SIR WILLIAM WATSON :

A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY

by

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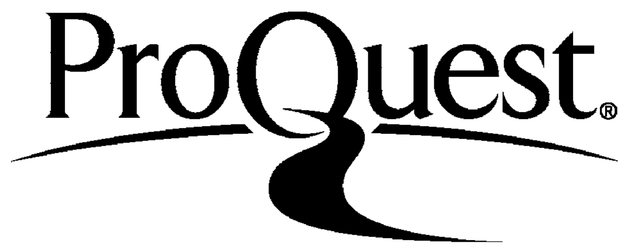

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I attempt to give a full account of Watson's life, since neither of his previous biographers have done so; Walter Swayze ends his examination thirty years before Watson's death and James Nelson deals mainly with his work. But I find his whole life significant, particularly in view of the new material I have discovered. Watson's teenage years in Liverpool, for instance, give an interesting picture of a group of provincial writers who later became famous. His previously unpublished letters to Professor Dowden, his next main influence, are full of useful information on the eighties, and the relative success of his early work reveals more about its prevalent attitudes, especially his political sonnets, which raise the question of nineteenth century political poetry in general. His critical elegy on Wordsworth in 1887 introduces the possibility that he innovated a new poetic form. But it is his entry into London literary circles and rise to fame there in the early nineties that gives the main interest to Watson's life. I suggest that this success shows the strength of the Tennysonian tradition in a supposedly "decadent" age. Drawing on another collection of unknown letters, I then trace his relationship with his publisher, John Lane, and many other well-known figures of the period, as well as his surprising failure to become poet laureate. The decline of his popularity and its brief revival at the turn of the century provides more interesting proof of

contemporary poetic taste. So, too, does his rejection of the Georgians a decade later. His increasing obscurity in the twentieth century shows that the Tennysonian tradition was finally dying. I argue, in conclusion, that Watson was one of its last representatives and that his death in 1935 was the end of an age.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BCL = The Brotherton Collection, University of Leeds' Library, Leeds.

BM = The Manuscript Room, British Museum, London.

Bodleian = The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Garnett Collection = David Garnett's collection of his grandfather, Richard Garnett's letters, St. Ives, Huntingdonshire.

Poems = The Poems of William Watson, 2 vols., London, 1904.

TCD = The Dowden Collection, Trinity College, University of Dublin.

UC = The Lane Archive, University College, University of London.

Yale = The Watson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book Library, University of Yale, New Haven.

Chapter 1

Birth and Childhood

John William Watson was born nearly halfway through Queen Victoria's reign at the small town of Burley-in-Wharfedale, just outside Leeds. Burley had first grown from a village into a town when William Fison and William Edward Forster began developing mills in the area in 1857. Peel Place was one of the streets "opened up as a site for industrial dwellings" and in the same year Watson's father bought land there and built himself the house in which William was born on August 2, 1858.[1] Watson is remembered today by many of the town's older inhabitants as the "Burley poet". Visiting the district in 1966, the first people I spoke to in the High Street were able to direct me to his birthplace and an authority on local affairs supplied me with some interesting details about the Watson family. In answer to my enquiry printed in the Wharfedale and Airedale Observer, a Mrs Emily Brown of Guiseley wrote to say that her great-grandfather, Robert Blakey, had bought John Watson's house from him on March 22, 1861. She herself was born there and her description of "the garden with the long stone-flagged table,

1. The Yorkshire Post, April 25, 1930.

and ivy growing on the walled garden and old shed at the bottom of the garden, and gooseberry bushes with either plum or pear tree growing up the house side"[1] suggests that it was far less depressing than the phrase "industrial dwellings" implies. Her great-grandfather "was very proud of the fact that William Watson was born there" and so, too, were Ilkley Urban Council, which has since erected a plaque to him on the nearby drill hall:

Sir William Watson
Born August 2nd 1858 Died August 13th 1935
Poet and Humanitarian
Was born at Peel Place, Burley-in-Wharfedale.
Here he spent his youth and gained inspiration
from his native dale
"To thee what wealth was that the immortals gave
The wealth thou gavest in thy turn to men".
(Wordsworth's Grave)

Local enthusiasm must excuse the slightly exaggerated claim that Watson "spent his youth" in Burley; in fact he passed only the first two years of his life there. Nevertheless, he always remembered his beginnings in the "Yorkshire Dales" with pride. "I should like", he wrote at the age of forty-six, "to have my connection with those grand parts of England better known".[2] Though he left the north as a young man, there was no doubt where his affections lay:

'The land that lies eastward, the land that lies west,
The northland, the southland, which lovest thou best?'
'To eastward, to westward, to southward I stray,
But the North has my heart at the end of the way.'[3]

1. Letter to me dated February 14, 1966.

2. Letter to John Lane, November 28, 1904, UC.

3. 'The North Has My Heart', Poems, i, p.94.

Watson was also proud of his ancestry, which was as solid and respectable as the time and place of his birth. Both sides of his family for generations back were of pure Yorkshire blood. His father's branch he scarcely ever referred to, but was much more interested in his mother's. He made a special trip to her childhood home of Wensleydale a few years after her death and discovered that she had been brought up mainly by her maternal grandfather, who was of farming stock. "Whether they came from people of more substance and better position"[1] Watson never knew, but he did discover that her paternal uncle, George Robinson, was a doctor. Though not able to find his great-uncle's grave in the family churchyard at Richmond, he heard intriguing stories about his son, who lived at Reeth, "where he played the part of the prodigal and wasted his substance, or large part of it, in riotous living".[2] This Robinson's son was still living there when Watson visited the area, but "so reduced in circumstances that though he [stuck] to the family mansion . . . he [couldn't] afford to keep a single servant but [did] housemaid's work and all the rest himself, and was last seen . . . wheeling a barrow of manure in his own park grounds!" Watson traced the family back as far as the fourteenth century in ancient records, which showed "Robinsons to have been very much mixed up with [Middleham Castle], the

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1. Letter to Lane, November 30, 1904, UC.

2. Letter to Lane, May 28, 1909, UC.

chief northern stronghold of Warwick the King-Maker, and where Richard III lived a good deal in his early youth - marrying, of course, Anne Neville, whose father was lord of the place". One William Robinson held the important position of castle-gaoler some time in the fifteenth century.

Part of the reason for this obsession with his mother's family may have sprung from Watson's belief, or hope, that they were related to a certain John de Orton who "received a grant of land from Edward I - probably for military services against the Scots - and [who] must therefore have been a person of standing some time between 1272 and 1307". He seems anxious to emphasise even the vaguest aristocratic connections and these are all on his mother's side. One passage from a letter to a friend in 1909 shows that he was very sensitive about his predominantly plebeian roots and its defiant tone suggests that this put him very much on the defensive socially:

> I never visited Askrigg during my parents' lifetime, but when I first did so, eleven years ago, and looked on it mainly as the place where my mother was born when her father (a good Latin scholar and given to writing reams of verse, but always on the brink of perdition) was in the deeps of poverty - when, I say, I first went there, it struck me as one of the ironies of life that I had received that morning an invitation from Lord Rosebery to dine at 38 Berkeley Square - an invitation I declined, being much too enamoured of the dales to desert them for Mayfair.[1]

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1. Letter to Lane, May 28, 1909, UC.

When another friend asked him about "his Classical strain" in 1907, he attributed it largely to his maternal grandfather who, though "a perfect ne'er-do-well in business affairs, thriftless and poor" and though never regularly educated, was "a most accomplished scholar, teaching Latin in the village where he lived".[1] Watson believed that "all his poetry came from his mother", whom he described as "Celtic, emotional and poetic". Coulson Kernahan, who met her many times during the Nineties, when he became a close friend of Watson's, remembered her "strength and yet sweetness of disposition, and the gentle graciousness with which she bore herself to high or to low".[2] He also suggested that from her Watson inherited his appreciation of Nature and her remarkable memory too:

> Her knowledge of the Bible seemed limitless, for she could not only give chapter and verse for a text but could quote correctly, from beginning to end, the more glowing and richly poetic passages both of the Old and the New Testament. Hers was the old-fashioned, unquestioning, and fragrant-as-sweet-brier faith in revealed religion which is now comparatively rare.[3]

But Watson, who presumably knew her better, described her as "not . . . at all pious"; she repeated whole chapters of Job, the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets "simply because of her literary enjoyment of the Bible: its phraseology, its style, its rhythm".[4]

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1. L.C. Collins, Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, London, 1912, p.253.

2. C. Kernahan, Five More Famous Living Poets, London, 1928, p.294.

3. ibid., p.295.

4. The Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, p.253.

These apparently contradictory viewpoints are not necessarily incompatible; Mrs Watson was certainly of "good Methodist stock",[1] but she was probably less pious with her own family than with outsiders, especially as her husband was a convinced Rationalist. She may nevertheless have had some religious influence in the home, since one of her three sons became a Methodist preacher for a time.

Dorothy Watson's "strength" of character, unlike her piety, is beyond question. William mentions her more than either his father or his two brothers in his account of his home life[2] and implies, subconsciously no doubt, that she dominated them too. For one thing her frequent illnesses affected her husband and sons greatly and demanded their constant attention. There were times when her family "hardly hoped for her recovery".[3] Edmund Gosse, who wrote to Richard Holt Hutton in 1892 about William's own health, must have suggested that Mrs Watson was a hypochondriac, for Hutton replies that he "think[s] his mother whether hypochondriacal or not should be told of Watson's state".[4] Her chief complaint was bronchitic-asthma, which suggests that her ill-health might have been partly psychosomatic. None of Mrs Watson's family seem to have resented the constant care she demanded, least of all William, who suffered "hardly less acutely from sympathy".[5]

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1. London Quarterly, vol.CLXI, 1936, p.14.
2. The main source of information on Watson's home life is the series of letters he wrote to Edward Dowden, 1879-1892, which are housed in Trinity College, Dublin.
3. Letter to Edward Dowden, March 16, 1886, TCD.
4. Letter from R.H. Hutton to E. Gosse, December 12, 1892, BCL.
5. Letter to Dowden, October 13, 1882, TCD.

He also suffered real ill-health in childhood and was forced to spend a great deal of it at home. As he told an interviewer in later life, his "early years were notable rather for the things from which he was cut off than for the things he achieved".[1] This meant that his mother devoted much more time to him than to either of his elder brothers, which may have been one reason they resented him in later life. His precocious appreciation of poetry, which drew him even closer to her, may have been another cause for jealousy. When her husband died,[2] William was the son she chose to live with, and they were never really separated until her death in his thirty-eighth year. His love for her is expressed in a poem he wrote not long after:

> This is the summit, wild and lone.
> Westward the Cumbrian mountains stand.
> Let me look eastward on mine own
> Ancestral land.
>
> O sing me songs, O tell me tales,
> Of yonder valleys at my feet!
> She was a daughter of these dales,
> A daughter sweet.
>
> Oft did she speak of homesteads there,
> And faces that her childhood knew.
> She speaks no more; and scarce I dare
> To deem it true,
>
> That somehow she can still behold
> Sunlight and moonlight, earth and sea,
> Which were among the gifts untold
> She gave to me.[3]

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1. The Critic, vol.22, March 11, 1893, p.193.
2. See chap. 5, p.100.
3. 'The Heights and the Deeps', Poems, i, p.140.

It may have been a feeling of possessiveness towards his mother that caused William's slightly hostile attitude towards his father, though this could have sprung more simply from a basic difference of temperament. His account of John Watson suggests that they had very little in common:

> His father was Teutonic, a pure practical business man, caring nothing about poetry or literature and angry with him for his showing no capacity for business, which caused much friction between them.[1]

William externalises his sense of incompatibility with one parent and affinity with the other rather naïvely by labelling his father "Teutonic" and his mother "Celtic", a theory which seems to be based more on imagination than on fact. The only feature he does seem to be proud of inheriting from his father's side is his Roman nose! Though he lacked sympathy for his father, however, he never lacked respect. Eleven years after his death he described him as a "singularly just and honourable man"[2] and on another occasion spoke of him as "a man of unusual strength, character, and understanding".[3] John Watson must certainly have had understanding since he left William free to become a writer if he wished.[4] He did not insist that his son should come to work in his office, but supported him until he died in William's twenty-eighth year. His son was "grateful to remember" that he

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1. Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, pp.252-3.
2. Letter to Lane, c. November, 1898, UC.
3. Black and White, vol.II, September 26, 1891, p.419.
4. cf. Hall Caine, My Story, London, 1908, pp.51-2.

also paid all expenses for the publication of his first two volumes of poetry.[1] He must have given him emotional as well as financial security, for William found his death "shattering" - "the whole world was changed" for him in a moment.[2]

In spite of his great respect for his father, Watson seems to have been ashamed of his early career as a general shop-keeper and twine-maker[3] whose business was largely with the Malsters of Burley.[4] Why else was he so annoyed at the routine enquiries of Who's Who in 1898? "What the devil do they want to know about my father?" he asked his publisher:

> I hate these extraneous and impertinent details. Tell the beggars the date of my birth, and the place of my birth, and they can say if they choose "of Yorkshire ancestry on both sides". Anything beyond this, while a fellow is living, is simply unnecessary. They may as well correct the error about my father being a farmer, but it is of not the slightest importance, and I would almost as soon it were not corrected because the "Liverpool merchant" detail makes some people suppose me a Liverpool man, which thank God I'm not. The whole blessed thing is perfectly unimportant. If they ask for further information tell them to be damned in the devil's name.[5]

Had Watson known that his birthplace became a fish-and-chip shop some time after he left it, he might have been even more anxious to conceal his origins. It is harder to understand his

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1. Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, p.252.
2. Letter to Louise Chandler Moulton, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Moulton Collection, vol.44.
3. Yorkshire Post, April 25, 1930.
4. Wharfedale and Airedale Observer, November 14, 1958.
5. Letter to Lane, October 25, 1898, UC.

lifelong antagonism towards Liverpool. John Watson's move there in 1861, when business declined in Burley, represented a rise in the social scale for the family. It also gave his youngest son the chance to create a more respectable "image" for him in later life, by comparing him to the father of a famous Liverpudlian; he told an interviewer in 1893 that John Watson "was, like Mr Gladstone's father, a Liverpool merchant".[1]

Another "Liverpool merchant" in the family was Mrs Watson's bachelor brother, William Robinson, who was already successfully established there when the Watsons arrived in 1861. William Robinson did not live in Liverpool, but travelled into business each day from Birkdale, a suburb of Southport, on the Lancashire coast.[2] His youngest nephew was always anxious to point out its prosperity and social respectability; "it is the opulence of Man that chiefly strikes the visitor there", he wrote to The Daily News in 1905, "for the place consists to a remarkably preponderating extent of the residence of the obviously well-to-do, among whom indeed are some of the wealthiest merchants of Liverpool and Manchester, masters of the legions of labour or the fleets of a world-wide commerce".[3] He was probably thinking of William Robinson,

1. The Critic, vol.22, March 11, 1893, p.153.

2. Southport Guardian, February 19, 1936.

3. Daily News, November 4, 1905.

whom he always referred to as his "rich" uncle. It was almost certainly he who made his brother-in-law's change of business possible, and John Watson's three sons were also to benefit from their uncle's money later on.[1]

Of his two brothers, William seems to have been closest to Robinson, the middle son, who was at least twelve years older than he. Robinson had been apprenticed to the grocery business in Otley while the family were still living in Yorkshire,[2] but he was very unsettled and kept changing his job. When they moved to Birkdale he became a Methodist lay preacher in the neighbourhood, exercising "a powerful ministry" among the people there. Some of the older inhabitants could still remember in 1936 his "passionate fervour, and . . . uncanny gift of spiritual prescience that was one of his strange attributes".[3] William's own evident love of rhetoric[4] and his early striving towards a mystical appreciation of the universe[5] were obviously family characteristics.

James, the elder son, was also highly gifted. Though William had very little to do with him after his teens, he continued to admire his "real genius in draughtmanship", his "great power of comic invention" and his outstanding talent as a violinist.[6] He

1. See chap.9, pp.205-7.
2. Wharfedale and Airedale Observer, November 14, 1958.
3. The London Quarterly, vol.CLXI, January 1936, p.14.
4. See chap. 5, pp.90-7.
5. See chap. 3, pp.49-54.
6. Letter to Lane, March 22, 1915, UC.

does not appear to have been affected by James's interest in drawing, but he may well have been influenced by his musical abilities. Growing up in an environment where good music was not only highly appreciated but also skilfully performed must have helped develop his own musical talents. Several critics have commented on his brilliance as a pianist, the most reliable being James Ashcroft Noble, who knew him personally from the age of sixteen onwards. Noble said that many of those who heard him playing Beethoven, Schubert and Chopin believed, "not without reason, that he might have won fame as a musician almost equal to that which he has achieved as a poet".[1] His taste in music, as in poetry, was fairly catholic, though he had a bias in favour of the nineteenth-century Romantics,[2] with the exception of Wagner, whom he never liked or understood.[3] Besides playing the piano, Watson also "from time to time set lyrics of [his] own to music" and wrote them out with what he considered "rather artistic accompaniments".[4] But he rarely managed to combine his talents in this way and was finally forced to decide between them in his teens:

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1. 'A Personal Reminiscence', The Critic, vol.22, March 11, 1893, p.154.
2. See chap. 2 for a description of a series of articles he wrote on German composers.
3. See his letter to Dowden, c. January 8, 1885 (TCD), in which he compares Whitman's aims in poetry with Wagner's efforts in music.
4. Letter to Wallace Nichols, January 18, 1929, Yale, Watson Collection, box 4: five of these lyrics may be found in the Yale collection of Watson material - 'I Care Not', 'Lady Coy's Refusal', 'The Lighthouse of Love', 'O Placid Moon', 'Thy Heart'. Another three pieces - 'Fickle Spring', 'Elfin War-dance', and 'The March of the Peacemakers' - are without words.

Music and Poesy, like Gods at play,
Diced for the domination of my soul.
Poesy won, - yet oft, too easy in sway,
Lets Music snatch control.[1]

As he himself implied with regard to Milton, it is likely that his musical training influenced his poetic technique, especially his handling of metre.[2]

There is an interesting reference in the Southport Atkinson Library catalogue to a man who may have taught William music - "a 'John Sadlier Watson', teacher of music and musical instrument seller", who lived in Birkdale, the same district as William Robinson. The compiler thinks it "likely that this man was a relative and that William lived with him", though he can trace no relative of this name, nor find any record of a Sadlier family connection. On one point, however, he is quite definite, that from 1871 William lived at Hollybank, 13, Cross Street, Southport. Yet a close friend of William, who lived near the Watsons for several years in the early eighties, says that they stayed where they had first settled in Old Swan, Liverpool, until 1875.[3] John Watson is not registered in any of the Southport directories at 13, Cross St., though his eldest son, James, is listed at 11, Cross St. in 1882. It is unlikely that the family moved twice to the same street within a period of four years.

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1. 'The Gamesters', Poems Brief and New, London, 1925, p.34.
2. Pencraft, London, 1917, p.53.
3. See James Bromley's 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire', Proceedings of the Southport Literary and Philosophical Society, vol.2, 1903-4.

Wherever William spent his childhood, he did not get a very good formal education. His ill-health kept him away from school until his teens. As he himself admitted, he had "little learning":

> . . . hardly more
> Than bids envy others' lore.[1]

There was at least one large gap in his education - a knowledge of either classical or modern languages. Watson felt his ignorance of these very keenly in later life. Replying to the critic William Archer's charge that he is "without the slightest pretence to academic scholarship", he admits that "owing to educational circumstances I am little skilled in reading or writing foreign languages, living or dead".[2] As the next part of the same letter shows, he resents being reminded of what he does not know and retaliates by emphasising what he does:

> But since an early period in my life I have been in the habit of writing English with a careful regard to its historic aspects and relationships, and it is probable that I scarcely ever use a word of which I could not off-hand give you some etymological account, whether that word be of Teutonic, Latin, Greek, Celtic, or other origin: and I claim that the ability to do this is . . . as real and serviceable as the more academic kinds.

His defensive attitude is strongest when he feels that this knowledge of etymology is being questioned. In 1909, for instance,

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1. 'Mastery', Retrogression and Other Poems, London, 1917, p.4.

2. Letter to Archer, April 24, 1904, BM, Add. MS., 45,297. Since all Watson's letters to Archer come from this collection, no further reference to it will be made.

having sent a series of sonnets to the manager of the Bodley Head, Frederic Chapman,[1] he was furious when Chapman criticised them on etymological grounds. He complained to his publisher, John Lane, who tried to mediate between the two.[2] But both men considered themselves experts in etymology and neither would give way. In Watson's case, at least, the dogmatism sprang almost certainly from a feeling of inadequacy in academic matters. This same sense of deficiency probably caused an extremely pedantic argument he had with Professor Dowden of Trinity College, Dublin, over a minor point of grammar, in which he went into absurd linguistic detail and quoted extensively from Milton, Wordsworth, Landor, Swinburne, Tennyson, Addison, Lowell, William Cobbett and Rossetti to prove his case.[3] His inferiority to Dowden and others in most matters of scholarship galled him and it is easy to see why he occasionally lost his sense of perspective once he found himself on equal or superior ground with them. He freely admits to Richard Garnett:

> I greatly envy your vast store of historic and legendary knowledge, and lament my own exceeding deficiency in that respect, for there must be many fine subjects for poetry still untouched, or at least unexhausted, but my amplitude of ignorance - an ignorance of wide and various range - prevents me from having the key to them.[4]

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1. Frederic Chapman (1864-1918) was John Lane's manager at the Bodley Head during the first few years of its existence, and for over twenty years Lane's chief literary adviser. Among his discoveries were Arnold Bennett, Henry Harland and Lascelles Abercrombie. He also edited the greater part of Lane's English edition of Anatole France.

2. Chapman responded to Lane's attempt with three closely-typed pages in refutation of Watson's refutation; letter from Watson to Lane, July 15, and letter from Chapman to Lane, July 21, 1909, UC.

3. Letters to Dowden, June 25 & 26, /1885/, TCD.

4. Letter to Garnett, May 28, /1894/, Garnett collection.

Yet he refused to take Garnett's advice on his Ode on the Day of the Coronation of King Edward VII (1902), even though he asked for it originally. He reacted in a similar way with William Archer, who, at his own request, suggested how he might improve his play The Heralds of the Dawn.[1] It seems that he resented having to ask for so much help.

It may have been his lack of formal education which made him argue for the superiority of self-education. "I know you have not had too much education", he replied to a nephew who asked his advice on writing, "but that is nothing. Literary talent is its own education, and the culture that counts is mostly from within. Make of yourself a general receptacle for impressions from life and the world; then render them in the simplest manner and with such colouring as your own individuality will insensibly supply".[2] "All men who achieve anything in a creative way are self-educated", he argued elsewhere.[3] "The schools often aid them greatly, but the training and spiritual nurture which make them masters of the truth they are to teach or the beauty they are to illustrate are personal and individual". He himself received this "deeper education" from "long, unbroken hours of companionship with the

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1. Letters to Archer, October 23, November 5 & 12, 1911.
2. Letter to William Robinson Watson, October 18, 1906, UC.
3. The Critic, vol.22, p.154.

poets, and from constant rambles along the Lancashire sea-coast and frequent excursions into the country immortalised by Wordsworth".[1] Often he was able to combine these two activities, by taking his poetry-books out into the fields. He "had access to the best books", and it was undoubtedly his mother, with her quotation of the most poetic parts of the Bible, who first roused his interest in these books and encouraged him to read them for himself. He "soaked" himself at an early age in Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Chaucer, Byron, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Shelley and Landor.[2] The preface and contents of Lyric Love, an anthology of love poetry he edited in 1892, confirm both the width and the depth of his knowledge of English poetry.[3] Numerous references and quotations in other works and letters show that he also became familiar with major American poets such as Longfellow, Poe and Whitman.[4] He read a great deal of drama too; though critical of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, his detailed discussion of Dekker, Webster, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, Massinger, Beaumont and Fletcher, Middleton, Tourneur, Ford, Randolph, and Heywood, in his essay 'Some Literary Idolatries',[5] proves that he

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1. The Critic, vol.22, p.154.
2. Letter to Lane, February 9, 1908, UC.
3. See chap. 6, pp.122-3.
4. He writes an epigram on Whitman in 1884; mentions him in his review of J. Addington Symonds's Essays Speculative and Suggestive (The Academy, 38, August 30, 1890, p.167), and discusses him in some detail with Dowden in a series of letters dating from November 21, 1884 to January 21, 1885.
5. Excursions in Criticism, London, 1893, p.1ff.

is well-acquainted with their works. His references, in the same essay, to the prose writings of Swinburne, Landor, Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt show his familiarity with yet another area of literature and further references to Milton, Bacon, Macaulay, Johnson, Boswell, Ruskin, Pater, Froude, and Newman in a companion piece, 'The Mystery of Style',[1] suggest that this is far from superficial.[2] Nor is his knowledge of prose confined to non-fiction; "though not greatly given to the relaxation afforded by fiction",[3] he has nevertheless read such a variety of novelists as George Eliot, Fielding,[4] Hawthorne, Richardson, Dickens, Sterne, Robert Buchanan, Henry James, George Meredith,[5] and W. D. Howells. Three of his earliest loves were Bunyan, whom he "read through at the age of six, for the pure delight of it",[6] Wilkie Collins, whom he admired for his "astonishing adroitness and legerdemain",[7] and Scott, in whom he took an "enthusiastic delight".[8] A remark he made about Scott in later life shows that he did get some formal education:

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1. Excursions in Criticism, p.104ff.
2. See chap.6 for a discussion of Watson's prose-writing.
3. Pencraft, p.69.
4. See his article in The New York Times, February 11, 1912 and his letter to William Archer on December 3, 1907, where he argues that Amelia is inferior to Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews.
5. See Pencraft, pp.23, 24 & 87, and his essay 'Fiction - Plethoric and Anaemic' in which he discusses Meredith as an example of the 'anaemic'.
6. Pencraft, p.71.
7. Pencraft, p.69.
8. Letter to Lane, October 4, 1894, UC.

> Scott I adore, but his authority in such matters [i.e. whether it should be 'antiquarian' or 'antiquary'] is not very weighty. He was capable of very loose English, and I remember as a boy asking my schoolmaster if anything worse than the opening sentence of Ivanhoe[1] was known to exist. He admitted that it would disgrace a ten-year older ...[2]

The schoolmaster referred to here is the Rev. Edward Hall, who ran a small private school near Southport, which Watson attended from the age of sixteen to nineteen. Judging from the description of W.E. Mawdsely, who was there at the same time, Watson's lack of previous schooling did not put him at a disadvantage:

> Watson had a certain amount of pride, or a personal bearing due to uncommon self-retentiveness. He was aware of his unusual gifts, which he held in great control. The ordinary school-work was done without apparent effort; while others laboured heavily over lessons, he assimilated everything readily. He seemed to get his homework done in the street, in the short walks between his school and home. He had no interest in outdoor games; his concern was almost exclusively with his own quick mind which astonished his companions by its skill in dialectic and the fertility of its ideas.[3]

There are several legends about his remarkable memory, which he shared with his mother, one of which is worth repeating since it shows that he kept his detailed knowledge of English literature beyond his childhood. John Lane invited him to dinner one evening with Churton Collins, Professor of Classics at Birmingham University.

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1. "In that pleasant district of merry England which is watered by the river Don, there extended in ancient times a large forest, covering the greater part of the beautiful hills and valleys which lie between Sheffield and the pleasant town of Doncaster."

2. Letter to Lane, January 20, 1916, Yale, Watson Collection, box 4.

3. Rev. W.C. Hall, "William Watson", Manchester Quarterly, July-September 1936. W.C. Hall pointed out that he was no relation to Edward Hall.

When Collins, who was proud of his memory, started to reel off "some dozen of the Letters of Junius", Watson, not to be outdone, "repeated whole books from Paradise Lost".[1] Watson's obituary-writers improve on this story, both H. Bett and the critic of The London Mercury maintaining that he knew the whole of Paradise Lost by heart when still a boy.[2] His own humbler claim, that he "could have repeated the whole of Comus from memory" at the age of fourteen sounds nearer the truth.[3]

Apart from English literature, Watson also got a solid grounding in current scientific theories from his father, whose "very enfranchised mind had a natural impulse towards scientific speculation on its largest lines".[4] He would explain theories like natural selection and the survival of the fittest to his son, who was actively excited by these ideas. He even formed one of his own, which he consulted Darwin about in 1882.[5] He was proud to remember that "one of the last letters written by Darwin" was a "beautifully courteous acknowledgement of the utility of [his] trifling

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1. Harry Furniss, Paradise in Piccadilly, London, 1925, p.114.
2. See The London Quarterly, CLXI, January, 1936, p.21 and The London Mercury, XXXII, September, 1935, p.416.
3. Letter to Lane, March 22, 1915, UC.
4. Preface to The Muse in Exile, London, 1913, p.8.
5. Basing his theory on the involuntary movement of the human arm when walking, Watson suggested that the "ultra movement" which occurred in more strenuous activities, such as ploughing, was a remnant "from the far ages when our ancestors walked on all fours" (James Bromley, 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire').

suggestion".[1] He was also proud to be thought "in touch with the 'modern' spirit" by another scientist he admired - Herbert Spencer, who was known to have taken a "friendly interest" in his writings.[2] Defending his "modernity of thought", Watson wrote towards the end of his life, "I don't see how that can even be questioned".[3] He never felt threatened by the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century in the way many of his immediate predecessors in poetry had done. Lionel Stevenson, in his survey of Darwin Among the Poets, contrasts him with Tennyson, who was "profoundly impressed by the responsibility of contesting doubt and defending the compatibility of science and faith".[4] On the contrary, Watson rejoices in scientific advances and feels that all poets should do so. "Between

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1. Watson sent Darwin's reply to The Academy, where it was printed on June 10, 1882 (vol.21, p.417):

   Dear Sir, - You have misunderstood my meaning [in "The Expression of the Emotions of Man and Animals"]; but the mistake was a very natural one, and your criticism good. I ought not to have interpolated the sentence about the burying of food; and if inserted at all, it ought to have been at the end of paragraph [sic], or in a separate one. The case was instanced solely to illustrate a long continued habit, for, as far as I have seen, well-fed domestic dogs do not revisit their buried treasures. A dog when burying food makes a hole (as far as I have seen) with his front legs alone, and thrusts in the earth with his nose, so that there is no resemblance to the supposed excrement-covering movements. - Dear Sir, Yours faithfully

   CH. DARWIN

   I see that I have omitted to thank you for your very courteous expressions towards me.

2. The Muse in Exile, p.9.
3. Note "Re Wallace Nichols's proposed introduction to a selection from my lyrics" in Watson's hand; Yale, Watson Collection, box 3. Nichols told me that this selection was never completed.
4. Chicago, 1932, p.301.

poetry and science" he could "perceive no antagonism whatever". He did "not believe it possible for any true poetic greatness to coexist with an attitude of hostility towards the advancement of knowledge. . . . The poet who is really a poet, however deeply he may strike root in the past, emphatically lives and moves and has his being in the present".[1] He can see a difference between the two disciplines, however, and there is no doubt which he admires more:

> You babble of your "conquest of the air";
> Of Nature's secrets one by one laid bare.
> Her secrets! They are evermore withheld:
> 'Tis only in her porches you have dwelled.
> Could you once lift her veil as you desire,
> You were burnt up as chaff before her fire.
>
> When will you learn your place and rank in Mind?
> Art can create; Science can only find.
> You do but nibble at Truth: your vaunted lore
> Is the half-scornful alms flung from her door.
> Your lips her weak and watered wine have known;
> The unthinned vintage is for gods alone.[2]

Whilst he watched "all the really great achievements of the scientific intelligence with [a] fascinated gaze" and used several of its theories as subjects for poems, he could see good reason for "some protest against what used to be called, not entirely without justification, the arrogance of science".[3]

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1. The Muse in Exile, pp.18-19.
2. 'Science and Nature', The Muse in Exile, p.94.
3. The Muse in Exile, p.9.

Watson learnt most of his science on the long country walks his father took him from his earliest years. He loved walking and was pleased when his family moved to the much more rural district of Southport in his teens. It was in Southport, too, that Watson first appeared in print, at the age of fourteen, with "a sequence of what [he] called sonnets"[1] and a Yorkshire dialect poem.[2] His literary career had begun.

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1. The Critic, vol.22, p.153.

2. See The Southport Visiter [sic], January 25, 1876.

Chapter 2

The Liverpool Literary Circle

Watson's second contact with the literary world was much more exciting than his first, for in 1875, just before his seventeenth birthday, he paid a visit to Tennyson. He set off on the long journey to the Isle of Wight with no certainty that Tennyson would see him, having no letter of introduction. On his arrival at Freshwater he simply "sent a note together with a poem to Tennyson".[1] To his surprise he had a reply by return of post and was received the same evening at Farringford by Hallam Tennyson who told him that his father would like to see him at noon the next day. Tennyson himself gave him "a most cordial reception", but did his best to dissuade Watson from following literature as a profession. Hallam's remark, that "Browning was not making £200 a year out of his poetry", suggests that Tennyson was referring to the financial difficulties involved. His opinion of Watson's work, however, implies that he also doubted whether it was good enough; though he admired his "great flood of words . . . he did not see any genius for thought".

