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PURE NORTHERNNESS – WILLIAM MORRIS AND C.S. LEWIS

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Abstract

Having seen one of Rackham's illustrations to *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods* in his youth, C.S. Lewis became instantly attracted to "pure 'Northernness'", a feature he would later associate with Scandinavian literature and mythology, Wagner's music and William Morris' romances. In a similar manner, Morris describes his reading of the Norse sagas as a momentous experience which influenced his later writings. However, the two authors seem to have responded to different aspects of the sagas: Morris to their realism of presentation and to their worship of courage, and Lewis to their use of magic and myth. Paradoxically, in spite of Morris' paganism, his prose romances played an important part in Lewis's conversion to Christianity.

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One of the greatest Victorian personalities, William Morris (1834-1896) left his personal imprint on the wide range of his fields of interest, from interior design to the private press movement. If the products of Morris' decoration firm are still popular, nowadays his literary works have fallen into disrepute with the general public. The decline of Morris' fame as a writer began very early and, after his considerable success with *The Earthly Paradise* and *Sigurd the Volsung*, the prose romances were seen as a regress, a return to "literary Pre-Raphaelitism". In Lewis' time, Morris was seldom seen as part of the literary canon and studying him was interpreted as a sign of eccentricity. The most frequent accusation was the one of escapism, of retreating in a Palace of Art in order to forget the world of trouble. This accusation starts from the underlying assumption that art should reflect contemporary realities, having a well-ordained purpose in a society structured according to unchangeable principles. However, there are some critics, including C.S. Lewis, who deny the existence of escapist tendencies in Morris' works, underlining his pragmatism and his desire for

reform. This desire is present even in *The Earthly Paradise*, in the prologue of which the reader is invited to forget about industrialised London and to imagine the beauty of the city in Chaucer's time.

Among the writers who exerted a considerable influence in C.S. Lewis' youth, William Morris and George MacDonald hold a special place. The two writers knew each other and in 1878 Morris bought the Retreat, the house in which MacDonald wrote *At the Back of the North Wind* and *The Princess and the Goblin*. He renamed it Kelmscott House after his beloved manor in the Cotswolds and it is here that he wrote his own series of romances. In *Surprised by Joy* C.S. Lewis speaks about the beginning of his lifelong friendship with Arthur Greeves in 1914, fuelled by the realization "that both knew the stab of Joy and that, for both, the arrow was shot from the North" (p. 130). It is in his friend's bookcase that Lewis found Morris' *The Well at the World's End* and he immediately fell under its spell. Being touched by its "magic", he subsequently read most of Morris' works, "the great author" (p. 163) of his youth. His admiration for Morris never lessened, as proven in the letters to Greeves which often mention the reading or re-reading of his works. In 1915 Lewis reads again *The Well*, associating it with the memory of his happy walks in the fog with Greeves, and he writes: "it has completely ravished me" (*Collected Letters*, p. 153). In 1926 he re-reads *The Well* and declares: "I was anxious to see whether the old spell still worked. It does—rather too well" (*All My Road*, p. 421). In 1930 Lewis bought *The Collected Works of William Morris*, edited by his daughter May; in a letter from the same year he declares "what with Morris & other things I really seem to have had youth given back to me lately" (*Collected Letters*, p. 921). It is significant that Morris constantly carries him back to an earlier age, adding the pleasure of the past to the happiness of the present.

The reasons for which Morris was so important to Lewis are detailed in his essay "William Morris" which was read to the Martlet Society in 1937 and later published in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*. Lewis declares that "A man is seldom moved to praise what he loves until it has been attacked" (*Rehabilitations*, p. vii). This is supposedly the main motive for which he wrote his defence, yet the essay could also be interpreted as an attempt to clarify to himself the charm exerted by the prose romances throughout different periods of his life. Because he still considered Morris pleasurable he wanted to explain the paradoxical appeal of a pagan poet to the Christian. Lewis would later declare that from all the essays in his book this was "the one into which I had put most of my heart, the one I really cared about and in which I discharged a keen enthusiasm" (*Essential Lewis*, p. 354) yet critics misunderstood its import.

