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# ANDREW LANG THE POET

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**ANDREW LANG, THE POET**

In Mr. Green's life of Andrew Lang<sup>[1]</sup> there is an anecdote which may serve as my text this afternoon. When staying with the Sellars in Mull in 1871 he spoke disrespectfully of Clough's poetry, saying it was all 'poetry about the Thirty-Nine Articles'. 'Then what subjects would you select as suitable for poetry?' was his uncle's somewhat indignant question. 'Apple-blossom', said Lang.

Now it is not by any means true that Clough's poetry is all about—or even strictly speaking any part of it really about—the Thirty-Nine Articles of the faith of the Church of England; nor would anyone maintain that all poetry ought to be about apple-blossom. But those subjects are, as it were, two poles—the poles of dogmatic philosophy and of romance—between which the world of poetry revolves.

To turn back a little to Lang himself, he was a man for whom my generation of Oxford undergraduates and young graduates had an almost idolatrous admiration. He had such diverse learning: he knew all the things that we knew, and, besides, opened doors to us into exciting regions of which we knew nothing—anthropology, medieval romance, old French poetry, and the like; and then he was so light of touch, a wit and a writer of pointed stories like *In the Wrong Paradise* or the tragic history of *Why-Why, the First Radical*. I owed him some personal gratitude also because it was he who recommended my first book to a publisher. Afterwards we differed about the Homeric Question, as all Homer scholars do; and neither of us was quite right, as no Homer scholars ever are. Let me, before I begin the strict discussion of my subject, indulge in one further anecdote, which has never been recorded and is, I think, too good to be altogether lost. When Theodore Roosevelt, the first of that name to be a famous President of the United States, was in England after his bold exploration of the Amazon, he was invited to Oxford to give the Romanes Lecture. It was a great occasion. The Vice-Chancellor and Doctors were assembled in the Divinity School, preparatory to walking in procession across to the Sheldonian Theatre, where the lecture was to be delivered. Roosevelt had written to me saying that he had been quite convinced by my book on Homer, and as he had previously expressed his agreement with Lang's books, this put him in a slightly difficult position towards Lang. The President came up to me and said: 'Are you on speaking terms with Andrew Lang?' 'Yes', I said, 'we call each other the most dreadful names.' 'Will you introduce me to him?' I took him to where Lang was leaning absent-mindedly against the wall. 'Mr. Lang', he said, 'I have done you a wrong. I have let Gilbert Murray convert me about Homer.' 'Never mind', said Lang rather wearily; 'I converted a man once.' 'But that is not the worst', said Roosevelt. 'I have taken one of your most ardent disciples and destroyed his faith in you. When I was exploring the Amazon we had with us a man, a hard-headed, ultra-scientific Scotchman, who was always quoting Andrew Lang to us: Andrew Lang the historian, Andrew Lang the anthropologist, Andrew Lang who knew the really scientific explanation of all the problems that we came across in our travels. At last I couldn't stand it and said to him: "Do you mean Andrew Lang the poet?" "Poet?" said he. "Nonsense; he is a great man of learning, not one of your poets." Now when I travel', Roosevelt continued, 'I travel very light, but I take with me five or six really good books, just the few I admire most. "Not a poet?" I said, taking your poems out of my pocket. "What do you call that?" He took it, and he set to work to read it. The first week he read hard and got to page twenty. The second week he fell back somehow, and only got to page fifteen. Couldn't bear it, I suppose. Sir, I fear I have destroyed you in that man's estimation for ever.' So saying, Roosevelt turned away, leaving Lang quietly purring with pleasure, and joined the procession, which had been waiting for him most of the time that he was telling his story.

All that Roosevelt's anecdote implied is true of Lang. Greek scholar, anthropologist, historian, critic, scientific researcher, poet, he achieved distinction in a surprising number of varied fields; yet, in reading some reviews of Mr. Green's book about him, I was struck more than once by an impatient note: 'Who wants to hear more about Andrew Lang? He was just a Victorian romantic. He is not interesting to anybody.' What is the reason for this?