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1. Typewritten article by Lane entitled 'Conversations with Watson, April 30th /1909/', UC.

Watson's visit to Tennyson served no practical purpose, but his meeting with the Liverpool journalist James Ashcroft Noble, in the same year, was to be extremely useful to him. Unlike Tennyson, Noble discerned signs of "a certain intellectual grip" in Watson's poetry which distinguished it from most adolescent work he had seen, and he was "reckless, or prescient, enough to encourage him to persevere".[1] He first got to know William through his father, whom he had met journeying up to Liverpool on business. John Watson told him that the youngest of his three sons had "some apparent talent for versification" and asked if he would give him an "outside estimate of the young poet's powers". Noble had responded by inviting William to spend an evening at his house and "to bring with him any manuscripts which he thought fit to read" to him.

Noble was living close to the Watsons in the suburbs of Liverpool at this time[2] and, when they moved to Southport in 1876, he too moved there.[3] This continued nearness probably helped to strengthen his friendship with Watson, for they were "on terms of greatest intimacy" between 1876 and 1879,[4] when Watson spent many more evenings at Noble's house. He left a distinct impression on Noble's daughter, Helen, who described his visits to J.L. May years later.

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1. The Critic, vol.22, March 11, 1893, p.154.
2. Noble's address is given as: 21, Derwent Rd., Stoneycroft, West Derby, in the Lancashire Directory for 1864 and 1873.
3. The Watsons went to live at 11, Cross St., Southport, and Noble went to live in Ainsdale, a few miles outside the town.
4. James Bromley, 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire', vol.4, 1903-4, p.230.

She was struck by "his fine, handsome features [and] his delicate aquiline nose", and also by his "lively consciousness of what he conceived to be his high mission as a bard".[1] She remembered "how he would stride up and down her father's study, reading alternately passages from Milton and [his own] Prince's Quest as if to invite comparison between them". As she went on to say, her father had many other young protegés, including the poet Edward Thomas, whom she later married.

Yet Noble had published only one book when Watson first met him - The Pelican Papers (1873), a series of semi-autobiographical essays. By 1875 he had also composed most of the poetry he published later as Verses of a Prose-Writer (1887) and written some of the essays which he collected together under the titles The Sonnet in England (1893) and Impressions and Memories (1895). He was still to write three books on shorthand and a fourth on Morality in English Fiction during the eighties. His literary prestige was obviously not based on an impressive output, but was well-established by 1875, as John Watson's faith in his judgement shows. His being chosen in 1876 to start a new Liverpool weekly, The Argus, is even more convincing proof of his established reputation. His true medium seems to have been journalism, though his daughter suggests that it was something forced upon him, "to eke out his means".[2]

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1. J.L. May, John Lane and the Nineties, London, 1936, p.126.

2. Helen Thomas, As It Was, London, 1926, p.2.

Whether he liked journalism or not, Noble knew how to edit a newspaper. When he set about organizing The Argus he was faced with a number of problems which he dealt with most efficiently. The promoters of the paper were mainly members of the Temperance Society and anxious to establish it "as their organ and mouthpiece".[1] Noble did not share all their views by any means, yet he was able to satisfy them. Choosing contributors was an anxious business, since he "knew that the faddists would be well to the fore" (250). He was aware that a weekly paper could not "live on fads alone" and managed "to supplement their contributions by something that would not be so entirely 'caviare to the general'". According to one member of the staff, he was "an ideal editor for such a paper - able, courteous, and jocular"; he was also very wise, for he "did not require a teetotal certificate from his impetuous recruits".[2] Noble got a number of well-known writers to contribute,[3] but as he himself said later, The Argus owes its main interest "to certain other names, then of no account, but now known (at least two of them are known) wherever English literature is read".[4] Watson is obviously one of these two, for Noble places his name, with pride, at the head of his list:

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1. The Idler, vol.7, February-July, 1895, p.249.
2. James Bromley, 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire', p.231.
3. e.g. Francis Power Cobbe, Francis Newman, Edward Dowden, Edward Jenkins.
4. The Idler, p.250.

> A volume containing all the earliest published work of Mr William Watson, all but the earliest work of Mr Hall Caine, and the maiden efforts of that rising novelist, Mr William Tirebuck, may fairly claim something of distinction as a 'Book of Beginnings'.

Though not, strictly speaking, Watson's "earliest published work",[1] 'Poetae Musae', which appeared in the opening number of The Argus on October 21, 1876, is his first serious claim to poetry. It is not a startling beginning; the "intellectual grip" which Noble thought differentiated Watson's early work from that of other "juvenile rhymers" is not apparent; nor is it original in any other way. The content, little more than a plea to the "Spirit of Poesy" for inspiration, has been repeated by poets innumerable times. The form, at first sight experimental, is probably a slight adaptation of the well-known hymn "Let There Be Light":

> Cheer me and comfort me,
> Spirit of Poesy,
> Aye when I tread the long life-path alone.
> Fold up thy wandering wing!
> Sing to my spirit sing!
> Sighing and murmuring
> Every wild tone,
> Gladness and sorrow and laughter and moan.

The diction, too, is largely derivative, its main source being early and mid-nineteenth century Romantic poetry; "undulates", for example, occurs frequently in Shelley, and "laves" in Scott; there are also echoes of the deliberate archaisms of the followers of Spenser in such words as "aye" and "poesy"; onomatopoeic words like "melodious" and "mellifluous" are powerful reminders of Tennyson and Poe, and the heavy alliteration - "dirges of dole", for instance - probably stems from the same root. The syntax,

1. See chap. 1, p.28.

like the vocabulary, bears very little relation to "the language that men do use", as the inversion in the last line of the following extract shows:

> Lap me in melody,
> Spirit of Poesy;
> Lull me with joy-notes and dirges of dole.
> Anthem or madrigal,
> So be it musical . . .

There are no distinctive images; the implied analogy between music and poetry in the passage just quoted is common to verse of all ages; so too is the association of birds with evening and the spirit with a dove, which follow. This in itself is no condemnation, but Watson has added nothing fresh or individual to this traditional imagery; his use of the nightingale, a familiar symbol of mingled beauty and sorrow, suffers badly by comparison with Keats's:

> When the lorn nightingale
> Sighs out her doleful tale
> Telling the grove
> All the mellifluous sorrows of love.

Noble calls this poem "a musical little lyric betraying the influence of Shelley, who, the poet has himself told us, was his earliest master".[1] It not only betrays the influence of Shelley, but is a patchwork of scraps from many poets, the Romantics in particular.

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1. The Critic, p.154. Watson wrote in a later poem:

> 'In my young days of fervid poesy
> He drew me to him with his strange far light, --
> He held me in a world all clouds and gleams
> And vasty phantoms, where ev'n Man himself
> Moved like a phantom 'mid the clouds and gleams.'

("To Edward Dowden", Poems, i, p.148.)

'Time and Tide', the second poem to appear in The Argus, on November 11, 1876, is no less derivative, but far less diffuse in its borrowings. Noble thought the poem "showed that he had also come under the spell of Poe". Poe's poetry would have been readily available to Watson during the seventies as it had been brought out in several English editions by then. The "Wilson" of his anagrammatic pseudonym, "John Wilson Maitlaw", sounds like a deliberate echo of Poe's autobiographical tale "William Wilson", especially in view of the added coincidence of initials and Christian names.[1] The treatment of the subject matter in 'Time and Tide' closely resembles Poe's in 'A Dream Within a Dream'; the poet imagines himself walking on the seashore with a friend and coming across a name written in the sand. As the tide sweeps it pitilessly away, he reflects on the allegorical implications of the transience of human life:

> And we think 'twill endure in the eye of the years –
>   This poor name in the sands of the shore;
> And ev'n while we dream come the breakers of time,
>   And the waves of the future sweep o'er;
> And the stars shine above, and the tides roar beneath,
>   But the name is a name nevermore.

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1. Herbert Palmer, in Post-Victorian Poetry, London, 1938, suspects that Wordworth fascinated him for similar reasons: "To what extent he was barrenly intrigued by the double William of the Christian names and the double W of the surnames we can only conjecture". (p.33).

On the bleak shore of life, with its footprints of years,
  By the brink of the water we stand,
And before us outstretched lies a limitless sea
  That surges and chafes on the strand;
And with labour and care we inscribe our poor names
  In the sterile and featureless sand.

Poe had written:

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand –
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep – while I weep!
O God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
<u>One</u> from the pitiless wave?
Is <u>all</u> that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?[1]

Poe's moral is not so heavily laboured and he achieves a greater sense of loss and desolation by means of more personal and particular references, such as the grains of sand creeping through his fingers; the series of rhetorical questions also draws the reader more intimately into the experience. There are many other similarities with Poe's verse; the metre, for instance, is very like that of 'Annabel Lee', and the concluding word of the poem echoes the ominous "nevermore" of 'The Raven'.

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1. <u>Poems</u>, London, 1875, pp.167-168.

Watson described the poet in 'Time and Tide' as one who makes "all beautiful shapes out of dreams", a view which tallies very closely with the one Poe expresses in 'The Poetic Principle'. In this essay, which Watson is likely to have read in the English edition in 1875, Poe stressed the integral link between poetry and music. Watson had made the same point in 'Poetae Musae', and his next contribution to The Argus, a series of six articles on 'German Music and the German Musical Composers'[1] shows that his interests are running along similar lines. In the opening chapter he contrasts music and poetry, in which perfection is not attainable, with painting and sculpture, in which it is. Form is not the only thing of importance in music and poetry; there must also be "passions and emotions and aspirations". His non-classical approach to art, implicit in such a distinction, is clear also in his order of preferences, for though he admires the technical achievements of Bach, his real praise is kept for Gluck, Mozart, Mendelssohn and Wagner. His reservations about Bach spring from a dislike of his "spirit of so-called classicism which more or less pervaded all arts from poetry downwards, during the whole course of the eighteenth century", the pernicious influence of which "has since been universally acknowledged". After a detailed account of Addison's Spectator articles on Italian opera he continues his criticism of the classical, attributing the faults of eighteenth-century music to a "lack of

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1. The Argus, November 1876 to June 1877.

union betwixt musical science and musical art"; he also condemns the "pedantic versifiers" at the court of Charles I. Reverting back to the direct relationship between music and poetry, Watson praises Gluck for being the first to realise that "poetry should have an equal share in the structure of lyrical drama" and that "the true province of music [is] that of seconding poetry".[1] Gluck tried to make his work "the genuine and faithful interpreter of poetry", and in this respect he contrasts favourably with his contemporaries, who relied too little on the "higher qualities of imagination, impulse and passion". Mozart, however, possessed all these qualities, as well as "scholarly finesse" and it is this "sheer poetry" in his music which "exalts it above the works of all his predecessors".

Noble praises these articles for their "maturity of thought and expression remarkable in the work of a mere youth",[2] but I find very little of either. Their real interest lies in the light they throw on Watson's attitude towards art at this period; they show his dislike of the eighteenth-century Classical movement and his leanings towards the Romantic one of the nineteenth.

There is one more youthful work which deserves mention as "the first poem published by . . . William Watson in a London periodical".[3]

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1. He appears to have changed his mind as to the relative importance of the two in "Ludwig van Beethoven" (see p. 39).
2. The Critic, p.154.
3. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, f.190.

Its publication, though not in The Argus, was again due to Noble, who sent the poem to someone he knew in the printing department of The Graphic. It consisted of eight or nine Spenserian stanzas, of which two appeared. 'Ludwig van Beethoven', as it was called, is a distinct improvement on the other two poems; not only is it less derivative in style, it is also more original in content. Besides linking poetry with music, Watson now expresses an opinion of his own - that music is the superior of the two:

> . . . 'Twas his to teach
> How music's subtler language may outreach
> The heavenliest possibility of words,
> Till our weak utterance fail beside the rich
> Pulsating passion of tempestuous chords,
> Swoln with a vaster voice than mortal breath affords.

In these few lines alone an increased technical skill is apparent in the use of enjambement, the variation of the iambic pattern and the control of the demanding rhyme scheme. The diction, apart from "sprite" and "writ", is no longer deliberately archaic, though there are still many stock poetic euphemisms, such as "dwelling-place" for "home"; but an individual note is beginning to emerge in a marked taste for sonorous words like "pulsating", "tempestuous" and "incorporeal". Watson's own evaluation of the poem, as he remembered it, is a fair one - "just passable - certainly nothing more".[1]

Besides helping Watson to get his work published, Noble also introduced him to a number of interesting writers. One of these

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1. Bodleian, Walpole MS., b.6, f.69.

was Thomas Hall Caine who, Noble pointed out, was "among the first of /his/ contributors, both in point of time and of subsequent importance".[1] Caine was an ambitious young man and made his way quickly to the top of his profession. He started as a journalist on The Liverpool Daily Post and the turning point in his career came in 1879, when he gave a lecture in defence of Rossetti who had just been attacked by Robert Buchanan in an article called 'The Fleshly School of Poetry'. Rossetti was so pleased with Caine's defence - which Caine took care to send him - that he started up a correspondence with him and shortly afterwards invited him to become his secretary in London. Caine accepted and was with him when he died a year later. He lost no time in writing his Recollections of the poet, which appeared almost immediately. He then worked as a regular correspondent for The Liverpool Mercury in London, where he came into contact with Watts-Dunton, Swinburne, Arnold and Browning, among others, and contributed to many well-known periodicals, The Athenaeum in particular. In the mid-eighties he began writing novels,[2] several of which he later adapted for the theatre.[3] He also spent many years on a very different kind of work - a Life of Christ - in which he expressed his strong Christian beliefs. These were undoubtedly genuine, though apparently at

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1. The Idler, p.250.
2. e.g. The Shadow of a Crime, The Son of Hagar, The Deemsters.
3. e.g. The Bondman.

variance with his hard-headed ambitiousness. It was for his novels rather than his religious work, however, that he was to be remembered.

But "he was not a novelist, distinguished or otherwise, until several years after The Argus had had its day and ceased to be".[1] He was recommended to The Argus by his editor on The Liverpool Daily Post, Sir Edward Russell, who was an old friend of Noble's. Noble had had very little experience in journalism - "save the microscopical experience given by reviewing for a daily paper"[2] - and was delighted to find someone with more, especially someone who "could write". Though younger than himself, Noble was reassured to find that Caine was "much more a man of the world", more familiar with local affairs and proved to be a promising dramatic critic too.

Besides his important part in The Argus Caine made various other "grandiose efforts" to enliven the cultural life of Liverpool. The most important of these was "an attempt to establish a branch of the Shakespeare Society, the Ruskin Society, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings - all rolled into one".[3] By 1878 the Notes and Queries Society, as it came to be called, was

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1. The Idler, p.250.
2. The Idler, p.251.
3. My Story, p.50.

flourishing. Caine had managed to get such distinguished men as William Morris, Henry Irving and Ruskin to address it. He himself realised in later years that it was the local young men, however, who were of most interest, as in the case of The Argus:

> One became known as a poet (I think a great one), another as a politician, a third as a preacher, and two of us as writers of tales.[1]

The poet was almost certainly Watson, who attended the meetings of the Society with Noble. The other "writer of tales", beside Caine, was his close friend William Tirebuck. Tirebuck was an active member of this groups of young writers and helped Caine to found and run the Society.[2] Like Caine he was a self-made man. He had been forced to leave school before the age of twelve, yet had got his first literary post at sixteen, as co-editor of a new weekly. Like Caine, too, he experimented in a number of literary forms other than journalism. His first three books[3] and many of his articles were a combination of biography and art-criticism, whereas his editions of the work of Bowles, Lamb, Goldsmith, Longfellow and Hartley Coleridge showed his powers of literary criticism. He also wrote short stories[4] and novels, one of which Tolstoi described as "the best example of modern English fiction" he had read.[5]

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1. My Story, p.51.
2. See Caine's memoir of Tirebuck published in 'Twixt God and Mammon (1903).
3. William Daniels, Artist (1879), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1882) and Great Minds in Art (1887).
4. Jenny Jones and Jenny (1896) and The Little Widow (1894).
5. My Story, p.36. The novel referred to is Miss Grace of All Souls (1895).

Though he had written poetry too, this was not published till after his death[1] and he was known in his lifetime as a writer of prose. Noble, who had, of course, seized him for The Argus, considered him a better journalist than Caine and valued his work greatly. He thought Tirebuck's criticisms of Liverpool preachers and articles on such themes as 'Dramatic Interest', 'Dramatic Influence', and 'Mediocrities' - "capital examples of journalistic work . . . plain-spoken, vigorous performances, with here and there . . . a touch of subtlety that denoted a mind with an analytic turn".[2]

Watson would have met Tirebuck, who was four years older than he, at The Argus offices and at meetings of the Notes and Queries Society. Through the same two channels he got to know yet another member of the group - James Bromley. Bromley differed from the other members of the group in at least two ways. He was considerably older than most of them and the head of a large firm of building contractors. It was as an employer that he first met Caine, who had worked in his architectural office before taking up writing full-time. Bromley combined a concern for business with an impressive "breadth of cultivation"[3] and his first venture with Caine outside the office was to set up a branch of William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. "An ardent

1. Poems, ed. John Hogben, London, 1912.
2. The Idler, p.255.
3. The Bookman, vol.4, May, 1893, p.48.

antiquarian", Bromley had "no difficulty in inspiring Mr Caine with his own enthusiasm".[1] Bromley thought that it was possibly this example which stimulated Caine to start the Notes and Queries Society,[2] though Caine himself says that the two societies were founded simultaneously. Having been introduced to Noble and Tirebuck by Caine Bromley became, in his own words, "a very occasional contributor to The Argus".[3] But he seems to have been more of a patron than a practitioner of the arts. When Caine had gone over to the Isle of Man in the early eighteen seventies to help his uncle run a small school there, Bromley promised to support him if he would return to carry on his "proper" career.[4] With his "singular geniality",[5] he became "Watson's Maecenas" too.[6] He also helped him in other than financial ways, though this was later on in the early eighties, when they became close friends.[7]

With the exception of Bromley, for whom literature was not a full-time occupation, all the members of this coterie eventually became known in a much wider context. But while they were together in Liverpool, it was Caine who stood out as leader. Though Noble started the new weekly, Caine found him many of his contributors.

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1. The Bookman, p.49.
2. 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire', p.230.
3. ibid., p.231.
4. My Story, p.43.
5. The Bookman, p.48.
6. The Liverpool Post.
7. See chap.4.

He introduced both Tirebuck and Bromley to Noble, Bromley to Tirebuck and probably Tirebuck to Watson. The literary society, at which they all got to know each other better, "owed its existence to his indomitable ardour", as Noble put it.[1] Besides finding well-known people to address the Society, he also read papers to it himself. He must have made a very strong contrast with Watson, whom he describes as "a boy of seventeen or eighteen at that time, . . . very slight and pale, very modest and reticent, and reminding us constantly of Keats - not alone by his spiritual gifts but also his physical infirmities, for he was very delicate then, and we feared he would die of decline".[2] The critic Samuel Waddington, a fervent admirer of both, was struck by the contrast between the two when he saw them together in 1890:

> Two men more dissimilar in appearance, and also in character, than Mr Hall Caine and Mr Watson it would be difficult to find, for the former, dressed in a velveteen coat, . . . somewhat resembled the supposititious portraits of Shakespeare as regards his face and forehead; whereas Mr Watson was, like myself, only attired in an ordinary tweed country suit, and did not resemble Shakespeare, Dante, or any other illustrious poet of the past.[3]

Their obvious difference of temperament may help to explain why Watson could not get on with Caine. It does not, however, account for his intense dislike of him, which comes out clearly in his satirical portrait in 1884:

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1. The Bookman, p.49.
2. My Story, p.51.
3. Chapters of My Life, London, 1909, p.217-8.

Methinks I see him, Garb of wondrous mode
As though dead genius' mantle o'er him flowed;
Smorzando tricks of voice, that make you stare;
And superfluity of fragrant hair,
Pronunciation strange, at second hand,
Pictorial pose, in complex detail planned.
With affectation so ingrained through all
In him were naturalness unnatural.

Groveller before greatness late alive [i.e. Rossetti]
Now on dead greatness fattened may'st thou thrive!
Dead greatness, who permitted thee to blend
In equal parts the footman and the friend;
And whose one blessing 'twas, this world to quit
Some hours before thou hadst his memoirs writ.[1]

The second stanza implies that Watson envied and resented Caine's success with Rossetti in particular. The same personal animosity seems to have motivated an article he wrote for The Fortnightly in 1888, in which Caine, he admitted, was "the victim".[2] But the title of the article, 'The Further Fall of Fiction', suggests that Watson's scorn was not only personal; he did genuinely despise most of Caine's literary efforts, as his description of Caine's review of William Sharp's Human Inheritance shows:

> He liked Sharp and classified him as belonging to "the school of Pope - as seen, for example, in Gray (!)" . . . one of the most remarkable dicta of the "Higher Criticism". The same article being "in" for classifying, numbered Mr Matthew Arnold among poets of "what may be called the Tennysonian school".[3]

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1. Unpublished holograph MS., Yale, Watson Collection.
2. Letter to Edward Dowden, headed 'Sunday', some time before August 30, 1888, TCD. The article was never published, perhaps because it was too vindictive or libellous.
3. Letter to Dowden, September 24, 1882, TCD.

Watson's antagonism did not have time to develop serious consequences in Liverpool, however, for in 1879, according to Bromley, "this pleasant confraternity of young men was broken up".[1] The break-up began with Noble's move to London, when The Argus came to an end. It continued with the departure of Caine to join Rossetti, which coincided with the sudden death of the 'Notes and Queries' Society. Shortly afterwards Tirebuck left for Leeds, to become sub-editor of The Yorkshire Post and the group ceased to be. Thus, of all the original members, only Watson and Bromley remained in Liverpool, though the others were to return, either on visits like Caine, or to live, like Noble, or to die, like Tirebuck.

The effect of the break-up on Watson is hard to judge. Being a member of a literary circle, however limited, had made a great deal of difference to him. It had enabled him to get his work published in a reputable weekly. It had also meant that he met other writers with whom he could discuss literature from a professional point of view. Their admiration for his work had probably helped him to overcome the shyness caused by an abnormally sheltered childhood and given him greater confidence in his abilities. His taste in literature had almost certainly changed under so many new influences. The members of the group had at least one love in common - Rossetti. Noble had influenced Caine with his own enthusiasm

1. 'Some Literary Reminiscences of Lancashire', p.231.

for the poet[1] and probably Tirebuck too; it was not surprising that Watson, the youngest and most impressionable member of the circle, should have been similarly affected. Rossetti's influence on his poetic technique can be clearly seen in what Caine described as "a long romantic poem . . . full of genius".[2] 'The Prince's Quest', as it was called, may not strike the modern reader in the same way, but it is worth looking at for other reasons.

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1. The Bookman, vol.4, May, 1893, p.49.

2. My Story, p.51.

Chapter 3

The Prince's Quest and Professor Dowden

Watson planned 'The Prince's Quest' in 1877[1], when his friendship with Noble was at its strongest, and he relied heavily on Noble's guidance in writing it. Each of its ten cantos was taken over to Noble's house as it was finished and Watson remembered him "reading it passage by passage . . . discussing it with [him] and even in one instance making [him] his debtor for hints towards the evolution of the circumstances".[2] But Noble's most powerful effect on the poem was indirect; he roused Watson's interest in Dante Gabriel Rossetti. William Rossetti told Coulson Kernahan that his brother was "immensely taken" with 'The Prince's Quest' and saw great promise in the work.[3] Clearly Rossetti found some affinities in Watson. We have only to look at a passage he marked

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1. Letter to John Lane, March 22, 1915, UC.
2. Letter to Edward Dowden, October 11, 1879, TCD: Noble's version can be found in his 'Personal Reminiscences', The Critic, March 11, 1893, p.154.
3. J.C. Kernahan, Five More Famous Living Poets, p.283:

   'Gabriel was living...in that gloomiest of abodes, Tudor House, Chelsea, where a room was always kept ready for Tom Hall Caine...and Walter Watts..., when he first came across a book by a young poet called Watson. I rather fancy that Caine brought the book to the house, for he said that Watson hailed, as he did, from Liverpool, but Gabriel, who didn't trouble himself much about the work of new men, was immensely taken with it, read passages aloud to me, and predicted great things of the young poet'.

   Theodore Watts-Dunton claimed that, though Hall Caine brought The Prince's Quest into the house, it was he who had brought it to Rossetti's attention.

as "specially excellent"[1] to see what these affinities might be:

> About him was a ruinous fair place,
> Which Time, who still delighteth to abase
> The highest, and throw down what men do build,
> With splendid prideful barrenness had filled,
> And dust of immemorial dreams, and breath
> Of silence, which is next of kin to death.
> A weedy wilderness it seemed, that was
> In days forepast a garden, but the grass
> Grew now where once the flowers, and hard by
> A many-throated fountain had run dry,
> Which erst all day a web of rainbows wove
> Out of the body of the sun its love.
> And but a furlong's space beyond, there towered
> In middest of that silent realm deflowered
> A palace builded of black marble, whence
> The shadow of a swart magnificence
> Falling, upon the outer space begot
> A dream of darkness when the night was not.[2]

Rossetti would probably have liked the combination of concrete details and decorative effect in phrases like "a many-throated fountain", "a web of rainbows", "the body of the sun" and "a palace builded of black marble". He would have appreciated the suggestion of past glory and present decay in "the ruinous fair place" and approved of archaisms such as "delighteth", "prideful", "erst", "builded", and "swart". The vague mysticism and symbolism of the dry fountain, the weedy garden and the black palace would have appealed to him, as would the hint at the supernatural in phrases like "the silent realm deflowered" and "the shadow of a swart magnificence". Above all he would have responded to the lyric

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1. William Sharp found this comment in Rossetti's heavily annotated copy of The Prince's Quest, which he 'came to possess' (Sonnets of this Century, London, 1886, p.318).

2. Poems, ii, pp.173-4.

beauty of the lines. His general comment on 'The Prince's Quest' - that it "takes one straight back to Keats"[1] - together with Watson's own admission of his love of Keats,[2] suggests that Watson was drawing on similar sources to Rossetti, rather than imitating him directly. 'The Prince's Quest' has a number of features in common with Keats's first ambitious narrative - 'Endymion'. Both poems are love-quests, both rely on dreams and supernatural elements to carry the action forward, both are written in heroic couplets, both contain inserted lyrics in a variety of metres and both make use of sensuous imagery. Like Keats, and Rossetti too, Watson was an admirer of Spenser:

> The poets who at that time had most influenced me [he wrote twenty-one years later] were Spenser, whom I had read and imbibed completely (first making his acquaintance in the supremely well chosen passages extracted by Leigh Hunt in "Imagination and Fancy"), the Milton of Comus and the Minor Poems, Keats, Shelley and Coleridge.[3]

He attributed the archaic diction of 'The Prince's Quest' to Spenser, whose own diction had "a good deal of patchwork about it", and denied the influence of William Morris, which many critics detected.[4]

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1. C.H. Ross, 'The Poetry of William Watson', The Sewanee Review, vol.3, February, 1895, p.158.
2. Once his enthusiasm for Shelley had passed, Watson wrote:

   'Anon the Earth recalled me, and a voice
   Murmuring of dethroned divinities
   And dead times deathless upon sculptured urn -
   And Philomela's long-descended pain
   Flooding the night - and maidens of romance
   To whom asleep St Agnes' love-dreams come -
   Awhile constrained me to a sweet duresse
   And thraldom, lapping me in high content,
   Soft as the bondage of white amorous arms'.

   ("To E. Dowden", Poems, i, pp.148-9.)
3. Letter to William Archer, November 8, 1901.
4. e.g. C. Weygandt, 'William Watson and his Poetry', The Sewanee Review, vol.12, April, 1904, p.192.

Rossetti agreed with Watson that there was no sign of his having read Morris. The narrative of 'The Prince's Quest' is very similar to that of <u>Love is Enough</u>, but since both are heavily indebted to Spenser, this is no proof that Watson was lying. Watson also denied the allegorical nature of his poem,[1] but most critics interpreted it allegorically, as an extract from <u>The Athenaeum</u> will show:

> The prince's quest is for a fair land, of course with a fair queen to match. This region of delight is first beheld by him in a dream of his youth. After many adverse fortunes he succeeds in reaching it at last, but only when he is old and worn out. He drinks, however, of the river that flows through the land, and so regains his youth.[2]

In spite of its rather too obvious allegory and derivativeness, 'The Prince's Quest' is not entirely dismissable. It contains some good passages, such as the description of the final reconciliation of the prince with his dream-princess, where the imagery and use of repetition is skilfully controlled:

> Often when evening sobered all the air,
> No doubt but she would sit and marvel where
> He tarried, by the bounds of what strange sea;
> And peradventure look at intervals
> Forth of the windows of her palace walls,
> And watch the gloaming darken fount and tree;
> And think on twilight shores, with dreaming caves
> Full of the groping of bewildered waves,
> Full of the murmur of their hollow halls.

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1. See <u>Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins</u>, p.254, where L.C. Collins describes Watson's reaction to Richard Hutton's allegorical interpretation of 'The Prince's Quest' in <u>The Spectator</u>, LXX, May 20, 1893, pp.874-875.

2. <u>The Athenaeum</u>, no.2756, August 21, 1880, p.237.

As flowers desire the kisses of the rain,
She his, and many a year desired in vain:
She waits no more who waited long and well.
Nor listeth he to wander any more
Who wandered with the winds from sea to shore,
From shore to sea, till lovelier fate befell.
The winds do seek a place of rest; the flowers
Look for the rain; but in a while the showers
Come, and the winds lie down, their wanderings o'er.[1]

Noble thought 'The Prince's Quest' worth publishing and so, too, did his friend Professor Edward Dowden of Trinity College, Dublin, who recommended it to Kegan Paul in November 1879.[2] It was published at John Watson's expense in 1880 as The Prince's Quest and Other Poems. The "other poems" had been suggested by both Dowden and Noble, though Watson himself had originally thought of including some lyrics and sonnets from earlier work. Kegan Paul had advised him to let 'The Prince's Quest' stand alone, but after arranging to have it printed Watson had written a shorter and very different narrative poem - 'Angelo' - which he wanted to include. In order to balance the book he "threw in all [his] little lyrics etc. which in any way satisfied" him and one or two which did not, to please Noble.[3] Looking at these additional poems it is not hard to see why the book was, in Watson's own words, "a dead loss to everybody concerned".[4] There is very little

1. Poems, ii, p.205.

2. Letter from Watson to Dowden, November 19, 1879, TCD. Since all Watson's letters to Dowden come from Trinity College Library, Dublin, "TCD" will be omitted from future references to them.

3. Letter to Dowden, May 8, 1880.

4. The Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, p.253. It sold only forty copies in eight months Watson told Dowden on November 5, 1880, and received very few reviews.

originality in any of them. 'Angelo' shows the same influences as the title-poem - Coleridge in particular - without sharing its occasional good points. Most of the short lyrics are clearly modelled on Blake's 'Songs' but lack either his 'Innocence' or his 'Experience'. Even the four sonnets, two of which David Main thought worth including in his Treasury of English Sonnets (1880), derive largely from Shelley, not Watson. The poems are technically competent but rarely anything more. Their subject matter is often trite and their syntax and diction sometimes highly artificial. It is not surprising that the editor of The Spectator had refused them, when Watson had sent them to him a few years earlier.[1] The only way in which the poetry does rise above the mediocre at times is in its use of certain striking similes, such as the comparison of a few tense moments to "a pyramid of piled eternities".[2] But the best of these comes from 'The Prince's Quest', not its supporting poems:

> He came, an hour past midnight, to the shore,
> And, looking backward, far above espied
> The two sharp peaks, one peak on either side
> Of that lone pass; verily like a pair
> Of monstrous horns, the tips far-seen, up there:
> And in the nether space betwixt the two,
> A single monstrous eye, the moon shone through.[3]

Watson soon turned against 'The Prince's Quest', finding it "most alien to [his] adult tastes and preferences", mainly because

1. Letter to Dowden, March 30, 1885.
2. 'Angelo', The Prince's Quest, p.125.
3. Poems, ii, p.193.

of what he called its "latter-day mannerisms".[1] His admiration for Rossetti, to whose style he is obviously referring, passed off very quickly. Only four years after the poem appeared he told Professor Dowden that Canon Beeching's remark about the predominance of Rossetti's influence in his next volume was "simply absurd" and showed that Beeching knew nothing of either his or Rossetti's essential features.[2] Watson's reaction against Rossetti was so strong that he even resented being reminded of his praise, which he felt fixed him as nothing more than the author of 'The Prince's Quest'.[3] He was not at all grateful when William Sharp sent him Rossetti's annotated copy of The Prince's Quest and had no compunction in presenting it to Dowden, who was shocked by such lack of reverence. Watson's attempt to explain his attitude shows that he thought both Rossetti and Sharp had been condescending towards him:

> To tell the truth about that blessed volume, my pleasure in its proprietorship has never infringed upon rapture. In the first place I am no very fervid Rossettian. In the second place D.G.R's kind words to me and about me, though I was always sufficiently sensible of their kindness, had a little too much of the tone of patronage to be wholly mellifluous to me - though I daresay the patronage was quite unconscious and that he intended pure encouragement. In the third place . . . I feel somehow no great disposition to like Mr Sharp, though his demeanour towards me has been consistently courteous. So, having now deliberately and insultingly degraded the thing

1. L. Stedman and G.M. Gould, Life and Letters of E.C. Stedman, New York, 1910, vol.2, p.52, letter from Watson to E.C. Stedman, July 9, 1887.
2. Letter to Dowden, March 4, 1884.
3. Letter to Dowden, November 17, 1882.