Lewis believes that Morris is the victim of prejudice when critics condemn his archaic language and declare that "his poetry is the poetry of escape" (*Rehabilitations*, p. 37). Morris' admirers are said to read for pleasure, a long-lasting pleasure which cannot be analysed. And yet there is an attempt to

analyze its appeal by quoting another admirer' concise depiction of its charm: "It's the Northernness—the Northernness" (p. 37). Lewis insists upon the fact that most of the criticism against Morris comes from clichés with no real basis, but it is impossible for them to affect "the few" who cannot help enjoying a writer "who is so obstinately pleasurable" (p. 38). Remembering Lewis' insistence on the importance of pleasure in reading, this is a high qualification.

Lewis proceeds to refute the frequent accusations levelled at Morris and he begins with his language, underlining its simplicity, its avoidance of decoration, and its preference for the general, comparing it with the language of Samuel Johnson. According to Lewis, it is the realism of presentation which offers credibility to Morris' stories; the same point was made by May Morris in the introduction to *The Well at the World's End*. Lewis discusses Morris' treatment of landscape, which allows readers to paint the scenes for themselves, and to create thus a world with its own geography. We thus come to a key point in the essay: "the effect is at first very pale and cold, but also very fresh and spacious. We begin to relish what my friend called the 'Northernness'" (p. 40). His words echo the reminiscence of his meeting with Northernness in his youth and its association with Joy. Lewis believes that Morris is closer to the world of sagas than to the Middle Ages, the most pervasive influence being felt on his language with its conciseness and its use of litotes: "That is another aspect of the 'Northernness'" (p. 42).

William Morris is often credited for being among the first writers of secondary-world fantasies. Lewis' essay proves the fact that Morris invents worlds which should not be examined too closely in terms of probability, being judged on their relevance to the world we live in. The adventures of Morris' heroes are said to be linked to his own life and to humanity in general, being a testimony of "the author's deepest sense of reality, which is much subtler and more sensitive than we expect—a mass of 'tensions'" (p. 44). In a similar manner, Morris defends the seemingly unrealistic content of *The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon* by contrasting history and dreams. Similar values and principles are thought to apply to the dream and to the waking world. In spite of the presence of fantastic elements, the veil which makes the familiar seem strange, this type of dream is relevant for human existence, helping people in times of need (cf. Morris, CW, V: 23).

Lewis understands better than any other critic that Morris' writings express not so much the fear of death as the desire for immortality tempered by the feeling that life on earth is more than enough. Lewis notices these two opposing tendencies and their unresolved tension, since "for Morris it is not unhappiness but happiness which is the real fountain of misgiving" (*Rehabilitations*, p. 46) raising our awareness of the transience of life. The Wanderers are consoled by stories of failure and grief, and sorrow may become a spur for heroism. The love of mankind and the Earth helps Morris' heroes to

overcome their grief and to understand that life can be pleasurable in spite of all its pains and misfortunes. Ralph loses his first love yet continues his search for the Waters of the Well and marries Ursula, Walter is unhappy when his wife is unfaithful, yet the world is wide and it is enough for him to embark on a ship in order to become a light-hearted merchant, who will later reach the Wood beyond the World. In one of his letters Morris famously declared: "life is not empty nor made for nothing, and […] the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful…" (in Henderson, p. 78)

C.S. Lewis underlines another significant tension between the desire for immortality and the impulse for heroic action. Morris' Wanderers reject the offer to fight for King Edward III in order to pursue their futile yet poignant dream of finding a paradise on Earth. The answer to this tension, to the troubling thoughts which threaten to spoil happiness, is the involvement in an activity, avoiding too much introspection. Therefore, this is said to be the core of Morris' creed: "The gods have not made the world for happiness but to be 'a tale', and it is good, when they ask us for one deed, to give them two" (*Rehabilitations*, p. 47). This is the lesson learned from the Norse Sagas: "For one so enamoured of 'the Northernness' these doomed Eddaic gods—the very type of Stoical Romanticism—had a strong appeal" (p. 47). The late prose romances are considered "the real crown of his work" and here the solution to the same tension lies in "the daily life, health, and preservation of the community" (p. 48).