Of course, it is the common lot that every poet or man of letters who is on the crest of the wave during his lifetime falls into a trough of unpopularity after his death. But in Lang's case there is something more. He is really a somewhat extreme example of an attitude towards life of which the post-war generation is perhaps incapable, is certainly intolerant. This intolerance shows itself to a limited degree in practical life, but more freely and abundantly in all the arts: painting, sculpture, imaginative literature, and most of all in poetry. I believe it is the same in music, but of that mystery I do not venture to speak. Belonging as I do to an older generation, I find it difficult to sympathize with this new movement and therefore am likely to be unjust to it. It seems to me to have arisen from the intense urgency of the immediate and obvious problems of life to a generation involved in war and economic hardship. There is little leisure for artistic creation.

There are intervals of boredom between periods of intense activity. There is impatience to get on with the job. Impatience of dreams and make-believe. Impatience of the slow, loving effort after artistic perfection, and consequently impatience of that perfection itself, as shown in correctness of form, beauty of rhythm, or choice of language. Such perfection makes those who do not understand it feel small. They are pleased with a poet who turns from Homer and Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton, and says contentedly like Walt Whitman:

I lift my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The yawp sounds somehow manly and 'real'. When a poet of the older style writes of an Earthly Paradise they tell him there is no such place; he had better attend to the slums of London or Glasgow. If he confesses

Of heaven and hell I have no power to sing;  
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,  
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,  
Or bring again the pleasure of past years . . .

they tend to sweep him aside, saying: 'In that case, what good are you to anybody?'

Now, first, let us make a concession to these moderns. Let us say, 'Your claim is true. You have been born into a struggling and wounded world, in which your best efforts must be given to other things, not to dreams, not to mere artistry—except perhaps the artistry of engineering—not to any "idle singer of an empty day", but to the various means of dealing with the military and social and economic problems that beset us. We may grant you more: in the intervals between your bouts of hard work you will naturally want something easy, something obvious, perhaps at times something that will give satisfaction to the feelings of anger and disgust that are apt to follow long periods of uphill and disappointing effort. You cannot be expected to make the serene and patient effort of imagination and understanding that the Muse demands of her true followers.'

I call this a concession; from the social point of view, so it is; but from the artistic point of view it is more like an accusation. It is, I think, a recognition of the fact that in the extraordinarily stirring and strenuous age through which we have lived, and from which we are now enjoying an interval of very imperfect holiday, the world in general has been forced to forget its culture. It has been no time for thinking about beauty or things of the imagination. The great world-movements are all in other directions. The Russian revolution began by utterly destroying the intellectual middle class. In Germany, the first victims of the Nazi movement were the intellectual classes, and reports now coming from the occupied territory speak of the utter decline of the universities and even of the schools. Almost every German writer of any note has for long been an exile, or a refugee. In Spain and Italy to be an intellectual was a danger, sometimes almost amounting to a capital crime. Even in France my experience in the Institute of Intellectual Co-operation taught me something of the neglect from which the intellectuals suffered. In some universities the wages of the janitor were suitably raised to meet the fall of the franc but the professor's salary was not. Writers, teachers, men of learning, worked immense overtime in order to live. For cultivated women it was still worse. Even in Great Britain, where we have had five Royal Commissions reporting on education and demanding from the taxpayer very large sums, the demands are all for what may roughly be called utilitarian purposes—more dentists, more doctors, more engineers, more technicians, and, of course, many more people to teach them. I am not criticizing any of these recommendations. As far as I can judge they are all reasonable and just. My point is to show that they express the felt needs of the day. They show what the country is interested in. Less brutally than in Germany or Russia, with less suffering than in France or Italy, in Britain also the necessities and preoccupations of this dangerous time have turned people away from what we used to think of as culture; away from Lang's apple-blossom; away from those pursuits that demand patient and intense work and bring in return only contentment and the joy of beauty. Instead there has been a marked direction of thought and ability to military science; a great and strikingly successful activity in medicine and surgery; and a rather one-sided preoccupation with economics. Well, why not? Those are the needs of the time. A community in danger must think first how to meet its dangers.

But, meantime, what happens to the neglected arts, particularly to poetry? I note several points. First, people do not read it much. I was once on the Brains Trust with the leading publisher of modern poetry, when we were asked whether it was possible for a poet now to live by his poems, as the great Victorian poets did, and if not, why not? In my own

wicked heart I knew what my answer would be, but I preferred to listen to Mr. Faber. He admitted the fact that no poet of the present day could possibly attract the mass of readers and lovers that Tennyson and Browning and even Swinburne could, but did not deal with the reason.

