wind" and "The Blue Closet", story and character play a very minor part—they are almost pure music. Take the opening lines of "The Wind":

"Ah! no, no, it is nothing, surely nothing at all,
Only the wild-going wind round by the garden-wall,
For the dawn just now is breaking, the wind beginning to fall.

Wind, wind! thou art sad, art thou kind?
Wind, wind, unhappy! thou art blind,
Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to find."

But perhaps the best example of this class of poetry may be found in the verses inserted in the prose romance "The Hollow Land". They sound, says one critic, "as if they had come into his mind as tunes come into the minds of musicians."#

"Christ keep the Hollow Land
All the summer-tide;
Still we cannot understand
Where the waters glide:

Only dimly seeing them
Coldly slipping through
Many green-lipped cavern mouths,
Where the hills are blue."

This intense love of sensuous beauty which I have shown to be so strongly marked in the early work of Morris links him definitely with the Pre-Raphaelites, and through them with Keats. All artists are linked together by their attempt to embody beauty, but it is by the method which they choose in order to accomplish "the embodiment of dreams"## that men are grouped together into so-called schools of art and poetry.

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# A.Clutton-Brock.op.cit. Page 40.
The distinguishing mark of the Pre-Raphaelite school is, as Ruskin termed it, their "intense sense of fact". While the initial revolt of those painters was directed against the tradition in art which made men falsify what they actually saw, they were really asserting one of Keats's most fundamental beliefs—namely, that ideal and imaginative beauty cannot be expressed by art without an intense devotion to the visible manifestations of that ideal. This idea is fully developed by Keats in his version of the myth of Endymion, which symbolizes for him the search of the soul for ideal beauty. While pursuing his quest for the moon goddess, Endymion is drawn from his single-hearted allegiance by the Indian maiden, who typifies the beauty of the senses. In vain he struggles against her attraction, which, however, cannot efface the memory of Cynthia; he says in his misery:

"For both, for both my love is so immense, I feel my heart is cut for them in twain." (Bk.IV.96,97.)

But at the close of the poem Endymion learns that Cynthia and the Indian maiden are one:

"And as she spake, into her face there came Light, as reflected from a silver flame: Her long black hair swell'd ampler, in display Full golden; in her eyes a brighter day Dawn'd blue, and full of love. Aye, he beheld Phoebe, his passion!" (Bk.IV.977 foll.)

It is Keats's belief, then, that in their essential nature the passion for sensuous beauty and the love of ideal and spiritual beauty are one; and it is impossible to express the visions of the imagination if one deliberately closes one's

# Pre-Raphaelitism. (J.M.Dent. Everyman series.) Page 41.
eyes to the beauty of material things. The Pre-Raphaelite re-
turn to nature was in reality an affirmation of this principle;
these painters recognized that they could not give shape to
their visions of beauty except by a close and loving study of
the manifestations of beauty in the world of the senses; or in
other words, to repeat Ruskin's phrase, they had an "intense
sense of fact". The natural result of this doctrine was of
course that attention to detail so characteristic of Pre-Rapha-
elite paintings and poems, and so marked in the work of their
artistic ancestor Keats. It has often been pointed out that
such poems as "The Eve of Saint Agnes" forecast very definitely
the Pre-Raphaelite manner. The stanza, for instance, which de-
scribes the feast spread by Porphyro, is filled with vivid and
beautiful detail, with delight in color and taste and smell;
and the whole poem contains picture after picture as beautiful
as the one which Keats has compressed into the two lines:

"Out went the taper as she hurried in;
   Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died."

One could multiply examples of this love of rich and exquisite
detail which is perhaps the distinguishing feature of Keats's
genius. I shall quote only one more: the very famous passage
which is echoed by William Morris in "The Earthly Paradise".
In the opening stanza of the "Ode to Autumn" Keats writes:

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
   With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
   To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
"Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells."

It is curious to turn from these lines to the description of Autumn days in "The Earthly Paradise", and to observe how similarly the two men work, though Keats of course has far greater power:

"Now came fulfillment of the year's desire,
The tall wheat, coloured by the August fire
Grew heavy-headed, dreading its decay,
And blacker grew the elm-trees day by day.
About the edges of the yellow corn,
And o'er the gardens grown somewhat outworn,
The bees went hurrying to fill up their store,
The apple-boughs bent over more and more;
With peach and apricot the garden wall
Was odorous, and the pears began to fall
From off the high tree with each freshening breeze."#

The passages quoted show that same care for exactness of detail which is a natural concomitant of the love of sensuous beauty. And both Keats and Morris are touched likewise with that regret at the passing of the beautiful which all poets indeed are conscious of, but which increases in intensity as the poet's perception of the sensuous becomes keener. All lovers of beauty mourn its decay; but it is because Keats had such a vivid sense of the loveliness of the world that the "Ode on Melancholy" is so superb an elegy on the beauty that is transient. The last stanza, with its splendid imagery, gives expression to that feeling of sadness which comes upon all men in the presence of beauty; but expresses it with a poignancy of regret which could be experienced only by one who loved that beauty as passionately as did Keats. Melancholy, says the poet.

"dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh.
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Aye, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung."

And the feeling which Keats condenses here into one stanza is
the mood which prevails throughout "The Earthly Paradise". The
men who tell the stories are old; the beauty of their lives is
past. They feel their hearts stirred by the tales of other
men's happiness in the long ago; but always there is the sense
that the people of the stories found beauty as fragile and tran­
sient as the narrators have done.

"They too, those old men, well might sit and gaze
Upon the images of bygone days.
And wonder mid their soft self-pity, why
Mid such wild struggles had their lives gone by,
Since neither love nor joy, nor even pain,
Should last for ever; yet their strife so vain
While still they strove, so sore regretted now,
The heavy grief that once their heads did bow,
Had wrought so much for them, that they might sit
Amid some pleasure at the thought of it;
At least not hardened quite so much, but they
Might hear of love and longing worn away
Twixt birth and death of others, wondering
Belike, amid their pity what strange thing
Made the mere truth of what poor souls did bear
-In vain or not in vain—so sweet to hear,
So healing to the tangled woes of earth,
At least for a short while." #

Morris in his own person strikes the same note in the prologues
to the months of the year, lyrics which express that same feel­
ing of the mutability of beauty. The verses on November are al­
most an echo of the "Ode on Melancholy":

# Vol. 5. Page 396.
"Look out upon the real world, where the moon,
   Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high trees,
   Turns the dread midnight into dreamy noon.
   Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
   Died at the sunset, and no images,
   No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth—
   Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

Yea, I have looked and seen November there;
The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
  Fair death of things that, living once, were fair."

William Morris is related to Keats, then, by his love of sensuous beauty, and his perception of its transience; and he likewise resembles Keats in that his idea of beauty developed from the purely sensuous to the moral and spiritual. The poetry of Keats is commonly associated with lovely pictures of external nature; and some critics have even said that he never rises above the interpretation of sensuous beauty. But although it is true that, as Matthew Arnold says, Keats was "not ripe" for the interpretation of moral beauty, there are indications throughout his work that if he had lived he would have devoted himself to that ideal. In a poem so early as "Sleep and Poetry" he speaks of "the agonies, the strife of human hearts" as being far nooler than the joys of the senses; and his growing power of character depiction, evidenced in "Isabella", points to the fact that Keats had the power to see the beauty of the moral and spiritual world. In the same way, we can trace in the work of Morris a development in his conception of beauty. From the depiction of external and sensuous loveliness which we find in "The Defence of Guenevere"; through the mood of "The Earthly Paradise", where the vivid sense of the beauty of the world is bound up inextricably with the sense of its mutability; Morris passed to the story
of Sigurd, in which he showed conclusively that he possessed the power to paint the "strife of human hearts" and to find the beauty there.

The grim saga of the Volsung race which attracted Morris so deeply is as monstrous and horrible, as cruel and as pitilessly tragic, as "Oedipus Rex" or "King Lear". But the imagination of Morris was able to pierce the crudity of the story and to find the enduring and beautiful element within. What makes the tragedies of Sophocles endurable is the poet's own profound insight into the whole of life and its purposes; we read "King Lear" not for the action, but for the study of character, for Cordelia's loveliness and her creator's faith that her nobility of soul is the most real thing in her story; similarly, in "Sigurd the Volsung" we are stirred by Morris's conviction that there is a moral and spiritual beauty in the saga—namely, the temper of mind in which the heroes meet the tragedy of their fate. Life itself in the saga world is often horrible in its ugliness; violence and murder, incest and treachery are main threads in the plot of the story; but there is a sublimity in the resolution and the faith with which the actors face each new threat of misery. It is true that the shadow of the inevitable hangs over the whole of "Sigurd the Volsung"; but the poet never suggests that man is powerless in the grip of Fate—the mere puppet of a fixed and unalterable destiny. On the contrary, man has a very large share in the controlling of the future, though the ultimate fate of the world is fixed. As Morris phrases it:"

"And yet without thine helping shall no whit of their will befall."

(Vol.12. Page 126)
And the saga heroes have the courage to face valiantly what seems overwhelming evil, because of their faith that the ultimate event, to which creation moves, is the triumph of good and the destruction of evil. There runs throughout the poem the old conception of the "strife of the gods" which is coming, when the old earth shall be destroyed and a new world, nobler and more beautiful, shall arise; and always there is the emphasis upon human action in bringing about the new age:

"...the day when the fair earth blossoms, and the sun is bright above. Of the daring deeds is it fashioned and the eager hearts of love."#

Or again, when Signy rises to the heights of prophecy in her speech to Sigmund:

"...Thine eyes like mine shall gaze
On the day unborn in the darkness, the last of all earthly days.
The last of the days of battle, when the host of the Gods is arrayed
And there is an end for ever of all who were once afraid...
And thine hope shall arise and blossom, and thy love shall be quickened again:
And then shalt thou see before thee the face of all earthly ill;
Thou shalt drink of the cup of awakening that thine hand hath holpen to fill."

On that day all the contradictions of life, all the apparent waste of good and the success of evil, will be explained; it will be clear to man as it is now to the ultimate power:

"Thy wit shall then be awakened, and thou shalt know indeed why the brave man's spear is broken, and his war shield fails at need;
Why the loving is unbeloved; why the just man falls from his state;
Why the liar gains in a day what the soothfast strives for late."

What has seemed sorrow and tragedy to man will fall into its
place in the scheme of the Gods; hence the heroes are exhorted to be bold and noble in deed, and to leave the consequences with the future:

"Be wise, and cherish thine hope in the freshness of the days, and scatter its seed from thine hand in the field of the people's praise; then fair shall it fall in the furrow, and some the earth shall speed. And the sons of men shall marvel at the blossom of the deed: but some the earth shall speed not: nay rather, the wind of the heaven shall waft it away from thy longing—and a gift to the Gods hast thou given. And a tree for the roof and the wall in the house of the hope that shall be, though it seemed our very sorrow, and the grief of thee and me."# Accordingly it is their constant and unfailing courage by which the saga heroes make their lives beautiful; they know that suffering and heartbreaking toil lie before them, but they count it shame to falter. After Gudrun’s happiness has been blotted out by the death of Sigurd, her brother Hogni recalls her to the ideals of her race:

"If thou bide with these toiling women when a great king bids thee to wife, then first is it seen of the Niblungs that they cringe and cower from strife: by the deeds of the Golden Sigurd I charge thee hinder us not, when the Norns have dight the way-beasts, and our hearts for the journey are hot!" ##

Or again, when King Volsung knows that Siggeir’s invitation is treacherous, he refuses to be untrue to his pledged word, and leaves his home, to fall in battle with a traitor and a coward: "I shall go a guest, as my word was; of whom shall I be afraid?" ###

And one could multiply instances of the saga temper of mind, which is summed up concisely in the two lines:

# Page 126.  ## Page 251.  ### Page 11.
"...I swear to seek no quarrel, nor to swerve aside for aught,
Though the right and the left be blooming, and the straight
way wend to nought."

From this discussion of the prevailing spirit of
"Sigurd the Volsung" it is obvious that Morris does not stand
apart from the thought of his age—for the note struck here is
surely the note of that "optimism," which is so characteristic of
much nineteenth century literature in England. It is very
natural that the spirit of striving towards some goal perceived
by faith should rule the great minds of that age, for only by
struggle did the poets and philosophers win back the calm so rudely
shaken with the downfall of authorities in thought. The very
fact that men have been forced to try the foundations of their
faith gives to those who win through the confusion a more assured
belief, a firmer conviction, an aggressive and passionate
faith. This spirit of optimism may be traced everywhere in the
writings of the century; it finds an almost blatant expression,
of course, in Robert Browning, whose "optimism" is one of the
catchwords of criticism. His affinity with William Morris is
shown most clearly in a poem like "Childe Roland to the Dark
Tower Came"—which is an epitome of the saga spirit. Like the
Scandinavian heroes, Childe Roland knows the evil which he is
to fight, the horror and the loathsomeness of it, but he is
still dauntless, and by sheer heroism achieves his quest. Even
Matthew Arnold, whose poetry rarely strikes the confident note,
rises in "Rugby Chapel" to a passionate cry of belief in "the
city of God" to which the race of man is moving—a faith which
the saga symbolizes in the Gotterdammerung and the new earth

#Page 178.
which is to come. But perhaps the most perfect expression of nineteenth century optimism is to be found in Tennyson's "Ulysses", who might well have been a saga hero. The death song which Morris puts into the mouth of Gunnar would not be un-fitting to the Ulysses of Tennyson's poem:

"I have dwelt in the world aforetime, and I called it the garden of God; I have stayed my heart with its sweetness, and fair on its freshness I trod; I have seen its tempest and wondered, I have cowered adown from its rain, And desired the brightening sunshine, and seen it and been fain; I have waked, time was, in its dawning; its noon and its even I wore; I have slept unafraid of its darkness, and the days have been many and more: I have dwelt with the deeds of the mighty; I have woven the web of the sword; I have borne up the guilt nor repented; I have sorrowed nor spoken the word; And I fought and was glad in the morning, and I sing in the night and the end." #

The race of Sigurd the Yolsung, like Ulysses, were

"... strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The fact that Morris could take the crude and repulsive elements of the saga story and so inform them with his imagination that we remember nothing but the dauntless spirit of his characters, shows clearly that he was able to perceive beauty in the moral world as well as in the objects of sense. Unlike Keats, he lived long enough for his genius to ripen; and therefore, with experience in the world of men and with the thought upon the problem of existence to which that experience drove him, he passed naturally from the poetry of "naturalistic interpretation" to the poetry of "moral interpretation". ## In "Sigurd the Volsung"

# Page 298.
## Matthew Arnold: Maurice de Guérin.
Morris did indeed express "with inspired conviction, the ideas and laws in the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature." # That he recognized the higher level of "moral interpretation" is shown clearly in a paragraph in one of his lectures, which is a perfect criticism of "Sigurd": "Stories that tell of men's aspirations for more than material life can give them, their struggles for the future welfare of the race, their unfselfish love, their unrequited service: things like this are the subjects for the best art." ##

Thus far, Morris's idea of beauty has developed along the same lines as did that of Keats—it has passed from the sensuous to the moral and spiritual. Any further development of his conception of beauty in his own poetry was precluded by his early death; but Morris carries to its logical conclusion the religion of beauty set forth in the poems of his master. It has often been remarked that Morris presents a curious union of the visionary and the practical man, the idealist and the craftsman—a union indeed which he constantly advocated as the true type of workman. Consequently, therefore, having received his own vision of beauty, he set to work with characteristic energy to make that vision practical, to embody his dreams not only in the creations of art, but in the actual life about him. He had seen the beauty of moral and spiritual staunchness in the face of a life that was brutal and sordid; he looked, too, upon the life of his own day and realized its pettiness and ugliness;

# Arnold: Maurice de Guérin.

and he resolved, by virtue of his own "unconquerable soul", to make that life beautiful in itself. The whole of his extraordinary powers, says his biographer, "were devoted towards no less an object than the reconstitution of the civilized life of mankind."# It was therefore his passion for beauty which drove Morris to become a Socialist, and, contradictory as it may seem, to sacrifice his art to soapbox oratory. Much as we may regret the waste of his genius, we cannot but admire the courage and the unselfishness which impelled him to take any means, however trivial and misguided, to make beauty an actual factor in the life of his time. His late prose romances show very clearly that his idea of beauty had passed from the moral and spiritual loveliness of courage in the face of evil and ugliness, to the idea of a beauty which should pervade the whole of life—the concrete and physical as well as the spiritual. The late romances, whether they are pure fancy, or Utopian prophecies, embody the two principles which William Morris felt to be at the basis of an ordered and beautiful life. One of these ideas connects him again with Keats, the other with the social reformers of his day, to whom, although his work is externally very different, he is akin in spirit.