Morris' communities depicted in the historical romances, with the melting of the individual in society, are considered to illustrate perfectly the idea of "good." Lewis speaks about Morris' concreteness which is the fruit of experience rather than abstract theorizing. His doctrine is said to revolve around the importance of fellowship and the love of the earth. It is difficult to place Morris in a category and Lewis is content with the general characterization "he is a good story-teller" (p. 52), concerned with life on the natural level. The conclusion of the essay discusses the relevance of Morris' works for Christian readers and for politics. Morris thus presents "the dilemma in the natural virtues and the natural desires from which all philosophical religion must start" (p. 53). He is content to state the question without providing a final answer, therefore he is the more valuable.

In his article "The Light of Holiness: some comments on Morris by C.S. Lewis" (1974) Lionel Adey discusses the references to Morris made in Lewis' letters and he declares that the two authors had much in common. Even though Adey draws several parallels between their lives, they could not have been more different. What united them, transforming them in kindred spirits, was the same passion which laid the foundation for Lewis' lifelong friendship with Arthur Greeves: the passion for "Northernness" and the love of efland. Lewis declares: "Though my friendship with Arthur began from an identity of taste on a particular point, we were sufficiently different to help one another" (*Surprised*

by Joy, p. 150). The same affirmation could be made about William Morris and their love of the North was pursued in a different manner and with different outcomes and reverberations in their private and literary lives.

The differences between Lewis and Morris become apparent when reading *Surprised by Joy*. Lewis speaks about his "extreme manual clumsiness" (p. 12) caused by his bad joint in the thumb, a defect which led him to writing. Unable to build cardboard castles, Lewis turned to building castles of words. Morris was rather deft with his hands and he successfully mastered one craft after another. J. W. Mackail, his biographer, mentions the "restlessness of his fingers" (I: 17) which had to find some occupation, from making fishing nets in his youth to writing calligraphic manuscripts and drawing countless patterns in later years. Morris, a great devourer of books, fascinated with history, had nonetheless an anti-intellectual attitude and a profound dislike of dry bookishness, of the incapacity to rejoice in the face of the earth. In his *News from Nowhere* scholars, who are happy to do a type of work not much desired, possess a sweet disposition, being "so humble, and at the same time so anxious to teach everybody all that they know." (Morris, CW, XVI: 31) Robert, who is a mathematician, weaver, printer, and writer of historical books, believes that his friend despises him "for not being very deft with my hands: that's the way nowadays" (p. 20) as opposed to the nineteenth century, which despised craftsmen.

If Lewis was aware from his youth that he was fit for becoming a writer or a scholar, a fact underlined by one of his professors (cf. *Surprised by Joy*, p. 183), Morris found it difficult to choose a career. The irony is that Morris studied in Oxford for entering the Church before he decided to dedicate himself to Art during a memorable walk on the quay of Le Havre. Unlike his friend Edward Burne-Jones, he did not give up his studies and he took his diploma. However, he articled himself to the architect G. E. Street, and he abandoned architecture in less than a year in order to study painting with D. G. Rossetti. He also experimented with sculpture, furniture and stained-glass design, and embroidery. If Morris declares that he has no memories of a time when he could not read, it is Lewis who writes about himself and his older brother: "I can remember no time when we were not incessantly drawing" (p. 6). Lewis excelled in drawing movement; Morris, on the other hand, gave up painting because he could never paint from memory and his pictures lacked movement. (cf. CW, XXII: xxxij) It was only with the foundation of the firm Morris & Co. that he finally found his vocation in the revival of long forgotten crafts and the so-called lesser arts. Nonetheless, Morris' writing was a constant, beginning with his college years: he dedicated a large portion of his "spare" time to poetry, then to translations, especially the Old Norse sagas, the prose romances and his socialist articles.