> into a gift having little value in the giver's eyes, you will not I am sure think it worth while taking the trouble to send it back to such a wanton ingrate as I.[1]

Watson knew Edward Dowden quite well by the time he sent him Rossetti's book in 1884. He had probably first met him in 1877 when he had been staying with Noble near Liverpool. Noble himself had only just got to know Dowden,[2] but he had already persuaded him to write for The Argus and almost certainly arranged for him to open the first meeting of the Notes and Queries Society - the reason for Dowden's visit. Watson saw Dowden again the same year, after he had returned to Dublin.[3] But it had been an unfortunate meeting, since Watson was suffering from a heavy cold and upset stomach - "due to having stayed a couple of days with a friend, whose meals were had at any time so long as it were two or three or four hours after the understood time".[4] He felt he had been so tiresome to Dowden and his wife that he had not dared to get in touch with him again for two years, when Noble happened to tell him that Dowden had been enquiring after him. Noble also told Watson that he had shown Dowden the little he had written of 'The Prince's Quest' when he paid a return visit to him in 1878. Having now completed it, a year later, Watson was writing to ask Dowden for a second opinion on it, since he had begun to find Noble a "perilously

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1. Letter to Dowden, November 21, 1884.
2. In The Sonnet in England, which Noble dedicated to Dowden in 1893, he dates their first meeting as sixteen years previously.
3. There is a postcard in the Trinity College collection, postmarked Dublin, September 15, 1877, and signed "W.W.".
4. Letter to Dowden, October 11, 1879.

partial adviser".[1] He was obviously looking for someone to replace Noble and he was delighted when Dowden, whom he considered one of the best living judges of poetry, agreed to help:

> I always have a feeling of perfect assurance that whatever I send you will produce in you its full and due effect, - that your judgement will take no tincture from temporary moods, subjective conditions, or accidental prepossessions of any kind, such as I often observe to influence the critical verdicts (upon various matters) of our otherwise admirable J.A.N. for instance. And indeed if I were to write anything on an extensive and ambitious scale, putting a deal of labour into it, and grounding no matter how sanguine expectations upon it, I believe that the receipt of clear evidence of its having communicated to you no such thrill of pleasure as I meant it to excite, would convince me that what I had proposed to myself was worthless, and would prevent me from putting any trust in more favourable impressions which my work might make upon other minds, how cultivated soever. There, briefly, is my confession of faith in you![2]

Dowden not only gave Watson literary advice. Besides recommending him to Kegan Paul who agreed to print The Prince's Quest, he was helpful in getting other work published. He had greater influence than Noble in the literary world and was able to introduce Watson to a number of important people. Watson was very grateful for the way he wrote to Joseph Cotton of The Academy, for example, about his next batch of poems.[3] His acquaintance with Alfred Austin and John Courthope, which led to the publication of two more important works[4] and several essays in The National Review, began

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1. Letter to Dowden, October 11, 1879.
2. Letter to Dowden, January 27, 1886.
3. Letter to Dowden, August 24, 1882. Cotton later gave Watson some reviewing, probably at Watson's suggestion. See chap.6, pp.114-8.
4. 'Ver Tenebrosum' and 'Wordsworth's Grave'.

with an introductory letter from Dowden,[1] and his "active zeal of friendliness" was behind an offer of work Watson received from Graves of The Spectator in 1890.[2] Dowden also brought Watson to the attention of Richard Garnett, whose scholarship and influence proved very useful to him. Watson himself often suggested how Dowden might help. He asked to be introduced to John Morley of Macmillan's Magazine, for instance,[3] and hinted that he would like to know Richard Holt Hutton of The Spectator.[4] He was more explicit about Dowden "putting in a good word"[5] for him with Macmillan's and how he could help him with the publication of a particular book of poetry:

> I send you in a volume the material of the projected vol. of verse, which I am going to send to Fisher Unwin. Do you mind just glancing over it and writing to me a short letter about it - you know the sort of thing - which I could without impropriety show to Unwin as letting him casually see the opinion of my work - the unsolicited and spontaneous opinion - of that great critical authority Professor Dowden. To throw him off the scent you might chuck in something more besides, so as to prevent it appearing like a letter written to be shown -.[6]

Dowden was helpful in other ways. John Watson's leniency towards his son, for instance, was probably due to Dowden, whom he considered "one of the world's ideal heroes".[7] In fact, Dowden

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1. See chap.6, p.112.
2. Letter to Dowden, March 5, 1890. See also chap.6, p.118.
3. Letter to Dowden, c. early 1884.
4. Letter to Dowden, December 22, 1887.
5. Letter to Dowden, July 6, 1890.
6. Letter to Dowden, April 9, 1889.
7. Letter to Dowden, c. December 1886. Cf. Hall Caine, My Story, pp.51-52.

impressed the whole Watson family, whom he visited several times during the seventies and eighties. They may not have been able to appreciate, as William did, his "dizzy altitude as an intellectual giant" but they instinctively felt him to be "a real man".[1] Dowden proved his humanity in several ways, the most concrete being the amount of money he lent Watson over the years.[2]

Though obviously willing to help where he could, however, Dowden refused to give literary advice unless he thought Watson was absolutely serious about a piece of work. By discouraging any discussion of mere projects, he hoped to make Watson produce more and dream less.[3] Part of his impatience with Watson's tendency to talk about his plans rather than put them into practice, sprang from his own sobriety and industriousness. Despite his complaints about the "College Mill-wheel"[4] - he had been a professor of English since 1867 - he produced many critical books and essays, most of which Watson read as they appeared. He had a wide knowledge of French and German, as well as English, literature and wrote on such varied subjects as Swift, Goethe, Montaigne, Milton, Lamb, Donne, Whitman and Edmund Gosse. He was chiefly interested in sixteenth and nineteenth-century writers, particularly Marlowe, Spenser and Shakespeare, but he also wrote on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Southey, Browning, Tennyson, Carlyle and George Eliot. He was a careful editor and biographer of many of these writers and when

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1. Letter to Dowden, December 11, 1885.
2. e.g. Watson thanked him for the loan of £10 in 1888 and for £20 in 1889.
3. Watson finally agreed with Dowden on the "non-advisability of expounding one's scheme of a poem". Letter of January 4, 1888.
4. Letter to Dowden, October 9, 1882.

Watson first met him his two books on Shakespeare[1] had already made him known as a sound critic. His single editions of Shakespeare's plays which followed established him as an authority on the subject. Watson admired his Shakespeare, his Mind and Art particularly, finding it "one of the most delightful by far of all Shakespeare books".[2] He also admired the other work for which Dowden became well-known - his life of Shelley.

Watson's six long letters to Dowden on the publication of The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley show that he did not always share his viewpoint,[3] but all his important productions of the eighties suggest that he was heavily influenced by his judgements. Dowden's admiration for Shakespeare, Landor, and Goethe, for instance, are reflected in Epigrams of Art, Life and Nature, his interest in the sonnet form makes itself felt in 'Ver Tenebrosum', a series of political sonnets, and his love of Wordsworth is echoed in 'Wordsworth's Grave', as well as his opinions on the eighteenth century. Watson always tried to read whatever Dowden suggested, ranging from J.R. Lowell's My Study Windows to Sir H. Taylor's Philip von Artevelde and his Autobiography. The most extravagant terms could not exaggerate his sense of his "own rare good fortune", he said, "in having the help and guidance in literary labours of a critic

1. Shakspere: a critical study of his Mind and Art, London, 1875 and a Shakespeare Primer (1877).
2. Letter to Dowden, August 10, 1882. Watson adopted Dowden's spelling, "Shakespere", during the eighties.
3. These letters date from December 27, 1886 to January 8, 1887.

and poet and friend" like Dowden,[1] and he asked for this guidance over the smallest details. He sent Dowden several similar versions of some epigrams and sonnets, for instance, before deciding on their final form[2] and was indebted to him for at least two Latin titles.[3] He could even accept adverse criticism from him, in contrast to his reaction to other friends;[4] "in most cases where you find fault", he told him, "I feel that you do so with reason".[5] On political questions only was he not willing to accept his suggestions, though he was probably influenced by Dowden's opinions more than he realised.[6]

Dowden's impressive output was a continued reminder to Watson of his own failings. He found his "invariably equipped condition and general effectiveness . . . an established rebuke to a miserable, self-conscious and self-condemned failure" like himself.[7] When he considered how much else Dowden had to do, beside producing original work, he was even more impressed and defeated:

> I "pine my loss", [he wrote] being myself a fellow cursed with indolence, and probably destined to be a failure throughout life from that cause chiefly.[8]

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1. Letter to Dowden, April 15, 1885.
2. Many of these MSS are preserved in the Trinity College collection.
3. i.e. Ver Tenebrosum and Lachrymae Musarum.
4. See chap.1, pp.19-21.
5. Letter to Dowden, August 24, 1882.
6. Letter to Dowden, April 15, 1885.
7. Letter to Dowden, March 4, 1885.
8. Letter to Dowden, January 27, 1885.

Though depressed by Dowden's industry, however, Watson was encouraged to go on by the genuine interest he took in all his work:

> . . . let me say [he wrote] that your warm welcome, and authoritative commendation, and serious criticism, of what I have lately written [i.e. some epigrams], has been a solid good to me, and that I shall hereafter go to work more cheerfully, more happily and altogether with greater zest because of your perge puer.[1]

Watson undoubtedly appreciated Dowden's willingness to give serious consideration to any literary experiment he made and to criticize his work. His strong sense of his "own great good fortune, [his] especial blessedness, in having a friend among the finest minds of this age"[2] comes out in an unpublished sonnet he sent him during the eighties:

> To me, your Singer, you have stood in line
> Of fame: you listened, and well paid was I.
> Oft as it flickered in the wind, 'twas you
> Forbade my pallid flame of song to die.
> O with your voice confirm my feet anew,
> Timidly halting, Parnasse looks so high.[3]

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1. Letter to Dowden, October 13, 1882.
2. Letter to Dowden, January 27, 1886.
3. Holograph poem, "To E.D.", undated, TCD.

Chapter 4

First Nervous Breakdown
and Epigrams of Art, Life & Nature

Though Watson greatly appreciated Dowden's literary advice, it had not been his sole reason for writing to him in 1879. With the departure of Noble, Caine and Tirebuck he had begun to feel a distinct lack of intelligent and cultured friends in Liverpool. A letter from Dowden, he told him, "would come like as to them that faint in parched wilderness the cloudy winds from South-west incontinent of rain".[1] But Dowden was a busy man and not always a regular correspondent. Even when he did write he could not supply what Watson had lost - personal contact and stimulating conversation. For these he had to turn to one of the few surviving members of the group, James Bromley. The two had been acquainted since the beginning of The Argus and the Notes and Queries Society, but it was not until these had come to an end that they really got to know each other. Their intimacy increased when the Watsons moved house in 1881 and William found himself a close neighbour of Bromley's at Lathom, near Ormskirk. The Watson

1. Letter to Dowden, March 4, 1884.

family had settled there, after a brief stay in Maghull,[1] by April 1881, for when William wrote to Dowden that same month, he told him that he had "shaken the dust of Southport from off [his] feet".[2] William was not only glad to have left that "pseudo-fashionable 'watering-place' and local metropolis of Philistinism" behind,[3] he was also delighted to be living in the country for the first time in his life. Lathom, fifteen miles north of Liverpool, is now a small town, but in Watson's day it was "an entirely rural district" where he could spend his time "in scribbling verses from mole-hills and five-barred gates, as Landor in Warwickshire did".[4] His description of the area shows that his love of the country was as strong in his early twenties as it had been in childhood:

> The country about here has no striking features, but yet (to my mind) much quiet charm, perhaps none the worse for its lack of loud self-assertion; and Lathom Park is really beautiful. My own favourite select haunt is a wood entirely within the park's enclosure and yet as wild and unsophisticated and unviolated as aught you could wish. One part of it is among the most pure and exquisite things I have ever seen - I hardly know of such a total and unthwarted concurrence of loveliness anywhere, especially just now, when all the foliage is a gradual smouldering fire. Yet perhaps its finest possibilities are developed in winter. Last winter I know I thought so, but ever when Autumn returns, all the rest of the year seems superseded by the glow of these crumbling glories.[5]

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1. Bromley gives their address as Taylor's Lane, Kenessee Green, Maghull ('Some Literary Reminiscences', p.230).
2. Letter to Dowden, April 23, 1881.
3. Letter to Dowden, November 5, 1880.
4. Letter to Dowden, April 23, 1881.
5. Letter to Dowden, October 10, 1882.

In Bromley Watson found someone to share his appreciation. "Many a moonlight night", Bromley wrote, "have we spent on the edge of Martin Mere, watching the ghostly shadow of the clouds as they glide in awesome variety over the green turf; or, on hot summer evenings, observing the mists rising from the earth like sacrificial incense".[1] They were both very fond of the Lake District and often spent holidays there together.[2] Another of their favourite places was Scotland, which they frequently toured. Liverpool was within easy distance of other interesting parts they also visited. They enjoyed the "sky and sea and women" of the Isle of Man, for instance,[3] and sailed to Dublin in Bromley's yacht on one occasion.[4] Bromley had his business to run and could not always get away for as long as Watson, but he would sometimes join him for a few days - in North Wales, for example.[5] He also took Watson with him on business, to places like Derbyshire.[6] Many of their trips were taken solely for pleasure, however. On one short visit to Edinburgh, for instance, they planned to take "no luggage beyond a couple of shirts and about

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1. 'Some Literary Reminiscences', p.234.
2. They were there as late as 1898, according to a letter from Watson to John Lane in April 1898 (UC). Watson mentions Bromley's love of the area in his dedication to him of 'Wordsworth's Grave' (1890).
3. Letter from Watson to John Lane, August 19, 1894, UC.
4. Watson wrote to tell Dowden he might be paying him a quick visit on May 29, 1885.
5. Letter from Watson to John Lane, 'Tan-y-Bwlch', July 6, 1907, UC.
6. Letter to Dowden, before August 30, 1885.

three dozen French Letters".[1] Other journeys were more literary - pilgrimages to places like Isaac Walton's favourite inn, The Old Peacok [sic] at Rowsley, Derbyshire. Two such visits were to supply Watson with the central theme for two of his most popular poems - 'Wordsworth's Grave' and 'The Tomb of Burns'. Bromley describes the second in his review of 'Wordsworth's Grave' for Gingerbread, a local magazine he had started in 1886:

> On our way down from Scotland last month we spent a night at Dumfries, and next morning we stood, as Wordsworth had done before us, with our head bent and uncovered, under the mausoleum of the great ploughman, Burns. As if to furnish a theme for some pilgrim poet, in the little enclosure around it - a spot that princes might covet for a sepulture - the only grave is that of a rural postman, the humble friend of the King of Scottish song.[2]

Beside writing about Watson, Bromley also got Watson to write for his magazine. Watson's mock-heroic poem on 'The Origins of Yorkshire Gingerbread' ran through the first three numbers and is too long to quote in full, but a short extract should show that this 'Romaunt of Medieval Lancashire' is far from being good poetry:

> Arrived downstairs, the dauntless Knight
> Called for his suit of armour bright -
> But no - I anticipate - first, 'tis thought
> He rang for his breakfast, which when brought
> Consisted (I quote from an ancient ballad)
> Of cold boiled griffin and lobster salad -
> A taste acquired by this dainty Paladin
> During the wars with the doughty Saladin.[3]

Watson's parody of Browning in the same magazine suggests that he

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1. Letter from Watson to John Lane, September 2, 1894, UC.
2. 'A Monody at Wordsworth's Grave', Gingerbread, October 1, 1887, p.3.
3. Gingerbread, December 1, 1886, p.3.

more often wrote humorously for Bromley than not. Bromley himself had written a number of facetious poems for Gingerbread under the pseudonym 'Guileless James' and he almost certainly encouraged Watson in the same vein. One of Watson's unpublished poems, written 'In James Bromley's Billiard Room', confirms this belief:

> Come, brothers, mind your p's and cues
> And though you Tyre of putting Sidon
> Or are o'er reached, no rest refuse,
> For tables are not to be relied on.
>
> May he be jiggered to his fall
> While all the men their fortune push on
> Who pots his own opponent's ball
> Or - here's the rubber - hurts the cushion.[1]

Whether Bromley was responsible for Watson's facetiousness or not, it was a vein to which he often returned, usually to the detriment of his poetry.

Watson and Bromley were closest during the time they lived near each other; but when Watson left the district in 1890 they kept up the friendship with numerous letters and meetings. These contacts slackened from 1904 onwards, and in 1909 seem to have stopped altogether, though Watson still thought of Bromley as "an unusually excellent fellow".[2] They met again in 1913, but in the same year the relationship came to an abrupt end. Watson asked Bromley to return all his letters and burnt them;[3] he was to give

1. Holograph poem, Atkinson Reference Library, Southport.
2. Letter to Maureen Pring, August 2, 1909, Yale, Watson Collection, box 3.
3. A list of these letters has survived in a MS note in the Yale collection and reflects the course of the relationship: 12 of the 324 dated from the 1880s, when the two men were living near each other, 284 from 1890 to 1904, when they were still friendly but living apart, none from 1904 to 1912, when the friendship was cooling, and 25 from 1913 when it broke up.

no explanation for the break even when commenting on Bromley's death in 1925.[1] As far back as 1904 there are signs that Bromley had offended him by a lack of discretion. Watson asked a mutual friend to write to Bromley about a paper he had delivered to the Southport Literary and Philosophical Society:

> to convey to him that you think his wealth of detail (of a kind not very impressive) about my early circumstances was indiscreet. It may prevent further and worse indiscretions. Otherwise, if some newspaper man were to approach him some day for personal reminiscences of me, he would be apt to gabble without reticence, thinking he was doing me a service.[2]

Watson may finally have broken with Bromley because of a further indiscretion in 1913. During the eighteen-eighties, however, he was far from critical of him. On the contrary, he appreciated his support through a difficult period of illness, obscurity and family troubles. Bromley's role was complementary to Dowden's; though not able to help Watson much in his literary career, he was a good friend and almost certainly provided financial aid. He also used his influence in local affairs to get him recommended for the post of county magistrate, though Watson felt "rather too much of a Bohemian to accept".[3]

Bromley's first chance to help Watson occurred soon after they became neighbours at Lathom in 1881. Watson describes the occasion to Dowden the following year:

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1. See letter to John Lane, January 24, 1925, UC.
2. Letter to John Lane, December 31, 1904, UC.
3. Letter to John Lane, February 24, 1907, UC.

> Perhaps you recollect receiving from the said Fellow (not of any College) - about November last - certain letters of which the general 'one-foot-in-the-gravery' tone cannot have been in any strict sense of the word, amusing. About that time my health broke down, suddenly and completely, all over, like the wonderful One Horse Shay . . . [1]

It was not only Watson's physical health that broke down; he also showed "slightly irrational tendencies".[2] There is not sufficient evidence to trace the causes of this breakdown. His friends and family offered their own explanations, the most popular being an excessive use of drugs. Watson was taking them for insomnia and other complaints; "for more than a year", he wrote to Dowden shortly before the breakdown, "I have only been able to keep myself fairly well by daily doses of medicines whose compensating ill effect is very marked - laudanum, and other infernal abominations".[3] The family lawyer, James Shield, traced part of the trouble to Watson's "excitability of temperament"[4] and Watson himself talked of having a "nervous system vulnerable at all points".[5] He alternated between periods of great excitement and moods of deep depression, when he felt "torpid, dull and good-for-nothing".[6] The pessimistic tone of his letter to Dowden on August 24th, 1882 shows which of these states was uppermost before his breakdown:

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1. Letter to Dowden, May 22, 1883.
2. <u>The Critic</u>, vol.18, December 17, 1892, p.350.
3. Letter dated November 17, 1882.
4. Letter to John Lane, January 12, 1899, Bodleian, Walpole MS., C.24, f.20.
5. Letter to John Lane, March 18, 1908, UC.
6. Letter to Dowden, January 27, 1885.

> I think we have all felt at times as if such things as crime, and agonizing disease, and desperate calamity of any sort, were shadows palpably obscuring even the loveliness or the happiness to which they are quite unrelated and irrelevant. The quatrain in question[1] may seem somehow morbid, but I think that even the morbid view of some facts may be now and then legitimate stuff for the poet to weave song out of - if his transient morbid viewpoint be not an affectation merely; and as for myself, I know that this particular quatrain was felt as sincerely as any of them were.

Two months later his depression has deepened and so has his morbidity; the only subject he can think of for the longish work Dowden suggests to him is "the period of the Roman Empire tottering towards its grave".[2] Within a few days Watson's breakdown took place.

Judging from the behaviour of his two brothers, mental instability ran in the family; James committed suicide and Robinson frequently acted in an extravagant and unbalanced fashion. Robinson's inability to settle to a regular existence actually had its advantages, as William realised when he had to go away to convalesce in January, 1883:

> My brother [he wrote to Dowden from Bern] gave up the work in which he was engaged and accompanied me. We spent two months in Algiers, basking under affablest skies, - slowly gathering my disintegrated self together again. Thereafter I recrossed the tideless, dolorous [midland sea], and passed through France into Switzerland. I have been a month in Geneva, a week at Montreux in the vicinage of Chillon Castle, a month or more at Thun, and

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1. This is an unpublished epigram, beginning 'The worm impatient'.
2. Letter to Dowden, November 17, 1882.

> came seven days ago hither, at last in excellent health. This is a village, or hamlet, at the head of a magnificent valley. We are the only visitors here, being in advance of the tourist-season. In a few days it is possible that my brother may return to England and leave me alone in my glory - in Ruskin's 'Mountain Glory', I should say.[1]

In spite of his appreciation of the "magic streams, and wizard woodlands, and necromantic mountains" of Switzerland, Watson was glad to be 'Back from Abroad' in June:

> I wearied of that southern sky and main,
> Ocean and heaven one mutual bland blue smile.
> Welcome the vapour-tarnish'd crown again
> And wind-torn girdle of our northern isle![2]

This epigram was Watson's first poem since his breakdown in November 1882. Even before it he had not written much, partly because he had been discouraged by the failure of The Prince's Quest, partly because he had realised that he was not ready to write another long poem, as Dowden kept suggesting he should. He had only a few slight lyrics, and seven short, blank-verse 'Poems on Poems'[3] to show him. Most of his time and energy had gone in "widening and deepening" his literary studies.[4]

But by August 1882 he did have some epigrams he thought might interest Dowden. His account of how he came to write these gives a valuable insight into his methods of composition at this time:

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1. Letter dated May 22, 1883.
2. Epigrams of Art, Life and Nature, Liverpool, 1884, no.XXVIII.
3. i.e. 'Shelley's Witch of Atlas', 'Keats' Hyperion', 'Landor's Hellenics', 'Mrs Browning's Portuguese Sonnets', 'Coleridge's Christabel', 'Wordsworth's Immortality Ode', 'Byron's Don Juan'.
4. Letter to Dowden, April 23, 1881.

> Some 15 of them I wrote last year without any very distinct notion of producing any more - and, in fact, I did not produce any more until some few months ago when I happened to see a review in The Academy of an English translation of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam (including a few specimens) of which I had not before heard. These recalled me to my own experiments in the same field and renewed my interest in the quatrain as a vehicle. The next thirty days I spent at Bolton Priory in Yorkshire, my native region, and turned out regularly a quatrain per diem. Since then the conditions for absorption in literary work have been less favourable, but still my fourliners have swelled to about 60.[1]

In epigram Watson felt that he had found an area where he could compete with the great poets, as he had not been able to in a long, ambitious narrative like 'The Prince's Quest'. Dowden obviously shared his opinion, for he sent the first twelve epigrams he saw to James Cotton of The Academy, who immediately agreed to publish them.[2] Watson then set about revising and arranging them, relying almost completely on Dowden for guidance as he did so.[3] The first twelve epigrams, signed 'W.W.', were printed in The Academy on November 4th, 1882, another twelve followed on November 11th and ten more on November 18th. Watson's breakdown intervened and no more appeared until July, 1883, when eleven were printed on the 14th, ten on the 21st and a final five on the 28th. Watson was

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1. Letter to Dowden, August 10, 1882.
2. Letters from Cotton to Dowden, August 17 & September 9, 1882.
3. He omitted several, at Dowden's suggestion; one, 'On Seeing Queen Elizabeth's Bed', was probably written after a visit to Speke Hall, Lancashire, with Bromley; it certainly shows his influence:

   And so, my friend, you wonder what possest her
   To need so huge a couch whereon to rest her?
   A mighty bed, I grant, and mighty tester:
   But then he was a bulky man, that Leicester.

   (Letter to Dowden, October 10, 1885.)

delighted that Macmillan's wanted to see the whole collection in August, and added forty more before sending them to London. When Macmillan's finally turned them down, Watson had them published in book form at his father's expense, with Gilbert Walmsley of Liverpool in January 1884. Like his first book, Epigrams of Art, Life and Nature was a "dead loss", selling only a hundred copies in five years, and they went mainly to friends.[1] Its publication, in Watson's own words, brought him "hardly more pleasure than irritation".[2] He told Dowden shortly after it that he was the only 'man of weight' to recognise Epigrams' value publicly, but it was favourably reviewed a little later by J.W. Mackail in The Oxford Magazine and by others in The Academy, The Liverpool Mercury and Daily Post. Too much importance cannot be attached to these reviews, however, since most of them had been written by friends, or friends of friends. Watson knew the editors of the Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury personally, Mackail was almost certainly a friend of Dowden and Noble had connections with The Critic. The Academy reviewer is also unlikely to have been disinterested, since the poems had first appeared in its pages. Of greater significance is Swinburne's guarded praise on the fly-leaf of his copy of Epigrams - "sunt

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1. Letter to Dowden, February 28, 1889.
2. Letter to Dowden, March 30, 1885.

bona, sunt quaedam mediocria, sunt mala plura".[1] Pater, to whom Watson also sent a copy, found it "the very quintessence of good thought in forms which make me think of fine firm-petalled flowers". Edmund Gosse, one of the main arbiters of literary taste during the eighties and nineties, was even more enthusiastic in acknowledging his copy:

> I have rarely noticed so decided a growth in power and originality, between a first and second book, as is shown between The Prince's Quest and Epigrams. Not a few of the latter seem to me very fine indeed, independent poetry of a high class. You have grown in every direction - in strength, in thought, in style.[2]

Watson explains his "absolute volte face from the dreamy sensuous to the culture of the epigrams" as a result of his serious reading of Shakespeare in 1881. He wandered about the Lancashire countryside for an entire summer with volumes of the plays always in his coat pocket, simply living on him and nothing else. He began to realise for the first time the greatness of life as well as of literature and wanted to express this in poetry. But he despaired of ever competing with Shakespeare in a long piece, and turned instead to what he called "the cherry-stone-carving work of the 'Epigrams'".[3] In a poem written thirty-six years later

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1. Samuel Chew told Watson of this quotation from Martial in a letter of January 31, 1918, (UC) and describes it fully in his biography, Swinburne (Boston, 1929, p.297, footnote 1).

2. Watson sent copies of both letters to Dowden, c. January 1884.

3. Letter to William Archer, November 8, 1901.

he contrasts Shakespeare with his early masters:

O let me leave the plains behind,
  And let me leave the vales below!
Into the highlands of the mind,
  Into the mountains let me go.

My Keats, my Spenser, loved I well;
  Gardens and statued lawns were these;
Yet not for ever could I dwell
  In arbours and in pleasances.

Here are the heights, crest beyond crest,
  With Himalayan dews impearled;
And I will watch from Everest
  The long heave of the surging world.[1]

Shakespeare makes him realise that poetry is more than beautiful words and images; thought is also necessary. This, in turn, demands a highly-controlled use of language - one of the qualities Watson admired most in Shakespeare. In one of his best epigrams he brings out his masterly control compared with the much cruder techniques of another great playwright, through a skilfully sustained metaphor:

I close your Marlowe's page, my Shakspere's ope.
  How welcome - after gong and cymbal's din -
The continuity, the long slow slope
  And vast curves of the gradual violin![2]

Watson has another motive in preferring Shakespeare's more austere approach to his own rather loose technique in The Prince's Quest and Other Poems:

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1. 'Shakespeare', Retrogression, p.24.

2. Epigrams of Art, Life and Nature, VII. This, and the following references are not taken from Watson's collected poems of 1905, since not all of his 1884 epigrams are included in it.

> Time, the extortioner, from richest beauty
> Takes heavy toll and wrings rapacious duty.
> Austere of feature if thou carve thy rhyme,
> Perchance 'twill pay the lesser tax to Time. (XIII)

He makes a direct link between Shakespeare and epigram in a letter to Dowden, under whose influence he had almost certainly started his serious study of Shakespeare:

> Fine quatrains could of course be dug out of Shakespeare's sonnets, - and in Titus Andronicus there is a passage in which the melodic capabilities of this form are well developed.
> 'The eagle suffers little birds to sing
> And is not careful what they mean thereby,
> Knowing that with the shadow of his wing
> He can at pleasure stint their melody'.[1]

In the 'Note' he added to Epigrams, however, Watson argues that, fine as they are, Shakespeare's epigrams cannot compare with those of Landor - "our greatest modern Epigrammatist".[2] Though his initial urge to write epigrams comes from Shakespeare, his theory and technique are based on Landor's "simple verse-craft, unshadowed lucidity of phrase, and completeness of utterance"(6). Watson opens his 'Note on Epigram', for which Dowden supplied

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1. Letter to Dowden, September 16, 1882. There are other direct signs in the epigrams themselves that Watson has been reading Shakespeare; four of them are devoted to specific plays - King Lear (IV), Antony and Cleopatra (XVIII), The Tempest (LI) and Julius Caesar (LXXVIII); 'On Such a Night' (XXXIX) is a deliberate imitation of the lovers' scene at the end of The Merchant of Venice, and no. XXXII contains an allusion to 'the sea-amorous Ariel' of The Tempest.

2. Epigrams, p.5.

many of the illustrations, with a description of the "popular" kind - "primarily an instrument of social satire or personal invective"(1). Dryden, Swift, Pope and Byron are the most consistent English representatives of this tradition, which he traces back to Martial, and it is no surprise to find clear signs of their influence in such epigrams as the one addressed 'To a Foolish Wise Man':

> The world's an orange - thou has suck'd its juice;
>   But wherefore all this pomp and pride and puffing?
> Somehow a goose is none the less a goose
>   Though moon and stars be minc'd to yield it stuffing.[1]

Watson was anxious to point out that such epigrams are exceptional in his volume, there being far more of the "nobler sort"(1). Judging from the one-, two-, three- and four-line examples he gives, he accepts no set form for this, though in practice he sticks to the quatrain, as Landor generally does. Like Landor too, he considers almost any subject suitable, as the 'Art, Life and Nature' of his title implies.[2] The largest well-defined class within these broad categories is one at which he is particularly good - literary criticism. His epigram on Marlowe

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1. XCIV: see also XXI, XXII, XXXIV, L, LVII, LXXI, LXVI.
2. The title itself is probably a deliberate allusion to Landor's famous epigram which Watson quotes in his 'Note':

   I strove with none, for none was worth my strife.
     Nature I loved, and next to nature, art.
   I warm'd both hands before the fire of life;
     It sinks; and I am ready to depart.

and Shakespeare shows his ability to summarise the essential difference between two writers; the same perception and conciseness can be seen in his fourth epigram on 'The Play of King Lear':

> Here Love the slain with Love the slayer lies;
> Deep drown'd are both in the same sunless pool.
> Up from its depths that mirror thundering skies
> Bubbles the wan mirth of the mirthless Fool.