The one point which Morris stressed in his lectures on art, in fact his whole theory of art, may be summed up in the famous line from "Endymion": "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." That is, it was upon the inseparable connection between beauty and joy that he based his whole conception of art. True art

# Mackail's Life. Page 1.
satisfies the creative longing of the artist, and gives him joy; and that same pleasure is communicated to the beholder. Or, to put Morris's creed in his own phrasing, real art is "the expression of man's happiness in his labour—an art made by the people, and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user."# And to Morris it was the separation of art from labor, the making it into an esoteric mystery in which the ordinary workman could have no share, that was responsible both for the decay of art and for the miserable social conditions of his age. What he called "the tangles of to-day"## could be straightened out only by establishing "the Democracy of Art, the ennobling of daily and common work, which will one day put hope and pleasure in the place of fear and pain, as the forces which move men to labour and keep the world a-going."### This artistic creed of Morris, though it is connected with Keats's theory of art in that it emphasizes the inter-relation of beauty and of joy, was directly derived from the chapter in "Stones of Venice" on "The Nature of Gothic". In this section of the book, Ruskin found a rational basis for the pleasure which was aroused in him and in kindred souls such as Morris by Gothic architecture. The old cathedrals give us because pleasure, their builders rejoiced in their work; because the craftsmen of those days were not machines, but men, with the imaginations and the dreams of men, which they strove to embody in stone. For the reason that Gothic architecture is informed with imagination, and with the joy of the creative artist, it is to Ruskin and his kind truly artistic. And with the loss of that joy in labor, art, true art in Ruskin's sense of the term,

vanished also. Moreover, Ruskin believed that the art of a people is the surest index of that nation's spiritual level: where there is no art there is no spiritual life, and "where there is no vision, the people perish." Hence it was Ruskin's opinion that the crying evils of his day could not be remedied without a recrudescence of popular art; for in his view the loss of art was at the basis of the social unrest and misery of the nineteenth century. "The foundations of Society", he says in this famous chapter, "were never yet shaken as they are at this day. It is not that men are ill fed, but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread." And Morris agreed whole-heartedly with Ruskin.

It was therefore Morris's aim to waken art again into life by basing it once more upon its true foundation—the labor of the people. And it was because he saw that truly artistic work was impossible under the social system of his day that he became a Socialist. It was evident to him that under the capitalistic and competitive regime, with its sharp distinction between designer and workman, its minute division of labor, the average man could have no pleasure in his work, and consequently, could not produce artistic work. And therefore he set about to overthrow that whole system and to establish society upon a basis which would allow art to grow and flourish. He saw clearly that the miserable and sordid life of the average workman was only the outward and visible sign of the "innate moral baseness".

which lay at the root of the society of his day. That society
was founded upon competition, or as Morris termed it, upon "com-
mmercial war"; and accordingly, the underlying idea of Morris's
socialism—both his revolt against the existing state of society
and his constructive plans for the future—is summed up in the
well-known sentence from "A Dream of John Ball": "Fellowship is
heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and
lack of fellowship is death." Morris felt that art was impos-
sible in the society of his day because the commercial system
had destroyed all idea of the fellowship of man with man and
class with class: it was in its essence a war, with the motto
"What I gain you lose", and with every man fighting for himself
alone. So Morris turned to Socialism as the best means which
presented itself of changing the whole framework of society; and
the socialist romances sketch the new world which he hoped to
establish. "The "Dream of John Ball" is a sermon on the text
which I have already quoted, written in the beautiful language
of an idealist setting forth his most cherished faith. The life
to which Morris looks forward is such a life as John Ball de-
scribes with the passion of the man who has helped to realize a
dream: "What else shall ye lack when ye lack masters? Ye shall
not lack for the fields ye have tilled, nor the houses ye have
built, nor the cloth ye have woven; all these shall be yours,
and whatso ye will of all that the earth beareth; then shall no
man mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack

cow-meat; and he that soweth shall reap, and the reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won; and he that buildeth a house shall dwell in it with those that he bid-eth of his own free will; and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward, and the rain-drift hideth the sheaves in August; and all shall be without money and without price. Faithfully and merrily then shall all men keep the holidays of the Church in peace of body and joy of heart. And man shall help man, and the saints in heaven shall be glad, because men no more fear each other; and the churl shall be ashamed, and shall hide his churlishness till it be gone, and he be no more a churl; and fellowship shall be established in heaven and on the earth."

The paragraph which I have quoted serves also as a summary of "News from Nowhere", which, although it is a romance of the future, embodies the same beauty of life which Morris found in the times of John Ball. In his Utopia Morris worked out in some detail the idea of fellowship which runs throughout the book. The heart of "News from Nowhere" is contained in such a passage as: "We have been living for a hundred and fifty years, at least, more or less in our present manner, and a tradition or habit of life has been growing on us; and that habit has become a habit of acting on the whole for the best. It is easy for us to live without robbing each other. It would be possible for us to contend with and rob each other, but it would be harder for us than refraining from strife and robbery. That is in short the foundation of our life.
and our happiness....'

'But...' I said; 'you don't mean to tell me that no one ever transgresses this habit of good fellowship?'

'Certainly not,' said Hammond. 'but when the transgressions occur, everybody, transgressors and all, know them for what they are; the errors of friends, not the habitual actions of persons driven into enmity against society.' 

'It was this kind of life that Morris was striving for; and his ideal of a beauty pervading life is expressed not only in his socialist tales but also in those prose romances which seem, on the surface, so remote from his own age. It is practically impossible for a man with strong convictions on some particular phase of life to conceal those habitual thoughts when he comes to make a work of art: and Morris's ruling passion is very clearly shown even in his fairytales. His dreams were far from realization in the actual world; and so when he turned to art he created a new earth, a fairyland, in which his visions were crystallized. I do not mean to imply that he did so consciously—but as all fairytales are in a sense the embodiment of the unsatisfied desires of the human race, so Morris's romances show the life for which he longed. The fairytales, no less than the Utopian romances, are informed with that same spirit of fellowship. True, there are evil beasts and evil men to fight against; but the enemies are there plainly before one, and one has not to face them alone. The people of the romances are happy amidst their troubles, "since their life was free and they knew no guile", and there is always a helper at

##The Roots of the Mountains. Vol.15. Page 139.
their need. The ideal life to which they look is the life which appealed so strongly to Morris. Compare, for instance, with the Utopia of "News from Nowhere" this passage from "The Roots of the Mountains", in which Gold-Mane talks to his speech-friend of the days that are to come: "Time shall be, if we come alive out of this pass of battle and bitter strife, when I shall lead thee into Burgdale to dwell there. And thou wottest of our people that there is little strife and grudging amongst them, and that they are merry, and fair to look on, both men and women; and no man there lacketh what the earth may give us, and it is a saying amongst us that there may a man have that which he desireth save the sun and moon in his hands to play with: and of this gladness, which is made up of many little matters, what story may be told? Yet amongst it shall I live and thou with me; and ill indeed it were if it wearied thee and thou wert ever longing for some day of victorious strife, and to behold me coming back from battle high-raised on the shields of men and crowned with bay; if thine ears must ever be tickled with the talk of men and their songs concerning my warrior deeds. For thus it shall not be. When I drive the herds it shall be at the neighbours' bidding whereso they will; not necks of men shall I smite, but the stalks of the tall wheat, and the boles of the timber-trees which the woodreeve hath marked for felling; the stilts of the plough rather than the hilt of the sword shall harden my hands; my shafts shall be for the deer, and my spears for the wood-boar, till war and sorrow fall upon us, and I fight for the ceasing of war and trouble. And though I be called a chief and of the blood of chiefs, yet shall I not be masterful to the goodman of the Dale, but rather
to my hound; for my chieftainship shall be that I shall be well
beloved and trusted, and that no man shall grudge against me."# Such is the atmosphere of the late romances, in which Morris
realized in fancy what escaped him in fact.

By this insistence upon fellowship as the basis for a
life of ordered beauty Morris is linked up with the great social
reformers of his day. What else was Dickens preaching, in his
sympathy for paupers and workmen and children, crushed in the
commercial system of the day, but good fellowship? Matthew Arnold,
too, laid emphasis upon the fact that his religion of culture was
general, as opposed to individual. To the men of culture, in-
dividual perfection is impossible so long as the rest of mankind
are not perfect along with them.## And certainly this idea of
fellowship was sorely needed in the mental life of the nineteenth
century, which is often characterized as the age of individualism.
With the breaking of the bonds of authority in all departments of
life, romanticism and its aftermath, the nineteenth century
proper, naturally carried to excess the development of the "moi";
just as men of the Renaissance, freed from the shackles of auth-
ority in church and state, turned their attention solely to the
gratification of their own impulses. It was because the Renaiss-
ance, particularly in art, symbolized the triumph of the indivi-
dual, that Morris hated it. He saw, as Matthew Arnold did, that
"doing as one likes" is apt to lead men away from the desires of
their "best self"; that is, their "community self", the instincts
for good which are common to the race. Men are tempted to affirm

# Vol.15. Page 140.
## Culture and Anarchy.Vl. 4.
just that part of them which is petty, miserable, and selfish—individual and anti-social. It was the individualism of nineteenth-century England, with its watchword of "every man for himself", with its affirmation with blind energy of the ordinary selves of men, that produced the competitive commercial system, which is, as Morris said, a perpetual warfare, in which the things of beauty, in which art itself, cannot possibly exist. And until that spirit of selfishness is replaced by the love of man to man, so Morris would say, there is no hope for art or for civilization itself. Hence in his preaching of the gospel of fellowship he was as truly a social reformer as Bernard Shaw or H. G. Wells—but he attacked the evil from the aesthetic side rather than from the purely economic and political. For to him the aesthetic viewpoint comprehended all the others. "In my mind," he said, "it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion."# It was because he felt that art was more fundamental than politics, and because art subsumed for him morality and religion, that he attacked the problem from the artist's standpoint. One cannot emphasize too much the fact that to William Morris art was not a thing apart from life, a kind of plaything for the favored few, but life itself—at least, all that matters about life,—that is, its beauty.

We have traced, then, throughout the work of Morris the underlying principle which binds together all his writing: the worship of beauty, passing from the love of the purely sensuous to the spiritual, and finally striving to incarnate itself in the daily life of the time. And because the existing framework of society made it impossible for that ideal beauty of life to take

#The Art of the People. Vol. 22. Page 47.
shape and form, Morris set about the construction of a society whose spirit of fellowship and goodwill should make it possible for that beauty to be realized. His romances represent therefore a very definite reaction against society as he found it in his day, and, remote as they may appear, are connected with the nineteenth century in spirit as vitally as "Hard Times" or "In Memoriam".
III. The "Mediaevalism" of the Romances.

Having discussed the principle which underlies the whole of the work of William Morris, we turn to the consideration of the literary form in which that ideal is expressed. Morris's worship of beauty revealed itself through many different media—through the various arts and crafts which he mastered so thoroughly, from wallpaper designs to cookery; but when we consider that division of his artistic production which may be classed as literature, we find that within the limits of that division, there is very little variety in the form which he employs. In other words, as a purely literary artist, Morris is peculiarly and primarily a writer of romances. In its widest sense, the term "romance" includes the whole literature of narrative fiction from the ballad to the modern novel; but the word is more specifically used to designate a branch of fiction which is distinctly mediaeval—the tales written in the vernacular or romance languages as distinguished from the Latin; tales based upon the traditional material kept alive by the mass of the people. It is to this more limited application of the word "romance" that I wish to confine this discussion; for to use the term in its broadest meaning would involve us in the question of what is meant by romance and romanticism in general—a subject which it is manifestly impossible to treat here. The consideration of his literary forms therefore resolves itself into an attempt to discover the relation between Morris and the typical mediaeval romancer. But it is first necessary to account if possible for Morris's adoption of this particular form of
literature. Many of his contemporaries were engaged in the pro-
duction of poems and novels like "Maud" or "English Idylls" or
"The Mill on the Floss"—works which bear directly upon the life
of Victorian England. But, with the exception of a few socialist
poems, and a youthful attempt at a modern story, (Frank's Sealed
Letter) both the poems and the prose writings of William Morris
deal with subjects which a man of the Middle Ages might have
chosen. Such a consistent and deliberate refusal to treat in any
direct fashion the life of his own day, demands explanation; for
in the Victorian era the average Englishman considered himself
"the heir of all the ages", and regarded the conditions in his
own country as the last word in civilization. The distinctive
attitude of William Morris may be explained by the combination
of his own temperament and of the circumstances of his life as
boy and man.