Another great difference between Lewis and Morris lies in the manner of perceiving beauty, nature, and architecture. For Morris, his childhood excursions were momentous experiences and the beautiful churches of Northern France inspired him with the desire to dedicate his life to artistic production. All the details of nature were deeply impressed in Morris' memory – the colours, the smells, and the sounds left a deep trace, recollected in his later writings. The smell of sweet balm reminded him of his early days in the garden at Woodford in his *News from Nowhere*, written when he was fifty-six. From a very early age Morris discovered a source of great pleasure in nature, architecture, and books, and his boundless energy was always invested in several causes at a time. He would later find a great pleasure in work, especially but not exclusively in creative work. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt records in his diary a visit from Morris in May 1896:

> We had a long discussion whether the love of beauty was natural or acquired. 'As for me,' he said, 'I have it naturally, for neither my father nor my mother nor any of my relations had the least idea of it. I remember as a boy going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of Heaven had been opened to me – also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript. These first pleasures, which I discovered for myself, were stronger than anything else I have had in life.' (p. 229)

Lewis' appreciation of beauty was not an inborn feature – it developed in time, and he declares in *Surprised by Joy* about himself and his older brother: "This absence of beauty […] is characteristic of our childhood" (p. 6). The first image of Paradise comes from his brothers' artificial toy garden since he never seemed to pay attention to real gardens nor did he notice beautiful buildings. Lewis insists upon the importance of his imagination and of his invented world (Animal-Land) in his childhood to the detriment of the real world. A holiday in Normandy, although well-remembered, bears little significance for him.

C.S. Lewis describes his first experiences of Joy, a longing for something unattainable, not clearly glimpsed, the pleasure being in the desire itself. One of them occurs when reading some verses from the *Saga of King Olaf*. The experience is repeated several years later when he sees one of Rackham's illustrations for *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*: "Pure 'Northernness' engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity." (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, p. 73) Lewis underlines the importance of his awakening love for the North, a passion which took precedence over his whole experience, containing elements which religious belief should contain. He traces the growth of his imaginative life, concerned with the experience of Joy, and he declares that it is by means of books that he began to see beauty in nature. Lewis studied Norse mythology, gaining solid knowledge of the world of the sagas, but

the moments of Joy became rarer. A revival of his interest in the sagas was associated with his friendship with Tolkien and his club, The Kolbitar, concerned with the reading and the translation of the Norse sagas.

Even though the Victorians were fascinated by the Vikings, the sagas were far from being considered great literature. William Morris' appreciation of the North developed gradually, but he never became a specialist in Scandinavian literature or mythology: his primary interest resided in the stories. His use of Norse material began in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, continued with *The Earthly Paradise*, reached a peak with his translations of Old Norse literature and his *Sigurd the Volsung*, and its echoes are evident in the late prose romances. The language of these romances is similar to the language he used in his translations from Old Norse. One of Morris' earliest poems, written while he was a student, contains a eulogy of the brave North, where people are happy in spite of their bleak environment:

> But in the North for ever dwells my heart.
> The North with all its human sympathies,
> The glorious North, where all amidst the sleet
> Warm hearts do dwell, warm hearts sing out with joy. (in Whitla, p. 68)

Morris became acquainted with Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (1851) in his Oxford years and his first short stories published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* use Nordic names for the characters. *The Lindenborg Pool* is a retelling of a story from Thorpe's book. The first of Morris' works which mentions a land ruled by laws which are different from those generally considered to be specific to the real world is *The Hollow Land: a Tale* (1856). Placed *in illo tempore*, with vague influences from the Middle Ages and the Arthurian cycle, the story opens with a stanza from the Niebelungen Lied taken from Thomas Carlyle's essay followed by an abrupt question addressed to the reader: "Do you know where it is—the Hollow Land?" (Morris, CW, I: 254) The narrator of *The Hollow Land*, now in his old age and with failing memory, is eager to reach it again since it is the place where he met his love; he suggests that the Land is difficult to find, although it is very close to his own land, because people waste their time and their lives with little things which distract them from their real purpose.