I seem to notice in the poets themselves a refusal to seek for perfection of form. This I attribute partly to a lack of training in classical models, partly to lack of patient industry, and partly to boredom or rebellion against a method that seems stale and insipid. Beauty of form is not valued.

Next, it seems to me that the sort of emotions that the modern poets seek to express—the emotions that are no doubt boiling inside them in this tormented age—are not those that have generally produced fine poetry. I know I am on perilous ground here. I remember the scathing chapter in Tolstoy's treatise on Art, describing the subjects conventionally regarded as 'poetical', such as swans, lakes, flowers, maidens—especially maidens in white dresses. I know that great poetry is not dependent on these so-called poetical subjects. It can be made not only out of 'blood, sweat, and tears' but out of mean streets and ordinary lives. It is not the subject that matters, it is the spirit in which it is treated. Still, I doubt if good poetry has often been made out of such materials as disgust, boredom, dislike, dirtiness, envy, and the denigration—or, as they now say, 'debunking'—of things which are higher than ourselves; and those emotions play a rather large part in the post-war realists. I do not think I need discuss the surprising claim that is made for some of them, that they are teaching such profound truths about economics or politics or theology that form does not matter, and that intelligibility cannot be demanded of a prophet.

Let us turn to some of the characteristics of Andrew Lang's poetry. We will remember that he does not want to write about the Thirty-Nine Articles, still less about the seamy side of life; he prefers apple-blossom.

Take, first, that famous translation of the *Odyssey*, Butcher and Lang. Scholars of my generation loved it. Why? Because, I think, it always remembered that the *Odyssey* was a poem, not merely a story; that it belonged, even when first spoken, to a past age, an age beautiful and far-away, when the world was a braver place than now. Also that it was written in a deliberately archaic poetical language, which neither the poets themselves nor their audiences spoke. Compare it with two recent translations which have their admirers. There is a translation in the Penguin series by Mr. E. V. Rieu, which, as the author modestly says, makes no attempt to represent the poetry; it tells excellently and in straightforward language the story of the poem. It makes good reading. Yet surely the sacrifice is very great. The *Odyssey* has lived to delight its readers for two thousand years not because it was a good story but because it was, line by line, canto by canto, a lovely poem. The second translation I will take is that by T. E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia, a deservedly famous man and a friend of mine—which, I am sorry to say, I consider not exactly unskilful but definitely wrong in its whole aim. Lawrence, being obsessed by the current dogmas, explains in his preface that Homer, regarded as poetry, is quite bad; being written in a language which the poets did not normally speak it is 'all Wardour Street humbug'; regarded as a novel, however, the *Odyssey* is quite good. He then translates in such a way as to conceal that the work was ever a poem and, having thus—excuse the word—'debunked' the poetry, he proceeds to 'debunk' Penelope and the principal characters. On this I wish to make two remarks. First, Lawrence was pretty certainly wrong in saying that the *Odyssey* is a bad poem, when the universal opinion of poets and critics has for some two thousand years recognized it as an extremely good poem; and the abstract a priori ground on which he condemns it is therefore probably a wrong ground. Secondly, his aim was a bad one: to 'debunk' involves cultivating a lack of appreciation towards things of unusual beauty and a lack of respect towards things greater than ourselves; whereas the aim of true education and culture is exactly the opposite: to see and love the beauty and greatness which otherwise we might be too lazy or stupid to see, too dull and self-satisfied to love. I am tempted to add a third, and for our immediate purpose a most important, criticism: he does choose his language with the purpose of destroying the poetry and thereby shows his belief in the effect of poetic or unpoetic diction. His own practice disproves his theory.

On this whole issue, therefore, I am strongly for Lang against Lawrence, and with some hesitation for Lang against Rieu. But let us consider what can fairly be said against Lang. First, take the phrase 'Wardour Street', which, I ought perhaps to explain, was a famous street in London full of theatrical costumiers, where you could hire sham wigs and helmets and armour. If, say the critics, Mr. Lang could really write about King Arthur in the language of King Arthur's time, well and good; but he cannot. It is lost. All he can do is to write nineteenth-century English with a sprinkling of obsolete words. His quasi-medieval language is a sham. Homer was better off. Though he could not exactly compose in the real language of the heroic age, he had a long, continuous tradition coming down from that age and forming a recognized dialect for

epic poets. Homer's language was a sham, too, but a much better sham.