"The love of the Middle Ages", says Morris's biographer,
"was born in him"#; but this method of accounting for his "media-
evalism" seems rather to beg the question. Granted that Mor-
ris had the temper of mind to which the Middle Ages would appeal,
one must take into consideration also the factors of environment
and training which put the mediaeval time before Morris's mind—
factors which Mr. Mackail regards as negligible. Had Morris
been brought up, say, in Chicago in the twentieth century, and
had then been confronted with mediaeval architecture and liter-
ature, I cannot think it possible that he could have loved them
with that passion which actually characterizes him. What was
born in Morris was not the love of the Middle Ages, but that

sort of artist soul to which the beauty of mediaeval times makes
its appeal; and if he had been placed in different circumstances,
he would probably have clothed his idea of beauty in a different
form. The doctrine of "the man, the milieu, and the moment"
accounts perfectly for the so-called mediaevalism of William Mor­
ris. The man himself was, as I have said, an artist by tempera­
ment; and further, his peculiar characteristics as an artist
made him abnormally sensitive to the influence of the "milieu".
Morris was dowered by nature with extraordinary keenness of sense
perception, and those sights and sounds and smells of childhood
which are so vivid even to us ordinary people, must have made a
much deeper impression upon him. And his environment as a child
and as a boy was fitted to direct his love of beauty into medi­
aeval channels. He was brought up in an English country house,
whose system of life touched at many points the life of mediaev­
al England. "Woodford Hall", says Mr. Mackail, "brewed its own
beer, and made its own butter, as much as a matter of course as
it baked its own bread. Just as in the fourteenth century, there
was a meal at high prime, midway between breakfast and dinner,
when the children had cakes and cheese and a glass of small ale.
Many of the old festivals were observed; Twelfth Night especially
was one of the great days of the year, and the masque of St,
George was always then presented with considerable elaboration."#
Mr. Mackail regards as negligible these slight "elements of medi­
aeval tradition" in Morris's childhood; but, given a child with
Morris's sense for beauty and with his remarkable keenness of
perception, one must surely allow that environment a very
# Page 9.
considerable place, I think, among the factors which turned Morris toward the Middle Ages. Again, the country-side about Morris's home was also fitted to direct his thoughts to mediaeval days. The old Essex churches, the country houses, too, within easy distance of Woodford Hall, made upon him an ineffaceable impression of the beauty of bygone centuries. Nor was he less fortunate in his life as a schoolboy. The easy discipline of the Marlborough of those days gave ample scope to Morris's love for country rambles; and the school was situated in a neighborhood remote from any large city, in a part of England which is beautiful naturally, and which is also "full of history" and therefore calculated to foster that love for past times which had already been aroused in the schoolboy. Architecture, particularly that of churches, had always appealed to his instinct for the beautiful. This interest received further stimulus from the fact that the school library at Marlborough was amply provided with books on archaeology and church architecture; and when Morris went up to Oxford he had a considerable knowledge of English Gothic. Oxford itself, its mediaeval beauty still (in 1853) unspoiled by any incongruous "modern improvements", fascinated Morris and confirmed still further his taste for the architecture of the Middle Ages. In later years, he could never speak calmly of the havoc wrought there by the commercial spirit. In "The Aims of Art", speaking of his own undergraduate days, he says: "Oxford in those days still kept a great deal of its earlier loveliness: and the memory of its grey streets as they then were has been an abiding influence and pleasure in my life, and would

be greater still if I could only forget what they are now—a matter of far more importance than the so-called learning of the place could have been to me in any case, but which, as it was, no one tried to teach me, and I did not try to learn."

And again, in "Art under Plutocracy" he says of Oxford: "Must I speak to you of the degradation that has so speedily befallen this city, still the most beautiful of them all; a city which, with its surroundings, would, if we had had a grain of common sense, have been treated like a most precious jewel, whose beauty was to be preserved at any cost? .... I am old enough to know how we have treated that jewel; as if it were any common stone kicking about on the highway, good enough to throw at a dog. When I remember the contrast between the Oxford of to-day and the Oxford which I first saw thirty years ago, I wonder I can face the misery (there is no other word for it) of visiting it."#

The "milieu", then, in which Morris passed the formative period of his life, was certainly fitted to arouse in him an interest in mediaevalism; and further, "the moment" was also favorable to his adoption of a mediaeval embodiment for his ideal of beauty. Morris grew up in the aftermath of the romantic revival proper, when the first impulse had spent itself, and men were developing and working out the ideas which the earlier poets had first expressed. Thus, the romantic interest in the "moi" had its logical outcome in the nineteenth century studies in psychology of such writers as Meredith or George Eliot; the love of actual nature which replaced the conventional landscape of the eighteenth century pastoral developed naturally into the minute
transcriptions of environment which one finds in "Cranford" or "Oliver Twist". Similarly, the interest in the Middle Ages first shown in such crude productions as "The Castle of Otranto", and enormously stimulated by Percy's Reliques and by the novels of Walter Scott, culminated in the second mediaeval revival about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The early romantic movement had revolted against authority in all departments of life and particularly in the world of thought. It stood for liberty of ideas, for the "free play of the mind" on all subjects, without regard to tradition or received opinion. To the generation immediately following the age of Byron and Shelley fell the task of selecting and putting in order the ideas of real and permanent value in the confusion of thought resulting from this romantic principle of liberalism. Many writers believed—or perhaps unconsciously felt—that by continuing along the line of thought emphasized by the romantics, by holding fast to the principle of the free play of mind, the chaos in the world of thought could eventually be reduced to order; and therefore these men dealt directly with the life of their own day: they took that confused mass of speculations and tried to fix upon the ideas of vital importance. "In Memoriam", for example, is an attempt—an indirect attempt, of course—to bring peace to the bewildered and perplexed minds of Tennyson's day, by dealing with their immediate problems. But there were other writers who sought refuge from the turmoil of thought in past ages where the watchword was not liberalism, but authority. Both types of men—those who dealt directly with contemporary thought and those who disregarded it for the thought of earlier
centuries—were actuated by a desire to escape from the confusion and tumult of ideas; but they adopted different methods. The retrospective attitude of mind is of course most clearly marked in connection with the religious unrest of the middle nineteenth century. The leaders of the Oxford movement recognized the absolute anarchy in the world of ideas; they saw the tendency toward materialistic and sceptical thought for which the free play of mind on religious subjects was responsible; and it seemed to them that men were basing their whole structure of ideas on a false principle. Newman and Keble looked back to mediaeval times and saw the peace of mind which marked the churchman of the Middle Ages—the classic period of authority in the realm of thought; and they attempted therefore to revive that attitude of mind which sacrificed individual freedom of thought for the certainty and sure refuge of a creed laid down by authority. In this return to the religion of the Middle Ages, there was wakened again into life that "mediaevalism" which had been practically dormant since the early romantic movement. And many people who could not accept the purely religious side of the Middle Ages, found there other elements which proved to them a stay in the midst of the unrest of their time. On the aesthetic side, the squalid ugliness of the great manufacturing cities brought about by the Industrial Revolution drove many an artist back to the age when man's handiwork, instead of being an insult to a landscape, blended into the beauty of hill and river and sky. On the social and political side, reformers like John Ruskin went back to the old framework of society in an impassioned protest against the sordid commercialism of Victorian England, which was crushing the soul out of
the workman and brutalizing the master.

Since to William Morris religion and art were practically synonymous terms, it is with the latter phases of the medieval revival that he is identified, rather than with its purely religious side—for the influence upon him of the Anglo-Catholic movement did not endure longer than his early Oxford days. His interest in the Middle Ages was at first chiefly aesthetic; he loved mediaeval architecture for its beauty, for its appeal to him as an artist; but with the study of Ruskin's chapter "On the Nature of Gothic" Morris realized that there was a rational and logical basis for that appeal. The doctrine of art as the expression of man's joy in labor, and of the Middle Ages as the supreme example of a time in which true art, thus defined, lived and flourished, lies at the root of Morris's Socialism, and is the most fundamental belief of his life. Hence it is perfectly natural that when he came to write pure fairytales, in the later prose romances, he should give them a mediaeval setting, for his ideal country was actually a land of the Middle Ages, when life, so it appeared to him, was beautiful because men had pleasure in their daily work.

Accordingly, therefore, the fact that William Morris expressed his artist's craving for beauty in a mediaeval form may be explained by his own peculiar temperament, by his surroundings in childhood and youth, and by the particular period in which he lived. We come now to the question of how far William Morris was a mediaeval romancer. I shall discuss the matter under the three heads, roughly, of action, character, and setting; # Stones of Venice.II.VI.
and I shall try, in so doing, to discover the mediaeval and non-mediaeval elements of Morris's romances.

The fact that William Morris should have chosen to write in the narrative form links him with the mediaeval writers, who are narrators rather than dramatists or lyrical poets. Even in the "Defence of Guenevere" volume there is ample evidence that narrative, and not dramatic monologue, is Morris's peculiar form. Contrast, for instance, the obscurity, the awkward structure of a piece such as "The Judgement of God", where the clumsy handling of the monologue form renders the situation almost impossible to comprehend, with the admirable clearness and vividness of "Welland River", or of the poem which to my mind is the gem of the "Guenevere" volume—"The Haystack in the Floods". This last piece indicates very clearly, I think, that Morris's genius lies in narrative. After that first volume, he attempted no other form, with the exception of the lyrics scattered throughout his romances, his Socialist poems, and the morality play "Love is Enough". The latter piece stands apart from the main line of his development; and indeed, he himself said: "I have not much sympathy with the dramatic form."#

And further, the stories which he tells resemble, in the various elements which go to make up the plot, the mediaeval romances. Morris does not tell a story as Stevenson or Thomas Hardy can tell it; for he apparently lacks the ability to frame a central plot, to choose what Stevenson calls a "motive" for his story. And it is just precisely this lack of an abstract

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# In a conversation with Mr. Cackerell. Nov. 28, 1892. Vol. 22. Introduction. Page xxxj.
idea, underlying the actual characters and incidents of the tale, that links Morris with the mediaeval romancers. Like them, he tells the story for the sake of the incidents, and not because of some abstract conception which he wishes to illustrate. In other words, his tales in general do lack an organic unity; they are not the representations of a single action, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Compare, for instance, "The Water of the Wondrous Isles" with such a novel as "Silas Marner". In the latter book, every character and incident illustrates the underlying motive—a soul cut off from humanity and restored again to fellowship; at the close of the story we feel that the action is completed, that the motive has been worked out in its entirety. On the other hand, in William Morris's romance there is no central action to be developed, no abstract motive to be illustrated by character and situation. If Morris had begun the story referred to at a point years before the time at which it actually commences, and if he had continued it after the point at which he actually stopped, we should not have felt the additions to be irrelevant or incongruous; for the whole story is not one action, but a collection of incidents, which are not related to any one underlying motive. Similarly, the mediaeval romancers continue their tales until compelled by the limits of space and knowledge to make an end. The Arthurian romances are not the stories of a single action, but consist of a succession of incident and situation, unified only by the figure of Arthur. The dropping of one incident, or the insertion of another, does not mar the symmetry of the story as the "Return of the Native" would be marred by such handling. In fact, the characteristic of the
romance proper in all ages is just precisely this "congregation of incident and episode": the mediaeval romances, the tales of William Morris, a modern romance such as Rudyard Kipling's "Kim", all are marked by the stringing together of episodes rather than by a single central motive.

And it is this very inability or lack of desire to frame an abstract plot upon which to build a story which denies William Morris a place among the great poets of the English tongue. Had his powers of reflection and of philosophic thinking been as rich and as full as his powers of perception, he would have ranked among the outstanding figures of our literature; but he is not, in his stories, a deep thinker. He does not try to show us the scheme of the universe behind the phenomena which we perceive. There is not very much in the work of William Morris which we may "rest upon", to use Matthew Arnold's phrase; only in "Sigurd the Volsung", in which the heroic "religion of the north" took hold on his imagination, does he approach what may be called a definite philosophy. I do not mean to imply that Morris had no sense of a power behind the tangible manifestations of the universe: the motive power of his life was that love of beauty which stood to him in the place of religion; but the bent of his nature is so toward the concrete that he was occupied rather in making beautiful things than in speculating on the nature of that power of beauty. Hence his poems and stories are beautiful in themselves, but they give us no inkling of the actual power which inspired Morris to produce them. Judging from his writings alone, if we were quite ignorant of his life, if we did not know that

# George Saintsbury: Romance. (Encyclopaedia Britannica. 11th. edition.)
all his activities are unified by his passion for beauty—which one may call, I suppose, his philosophy of life—we should not find in William Morris "that noble and profound application of ideas to life" which, according to Matthew Arnold, is the most essential part of poetic greatness. Morris applied ideas to life very nobly in his own actual everyday life; but the point is that he does not do so within his writings in such a way that the reader is helped in his own solution of the problem: How to live. Morris's own life, his own splendid and exhilarating personality, is sufficient witness to the fact that existence was to him no chaotic and meaningless thing; but in his poems and tales he does not tell us exactly what life does mean to him— he can live nobly, but he cannot show the way, except by his own example. It was not that he had no noble and profound ideas on human life, but he lacked the power to apply them to his subject matter. Or, to put the thing in another way, poetry to Wordsworth was "impassioned contemplation", and in such a piece as "Tintern Abbey" he can show himself in the very act of that contemplation; but to Morris that was impossible. His mind is always driving at the concrete beauty which is to issue as a result of that impassioned contemplation; he can show us that beauty, but he cannot show us the ideas and speculations which went to produce it. His "most distinctive utterance on life", to quote one of his critics, was phrased in this way: "Life is a progressive series of efforts; there are so many things to do, and to get to know things about; and when these are done, we don't want to worry about them. We had best leave them alone and pass on to something
else. And then, at the close of Life, we get to know a few things tolerably well."# In this passage there is no hint of the ultimate end of this "progressive series of efforts"; no sense of any power which unifies life and gives it meaning. True, it is evident from Morris's own life that he had a sense of that power; but he could not communicate it in words. And for this reason, I think, he can not be placed among the great makers of literature; for great poetry should, above all, communicate ideas in itself and should have no need of the life and personality of its maker to explain or to supplement it.

The romance form, then, which Morris adopted resembles that of the mediaeval romances in that the plot consists not in one action but in a series of episodes. Owing to this structure, in William Morris's tales as in the old romances, we have certain stock incidents perpetually recurring. It has been remarked that Morris's later romances, particularly, are not stories in the sense that the modern novel is a story: they are "pattern".## The battles, the love-scenes, the glamor passages are repeated continually—and this very recurrence makes their charm. So the mediaeval romancers were interested not in the invention of new incidents, but in combining in different patterns those stock episodes and scenes which were common property. The framework which gives the widest opportunity for the piling up of incident and episode is "the world-old motive of the quest"###, and the


Saintsbury: op. cit.
idea of the quest is continually present in Morris's work. Sometimes the whole story is merely the tale of the achievement of a quest, as in "The Well at the World's End", when the search for the well whose water shall give perpetual youth is made the pretext for a series of adventures strung together like beads. "The Earthly Paradise" itself is based upon the search for a new Eden upon the earth; and the quest motive occurs continually in all Morris's romances, where the heroes are always undertaking to punish some evildoer or to seek their ladyloves throughout the world. The stories consist then in a series of adventures arranged after "the fashion of a panorama".##

In the emphasis upon incident, therefore, in the primary interest in action, William Morris resembles the mediaeval romancers. One may contrast with this tendency the peculiarly nineteenth century interest in pure psychology, shown in such a poet as Browning, for example. Browning's poems are almost without exception analyses of states of mind, rather than representations of actions. It is recorded of William Morris that he placed Meredith on the same level of enjoyment as Euclid;# and one can well imagine that a story like "The Egoist", in which practically nothing happens, would appeal very little to a writer whose affinities are rather with the "moving accidents by flood and field" which fill the pages of Dumas or Scott.