The collection of tales which established Morris' fame as a poet is *The Earthly Paradise*, published in four volumes between 1868 and 1870. The prologue presents the Wanderers, a group of twelve Norsemen who wanted to escape not only from the bubonic plague but also from death itself. After a long and perilous journey they reach a beautiful land inhabited by the descendants of ancient Greeks. The stories they tell and the stories they listen to help them acquire a better understanding of the human condition and to face death with

dignity. The old men gradually learn to remember past suffering and disappointment not with regret but with acceptance and tranquillity. *The Earthly Paradise* comprises twenty four stories, two for each month, preceded by a three stanza lyrical introduction which, amid the descriptions of nature, tells the story of frustrated love and the merciless passage of time. The Wanderer's quest is the only completely original story in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Before 1868, when he began to learn Icelandic with the help of Eiríkr Magnússon, Morris was familiar with Icelandic literature only in translation. He was already a renowned poet, and his *Jason* and the first two parts of the *Earthly Paradise* had been well-received by the critics and the public. Magnússon's literal version of the *Volsung Saga* produced a great impression on Morris and he decided to undertake its translation in prose. In the preface to the last volume of *The Saga Library* Magnússon speaks about their twenty-five years of collaboration and the method used for translation, based on Magnússon's literal translation and Morris' alterations in matters of style. Morris constantly avoided words of Romance origin and often introduced literal translations of kennings, providing an archaicizing translation. In his short autobiography written for Andreas Scheu in 1883 Morris speaks about the importance of Old Norse literature in his development. The literature of the North met in translation at the time when he began the stories for his *Earthly Paradise* was "a good corrective to the maundering side of medievalism" (in Henderson, p. 186). He goes on to mention the meeting with Magnússon and the sagas in the original: "The delightful freshness and independence of thought of them, the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm." (p. 186)

While translating the Northern sagas Morris became more and more familiar with their spirit. The second November tale in *The Earthly Paradise*, *The Lovers of Gudrun*, is derived from the Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga* written in the thirteenth century and narrating events from the ninth to the eleventh century. The narrator speaks about Iceland, his homeland, in the introduction to the tale; although "strange", "barren", and "awful," it is inhabited by people "Yearning for love, striving 'gainst change and hate, / Strong, uncomplaining, yet compassionate" (Morris, CW, III: 250). This folk know no fear; their only care is to live a life which can be remembered for courage. The men of the North are not accustomed to asking of God for relief from pain or an easy existence, and the narrator warns that his tale depicts no marvels but speaks only about well-known feelings: "the seed and fruit of bitter love" (p. 250). The focus of the story falls on frustrated love and vengeance and especially on a love triangle: Kiartan and Bodli, foster-brothers and friends, fall in love with a beautiful and intelligent woman, Gudrun, who loves Kiartan but marries Bodli. In a letter to A. C. Swinburne from December 1869 Morris declares that *The Earthly Paradise* would have done him more credit "if there had been nothing in it but the

Gudrun" (in Henderson, p. 30). Nonetheless, the atmosphere is more romantic than Nordic, and the stoic heroes of the sagas do not hesitate to express their woes with much pathos in Morris' version.