How do we answer this? The answer is that all criticism based on the word 'sham' is dangerous and misleading. Pursue it, and you will soon find yourself in the same position as the negro in Mark Twain, who could not see why any sane person should give a thousand dollars for a picture of a cow by a Dutch artist when you could buy the cow itself for less. The whole question is whether the diction you choose produces the right aesthetic effect.

Next, the realist critic will say, why should any one suppose that there was any particular poetic value in the language of a past age. Human life is always much the same. The age of King Arthur was, no doubt, quite ordinary to the people then living, just as full as our own is of household worries and bills and tiresome children and colds. No doubt. But, to us, all that side of the Age of King Arthur is non-existent; it is forgotten; we know nothing of it; tradition has only preserved for us the chivalry and the wonders, Lancelot and Guinevere, and the traitor Modred, and the splendid quests on which the knights rode out to conquer or die. Just in the same way, Homer knew of his heroic age only by legend and tradition, which naturally preserved chiefly the high-lights and splendours. Consequently the language in which he sings of the heroic age preserves some touch of the heroic age about it, and of the heroic age in its grand moments. Quite different, I presume, from the language in which the bard himself asked to have his boots mended or his bill paid. Our feeling about the splendour of the past is rather like our belief in the excellence of its buildings; we judge it by the few very strong buildings that are now standing, and forget that all the common ones have disappeared.

Lastly, it may more fairly be said that Lang's slightly archaic prose is not at all like Homer's archaic poetry. Lang is medieval and romantic and a little languid, and, of course, makes no more attempt than Rieu to represent Homer's rolling splendour of sound. Homer has a magical language and metre of his own, which one cannot represent in English; why, then, attempt it? The answer of any translator to that criticism must be a modest one: 'I know I cannot reproduce the quality of the original, but I love it and hope that I can, to a certain extent, suggest it.'

Lang then tried by his choice of words and forms of sentence to bring back, or at least suggest, the atmosphere of an age which, to him and his contemporaries, was an age of imagination and legend, an age far removed from the trivial and commonplace. He believed in Poetic Diction. That is at present an extreme heresy. The young lions cry out against it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Victorian romanticism. They have much moral support from the actors who produce *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in modern dress and the scholars who translate the Bible into the sort of language that demands no effort from the reader, either of understanding or of imagination. 'Whatever you have to say,' they argue, 'can you not say it straight in the plain language of the common man?'

That demand, it seems to me, shows a curious failure to understand the extreme vitality and variability of language. It is not a mechanical thing serving all purposes equally without change. Think of speech itself. The ordinary manuals of phonetics recognize three kinds of pronunciation ordinarily practised in English—one for casual conversation, one for ordinary lectures or reading aloud, a third for public reading of the Bible or great literature. That is not an artificial invention. It is a natural development, and occurs in all languages. Then, as to the actual words used: listen to a mother talking to a child, to a group of scientific men or literary critics talking 'shop', to an average group of talkers in a public house, or of betting men returning from a racecourse. Which is 'plain language'? The realists fail to realize that every word and phrase has, besides what we call its 'meaning', a magnetic cloud of atmosphere or association hanging about it, and the nearer it is to poetry or to religion the deeper is that cloud and the more richly charged with memories and emotion. You can, of course, take any great passage in the Bible or in Milton and by stripping off all the cloud of emotion and association turn the thing into an exact statement. If an exact statement is what you want, well and good; but you will thereby have stripped off the poetry. This is why all the great poets of the Hellenic or European tradition have used poetic diction. It is most marked of all in the father of all our poetry, Homer. Not one line of Homer could be mistaken for prose. In Greek tragedy here and there, very rarely, there are such lines. That is because it is drama; and a phrase of ordinary work-a-day prose coming in the midst of poetic language has a special effect of dramatic shock. In the main the language of tragedy is completely lifted above that in which a man asks for his boots, or complains that his tea is cold. It is the same with Roman poetry, the same with Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Tennyson, Dante, Racine, Goethe, the whole line of the tradition. Some, of course, will have made special effects by the use of sudden prose phrases, like Browning, or a highly artistic use of colloquial dialect, like Burns or Yeats. Such devices, I think, are ultimately devices to make the reader think he is being told the plain truth while the poet is weaving his magic spells about him. For the poet's art, as Aristotle has told us, is to say untrue things so as to seem true; that is, first to create an imaginary world and

then to make it seem real. There is, so to speak, a dream language and a fact language. A touch of the fact language makes the dream seem true.