Yet, although Morris is interested primarily in men in action, and not in the psychology of men's minds, one must not forget that he never lost sight of the man in the action.

## Saintsbury: op. cit.
# A. Compton-Rickett: op. cit. Page 47.
as the mediaeval romancer commonly did. When we read a romance such as "Havelok the Dane" or "Amis and Amiloun", we feel that the writer is interested in his personages only in so far as they are puppets capable of being arranged in certain ways to form certain situations of the story. It is the action itself, and not the men who perform that action, which interests the mediaevalist. But it is far otherwise in the case of Morris. He is interested in humanity; perhaps not with that interest in the individual man which leads to pure psychological analysis, but with a more broad and general interest. The reason for his intense love of the Middle Ages is to be found chiefly in his feeling that in that period of the world's history humanity as humanity was more vigorous and alive than at any other time. In those days, he says, "Art, which Nature meant to solace all, fulfilled its purpose; all men shared in it: that was what made life romantic, as people call it, in those days—that and not robber-barons and inaccessible kings with their hierarchy of serving-nobles and other such rubbish." And it was the love of the workman whom Morris always saw behind the work that drove him to become a Socialist. He could have lived in ease and quiet of mind, with the joy that the creation of beauty gives the artist; but because he loved men more than art, or rather, because he recognized that art cannot be separated from its producer, he gave up his own security and the work which meant so much to him. Hence, though he does not analyze and dissect human beings, he writes of them as one who loves them, to whom they are alive, and not so many blocks to be arranged in a certain pattern. It is quite

true that the subtlety of Shakespeare's drawing of Hamlet is beyond Morris's power; but, in a large and perhaps superficial way, he can create characters who are real and alive to us. Sir Peter Harpdon, Medea, Sigurd and Brynhild, Birdalone—to cite the first examples which come to my mind—are real men and women; we do not know them very intimately, perhaps; their portraits are not very detailed; but still they are alive.

Morris is not mediaeval, then, in his interest in humanity and in character. But the portrayal of his characters is conditioned to some extent by the form in which he chose to write. In the mediaeval romance, the ideal of chivalry is part of the warp and woof of the story; the characters are merely exponents of that ideal—they are typical knights, typical ladies. William Morris can go beyond that and make his characters live, but nevertheless there are elements in his portrayal of them which are directly due to the chivalric ideal so closely associated with the romance form. The characters in the romances of chivalry such as the tales of the Arthurian cycle are portrayed chiefly as fighters, as lovers, and as followers of the Holy Church.

Let us examine to what extent these elements are to be found in the characters of Morris.

The heroes of Morris's romances are all men of courage and daring, skilful with sword and spear as the mediaeval knight had to be in a society based upon physical force. And Morris was peculiarly fitted to paint such men because in his own nature there was a primitive vigor and passion which showed itself in his characteristic vehemence of speech, his sudden fits of rage.
and the headlong energy with which he flung himself into anything which he undertook. "I was ever a fighter" might be his epitaph as well as Browning's; and it is this vitality and impetuosity of spirit which informs such a piece as "Sir Giles' War Song" or "The Gilliflower of Gold" or the address of Launcelot to Mellyagraunce:

"Slayer of unarm'd men, here is a chance! 
Setter of traps, I pray you guard your head. 
By God I am so glad to fight with you, 
Stripper of ladies, that my hand feels lead

For driving weight; hurrah now! draw and do, 
For all my wounds are moving in my breast, 
And I am getting mad with waiting so." #

The saga stories, too, as well as the romances of chivalry, idealize the qualities of courage and endurance; and Morris found characters after his own heart in the old tales of the North. In "Sigurd the Volsung", the last of all earthly days, when the new order shall be established, is spoken of as the day when "there is an end for ever of all who were once afraid"—cowardice being made synonymous with evil, and bravery with the good. In "Sigurd" Morris revels in the description of such mighty encounters as King Volsung's last fight, or the dauntless stand of the Niblungs, trapped in Atli's hall. The late prose romances, which are the products of Morris's imagination and are not based upon other men's work, as his first volume was founded upon Froissart and Malory, show this same delight in actual physical struggle, the same joy in the display of courage. In "The Roots of the Mountains" for instance, he dwells with evident pleasure upon the details of the fights between the Burgdalers and the Dusky Men:

# The Defence of Guenevere.
each combat is described with the precision and definiteness that marks the enthusiast; every blow is recounted with the same gusto and accuracy of detail with which the connoisseur in any art or game discusses his favorite subject. As Saintsbury suggests, the accounts of fighting in the mediaeval romances were read in their day with the same interest as football enthusiasts show in the sporting page of the newspaper. In a society where every man knew something of the art of sword play, the readers could appreciate the fine points of such descriptions. And Morris was able to recapture that attitude of mind, and therefore to paint battles and combats with a minuteness of detail which would certainly have appealed to a mediaeval audience.

A second element which appears in the hero of chivalric romance is the typical lover. To the mediaeval writer, "romantic love" was as much the business of a man's life as fighting, and every knight must have a lady whom he must honor by his deeds. This "romantic love" of the mediaeval times colors to a certain extent the pictures of men and women in Morris's romances; but it forms only a minor part of his whole conception of love. There is ample material for determining what "love" meant to William Morris, for all his romances, from "The Defence of Guenevere" to "The Sundering Flood", are love stories.

The early poems and prose romances, written when Morris was steeped in Malory and Froissart, are naturally the most strongly influenced by the conception of "romantic love". Launcelot and Guenevere, Sir Peter Harpdon and the Lady Alice, Olaf and Gertha, are the typical lovers of mediaeval romance—the lady being the inspiration of the knight to noble deeds. And
indeed, the conventions of "romantic love" seem to influence Morris's drawing of character in all his work, even in the late prose romances. But this influence is quite superficial—it shows itself only in the manner in which he describes the bearing of the lovers toward one another. The passage telling of the meeting of Jason and Medea will illustrate this point:

"Therewith she made an end; but while she spoke
Came Love unseen, and cast his golden yoke
About them both, and sweeter her voice grew,
And softer ever, as betwixt them flew,
With fluttering wings, the new-born, strong desire;
And when her eyes met his grey eyes, on fire
With that that burned her, then with sweet new shame
Her fair face reddened, and there went and came
Delicious tremors through her." (Bk.VII. 85.)

Set alongside these lines the rules of courtly love as quoted by Taylor in "The Mediaeval Mind"—for instance:

"None can love except one who is moved by love's suasion."
"Every lover turns pale in the sight of the co-lover."
"The lover's heart trembles at the sudden sight of the co-lover."

These and similar laws are all exemplified in Morris's heroes. They fall in love at first sight with exasperating monotony, and as far as the descriptions of the lovers' feelings are concerned, "The Earthly Paradise" is sheer conventional repetition.

But this is only a superficial mannerism: Morris's conception of love is essentially different from the "romantic love" of the mediaeval stories; and the contrast may be shown by examining the way in which he depicts women. His first writings, as I have said, are influenced very markedly by romancers like Malory; and hence in these poems and stories the women are the conventional ladies, who inspire to deeds of courage, and who

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themselves are more or less passive. "Praise of My Lady" shows clearly the attitude of the knight toward the woman he loves—a love half passion and half worship; the lady seems fixed for ever in the attitude of receiving his homage. So, for example, La Marguerite in "The Eve of Crecy"; the lady in "Two Red Roses across the Moon"; Alys in the prose romance "Golden Wings"—all these are passive lay-figures like Emelye in the Knightes Tale—women with no individuality of their own, made solely to fulfill the requirements of the "romantic love" convention. But the saga conception of women had also a very strong influence upon Morris's depiction of character. The old Northern heroines exemplified in such women as Signy and Brynhild in "Sigurd the Volsung", and the Wood-Sun in "The House of the Wolfings", are by no means mere passive recipients of the love and homage of the heroes. They take a very active part in shaping the destiny of the race; they are touched with the gift of prophecy— they are far-seeing and wise of speech; it is their province to frame the plans which are carried out by the swords of the men. It is Signy who shapes the vengeance against King Siggeir; and Sigmund is the more or less passive instrument of that vengeance; it is Brynhild who decides that the tangle of their lives can be straightened only by the death of Sigurd, and it is she who bends the wills of Guthrun's brothers to accomplish her purpose. The saga women are on a higher level than the heroes of their race, but on a different plane from the ladies of chivalry. They are closer to actual life: the lady of mediaeval romance was an ideal to be worshipped, but she had no very practical influence upon the actual deeds of her knight—she inspired him to be brave and knightly, but
she had little voice in the actual accomplishment of his deeds of valor. On the other hand, the heroines in the sagas, above the warriors as they are, interfere directly in the lives of the men who love them—they make plans for the heroes and assist in the carrying out of those plans. The saga women are touched by the conception of the Valkyrie—the maidens who shared in Odin's task of apportioning the fates of men—and hence the heroines of the Northern stories have a very active share in moulding the lives of their lovers. But the women of Morris's later romances—which, being pure imagination, embody his own ideas untrammelled by any attempt to be faithful to a source—are far more human and more real than the lady of chivalry or the saga heroine. They are essentially modern, in the sense that they are on the same level as men, neither above them as an ideal of unearthy purity, nor beneath them as sensualists tempting to evil.

That this conception of woman is really essentially modern may readily be shown by a brief survey of the main periods of English literature from the point of view of their attitude toward women. It will be seen that the idea of woman as a being actually of the same species as man and worthy of equal consideration is of comparatively recent date. The mediaeval writers commonly looked upon woman either as a shadowy ideal of beauty like Emelye, or as frankly sensual, like the Wyf of Bathe. The Puritan age, with its insistence on "the-woman-tempted-me" idea, gave further credence to the conception of woman as lacking in intellect and spirituality, and with the power to appeal only to the basest side of man's nature. The eighteenth century had a sort of sentimentalized chivalric idea of woman—its heroines
are impossibly priggish, and yet lack the ideal touch which redeemed the lady of romance. The circumstances of life have changed utterly, and in the modern world man's sphere and woman's sphere are no longer sharply separated as they were in the Middle Ages—and yet the eighteenth century writers, disregarding the facts, removed woman as far from the world of men's work and play as the lady of chivalry. They continued the convention without the basis in fact which marked the mediaeval romances; for these stories were written when man's chief business—actual physical fighting—was really impossible for woman to share in, and the setting apart of the lady of chivalry was thus to a certain extent explicable. The eighteenth century sentimental heroines are depicted as being now in society—the change from a regime based purely upon physical force renders it inevitable that they should be; but they are not of it—they are apart, in a world of absurd and outworn conventions. Nor did the French Revolution with its ideas of equality immediately affect the conception of woman. Men were ready to admit their fellowship with the so-called lower classes of society—"a man's a man for a' that"—but it apparently did not occur to them that their axiom "All men are born free and equal" could possibly refer to anything but the male portion of the human race. The bulk of the early Romantics regarded woman, to quote Chesterton on Sir Walter Scott, not as an individual, but as "an institution—a toast that was drunk some time after that of Church and King."# Even in the Victorian era, so great a poet as Tennyson could make to the

study of the woman question a contribution as futile and sentiment as "The Princess". It remained for such men as Browning, Meredith, and Morris to write books in which the question of the equality of man and woman is simply taken for granted, as a self-evident fact.

In Morris's late romances, men and women share equally in the business of life—they are partners, each of course with different powers but with equal part in shaping the destiny of mankind. The following passage from "The Roots of the Mountains" describes a woman who is typical of Morris's heroines: "She was of the kindred with whom the chiefs and great men of the Face mostly wedded, which was indeed far away kindred of them. She was a fair woman and strong: not easily daunted amidst perils: she was hardy and handy and lightfoot: she could swim as well as any, and could shoot well in the bow; and wield sword and spear: yet was she kind and compassionate, and of great courtesy, and the very dogs and kine trusted in her and loved her. Her hair was dark red of hue, long and fine and plenteous, her eyes great and brown, her brow broad and very fair, her lips fine and red: her cheek not ruddy, yet nowise Sallow, but clear and bright: tall she was and of excellent fashion, but well-knit and well-measured rather than slender and wavering as the willow bough. Her voice was sweet and soft, her words few, but exceeding dear to the listener. In short, she was a woman born to be the ransom of her Folk." And again, to quote the words of this same woman: "There is war in the land, and I have seen it coming, and that things shall change around us. I have looked about me and
seen men happy and women content, and children weary for mere mirth and joy. And I have thought, in a day, or two days or three, all this shall be changed, and the women shall be, some anxious and wearied with waiting, some casting all hope away; and the men, some shall come back to the garth no more, and some shall come back maimed and useless, and there shall be loss of friends and fellows, and mirth departed, and dull days and empty hours, and the children wandering about marveling at the sorrow of the house. All this I saw before me, and grief and pain and wounding and death; and I said: Shall I be any better than the worst of the folk that loveth me? Nay, this shall never be; and since I have learned to be deft with mine hands in all the play of war, and that I am as strong as many a man, and as hardy-hearted as any, I will give myself to the Warrior and the God of the Face; and the battle-field shall be my home, and the after-grief of the fight my banquet and holiday, that I may bear the burden of my people, in the battle and out of it; and know every sorrow that the Dale hath; and cast aside as a grievous and ugly thing the bed of the warrior that the maiden desires, and the toying of lips and hands and soft words of desire, and all the joy that dwelleth in the Castle of Love and the Garden thereof; while the world outside is sick and sorry, and the fields lie waste and the harvest burneth. Even so have I sworn, even so will I do."

If we contrast with these two passages the lines from the Knightes Tale which describe Emelye, the difference between Morris's conception of woman and the typical lady of romance is
at once apparent:

"... Emelye, that fairer was to sens
Then is the lilie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe—
For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe.
I noot which was the fairer of hem two—....
Hir yelow hear was broyded in a tresse,
Bihinde hir bak, a yerde long. I gesse,
And in the gardin, at the sonne up-riste,
She walketh up and doun, and as hir listë
She gadereth floures, party whyte and rede,
To make a sotil gerland for hir hede,
And as an aungel hevenly she song."(LI.1035 foll.)