The thought is presented metaphorically here, as Watson argues it must be within such limited compass; the tragedy of Lear's and Cordelia's death is represented by drowned bodies in a stormy landscape, and the emptiness of the Fool's jesting by the bubbles of air which rise to the surface of the water from them. In the eightieth epigram Watson conveys a sense of the delicate beauty of love through another simple analogy from Nature:

> Love, like a bird, hath perch'd upon a spray
> For thee and me to hearken what he sings.
> Contented, he forgets to fly away;
> But hush!...remind not Eros of his wings.

By emphasising the wings in the last line he is able to give concrete expression to the precariousness of love and at the same time introduce a second related image from classical mythology to strengthen his case. Beside presenting his thought metaphorically in this way, he also wants to give it "in utmost completeness"(3). This completeness can come from sustained metaphor, as in the epigram just quoted, or through other means - the use of antithesis, for example:

> The beasts in field are glad, and have not wit
> To know why leap'd their hearts when spring-time shone.
> Man looks at his own bliss, considers it,
> Weighs it with curious fingers; and 'tis gone. (XI)

Antithesis in this case makes also for conciseness, another important criterion. Watson says elsewhere that it was a "preference for compactness in versification" which made him turn to epigram.[1] Shakespeare had shown him that the way to achieve this was through a much more precise diction, as the last two lines of the forty-first epigram demonstrate:

> The children romp within the graveyard's pale;
> The lark sings o'er a madhouse or a gaol; -
> Such nice antitheses of perfect poise
> Chance in her curious rhetoric employs.

Watson now wants to "incise a gem"(5) like Landor, rather than load every rift with ore. In turning to the poet he considers least lyrical of all the moderns, he is quite unequivocally repudiating his earlier masters. "The lyrical temper, of which Shelley was the incarnation", he argues, "has little in common with the bent towards Epigram"(4-5).

Nevertheless, he recognises the need for "simple beauty"(2) in epigram and in his case this often amounts to the same thing as "lyrical utterance". His most successful epigrams, ironically enough, are often quite lyrical, like 'Shelley and Harriet Westbrook', where Harriet's appealing simplicity is conveyed in terms of "simple beauty":

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1. Letter to William Archer, December 19, 1897.

A great star stoop'd from heaven and loved a flower
Grown in earth's garden - loved it for an hour:
Let eyes which trace his orbit in the spheres
Refuse not, to a ruin'd rosebud, tears. (VIII)

Because the epigram can be at most "a condensed (perhaps a strangulated) lyric"(2), Watson realised after a time that it is not wholly suited to his talents, though many later critics were to argue that he had done his best work in it.[1]

Looking back on two years of epigram-writing he thinks that he must have "deliberately and with some violence to /himself/ have thrown many things into quatrain form which properly demanded a freer and more expansive expression - something more of lyrical fluidity in fact".[2] He begins to feel rather like an Epigram-Mill,[3] and does not intend to spend any more time "carving heads upon cherry-stones".[4] In fact, he almost gives up writing poetry completely after the publication of Epigrams, especially when its commercial failure becomes certain:

> I myself /he writes to Mrs Dowden/ am not very sanguine as to the realisation of your kind wishes of success in literature - at least for a good while to come. A dream of that kind of good fortune does sometimes haunt me, but alas! I am Tantalus to those fruits and waters. - Besides, having long been alive to the fact that any success which I may achieve will not be such as to yield harvest

1. e.g. Arthur Symons, Dramatis Personae, London, 1925, p.213; Richard Le Gallienne, Retrospective Reviews, London, 1896, vol.I, p.49; A.E. Housman, letter to Mr Owlett, October 8, 1930, Yale, box 4.
2. Letter to William Archer, December 19, 1897.
3. 'Life, the external World, Existence generally - "this Universal Frame" - goes into me as raw material, and comes out, after I have turned a handle, in neat square patterns labelled "Epigrams - with care; this side up".' (Letter to Dowden, October 17, 1883).
4. Letter to Dowden, October 11, 1882.

of a material sort, I am beginning to feel it incumbent upon me erelong to forsake the flowery paths of poesy for the unacademical roads of Business; and if it be hard to serve two masters, God and Mammon, I anticipate that it will be scarce easier to serve a master and mistress - Mammon and the Muse![1]

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1. February 2, 1884.

Chapter 5

'Ver Tenebrosum' and 'Wordsworth's Grave'

Watson's decision to stop writing poetry did not last, in spite of his depression over the failure of Epigrams. Shortly after its publication in January, 1884, he was at work again - on the "longish" poem Dowden had been suggesting to him since 1881. He seems to have kept the confidence he had gained from appearing in a well-known magazine, daring to suggest to Dowden, in a reversal of their usual roles, that he join Swinburne, Watts-Dunton and himself in contributing to The Academy. He even offered to introduce him to Havelock Ellis, who had written to ask for an anthology piece in October, 1883.[1] His confidence increased when Cotton gave him some books to review for The Academy in May, 1884. He was also asked to review 'Michael Field's' poems for The Liverpool Mercury in October.

Watson was far from stable, however, as his breakdown clearly shows, and towards the end of 1884 he suddenly became very depressed. His despondency continued until March, 1885, when he wrote to tell Dowden:

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1. Letter to Dowden, October 17, 1883.

> I have done absolutely no work this winter, and feel that I am not fulfilling a specially noble part in this active world, 'under God's earnest sky' as the gentle Carlyle would have put it. Nobody wants my poetry. Surely the position is a contemptible and absurd one, of labouring to present to the world what it does not thank one for but flings back in one's face. There is something meanly ridiculous and even grotesque about this.[1]

Dowden's reply must have renewed his confidence, for he immediately sat down and wrote a sonnet on the contemporary political situation, which he sent him by return of post. Dowden's response was again encouraging, and by the end of the month Watson had produced nineteen more sonnets, on the troubles in Soudan and Afghanistan - his first public statement of his political views.

The situation in the Soudan had been critical since 1880, when a fanatical Moslem leader known as the 'Mahdi' had started to take over the country, but it was only after he had severely defeated an English officer there at the end of 1883 that the British government felt obliged to take action. In January, 1884, they decided to send General Gordon out, to evacuate all Europeans and Egyptians wanting to leave. On his arrival in Khartoum Gordon, who was also privately determined to defeat the 'Mahdi', realised that he needed more troops. His appeal to the Liberal government then in power was ignored until August, though he had been besieged by the Moslems since May. Further time was lost discussing alternate routes, and it was September before Lord Wolseley left England with reinforcements. Even then the progress

1. Letter dated March 4, 1885.

of the badly-equipped army was slow; it had only reached Korti, halfway up the Nile, by the end of the year. On December 30th a camel corps was sent on ahead by a shorter route across the desert, but this too was delayed until January 24th by severe skirmishes, reconnaissances and rearrangement of troops at Gubat. When it finally arrived at Khartoum four days later, it found that the city had fallen and Gordon been killed two days earlier. In spite of strong protests from the Radicals, the government let Wolseley stay on in the Soudan to "smash the Mahdi", as he wished. It was not until his troops became urgently needed in Afghanistan that they ordered him to retire.

From Watson's letters to Dowden and his sonnets on the subject, it is clear that he disagreed with the government's policy, though a Liberal himself. He had been opposed to sending British troops into the Soudan initially and, much as he sympathized with the desire to avenge Gordon's death, he hated the idea of the further violence and bloodshed they would probably cause. On April 29th, when they were finally withdrawn, he wrote to Dowden concerning Gladstone:

> The Old Man's speech in the House on Monday night was certainly great and noble, but all the same it does not make it appear less probable that an early abandonment of the policy of trust and conciliation would have averted the war which now seems so imminent. If war does get averted, then the Old Man will have conducted this tremendous business throughout with splendid success, but if war ensue after all, though Gladstone will assuredly be in a position to "challenge the verdict of the civilised mankind" on all the moral bearings of his policy, and will emerge with a spotless conscience, he will yet none the less in many persons' eyes appear the head and front of the cause of hostilities.

He regretted Gladstone's policy the more because he considered him a great man. Comparing him in one sonnet to a 'skilful leech' who makes a wrong diagnosis, and a 'swift rider' who overestimates his 'equestrian art', he concludes:

> Lord of the golden tongue and smiting eyes;
> Great out of season, and untimely wise:
> A man whose virtue, genius, grandeur, worth,
> Wrought deadlier ill than ages can undo.[1]

Watson was not the only member of the Liberal party to question Gladstone's policy. Even his Chief Assistant, John Morley, did so and Dowden, who knew Morley well, suggested that he might be interested in publishing Watson's sonnets in Macmillan's Magazine. Watson thought it possible, depending on Morley's opinions on Russia, for his own views in this respect were fairly strong, and again opposed to the official Liberal policy. He thought Russia's claims at the Afghan border completely unjustifiable and condemned the British government for not defending the helpless Afghans against her barbarous attacks. Morley may not have shared this militant attitude, for he did not accept the sonnets for Macmillan's Magazine. Watson began to suspect that "no Liberal journal would print them".[2] On the other hand, he did not want his sonnets published in a Tory magazine, and the only alternative he could think of was to bring them out himself in pamphlet form. But Dowden, who was himself a Tory, persuaded

1. 'The Political Luminary', The National Review, 28, June, 1885, p.487.
2. Letter to Dowden, April 15, 1885.

Watson to let him send them to The National Review, which was run by another friend of his, Alfred Austin.[1] Austin's response was immediate:

> I admire them very much - their very ruggedness having an appropriate kinship with their theme. I venture, however, to except from my admiration sonnets V. XII. XIII. XVI. & XVII. These I do not think worthy of their companions. I will gladly print the others in the National Review, if the author wd like me to do so. I shall be glad to know the author's name, and should be proud to shake him by the hand.[2]

Austin was soon writing to Watson directly and continued to do so, over matters of revision, when he left Liverpool for the Lake District early in May. Watson probably went to the Lakes for reasons of health, since he spent most of his time there at the Windermere Hydropathic Establishment. He may have been in need of a rest, after the strain of writing twenty sonnets in less than a month, or he could have been suffering from one of the numerous ailments he constantly complained of to Dowden. By the time he was back in Liverpool, entertaining Dowden on a brief visit in June, the sonnets were ready for publication and appeared in The National Review of that month under the title 'Ver Tenebrosum'. Austin and his co-editor, John Courthope, had little doubt that their readers would "recognise in them the two qualities most requisite to all genuine poetry, manly imagination and musical diction". They believed that the

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1. Letter to Dowden, April 15, 1885.

2. Letter to Dowden, May 6, 1885.

sonnets gave, "in a manner which would be impossible to prose, articulate expression to feelings of shame, distress and indignation" which they hoped were shared by all. They claimed that this particular kind of poetry was "without parallel, at any rate, in the present century".[1]

It is surprising that in an age as politically conscious as the nineteenth century, very little political poetry was written after the first twenty years. There is nothing to compare with the political sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth, for instance, or Byron's commentaries on Greek Independence and the Napoleonic Wars. Neither Browning, Arnold, Rossetti, nor Morris touch on contemporary politics, and Tennyson, who does so occasionally, gives them en emotional rather than rational appeal. In 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', for instance, he makes no attempt to assess the political implications of the Crimean War. The poem contains no analysis, argument or generalisation, but simply a description of one small incident illustrating the courage of the British soldiers. Tennyson's main concern is to arouse patriotic feelings, not to instruct his readers politically. The same is true of 'The Charge of the Heavy Brigade' and two sonnets on Poland and Montenegro. Apart from passing allusions to Russia's activities, in 'Maud' and 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After', there are hardly any other political references in his

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1. The National Review, 28, June, 1885, p.484.

poetry. Swinburne, on the other hand, is one of the few well-known poets of the period who makes frequent use of politics for more than emotional reasons. His views on Russia, for instance, are given in a series of sonnets written over a number of years.[1] He also deals with British policy in the Soudan,[2] Ireland[3] and the Transvaal,[4] besides writing on international issues, like the Franco-Prussian War[5] and Italian Unification.[6] George Meredith makes a similar, though more limited, use of politics in his poetry. Apart from one or two minor poets, such as W.E. Henley and Alfred Austin, these are the only two poets seriously to deal with politics before 1900, except for Rudyard Kipling, who will be discussed later.

The comparative scarcity of political verse after Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley may be closely related to the change of attitude they helped to bring about. In the eighteenth century the poet had been thought of mainly as a teacher and public spokesman, whose responsibility it was to comment on current affairs. His work was expected to have an explicit moral purpose on the whole. Towards the end of the century this concept began to change. Although the moral and public functions of poetry were still

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1. e.g. 'The White Czar', 'Rizpah', 'To Louis Kossuth, 1877', 'The Launch of the Lividia (Sept. 1880)', 'On the Russian Persecution of the Jews (Jan. 1882)'.
2. e.g. 'In Time of Mourning (Mar. 1885)'.
3. e.g. 'The Union'.
4. e.g. 'The Transvaal (Oct. 1899)'.
5. e.g. 'A Year's Burden, 1870'.
6. e.g. 'The Halt Before Rome, Sept. 1867'.

accepted by poets, they began to insist that their subject matter should not be confined to public affairs. Wordsworth, for instance, while agreeing that poetry ought to have "a worthy purpose",[1] believes that "its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind".[2] By the mid-nineteenth century poets were beginning to doubt the validity of anything but private or personal subject-matter, though they still wrote for the public. By the nineties this last public element in poetry had started to disappear too. Most of the so-called 'decadents', for example, did not expect or try to appeal to more than a very limited audience, and many firmly opposed the idea that poetry had a moral function at all.

Watson regretted this change of concept, as his letter to Samuel Waddington concerning The Century of Sonnets clearly shows:

> In such of your sonnets as deal with public affairs, or express national sentiment (e.g. The Soudan, 1884, and Ireland: Home Rule), the political thought is so strong and bracing that I regret such subjects have attracted you so seldom as material for poetry. Perhaps this is partly because I find myself so thoroughly in agreement with your mental attitude. But surely our poets might oftener strike this note, for English politics, in their large issues and world-wide ramifications, as well as in the splendid historical background which they always suggest to one's imagination, are surely neither a mean nor a dull theme for strenuous verse . . .[3]

1. 'Preface to the second edition of...Lyrical Ballads', The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Oxford, 1952, vol.II, p.387.
2. 'Advertisement to The Lyrical Ballads, 1798', The Poetical Works etc., p.383.
3. S. Waddington, Chapters of My Life, p.239.

Watson believed that there was only one other living poet beside himself who could write "impressive verse on public affairs" - Rudyard Kipling.[1] But it must have been obvious to Watson from the start that, though Kipling dealt with similar themes - England's responsibilities towards other nations, her colonies especially - he adopted a very different tone of voice from him. Whereas Watson modelled himself on what he called the "public" tradition of poets like Dryden, Kipling deliberately used a more colloquial language. He commented on the early Soudanese campaigns, for instance, through the mouth of a private in the British Expeditionary Force:

> We've fought with many men acrost the seas,
> An' some of 'em was brave an' some was not:
> The Paythan an' the Zulu an' Burmese;
> But the Fuzzy was the finest o' the lot.
> We never got a ha'porth's change of him:
> 'E squatted in the scrub an' 'ocked our 'orses,
> 'E cut our sentries up at Suakim,
> An' 'e played the cat an' banjo with our forces.
> So 'ere's to you, Fuzzy-Wuzzy, at your 'ome in the Soudan;
> You're a pore benighted 'eathen but a first-class fightin' man;
> We gives you your certificate, an' if you want it signed
> We'll come an' 'ave a romp with you whenever you're inclined.[2]

There is a great deal of difference between this and the highly artificial language of Watson's first sonnet on the same subject:

1. Bodleian, Walpole MS., C.23, f.134.
2. 'Fuzzy-Wuzzy', Rudyard Kipling's Verse. Definitive Edition, London, 1940, p.400.

They wrong'd not us, nor sought 'gainst us to wage
The bitter battle. On their God they cried
For succour, deeming justice to abide
In heaven, if banish'd from earth's vicinage.
And when they rose with a gall'd lion's rage,
We, on the captor's, keeper's, tamer's side,
We, with the alien tyranny allied,
We bade them back to their Egyptian cage.
Scarce knew they who we were! A wind of blight
From the mysterious far north-west we came.
Our greatness now their veriest babes have learn'd,
Where, in wild desert homes, by day, by night,
Thousands that weep their warriors unreturn'd,
O England, O my country, curse thy name![1]

"It is a relief to know", James Bryce told Watson, concerning some later political poetry, "that those traditions of the love of poets for justice and humanity which come down to us from Milton and Wordsworth and Shelley are not extinct while you write".[2] Whilst admiring these three poets equally for their strong sense of justice, Watson had already tried to eliminate Shelley's "fervid poesy" from his early work. He had also rejected Wordsworth's language as generally "cumbrous, dull, prolix, and diffuse".[3] "The language of real life", he argues, against Wordsworth's theory, "is usually inexact and confused and embarrassed"; poetry needs an "ordered language" of its own.[4] His language in 'Ver Tenebrosum' is much nearer to Wordsworth's own master in the sonnet - Milton. Noble had pointed out in his essay on 'The Sonnet in England' that Milton was the first to use the sonnet

1. The National Review, p.484. This and the following references are taken from The National Review, since not all of the 'Ver Tenebrosum' sonnets were reprinted in the collected poems of 1905.
2. Yale, letter dated July 20, 1901.
3. L.C. Collins, Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, p.255.
4. Pencraft, p.20-21.

for political themes and he may have directed Watson's attention to Milton's sonnets.[1] There are sufficient echoes of them in his sequence to show he knew them well, even had he not explicitly referred to 'Milton's Use of the Sonnet':

> A hundred Poets bend proud necks to bear
> This yoke, this bondage. He alone could don
> His badges of subjection with the air
> Of one who puts a King's regalia on.[2]

His appeal to Milton's authority, with reference to his 'Gordon' sonnet, shows that he has studied his technique in some detail:

> I have much hoped [he writes to Dowden] of this sonnet pleasing you in its final form, despite the fact of its being rather irregular in technical structure, its metre having more effect of a blank verse movement than of the strict sonnet-manner - which, however, holds true even of Milton's great Piedmontese thunder-peal. (Milton there, as also elsewhere, making no rigid division or even demarcation of octave and sestet).[3]

Other references in the same correspondence make it clear that he was not exaggerating when he wrote in The New York Times for February 11th, 1912, "Milton is for me the supreme master". Yeats believed that Watson would have written quite differently if Milton had not written political sonnets before him. He was probably thinking of "the slow-moving, stately rhetoric" of 'Ver

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1. Noble's essay was first published in The Contemporary Review, September 1880, pp.446-71, then afterwards as the title-piece in a collection of essays he brought out in 1893; Watson is almost certain to have discussed this article with him as he wrote it, and read it by 1880.
2. Retrogression, p.55.
3. Letter dated March 13, 1885.

Tenebrosum', which was what he admired most about the sequence.[1] Watson based his defence of "rhetoric" partly on Milton's use of it:

> With regard to that word [i.e. rhetoric], now so much in use as a literary missile, I often think that a large number of our critics must have cut themselves off from the chance of enjoying any but a very small portion of the poetry of the past; for nearly all of it, let us say from the Book of Job to Milton, is deeply tainted with the qualities they sum up in their most fashionable word of condemnation.[2]

He is careful to qualify what kind of rhetoric he is defending:

> ...there is a tinsel rhetoric and there is a golden rhetoric. Our Bible is richly veined with the latter sort, and the view, now so common, that poetry and rhetoric are incompatible, or at any rate mutually antagonistic, would be hard to maintain in presence of the major prophets and the royal psalmodist.[3]

The best rhetoric, he believes, usually stems from anger; one of the chief constituents of Isaiah's style, for instance, is wrath.[4] "The quality in which I am superior to other men in general, and superior to most if not <u>all</u> other poets", he argues, "is precisely that faculty of magnificent and divine indignation and ferocity which ordinary persons, the cultivated even more than the vulgar, are by nature too turpid or too timid to share.

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1. 'A Scholar Poet', Letters to the New Island, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1934, p.208; this was first printed as a review of Wordsworth's Grave, which contained 'Ver Tenebrosum', in The Providence Sunday Journal, June 15, 1890. Noble had praised Milton's sonnets for precisely the same reason - their 'splendid and sonorous rhetoric', 'Sonnet in England', The Sonnet in England and Other Essays, p.35.
2. Ireland Arisen, London, 1921, pp.5-6.
3. Pencraft, pp.58-9.
4. 'The Mystery of Style', Excursions in Criticism, London, 1893, pp.107-8.

Of this splendid rage, this unique capacity for lyrical savagery, I am not going to abate one jot or tittle at the bidding of the everyday conventional mind as reflected by society and current journalism".[1] It is clear that he considers the poet's role a very serious one, comparable to that of the Old Testament prophets. He seems to think that by imitating their language, with which he is very familiar, he will also achieve their authority. His debt to them in 'Ver Tenebrosum' is most immediately obvious in the imagery and his handling of this imagery shows that part of their influence was filtered to him through Milton. His comparison of Gordon to Moses in the fifth sonnet, for instance, involves the use of numerous proper names, which are listed in Miltonic fashion:

> O'erthrown
> Thou liest, unburied, or with grave unknown
> As his to whom on Nebo's height the Lord
> Showed all the land of Gilead, unto Dan;
> Judah sea-fringed; Manasseh and Ephraim;
> And Jericho palmy, to where Zoar lay;
> And in a valley of Moab buried him,
> Over against Beth-Peor, but no man
> Knows of his sepulchre unto this day.[2]

This kind of Biblical allusion does give a certain air of authority to the poetry, but it is rarely so concentrated or sustained as in this sonnet, and its impact is often weakened by the introduction of other, mixed images, most of which appeal directly to the heart. In 'Home-Rootedness', for example, he

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1. Letter to John Lane, September 20, 1914. Yale, box 4.
2. The National Review, pp.485-6.

relies on the strong connotations attached to a mother and child to move his readers' pity; admitting to "insularity", he asks:

> Whom shall I trust if not my kin. And whom
> Account so near in natural bonds as these
> Born of my mother England's mighty womb,
> Nursed on my mother England's mighty knees,
> And lull'd as I was lull'd in glory and gloom
> With cradle song of her protecting seas?[1]

While he keeps to a single image, as he does here, he is at least consistent, but he more often mixes several within a few lines, and the effect is ludicrous. 'Hasheen', for instance, begins with an allusion to the killing of the Egyptians by the Red Sea, goes on to refer to the bruising of the serpent's head, then switches in rapid succession from images of prison and the blotting of a written name to the appearance of a ghost and a murderess with bloody hands (Lady Macbeth?); the result is wholly lacking in consistency:

> "Of British arms, another victory!"
> Triumphant words, through all the land's length sped.
> Triumphant words, but, being interpreted,
> Words of ill sound, woful as words can be.
> Another carnage by the drear Red Sea -
> Another efflux of a sea more red!
> Another bruising of the hapless head
> Of a wrong'd people yearning to be free.
> Another blot on her great name, who stands
> Confounded, left intolerably alone
> With the dilating spectre of her own
> Dark sin, uprisen from yonder spectral sands:
> Penitent more than to herself is known;
> England, appall'd by her own crimson hands.[2]

1. 'Home-Rootedness', p.488.

2. Pp. 484-5.

This sonnet is typical of the whole sequence in the amount of rhetorical figures it contains. Besides the personification of England, which recurs in almost all the others, there is repetition of consonants, vowels, words, phrases, and even of sentence structure. These figures are not very skilfully handled, and their obtrusiveness makes it difficult for the reader to concentrate on the content of the pieces. The same is true of almost all the other rhetorical devices he uses. The piling up of proper names in the 'Gordon' sonnet, for instance, does little more than distract the mind from the main theme - Gordon's appalling death.

In an epigram already quoted[1] Watson implies that the basis of successful rhetoric is antithesis. Its comparative rareness in 'Ver Tenebrosum' may be one reason why his own rhetoric fails. Its crudity, when it does appear, may be another; in 'The English Dead', for instance, the syntax is badly distorted for the purpose of antithesis:

> Give honour to our heroes fall'n, how ill
> So'er the cause that bade them forth to die.
> Honour to him,[2] the untimely struck, whom high
> In place, more high in hope, 'twas fate's harsh will
> With tedious pain unsplendidly to kill.
> Honour to him,[3] doom'd splendidly to die,
> Child of the city whose foster-child am I . . .[4]

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1. Chap.4, p.79.
2. The 'him' referred to is Sir Herbert Spencer.
3. i.e. Major-General William Earle, of Liverpool.
4. III, p.485.

This is by no means the only place where the syntax is twisted to fit various figures of speech. Watson almost certainly thought the numerous inversions and complex sentences Miltonic.

The difference between the diction of Epigrams and 'Ver Tenebrosum' suggests a change of purpose on Watson's part. Using words far less precisely and much more emotively in his sonnets, he is trying to stir up certain responses in his readers, rather than to clarify a thought for them. His phrases almost certainly roused "feelings of shame, distress and indignation" in his contemporaries, as his editors claimed, but they have dated badly.

The modern reader is amused or irritated rather than moved by the archaisms, circumlocutions, poetic compounds and highly-charged adjectives of a sonnet like 'Foreign Menace':

> I marvel that this land, whereof I claim
>   The glory of sonship - for it was erewhile
>   A glory to be sprung of Britain's isle,
> Though now it well-nigh more resembles shame -
> I marvel that this land with heart so tame
>   Can brook the northern insolence and guile.
>   But most it angers me, to think how vile
> Art thou, how base, from whom the insult came,
> Unwieldy laggard, many an age behind
>   Thy sister Powers, in brain and conscience both;
> In recognition of man's widening mind
>   And flexile adaptation to its growth:
> Brute bulk, that bearest on thy back, half loth,
>   One wretched man most pitied of mankind.[1]

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1. X, p.487.

The diffuseness and imprecision of this and most of the other sonnets in the sequence is ironical in view of Watson's own theory of the form. He sees it as "a mould which, when used in the spirit and tradition of its stricter masters from Milton onwards, is not a loose aggregation of lines which chance to be fourteen in number, but one of the most rigorously exacting of poetic forms; a form usually demanding from him who employs it no little mental concentration, and enjoining upon him a certain artistic asceticism such as forbids his being seduced into mere by-play of thought or emotion".[1] He had probably turned to the sonnet after epigram because it demanded almost as much conciseness, while allowing room for the expansion he desired. But he failed to live up to his own theories, "being seduced into mere by-play of thoughts and emotions" perhaps by the increase from four to fourteen lines. As a result, the 'Ver Tenebrosum' sonnets are rarely more than the "loose aggregation of lines" he scorned.

It is not surprising that the sequence attracted very little attention when it was first published in 1885. Apart from the "evening Tory paper" which Yeats says hailed 'Ver Tenebrosum' "as the greatest political poetry since Milton",[2] the critics were so unresponsive that Watson thought of asking Noble if he could get it reviewed in Vanity Fair or The World.[3] Nor was it commercially

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1. Preface to The Man Who Saw, London, 1917, p.vii.
2. Letters to the New Island, p.207.
3. Letter to Dowden, June 19, 1885.

successful. The whole sequence brought Watson only six pounds and, for the second time in two years, he felt he must give up poetry for something more lucrative.

His choice of prose-writing, he quickly realised, was hardly a practical alternative. He had planned to write a number of short essays on a variety of subjects - "literary, speculative (or what used to be called philosophical) and others of a kind which cannot be more specifically designated than as casual or occasional" - and got as far as to send Dowden a specimen on Christmas Day, 1885. Dowden's response must have been encouraging, for he continued to experiment throughout January, but by the end of the month he had decided to give up, at least until he could find "a regular continuous subject to go upon".[1] His main problem, he found, was a "helpless inconsecutiveness" of mind. What he wrote were passages, and no more.

He resolved to "stick to poetry" instead and by March was revising the "longish" poem he had begun two years earlier on Dowden's advice. One of his recurring depressions intervened, however, and for a whole year he produced nothing, beside some "blank blank verse", a mock-heroic poem on "The Origin of Ormskirk Gingerbread',[2] and an epistle to Dowden on his Life of Shelley which came out in December. When he did finally settle down to

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1. Letter to Dowden, January 27, 1886.
2. See chap. 4, p.66.

serious work in the spring of 1887, he was interrupted again by a "shattering" event which occurred in May.

On the seventeenth he wrote to tell Dowden that his father was seriously ill. By the end of the month John Watson was dead. What shocked William most about his death was the "horror of [its] unforeseen suddenness".[1] His father had died, he implies in 'To One who had Written in Derision of the Belief in Immortality', before he had been able to ask his pardon "for a word that wronged his love".[2] He now wanted to believe in an after-life, where he could hope for forgiveness. Another short lyric written soon after his father's death suggests that it suddenly made him realise that he was no longer young, and this added greatly to his depression:

> Youth! ere thou be flown away,
> Surely one last boon today
> Thou'lt bestow -
> One last light of rapture give,
> Rich and lordly fugitive!
> Ere thou go.
>
> What, thou canst not? What, all spent?
> All thy spells of ravishment
> Pow'rless now?
> Gone thy magic out of date?
> Gone, all gone that made thee great? -
> Follow thou![3]

It was perhaps a new feeling of responsibility that made Watson finally complete his "longish" poem - 'Wordsworth's Grave' -

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1. Letter to Dowden, June 8, 1890.

2. Poems, ii, p.20.

3. 'The Flight of Youth', Poems, i, p.70.

in June, only a month after his father's death. He had described its aims to Dowden while revising it the previous year:

> I knew you would be glad to hear my Wordsworth poem was going into the N/ational/ R/eview/ - where of course it owes its admission to you no less than the sonnets did. Its appearance in that quarter seems to have a certain appropriateness - it being a poem about a 'Conservative' poet, and to some extent an indirect manifesto on a small scale of what may be called conservative principles in poetry; though in Wordsworth's early days they were doubtless the most advanced Radical principles. I appreciate and understand your hesitations about sanctioning the last of the new stanzas. It does seem too bad to turn the quiet God's-acre at Grasmere into a sort of literary cock-pit. But more or less throughout the poem there is a certain undertone of bellicosity - a rumbling warnote against the Latter Euphuists. I fancy that is one of the features of the poem which specially recommends it to Courthope.[1]

Watson was particularly fond of Wordsworth because he had freed him from the unreal world of Shelley and Keats by his mystic view of ordinary life. Contrasting him with Shelley, he argued that Wordsworth was:

> . . . rapt
> Not less in glowing vision, yet retained
> His clasp of the prehensible, retained
> The warm touch of the world that lies to hand,
> Not in vague dreams of man forgetting men,
> Nor in vast morrows losing the today;[2]

While rejecting the cold formalism of the Augustan age,

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1. Letter dated March 26, 1886.
2. 'To Edward Dowden', Poems, i, p.150. Watson emphasised the same point about Wordsworth in an unpublished sonnet he sent to Dowden:
   He treads a shadowy vast with feet secure.
   Many, before and after him, have thought
   To roam this region: some have fared apace
   But coming in the night-time to a stream
   They could not ford, a hill they could not climb,
   Have turned them straightway homewards, and declare
   The mount unscaled of man, beyond whose bulk
   Is nothing, save the abyss of shadow, save
   The weltering darkness aboriginal.
   He swims the current: he ascends the hill
   By night, and from its cold peak hails the dawn.

Wordsworth had never gone to the opposite extreme as some of his contemporaries and most of Watson's had; he is used as a kind of touchstone with which to judge other poets. This literary criticism begins almost immediately in the first of the seven sections; after a brief description of the suitably Wordsworthian setting of the grave and a plea for a renewed appreciation of Wordsworth's greatness, Watson tries to define "the powers that with him dwell".[1] His further attempt to describe these in the second section involves him in some brief summaries of poets Wordsworth does not resemble:

> Not Milton's keen, translunar music thine;
> Not Shakespeare's cloudless, boundless human view;
> Not Shelley's flush of rose on peaks divine;
> Nor yet the wizard twilight Coleridge knew.
>
> . . . .
>
> From Shelley's dazzling glow or thunderous haze,
> From Byron's tempest-anger, tempest-mirth,
> Men turned to thee and found - not blast and blaze,
> Tumult of tottering heavens, but peace on earth (18).

Though scarcely profound or novel, these literary judgements give an instant impression of the essential features of each poet.

Section three opens with an ironic reference to contemporary poetry:

> I hear it vouched the Muse is with us still; -
> If less divinely frenzied than of yore,
> In lieu of feelings she has wondrous skill
> To simulate emotion felt no more (19).

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1. 'Wordsworth's Grave', Poems, i, p.17.

Both here and in the fifth section Wordsworth's "lofty song of lowly weal and dole" is contrasted with the "empty music" of poets like Swinburne. Watson's vehement condemnation of his contemporaries shows how much he wanted to dissociate himself from them:

> And idly tuneful, the loquacious throng
> Flutter and twitter, prodigal of time,
> And little masters make a toy of song
> Till grave men weary of the sound of rhyme.
>
> And some go prankt in faded antique dress,
> Abhorring to be hale and glad and free;
> And some parade a conscious naturalness,
> The scholar's not the child's simplicity (23).