Akin to poetic diction is the tradition of poetic form. Our realist doctrinaires disapprove of it. In part they are sick of the old convention. In part they have not the loving patience or the delicacy of ear to master the difficulties of good verse-writing. In part they are under the influence of the same strange delusion, that poetry should contain statements of fact, and that its value lies in the novelty and importance of the statements, differing from prose chiefly by the violence and temerity with which they are expressed. Lang would ask them why it is that all the poets of our European tradition have written or recited in strict forms, always in metre and regular rhythm, and after the Middle Ages mostly in rhyme. In the primitive forms you might almost say that the rhythm *was* the poem, the exact words or meaning hardly mattered. The earliest Greek poetry was *Molpê*, dance and song combined, the rhythmic sounds and the rhythmic yearnings of the body expressing things which definite words are too poor to express, and giving a satisfaction which definite statements cannot give. In Greek and Latin poetry every syllable has to be right. Apart from certain regular licences, there are places for the long syllable and places for the short, and neither can supplant the other. The other great sources of poetry, I should say, are Chinese and Hebrew. The Chinese is even stricter and more insistently exact than even the Greek, insisting not only upon measured syllables and rhymes but also on a series of musical tones; Hebrew has a different kind of form, caring not for metre but for rhythm and for musical notes, and also for a rhythm of meaning produced by a repetition of ideas in parallel clauses. The rules, I believe, are not yet fully known; but they are strong and subtle; they seem to me to be very near the original *Molpê*, the dance and song, that lies at the heart of poetry. Even the Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon poetry, though much less concerned with perfection of form, has its rules of rhythm and alliteration.

There is here a paradox; the old, well-known paradox, that in order to be free you must obey the law. Only so can a large and constructive freedom be created for man as a social being. The objectors to the laws of verse have a plausible case. The poet, they say, must be free. He has a message to deliver; it is intolerable that he should be required to write in lines of so many syllables, with the stresses regularly recurring at expected intervals and sometimes with all sorts of further soulless and senseless restrictions. Let him give his message straight, and let it stand or fall by its own value.

What is the answer? Why is it that the whole tradition of poetry, wide as the world and continuing not for hundreds of years but for many thousands, has firmly refused to listen to that argument? Because the poet's message is never a mere statement or piece of information. It is an appeal from emotion to emotion, the cry of a social being who wants to communicate to others some feeling or image of his own, not by intellectual statements, nor yet by a 'barbaric yawp' which may waken some response to the feeling of the moment, as the bark of a dog will wake another dog, but by what we call art, or form, or beauty, which will live on after the feeling of the moment and also make that feeling finer in quality. He creates a thing of beauty, and you and I feel the beauty. The statements he may make in the process are seldom of primary importance.

The mistake of the realist is to forget the aesthetic element and overrate the intellectual element in poetry. There must, of course, be some intellectual element, even in the primeval *Molpê*; but except in certain forms of verse which are only half poetical, such as satires or didactic treatises, it is never of primary importance. In all the great living poems every statement of fact is untrue. Such truth as there is—if one may, in deference to convention, call it truth—lies not in any statement but in the awakening of some thought—thought charged with emotion—to which the hearer immediately responds, and which is among the permanent or continually recurring thoughts of mankind. 'Commonplaces?' you will say. Yes, as far as their mere intellectual content goes they are commonplaces, but in poetical form they become something more. It is hard to say exactly what it is that they become. For one thing they become symbols, with the mystery always attaching to symbols. For another the approach to them is changed. Instead of feeling: 'I have heard that fifty times before; everybody knows it and I am sick of it', you feel: 'That is what men have felt from long ago; a solemn moment which has come to generations and generations of mankind, to Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, to the prehistoric painters of caverns, and which makes a link between me and the most remote ages.'