One may observe first that Morris's women are very different physically from the picture-book prettiness of Emelye—one cannot imagine that typical lady of romance wielding sword and spear and taking pleasure in her own strength, any more than the sentimental heroine, who, far from being "not easily daunted amidst perils", dissolves in tears at the slightest provocation. Again, there is no suggestion in the Knightes Tale that Emelye is anything but a beautiful picture to be admired for its beauty, and worshipped as apart from ordinary life—"as an aungel hevenly she song". But the Bride is an equal sharer with man in bearing the burden of her people; she rejects the position of the lady of romance in the Castle of Love, to share in the work of her men-folk and "to know every sorrow that the Dale hath".

From this discussion of Morris's conception of women it is evident that his drawing of character is affected very little by the typical lover pictured in the romances of the Middle Ages. The influence of the typical fighter of mediaeval literature is, as we have seen, very considerable. But when we consider the third element in the hero of old romance—the follower of the Holy Church—we find that William Morris is touched
hardly at all by that interest which was, to the Middle Ages, as vital as war or love—religion. The Oxford movement went back to mediaeval times to find the happiness of a fixed creed, an unquestioning faith—but such matters had no interest for Morris. "In religion", he said, "I am a pagan"; and the Middle Ages as the great age of the Christian Church did not appeal to him in the least. Love of beauty was his religion, and the loss of the old Christian faith caused him no such anguish as Matthew Arnold suffered. Hence Morris had no sympathy with the asceticism—with the purely religious side—of the Middle Ages; the quest of the Holy Grail did not fire his imagination, and the Galahad whom he paints is not the spotless ascetic of legend, but, as a critic has remarked, merely "Launcelot in his early youth".

So in Morris's romances there is very little of the conception of the knight as the defender of the Holy Church, the crusader, or the ascetic. In the late romances there is no suggestion of the tremendous power possessed by the mediaeval church, which held the keys of heaven and hell; Morris's characters are free from the domination of creed and church. We never hear of them going on pilgrimage to the shrine of some saint—their quests are not at all religious. "The Wood beyond the World" tells the story of the search for a lady seen in a magic vision; in "The Story of the Glittering Plain" the seekers attain the Land of Living Men and are granted "the gift of youth renewed". In "The Well at the World's End" Ralph achieves his quest only after
definite opposition from the churchmen. The romance of mediaeval religion had no appeal for William Morris.

Having discussed the romances under the heads of action and character, we come to the question of the setting. It is to be remarked first of all that Morris's tales are laid in a world which is a revival of the Middle Ages—his fairyland, as described in the late prose romances and in "News from Nowhere", is an idealized mediaeval England, an England whose natural beauty is unmarred by modern commercialism. The Middle Ages is Morris's chosen time; and like the mediaeval romancers, he recounts the old tales—Greek or Eastern as they may be—as if they had occurred in his own world. The old romancers had no desire to construct an accurate picture of life in the times from which they draw their subject matter; Chaucer's Palamon and Arcite make no pretence to be ancient Greeks—they are frankly and completely mediaeval knights. So "The Life and Death of Jason" and the Greek stories in "The Earthly Paradise" are not at all an attempt to revive the Greek spirit, to represent life as it actually was in ancient Greece. They are written in the spirit of the mediaeval romancer, to whom Troy was a walled town and Hector and Achilles the knights of chivalry. In fact, the whole structure of "The Earthly Paradise" was framed to account for the "mediaevalism" of the Greek tales: Morris wrote the elaborate prologue in order to put the stories in their proper framework—they are related by men of the later Middle Ages, and told frankly in the mediaeval spirit. Morris had no intention either of recapturing the Greek atmosphere or of informing the old tales with a modern meaning. The Middle Ages therefore, is the favorite
setting for Morris's romances; he tells the stories as if he were the mediaeval romancer reducing all foreign elements to the common denominator of his own time.

Having shown that the tales are written from the mediaeval point of view, that the setting—using the word in its broadest sense—is conceived in the mediaeval spirit, let us compare the actual setting of a mediaeval romance with the actual setting of Morris's romances. The chief point to be remarked about the setting of a mediaeval tale is the delight in rich and splendid ornament, in what may be termed pageantry; and this is an element which is very prominent in the work of William Morris. "It appeared to me", says a personal friend of his, "that all his love of the old times of which he wrote was chiefly of the setting; of needlework, rich colours of stained glass falling upon old monuments, and of fine work not scamped."# While there was far more in Morris's love of the Middle Ages than a sensuous delight in its pictorial possibilities, this joy in the beauty of actual physical things is certainly one of his most pronounced characteristics. What Chesterton calls "this deep-rooted poetry## of mere sight and touch" is instinctive in the human race, and in more primitive and natural eras than the Victorian age it is frankly expressed. Homer, the author of "Beowulf", Chaucer in the Knightes Tale, revel in the descriptions of armor, of the dress of the warriors, of the dwellings of the people. A more sophisticated civilization affects to despise the material and

the sensuous, and plumes itself rather upon its intellectual achievements. Tennyson's "prettification", for instance, arises from such an attitude of mind; it was because he could see no poetry in a real fish-basket that he called it an "ocean-smelling osier".

It is a very obvious fact that in modern poetry the pendulum is swinging away from the delight in subtleties of intellect, back to the old sense of sheer joy in the beauty of material things. The Impressionist poets are firm in the conviction that there is poetry in the actual sensuous qualities of objects: Amy Lowell, for a very modern instance, when she writes a poem on red slippers in a shop window; or Rupert Brooke in such a passage as:

"These I have loved:
White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;....
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets;

The good smell of old clothes; and other such—
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns."#

I think that William Morris would have been quite in sympathy with the point of view expressed in this passage: he is perpetually insisting upon the importance of the material, upon "the value and significance of flesh". It was because he recognized the possibilities for poetry in common, ordinary, chairs and carpets and pottery that he became what the superior Victorian intellectuals termed a "poetic upholsterer". He firmly

# The Great Lover.  ## Browning: Fra Lippo Lippi.
believed, too, that an artist should execute his own designs—that he should be a handicraftsman as well as a theorist. The basic argument in Morris's theory of art is the fact that good art cannot be divorced from man's daily labor—that it grows from the way in which material things are handled, and not that it is an ideal and theoretical sort of beauty to be impressed upon the finished product.

And accordingly, this delight in beautiful handicraft is evidenced very clearly in Morris's romances, and forms another link with the mediaeval writers. The old romancers take evident pleasure in such descriptions as the following, which I take at random from "Richard Coer de Lion":

"Another schip they countryd thoo,
Swylk on ne seygh they never non;
All it was whyt of huel-bon,
And every nayl with gold begrave:
Off pure gold was the stave;
Her mast was yvory;
Off samyte the sayl wyitterly,
Her ropes werë off tuely sylk,
Al so whyt as ony mylk.
That noble schyp was al withoute,
With clothys of golde spred aboute;
And her loof and her wyndes,
Off asure forsothe it was."#

This passage illustrates admirably the love of splendor and richness in material things; but it is purely fanciful—such a ship as Morris pictures in "Near Avalon":
"A ship with shields before the sun
Six maidens round the mast,
A red-gold crown on every one
A green gown on the last.

One may also note, however, the delight in sensuous beauty in mediaeval descriptions which have more connection with ordinary

life; for example, the lines on Emetreus, in the Knightes Tale:

"The great Emetreus, the king of Inde,
Up-on a stede bay, trapped in steel,
Covered in cloth of gold diapred weel,
Cam ryding lyk the god of armes, Mars.
His cote-armure was of cloth of Tars,
Couched with perles whyte and rounde and grete.
His sadel was of brend gold newe y-bete;
A mantelet upon his shuldre hanginge
Bret-ful of rubies rede, as fyr sparklinge."(Ll.2156 foll.)

It is needless to insist on the fact that Morris's romances are packed full of descriptions written in the same spirit as the passage quoted—open his books almost anywhere and you will find evidences of this love of pageantry. For purposes of comparison with the mediaeval descriptions, however, I shall quote a paragraph from the account of the spring market at Burgdale:

"Gay was the show; for the booths were tilted over with painted cloths, and the merchants themselves were clad in long gowns of fine cloth; scarlet, and blue, and white, and green, and black, with broidered welts of gold and silver; and their knaves were gaily attired in short coats of divers hues, with silver rings about their arms, and short swords girt to their sides. People began to gather about these chapmen at once when they fell to opening their bales and their packs, and unloading their wains. There had they iron, both in pigs and forged scrap and nails; steel they had, and silver, both in ingots and vessel; pearls from over sea; cinnabar and other colours for staining, such as were not in the mountains: madder from the marshes, and purple of the sea, and scarlet grain from the holm-oaks by its edge, and woad from the deep clayey fields of the plain; silken thread also from the outer ocean, and rare webs of silk, and jars of olive oil, and fine pottery, and scented woods, and sugar of the
It is quite obvious that the same spirit of delight in the actual qualities of actual things lies behind all three of the passages which I have quoted. And it is a frame of mind which is the reverse of pure sophistication and intellectual subtlety. Chesterton has a very illuminating paragraph on this point in his essay on the "Position of Sir Walter Scott". "One of the profound philosophical truths", he says, "which are almost confined to infants is this love of things, not for their use or origin, but for their own inherent characteristics; the child's love of the toughness of wood, the wetness of water, the magnificent soapiness of soap. So it was with Scott, who had so much of the child in him. Human beings were perhaps the principal characters in his stories, but they were certainly not the only characters. A battle-axe was a person of importance, a castle had a character and ways of its own. A church bell had a word to say in the matter. Like a true child, he almost ignored the distinction between the animate and inanimate. A two-handed sword might be carried only by a menial in a procession, but it was something important and immeasurably fascinating—it was a two-handed sword." Similarly, William Morris, whom one of his critics has called "half Berserker and half babe", has a child's sense of the romance in actual things, and one can feel his own sympathy with such an attitude as is put before one in the following lines from "The Roots of the Mountains": "Ironface had given him a new sword, a good one, and had bidden him
call it Thicket-clearer, and he would not leave it any moment of
the day or night, but would lay it under his pillow at night as
a child does with a new toy; and now he was leaning against a
buttress and drawing the said sword half out of the scabbard
and poring over its blade."

Accordingly, therefore, in the rich and ornamental
element in his setting Morris is related to the mediaeval roman­
cers. He is also connected with them by his use of the super­
natural. His tales are laid in the world of the old romances,
where magic swords and fire-breathing dragons are taken as a
matter of course.

The supernatural has always been very intimately con­
nected with religion. Indeed, the evolution of religion from
the crudity of its early forms consists in the gradual rejection
of the miraculous element. In primitive times, the marvellous
and the religious were one: the mythology of the Greeks or of
the Scandinavian peoples, for example, tells us of gods who are
simply men and women endowed with superhuman powers. Of religion
in the modern sense of the word, as man's inward relation with
a spiritual power, the early races had no conception. In medi­
aeval times, the creed of the Christian church laid emphasis
upon the relation of man's soul to God. Yet, unconsciously, that
creed was influenced by the old ideas of magic which had been
handed down by tradition. To the men of the Middle Ages religion
was not wholly an inward relation with a spiritual being—it was
tinged with the primitive idea of the gods as workers of marvels.
In the Saints' Lives so full of interest to mediaeval writers,in
# Vol.15. Page 220.
Chaucer's lovely story of the "litel clergeon" in the Prioresses Tale, there is exemplified this mingling of religion and pure myth. As the idea of religion as a spiritual condition was further developed, the marvellous element dwindled in importance; although it is true that the mythological attitude of mind was common even among cultivated people as late as the Victorian era, when Matthew Arnold found it necessary to insist that religion did not depend upon a belief in the Biblical miracles.

But in mediaeval literature, the mythical element is found not only in writings which deal directly with religion, but also in the romances of chivalry. The Isle of Avalon, for instance, so intimately connected with the Arthurian story, is a development of "the Celtic other-world of unending delight.... The story of the loss of Guenevere, and the struggle to recover her, is also without doubt the relic of an ancient myth." Arthur himself was originally "a Welsh Odin, a Celtic Mercury." But in the romances all religious significance of the myths has been lost; the marvellous powers attributed to Arthur in the primitive stories are merely an adjunct of Arthur as a hero of chivalry, who, far from being regarded as a God, is in duty bound to uphold the Holy Catholic Church.

Since, as I have already pointed out, the religious aspect of the Middle Ages did not attract William Morris, it is natural that in his tales, as in the chivalric romances, the marvellous and the supernatural should have no connection with religion. The gods in the "Earthly Paradise" are described.

from the point of view of the mediaeval romancer, to whom, as a devout follower of the church, they have absolutely no religious significance—they are not beings to be worshipped, but merely men and women with superhuman powers. Similarly, in the later romances, the magic is not religious magic, but that of pure fairytale.

Morris gives his tales a setting of this kind because he sees its possibilities from the point of view of picturesque incident. In the romance form of literature, which depends so largely for its effect upon adventure and incident, a strange and fantastical setting is almost a necessity. People are not interested in a plain account of the things which they themselves do every day, unless those things contribute to the development of character in the story, or unless the author can give them in some way a new significance. The romance writers, however, are not concerned with the depiction of character; they merely tell a story, in the simplest and crudest sense of the word; and therefore it was imperative that the incidents and situations in that story should hold the reader's attention by their strangeness, by their unlikeness to the everyday experience of the audience. And although, as I have shown, there is far more in the romances of William Morris than an interest in pure action, he does resemble the mediaeval romancers in that he sees the advantages of a setting in fairyland. "The Water of the Wondrous Isles", for instance, would be a very tame performance without the marvellous and the magical element—without Birdalone's fairy godmother, or the Sending Boat, or the enchanted castles and their weird inhabitants.
But indeed, the interest in the marvellous is prominent in the whole of Morris's work, though of course particularly so in the pure fancy of the late prose romances. Even in the "Defence of Guenevere" volume he foreshadows his successful treatment of a fairytale atmosphere in a piece like "Rapunzel", which is one of the most charming of his early poems. "The Hollow Land", also, has a magical, fantastical setting. In "The Life and Death of Jason" and "The Earthly Paradise", the gods are perpetually interfering in the lives of men with strange miracles and magic. Even in "Sigurd the Volsung", the most spiritual perhaps of Morris's writings, there is the same prominence of the magical—for instance, the sword which Odin gave to Sigmund and which was smithied afresh into the Wrath of Sigurd; and the ring of fire around the sleeping Brynhild. Indeed, the poem has been criticized very gravely because the whole action hangs upon the magic philtre of forgetfulness which is given by Gudrun's mother to Sigurd. Sigurd would not have forgotten Brynhild had it not been for that witch drink; if he had not forgotten Brynhild the rest of the poem would simply not have happened; and some critics feel that Morris weakened the entire conception when he allowed magic to be the pivot of the whole action. In other words, the action is not inevitable, as tragic action should be; it is removed from the domain of tragedy into that of romance, where the action is essentially fantastic, following no definite sequence of cause and effect. I think that there is much to be said for this criticism; but it seems to me that in reading the poem one does not observe the weakness. In the first part of his story, Morris impresses us so strongly

# Elton: op.cit. Page 43.
with the sense of the doom, certain and inevitable, which overhangs the characters, that the feeling persists throughout the poem. The story of Sigmund and Signy, and of Sinfiotli the instrument of their vengeance, strikes the keynote for the tale of Sigurd and Brynhild—it provides the atmosphere of inevitable fate working itself out. And because one feels that Sigurd and Brynhild are fated to tragedy, the philtre of forgetfulness seems of very minor importance in the action. It is like Desdemona's handkerchief; ostensibly the whole plot hinges upon it, but the atmosphere of the poem is such that in reality it does not matter so very much. The magical element, then, is to be found in practically all the writings of William Morris, and in this respect the setting of his romances is akin to the mediaeval.