In 1871 and 1873 Morris undertook two journeys to Iceland, in reality cultural pilgrimages to the places depicted in the Norse sagas. The journeys are often seen as an escape from his personal troubles, his declining marriage, and industrialized England. The meeting of a new society with its specific culture and a different set of values allowed Morris to evaluate the Victorian society from a new perspective while the harsh, lonely scenery intensified his love for his family. May Morris speaks about her father's Icelandic journeys as an important landmark in his life, an adventure and a radical change for a sedentary man attached to his home. She declares that because of her father's love for the North he was enveloped in a "magic dream" (Morris, CW, VIII: xv) which allowed him to focus more on the landscapes and on his own visions than on the inhabitants. Thinking about the sagas, the emptiness of the landscape convinces him that "whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves" (p. 108). Morris' journeys to Iceland express the need to distance himself from his daily activities and troubles in order to gain a broader perspective. In a letter to Aglaia Coronio from November 1872 he declares "what a blessing & help last year's journey was to me; what horrors it saved me from" (in Henderson, p. 51) and one year later he confirms the benefits of his travels: "surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed." (p. 59) Just a few months before his death, he travelled to Norway.

Over the last decade of his life Morris wrote an impressive series of romances in prose, an expression of his pleasure of writing and of his love for stories. His daughter May terms them "fairy romances," declaring that they are characterized by "the weaving of everyday life with the sense of marvel to come" (I: 508), while modern critics see in them the precursors of modern fantasy. May Morris also notices the quality of the 'eternal child' which is manifested in the romances, facilitating the intrusion of the fantastic in everyday life, merging the commonplace with the magical, populating the well-known meadows with fantastic creatures. It is these romances containing elements from elfland which fascinated Lewis and made him declare in 1931: "I wish he had written a hundred of them! I should like to have the knowledge of a new romance always waiting for me the next time I am sick or sorry and want a new treat." (*Collected Letters*, p. 40)

If *The Earthly Paradise* could be appreciated by Victorian readers because of its alleged escapism, an important stage in Morris' poetic development before he became fully committed to socialism, his prose romances were more difficult to interpret. In this light, the romances were seen as a regression, a refuge from reality or a result of his failure in politics. A superficial

analysis of the romances would conclude that Morris detached himself from the real world and entered the realm of fairy; however, the prose romances represent a continuity in Morris' literary output. His heroes constantly reject the magical lands, the false paradises providing escapism. They often discover that in the middle of despair there is still hope, a strong desire to live and, moreover, to enjoy life to the full. The search for adventure is gradually replaced by the search for peace and stability as the heroes mature, being drawn home by their love of the kindred and of the familiar landscape. The first allegiance is however due to their partner, seen as both lover and friend. The happy endings present the couple settling in a community, living a fulfilling existence so that people can say about them "that their love never sundered, and that they lived without shame and died without fear." (Morris, CW, XX: 387)

Among the late romances, *The Glittering Plain or The Land of Living Men* (1890) is said to be the most Icelandic in atmosphere. The language, with its kennings and word-plays—Puny Fox uses many kennings for "raven"—is obviously reminiscent of the Norse sagas. The beginning of the story introduces the reader to a vaguely mediaeval setting and a community of people who live in "good fellowship" (Morris, CW, XIV: 211), a key concept in Morris' writings. The main character, Hallblithe, has to choose between immortality in a land of eternal summer and a mortal life near his betrothal. His homeland, in which people's lives are "long enough for the doing of deeds that shall not die" (p. 212), is his true Paradise. Long-hoary explains that the Glittering Plain "is the land of the Undying King, who is our lord and our gift-giver; and to some he giveth the gift of youth renewed, and life that shall abide here the Gloom of the Gods" (p. 248). This Blessed place is a temporary dwelling, a reward for the warriors who wait for Ragnarök, resembling the Greek Elysian Fields, the pagan Paradise for worthy heroes, rather than the Norse Valhalla or Fólkvangr. Only some selected chieftains of the House of the Eagle gain this gift, and some refuse it, wishing to go to an unnamed place where they would meet more of their kindred. Although the Isle of Ransom seems to be a grim place, it is rather reminiscent of the harsh Icelandic soil with its brave warriors. Puny Fox leaves it forever, but his love for the land is the fruit of fellowship within a community with its specific traditions. The spirits of the land, the land-wights from the Norse mythology, are his friends: "Nay, I love the land. Belike thou deemest it but dreary with its black rocks and black sand, and treeless wind-swept dales; but I know it in summer and winter, and sun and shade, in storm and calm." (p. 319) The captain of the Ravagers cannot leave it even for a short period of time and he seems to be more attached to its peaceful side, the day-to-day activities and the impressive landscape.