Why 'solemn'? Well, that is what poetry makes it. Solemn, symbolic, beautiful. When Virgil describes the ghosts craving to find rest across the river of Hades and reaching out their arms with longing for the farther shore—

Stabant orantes primi transmittere gressum,  
Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore—

not a word of it is true in fact; it is deeply moving as a symbol. It is an expression of something eternal in human life. When Satan in the burning marl first speaks to Beelzebub:

If thou beest he, but Oh, how fallen, how changed . . .

how does that differ from 'You are looking very ill, old man. I hardly recognized you'? It is hard to say; but it does differ, and I do not see how we can deny two facts: first, that the one is poetry and the other prose; second, that the difference is made by the choice of words and the rhythm.

Let us consider a little more closely this 'message' that the poet delivers, the actual substance of what he has to say. We have seen, first, that it needs metre or rhythm; that is, so the psychologists tell me, because emotion itself is rhythmical, being connected with certain pulsations of the body, such as those of the heart and the breath. Secondly, it needs a particular choice of words; why is that? Because all words have long life-histories and associations—associations which are often so strong as to obliterate the primary definite meaning. That always happens when there is a strong element of emotion, as, for example, in so many words denoting women, where the emotional connotation has changed 'housewife' to 'hussy' and made 'quean' a very different thing from 'queen'. Or, again, in political conflicts, where people habitually use controversial words without any clear thought of their strict meaning. Now in poetry every thought is charged with emotion, consequently the associations of the words are of enormous importance. The words 'father', 'sire', 'the pater', 'the governor', and 'papa' all denote the same object; but you cannot call Zeus 'the Papa of gods and men', nor make Artemis address him as 'Governor'—unless you are aiming at some very special effect. Tradition is everything. The most living words are haunted by memories and half-memories of the ways in which they have been used before; they are charged with overtones. And the greater the overtone, the greater is the element of emotion, the less that of pure meaning or intellect. 'Does not this amount to a confession?', a critic may say, whether he be a modern realist, or a plain man of science, or a philosopher like Jeremy Bentham, 'Does not this amount to a confession that poetry is an utterly inferior form of expression? It is, in fact, as you have hinted, like bad party politics, in which people are just led by their emotions and do not know the meaning of what they say.' What is our answer? It is, I think, that the charge is partly true. But the vague emotionalism of party politics is bad because it is meant to have a clear meaning and to lead to definite action; in poetry the language of emotion is right because poetry is generally engaged simply in creating beauty, not recommending specific action; and generally—I might say always in its higher forms—engaged in putting across to other minds something that is, strictly speaking, not fully expressible, something that belongs to the unfathomed mystery by which the mind of man is surrounded.

Another sign of this is the constant use of metaphor in poetry. It is one of the poet's normal instruments. Why, and on what occasions, does one want that instrument? The answer, the classic answer, is given more than once by Plato. In his philosophical speculations he is apt to reach a point where he cannot pronounce a definite or confident conclusion; and has to say 'I cannot tell what it is, but I can say what it is like', and then plunges into one of his great myths or metaphors or similes. The more restrained and classical poets use metaphor more sparingly, the more romantic and unrestrained use it abundantly. Think of a quite simple thing like Christina Rossetti's famous lyric:

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;  
My heart is like an apple-tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these,  
Because my love is come to me.

Does one not feel, even in a simple song like that, a constant effort to express the inexpressible?

How does this bear upon Andrew Lang? I will try to say, though it must be remembered that his was a mind difficult to penetrate. He was very reserved and did not speak about himself. He was immensely learned, cultured, and widely read. He was perhaps too full of subjects which floated on the surface of his mind and obstructed any view of what lay deeper below. He wrote with extreme facility. Indeed, he was always writing. I have seen him at a garden-party surreptitiously

taking a block of paper out of his pocket, scribbling a few lines in pencil, and putting it back, in the hope that he had not been seen. And the things so written could be printed straight, without correction. All this superficial abundance, I think, added to the obstruction. Yet let us collect such evidence as we have.

We have noticed his extreme love of form; even of specially complicated and difficult forms, such as ballades and villanelles. Also, though he never claimed to be a poet—and indeed disclaimed that high pretension when occasion arose—yet he was a poet and wrote a great deal of poetry. Like Pope and Ovid he 'lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.' On into his old age, when most people get over the youthful distemper, he continued to write verse.

Then take his subjects: he is always in the past, the legendary past; in thoughts of old Scotland, of old France, of Greece, in memories of childhood. More than that, what are the two real changes in the taste of the general reading public which Lang produced? Both are instructive.