Watson described the fourth section to Dowden as a foil or contrast to the others, "presenting a view of the literary physiognomy of the era from which Wordsworth was the great reactionary".[1] It is, therefore, unavoidably condemnatory of the Augustan age, though no one, he says, is more alive than he "to the admirable side of that spirit, or to the futility and fallaciousness of bringing an indictment against an Age so splendidly and so sufficiently criticised already". He has "honestly tried not merely to produce a few brilliant lines on the subject but to hit the truth about it".

His "truth" about the eighteenth century, if he "hits" it at all, is a fairly obvious one. Using Wordsworth again as a contrast, he describes the poverty of an age which, instead of a

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1. Letter dated May 7, 1887.

"robe of sunlight, dew and flame", wore "a modish dress to charm the Town"(20). The Muse was completely unconcerned about the meaning of life, and had no interest in Nature. But men grew tired of her "sterile wit" and began to crave "a living voice"(20). A new age was heralded by a number of poets who are characterised in another series of brief descriptions. Watson had not long finished writing Epigrams when he started on the first version of 'Wordsworth's Grave' in 1884 and he specifically described section four as "an attempt to give an account of the eighteenth century Zeitgeist in a succession of epigrams pure and simple".[1] The first of these is devoted to Dr Johnson's "sad, stern verse" - the first sign of a distinct change of atmosphere, which is next described, appropriately enough, in terms of the weather:

> From dewy pastures, uplands sweet with thyme,
>   A virgin breeze freshened the jaded day.
> It wafted Collins' lonely vesper-chime,
>   It breathed abroad the frugal notes of Gray.
>
> It fluttered here and there, nor swept in vain
>   The dusty haunts where futile echoes dwell, -
> Then, in a cadence soft as summer rain,
>   And sad from Auburn voiceless, drooped and fell (21).

Watson achieves accuracy and concentration in these descriptions mainly through a skilful choice of metaphor. In the case of Burns, the next to be dealt with, he uses metaphor not only to

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1. Letter to William Archer, December 19, 1897. He almost certainly chose the four-line stanza for its closeness to epigram-form.

help identify him, but also to describe his contribution to the revival:

> On life's broad plain the ploughman's conquering share
> Upturned the fallow lands of truth anew,
> And o'er the formal garden's trim parterre
> The peasant's team a ruthless furrow drew (22).

There is an equally successful use of imagery in the contrast between Wordsworth and Coleridge with which the section closes; as with Burns, no names are needed:

> In elvish speech the Dreamer told his tale
> Of marvellous oceans swept by fateful wings, -
> The Seer strayed not from earth's human pale,
> But the mysterious face of common things
>
> He mirrored as the moon in Rydal Mere
> Is mirrored, when the breathless night hangs blue:
> Strangely remote she seems and wondrous near,
> And by some nameless difference born anew (22).

After contrasting Wordsworth with another of Nature's disciples, Byron, Watson returns in the last section of the poem to the churchyard, which is seen to reflect Wordsworth's two great gifts of rest and peace:

> The half-heard bleat of sheep comes from the hill.
> Faint sounds of childish play are in the air.
> The river murmurs past. All else is still.
> The very graves seem stiller than they were.
>
> Afar though nation be on nation hurled,
> And life with toil and ancient pain depressed,
> Here one may scarce believe the whole wide world
> Is not at peace, and all man's heart at rest.
>
> Rest! 'twas the gift he gave; and peace! the shade
> He spread, for spirits fevered with the sun.
> To him his bounties are come back - here laid
> In rest, in peace, his labour nobly done (26).

In spite of the fact that the poem closes in a churchyard, it is easy to forget that 'Wordsworth's Grave' is ostensibly an elegy. Written thirty-seven years after Wordsworth's death, it is unlike most English elegies in giving no sense of immediate loss, either public or private. Nor does it contain any meditation on death, as in 'Lycidas' or 'In Memoriam'. Watson's reflections are mainly on literary matters.

This is not to say that his poem has no resemblances to any other elegy. The four-line stanza is almost certainly a direct imitation of Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard, which he greatly admired. Further similarities between the two works are the use of the ploughman image, the emphasis on the "solemn stillness"[1] of the respective graveyards, the echo of Gray's "tinklings . . . of the distant folds" in Watson's "half-heard bleat of sheep", and the describing of the churchyard itself.

Apart from these minor likenesses to one particular elegy, 'Wordsworth's Grave' is essentially a departure from the tradition, since Watson's main concern is to assign Wordsworth his proper place in the poetic hierarchy, not to lament his death. Such concentration on the dead man's literary abilities is rare, even in elegies devoted specifically to poets, like Spenser's 'Astrophel' on Sidney, Cowper's 'Ode on the Death of Thomson' or Shelley's 'Adonais' on Keats. By combining elegy and literary criticism

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1. The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray, Oxford, 1966, p.37.

Watson found a virtually new genre to suit his own particular talents. It enabled him to show his wide knowledge of English literature and to voice his very definite opinions on it. His increasingly competent use of verse, especially epigram, helped him to express these views in a readable way. He returned to the form frequently in later years. Many contemporary critics felt that literary criticism was not a valid subject for poetry, but Watson argued that poets were "a very part / Of Nature's greatness" and their work not the "least heroical of deeds".[1]

Like 'Ver Tenebrosum', 'Wordsworth's Grave' was almost completely ignored by the critics when it was first published in The National Review for September 1887. (James Bromley's glowing review of it in Gingerbread hardly counts.) Alfred Austin's surmise about Watts-Dunton's and Swinburne's reaction may help to explain this neglect:

> So highly did I think of it that I wrote a letter to a prominent living English critic of Poetry, requesting him to show it to the eminent Poet who was an intimate friend of his . . . To my astonishment, neither of them shared my admiration; but I fancy their judgement was in some degree warped by a circumstance I had at first not noticed, that a stanza in Wordsworth's Grave might be interpreted by them as adverse to a style and school of Poetry that enjoyed their preference.[2]

Watson had probably antagonised other writers beside Watts-Dunton and Swinburne by his attack on contemporary verse, but he was too insignificant to create much stir. Few critics suspected

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1. 'Apologia', Poems, i, p.99.
2. The Autobiography of Alfred Austin, London, 1911, vol.II, p.218-9.

how popular he was to become on the publication of 'Wordsworth's Grave' in book form several years later. For the moment, however, it was barely more successful than 'Ver Tenebrosum' had been, and Watson again decided he must give up poetry.

Chapter 6

Literary Criticism for London Periodicals

Watson was even more disturbed by the failure of 'Wordsworth's Grave' in 1887 than by previous failures, since his father was now no longer alive to support him. John Watson had left only a hundred pound legacy to each of his sons and the rest of his property to his wife. James, the eldest, bought his business and trade stock from Mrs Watson for an annual payment of a hundred and fifty pounds, which gave her enough to live on, though not enough to keep William too.[1] So in his twenty-ninth year he was faced with the need to earn his own living for the first time in his life. After a long talk with Noble about his literary prospects, he decided to take up prose-writing again, though with certain reservations:

> I have thought much about the question of journalism, [he writes to Dowden on July 4, 1887] and have definitely made up my mind that journalism is not the thing for me at all. After all, trying my best, I can do work in criticism that is worth doing. Where's the good of consciously stooping to employment that is beneath me? I would rather measure tape or weigh sugar than spend my life writing articles for newspapers on matters that don't concern me. The former employment, the tape and sugar I mean, would be quite honourable and more congenial. No, I shall write magazine articles and put my best into them and take my chance of selling them to editors.

1. Letter to Dowden, March 4, 1889.

But his father's death had depressed him more than he first realised and he was unable to work, though not through lack of ideas. Apart from a political poem and two prose articles, he wrote only a few short lyrics, one of which expresses his feelings at this time:

> Strange the world about me lies,
>   Never yet familiar grown -
> Still disturbs me with surprise,
>   Haunts me like a face half known.
>
> In this house with starry dome,
>   Floored with gemlike plains and seas,
> Shall I never feel at home,
>   Never wholly be at ease?
>
> On from room to room I stray,
>   Yet my Host can ne'er espy,
> And I know not to this day
>   Whether guest or captive I.[1]

To compensate for his sense of a distinct falling off in his poetical powers, Watson felt a greater ease in prose-writing. By July, 1888, he was hopeful of doing "a fair amount of decent work",[2] and by September had finished his first successful attempt, 'The Fall of Fiction'. This article - a fierce attack on Rider Haggard, who represented all he despised in contemporary fiction - caused quite a stir when it appeared in The Fortnightly Review

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1. 'World-Strangeness', Poems, i, p.104. Yeats wrote of this poem: "One finds an expression of a sensitive nature and of its trouble over the riddle of things, a nature that is refined, inquiring, subtle - everything but believing. It is a nature admirable for most things that man has to do - except found religions or write the greatest kind of poetry." ('A Scholar Poet', Letters to the New Island, Cambridge, Mass., 1934, p.211.)

2. Letter to Dowden, July 8, 1888.

the same month. Andrew Lang, a respected critic, poet and scholar, immediately rushed to his friend's defence in the October issue of The Contemporary Review[1] and Watson replied in turn the following month with an article called 'Mr Haggard and his Henchman'.[2] The Fortnightly had agreed to print another article he was writing about Hall Caine and 'The Further Fall of Fiction', but they never did so, probably because they thought it libellous. Apart from two much later pieces on 'Tragedy and Mr Stephen Phillips' and 'The State Discouragement of Literature',[3] Watson wrote nothing else for the magazine, though he remained on friendly terms with the editors, Frank Harris and John Verschoyle.[4]

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1. 'A Dip in Criticism', pp.495-503.
2. The Fortnightly Review, L, November, 1888.
3. These were published respectively in March, 1898, and February, 1904.
4. Watson intended to use Frank Harris's name as a referee for a "Literary Letter" he was planning to send to all provincial newspapers at the beginning of 1890 (Letter to Dowden, February, 1890). His request to Dowden for information about Verschoyle in the early eighties suggests that little was known of him even in his own day. The son of a clergyman and ordained Anglican priest himself, Verschoyle devoted most of his life to literature. He helped Frank Harris to edit The Fortnightly from 1886 onwards and went with him to The Saturday Review in 1894. He also edited The Abolitionist, to which Watson contributed a few poems at the turn of the century, and two books - The History of Ancient Civilisation (1889) and The History of Modern Civilisation (1891). His only original work was a few articles and poems published in The Fortnightly, The Contemporary Review, The Review of Reviews and The Living Age between 1892 and 1904. Watson still knew him when he became very ill in 1905 and in 1907 suggested to John Lane that they should give a dinner for him to cheer him up.

The first periodical Watson contributed to regularly was The National Review, where he was already known and admired as the author of 'Ver Tenebrosum' and 'Wordsworth's Grave'. Starting with 'Some Literary Idolatries', he supplied its editor, Austin, with seven articles between October, 1888, and August, 1890. Towards the end of this period he complained to Dowden that the best part of his essay on poetry anthologies "had to be sacrificed to Austin's scruples".[1] But to start with at least, he was allowed a good deal more scope than this suggests and not limited to routine reviewing of minor books, like so many beginners. In his first three articles he was able to develop his own theories about literature. He argues against a prevailing belief in the greatness of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, for instance, in 'Some Literary Idolatries'.[2] In 'Dr Johnson on Modern Poetry' he has even more space to move, for the essay takes the form of a dialogue between the eighteenth century master and a nineteenth century critic, which allows him to present two opposed points of view. He can therefore express his own conflicting opinions on eighteenth-and early-nineteenth-century literature with no apparent inconsistency. In his third article, 'Fiction - Plethoric and Anaemic',[3] he pursues his theory, introduced in 'The Fall of Fiction', that modern novels are divided into two kinds. Since he has already

1. Letter dated February 5, 1890. The article referred to is 'The Siege of Helicon', The National Review, xiv, February, 1890.

2. XII, October, 1888, pp.160-173.

3. XIV, October, 1889, pp.167-183.

fully illustrated the 'plethoric' from Rider Haggard, he now discusses the 'anaemic', taking George Meredith as his victim. Up to this point Austin had not asked him to write reviews, but even when he did so, he still allowed him freedom to introduce his own particular interests. In 'Poetry by Men of the World',[1] for example, Watson makes Sir Alfred Lyall's and Wilfred Scawen Blunt's poems an excuse for discussing the nature of the poet and the sonnet form. His analysis of Edwin Waugh, 'The Lancashire Laureate',[2] gives him an opportunity to show his detailed knowledge of dialect poetry and his review of Buxton Forman's "painstaking edition of Keats"[3] the chance to condemn the publishing of intimate biographical material.

Watson made his first sustained contact with the London literary world through his work for The National Review. In Austin he had an editor who not only believed in his literary abilities himself, but wanted others to also. He was so anxious for Watson to become known that in 1889 he offered to be guarantor for a volume of poems and in February, 1890, suggested that he should write him a series of articles on minor contemporary poets. He could not accept Watson's alternative suggestion of a series on poets of middle rank, for personal reasons, but was quite happy for him to take the idea elsewhere. It was probably at Austin's suggestion that Watson was asked to write an introduction to

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1. XIV, December, 1889, pp.520-9.
2. XV, June, 1890, pp.518-28.
3. 'The Punishment of Genius', XV, August, 1890, pp.764-9.

Austin's English Lyrics in June, 1890, for Austin had more faith in him than he had himself: "Austin has offered me the editorship pro. tem. of the National Review during a forthcoming absence of his for some months", he told Dowden in February that year, "but tempting as this looks, I am too doubtful of my own equipment for the task to jump at it precipitately". Though he stopped writing for The National Review seven months later he remained good friends with Austin until 1895.

He was not nearly so close to his next editor, James Cotton, in spite of the fact that he had known him much longer than Austin. He had visited Cotton several times during 1883 to discuss the publication of his epigrams in The Academy and also reviewed three books for him in 1884.[1] He is listed among the 'Contributors to the Academy' in the July to December, 1884, and January to June, 1885, volumes, though these contain no signed articles by him. This may mean that he helped to write the anonymous poetry reviews or simply that he was left on the list by mistake. His next signed piece appears in 1889. Cotton had probably asked him to work for The Academy again because he had been impressed by his articles in The National Review, but he gave him very little chance to produce the same kind of work. His demand for more routine review work, which would not have helped Watson to change his mind about the "general correct dulness"

1. i.e. Mrs Pfeiffer's Lady of the Rocks, April 19th; William Sharp's Earth's Voices, May 24th; W.C. Smith's Kildrostan: A Dramatic Poem, June 21st.

of The Academy,[1] gave him almost no opportunity to discuss his favourite theories. However limiting Watson may have found it, his reviews are interesting because they show his attitude towards different classes of literature. His own aims in the critical essay, for instance, are implicit in what he admires about Pater's Appreciations:

> It is noteworthy that in these studies, where the critical posture is invariably one of extreme modesty - the writer contentedly sitting at the feet of his Gamaliels and reverently transmitting to us the essence of their utterances with such elucidatory comment as he may think needful - it is noteworthy that by virtue of this very humility and apparent self-repression he attains to something like kinship and equality with the masters whom it is his ambition simply to understand and report.[2]

He praises Pater's "unerring precision of phrase" and "delicately luminous perception" and points out that he is "one of the most catholic of living critics". Watson believes that precise diction is important in the general essay, too; he criticises John Addington Symonds for using the word 'evolution' ambiguously in his 'Essays Speculative and Suggestive'.[3] His other criticism of Symonds's work is that it contains very little "original thought", though he recognises its "varied erudition", "just apprehension, luminous generalisation, masterly utterance" and "admirable order and arrangement of ideas". Watson obviously thinks organisation of material very important, for he condemns

1. Letter to Dowden, September 3, 1883.
2. The Academy, XXXVI, December 21, 1889, pp.399-400.
3. XXXVIII, August 30, 1890, pp.166-7.

Henry Van Dyke's book on Tennyson because of its order.[1] He criticises Van Dyke also for "not throwing any very novel flood of light upon the Tennysonian ethics or aesthetics" and contrasts his fruitless use of comparative criticism with Professor Dowden's successful use of it in 'Mr Tennyson and Mr Browning'. Since Van Dyke has compared Tennyson with Milton, however, Watson thinks it his duty to give his readers a brief history of blank verse.[2]

He is even more thorough in dealing with another class of literature - the novel. He has already said, in 'Fiction - Plethoric and Anaemic', that a novel should be judged according to its structure, narrative, dialogue and character, and he examines all these aspects of Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles.[3] While criticising it for "over-academic phraseology" and some faults of character-drawing, he recognises that these are more than compensated by an overall subtlety of characterisation, a poetic use of "external Nature not simply as a background or setting, but as a sort of superior spectator and chorus" and, above all, by its "great theme". Watson's attitude towards sexual morality was narrowly conventional and it is a surprise to find him approving of Hardy's passionate protest "against the

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1. 'The Poetry of Tennyson', XXXVII, March 29, 1890, pp.217-8.

2. For a fuller account of Watson's opinions on blank verse in drama see chapter 10, p.244, where his review of Tennyson's plays is discussed.

3. XLI, February 6, 1892, pp.125-6.

unequal justice meted out by society to the man and woman associated in an identical breach of the moral law", which so many of his contemporaries condemned.

Sound as Watson's criticism of Tess is, he basically disagrees with the novel form and his most interesting reviews for The Academy are on poetry, where his reaction to different kinds of verse helps define his own poetic position. In his review of The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges,[1] for instance, he shows his disapproval of most contemporary poets by contrasting their "flashy literary workmanship" with Bridges' "quiet and evenly-ordered excellence". Dismissing the older poet's faults as "pleasant foibles of the past", he condemns the work of more modern ones as "highly-spiced or over-flavoured". His praise of Bridges' haunting lyricism and "peculiar choiceness of diction" shows that he is quite content with the conventions established in poetry by the mid-nineteenth century and cannot understand the wish to change them. He refused to review the work of a modern poet, 'Michael Field', because he could not "honestly say complimentary things of it".[2] Cotton must have valued Watson's work, for he accepted his refusal and continued to print his reviews, even after one of them - on the first and sixth volumes of Miles' Poets and Poetry of the Century - antagonised the publishers so

1. XXXVIII, November 29, 1890, pp.496-7.
2. Letter to Dowden, July 6, 1890.

much that they would not send Cotton volumes three and four. Watson went on writing for The Academy until 1892. Though never close friends with Cotton, he seems to have been on fairly good terms with him. When Noble tried to prejudice Cotton against Watson in 1890 he failed to do so.

Noble's attempt to prejudice Richard Holt Hutton against Watson, too, must have been equally unsuccessful, for Hutton asked Watson to start work for The Spectator in March, 1890. His admiration had first been roused by 'Wordsworth's Grave' when it came out in book form, together with 'Ver Tenebrosum', selected epigrams and a few lyrics, at the beginning of the year. Hutton's biographer says that it was his "passionate appreciation" of this volume in The Spectator which started Watson's reputation rising,[1] but Richard Le Gallienne, who also claims to have recognised Watson's genius at the time, argues that it needed the authority of a popular writer like Grant Allen to do this.[2] Allen did not review Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems until a second edition was published in August, 1891,[3] when he wrote in The Fortnightly Review:

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1. J. Hogben, Mr R.H. Hutton, London, 1900, p.44.

2. Attitudes and Avowals, London, 1910, pp.190-1.

3. Watson added twenty-six of his Epigrams and four longer poems, which had already appeared in The Spectator, to the second edition.

> One glimpse revealed the gold. I looked up in surprise, and exclaimed at once, "This is _not_ minor poetry!" And minor poetry it is not---. "Wordsworth's Grave" itself stands out conspicuous as a delicately-finished piece of fine and austere handicraft in the metre of Gray's Elegy - not hysterical or overwrought, after the common modern fashion, not involved or enigmatical, but subdued, terse, graceful, carefully chased, daintily modulated, and clear as crystal.[1]

Allen's attention had been drawn to _Wordsworth's Grave_ by his friend, Edward Clodd, who had handed him the book open at an epigram on Shelley. Clodd had known of Watson's work since at least October, 1889, when he discussed his "slashing paper" on Meredith in _The National Review_ with its editor, James Cotton at the Savile Club.[2] Clodd read and admired _Wordsworth's Grave_ when it first came out early in 1890 and wrote to tell Watson so. Once he had converted Allen to his viewpoint he arranged for Watson to meet them both at Allen's house in Dorking. The two of them then took this "bright-eyed Dantesque" poet to visit George Meredith, who, seeing the "blue funk" he was in, very graciously came to meet him at his cottage-gate. Watson found Meredith a "fantastic, theatrical old man, talking for an audience in every sentence - a spectral sort of personage, semi-paralytic, a posing, drawling, strutting enigma, with a kind of pallid, lurid, lunar ghastliness upon him",[3] but he appreciated Meredith's

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1. 'Note on a New Poet', _The Fortnightly Review_, L, August 1, 1891, p.196.
2. This and all the following information about Clodd, unless otherwise stated, comes from the minute pocket-diaries he kept throughout his life. After his death these came into the possession of his grandson, Allen Clodd, who very kindly allowed me to read them.
3. Letter to Dowden, _c_. end of August, 1891.

kindness to him and was delighted that he "privately expressed much admiration" for his verse. Clodd asked Watson to dine with him at the Savile a week later and they quickly became close friends. Only a month after their first meeting Watson went to spend the weekend in Clodd's country-house at Aldeburgh on the Suffolk coast. There he met another well-known novelist of the day, Mrs Lynn Linton, whom he described to Dowden as "a most gentle old lady, belying her aggressive reputation extraordinarily - she was calling me 'dear' within an hour of our first meeting". Clodd also introduced him to Kipling at the Savile and probably brought him into personal contact with other influential members like Edmund Gosse, Walter Besant, Austin Dobson and Thomas Hardy. In fact he formed Watson's first real introduction to the literary world of London, though Watson had been living there for over a year. Quite apart from his usefulness, Watson found Clodd "a delightful companion".[1] He spent many evenings at Clodd's house in Tufnell Park, talking, reading and playing the piano to him, and often stayed the night. It is more than likely that he moved his lodgings to Hampstead to be within walking distance of Clodd. He expressed his appreciation of him in a sonnet which reminds us that he had been waiting over ten years for recognition:

1. Letter to Dowden, c. end August, 1890.

Friend, in whose friendship I am twice well-starred,
A debt not time may cancel is your due;
For was it not your praise that earliest drew,
On me obscure, that chivalrous regard,
Ev'n his, who, knowing fame's first steep how hard,
With generous lips no faltering clarion blew,
Bidding men hearken to a lyre by few
Heeded, nor grudge the bay to one more bard?
Bitter the task, year by inglorious year,
Of suitor at the world's reluctant ear.
One cannot sing for ever, like a bird,
For sole delight of singing! Him his mate
Suffices, listening with a heart elate;
Nor more his joy, if all the rapt heav'n heard.[1]

Watson wrote this on September 30th, 1891. Three days later he felt even more grateful to Clodd, when he introduced him to another friend - Marian Roalfe Cox. Clodd had first met Marian three years previously and quickly got her to share his own interest in folk lore. He encouraged her to start work on a collection of Cinderella legends, which he then helped her to edit.[2] He also persuaded her to join the Folk-Lore Society, of which he himself was an important member, and helped elect her to its committee not long after. They saw a good deal of each other during the late eighties and early nineties; he often dined with her family in Streatham and took her on frequent visits to museums and art galleries. They also went to Kew Gardens together, to watch the progress of a rosebush grown out of seeds from Omar Khayyam's supposed grave at Nishapur. Marian,

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1. 'To Edward Clodd', Poems, ii, p.10.

2. Cinderella was published for the Folk-Lore Society at London in 1893. Marian's next book - An Introduction to Folk-Lore (1895) - was dedicated "To my friend EDWARD CLODD who suggested its theme, this book is gratefully dedicated".

whom Clodd thought "artistic", made a copy of a sketch of the grave for him the same year. It is difficult to say exactly what kind of relationship this was. Though Clodd was old enough to be Marian's father, their constant meetings and her numerous personal presents to him suggest more than daughterly feelings on her part. Once she met Watson, however, any incipient romance between them disappeared. Clodd first introduced Marian to Watson indirectly when he read 'Wordsworth's Grave' to her at Aldeburgh in September, 1890, but it was another year before she met him in person - at a Folk-Lore Society outing to Oxford. Watson was immediately attracted to her and visited her family with Clodd several times during the next few months. He then started to see her independently of Clodd and by February 24th, 1892, they were engaged. Clodd was the first person to hear Watson's "secret"; Marian, too, had a serious talk to him about the engagement, which threatened to be a long one, for financial reasons. He had also to attend the "deadly dull" engagement party they gave at Streatham in April.

Watson regarded his engagement to Marian as one of the happiest events in his life. Since their meeting he had started to write poetry with greater ease. The poems he added to the third edition of Wordsworth's Grave, which Macmillan's published simply as Poems in February, 1892, suggest that it was Marian who had inspired this new ease; he himself hinted as much in dedicating an anthology of love poetry he was editing to her:

Take, then, this garland of melodious flowers.
Till he, whose hand the fragrant chaplet wove,
Another wreath from his own garden bring,
These captive blossoms of a hundred bowers
Hold thou as hostages of Lyric Love,
In pledge of all the songs he longs to sing.[1]

An examination of the "songs" he did produce for Marian shows that his love for her and his reading of large amounts of love poetry for his anthology made him write a very different kind of verse from 'Ver Tenebrosum' and 'Wordsworth's Grave': most of his new poems are inspired by a passion stronger than either political fervour or literary enthusiasm. His double source of inspiration comes out clearly in 'Autumn', where his re-reading of Keats, in particular, seems to have affected his choice of subject matter and style:

Thou burden of all songs the earth hath sung,
Thou retrospect in Time's reverted eyes,
Thou metaphor of everything that dies,
That dies ill-starred, or dies beloved and young
And therefore blest and wise, -
O be less beautiful, or be less brief,
Thou tragic splendour, strange, and full of fear!
In vain her pageant shall the Summer rear?
At thy mute signal, leaf by golden leaf,
Crumbles the gorgeous year.[2]

Arthur Symons compares Watson's ode to Autumn unfavourably with Keats's. He also argues that epigram "lies at the root of his work",[3] and the other new lyrics in the volume,[4] which are nearly

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1. Lyric Love, London, 1892.

2. Poems, i, p.44.

3. 'Sir William Watson', Dramatis Personae, p.213.

4. Beside adding eleven lyrics Watson also added some epistles, to newly-made friends like the Grant Allens, an elegy on Matthew Arnold, a short ballad and a few political poems.

all in quatrains, seem to prove him right. The simplicity of the form almost invariably adds to their power. The lyrics, which are obviously based on Watson's meeting with Marian, show him attempting to illustrate his theory that "the most truly interesting effects in love poetry are where the shadow of two living and credible personalities - those of the lover and his beloved, - are recognisably thrown across the verse".[1] Each of them refers to a particular phase of the relationship. The first, which describes the effect Marian had on his life, is worth quoting for the simple but unusually applied image he uses in the third and fourth lines and the meaningful paradox of the last stanza:

> Thy voice from inmost dreamland calls;
> The wastes of sleep thou makest fair;
> Bright o'er the ridge of darkness falls
> The cataract of thy hair.
>
> The morn renews its golden birth:
> Thou with the vanquished night dost fade;
> And leav'st the ponderable earth
> Less real than thy shade.[2]

The third lyric, a clever little conceit about scentless flowers, which grow fragrant in his mistress's bosom, reminds us that he was reading a good deal of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century love poetry when he wrote it. The preoccupation with death and 'carpe diem' theme of another piece suggests that its influence was fairly strong:

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1. Preface to Lyric Love, p.ix.
2. Poems, i, p.64.

And these - are these indeed the end,
     This grinning skull, this heavy loam?
Do all green ways whereby we wend
     Lead but to yon ignoble home?

Ah well! Thine eyes invite to bliss;
     Thy lips are hives of summer still.
I ask not other worlds while this
     Proffers me all the sweets I will.[1]

In "Well he slumbers, greatly slain", Watson also adopts the Petrarcan convention of complaining about the cruelty of love. But in the main he is convinced of its delights and describes one occasion when these seemed particularly strong:

Under the dark and piny steep
     We watched the storm crash by:
We saw the bright band leap and leap
     Out of the shattered sky.

The elements were minist'ring
     To make one mortal blest;
For, peal by peal, you did but cling
     The closer to his breast.[2]

Marian, in turn, made Watson feel protected, he tells us in 'Liberty Rejected', yet without stifling him; her weakness in itself was a kind of strength to him. The best lyric in the volume may not refer to Marian, except prophetically, but it describes the kind of effect she obviously had on him:

Just for a day you crossed my life's dull track,
     Put my ignobler dreams to sudden shame.
Went your bright way, and left me to fall back
     On my own world of poorer deed and aim;

---

1. Poems, London, 1892, p.68.

2. Poems, i, p.75.

To fall back on my meaner world, and feel
    Like one who, dwelling 'mid some smoke-dimmed town, -
In a brief pause of labour's sullen wheel, -
    'Scaped from the street's dead dust and factory's frown, -

In stainless daylight saw the pure seas roll,
    Saw mountains pillaring the perfect sky:
Then journeyed home, to carry in his soul
    The torment of the difference till he die.[1]

Watson manages to give fresh impact to a simile used by Milton in Paradise Lost and Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey in this piece, which also illustrates the unevenness of most of his lyric poetry. At its worst it is full of archaisms, awkward syntax and confused metaphor; at its best it shows a simple, fresh use of imagery, expert handling of syntax and metre, precision of diction and, most important of all, the kind of word-magic which makes the last two lines memorable long after the rest is forgotten.

Though Watson had not given up writing lyrics completely after The Prince's Quest and Other Poems in 1880,[2] he had never produced so many in such a short time since then. His renewed enthusiasm may have reminded him of his first book, for in 1891 he sent a copy of it to Marian. In the 'Lines' written to go with his gift, he describes her as "a scholiast fair, / Who dwelleth in a world of old romance, / Magic emprise and faery chevisaunce",[3] which suggests that he was attracted to her partly because she took him back to his own early interest in Spenser,

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1. Poems, i, p.154.
2. 'The Lute-Player', one of his well-known lyrics, was written in 1882.
3. Poems, (1892) p.53.

Keats and Shelley. She also shared his maturer taste for Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Tennyson. He was probably fascinated, though slightly awed, by her knowledge of Greek, Latin, Italian and German literature, none of which he knew at first-hand. But as he told Dowden on April 20th, 1892, her scholarship was the least of her virtues:

> Marian Roalfe Cox is, I will not say a charming girl, for, though girl in outward seeming, she in reality only falls short by three years of my own hoary age of 33, - but a truly noble woman, one of those natures that sweeten the world, and having among her lesser graces a range of intellectual attainments rare among the daughters of Eve, or her sons either.

Watson's appreciation was short-lived, apparently, for he broke off the engagement only a month later. He has left no explanation, but judging from Clodd's reaction he was to blame. Admittedly Clodd may have been prejudiced by his affection for Marian and by hearing her version of the break first; at any rate, he became much cooler towards Watson, whom he began to find very egotistical, and, when Watson tried to explain himself to him in October, accused him of lacking a "fine sense of honour". James Ashcroft Noble had made the same accusation only a few years earlier, when Watson had broken off a previous engagement to the daughter of Noble's friend, Alexander Ireland. Watson had become engaged to Ethel Ireland shortly after her family moved from Manchester to Southport in 1888, when she was sixteen. His break with her in 1889 was probably a main cause of his

"irreparable breach" with Noble[1] and his departure for London the same year.

Watson had intended to go and live in London directly after his father's death in 1887, but moved instead to lodgings near his earlier home at Southport. Though "always wonderfully well physically" in Southport, he found it a "soul-deadening place",[2] and before the end of the year he had moved again - to West Derby on the outskirts of Liverpool. After only a month there, he went to stay in the Southport Smedley Hydropath, for a rest, and by June, 1888, had crossed the Mersey to Heswall in Cheshire. By August he was back in the Liverpool suburb of Childwall, though not for long. November found him in London, at 79, Southampton Row, but he soon returned north, where he stayed in yet another suburb of Liverpool - Stoneycroft - until 1889. Up to this point his mother had lived sometimes with him, sometimes with Robinson, but in March Robinson went bankrupt and she became William's full responsibility. He took her back to their old neighbourhood of Ormskirk till December, then on to Southport in the spring of 1890. After a summer holiday in the Lake District he decided to move to London, mainly so that he could begin work at the British Museum on the anthology of love poetry Macmillan's had commissioned him to edit.[3] He and his

1. Letter to Dowden, August 28, 1891.

2. Letter to Dowden, March 5, 1890.

3. Watson first registered as a 'Reader' at the British Museum Library on September 10th, 1890, and renewed his ticket on March 11th, 1891, and March 14th, 1894.

mother took lodgings in Putney, though Watson still felt "very unsettled, with a great longing sometimes for a fixed abode and manners of existence, and at other times the desire to wander over the world and chuck up literature for ever".[1] Once settled in London, he realised that he was "much more favourably placed for getting the ear of editors". His commission to write a paper on Lewis Morris, for instance, resulted from a casual conversation with Alfred Austin. The cost of living was higher in London than elsewhere, however, and he could only just afford to support himself there. When it became necessary to provide for his mother too, since James, like Robinson, had gone bankrupt, he had to leave. He could hardly hope to write and place more than fifteen articles a year and, at less than a pound a page, this was not enough for both of them to live on. So he took his mother up to Birkdale for the rest of the winter and left her there during 1891, while he returned to find lodgings and more work. Grant Allen's review of Wordsworth's Grave in August made things much easier for him and on December 22nd, 1891, he could write to his mother:

> I shall be able to send you some money tomorrow.--- After transferring my poems from Unwin to Heinemann I have since had better offers made to me spontaneously by Macmillan & Co. and after a hard fight have just succeeded in getting my agreement with Heinemann cancelled. Macmillan's have repaid him what he advanced me and will

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1. Letter to Dowden, February 4, 1890.