The Well at the World's End (1896) is the first romance which entranced Lewis, a Bildungsroman set entirely in an invented world in which elements of magic become apparent as the story unfolds, without being the focus of the

story. The fairy-tale beginning presents Ralph, the youngest son of a kinglet, who is desirous of adventure. His quest is motivated by the young man's longing to see the world since his homeland seems too small for his growing aspirations. It soon acquires a purpose, inspired by his godmother's gift of the Saracene beads: the search for the remote Well at the World's End whose waters bring healing and a life of more-than-natural length. The Fountain of Youth is also a Fountain for the Mighty, the true heroes who can bear the weight of years, desiring to live in peace in the middle of a community. During his voyage, Ralph sees many lands with their specific customs, some of them heathen. Before reaching the Well, Ralph and Ursula must cross the Wall of the World, a menacing range of mountains similar to the Icelandic landscape. Lewis would declare about the romance: "I wondered how much even of my feeling for external nature comes out of the brief, convincing little descriptions of mountains and woods in this book." (*All My Road*, p. 421)

In *An Experiment in Criticism* C.S. Lewis explains the meaning of the word fantasy as a literary term: "any narrative that deals with impossible and preternaturals" (p. 50) and as a psychological term with its three versions: mental delusion, Morbid Castle-building, and Normal Castle-building. In the same work Lewis offers a convincing argumentation for rejecting the accusation of escapism which has been attached to William Morris. Lewis distinguishes between realism of presentation and realism of content rejecting the critics' underlying belief that the lack of the former is a sign of escapism. Unliterary readers, according to Lewis' classification, prefer realism of content which allows them to easily enter the script. (cf. 55-56) The fantastic draws attention to the fact that what is read is only a work of art, being thus less deceiving than realism: "Escape is not necessarily joined to escapism. The authors who lead us furthest into impossible regions—Sidney, Spenser, and Morris—were men active and stirring in the real world." (pp. 60-61)

This is indeed true about Morris who was a successful businessman, a designer who taught himself various crafts and an active politician who learned the art of public speaking. Whenever he was unsatisfied with exterior reality, he did everything in his power to change it—his dreams were not unsubstantial but the starting point for action. When he realized that the products available on the market of interior decoration were pieces of shoddy, he decorated his house with the help of his friends and then founded a firm. When he saw the opportunity for a radical change of society, he became involved in politics and spared no effort for the cause. Critics nonetheless believe that he needed a compensation for all the troubles arising from an active life, a refuge in the world of his romances. Even though May Morris believes that the late romances were a form of escape, she declares that her father never refused to do his duty in the world of action: "it is not to be thought that the writer lived in reverie among his enchanted woodlands: the journeying to rejoin his dream-friends were sometimes of the

shortest" (Morris, CW, XVII: xxj) and he wrote in "a room no whit retired from the daily movement of the house" (p. xxj). For Morris, art was profoundly linked with all the aspects of human life; instead of isolation, it should provide opportunities for connecting.

Lewis (re)converted to Christianity in his early thirties, an event with a profound impact upon all of his subsequent writings. Morris, also in his thirties, was deeply touched by the spirit of the sagas met in the original. Although the influence of the sagas upon his writings was less obvious and less remarkable, it was also constant. A romantic by nature, as he defined himself, trained in the romantic school, he was impressed by the stark realism of the sagas. Morris found solace and hope in the implicit lessons of the literature of the North which helped him deal with failure and sorrow. His heroes come to understand that people may fail in spite of their efforts and their pitiless fate must be bourn just as much as old age and death. In a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones Morris speaks about the admirable characteristics of the Norse heroes and the consolation provided by their courageous conduct. (in Mackail, I: 335) This is Morris' own attitude in life, perfected due to his admiration of the Northern spirit and the sagas.