He restored the fairy-tale and the love of folk-lore. When he produced in 1889 the first of his Fairy Books, says Mr. Green, 'the fairy-tale had almost ceased to be read: the novel of child life, the stories of Mrs. Ewing, Mrs. Molesworth and L. T. Meade were the only fare. Writing in 1889 in her history of children's books Mrs. E. M. Field says: "At the present moment the fairy-tale seems to have given way entirely in popularity to the child's story of real life." Early in 1891 however she added a note: "Since the above was written eighteen months ago the tide of popularity seems to have set strongly in the direction of the old fairy stories.'" That was the work of the *Blue Fairy Book*.

What is the special charm of fairy-stories? They are not clever stories, or ingenious, or surprising. But they are very old and are spread over almost all the world. Consider the themes which they treat, the emotions which they awaken: the small and oppressed Cinderella or Third Son chosen out and raised to greatness, the paths of unknown adventure leading to strange ends, the impossible ordeals that must be conquered, the superhuman help that comes from unsuspected quarters, from animal or bird or fairy, the trials and sufferings bravely borne, after which—dream of dreams, so impossible and so habitual—the persons concerned 'live happily ever after'. They are the dreams of mankind, thousands and thousands of years ago. They were there before conscious literature, and they are constantly repeating themselves in literature. They are based on what Jung and the modern psychologists call 'Primordial Images'. Primordial Images are those that appeal to the most deep-rooted human instincts. They are present in the small change of nursery stories and peasant folk-lore; they find their best fulfilment in the great treasure-stores of traditional tragedy, in *Hamlet* and *Lear*, in the *Agamemnon* and the *Oedipus*. As I have said in a lecture to the British Academy on *Hamlet and Orestes*, in pointing out the many traces in these figures of a common prehistoric origin: 'It is only natural that those subjects, or some of those subjects, which particularly stirred the interest of primitive men, should still have an appeal to certain very deep-rooted human instincts. I do not say that they will always move us now, but when they do, they will tend to do so in ways which we recognize as particularly profound or poetical.' And, a little later, speaking of these primordial images as they appear in great poetry: 'We have forgotten their faces and their voices; we say that they are strange to us. But there is that within us which leaps at the sight of them, a cry of the blood which tells us we have known them always.'

Andrew Lang, it may be said, had no great creative power. I would not claim that he succeeded to any great extent in tapping these deepest fountains of poetic emotion. But he did, with no conscious theory to guide him, seek them and love them.

Next, he led people to read anthropology. *Custom and Myth* in 1884, *Myth, Ritual and Religion* in 1887, not only constituted a solid contribution to the scientific study of early mankind but, unlike many of the great anthropological books, made it romantic and fascinating. He loved searching for the prehistoric, the pre-artificial; and, though I believe he was the author of the famous description of the manners and customs of a primitive tribe, 'Manners none, customs beastly', he found beauty and mystery in the primitive mind. He was sometimes led away by this sympathy. It was hardly objective science that led him to his famous theory of the sublime original monotheism from which the present-day superstitions of savage tribes should be mere degradations. He was groping unconsciously towards the primordial fountain of human poetry.

Another move which seemed to his contemporaries a strange divagation of taste points in the same direction. He was fascinated by Rider Haggard's tales of African adventure, *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*. He put Rider Haggard far higher than ordinary cultured opinion did. The two became intimate friends, and co-operated long and earnestly on a

book which the critics of the time thought a failure and the public bought less eagerly than Rider Haggard's other books. It was called *The World's Desire*, and dealt with an ideal Helen who was a sort of *Ewigweibliche*, since she was also Meriamun, the evil Queen of Egypt, and also Ayesha, the immortal princess who was the heroine of *She*. Lang wrote a prologue to the book, but left it unpublished for Mr. Green to find in manuscript in the Norwich Museum. I quote the last paragraphs:

Back to the dawn of time we look, with the dim eyes of the world's elder days, striving to see the sunlight gleam upon the golden helm and hauberk, and the fire of burning citadels glitter on points and blades of bronze.

Wistfully we listen for a word out of that eager time, for a fragment of an ancient song, a murmur of grey tradition, a woman's name cried aloud through the din of battle; the clash of sword on shield, the hurtling flight of the shafts of sorrow.