However, although Morris is mediaeval in his love of actual things, and in his use of the marvellous, there is one element in the setting of his tales which is distinctly non-mediaeval—that is, of course, the element of natural description. The mediaeval writers are not interested in scenery or landscape; such references as they do make to nature are purely conventional, and as obviously phrased without the eye on the object as Burns's lines to the daisy are written from first-hand observation. Chaucer's lines on the Squyer—

"Embrouded was he, as it were a mede
Al ful of freshe floures, whyte ang rede"—

will serve as an example of the treatment of nature in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, William Morris's romances are informed with his own passionate love of the earth, and it is evident that he visualizes with detailed clearness the scenes amid
which his stories are laid. Contrast, for example, the conventional phrasing of the lines which I quoted above, with the accurate observation of this passage from the story of Cupid and Psyche:

"There, at the head of a green pool and deep,
She stood so long that she forgot to weep,
And the wild things about the water-side
From such a silent thing cared not to hide;
The dace pushed 'gainst the stream, the dragon-fly,
With its green-painted wing, went flickering by;
The water hen, the lustred kingfisher,
Went on their way and took no heed of her;
The little reed birds never ceased to sing,
And still the eddy, like a living thing,
Broke into sudden gurgles at her feet."$4$

Such a passage could have been written only by a man who loved the beauty of the earth and saw it with eyes made clear by that passion. No doubt the mediaeval romancer loved the earth too; but such natural description as there is in his writing is quite incidental. He never sets out with the express purpose of painting a nature picture; he does not make a special study of nature as more modern poets do. And accordingly, the lines which I have quoted would have been impossible for a writer of the Middle Ages.

The romances are full of words and phrases which show the keenness of Morris's vision; he uses similes which read like the newest of imagist verse. The following passage, for instance, might serve as a motif for Amy Lowell's piece "Spring Day":

"The sun was high now, and his beams were cast back from the ripple of the lake, and shone wavering on the wall of the chamber, the window whereof gave on the water."## Or again, there is a very modern touch in this sentence: "His eyes glittered from

$^4$ Vol.IV. Page 40.
## Vol. 20. Page 140.
his dark-brown face amidst of his shock-head of the colour of rain-spoilt hay." The passionate love of nature which gives rise to these minute observations is continually shown in Morris's lectures on art and industry. He is constantly reminding his architect hearers that their duty is "to treat the natural beauty of the earth as a holy thing", and to add to its loveliness by their buildings, instead of marring it with the vulgar architectural style of Victorian Podsnappery. The following passage, for instance, shows how keenly he felt the stupidity and the greed which destroyed the beauty of the earth for the sake of a few more brick boxes with slate lids: "Even while (the old house) is being pulled down, you hear the axe falling on the trees of its generous garden, which it was such a pleasure even to pass by, and where man and nature together have worked so long and patiently for the blessing of the neighbours: so you see the boys dragging about the streets great boughs of the flowering may-trees covered with blossom, and you know what is going to happen. Next morning when you get up you look towards that great plane-tree which has been such a friend to you so long through sun and rain and wind, which was a world in itself of incident and beauty: but now there is a gap and no plane-tree; next morning 't is the turn of the great sweeping layers of darkness that the ancient cedars thrust out from them, very treasures of loveliness and romance; they are gone too: you may have a faint hope left that the thick bank of lilac next your house may be spared, since the newcomers may like lilac; but 't is gone in the afternoon, and the next day when you look in
with a sore heart, you see that once fair great garden turned into a petty miserable clay-trampled yard, and everything is ready for the latest development of Victorian architecture—which in due time (two months) arises from the wreck."# It is needless to insist further on Morris's love of nature, which might be summed up in the cry of Birdalone: "Oh! but thou art beautiful, O earth, thou art beautiful! "##

Yet though the passion for the beauty of the earth rings in that sentence, William Morris is not a great nature lover in the sense that Wordsworth is. He is not a nature worshipper; he does not see in earthly beauty the veil of the Infinite Being. I do not think that the doctrine of "One impulse from a vernal wood" meant very much to Morris; unlike Wordsworth, he did not regard nature as the main source of spiritual inspiration for man. His love of the beauty of the earth has been compared to "Scott's passion for the Highlands. It was a passion for places....It was almost an animal instinct; and he felt for certain localities as some feel for certain people, an intense, personal attachment."### That seems to me a very just criticism of William Morris as a lover of nature. It was not nature in general that touched his imagination, but certain definite places such as the Thames valley or the Essex landscape of his childhood, or the fierceness and grandeur of the plains and mountains of Iceland. It is a matter of common property that Morris immortalized in "News from Nowhere" the beautiful country-side about Kelmscott, which was so lovely to

him that he described it literally in his Utopia. William Morris never passed beyond the stage described by Wordsworth in these lines from "Tintern Abbey":

"... The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood.
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest
Unborrowed from the eye."

Morris's characteristic attitude toward nature—the attitude expressed so perfectly by Wordsworth's lines—is shown very clearly in a passage from the "Story of the Unknown Church", which to me is one of the most beautiful of Morris's romances:

"The Abbey where we built the Church was not girt by stone walls, but by a circle of poplar trees, and whenever a wind passed over them, were it ever so little a breath, it set them all a-ripple; and when the wind was high, they bowed and swayed very low, and the wind, as it lifted the leaves, and showed their silvery white sides, or as again in the lulls of it, it let them drop, kept on changing the trees from green to white, and white to green; moreover, through the boughs and trunks of the poplars, we caught glimpses of the great golden corn sea, waving, waving, waving for leagues and leagues; and among the corn grew burning scarlet poppies, and blue corn-flowers; and the corn-flowers were so blue, that they gleamed, and seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew beside the poppies among the gold of the wheat. Through the corn sea ran a bluer river, and always green meadows and lines of tall poplars followed its windings."

This description exemplifies, besides his characteristic
attitude, another aspect of Morris's treatment of nature—that is, his tendency to conventionalize. I do not mean that his nature pictures are conventional in the sense that they follow what has been done by other men; they are the result of actual personal observation; but they are sometimes conventional in the sense that the blossoms in a design are conventional when compared with the actual growing flowers. By a conventional rose, we mean a representation which has seized upon the most outstanding characteristic of the real flower, its typical quality, so to speak; and has disregarded the irregularities and differences in structure which make the individuality of the actual rose. It is a true picture of the flower, but a limited one. Similarly, the "blue river", the "green meadows", the "golden corn" of William Morris are conventional epithets— they are epithets which give the essential quality of the object, and that alone. There is about his landscapes a certain flatness; a decorative quality; a system of color such as a child might use, to whom all trees are green and all skies are blue. There is no subtlety in his nature descriptions. Compare, for instance, the passage which I have quoted with the nature pictures of Joseph Conrad, which are built up touch by touch into individuality. Conrad's pictures are full of light and shade; the colors blend into one another as in nature herself; whereas Morris's units of color give one the impression of a flat wash of paint. Morris belongs to the class of artists which Ruskin describes as "men of design", whereas Joseph Conrad would be classed among the "men of facts". #

# Stones of Venice. Vol.2. Chapter VI. Par. XLIV.
(Ed.ition cited. Vol.8. Page 184.)
These latter picture nature as accurately as they can, without an attempt "to compose or arrange the form"; William Morris, on the other hand, tends to make nature into a sort of decorative pattern. His descriptions have little sense of arrested life in them, but give rather an impression of still life—we do not feel that the living object has been fixed for ever immoveable by the skill of the artist, but rather that it never had life or power of growth. For purposes of comparison I shall quote two short passages which will illustrate the two methods of describing nature to which I have alluded. The first is from "I Stood Tiptoe upon a Little Hill":

"Here are sweet peas, on tiptoe for a flight:
With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white,
And taper fingers catching at all things
To bind them all about with tiny rings."

The second I have taken from "The Life and Death of Jason":

"But in the midst there was a grassy space,
Raised somewhat over all the flowery place,
On marble terrace-walls wrought like a dream;
And round about it ran a clear blue stream,
Bridged o'er with marble steps, and midmost there
Grew a green tree, whose smooth grey boughs did bear
Such fruit as man never man elsewhere had seen,
For 'twixt the sunlight and the shadow green
Shone out fair apples of red gleaming gold."(Bk.XIV. 541.)

The difference between the two methods of description is very marked: Keats's picture has the suggestion of life caught and fixed as a portrait fixes a living person; the lines from Morris have the effect of design, as the figures in a stained-glass window are design. The words which Keats uses—"flush" for instance—have about them a certain suggestive vagueness. Not only do they connote different things to different people, but they may have a new meaning for the same person at different

# Ruskin.
times. They are broad enough to leave scope for the reader's imagination. Morris's epithets—the "green tree", the "grey boughs"—are hard and definite, denoting one clear flat color, just as the forms and colors in a decorative pattern are definite and flat. One must admit that in his descriptions of nature William Morris tends to simplify and conventionalize nature into a sort of pattern—even though one cannot go as far as Chesterton, who remarks rather maliciously of Morris's characters that "so long as (a man) had the inspiring consciousness that the chestnut colour of his hair was relieved against the blue forest a mile behind, he would be serenely happy."

In the setting of his romances, therefore, William Morris is akin to the mediaeval writers in his love of actual things, and in his use of the marvellous; but he is unlike them in his passionate love of the beauty of the earth—although he is not a great worshipper of nature and tends to regard her somewhat from the designer's point of view.

In this discussion of the "mediaevalism" of the romances of William Morris, I have tried to show both his points of contact with the mediaeval romancers, and the points of difference. Morris is a mediaevalist in that he is interested in action rather than in pure psychology; his character depiction is influenced to some extent by the typical hero of chivalry—more particularly by the element of the fighter in that hero; the setting of his romances is mediaeval in its love of pageantry and in its use of the marvellous. But Morris is distinctly

# William Morris and his School. Twelve Types. Page 17.
non-mediaeval in his love of humanity; in the fact that his characters live; in his conception of love as shown by his drawing of women characters. He has no sympathy with one of the most dominant interests in the Middle Ages—religion as revealed by the Christian church. And he is decidedly non-mediaeval in his love of nature. On the whole, I think we may conclude that the modern element in William Morris's romances is far more significant than his affinities with the mediaeval writers. Morris's own characterization of himself as "Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time" has led many people to look upon him as a sort of reincarnation of a mediaeval romancer, apart from the currents of thought in his own day. I have tried to point out in this discussion that it was impossible for William Morris, as it is for any writer whatsoever, to remain untouched by the influences of his time.
IV. The Style of the Romances.

The question of style is of peculiar interest in the case of Morris because there is apparently a very distinct change in his artistic manner between "The Defence of Guenevere" and "The Life and Death of Jason". It is almost incomprehensible to some critics that Morris's first poems could have been written by the author of "The Earthly Paradise" or "The Well at the World's End". I wish now to examine Morris's style with a view to determining how far the style of "The Defence of Guenevere" differs from the so-called later manner; and to account as far as possible for that difference.

We may set aside as negligible the idea that the change from the rough and jerky rhythms, the abrupt transitions in thought, of the "Guenevere" volume, to the smooth-slipping movement of "The Earthly Paradise" and the later romances, is marked by a corresponding loss of energy and vigor in the treatment of the subject. People have looked upon the William Morris of the late romances as a lackadaisical dreamer, a spinner of tales with no life or vitality in them. But it must be remembered that the rude and the grotesque forms of style are by no means the only forms which are marked by energy and vigor. We are too apt to look upon a poetic manner like Browning's as the only style which may be called "vigorous". But there is in style a kind of restrained energy, as well as an energy which shows itself in spasmodic words and rhythms, in grotesque phrases and images. To take a very obvious example from the art of sculpture, the Winged Victory is as full of life and force as the grotesque
figures on Notre Dame—but the former has a smoothness and finish of outline, a compressed and moulded energy, in contrast to the more fantastical and impetuous sculpture of the Middle Ages. Similarly in the romances of William Morris: "A Dream of John Ball" has as much passion behind it as "The Defence of Guenevere" or "King Arthur's Tomb", but the style is as smooth and musical as that of the early poems is discordant and abrupt. It is not therefore a difference in temper for which we have to account, but purely a difference in the mode of expression; for the same vigorous personality found voice in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" and in the ringing prophecies of John Ball.

I shall discuss what seem to me to be the salient qualities of Morris's later style, connecting them as far as possible with the style of "The Defence of Guenevers".

I have already had occasion to remark upon Morris's preference for the narrative form; and what may be called the quality of diffuseness is, in my opinion, a natural concomitant of the particular power of narration which he possessed. The tendency in modern literature is toward concentration and condensation of material. It is true that novelists such as H.G. Wells or Arnold Bennett write at great length, but consider the subjects which they treat. "Joan and Peter" mirrors the conditions—social, political, and religious—existing in England during two generations; it includes a minute character study of the chief personages; and the book also expresses its author's constructive plans for the reform of society. A less concentrated method of treatment than Wells actually used would have resulted in an encyclopaedia. But William Morris is not
interested in the novel of environment, or the novel of psychology, or the novel as a means of propaganda: he is concerned rather with the novel of action. Now the writer who deals with environment, or with psychology, or with his own particular theories on society, must necessarily condense; the mass of material before him is so great that he must select only the most significant facts; he must compress and concentrate his subject matter in order to fit it into the framework of his story. It is far otherwise in the case of a writer who is interested primarily in action. His subject matter is limited: the actual things which people do may be summed up in a brief list of typical actions or situations; and the writer must develop these incidents with the aid of character and setting, and combine them in fresh and interesting patterns. His object is not so much to condense a huge mass of material, as to expand and develop a few stock motifs. According to my theory, then, those writers whose primary concern is action are usually characterized by a certain diffuseness of style. Of course it may be said that an interest in action is sometimes united with a concentration in style. But in the case of verse, this union is surely of very rare occurrence; narrative poetry which deals with the outward show of events—Scott's for instance—tends to be diffuse. And in the case of prose, it seems to me that such a combination results not in the novel or in the long romance to which Morris devoted himself, but in the short story. Rudyard Kipling is concerned chiefly with action; but he has the modern habit of mind—he condenses and concentrates; and therefore—since he deals with action and his subject matter
is accordingly limited—he cannot write a long story. The novels which he has attempted are really glorified short stories, for his style is essentially concentrated and he must therefore relate an action in the shortest possible fashion. But, setting aside the short story—which is indeed a distinct genre of literature, with rules of its own—it seems to me that a writer whose primary interest lies in action will be diffuse, rather than condensed, in his manner. The old romancers are the most obvious examples of this style of writing, and to them William Morris is allied. His power of narration is similar to theirs, and like them he is diffuse rather than concentrated in style.