> tomorrow make me a further advance. My poems will therefore shortly be re-issued by the greatest house in London.[1]

Macmillan's must have given him a substantial advance, for by the spring he was able to bring his mother down to live with him again in a small cottage he had found at Norwood, near to Marian's in Streatham.

Watson had first been brought to Macmillan's notice by Austin, who suggested that he write an introduction to his *English Lyrics* in 1890. This had pleased them so much that they then asked him to edit an anthology of love poetry in 1891 and to revise and expand *Wordsworth's Grave* for a third edition. The new version came out successfully in February, 1892, and for the first time in his life Watson began to take an optimistic view of his literary prospects, as a letter written to James Bromley at this period shows:

> There is no doubt that /_Macmillan's_/ are going to 'star' me, as the phrase is, and there is every sign that my real public success is just going to begin. I shall really have no competition to speak of just now: the field is unusually clear, with Edwin Arnold and Lewis Morris getting discredited and deservedly so, the two masters Tennyson and Swinburne doing nothing, Austin making no headway, and no new man rising head-and-shoulders above the rest except myself. The unanimity of the Press in my favour has really been something wonderful; - and I suppose, living where you do, you have probably no idea what a chattered-about and lionised man I have become in this sity. Then too, every week my circle of personal acquaintances . . .[2]

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1. Letter in the possession of Mr William R. Watson.

2. Yale, box 3.

The rest is missing, but fairly easy to complete. Beside meeting people at Clodd's house and the Savile, he also met them at the Johnson Club, which Clodd had started in 1884. Clement King Shorter, to whom he introduced Clodd was another useful contact and invited them both as guests to the first meeting of the Omar Khayyam Club in 1892.[1] Edmund Gosse also invited Watson to the National Club, where he met more well-known figures.

One of Watson's most influential friends at this time was Richard Holt Hutton, who had offered him work immediately Wordsworth's Grave came out in 1890: by January, 1891, Hutton had given him several books to review and appears to have put him on the reviewing staff of The Spectator. Watson took great pains with his work and was rewarded "with good pay and unstinted appreciation".[2] He also got on well presonally with Hutton, who delighted him by his "homely simplicity and sincerity". Richard Le Gallienne, attempting to account for Watson's sudden rise to fame, says that at one time "Mr Hutton seemed to edit The Spectator for the very proper purpose of announcing the truly momentous presence in our midst of the author of 'Wordsworth's Grave'".[3] In his anxiety to make Watson known, Hutton printed

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1. The club's membership was limited to 59 and Watson was not elected a member until 1902, though he was asked to give a speech at the inaugural dinner and to write a poem for the menu card. He was asked to write another poem for the annual dinner in 1902. Clodd became a member almost immediately and was elected president in 1895.

2. Letter to Dowden, January 23, 1891.

3. Attitudes and Avowals, pp.190-1.

a number of his poems as well as reviews.[1] Watson responded with an appreciative article on Hutton, which appeared first in The Bookman,[2] then in his prose collection, Excursions in Criticism (1893). He valued his work for The Spectator enough to include one of the articles he wrote for it in the same collection. This essay, 'Mr Austin Dobson's "Hogarth"',[3] shows what he can do with the essay at his best. Proceeding from the general to the particular, he starts by admitting that there is a certain amount of truth in the popular conception of the eighteenth century as cynical and amoral, but argues that it also contained "a prevalent ethical bent", evident in its best writers - Addison, Pope, Swift, Young, Thomson, Gray, Richardson, Johnson and Cowper. He then introduces Hogarth, quite naturally, as "the satirist whose painted and engraved sermons are the most powerfully impressive of all examples of moralised art". He next contrasts Hogarth's satiric method with that of his friend, Fielding, whose art has nothing of his "tragic and terrible ludicrousness". The final paragraph is a detailed description of Hogarth's love of symbols and his "imaginative method of mingling oblique with direct narrative". The only dubious aspect of the piece is this concentration on Hogarth's art, rather than on Dobson's book about it.

1. e.g. 'An Epistle', The Spectator, August 15, 1891; 'The Blind Summit', September 19, 1891.
2. Vol.III, 1892.
3. The Spectator, LXIX, October 29, 1892, pp.597ff.

Before he stopped contributing to The Spectator in October, 1892,[1] Watson had already begun work for yet another magazine - The Illustrated London News. He had met its editor, Clement King Shorter, by October, 1891, probably through Dowden, who recommended Wordsworth's Grave to Shorter in 1890 and could well have given Watson a letter of introduction to him, as he had to other journalists. Watson knew Shorter closely enough by December to write to Clodd:

> I saw Shorter today. He wants very much to make your acquaintance. If you have any free evening next week would you mind naming two, and allowing Shorter and me to select, and then he and I wd. come out to you together. I hope this is an agreeable suggestion. Nice fellow, Shorter. He and I are going on Sunday to Mrs Graham Tomson's.[2]

Watson started work for Shorter in January, 1892. He was asked to review books on contemporary literature, with one exception, and his articles reveal a good deal about his attitude toward it. His views on 'realistic' drama, for instance, emerge very clearly in his first piece on William Archer's book, Ibsen's Prose Dramas.[3] While admiring the Norwegian's moral aim and undeniable power, Watson feels that his "narrow intensity of vision, his preoccupation

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1. His other signed contributions were a review of The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, August 15, 1891, p.215, a long letter containing seventeen epigrams, entitled 'Wilde and Whirling Words', March 29, 1892, p.429, and an article on 'The Poetesses of the Century', August 10, 1892, pp.258-60.

2. Yale, Ts. copy of a letter c. December, 1891. Shorter and Clodd became close friends and remained so long after Watson and Clodd had parted.

3. The Illustrated London News, January 16, 1892, p.79.

with death disqualifies him for a place among the greatest dramatists":

> All is not right with the world; but then, neither is all wrong with the world, as Ibsen would apparently have us believe. In the way he closes and wrestles with life's problems he gives us an impression of huge and savage strength; there is something gigantic about the proportions of the man; but he is a one-eyed giant, a cyclops of ethics and art.

Watson obviously believes what he says Ibsen does not - that "the ultimate end of art is beauty of some sort". His condemnation of Walt Whitman's technical innovations[1] springs from the same belief, as well as from a conventional liking for tradition and artifice:

> Whitman's so-called 'message' is clear, and, on the whole, true; if it had been delivered, as poets' messages always are, in the accents of music, even though the music were tumultuous rather than dulcet, it might have reached our hearts. But, instead of that, it is simply shouted at us from the stentorian lungs of a man standing on a barrel in the street.

Yeats' The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends[2] also rouses his antagonism. He criticises Yeats' weak use of the supernatural, his crude attempt at "spiritual symbolism" and his experiments in versification. He is discerning enough to recognise, at this early stage in Yeats' career, that his greatness lies not so much in his "extravagant picturesqueness" or "romantic grandeur", as in his "charming and exquisite" lyric

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1. 'An Exposition of Walt Whitman', July 9, 1892, p.47.
2. September 10, 1892, pp.334-5.

gift, which reminds Watson of Blake at times. His attitude towards Meredith's Modern Love[1] shows that he was not dismissive of metrical experiments as such. He accepts Meredith's "thick utterances" and tortured rhythms because they are an honest attempt to express "tumultuous feeling" and "complexity of emotions", and is again discerning enough to predict that Modern Love will stand the test of time, whereas 'The Sage Enamoured' will not.

Arthur Symons argues, with reference to an earlier article on Meredith, which Watson wrote in reply to his own, that Watson's power lies in a "critical intelligence" rather than a "poetical temperament".[2] Yeats, too, believes that he possesses a "critical rather than . . . creative imagination".[3] Both men may be motivated by a desire to discredit his poetry rather than to praise his criticism; this is how it appears to the modern reader. Whatever they intended, their comments give us an opportunity to look at Watson's criticism more closely.

On the whole his criticism lacks distinction. Watson cannot be compared with contemporaries like Dowden, whose power he himself recognised and tried to emulate. In our own century, when criticism and the criticism of criticism has become so

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1. He reviewed a reprint of this on April 2, 1892.
2. Dramatis Personae, p.215.
3. Letters to the New Island, p.208.

sophisticated, Watson's work seems rather naïve and thin. But it has a certain historic interest and some intrinsic merit, which make it worth examining.

Watson has most of the technical equipment needed for a good critic - an encyclopaedic knowledge of English literature, including the works of the major critical authorities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,[1] a deep interest in the English language and a very retentive memory. On the whole he makes good use of these. He drives home his point about Ibsen's limitations, for instance, by contrasting him with other great writers he knows, and gives authority to his criticism of Rider Haggard by quoting Dryden and Dr Johnson on 'probability' and Matthew Arnold on style. There are times when his insistence on the importance of grammatical and verbal accuracy seems merely pedantic, but it is often justified; J. A. Symonds' ambiguous use of the word "evolution", for instance, is confusing, as Watson suggests.[2] His good memory not only enables him to recognise serious textual errors in the first volume of Alfred Miles' Poets and Poetry of the Century, it also supplies him with relevant quotations which generally strengthen his argument. His essays gain authority, too, from

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1. He quotes or refers to Dryden, Dr Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Macaulay, Tennyson, Saintsbury and Arnold.

2. See p.115.

their close and detailed reference to the works in question. Another reassuring feature of his criticism is the clear way in which he organises his material. I have already shown how he does this in 'Hogarth' by proceeding from the general to the particular. He follows the same plan in 'Critics and their Craft', where he introduces his review of Saintsbury's Essays in English Literature with a discussion of criticism in general. In 'Poetry by Men of the World' he reverses the process, moving from the texts themselves to wider issues. At times he works on the principle of contrast, beginning his article on William Sharp's Earth's Voices and Graham Tomson's A Summer Night, for instance, by praising their previous volumes, then using these as criteria for judging their latest ones.

Not unexpectedly, the control shown in the form is also apparent in the style, which has both ease and dignity, as he felt it should.[1] His admiration for J.R. Lowell's witty use of metaphor and epigram reflects his own aims in prose. Love of epigram is probably his most characteristic feature and it sometimes tempts him to make rather superficial statements, like "[Shelley] is without posterity even as he is without progenitors".[2] But another epigram in the same essay proves

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1. He contrasts Leigh Hunt's chatty style unfavourably with Saintsbury's familiar yet dignified one in 'Critics and their Craft'.
2. 'Shelley as Poet', The Bookman, II, August, 1892, p.141.

that his cleverness is not always without acuteness: "Song, after all, is not so much either Truth or Wisdom as the rose upon Truth's lips, and the light in Wisdom's eyes"(142). In this instance metaphor helps to clarify thought and is therefore an important part of Watson's critical apparatus. When he uses metaphor humorously, as he often does, he generally achieves the same clarification, with added emphasis. Replying to Andrew Lang's remark that Rider Haggard deliberately dug "holes" for his readers to fall into, Watson says that it is not so much his "holes" he minds, as his "inartistic helplessness to save himself from being always seen, spade in hand, and with loamy fingers at his digging". He is often equally witty and ironic in his handling of single words and phrases. In a deliberate attempt to suggest the absurdity of modern fiction, for instance, he describes it as being in a state of "perpetual precipitation".[1] In the same essay, besides playing on the similarity between "meritorious" and "meretricious" to bring out what he dislikes about Meredith's style, he also uses paradox to define his paradoxical style: - "naturalness is not natural to him; but when he is frankly artificial, he is then himself". Such comments are not just word-games; they are a genuine attempt to describe the nature of Meredith's genius. At its finest Watson's style is generally a combination of

1. 'Fiction - Plethoric and Anaemic', The National Review, XIV, October, 1889.

metaphor, epigram and word-play, which clarify and point his thought. In his review of A.M.F. Robinson's Lyrics, for instance, describing a group of minor poetesses, who "combine a sort of belated Byronic romanticism of style with a rather humdrum domesticity of sentiment", he summarises their work as "Byron and weak tea".

Style is not the most important feature in criticism, however; as Watson himself realises, "sound thought" and "luminous perception" are also needed. He sometimes seems to cultivate style at the expense of these more basic qualities. Not that he is incapable of thinking clearly. In his essay 'Lowell As Critic', for instance, he successfully corrects some "confusion of thought".[1] Referring to Lowell's statement that "mannerism is the wilful obtrusion of self, as style is its unconscious abnegation"(93), he points out that though this may be true of Shakespeare, Milton's work proves that style and mannerism are not always antithetically opposed; mannerism is "not so much inverted as perverted style"(94). He goes on to question Lowell's distinction between a "receptive" and a "creative" imagination, arguing that every sound definition of imagination implies that it is "always something transitive, not passive"(94). Beside "sound thought", Watson also shows "luminous perception" at times, as I suggested in connection with

1. Excursions in Criticism, p.93.

Hardy's *Tess* and Meredith's *Modern Love*, but both abilities are limited. His thought, for instance, is seldom original. He himself does not seem sure whether originality is essential in a critic. In 'Critics and their Craft' he approves of the early-nineteenth-century concept of the critic as a judge, whose "business was to interpret and administer the literary law" deduced from "tradition and generally approved usage",[1] giving Brougham, Gifford, Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Wilson, Lockhart and Macaulay as examples. Though not completely disapproving of the change that took place "even in the heyday of the old judicial or magisterial *régime*"(82), he is not fully in sympathy with the group of "imaginative critics" who initiated it. These critics, headed by Lamb and Hazlitt, were the "exponents of Radical principles in literature"(81) which he could not accept. They may have unearthed forgotten treasures in literature, but, as the title of one of Lamb's collections suggests, these were no more than *Specimens*. Their "destruction of everything that savoured of official rule in matters of taste and aesthetics . . . made a recognised seat of authority in criticism impossible"(83) and led on to a state of "unchartered freedom", which sometimes made Watson "sigh for a paternal government again"(84). In his own day he says, critics "have ceased to pose as the responsible guardians of

1. *Excursions in Criticism*, p.82.

law and order in literature" and are more interested in discussing "the subject of their own craft", so that the terms "author" and "critic" have become almost synonymous. Watson's faults as a critic seem to have resulted from an attempt to combine these three types of criticism, or an inability to settle for one alone. His essays on Rider Haggard and Walt Whitman, for instance, are based on "old-fashioned dogmatic criticism"(87), which allows him to practise "the noble art of slating"(86), but his article on 'Mr Meredith's Poetry' shows him trying to be more imaginative and appreciative, while a piece like 'Poetry by Men of the World' proves that he is almost as deeply involved in the problems of his own technique as the "author-critics" he despises. In fact he is far more interested in technical than in aesthetic questions. Though criticising Henry Van Dyke for not "throwing any very novel flood of light upon the Tennysonian ethics or aesthetics", he rarely discusses such matters himself.

Watson's confused principles and lack of interest in aesthetics limit him as a critic, but his most serious fault is his narrowness of taste, ironic in view of his admiration for Pater's catholicity. His failure to appreciate certain poets very different from himself, such as Donne, Browning, Whitman and Yeats, is understandable, though disappointing. His dismissal of Henry James's novels as "attenuated" and "deplete" and Meredith's Egoist as "an entirely wearisome book"

in 'Fiction - Plethoric and Anaemic' is more disturbing. Yet the same article shows that what he lacks in breadth he often makes up for in depth: replying to Frederic Harrison's charge that George Eliot's novels have no "vigorous action", he argues:

> . . . some of us still think that George Eliot's "analysis" will compare favourably with a good deal that passes for synthesis, and that her "reflection" is quite as truly vigorous as their "action"....when one thinks of the opulence of material, the mere mass of story in such a book as Adam Bede, when one thinks of the tragedy of passion and error and fate in it, the exquisite comedy of humours and manners, the play and movement of circumstances, the sweeping tide of events, this wretched gabble about George Eliot as a writer in whom "action is subordinated to reflection" would move one's wrath if it were not so ineffably silly and inane.[1]

Watson does not allow his admitted "limitedness" to blind him too badly; there is some truth in his criticism of Meredith's awkward construction, "verbal extravagance" and unevenness of style, yet this does not prevent him recognising certain good qualities:

> He is an epigrammatist, with scintillations of steely-cold wit; he is a poet, with glimpses of beauty; he is a social essayist, with acute observation and suggestive criticism of human conditions and conventions.(183)

Most of Watson's prose is equally vigorous and enthusiastic and it comes as a slight shock to remember that he began writing it from economic pressure rather than inner compulsion. The condescending tone of his letter to Dowden, a much better critic than himself, reminds us that he thought criticism inferior to poetry:

1. The National Review, XIV, October, 1889, p.168.

Chapter 7

Second Nervous Breakdown and London Life

1892 was an exciting year in Watson's life, and in the literary world generally. Watson marked its two main events - Shelley's centenary and Tennyson's death - in both verse and prose. Clement King Shorter, the editor of The London Illustrated News and a close friend by now, commissioned him to write a prose account of the Shelley centenary celebration at Horsham, to which Edmund Gosse had given him his last ticket. In appreciation, Watson laid particular emphasis on Gosse's attendance, which he said represented "Shelley's victory over his foes", since Gosse could "fairly be considered as by nature more in touch with the calmer and less revolutionary spirit in poetry, the spirit of politic conformity, than with the lone and thunderous defiance of the Prometheus among bards".[1] Gosse himself appreciated Watson for similar reasons - that he had "mind" as well as "soul" in his writing - and was delighted to find a rising young poet who was still "fighting under the old standard".[2] It is significant that they shared a love of Gray;

1. The Illustrated London News, 101, August 13, 1892, p.195.
2. Letter from Gosse to Watson, November 30, 1916, BCL.

Watson wrote to tell Gosse how much he admired his biography of Gray in 1891.

Watson and Gosse had been writing to each other quite regularly since 1880, when Gosse had thanked Watson for a copy of The Prince's Quest, forwarded to him by their mutual friend Dowden. The correspondence increased, in both warmth and size, after they met in 1891, when Gosse was so impressed by Watson that he invited him to meet two well-known poets of the day - Arthur Symons and Herbert Trench - at his club. He also began asking Watson to his Sunday "afternoons" and tried to get him an invitation to lecture at the London Institute. Watson wrote even more frequently to Gosse at this time, but his letters are largely concerned, not with literary matters, but with a series of illnesses which had attacked him and his mother and caused them to move from London to Southend in September. In addition to vague internal complaints Watson had begun to suffer badly from insomnia again and started taking large amounts of chloral and alcohol to cure it.

When Tennyson died on October 6th, Watson pulled himself together long enough to write an elegy on him. Shorter, who had again commissioned the work, wanted it as soon as possible for The Illustrated, so Watson worked fifty hours non-stop to produce 'Lachrymae Musarum'. Coulson Kernahan, who lived near his lodgings in Southend, says that "not one of the hundred and thirty odd lines of the noblest and most enduring of all the

many Threnodies in memory of Tennyson was committed to paper before the Threnody was complete".[1] It may have been on the strength of this elegy that Watson was invited to be an honourable pall-bearer at Tennyson's funeral on October 12th;[2] it was certainly the reason for the award of two hundred pounds the government gave him on November 17th. Several of his friends hoped it might also be the means of getting him a civil list pension, perhaps even the vacant laureateship.

Shortly after 'Lachrymae Musarum' appeared in The Illustrated, Watson's anthology, Lyric Love, was published by Macmillan's on October 22nd. By November they had also brought out his elegy in book form, together with other recent work. Lachrymae Musarum and Other Poems raised his already high reputation, helping particularly with his claims to the laureateship, for it showed quite clearly that he was capable of writing good 'public' poetry. Beside the elegy on Tennyson, the volume included such occasional verse as 'Shelley's Centenary', 'At the Grave of Charles Lamb' and 'Lines to our New Censor' - a satire on Oscar Wilde's announcement that he intended becoming a

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1. Five More Famous Living Poets, pp.291-2.

2. Thomas Hardy wrote in his diary for that day: "At Tennyson's funeral in Westminster Abbey. The music was sweet and impressive, but as a funeral the scene was less penetrating than a plain country interment would have been. Lunched afterwards at the National Club with E. Gosse, Austin Dobson, Theodore Watts, and William Watson". (F.E. Hardy, The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, London, 1930, p.13.)

naturalised Frenchman - two patriotic poems and six suitably chaste love lyrics. The only piece which might not have had an immediate popular appeal is 'The Dream of Man', a long, philosophical poem based on evolutionary beliefs, and even this would not positively have alienated a public already well-exposed to Darwin's theories. Watson felt there was "quite as much of direct popular appeal" in his poetry as there was in Tennyson's.[1] A good deal of this comes from distinctly Tennysonian features in it. Richard Le Gallienne thought that the "artful vowelisation" of Watson's best poetry was based "on a very close study . . . of the manner of the Laureate",[2] and Watson himself admitted that it was Tennyson who had established a concern for the "careful artistry" he was trying to achieve.[3] The frequent alliteration, assonance

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1. Letter to Lane, June 5, 1907, UC.

2. Retrospective Reviews, vol.i, p.51.

3. Letter to Lane, November 1, 1904, UC. One example of Watson's painstaking attention to detail shows that he had been corresponding with Tennyson since meeting him in 1875. In thanking Watson for his "fine lines" on him, early in 1892, Tennyson had written: "If by 'wintry hair' you allude to a tree whose leaves are half-gone, you are right, but if you mean 'white' you are wrong, for I never had a grey hair on my head". (Letter dated April 3, 1892; reprinted in The Illustrated London News, 101, October 15, 1892, p.492.) Watson carefully corrected his mistake in his elegy:

   No more, O never now,
   Lord of the lofty and the tranquil brow,
   Whereon nor snows of time
   Have fall'n, nor wintry rime,
   Shall men behold thee, sage and mage sublime.

and repetition in 'Lachrymae Musarum', its carefully worked out imagery and deliberately generalised feelings are clear signs of Tennyson's influence:

> Lo, in this season, pensive-hued and grave,
> While fades and falls the doomed, reluctant leaf
> From withered Earth's fantastic coronal,
> With wandering sighs of forest and of wave
> Mingles the murmur of a people's grief
> For him whose leaf shall fade not, neither fall.
> He hath fared forth, beyond these suns and showers.
> For us, the autumn glow, the autumn flame,
> And soon the winter silence shall be ours:
> Him the eternal spring of fadeless fame
> Crowns with no mortal flowers.[1]

As this short extract shows, 'Lachrymae Musarum' is much closer to traditional elegy than 'Wordsworth's Grave'. Watson now deifies Tennyson in general, rather than discussing his work in particular. He also makes use of such elegiac conventions as the laurel and the lyre and expresses a pantheistic belief in his subject's immortality:

> Nay, he returns to regions whence he came.
> Him doth the spirit divine
> Of universal loveliness reclaim.
> All nature is his shrine.
> Seek him henceforward in the wind and sea,
> In earth's and air's emotion or repose,
> In every star's august serenity,
> And in the rapture of the flaming rose.[2]

Lionel Stevenson argues that Watson hankered after the mystical pantheism of Tennyson all his life,[3] but the second

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1. Poems, i, pp.3-4.
2. Poems, i, p.5.
3. Darwin Among the Poets, pp.306-9.

poem in Lachrymae Musarum - 'The Dream of Man' - shows him accepting a much more rational explanation of the universe:

> The Spirit of Man saw clearly
> the Past as a chart out-rolled, -
> Beheld his base beginnings
> in the depths of time, and his strife,
> With beasts and crawling horrors
> for leave to live, when life
> Meant but to slay and to procreate,
> to feed and to sleep, among
> Mere mouths, voracities boundless,
> blind lusts, desires without tongue,
> And ferocities vast, fulfilling
> their being's malignant law,
> While nature was but one hunger,
> and one hate, all fangs and maw.[1]

But unlike many of his immediate predecessors, Watson knows no reason why the theory of evolution should deny the possibility of religious belief. On the contrary, he sees it as an added proof of Man's great need of God, for he imagines Man's despair if he should finally perfect himself and conquer Asraël, the Lord of Death:

> And Man the invincible queller,
> man with his foot on his foes,
> In boundless satiety hungered,
> restless from utter repose,
> Mighty o'ercomer of Nature,
> subduer of Death in his lair,
> By mightier weariness vanquished,
> and crowned with august despair.[2]

Continuing his myth, Watson suggests, that only God, by releasing Asraël from his chains, can give Man back a sense of purpose in

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1. Poems, i, pp.204-5.
2. Poems, i, pp.209-10.

life. For all its ingenuity, this examination of the possible effects of evolution does not go very deep. Its language, too, is unsatisfactory, being padded out with conventional 'tags', tautological phrases and loose metaphors.

The same lack of original expression reflects an absence of original thought in 'Shelley's Centenary', the third poem in the volume. Watson's central thesis adds very little to Matthew Arnold's theory that Shelley was a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain":[1]

> Below, the unhasting world toils on,
> And here and there are victories won,
> Some dragon slain, some justice done,
>   While, through the skies,
> A meteor rushing on the sun,
>   He flares and dies.[2]

The language of 'Shelley's Centenary', though ostensibly epigrammatic as in 'Wordsworth's Grave', is rather slack; in the phrases "fellowship sublime", "eternal Rome" and "mortal clay", for instance, the adjectives have very little impact. Watson's brief description of "Byron's scorn" and "Keats's magic" are equally vague.

The rest of the poems in Lachrymae Musarum are open to the same kind of criticism, with the exception of 'The Fugitive Ideal' - a slight, nostalgic lyric which expresses Watson's recurring sense of deep loss and deprivation:

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1. Essays in Criticism, 2nd series, p.203.
2. Poems, i, p.54.

As some most pure and noble face,
  Seen in the thronged and hurrying street,
Sheds o'er the world a sudden grace,
    A flying odour sweet,
Then, passing, leaves the cheated sense
Baulked with a phantom excellence;

So, on our souls the visions rise
  Of that fair life we never led:
They flash a splendour past our eyes,
    We start, and they are fled:
They pass, and leave us with blank gaze,
Resigned to our ignoble days.[1]

In contrast to 'Shelley's Centenary', the adjectives here are very carefully chosen. The application of "hurrying" to a street, for instance, is unusual enough to draw attention to its appropriate sense of urgency, and the adjectival use of the noun 'phantom' in the sixth line links the first half of the simile to the second, which neatly balances it. Watson shows the same skill and the same preoccupation with the elusiveness of beauty in a later sonnet, where he also reverts to similar imagery:

At the hushed brink of twilight, - when, as though
Some solemn journeying phantom paused to lay
An ominous finger on the awestruck day,
Earth holds her breath till that great presence go, -
A moment comes of visionary glow,
Pendulous 'twixt the gold hour and the grey,
Lovelier than these, more eloquent than they
Of memory, foresight, and life's ebb and flow.

So have I known, in some fair woman's face,
While viewless yet was Time's more gross imprint,
The first, faint, hesitant, elusive hint
Of that invasion of the vandal years
Seem deeper beauty than youth's cloudless grace,
Wake subtler dreams, and touch me nigh to tears.[2]

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1. Poems, i, p.180.

2. Poems, ii, p.22.

It was not Watson's lyricism, however, which was praised most when Lachrymae Musarum first came out. It was rather, in the words of the anonymous Spectator critic, his ability to "give the highest distinction to the expression of every cultivated man's feelings". It is significant that these words were written in Hutton's magazine, possibly by him; they suggest that he was still trying to get the laureateship for Watson, who had dedicated Lachrymae Musarum to him and his co-editor, Meredith Townsend. Other critics praised Watson's occasional poems too, and it was well received by the general public. Watson was in a stronger position than ever before.

Physically and mentally, however, he was in a very weak state. The first outward sign of his condition was a series of violent rows he had with his publishers in late November. Convinced that Macmillan's had cheated him over payment for Lyric Love, he denounced them publicly and privately circulated some "scurrilous verses" on them.[1] John Lane, who was just beginning to make his name as a publisher of unknown young writers, had got to know Watson fairly well since his sudden rise to fame and now came to his help, as he reminded Watson many years later:

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1. Clodd writes in his diary for November 17, 1892: "To see Cotton (Have you come about that d——d Watson, says he! for he's been writing scurrilous verses about Macmillan, who won't advance him more money.)".

> My first step was to interview Messrs Macmillan and urge them to give you the fifty pounds you required. On their refusal I made an agreement with you myself. I had no sooner signed my contract with you for 'The Eloping Angels' and 'Excursions in Criticism' than your breakdown came about.[1]

The breakdown to which Lane refers took place on Sunday, December 11th, 1892, in the grounds of Windsor Castle. There are several different accounts of it, some contradictory. One of the most reliable is given by A.C. Benson, who was seeing Watson daily at the time in Eton.[2] Watson came to visit him from Windsor, where he was staying at the White Hart, "drinking and living like a lord" on his government grant.[3] He stayed to dinner with Benson on Wednesday, 7th and Thursday, 8th and talked very irrationally on both occasions. The following day he sent him an "insane" letter and a note which read: "The moment has come, if you are ready and can bear the great and glad tidings". Benson, who was busy marking school examinations, refused to see Watson until Saturday, when he found him "perfectly rational on ordinary subjects" but under "some strange delusion as to his own personality". Watson apparently believed "that Milton was Samson re-incarnated, that he (Mr Watson) was the re-incarnation of Milton . . . and that Delilah had been re-incarnated to tempt him".[4] To Benson's

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1. Letter dated January 21, 1910, Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, ff.49-53.
2. Benson described the whole incident to Gosse in a series of letters between December 9th and 12th, which have been preserved in the British Museum, Ashley MS., 5739.
3. Clodd's diaries.
4. St. James Gazette, December 13, 1892.

great relief, Robinson Watson turned up on Sunday, the day William finally broke down. Robinson has left no first-hand account of the incident, but Benson's description is based on what he told him the next day:

> /̲Watson̲/ insisted on going out a long walk with his brother, & on coming in stopped a Royal carriage which was driving down the Longwalk, in which the Duke of Edinburgh was, & was arrested; by this time his mind must have completely given way; he had some delusion of royalty, & I discover that the reason why he came here was partly to be at Windsor, partly to induce me to communicate with my father[1] about him; he had great ideas it seems of a moral revolution & reformation which he was to inaugurate.
>
> This morning there was a private enquiry before the magistrates & he committed to an asylum: the doctors think it will only be temporary. The delusions are very acute, but condition not unhopeful: he has hardly been sleeping at all lately.

In three "insane" telegrams William sent his brother James in America he was even more explicit about his reforming purpose; he announced his intention of "destroying off face of earth miscreants in high places".[2] Lane, who was with William up to a few days beforehand, said he had a "detestation against the reigning house"[3] and Grant Richards, who told Wallace Nichols that Watson turned up in his office one day with a revolver uttering threats against the Royal family, was convinced he meant to do them serious harm. Robert Graves also believes that Watson's intentions were violent. His version, though garbled, is worth quoting for another interesting question it

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1. Benson's father was Archbishop of Canterbury.
2. Typescript copy of letter from James to Robinson Watson, December 9, 1892, Yale, box 4.
3. Letter to Robinson Watson, December 21, 1909, UC.

raises:

> . . . I was always sorry for him, because he was the obvious next choice for Laureate but got passed over in favour first of Bridges & then of Masefield - because he had, as a young man, attempted to kill the Prince of Wales in a London street - some sort of moral protest I forget what - & the Prince became Edward the Peacemaker so his copybook was irremediably blotted![1]

Lane thought that Watson's failure to get the laureateship immediately after Tennyson's death was a cause rather than a result of the breakdown, an opinion many people shared. An anonymous writer in The Critic, for instance, argued that "the death of Tennyson and the falling vacant of the Laureateship completed an aberration of mind brought on by over-work and loss of sleep".[2] Watson himself attributed his breakdown to his "folly in overworking".[3] Since his sudden rise to fame, which Noble and Clodd thought another disturbing experience, he had been extremely busy, producing articles for The Academy, The Spectator, The Bookman and The Illustrated London News, an anthology of love poetry, two revised and enlarged editions of Wordsworth's Grave, two long elegies, a new volume of verse and part of a verse satire. He had also to look after his sick mother and to fight his own ill-health and sleeplessness. It was partly to overcome insomnia that he had begun drinking

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1. Letter to me, January 29, 1967.
2. XXII, May 13, 1893, p.311.
3. Letter to Lane, January 27, 1894, UC.

more heavily than usual and Clodd believed that it was this which "completed his mental ruin". His broken engagement, too, was probably both a cause and a result of his increasing instability during the year.