That tells its own story. It is the same longing for the primitive, expressed in Lang's ultra-romantic manner. But there is something more. The crowning surprise has come only recently, long after Lang's death. Dr. Jung, one of the most famous and, may I add, one of the least cranky and incredible of modern psychologists, considers Rider Haggard's work a serious contribution to psychology, and *The World's Desire* a remarkable expression of a truth about the human soul, with its *Animus* or *Anima*, an expression made still more clear in Haggard's later allegory *Wisdom's Daughter*.

It is very Platonic, but a Platonism romanticized. Mr. Desmond MacCarthy has well said: 'It appeared to me that Lang's authentic original note as a serious poet had really been a poetic Platonism of a fay-like kind. He appeared to me then as one whose deeper love, out of which he had so seldom written, was for the lips that never could be kissed; as a poet who, all his life, had been homesick for he knew not what.' Homesick is the right word. He sought a home in the world of Homer, in the garden of Aucassin and Nicolette, in old Scotland and the haunts of his vanished boyhood, in the mysteries of the primitive mind, in the strange allegories of *Ayesha* and *The World's Desire*. If he had woken in any of them no doubt the sophisticated nineteenth-century bookman would have found himself in the wrong Paradise.

There is a word, I think a foolish word, highly characteristic of the literary criticism of the present day; the word 'escapism'. It is used as a term of strong reprobation. The prisoner is accused of trying to escape from his concentration camp, in which it is his duty to think continually of slums, crime, the divorce court, the capitalist system, and the wages of washerwomen in Patagonia, and of having wasted his talents on such subjects as *Paradise Lost* and *Prometheus Unbound*, or even, in the worst cases, *The Faerie Queene*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *The Tempest*. Judged by such a tribunal Lang would be lucky if he got off with imprisonment for life. He was always escaping; possibly escaping too often and too much, since, of course, every social being has a duty to his fellow citizens and must give some pretty constant thought to the material troubles of his society. But is there to be no escape, no holiday? And, when we do let our thoughts escape beyond the actual walls of our house or street, is it not a splendid boon that these great escapist poets have conferred on us by creating another world, in which the mind can be enabled to see a higher beauty, to have glimpses of greater nobility and joy, than are granted by the practical cares of every day? Nay, more. I will not ask whether the power of visiting that land of imagination does not give most men more strength for doing their daily duties; but does it not, in Matthew Arnold's words, provide us with a 'criticism of life' deeper and more piercing than that given by statistics and blue books? If we are to make a list of the great benefactors and interpreters of the human race, must we not find a place in it not only for statesmen and philanthropists, not only for the creators of *Lear* and *Hamlet*, the *Iliad* and the *Agamemnon* and the thirteenth chapter of Corinthians, but even to many of those who helped to make a world of lyrics and old ballads and fairy-tales? I cannot say that Lang was among the creators. He was, as Professor Gordon puts it, 'the greatest bookman of his age'. When he had some deep thought or emotion to express he knew too well where he could find it already expressed in Greek or medieval French or an old Scottish ballad or the like; there was no need for him to create it again. Lang never reached his goal, never attained the thing he longed for. Perhaps he had too many and various gifts, too many distracting intellectual interests. I remember Kipling saying to me that if he were to live in London he would never write another line of poetry. Lang did live in London, in the midst of its brilliant intellectual literary life. Did he, perhaps, make a comment upon the failure of which he was conscious in a sonnet called 'Lost in Hades', quoted by Mr. Green? He there describes how at last he was just reaching his beloved, how 'Hope had no more to hope for, and desire and dread were overpast', and then from the press of shades—from the crowding multitude of unreal things—there came to him some distracting siren:

Then from the press of shades a spirit threw  
Towards me such apples as these gardens bear,  
And, turning, I was ware of her and knew  
And followed her fleet voice and flying hair—  
Followed and found her not; and seeking you  
I found you never, dearest, anywhere.

He did not find her because she cannot be found. But at least, for a great portion of his life, he escaped into the regions that she inhabits, and made it easy for thousands to join in his escape.

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**FOOTNOTE**

[1] *Andrew Lang*, by Roger Lancelyn Green (Edward Ward, Leicester), 1947.

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[End of *Andrew Lang, the Poet* by Gilbert Murray]