The peculiar advantage of this style lies in its power to paint large effects, to give to the story that sense of spaciousness which appeals to one type of reader. The relative merits of concentration and diffuseness in style is a matter for individual judgment. There are those whose minds are tempered to minute study and observation; who love subtlety and nice distinctions in language and conduct—spirits whom the French would characterize as "fin"—a word for which we have no equivalent in English. On the other hand, some readers appreciate more keenly "the big bow-wow strain", the broad sweeping effects; and such persons are fatigued by the concentrated attention which a more detailed and subtle manner of writing demands. Similarly, in the world of art, a certain type of mind is attracted by the exquisite detail, the minute discrimination in color and line, of a miniature; while another type admires the more ample scope, the breadth of treatment, of a fresco; the beauty of which is to be apprehended not through
a microscopic study of detail, but by the perception of the painting in its general effect. It is to the latter type of mind that the romances of William Morris appeal. There is about them a largeness of design, a freedom and boldness of execution, which relieves and refreshes a mind fatigued by the highly concentrated and complex manner of a Meredith. At his best, Morris creates beauty, says a critic, "not in some dazzling streak of light but as a luminous atmosphere."# Contrast his method with the artistic manner of Tennyson in the "Idylls of the King". The latter poem suggests to me a series of beautiful similes and metaphors—figures which are lovely in themselves, quite apart from their context in the piece. But what one remembers about "The Earthly Paradise" is its whole atmosphere, the sense of a "pleasant spaciousness of beauty".# There are few strikingly beautiful images to seize and hold one's attention; the success of the poem lies in its general effect. Of course Morris is not free from the characteristic fault of the diffuse style of writing—the romances are sometimes monotonous and straggling. "The Well at the World's End", for example, would have gained tremendously in effect if it had been somewhat condensed. As it is, however, the framework of the story is too large; or, to change the figure, the space which Morris set himself to cover is too vast, and the repetition of motifs in order to fill up that space becomes very wearisome to the reader. At its worst, the diffuse style becomes prolix and nerveless.

Morris's first volume of poems apparently differs widely from his later work in that it lacks this quality of

diffuseness which is of the very essence of his genius. In attempting to account for this difference, one must remember that these early pieces are largely in the nature of experiment, and one would not expect to find in them, fully developed, the characteristics which mark the author when he has found his true form of expression. But I think that even in this volume there are indications of the essentially diffuse quality of Morris's style, his inability to condense and concentrate. These early poems were written when Morris was in the first flush of his passion for the Middle Ages, and in them he is trying to reconstruct for himself the mediaeval world. "He wishes not only to tell a story or express a passion," says a critic, "but also to describe a world different from that in which he lives. He is not entirely occupied with strange circumstance; for Guenevere and Lancelot and the people of the 'Morte d'Arthur' were real people to him; but they were more real than the people he met in the street just because he thought of them as living in this world of his desires. So he could not bring them to life without also bringing that world to life; and 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb' are troubled and confused with this two-fold task." But it seems to me that the confused structure of these poems is due not to the twofold task of telling a story of real people and of making the mediaeval world alive, but to the fact that Morris is attempting this task in a form which is utterly unsuited to his genius. In the late prose romances, he accomplished this same task with perfect smoothness of construction and language: he created real men and

# A. Clutton-Brock: op. cit. Page 83.
women, and he made vivid and distinct the world in which they lived. But when Morris wrote "The Defence of Guenevere" his style was not yet formed; he was young, and plastic; and further, his particular admiration at that time was Robert Browning. Morris himself, when asked in whose style "The Defence of Guenevere" was written, said "More like Browning than anyone else, I suppose"; and his appreciation of Browning's poetry is further shown in almost the only piece of criticism he ever wrote—a review of "Men and Women". Now the style of Robert Browning is above all things highly concentrated and condensed, a style diametrically opposed to Morris's own natural manner; and the attempt to write in the manner of Browning produced the roughness in construction and composition of "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb". If Morris had written those poems in his own natural style, they would have become long narratives, giving him space enough in which to create both the characters and the setting; they would have been constructed with the smoothness and finish of his later poems. But the dramatic monologue is the most highly concentrated of forms, and is therefore the very last medium of expression for a writer who tends to be diffuse. "The Judgement of God" would have made an excellent and stirring romance in Morris's later manner; but as a dramatic monologue it is a complete failure. The parts are badly connected; the transitions in thought are abrupt and obscure. We are given no clear idea of the situation, no sharp impression of the personality of the speaker; for Morris has little power to condense and select. He cannot hit off the salient points of a

# Mackail's Life. Page 132.
character and a situation as Browning does in "My Last Duchess"—where even the title is significant of the character of the Duke. I am the more convinced that imitation of Browning is responsible for the harshness in construction of the "Defence of Guenevere" when I consider the early prose romances. Since they are not written in verse, there was no temptation for Morris to model himself upon Browning; and these early stories foreshadow very definitely the fairytales of his maturity. "Gertha's Lovers" is almost as little condensed as the late romances, and in comparison with the early poems, its structure is remarkably clear. In the interval between "The Defence of Guenevere" and "The Life and Death of Jason", the influence of Browning faded, and Morris's own powers matured—with the result that the style of "Jason" is marked by the spaciousness and diffuseness of the later manner.

The second quality of Morris's later style which seems to me characteristic is its clear simplicity. On the surface, it may appear that this quality has already been discussed under the head of diffuseness, that Morris is clear because he works on the big scale, because he uses many words to paint an effect. But while it is true that a diffuse style is more favorable to a certain clearness in construction, as we saw in the case of the "Defence of Guenevere", yet clearness in style, in the sense of the fitness of the words to the meaning which the writer wishes to convey, is by no means dependent upon diffuseness. The old romances are very often obscure—and they are assuredly diffuse; the manner of Robert Louis Stevenson is highly concentrated, but it is admirably clear.
Over and above the diffuseness of his style, Morris had the gift of making his meaning clearly understood by his reader—the quality of clarity.

Now a poet may be clear in one of two ways, according to his temper of mind: he may be clear with the elaborate lucidity of Tennyson in "In Memoriam"; or with the effortless simplicity of the Lucy poems. Only in very rare instances does a writer combine within himself the clarity of the elaborate and subtle with the clarity of utter simplicity. Wordsworth I think unites the two in some degree: I have spoken of the simplicity of the Lucy poems; compare with them the Immortality ode, which is at once clear and subtle. Keats, too, though his bent is rather toward the elaborate, attains the clearness of simplicity in the "Ode to Maia" or "La Belle Dame sans Merci". In general, however, a poet is elaborately clear, or he is simply clear; and as Arnold says in his essay "On Translating Homer", when a writer whose genius lies in the highly-wrought and subtle steps outside his own province and attempts the style of simplicity, his imitation does not ring true. Sometimes the imitation is beautiful, though with an artificial kind of loveliness; while at its worst it is exemplified in the atrocious style of Tennyson's "Lady Clare"—

"She went by dale and she went by down,  
With a single rose in her hair."

In Morris we find, I think, the genuinely simple style and not the artificial imitation produced by a mind essentially subtle.

There are, however, many critics who accuse Morris of affectation in style, of conscious archaism and of deliberate
imitation of old forms; in other words, they consider that his romances are marked by "simplesse" and not by the true "simpliciété". No one has ever doubted that Morris's style is far more simple than that of his contemporaries—a fact which is due partly to the subject matter of his writing. His romances deal not with intricate psychology or with the more intricate influence of environment, but chiefly with action—with concrete objects of sense and with the most elemental feelings and deeds of men. On the face of it, then, he had no need for those terms which express delicate shades of emotion and thought. Yet, if he had been of a subtle type of mind, his expression would not have been simple, no matter how simple his subject matter. Shelley, for instance, could write an elaborate and highly finished ode on so simple a subject as the west wind. But the bent of Morris's mind is towards the concrete; he has little interest in abstract speculation; and he chooses a simple subject matter not consciously and deliberately as Tennyson chose "Lady Clare", but because it appeals to his genius. And therefore his expression is as simple and definite as the objects with which he deals. Those who accuse him of affectation because he uses genuinely English words in preference to foreign derivatives forget that it is precisely those words which he needs to express his meaning. For the terms which we apply to common things about us, to the everyday actions of men, are for the most part of Anglo-Saxon origin, being the very foundation of our language; while the words which express more delicate gradations of feeling and thought were borrowed from other languages less concrete and definite than the Anglo-Saxon. And since William Morris is
interested in the concrete, and not in the abstract and speculative, he confines himself chiefly to the old English portion of our vocabulary. It is true that he does occasionally use words and expressions which are obsolete, such as "yea-said" or "speech-friend". But it must be remembered that Morris was so deeply read in mediaeval English literature that his mind was accustomed to these words; they were not pedantic to him. In the list of his favorite reading books, mediaeval poetry and mediaeval story-books, traditional history such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, are of far greater importance than modern poetry or fiction. And again, his constant translation from the Icelandic, which is akin to Anglo-Saxon, would make him still more familiar with the ancient forms of speech. That he used these old words and constructions naturally and unconsciously, without any idea of displaying his knowledge, is shown very clearly, I think, by the style of his familiar letters. Take, for instance, the phrase "by then" for "by the time that". Its use in Morris's romances has been considered pedantic; but the following sentence is taken from a letter to his daughter: "It was quite dark by then we got to Ventimiglia even". No man, unless of the Sir Willoughby Patterne type, would strive for literary style in a letter to his family; and it seems evident that Morris used the phrase because it came naturally to him. And if he was so accustomed to the old constructions that they slipped unconsciously into his letters, surely his use of them in the romances does not lay him open to the charge of affectation. He was so steeped in the old language that his thoughts were phrased unconsciously in the old forms. And therefore,

since he wrote in the style which was natural to him, I do not think that he can in justice be accused of affectation, of "simplesse".

The style of genuine simplicity, at its highest level, has a power and charm which can be attained by no other manner of writing. It is marked by a transparency, a limpidness—so that one sees the object as through clear water, and not through the stained glass—beautiful though that may be—of a rich and elaborate style. Shakespeare has that transparency of manner in such lines as:

"Finish, good lady: the bright day is done
And we are for the dark."

Matthew Arnold attains to it in the lovely verses on the "tired madcaps" in "Tristram and Iseult", or in the words of Callicles which close "Empedocles on Etna":

"The day in his hotness,
The strife with the palm;
The night in her silence,
The stars in their calm."

The transparent quality in Morris's style is apparent in the lines from "Jason" in which Medea speaks of her children, whose death she has determined:

". . . when I kneel in temples of the Gods,
Must I bethink me of the upturned sods,
And hear a voice say: "Mother, wilt thou come
And see us resting in our new-made home?
Since thou wert used to make us lie full soft,
Smoothing our pillows many a time and oft?
O mother, now no dainty food we need,
Whereof thou once wert wont to have such heed.
O mother, now we need no gown of gold.
Nor in the winter time do we grow cold:
Thy hands would bathe us when we were thine own.
Now doth the rain wash every shining bone." (Bk.XXII.925.)

In that passage there is no style to interfere with our perception
of the meaning—there is no rhetoric, no striving for effect; but the appeal to the emotions is none the less powerful. There is a characteristic passage in one of Morris's letters in which he fulminates against "the idea of a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express." The last phrase shows clearly that the simple style was for Morris the style best fitted to express profound emotions, because it is the most typical—that is, the most perfectly fitted to the meaning, the most transparent.

"The Defence of Guenevere" lacks the clear simplicity of Morris's later romances, but I think that the difference in style on this point may be explained by Morris's youth. One hardly expects a writer's first poems to be as lucid and as clear as his mature work; he is usually far more interested in his ideas than in the form in which they are expressed. A young poet writes to give expression to his own feelings and thoughts, and it matters very little to him whether other people are able to understand them or not. As he grows older, he is less wrapped up in himself; the riddle of his own mind is no longer the one absorbing interest; and since he has now a larger acquaintance with words and their meanings, a more assured command of language, his style tends to become very much clearer. G.K. Chesterton has an interesting paragraph on this point in his discussion of Robert Browning. "Outward obscurity", he says, "is in a young author a mark of inward clarity. A man who is vague in his ideas does not speak obscurely, because his own

dazed and drifting condition leads him to clutch at phrases like ropes and use the formulae that every one understands...... But if a young man really has ideas of his own, he must be obscure at first, because he lives in a world of his own in which there are symbols and correspondences and categories unknown to the rest of the world. "# I think that the obscurity in Morris's first volume may be very well explained on those grounds. It is not that he is obscure because his thought is vague; but the words which he uses have a meaning to him which they do not carry to the reader. I shall quote only one example, from the poem "In Prison". Morris speaks there of

"The grim walls, square letter'd
With prison'd men's groan,"

—a phrase which is certainly somewhat obscure in meaning. But I do not doubt that to Morris the words "square letter'd" conveyed a very precise and definite meaning. A young writer will use any word which conveys an idea to himself; a more mature poet, because of his wider knowledge of literature and of the speech of men, will write unconsciously in the language understood by the ordinary cultivated person, and not in a sort of dialect peculiar to himself.

I have spoken of the essential diffuseness and the clear simplicity of Morris's work; there remains to be discussed a quality which is one of the most charming features of Morris's style—its smoothness. There is no need to insist upon this characteristic in the later style—any of the passages which I have quoted from "Sigurd" or the late prose romances shows very clearly the musical flow of Morris's language. The most

interesting problem in connection with the melody of Morris's style is the apparent harshness of rhythm in many of the poems in the volume of 1858. "The Earthly Paradise" is absolutely smooth in its rhythm; an extra syllable in a line would be noticed at once—it would strike with a jarring note upon the ear of the reader who had become accustomed to the regular flow of the verse. But "The Defence of Guenevere" lacks that smoothness and is apparently written in quite a different style. What is the reason for the change? In the first place, it must be remarked that even in the 1858 volume there are pieces which have a very beautiful and rhythmical flow—"The Wind", "The Blue Closet", "The Tune of the Seven Towers", "In Prison"—poems which show that Morris could write melodious verse. But, as I have already pointed out, these pieces seem merely experiments in sound and rhythm, without any very precise meaning; and at that period of Morris's poetical development, I do not think that he had the power to paint character and situation in good verse; he could not pay attention to manner and to meaning at one and the same time. Maurice Donnay, speaking of Alfred de Musset, says: "Un poète a toujours un art complémentaire; la peinture ou la musique."# In his first volume, William Morris is either painting a picture, in which case his verse is rough and crude; or he is writing music, and the meaning of his lines is vague and altogether secondary.