Watson was resilient and the breakdown, though sharp, was brief. He had recovered sufficiently by the end of December to write 'A New Year's Prayer', which a friend, H.D. Traill, printed in The Daily Telegraph on January 2nd, 1893. While he was recuperating, first at Aylesbury, then at Roehampton, Hutton and Gosse started a fund for him and by mid-January had collected enough money to send him away to Switzerland with Robinson. Not only had close friends like Benson and Lane contributed, but also well-known figures such as Henry James, Arthur Balfour and Mrs Humphrey Ward, none of whom knew Watson personally at the time.[1] Watson complicated matters extremely by returning earlier than expected in March. Gosse was not sure whether he was now entitled to the rest of the fund, but finally agreed to let him have it with what Watson later recognised as "generous sympathy".[2]

Watson felt even more grateful towards Hutton - with good reason. Hutton had given him £115 for reviews and poems during 1892 alone; he had started and contributed to the fund

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1. Details of the fund and its proceedings can be found in the Brotherton Collection in letters to Gosse from Robinson and others.

2. Letter from Watson to Gosse, October 29, 1894, BCL.

and on Watson's return had offered him more reviewing, as well as the chance to publish any poetry he should write in the near future. Watson took advantage of his offer almost immediately and 'Vita Nuova' appeared in The Spectator on April 22nd. In a metaphor which probably reflects Marian's interest in fairy-tales, Watson compares the coming of spring to the awakening of Sleeping Beauty, and then to his own sense of renewal:

> I too have come through wintry terrors, - yea,
> Through tempest and through cataclysm of soul
> Have come, and am delivered. Me the Spring,
> Me also, dimly with new life hath touched,
> And with regenerate hope, the salt of life;...[1]

His gratitude for the healing power of nature is expressed appropriately, though not very originally, in an unmistakeably Wordsworthian manner:

> And I would dedicate these thankful tears
> To whatsoever Power beneficent,
> Veiled though his countenance, undivulged his thought,
> Hath led me from the haunted darkness forth
> Into the gracious air and vernal morn,
> And suffers me to know my spirit a note
> Of this great chorus, one with bird and stream
> And voiceful mountain,... .

'Vita Nuova' shows that Watson was able to write poetry again by the spring of 1893, but it was a long time before he could do so "without pain or danger".[2] Fortunately, he had

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1. Poems, i, pp.105-6.
2. Letter from Watson to Richard Garnett, December 15, 1893, Garnett Collection.

almost finished compiling two books the previous autumn and John Lane and his partner Elkin Mathews published these, with a revised edition of The Prince's Quest, shortly after his return to England in 1893. Both The Eloping Angels and Excursions in Criticism went through their first editions, though there is little in either to justify such a sale. Excursions in Criticism is a collection of sound but not very exciting essays which had already appeared in various magazines. The Eloping Angels is a rather heavy attempt at light satire. When he first started planning it in 1884 Watson explained to Dowden that his general notion was "to use Satan and his angels as the dramatic vehicle for a discursive commentary upon various things that go on in our own world".[1] But the subject proved too weighty for a slight "caprice", as Watson sub-titled his piece. The treatment, too, is inappropriate and uneven, parts of the narrative being treated farcically and parts seriously. The factious description of Faust's and Mephistopheles' entry into heaven, by "a window in the heavenly wall", seems almost entirely unrelated to the highly didactic account of the happiness of two angels, who choose to return to a humble cottage on earth. Unlike Byron's 'Vision of Judgement',

1. Letter dated September 16, 1884.

which Watson almost certainly had in mind,[1] Watson's farce has no real function. Whereas Byron is closely parodying a specific poem, Watson is only satirising certain general attitudes, and his wit lacks focus.

The Eloping Angels was commercially successful, however, So, too, was Excursions in Criticism, but Watson, with his usual extravagance quickly spent the money they brought. Lane then started to pay him a weekly allowance of £5 from money collected among friends and, when this ran out, continued the allowance as an advance on a new book Watson was planning. He had already "secreted a fresh deposit of verse towards" it by December, 1893,[2] though he was still not back to normal as his letter to Lane a few months later shows:

> I am not any longer in a state of absolute broken-down-ness, far from it, and am regaining my power for accomplishing work up to my normal standard of literary merit, but only in such limited quantity and at so slow a rate of production, and with such absolute necessity for intervals of complete suspension of effort, as to make it impossible for me to earn more for a considerable time to come than a small proportion of the amount necessary for my own and other expenses; while the anxiety inevitably attendant on such a situation - one's small available funds daily diminishing before one's eyes - makes it difficult to resist the temptation to overwork

1. The Eloping Angels resembles 'A Vision of Judgement' not only at the superficial level of incident, but also at the more basic ones of form and style. Watson chooses the same stanza of six alternately-rhyming lines and a final couplet; he also makes a similarly ironic use of understatement, puns, forced rhymes and parody.

2. Letter from Watson to Richard Garnett, December 15, 1893.

> when the impulse comes, & thus indefinitely to push forward the date of one's eventual recovery of power. (UC)

Watson gradually found it easier to work and by April, 1894, he had finished two sonnets Lane had asked him to write for the first issue of his Yellow Book.[1] He was also producing more poems for Hutton's Spectator and some for The Daily Chronicle, which was edited by another friend, Henry Norman. By the end of the year he had collected enough material for his projected volume and this was published by Lane, now separated from Elkin Mathews, as Odes and Other Poems in November, 1894.

The title and many of the poems suggest that Watson had been reading Horace while he was writing Odes.[2] One piece, 'To Licinius', is a literal translation of the tenth of Horace's second book of odes. Most of the other poems, though not direct translations, are addressed in Horatian fashion, to friends or patrons and express personal views on life and art. In 'To H.D. Traill', for instance, Watson states his attitude towards poetry more clearly than ever before. Though still recognising the importance of craftsmanship, he now lays more emphasis on the need for inspiration too and complains bitterly of his own lack of it; unlike many of his contemporaries, he

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1. These appeared in the first volume under the titles 'The Frontier' and 'Night on Curbar Edge'.

2. It was almost certainly John Churton Collins, Professor of Classics at Birmingham University, who had started Watson reading Horace, for Watson makes specific reference to Collins' love of "the gracious lyrist of the Sabine farm" in his sonnet to him (Poems, ii, p.13.).

cannot "harvest from all things that be, / Grist for the mill".[1] Another important aspect of poetry, he implies in 'To Arthur Christopher Benson', is its relation to the past. Having been often accused of clinging to outdated poetic traditions, he is anxious to point out that, though the Gothic splendour of medieval times attracts him, he has never ignored the present:

> This neighbouring joy and woe -
>   This present sky and sea -
> These men and things we know,
>   Whose touch we would not flee -
> To us, O friend, shall long
> Yield aliment of song:
> Life as I see it lived is great enough for me.[2]

The "mode of yesterday" is acceptable to him only if it should "prove tomorrow's mode as well", but he refuses to reject all poetic traditions and criticises those of his contemporaries who have done so. He takes the same ambivalent stand between past and present in matters of religion; while envying the "mystic creed"[3] of Aubrey de Vere, a highly conservative Catholic poet, he cannot accept it himself, in view of recent scientific discoveries. He sees the ideal attitude towards past, present and future in a friend, who unites "antiquarian tastes with progressive politics":

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1. Poems, i, p.145.

2. Poems, i, p.59.

3. 'To Aubrey de Vere', Poems, ii, p.9.

True lover of the Past, who dost not scorn
To give good heed to what the Future saith, -
Drinking the air of two worlds at a breath,
Thou livest not alone in thoughts outworn,
But ever helpest the new time be born
Though with a sigh for the old order's death.[1]

Watson himself gives more than "a sight for the old order's death" in another sonnet, 'After the Titans'. In imagery which recalls Keats's 'Hyperion', he argues that Gladstone and Disraeli were the last of the Titans and have been succeeded by "men light and slight, on narrower scale designed",[2] a change reflected also in "art, arms, action, manners, morals, mind". This influence of 'Hyperion' is also obvious in 'Night on Curbar Edge', one of the best poems in Odes:

No echo of man's life pursues my ears;
Nothing disputes this Desolation's reign;
Change comes not, this dread temple to profane
Where time by aeons reckons, not by years.
Its patient form one crag, sole stranded, rears,
Type of whate'er is destined to remain
While yon still host encamped on night's waste plain
Keeps armed watch, a million quivering spears.

Hushed are the wild and wing'd lives of the moor;
The sleeping sheep nestle 'neath ruined wall,
Or unhewn stones in random concourse hurled:
Solitude, sleepless, listens at Fate's door;
And there is built and 'stablisht over all
Tremendous silence, older than the world.[3]

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1. Poems, ii, p.21.
2. Poems, ii, p.45.
3. Poems, ii, p.3.

Watson shows more feeling for the grand effects of natural scenery than for its individual features. He compares himself to Wordsworth in his love of the country, but fails to convey what Hopkins calls its "inscape". In 'Lakeland Once More', for instance, he describes the region in such general terms as to make the reader wonder if he had ever been there. He seems far more interested in the intricate hexameters, which he uses here for the first time. He again fails to catch the essence of his subject in the most well-reviewed piece in the volume - 'The First Skylark of Spring'. Modelling his work almost certainly on Shelley's and Wordsworth's skylark poems, Watson compares the bird to the poet, as a symbol of freedom, but his "message" outweighs the amount of felt life:

> Two worlds hast thou to dwell in, Sweet, -
> The virginal untroubled sky,
> And this vext region at my feet. -
> Alas, but one have I![1]

Watson gets a far greater sense of immediacy into his love-poems in Odes. These were almost certainly addressed to the wife of his friend, Henry Norman. Mrs Norman, who wrote travel books and novels under her maiden name of Menie Muriel Dowie, had first met Watson when he started contributing to her husband's newspaper early in 1894. Watson admitted to Lane that he was "fooling around after Mrs Norman's twat"

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1. Poems, i, p.41.

at this time[1] and their relationship soon became a subject for gossip. But it was still a secret while he was writing his poems to her, which may explain their guarded, almost courtly, tone:

> Tell me not now, if love for love
> Thou canst return, -
> Now while around us and above
> Day's flambeaux burn.
> Not in clear noon, with speech as clear,
> Thy heart avow,
> For every gossip wind to hear;
> Tell me not now!
>
> Tell me not now the tidings sweet,
> The news divine;
> A little longer at thy feet
> Leave me to pine.
> I would not have the gadding bird
> Hear from his bough;
> Nay, though I famish for a word,
> Tell me not now!
>
> But when deep trances of delight
> All Nature seal,
> When round the world the arms of Night
> Caressing steal,
> When rose to dreaming rose says, '*Dear*,
> *Dearest*,' - and when
> Heaven sighs her secret in Earth's ear,
> Ah, tell me then![2]

Watson called another of the lyrics 'A Song in Imitation of the Elizabethans' and the title would apply to most of the others in this collection, which make similar musical use of assonance and refrain. Perhaps because they are so obviously imitations, none of these lyrics are outstanding. In fact

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1. Letter to Lane, between May and September, 1894, UC.
2. *Poems*, i, pp.85-6.

very few pieces in Odes are, which makes it hard to understand its reception in November, 1894, when Watson wrote to Lane:

> Very glad book going well. Times notice capital. Bridges no doubt swearing awful. Have also seen today very jolly notice by Richard Le G/allienne/ in Star. Star of the Evening, logrolling Star. Called on Le G. night before I left Richmond, but found him lecturing in Liverpool (to speak Hibernically). St. James's /_Gazette_/ today not bad. Have also seen D/aily/ C/hronicle_/, Globe & Saturday /_Review_/ & of course Times. (UC)

It may have been Richard Le Gallienne - the pseudonymous 'Logroller' of the Evening Star - who first introduced Watson to Lane. Le Gallienne had got to know Watson himself in Liverpool during the early eighties. A young man of twenty, he had haunted the publisher's Walmsley's at the time they printed The Prince's Quest and had almost worshipped Watson until long after the publication of his own first volume - My Ladies' Sonnets (1887). With the publication of his second, Volumes in Folio (1889), by Mathews and Lane, their roles began to change, for Le Gallienne now began to be recognised - a position he strengthened with numerous collections of verse and prose during the next few years. He was well-established in London by the time Watson came down as a virtually unknown poet in 1890. Le Gallienne, who claimed that after Hutton he was Watson's "earliest discoverer and most indefatigable trumpeter",[1]

1. Letter to Lewis May, November 11, 1936.

introduced Watson to a number of well-known literary figures and it is likely that Lane was amongst them.

Another possibility is that Watson and Lane first met at Mrs Graham Tomson's "teas", which Watson began to go to in 1891. Lewis Hind says that he met them both there in the early nineties.[1] However Watson and Lane got to know each other, they had become such good friends by September, 1894, that they were thinking of sharing a cottage in Chesham. Lane's company made Watson forget for a time that he was "the most ill-used man of letters of [his] day and generation".[2] Watson was also grateful for his offer to buy all his rights from Macmillan's. He must have introduced Lane to his other close friend Bromley in 1894, since Lane spent a holiday with Bromley in Edinburgh that autumn. Lane and Watson themselves took many holidays together during the first few years of their friendship, when Watson got to know some of Lane's more celebrated friends. He met Francis Coutts[3] and Thomas Hardy at

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1. See Hind's introduction to Stephen Phillips' Christ in Hades, London, 1917, pp.17-18.

2. Letter to Lane, c. June, 1894.

3. Francis Burdett Thomas Money Coutts, later Lord Latymer, who was known as the "millionaire poet", guaranteed Lane financial support when he decided to end his partnership with Elkin Mathews in 1894 and stood behind him in his first few years of independent business, though Lane told Watson in 1912 that he had never needed to ask him for help. Watson's opinion of Coutts changed over the years, but his prevailing feeling was one of "qualified respect"; he described him to Maureen Pring in 1909 as "a man of many if not exactly great gifts, of wide interests and of very sensitive and sympathetic mind, also a very distinguished-looking fellow" (Letter c. August 13, 1909, Yale, box 3.). Coutts wrote a poem 'To William Watson at Windermere' in which he admitted that Watson had a "finer inspiration" than himself. He also lent Watson money on occasions.

Glastonbury on a bicycling expedition and Aubrey Beardsley and Max Beerbohm at Windermere, in the house of Lane's friends, the Barnards. After Lane's marriage in 1898 to Mrs Annie King, whom Watson described as "wealthy and witty, an American, with a dash of jewess",[1] he was invited regularly to their Sunday "teas". He found the people he met there "perhaps more fashionable than interesting" and was rather ill-at-ease in their company. Lane's biographer, Lewis May, remembers him as "a well-favoured, neat-headed man of military aspect in a rather close-fitting suit of grey, and a high stiff collar, sitting bolt upright beside Mrs Lane as she dispensed the tea".[2] With his "height and weight and serious face and heavy moustache", Edgar Jepson said, he looked "very like one of Ouida's guardsmen".[3] Watson was more comfortable in Lane's office at the Bodley Head, where he became friendly with Lane's staff - Frederic Chapman, Basil Willett and Herbert Jenkins. He also met many of Lane's authors, who got to know each other almost inevitably. Lane's public office led into his private rooms GI, Albany[4] and he made very little distinction between business and social life. He held his famous "smokes" from

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1. Letter to Maureen Pring, August 2, 1909, Yale, box 3.
2. John Lane and the Nineties, p.168.
3. Memories of a Victorian, London, 1933, p.239.
4. Lane allowed Watson to use this as his London address for at least twenty years and often invited him to stay there before his marriage.

1894 onwards, when such well-known figures as Henry James, Francis Thompson, Steven Phillips, Edward Dowson and Lionel Johnson were brought together in G.I. Watson, who was definitely at the first of these and probably at many others, must have been introduced to these men, even if he did not get to know them well.

The list of names just given shows what a mixed collection of writers Lane had gathered together at the Bodley Head. Yet they were often referred to as a homogeneous group, particularly those who contributed to _The Yellow Book_, a magazine started by Lane in 1894. Watson, who wrote poems for the first, second, third, fifth and twelfth numbers between 1894 and 1897, objected to being associated with certain other contributors, especially supposed 'decadents' like Aubrey Beardsley, John Davidson and Richard Le Gallienne. Only a year after it started he wrote to Lane, concerning one of his poems:

> ...in all candour, I must tell you that despite your liberal offer I am not at all happy about it going into the 'Yellow Book'. If you, or rather Harland, _will_ print such rubbish & such filth as disgraces its every number, you must not be surprised if some of us stand aloof. One likes to be in congenial & decent company & to be tarred with the Yellow Book brush in popular imagination is a hideous possibility, not to be risked with composure.[1]

It is hardly surprising that Watson reacted as he did at Oscar Wilde's trial, which began the same month. Wilde had come into court one day carrying a yellow French novel under

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1. Letter _c._ April, 1895, UC.

his arm. The public had taken this to be a copy of The Yellow Book and, already thoroughly outraged, had stormed the Bodley Head. Ironically enough, Wilde had never contributed to Lane's magazine and had published only a few works with him,[1] but he was mistakenly associated in the public mind with The Yellow Book through its art editor, Aubrey Beardsley. The story of how Watson, acting on behalf of conservative writers like the Meynells and Mrs Humphrey Ward, cabled to Lane in New York "withdraw all Beardsley's designs or I withdraw all my books", has been told many times.[2] Only one detail needs to be added. Katherine Lyon Mix and others suggest that Mrs Humphrey Ward - that "pillar of respectability" - encouraged Watson to threaten withdrawal: new evidence in the Lane archive shows that she in fact tried to bribe him into it, for Watson told Lane shortly afterwards that she had offered him "private help", which he was unwilling to accept. Watson had admired some of Beardsley's work in earlier issues of The Yellow Book, though he did not find it "pleasant",[3] and was on friendly terms with him in the mid-nineties. He is unlikely to have acted against him without heavy pressure. In later years, however, he grew to pride

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1. By 1895 Lane had printed four things by Wilde: Lady Windermere's Fan (1893); The Sphinx (1894); A Woman of No Importance (1894); Salomé (1894).

2. e.g. J.L. May, John Lane and the Nineties, pp.85-6; K.L. Mix, A Study in Yellow, London, 1960, p.143ff; H. MacFall, Aubrey Beardsley, London, 1928, pp.62-3.

3. Letter to Lane, July 15, 1894, UC.

himself on "preventing the publication of those filthy sodomitic designs of Beardsley's", which he was convinced had saved Lane "from utter ruin and destruction".[1]

Most critics have seen Lane's decision to sack Beardsley rather than lose Watson as a desire to be thought respectable by the general public. Few have realised that it also sprang from a genuine admiration for Watson's work, which Lane was anxious to keep. By 1895 he regarded Watson as his most important writer and the greatest lyric poet of the day.

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1. Letter to Lane, c. May, 1909, UC.

Chapter 8

The Laureateship

In spite of Watson's success in London during the early nineties, his hatred of its "conventional absurdities" and "tiresome tyrannies of dress"[1] made it impossible for him to stay there long. He also missed the country and was soon travelling restlessly about it again. On returning from Switzerland in March, 1893, he went almost immediately to the Darley Dale Hydro in Derbyshire. Leaving his mother there for the summer, he made one of his frequent tours of Scotland with Bromley, then went down to Bournemouth for the winter. By February, 1894, he and his mother were back in Derbyshire, but they had left before April to spend the summer in Southport. "'Tis a twelve-months' space and more", Watson wrote to Traill,

> Since feet of mine have sought your door,
> There where one fancies London's roar
> Long leagues away,
> And Thames an old-time-haunted shore
> Keeps to this day.
>
> For I, with course 'twere hard to trace,
> Have southward, northward, set my face,
> Coy to the vast and vague embrace
> Of London's arms,
> The siren's all-too liberal grace
> And venal charms.[2]

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1. Letter to Lane, June 16, 1905, UC.
2. 'To H.D. Traill', *Poems*, i, p.143.

Watson's description of the "sovereign poet" in the same volume of Odes shows that he shared the bardic notion of one who "asks not converse nor companionship".[1] He had left London with the idea of working better in isolation, but a summer in "Philistine" Southport made him anxious to get back there. When his plan to share a cottage with Lane at Chesham failed, he left his mother in Southport and went to stay in Richmond. After the publication of Odes in November he moved on to Folkestone, where he finally settled for almost a year. In March, 1895, he was finally granted the government pension Lane had been petitioning for since his breakdown and, to make it even better, Rosebery had backdated it to July, 1894. Watson was financially independent for the first time in his life. He was also free of his mother, who had gone to live with Robinson, though he still had to send her money.

But after a few months in Folkestone, Watson began to feel lonely. He missed London and began visiting it again in 1895. He usually stayed either in Lane's apartment at G1, Albany, or in Grant Richard's rooms at 5, Barton Street, Westminster. Most of his time there was spent with friends. In April, for instance, he visited the Stracheys, the Spenders and Traill. He also dined with Lord de Tabley at the Athenaeum. De Tabley, who had suddenly become known in 1891 after thirty years'

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1. Poems, i, p.160.

obscurity, had shared Watson's reverence for the Tennysonian tradition, which may explain why he took him up. He was "always very nice" to Watson and invited him to the Athenaeum several more times before his death the same year. Watson met other interesting people on his visits, not all of them writers. In July he dined at the Cheshire Cheese with the artist E.H. New, who was doing his famous black and white sketch of the Bodley Head at the time.[1]

Watson enjoyed his visits to London immensely, but he soon realised their drawbacks; "I only realised in getting back here", he wrote to Lane, "how my London days (& nights) had knocked me up. I really must stay here rest of week, my health won't stand any more of town just now, & besides I feel I must get something done, & days in London are lost days from the point of view of work" (UC). By resolutely staying in Folkestone most of the year he did "get something done" in 1895. The first poem he produced there, 'The Hymn to the Sea', was directly inspired by his surroundings. Since his childhood on the Lancashire coast he had always been fascinated by the sea. It had many implications for him, but in 'The Hymn to the Sea' he was using it mainly as a metaphor of mankind, as the second of the four sections clearly shows:

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1. E.H. New wrote in his diary that he had dined at the Cheshire Cheese with Watson and Lane on July 24th and 25th and seen Watson at Vigo Street on the 26th. (Furniss, H., Paradise in Piccadilly, pp.113-4.).

Sea that breakest for ever, that breakest and
never art broken,
Like unto thine, from of old, springeth the spirit
of man, -
Nature's wooer and fighter, whose years are a suit
and a wrestling,
All their hours from his birth, hot with desire
and with fray;
Amorist agonist man, that, immortally pining and
striving,
Snatches the glory of life only from love and
from war;
Man that, rejoicing in conflict, like thee when
precipitate tempest,
Charge after thundering charge, clangs on thy
resonant mail,
Seemeth so easy to shatter, and proveth so hard to be
cloven;
Man whom the gods, in his pain, curse with
a soul that endures; ---[1]

But Watson also argues, in the last section, that Man is <u>not</u> like the sea, a contradiction which springs from his strong sense of paradox. His language, too, shows the same awareness; like Swinburne's, which almost certainly influenced it, it is full of unresolved antitheses.[2] One reviewer conceded that Watson had described the sea as brilliantly as Swinburne, but added that he could not "compass Mr Swinburne's swing and rush, or indeed his passion for the sea".[3] Lane thought Watson as great a sea-poet as Swinburne, however, and printed his poem on the front page of the April <u>Yellow Book</u> - the first volume to appear without Beardsley. Most modern critics would

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1. <u>Poems</u>, i, pp.34-5.

2. Swinburne's influence is suggested by Watson's choice of rhymed hexameters and his frequent use of alliteration, repetition and unusual Greek or Latin words.

3. <u>The Edinburgh Review</u>, 198, October, 1903, p.509.

find it a poor substitute for Beardsley, but many of Lane's contemporaries shared his enthusiasm. George Cotterell, for instance, praised 'The Hymn to the Sea' in The Academy[1] and The Spectator used it to suggest once more that Watson would make a fine poet-laureate.[2] The anonymous reviewer on this occasion was probably John St. Loe Strachey, who took over a good deal of work from Hutton and Townsend in 1895 and finally became sole owner and editor when Hutton died in 1897. Strachey's wife said afterwards that he had "advocated the appointment of William Watson"[3] to the laureateship and Owen Seaman, who wrote a clever skit on The Battle of the Bays, described him as Watson's "journalist, eulogist critic".[4] Seaman also imagined how Watson might react to disappointment over the laureateship, in an obvious parody of 'The Hymn to the Sea':

> Vainly the solid Spectator, bewildered with fabulous bow-wows,
> Sick with a surfeit of dog, ran me for all it was worth!
> Vainly - if I may recur to a metaphor drawn from the ocean,
> Long (in a figure of speech) tied to the tail of the moon -
> Vainly, O excellent organ! with ample and aqueous unction,
> Once, as a rule, in a week, 'cleansing the Earth of her stain';
>
> -

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1. XLVIII, December 7, 1895, p.479.
2. The Spectator, LXXIV, May 4, 1895, pp.607-8.
3. Amy Strachey, St. Loe Strachey, London, 1930, p.85.
4. London, 1896, p.46.

Vainly your voice on the ears of impregnable
Laureate-makers,
Rang as the sinuous sea rings on a petrified
coast;
Vainly your voice with a subtle and slightly
indelicate largess,
Broke on an obdurate world hymning the advent
of Me.

Herbert Norman was also "puffing" Watson in The Daily Chronicle,[1] which may have been one reason Watson dedicated 'The Hymn to the Sea' to him, when it was published in April. Watson's gratitude seldom lasted long, however, and in the same month he had a fierce argument with Norman over a love lyric in The Spectator, which Norman thought would be associated with his wife. Watson denied the connection, but admitted it to Lane later. Norman not only believed Watson's denial, he also promised to publish another poem he was writing in The Daily Chronicle and to try to get it into the New York World. Watson had started working on this poem - 'Ode for the Centenary of the Death of Burns' - as soon as he finished 'The Hymn to the Sea' in March. It was published by June, though the actual centenary was not until July, 1896, a year later. When compared with the ode Swinburne also wrote for the occasion, it appears to have been influenced even more strongly by him than 'The Hymn to the Sea'. The similarity between the imagery of the two poems, for instance, seems too close for coincidence.

1. Watson told Lane that Norman had confidently promised him the laureateship in 1895 (letter dated December 19, 1905, UC).

Swinburne's ode opens with an image of lightning, which Watson uses in his tenth stanza, and both describe Burns' genius in terms of fire: Watson talks of his "fiery heart" and "spirit's gusty blaze",[1] Swinburne of his "fire of laughter" and "fiery glory".[2] Each emphasises his fighting spirit, with a cluster of battle images which range from bows and arrows to spears and swords. Both take advantage of Burns' agricultural background: Watson uses the image of the ploughman, as in 'Wordsworth's Grave', to describe Burns' dislike of the artificial: "Through ancient lies of proudest birth / He drove his share" (13). Swinburne applies it less favourably:

> The daisy by his ploughshare cleft,
> The lips of women loved and left,
> The griefs and joys that weave the weft
>   Of human time,
> With craftsman's cunning, keen and deft,
>   He carved in rhyme.
> But Chaucer's daisy shines a star
> Above his ploughshare's reach to mar, --- (1190)

Another resemblance, illustrated by this quotation, is the way in which the two poets approach their subject; both begin by describing what Burns is <u>not</u>. Swinburne's choice of foils - Chaucer, Dunbar and Villon - are perhaps the more appropriate, but Watson's - Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth and Milton - show a desire to place Burns in the main stream of English poetry. Though Swinburne and Watson

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1. <u>Poems</u>, i, p.10.
2. <u>Collected Poetical Works</u>, London, 1924, vol.II, pp.1189, 1191.

differ in their analyses of Burns, they arrive at similar conclusions - that his genius lies mainly in his capacity for "shattering ire or withering mirth" (Watson, 13), or, as Swinburne puts it, "godlike wrath and sunlike scorn" (1191). The most significant resemblance between the two odes, however, is their common use of the "habbie" stanza, which implies that, if there was any influence, it came from Watson. Swinburne had never used this form before, whereas Watson had used it as early as 1890, in an elegy on Matthew Arnold. He had also used it for 'Shelley's Centenary' in 1892. It is just possible that both poets found their stanzaic forms independently. Burns himself had written the majority of his own elegies and epistles in the "habbie" stanza, and Wordsworth used it for his poem 'At the Grave of Burns'. But it is more likely that Swinburne, as Watson himself believed,[1] took his metre and some ideas and phrases from Watson's 'Ode'. Swinburne had definitely read and admired Watson by 1895[2] and he could not have failed to see his 'Ode', which came out in book form seven months before his own appeared in <u>The Nineteenth Century</u>.

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1. See letter from Watson to Lane, November 27, 1905, UC.
2. See chap. 4, pp.73-4.

Watson's elegy was well reviewed by a number of magazines. The Spectator, as usual, was one of these.[1] Strachey, who was almost certainly behind the praise, took more than a professional interest in Watson. He got to know him personally and began to invite him down to his cottage at Merrow. It was on one of his visits there that Watson wrote his next important poem this year, as Mrs Strachey tells:

> Mr Stephen Phillips was not the only poet who came to see us, for I remember that Mr William Watson, after a walk on the Merrow Downs, spent a meditative afternoon in a hammock in the larchwood. This resulted in that extremely fine poem, The Father of the Forest, which will give anyone who cares to look it up more of the history of England and of our Downs than any other single document that I know.[2]

Watson attempts to summarise the history of England in 'The Father of the Forest', which he dedicated to Strachey, by imagining what an ancient yew-tree must have seen during its life-span. Most of the analysis is cursory and unoriginal, as his description of the Reformation will show:

> Hardly thou count'st them long ago,
> The warring faiths, the wavering land,
> The sanguine sky's delirious glow,
> And Cranmer's scorched, uplifted hand.
> Wailed not the woods their task of shame,
> Doomed to provide the insensate flame?[3]

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1. See The Spectator, 75, July 6, 1895, pp.14-15.

2. St. Loe Strachey, pp.63-4.

3. Poems, i, pp.107-8.

Watson told Dowden that his knowledge of history was based largely on Shakespeare; so too is his interpretation of it. Henry V, for instance, is described as a "roystering youth", who becomes a "greatly simple warrior lord" (109). Starting with the Armada, the narrator of the first section goes back as far as the Roman invasion; in the second half the tree begins to speak, an idea which H. Brett thinks borrowed from Tennyson's 'Talking Oak'. Watson could equally well have got it from Emerson's 'Woodnotes II', which he had definitely read. But unlike Emerson's mystic pine, Watson's yew-tree has a rather trite prophecy to make, about the "morn divine":

> When nations may as forests grow,
> Wherein the oak hates not the pine,
> Nor beeches wish the cedars woe,
> But all, in their unlikeness, blend
> Confederate to one golden end -
>
> Beauty: the Vision whereunto,
> In joy, with pantings, from afar
> Through sound and odour, form and hue,
> And mind and clay, and worm and star -
> Now touching goal, now backward hurled -
> Toils the indomitable world (114-15).

H.J.C. Grierson admired the last section of 'The Father of the Forest' for quite different reasons from its message. He saw it as proof that Watson was "the last of our great oratorical poets".[1] Watson himself felt that he was in a rear-guard position and defended it in the last important poem he

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1. Lyrical Poetry from Blake to Hardy, London, 1928, p.134.

wrote in 1895 - 'Apologia'. While admitting that he can "bring nought new" to poetry, he argues that Nature herself is repetitive; he is not ashamed "to tread in nobler footprints" than his own. "Is the Muse", he asks, "Fall'n to a thing of Mode, that must each year / Supplant her derelict self of yester-year?"[1] Like Grierson, he implies that his "high /poetic/ lineage" makes him an ideal candidate for the laureateship. He probably had this in mind, too, when he brought out 'Apologia' in book form, together with 'The Father of the Forest', 'The Hymn to the Sea', 'The Tomb of Burns' and a few lyrics, in November, 1895. Watson thought The Father of the Forest and Other Poems his best book and the public seemed to share his opinion. It was well subscribed, as well as being favourably reviewed, and its sales, Watson reminded Lane six months later, "fell little short, if at all, of the sales of Tennyson's last volume, 'Demeter and Other Poems', which sold 5,000 copies".[2] Though not such an impressive figure for a book of poetry as it would be today, 5,000 copies still showed great popularity and made Watson's supporters quite hopeful about his chances of the laureateship. But when the government's decision was finally announced on January 1st, 1896, it was Alfred Austin, not Watson, who was named. Watson's main reaction was one of scorn. "Alfred

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1. Poems, i, pp.99-101.
2. Letter c. April, 1896.