Another lesson learned from the sagas is linked to the fear of death and Morris' heroes begin to be more and more interested in the immortality achieved by doing great deeds and being remembered by one's kindred. The envoy to the *Eyrbyggja Saga* expresses Morris' kinship with its author, who knew how to overcome fear in order to hear the true voices of the Earth. Although Morris' desire to dissipate fear remains only a vain hope, he confesses to the tale-teller: "Well, ye have helped me at my need." (in Mackail, I: 264) It is this courage in the face of adverse circumstances, hope when there is nothing to hope for, which greatly impressed him.

In a lecture touching on the religious belief of the men of the North, a religion he associated with happiness, Morris sums up their creed:

> [L]et us live joyously while we can, fearlessly at the least; not stepping aside for any pain or sorrow if the way to deeds lie through it, sure that we may win some glory before death or through it […] There is no defeat possible to a brave man. [...] Think of the joy we have in praising great men and how we turn their stories over and over and fashion their lives for our joy—and this also we ourselves may give to the world. ("Mythology and Religion" f. 2v)

The most thorough discussion of Morris' religious beliefs in his mature years is found in the last chapter of Bruce Glasier's *William Morris* (1921). Glasier's reminiscences are so full of veneration that the last chapter comes as a surprise. He notices that Morris' paganism is not a religion or a substitute for religion, having no effect upon his everyday life, and he deplores his lack of spiritual concerns which reflected the trend of his own times. Glasier declares that

Morris, who was essentially moral, can be a model of how to relate to one's fellows and society in general: "in Morris' conception of what life on earth should be, and could be, there is a much nearer approach to the true Kingdom of God than is to be found in most of the conventional devotionalism of the Churches" (p. 166).

C.S. Lewis similarly regrets Morris' attitude to the life of the spirit. A concession is made for Morris' *Love is Enough*, an alliterative morality full of Biblical imagery, which is said to express his mystical aspirations. It is the story of a king who renounces the world in order to find his love, seen in dreams, returns for a brief while to his kingdom, then departs again to be re-united with his love. Lewis believes that the answer to Morris' dilemma, to the tension between the desire for immortality and the belief that life on Earth is enough, lies in the Christian conception of death. In a letter to Arthur Greeves from 1931 Lewis discusses in detail the importance of Morris' lesson:

> I feel more and more that Morris has taught me things he did not understand himself. These hauntingly beautiful lands which somehow never satisfy,—this passion to escape from death plus the certainty that life owes all its charm to mortality—these push you on to the real thing because they fill you with desire and yet prove absolutely clearly that in Morris's world that desire cannot be satisfied. The Macdonald conception of death—or, to speak more correctly, St Paul's—is really the answer to Morris: but I don't think I should have understood it without going through Morris. He is an unwilling witness to the truth. He shows you just *how far* you can go without knowing God, and that is far enough to force you (though not poor Morris himself) to go further.
>
> (*Collected Letters*, p. 970)

In his literary works Morris depicts an idealized world, the highest point of development that can be reached on the natural level. However, this Earthly Paradise is not enough for Lewis, and moments of happiness trigger paradoxically uncomfortable thoughts. The fear of death and the regret of passing years are ever near in Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*, and more so in the midst of happiness when joy often becomes a pain. An assurance of future life would ease the Wanderers' fear of death; however, this type of continuing existence is never mentioned. The various hypostases of the deathless in the late romances land prove the emptiness of the pagan immortality without God. Nonetheless, Morris' heroes often reject these deedless places being aware of the importance of community and immune to the temptation of perpetual bliss in a static land. Morris, who declared himself careless of metaphysics and religion, was greatly impressed by the Norse sagas and, if Lewis went further to Christianity, Morris remained more concerned with life on the natural level. Due to their worship of courage, the sagas inspired him with a reverence for heroic

deeds and the selfless dedication to a purpose which helped him in times of need.

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