And it does not seem to me that he ever combined the two arts in his verse. From the standpoint of pure technique, I do not think that his verse ever reaches the highest level.

The charm of good verse lies in the variations from the normal line which play against that fixed background. Now in the poems of 1858, with the exception of the musical experiments which I have cited, Morris does not succeed in producing the illusion of the fixed background; there are not enough normal lines to give the impression of rhythm—and further, there is no definite emotional value in the frequent variations from the norm. For purposes of illustration, let us take a passage from "The Defence of Guenevere" and observe its scansion:

"Christmas and whitened winter passed away,
And over me the April sunshine came
Made very awful with black hail-clouds, yea
And in the summer I grew white with flame,
And bowed my head down—Autumn, and the sick
Sure knowledge things would never be the same,
However often Spring might be most thick
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew
Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick,
To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through
My eager body, while I laughed out loud,
And let my lips curl up at false and true,
Seemed cold and shallow without any cloud."

There are very few normal lines in those verses; and there seems to be no particular point in the constant variation. It is quite true that in the "Idylls of the King", for instance, there are many passages which are famous because of their rhythm, which are marked by constant variation from the norm; but Tennyson never changes the regular flow of a line unless there
is some emotional effect to be gained by so doing. I do not see that there is any particular emotional value in the clumsiness of many of these lines. It seems to me that Morris was too interested in the pictures of Guenevere which he was painting to polish his verse forms: a careful artist would not have been satisfied, for instance, with such a clumsy line as

"However often Spring might be most thick".

Morris had not learned the craft of verse in the days of "The Defence of Guenevere"; but by the time that "Jason" and "The Earthly Paradise" were published, he had mastered the art of metrical composition. Indeed, "The Earthly Paradise" seems to me almost too perfect in craftsmanship—the verse tends to be monotonous and mechanical. If "The Defence of Guenevere" is too full of variations from the norm, "The Earthly Paradise" does not depart from it sufficiently. Excess of variety arises from an imperfect control over the metrical instrument; but monotony is more probably due to a certain lack of imagination—for it is imagination which shows the poet how his metre should be varied with the different emotional effects which he wishes to produce. "The Defence of Guenevere" is rough because Morris was not skilled enough in the mechanical part of verse writing; in "The Earthly Paradise" he has learned how to write smoothly, but he does not go beyond that. The metre of the verse does not fluctuate in response to the variations in emotion, as it does in the greatest poetry. "The Earthly Paradise" is the work of an accomplished craftsman, but it is not great poetry. Even in "Sigurd the Volsung" the metre tends to be monotonous, too little varied to suit the sense. One cannot help, suspecting that
William Morris would have been a greater poet if he had had more of that "infinite capacity for taking pains"—he wrote too easily, and would not be troubled to revise and polish. Tennyson works laboriously over his poems until they are as nearly perfect in their form as he can make them; Morris writes his first draft, and then passes on to something else. It is characteristic of him that if a passage did not please him he did not attempt to revise it, but wrote an entirely new version.

But though Morris never succeeded in combining in his verse the art of painting and the art of music, we do find the union of the two in his prose, where he gives us definite and beautiful pictures and at the same time a prose rhythm of enchanting loveliness. The early prose romances, being the product of Morris's youth, are naturally rather uneven in style, and lack the perfect fusion of manner and matter which is wanting likewise in the poems of that period. But the most beautiful of all Morris's writings, from the standpoint of melody, are the prose romances of his maturity. In the writing of prose, there is not the same temptation to monotony as there is in verse, with its fixed background—a temptation to which Morris, by reason of his facility in the mechanical part of poetry, was peculiarly susceptible. In prose, one cannot depend upon metre to give the illusion of melody; and therefore the music of the later romances seems to me more artistic, more imaginative, than the regular flow of "The Earthly Paradise".

And yet Morris did not devote himself to making the romances beautiful in sound alone; their charm lies in the fact that the rhythmical language is only so to speak the setting for the
story, the characters, the vivid and detailed pictures. Neither style nor subject matter is over-emphasized. A musical prose style became habitual to Morris, so that even his lectures on art and industry are a delight to read. In his early volume, matter and manner were almost mutually exclusive; the development in his style, the perfect union of manner and matter, may be seen in "A Dream of John Ball", or in a passage such as the following, which I have taken almost at random from his lecture on "The Prospects of Architecture": "For we indeed freed from the bondage of foolish habit and dulling luxury might at last have eyes wherewith to see: and should have to babble to one another many things of our joy in the life around us: the faces of people in the streets bearing the tokens of mirth and sorrow and hope, and all the tale of their lives: the scraps of nature the busiest of us would come across; birds and beasts and the little worlds they live in; and even in the very town the sky above us and the drift of the clouds across it; the wind's hand on the slim trees, and its voice amid their branches, and all the ever-recurring deeds of nature; nor would the road or the river winding past our homes fail to tell us stories of the country-side, and men's doings in field and fell. And whiles we should fall to muse on the times when all the ways of nature were mere wonders to men, yet so well beloved of them that they called them by men's names and gave them deeds of men to do; and many a time there would come before us memories of the deeds of past times, and of the aspirations of those mighty peoples whose deaths have made our lives, and their sorrows our joys."
My extremely limited knowledge of the technique of prose rhythm forbids anything but a very tentative comment upon the rhythmical beauty of these lines. In the first place, it may be observed that there is no definite verse movement in the passage to force itself upon the reader's ear and to impair the prose rhythm. It is true that a line such as "the road or the river winding past our homes" may be scanned (if we cut the words) as iambic verse. But the prose scansion, which takes account only of entire words, would read: "the road | or the river | winding | past our homes"—(iamb, third paean, trochee, and cletic.) And as Oliver Elton points out in his essay on "English Prose Numbers"#, the music of good prose arises from the fact that we perceive the two movements together—we hear the verse rhythm through the prose. There is only one phrase which does suggest a definite metre to me; and that is "the wind's hand on the slim trees", which has the same peculiar rhythm which Masefield uses in "Sea Fever"—"the wheel's kick and the wind's song". But such a movement does not fit into any of the conventional verse moulds; so that the impression of metre in that single phrase is only very faint; and was probably suggested to me only because that movement is at once so rare and beautiful that having observed it in Masefield's lyric one is arrested by another instance of it. Again, this whole paragraph is marked by the rising and waved rhythm, characteristic, from the very nature of the language, of English prose. But Morris avoids monotony and harshness by the occasional introduction of falling and level rhythm. In the first sentence, for example, the hurried movement of "and should

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Vol.IV. ( Oxford at the Clarendon Press.1913.)
have to babble to one another" is checked by the falling and
level rhythm of "man\l things". And lastly, the cadences in
this passage are very beautiful. Phrases like ",(our) joy in
the life around us", ",(the) drift of the clouds across it ",
conform to the classical "cursus" discussed by Elton; and the
native cadences--"(the) tale of their lives", "(a)mid their
branches", "field and fell"--occur very frequently. But the
chief value of a technical discussion is, as Elton says, "to
put names and numbers" to something of which we already feel
the beauty. One does not need a knowledge of cursus and anapest
in order to appreciate the melody of Morris's prose.

The difference in style between "The Defence of
Guenevere" and Morris's later work may be partly explained, as
I have shown: the abruptness and roughness in construction of
the poems of 1858 is due to imitation of Browning; their lack
of clarity to Morris's youth; and the harshness of their rhythm
to the want of craftsmanship. But in spite of these considera-
tions, there is a charm about Morris's first poems which he
never recaptured. They are marked by a certain freshness, an
originality, which belongs only to youth. Swinburne says of
"The Defence of Guenevere": "Such things as were in this book
are taught and learned in no school but that of instinct. Upon
no piece of work in the world was the impress of native character
ever more distinctly stamped, more deeply branded."# And it
is because these poems are pure Morris, because they are written
out of his own imagination, before his "native character" was
modified by experience in the world of men, that they have an

# Morris's Life and Death of Jason. Essays and Studies.
(London: Chatto & Windus. 1875.) Page 112.
intensity and a spontaneity which fascinates one. Many of these poems are unforgettable; stanzas and phrases haunt one constantly—they seem to sing themselves into one's mind.

"Swerve to the left, son Roger," he said,
When you catch his eyes through the helmet-slit,
Swerve to the left, then out at his head,
And the Lord God give you joy of it! "

Or again:

"Down sank our threescore spears together,
As thick we saw the pagans ride;
His eager face in the clear fresh weather
Shone out that last time by my side....

We ride no more, no more together;
My prison-bars are thick and strong,
I take no heed of any weather,
The sweet Saints grant I live not long."

I have already spoken of Morris's faculty for making pictures, which is so marked in this early volume. By a few sharp-edged details he calls up the scene visibly before one's eyes. Take the close of "Golden Wings":

"The apples now grow green and sour
Upon the mouldering castle-wall,
Before they ripen there they fall:
There are no banners on the tower.

The draggled swans most eagerly eat
The green weeds trailing in the moat;
Inside the rotting leaky boat
You see a slain man's stiffened feet."

This first volume is full also of strange and dramatic incidents that fire the imagination. The meeting of Launcelot and Guenevere by the carven stone of King Arthur's tomb; Ozana, dying slowly in the Chapel in Lyoness; the "shameful death" of "brave Lord Hugh" "in a place where the hornbeams grow";—situations such as these are powerful in themselves—they touch one's sense of the dramatic. And the book is fascinating too because.

"# The Judgement of God." "# Riding Together."
of the vividness and originality of its phrasing. One has never read anything quite like—

"The hot sun bit the garden-beds,  
When the Sword came back from sea;  
Beneath an apple tree our heads  
Stretched out toward the sea;  
Grey gleam’d the thirsty castle-leads,  
When the Sword came back from sea." #

In dealing with intense emotion Morris has a power of language which grips one almost physically. One could quote illustration after illustration: Guenevere’s passionate cry to Leuncelot—

"Banner of Arthur—with black-bended shield
Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground!  
Here let me tell you what a knight you are  
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found  
A crooked sword, I think, that leaves a scar
On the bearer’s arm, so be he thinks it straight,  
Twisted Malay’s crease beautiful blue-grey,  
Poison’d with sweet fruit; as he found too late,  
My husband Arthur, on some bitter day!"

Or Jehane’s answer to Robert’s forced cheerfulness, in "The Haystack in the Floods":

"... But, ’0’, she said,  
‘My God! my God! I have to tread  
The long way back without you; then  
The court at Paris; those six men;  
The gratings of the Chatelet;  
The swift Seine on some rainy day  
Like this, and people standing by,  
And laughing, while my weak hands try  
To recollect how strong men swim.  
All this, or else a life with him,  
For which I should be damned at last,  
Would God that this next hour were past!’"

In spite of roughness in construction and harshness of rhythm, "The Defence of Guenevere" holds its readers spell-bound with its vivid pictures, intensely and imaginatively realized, its strange and bizarre incidents, and the curious poignancy of its language. The fresh strange beauty of these early pieces more

# The Sailing of the Sword.
than compensates for their defects of structure and metre, and the volume of 1858 will be the last of Morris's writings to be forgotten.
V. Conclusion.

In this study of the romances of William Morris it has been impossible to touch on any but the most general aspects of his work. All his writings are based upon the principle of beauty—though the term "beauty" shifts in meaning as Morris's own nature develops and matures. The sensuous beauty which attracts his youth is sublimated into the spiritual beauty of the dauntless saga heroes; and it reaches its logical outcome in the vision of a world in the future where even the details of ordinary life are beautiful. Viewed from the angle of subject matter, there are obvious points of contact between Morris's romances and the old romance writers of mediaeval times, but the modern elements in his work are far more significant. And there are certain broad general statements which may be made with regard to the style of the romances—its essential diffuseness, its clear simplicity, and the smoothness of its rhythm.

If one may be permitted to generalize still further, this discussion may fitly conclude with a brief glance at the most obvious limitations and the most striking excellencies of William Morris as a maker of literature. I have already indicated the one thing which Morris lacked to be accorded a place among the greatest writers of the English tongue. His romances make no attempt to lighten the darkness which surrounds the deepest problems of human existence; they do not touch the most profound feeling in the heart of man—the desire for
consolation and conviction in the face of the mysterious universe. William Morris had not the gift of communicating to others his own sense of the "power not ourselves" as Wordsworth had it in his most inspired moments; and therefore, though his romances may be true art in the sense that he succeeded in what he tried to accomplish, they cannot be called great art—which is permanent and inexhaustible only because it appeals to the most fundamental elements in human nature.

It cannot be denied, also, that sometimes Morris's work suffered from the fact that he wrote so easily, that literature was to him too much a mere craft which he had mastered with that flair for technique which was so characteristic of his genius. His inspiration does sometimes fail him; the diffusion of his style sometimes becomes mere verbosity, and its clear simplicity, banal commonplace. But when one considers the enormous quantity of work which Morris produced, these infrequent lapses into flat platitudes do not assume a very important place. The only parts of Morris's writing in which I frankly lose interest are to be found in "The Earthly Paradise"; and one does seem to miss in some of those stories the feeling of the writer's own personal delight in the tale, which is usually so strongly marked in Morris's romances.

Generally, however, the tales are enthralling in action, character, and setting. Morris's invention seems well nigh inexhaustible, and incident follows incident so smoothly and so easily that one is carried along by one's interest in the mere events of the story. The characters, too,
are living men and women, so wholesome and vigorous that one really cares what happens to them; one reads the tale to find out their future, and not simply to admire the author's skill in character depiction. And the setting of Morris's romances is always fascinating—chiefly because he describes it with such minute precision. He touches each object in that quasi-mediaeval world lingeringly, as if he loved it; and he paints it with intense clearness and sharpness of detail, as if he saw it actually before him.

But the unique and permanently delightful quality of Morris's romances lies in the whole impression which they leave on the reader. One may not remember the exact events of every story, one may even confuse the characters, but one has always that sense of an atmosphere of beauty pervading the whole of Morris's work. In his romances he creates a sort of fairyland into which one may withdraw and see one's dreams fulfilled. True, they are perhaps not very "close to life"—but it is for that very reason that they attract us. After the pitiless realism of some modern novels, which too often degenerates into a deliberate search for ugliness, it is good for mind and soul to pass into the fresh and invigorating air of Morris's romances. One loses sight of the harassing details of everyday life; one forgets to be modern and sophisticated; and the permanently child-like part of one finds a naive and innocent satisfaction in that "Land of Heart's Desire."
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