Austin's appointment", he told his mother, "was no surprise to me, and far more acceptable to my mind than if any real rival of mine, like Henley or Bridges, men of genius, had been selected. The truth is", he went on, "Salisbury and Balfour and the rest of this Tory Government and all Tory Governments, are quite ignorant of the best contemporary literature". Watson did not agree with Lane's theory "that the Oscar Wilde scandal marked the reflux in the tide of the popular appreciation of poetry. No one thought of Oscar as a poet - he wasn't a poet, but a brilliant dramatist and wit of the period of Congreve, born out of his time"; the "real epoch was marked by the appointment of A.A. as Poet Laureate".[1] Watson had obviously changed his mind about Austin since writing an introduction to his English Lyrics (1890), when he had emphasised Austin's "nobly filial love of Country" and "tenderly passionate love of the country".[2] He had also made an explicit comparison between Austin and the then laureate: it seemed to him that if the question were asked, "'Who among the poets of a later generation can be said to share with Lord Tennyson the quality of being in this double sense English through and through?' any competent person trying to answer the question honestly will find the name of the author of this

1. Letter from Watson to Lane, March 19, 1907.
2. English Lyrics, London, 1890, p.viii.

volume of English Lyrics the first to rise to his lips"(xii). Kenneth Hopkins, in his study of The Poets Laureate (1954), recognises that Watson's introduction strengthened Austin's claims; he does not point out how ironical it was that he should have helped his own rival. For Watson had definitely been in the running. When asked 'Who Should Be Laureate?' by The Idler in April, 1895, Norman Gale, Aaron Watson, Grant Allen, Barry Pain and Richard Le Gallienne had all chosen Watson. Others had said Swinburne, Morris or Kipling, but no-one had suggested Austin. Grant Richards wrote in his memoirs, nearly forty years afterwards:

> I thought then, and think now, that William Watson should have had the job. Mr Gladstone should have spent in reading Wordsworth's Grave the hours that he gave to "making enquiry as to the present health and strength of Mr Ruskin, who has published a volume of poems"![1]

Sir Edward Russell, who had known Watson since he worked for The Argus in Liverpool, believed that, in fact, Gladstone had been "with difficulty dissuaded from giving Mr Watson the honorific appointment" and that "this was the reason why no appointment was made until the Tories came in".[2] Herbert Palmer, looking back on the affair in 1938, found it "difficult to grasp the reason for the rejection of William Watson, for he had already published Wordsworth's Grave, and here was a

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1. Memories of a Misspent Youth, London, 1932, pp.333-4.
2. That Reminds Me -, London, 1899, p.125.

poet who fulfilled the demands of respectability and assertive loyalty to the Crown, united to a really fine and individual gift of poetry".[1] It was precisely his "respectability" and "loyalty" which were in question, however.

Watson's respectability had been badly damaged by his breakdown in 1892. Though most people had been sympathetic, it made them question his fitness for a public post. There is a rumour that, when Gladstone suggested Watson for laureate, "objections were raised by a member of the royal family with whom the poet, while suffering from mental over-strain, had had a personal altercation".[2] Watson had been sent an article from America telling him that he was "generally considered too crazy" for the post.

Watson's politics were probably considered doubtful, too. When Tennyson died in October, 1892, the Liberals had been in power, first under Gladstone, then Rosebery, and Watson's political opinions had been quite acceptable to the government. But when the Conservatives took over in June, 1895, they obviously preferred Austin's imperialistic views, which, his biographer shows, "like Tennyson's, grew out of the fertile soil of Toryism, [though] the younger man was far more a Conservative and far more a jingoist".[3] Tennyson, Crowell

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1. Post-Victorian Poetry, p.25.
2. G.M. Harper, Literary Appreciations, New York, 1937, p.196.
3. N.B. Crowell, Alfred Austin, New Mexico, 1953, p.185.

argues, had "inseparably linked the laureateship with imperialism"(184), and Watson, though very patriotic, was mainly anti-imperialist. In addition, he never hesitated to criticise the government, Liberal or Conservative, when he thought their policy wrong. On March 2, 1895, he wrote a sonnet about 'The Turk in Armenia' in which he condemned the Liberal government's refusal to help the Armenians fight Turkish oppression. By including the same sonnet in The Father of the Forest in November, he showed his disapproval of Conservative policy too. Not content with this, he made his sonnet the basis for a whole series, which began to appear in The Westminster Gazette on December 16th. Coming as they did two weeks before the laureateship was settled, these sonnets may well have decided the government against him.

When the Turks started massacring the Armenians in July, 1894, Lord Rosebery had insisted that an investigation should be carried out by England, France and Russia. These three powers had presented a joint note of protest to the Porte in May, 1895, demanding reforms. The Sultan, encouraged by German support, ignored these demands. When Britain suggested taking action, Russia refused to help her, so Rosebery, who thought solitary intervention foolish, did nothing to prevent the atrocities. Salisbury, who took over for the Conservatives in June, adopted the same policy of non-interference. When a fresh outburst of massacres began in the autumn, Watson, who

was already very critical, could contain himself no longer and started writing his anti-government sonnets. By January, 1896, he had produced fourteen, which, with the addition of three new ones, he published as a book the following month. He took its title - The Purple East - from Shelley, whose political idealism he admired and was trying to emulate.

In the first seven sonnets Watson accused "craven England" of betraying her fellow-Christians[1] and thus forgetting "what Truth and Honour meant".[2] He urged her to act before it was too late, and appealed also to America for help. In the last of the seven, 'The Tired Lion', he begged Gladstone to "speak once again" to the nation with "wrath divine".[3] Watson expressed his own "wrath" very strongly in 'Repudiated Responsibility', where he compared the Chancellor of the Exchequer's words to Cain's: "Am I my brother's keeper". None of these seven sonnets could have pleased the government. They were far more likely to have admired Austin's reply to them - 'A Vindication of England' - where the Poet Laureate assured Watson that "whosoever in any circumstances arraigns this country for anything that she may do or leave undone, thereby covers himself with shame". Although he too thought the Armenian massacres a

1. England had promised to protect Armenia at the Cyprus Convention.
2. The Purple East, p.18.
3. Gladstone spoke the following September, when his speech on the massacre of 6,000 Armenians in three days at Constantinople caused Rosebery to resign.

terrible criticism of England, he believed it "best to be patient, seeing that the patience of God Himself can never be exhausted". He was sure that if Watson were with him in his "pretty country-house . . . by the yule-log's blaze" he would begin to understand that England "bides her hour behind the bastioned brine". Watson replied to Austin's "amiable effusion, with its conventional patriotism and its absolute penury of argument", with 'The Bard-in-Waiting' and 'Leisured Justice'.[1] In them he argued that his concern for England's honour, rather than her safety, made him more patriotic than Austin, who was really "Treacheries' apologist". In the four sonnets which followed Watson's retaliation and the three he added for the book he continued to condemn, warn and appeal to England. His most serious warning came in 'Last Word', which incidentally shows his opinion of contemporary culture:

> Still in your midst there dwells a remnant, who
> Love not an unclean Art, a Stage no less
> Unclean, a gibing and reviling Press,
> A febrile Muse, and Fiction febrile too.
> And they it is would pluck you from this slime
> Whereof the rank miasma clouds your brain
> With sloth that slays and torpor that is crime
> Till ye can feel nought keenly, see nought plain.
> Hearken their call, and heed, while yet is time,
> Lest ye be lulled too deep to wake again (47-8).

There is the same tendency towards overstatement here as in 'Ver Tenebrosum', but on the whole The Purple East is a definite improvement on the earlier sonnet sequence. It shows

1. Preface to The Purple East, pp.7-8.

increased technical skill, greater restraint and contains reasoned argument as well as appeals to the emotions. In 'A Birthday', for instance, the repetition of the first line, the antithesis between an English Christmas and Armenian massacre, the alliteration in "Prince of Peace", the biblical imagery and the personification of Famine all help to bring out the horror and irony of the situation:

> It is the birthday of the Prince of Peace:
> Full long ago He lay with steeds in stall,
> And universal Nature knew through all
> Her borders that the reign of Pan must cease.
> The fatness of the land, the earth's increase,
> Cumbers the board; the holly hangs in hall;
> Somewhat of her abundance Wealth lets fall;
> It is the birthday of the Prince of Peace.
> The dead rot by the wayside; the unblest
> Who live, in caves and desert mountains lurk
> Trembling, His foldless flock, shorn of their fleece.
> Women in travail, babes that suck the breast,
> Are spared not. Famine hurries to her work.
> It is the birthday of the Prince of Peace (27-8).

Though still relying quite heavily on the Bible, Watson varies his imagery much more over the whole sequence than he did in 'Ver Tenebrosum'. He also presents his ideas dramatically, rather than melodramatically. 'A Hurried Funeral', for instance, contrasts favourably with an earlier sonnet like 'Hasheen';[1] his use of direct speech suggests that he has learnt a good deal from his interim study of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists:

1. See chap.5, p.91.

A little deeper, sexton. You forget,
She you would bury 'neath so thin a crust
Of loam, was fiery-souled, and ev'n in dust
She may lie restless, she may toss and fret,
Nay, she might break a seal too lightly set,
And vex, unmannerly, our ease! She must
Beneath no lack of English earth lie thrust,
Would we unhaunted sleep! Nay, deeper yet.
Quick, friend, the cortege comes. There - that will serve;
Deep enough now; and thou'lt need all thy nerve,
If, in her coffin, at the last, amid
The mourners in the customary suits,
And to the scandal of these decent mutes,
This corpse of England's Honour burst the lid! (43-4)

By the time The Purple East came out in February, 1896, the Conservatives had already given Austin the laureateship, which may be one reason why Watson began to hope his sequence would prove "an engine against Salisbury's government".[1] He was therefore upset when Lane charged a relatively high price for the pamphlet:

> The result is, that I have had quite a signal "literary" success, but I have not reached the masses of the people, who have many claims upon their few available shillings; in other words, I have failed - failed lamentably - in the object which impelled me to write and to publish the Purple East, which was - not to make money - but to reach the ears of the million, to whom a shilling is a very considerable sum for which they expect a very substantial-looking equivalent when they invest it in literature (UC).

If Watson could not make The Purple East available to "the whole of liberal England", he was determined that the leaders of the party should know of its existence, so he sent copies to Gladstone, Rosebery and Morley. All three praised

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1. Letter to Lane, c. February, 1896.

the sonnets and other Liberal MPs quoted them at political meetings. In its obituary on Watson many years later The Times said that his "noble invective found many readers", which shows that his fears about the cost of The Purple East were unnecessary.[1] His title for the Sultan - "Abdul the Damned" - became so popular that Punch featured a cartoon in which the Sultan was seen reading Watson's work and remarking "Well, I'm d——d!". Watson had first used the phrase in a sonnet he added to a second edition of The Purple East. Later in the year he decided to add still more poems, arising out of further Turkish atrocities and to rename his original sequence The Year of Shame. This new version came out in December, 1896, with an introduction by the Bishop of Hereford, who hoped that his "few words of plain prose" would "assist in carrying the book into some homes which it would not otherwise have entered".[2] The sequence opens with a dedicatory sonnet to Mrs Herbert Studd, cousin of the Irish poet, Aubrey de Vere. Watson also addresses a sonnet 'To Our Sovereign Lady', in which he comments on Queen Victoria's meeting with the White Czar at Braemar. In two more of the seven new sonnets he openly condemns Russia's refusal to intervene and in another bitterly attacks France, whom he had thought of as "the

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1. The Times, April 14, 1935.
2. The Year of Shame, p.8.

impassioned name" of Freedom, before she began to support "a tyrant, Hell's most perfect minister"(62). The reference is clearly to the Sultan, whom he criticises even more fiercely in another sonnet. Apart from 'Starving Armenia' - one more appeal to England's heart and conscience - the rest of the sonnets are from The Purple East. Some, like 'A Hurried Funeral' and 'Birthday' remain unchanged, but others are heavily revised and generally improved. In 'The Turk in Armenia', for instance, the vocabulary is less archaic, the syntax more straightforward and the language much less exaggerated than in either of the two previous versions. The volume ends with three new poems which are of little interest, except that they show Watson experimenting with different verse forms. 'The Awakening' is in blank verse, 'Europe at the Play' in octosyllabic couplets, and 'How Weary is Our Heart' a combination of terza rima and free verse.

Apart from these few poems Watson wrote nothing new during 1896. As he explained to Lane at the beginning of 1897, "the whole past year [had] been full to an unusual degree of disquieting and agitating occurrences and events, which [had] thrown one off the track in a variety of ways, with many unfortunate results" (UC). His worst problem was connected with his mother, who was still living with Robinson and his wife. Robinson had continually troubled William, first with demands for a loan of fifty pounds and more money for Mrs Watson's keep, then with complaints about her awkwardness -

"as if I didn't know all about it", William wrote to Lane, "I who have had to endure it in a thousand ways for years past!".[1] In the end William became physically violent, as he often did under great strain, and attacked Robinson, who quite naturally refused to let him enter his house afterwards. William was therefore unable to visit his mother, though she was now dying of cancer. He was also distracted from work by less serious matters during 1896, if we are to believe his letter to Lane in June from Salisbury:

> I have just returned from my exploratory trip. I have been away four nights and have slept at three places - to wit, Glastonbury, Wells and Cheddar. There are some amiable and kind-hearted girls at Wells - indeed almost everywhere in that part of the country. It adds a great charm to the pleasure of travelling and of archeological research.
>
> I intend to explore further next week (UC).

In case Lane fails to grasp the rather obvious sexual innuendo, Watson tells him explicitly that his "French letters were quite a sensation in Glastonbury". He was convinced that both his general health and creativity were dependent on regular sexual intercourse; "having a woman", he insisted, did him "a heap of good".[2] Though Lane might be able to lead "a celibate life without damage", Watson felt he could not do without sex. But he was unable to form a permanent or regular relationship with women of his own class, and the shop-assistants,

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1. Letter dated October 30, 1895, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, c. May, 1897, UC.

land-ladies and barmaids he could contact had to be paid for in one way or another. He economised where he could, staying on at the Royal Hotel, Ventnor, for instance, in 1897, partly because he had "a girl in the house gratis".[1] But it was still expensive and he therefore demanded a rise in salary to meet the cost! His attitude towards sex seems to have been rather ambivalent, for he strongly condemned "licentiousness and loose ideas of conduct in art and literature", his own ideals being those of "chastity and self-restraint".[2]

Besides allowing himself to be diverted in Somerset in 1897, Watson was also indulging in more visits to London in spring and early summer. These came to an end, however, when his mother died on July 27th and he had to go up to Liverpool to arrange the funeral. Though he did not find her death nearly so "shattering" as his father's, he was upset that she died thinking he had forgotten her, because he had been unable to visit her. He felt that Robinson's whole conduct concerning their mother had been "disgraceful". Robinson had expected him to provide for her completely and had then spent part of that money on himself. Lane admired the way William had taken full responsibility since John Watson's death in 1886 and gladly lent him money to pay for her funeral, which he also attended.

1. Letter to Lane, October 22, 1897, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, June 23, 1908, UC.

In August Watson asked Lane to lend him more money. His uncle, William Robinson, who was staying near him in Southport, had asked him to go with him to Madeira and, not wanting to spoil his chances of inheritance, he had agreed, but had no money for the fare. The "Old Gentleman" had been so ill that, for a time, his nephews feared he would die intestate. Since he was planning to divide his large fortune between William and James, William was anxious to do all he could to help his recovery. But when his uncle got well enough to make his will, he became "possessed with wild delusions about Shield", the family lawyer and refused to trust him. So his will was still unmade when he left for Madeira at the end of August and Robinson afterwards accused William of trying to influence his uncle about it while they were out there together.

William Robinson stayed on in Madeira for the winter, but Watson, who was bored, returned to England, where he took lodgings in Bournemouth. He had hurt his shoulder while abroad and it started to trouble him when he got back. One of his admirers, the Right Honourable Mrs Henniker, very kindly arranged for him to see her "bone-setter", who recommended a small operation. Watson fussed a great deal about finding the necessary money and lodgings in London, but finally had it done in December. He was able to convalesce in comfort at Frederick Barnard's large country-house near Windermere, where he had been invited to spend Christmas with Lane, Max Beerbohm and

Aubrey Beardsley. Barnard, a close friend of Lane, was a medieval historian, numismatist and collector of epigrams. In 1884 he had married the elder daughter of William Pollard, a wealthy J.P., who lived at St. Mary's Abbey, Windermere. Barnard entertained his mainly literary friends, together with his wife's more aristocratic ones, in his father-in-law's house and Watson met many people there. He obviously enjoyed his stay, for he returned to Windermere the following summer, having spent January at Brighton with the Coutts, February at Chichester, in an attempt to economise and March at Cheltenham. By April he was settled at a farm near St. Mary's Abbey and "dining and lunching extensively with the Barnards".[1] He visited them almost daily until September, when an unfortunate incident put an end to the friendship. Having presented Mrs Barnard's sister, Ella, with a copy of his Eloping Angels one day, he had just begun to explain some fine point in its composition, when he suddenly noticed that she was not listening. Furious, he snatched the book from her and threw it into the fire. He then seized the poker, with which she was trying to rescue the book, and pinned her to the fireplace. His violent outburst frightened her extremely, but Watson felt that, left to herself, she would not have made half the fuss that followed. Barnard had simply used the incident, he said, as a pretext for getting rid of him before one of his guests, Lady Katherine Manners, returned. Watson had first

1. Letter to Lane, c. April, 1897, UC.

met Lady Katherine when she came to stay in August and had been immediately attracted to her. Judging from the poem he wrote to go with a book he gave her, she returned the interest.[1] Lady Katherine had to leave St. Mary's at the end of August, but she promised to come back to see Watson later in the year. Barnard may well have been jealous, though the maliciousness of Watson's comments on Barnard make it sound more like jealousy on Watson's part. He told Lane that Mrs Barnard was "condoning her husband's adultery with her sister (and with anyone else) because she would undergo any moral humiliation rather than forego her share in /the/ titles she /was/ looking forward to". He had already admitted that he wanted "to quarrel irrevocably and irreconcilably" with Barnard, before The Eloping Angels incident, but had deliberately restrained himself while Lady Katherine was there. Once she had gone he was more than ready for a quarrel and was probably as much to blame as Barnard in the affair.

Lady Katherine was only one of several "society" women Watson met this year. The Purple East had brought him to the notice of leading Liberals, whose wives now started inviting him to their receptions. He received invitations from Lady Tweedmouth and Lady Battersea, for instance, both wives of well-known Liberal peers. Lady Grey, wife of Rosebery's Under-Secretary, Lord Edward Grey, and a friend of Mrs Norman, even thought of asking him "to make their

1. See 'To the Lady Katherine Manners', The Hope of the World, London, 1897, p.48.

Northumberland place [his] headquarters".[1] He also had invitations from less politically involved hostesses, such as the Right Honourable Mrs Henniker, daughter of Baron Houghton and sister of the first Marquess of Crewe. She knew a number of famous writers and Watson met Thomas Hardy at her gatherings. Florence Henniker was herself a writer and Watson probably got to know her through Lane, who published her short stories, _Scarlet and Grey_, in 1896 and her novel, _Contrasts_, in 1903. She was very flattered when Watson dedicated 'The Tomb of Burns' to her in 1895 and sent him the three volume Aldine Burns to show her appreciation. Beside helping him to arrange his operation in December, 1896, she also allowed him to use her name when he sent Morley a copy of _The Purple East_ and got him an invitation to visit her brother, the Marquess of Crewe. Watson was grateful for these favours, but he resented the possessiveness that went with them. When she "pitched into him"[2] about some verses he had written to Mrs Studd, he almost ended the relationship. It is difficult to see what Mrs Henniker found to make her jealous in a poem which is concerned mainly with Mrs Studd's cousin, Aubrey de Vere, and the nature of poetry generally.[3] Both Mrs Henniker and Mrs Studd were halfway between the social and the literary world,

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1. Letter to Lane, 1897, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, _c_. May, 1897, UC.
3. _The Hope of the World_, p.40.

but Watson was also popular with women of almost purely literary tastes. He had known the poetess, Mrs Graham Tompson, since 1892 and the novelists, Mrs Humphrey Ward and Mrs Norman, since 1894. He stayed with Alice and Wilfred Meynell in 1896, when his comments show that he was not at all overawed, and perhaps even a little ungrateful, for such patronage: "After Mrs Meynell and water", he wrote to Lane, "I want some beer".[1] He had first met Alice Meynell at the Bodley Head, where he also met the writers Ella d'Arcy, Margaret Roberts and Evelyn Sharp, who gives an amusing account of their brief involvement in 1896:

> I am afraid I sometimes disappointed John Lane by not responding to his well-intentioned match-making schemes, which he pursued with the same thoroughness that he brought to log-rolling campaigns in the Press. He manoeuvred delightfully to throw William Watson and myself together, in a guileless fashion that would not have deceived a child and certainly did not deceive us. I do not know what he told William Watson about me, but to me he used continually to enumerate the many charms of his favourite poet, ending up with the assurance that he had never seen him so much attracted by any other girl, to which my answer, if it had not been tactfully left unspoken, would have been that I knew more, in that case, of William Watson's susceptibility than he did. Fortunately, neither I nor this very attractive poet took Lane's plot seriously; and it gave us one jolly day at Salisbury, when we three and another writer, Miss Prideaux, went down by train on a summer morning, lunched at the White Hart and then walked out to Old Sarum. We passed a beautiful old house on the way, with cedar trees on the lawn, and a moat in which swam curiously large gold-fish: I made a fairy story about them afterwards that I dedicated to William Watson, and he wrote a pretty verse on it in return of which I am proud to possess the original MS.[2]

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1. Letter c. February, 1896, UC.

2. Unfinished Adventure, London, 1933, p.75.

She was quite right about Watson's "susceptibility"; even while asking Lane for her address in letter after letter, he was also involved with the "amiable girls" of Somerset and someone who signed herself "your loving little friend Monny". His 'Fly-Leaf Poem' on Evelyn Sharp's fairy-story, Wymps, was only one of many he wrote to different women during 1896 and 1897. Some of these, like his lines to Mrs Herbert Studd and Lady Katherine Manners, appeared in magazines as he wrote them, but they were not brought together until the end of 1897, when he published them, with three longer works and a few smaller ones on public affairs, as The Hope of the World. None of the four poems 'On Public Affairs' call for close analysis, despite Watson's belief that they equalled Tennyson's public verse, but their contents are worth mention. 'Jubilee Night in Westmoreland' commemorates Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, a reminder that her reign was nearly over. 'Hellas, Hail!' and 'After Defeat' were written before and after Greece's brief struggle for independence in 1897 and show that Watson was continuing to champion Turkey's enemies. (He had been asked to write the poems by the Greek Committee in London, who recognised his authority.) 'The Three Neighbours' is an allegorical argument for Home Rule in Ireland, in the manner of Swift's Tale of a Tub. The middle section of 'Miscellaneous Poems' is also of more biographical than poetic interest; it contains one of his most anthologised pieces:

April, April,
Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!
April, that mine ears
Like a lover greetest,
If I tell thee, sweetest,
All my hopes and fears,
April, April,
Laugh thy golden laughter,
But, the moment after,
Weep thy golden tears![1]

One other poem, 'The Last Eden', which had appeared in The Yellow Book for January, 1897, is worth quoting in part. The first half - a description of Man's Fall in the Garden - is weak, but the conclusion successfully conveys a deep sense of melancholy, quite different from Milton's version and freshly imagined:

. . . . But oftentimes he feels
The intolerable vastness bow him down,
The awful homeless spaces daunt his soul;
And half-regretful he remembers then
His Eden lost, as some grey mariner
May think of the far fields where he was bred,
And woody ways unbreathed-on by the sea,
Though more familiar now the ocean-paths
Gleam, and the stars his fathers never knew.[2]

'The Lost Eden', Watson said, was in "a kindred key" to the three main poems in The Hope of the World, of which "the relation of Man to the Universe may be said to be their general theme".[3] He began the title poem only two months before the book was published in December, though he had been intending to write it all summer.

1. Poems, i, p.89.

2. Poems, i, p.117.

3. Letter to Lane, c. October, 1897, UC.

After leaving Windermere at the end of September, he had gone to stay at the Royal Hotel, Ventnor, the Isle of Wight, as he explained to Lane on October 22nd:

> I have this big hotel all to myself! The proprietor is profoundly civil and effusively obliging, and while the place remains quiet it is everything I could wish. I have had my bedroom fitted up with conveniences for writing, (as at 'Wampach' at Folkestone, where I wrote the H/ymn/ to the Sea) and I look out upon the channel as I scribble (UC).

It was in these ideal surroundings that he finished 'The Hope of the World', a philosophical poem in sixteen verses. Its nine-line stanza is very similar to the form Arnold uses for Empedocles' song to Pausanias[1] and Watson may well have been thinking of Arnold's poem, which he greatly admired. There is a further resemblance in the agnostic philosophy and cautious tone of the two pieces. But 'The Hope of the World' cannot compare intellectually with 'Empedocles', in spite of Watson's belief that it contained a "rather closely linked chain of thoughts" and "a certain line of strictly philosophic argument".[2] It is true that in it he attempts to sum up the implications of the theory of Evolution, but his treatment of the same theme in the earlier 'Dream of Man', though not completely successful, is more interesting than this absurdly over-simplified account:

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1. 'Empedocles on Etna', Act 1, scene II.

2. Letter from Watson to Richard Garnett, December 17, 1897, Garnett collection.

In cave and bosky dene
   Of old there crept and ran
The gibbering form obscene
   That was and was not man.
The desert beasts went by
   In fairer covering clad;
More speculative eye
   The couchant lion had,
And goodlier speech the birds, than we
                              when we began.[1]

Dismissing the Christian version of creation as a "flattering dream", Watson argues that all "hope" is unfounded, though it springs up occasionally, like "some adventurous flower, / On savage crag-side grown"(127). Most critics were "kind and generous" towards the poem,[2] but they wondered why it was called 'The Hope of the World'. Watson was disappointed that it had not been fully understood, for he felt it was a "more absolutely sincere and unconventional" expression of himself than any previous work.[3] So, too, was the second main poem in the volume, 'The Unknown God'. His frankness in both cases probably stemmed from the fact that he was no longer trying to present himself as an ideal poet-laureate. He seems even to have relished the idea of shocking his readers with 'The Unknown God':

> For some time past [he wrote to Lane] I have chafed at the stupidity of the public who because I usually maintain a certain reticence about religion imagine me to be on the side of Christian superstition despite the numerous though not aggressive evidences of agnosticism which they would find in my poems if they only had half an eye, and I don't mind if this poem dispels the delusion once for all,

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1. Poems, i, pp.124-5.
2. Letter from Watson to Richard Garnett, 1897, Garnett collection.
3. Letter to Lane, c. November, 1897, UC.

> for I hate occupying a false position in the public mind.
> So don't be frightened about the consequences.[1]

'The Unknown God' had been sparked off by the "Christian superstition" of Kipling's 'Recessional', which Watson found "merely primitive and barbarous". Addressing God as "Lord of the far-flung battle-line, / Beneath whose awful Hand we hold / Dominion over palm and pine", Kipling had begged Him to be with the British in ruling the Empire - "Lest we forget - lest we forget".[2] Watson replied, in the tenth of his twelve stanzas:

> Best by remembering God, say some,
> We keep our high imperial lot.
> Fortune, I fear, hath oftenest come
> When we forgot - when we forgot!---[3]

Watson prophesied that his more "modern" attitude would prevail. He thought Kipling lacked utterly "the power of philosophic thought", though he was forced to admit that he had "magnificent style". He saw this "bustling, voluble, immensely energetic, glorified journalist" as the complete opposite of himself, "a thinker and dreamer".[4] He tried to express his more "modern" attitude again in the third and last of his "cosmic" poems. 'The Ode in May', he told Lane, "reflects symbolically modern teleology and cosmogony",[5] a slightly inflated claim for the rather vague explanation of creation he actually gives:

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1. Letter between May and September, 1897, UC.
2. Definitive Edition, p.328.
3. Poems, i, p.133.
4. Letter to Lane between May and September, 1897, UC.
5. Letter c. November, 1897.

For of old the Sun, our sire,
Came wooing the mother of men,
Earth, that was virginal then,
Vestal fire to his fire.
Silent her bosom and coy,
But the strong god sued and pressed;
And born of their starry nuptial joy
Are all that drink at her breast.[1]

Samuel Chew has compared Watson's ode with Swinburne's 'Hertha'. The two poems do both attempt to explain the origins of Man, as he claims, but Swinburne's version is far more thoughtful than Watson's. The only real likeness the 'Ode' has to 'Hertha' is in its language, which is consciously patterned and balanced:

And the triumph of him that begot,
And the travail of her that bore,
Behold, they are evermore
As warp and weft in our lot.
We are children of splendour and flame,
Of shuddering, also, and tears.
Magnificent out of the dust we came,
And abject from the Spheres.

It is a pity Watson made pretentious philosophical claims for his 'Ode'; it gives much more satisfaction if read simply as a lyric expression of joy in creation. Most critics praised it as such, but Watson, though he agreed that it was the best piece of "pure poetry" he had ever written, complained that few of them had noticed its well-knit argument or firm structure. The most obvious and true explanation of their failure is that the 'Ode in May', like the majority of poems in The Hope of the World, is remarkable for neither.

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1. Poems, i, p.48.

Chapter 9

A Legacy, Marriage and a Scandal

Watson's complaint that The Hope of the World had not been understood by the critics is only one of many he made about them in 1897. His reaction to Wilfred Meynell's description of the 'Ode in May' as a "very dainty piece" is typical:

> [It is] a tangible symbol and symptom of the dead-set which is being made upon me all round in the newspapers, not so much in the shape of positive attack as in the damning-with-faint praise method which is so much more effectual against one's reputation. It is beginning really to depress and haunt me. These persons have quite given up using the word "poetry" as a description of anything I write: it is "verse" always. Even my casual unknown correspondents have caught the trick, and begin to ask for my autograph on the ground of their interest in my "verses". I begin to feel as if, in my fortieth year, I were commencing my old career of struggle over again.[1]

Watson was not being paranoid, though he had a tendency that way. His reputation was definitely on the decline and he himself made things worse by failing to produce any new volumes of poetry in the next five years. Lane thought it was the £13,000 his uncle left him in 1898 which had destroyed his incentive to work.[2] Whether Lane was right or not, the trouble caused by family quarrels over the will made it difficult for Watson to concentrate on poetry in the late nineties. Having spent the winter of 1897 at Bath, the

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1. Letter to Lane, c. December, 1897, UC.

2. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, ff.49-53.

spring in the Lake District, the summer in Yorkshire and the autumn in Torquay, he was staying at Sevenoaks, Kent, when the news of his uncle's death reached him on November 30th, 1898. He immediately joined Robinson in Plymouth for the funeral and they then travelled up to Southport together to see the family lawyer, Shield, about the will. Legal matters were delayed by the Christmas holidays, but by January 12th, 1899, probate was granted.[1] William Robinson had divided his £26,000 between James and William. He had decided to cut Robinson out of his will after his sister's death in 1896 and Robinson accused Watson of having prejudiced his uncle against him in Madeira. William admitted that he had spoken "in terms the reverse of favourable, in connection with your conduct to me about your mother",[2] but only after they had left England, when he thought the information unlikely to affect the will. If anyone had tried to create prejudice, he continued, it was James, who had told their uncle that William had helped Robinson to write him abusive letters. William was not quite as innocent as he liked to make out. He had known before leaving England that William Robinson had not yet made his will and that he intended cutting Robinson out of it, yet had sent Lane strict instructions not to give Robinson their address in Madeira, as though trying to prevent a possible reconciliation. It was probably a sense of guilt which made William suggest that Robinson should be given a part of the legacy. He was unwilling

1. Letter from Shield to Lane, Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.24.

2. Letter from Watson to Lane, December 5, 1898, UC.

to bear the whole cost of this, however, and asked Shield to contact James, "putting Robinson's case before him very fully and asking him what he meant to do".[1] When James arrived from America at the end of January, he and William agreed in less than five minutes to give Robinson £1,000 each, which satisfied Robinson temporarily and still left them £12,000 apiece.

Neither James nor William seems to have had any idea how to handle such a large sum. James lost the whole of his inheritance in business within three years and committed suicide.[2] William lost half of his in South African shares before he invested the other half more wisely in American Railways. He refused to break into his remaining capital for a long time and could have lived quite comfortably on the interest, had he not become much more extravagant. He now stayed at expensive hotels, drank wine with every meal and travelled more widely than ever. Between March, 1899, and November, 1900, he visited the Lake District and Scotland twice, Margate, Lyndhurst, Ilfracombe, Southampton, the Isle of Wight, Skipton, York, Norwich, Exeter, Shrewsbury, Llandudno, Dolgelly, Rothesay, Winchester and Buxton. By December, 1900, when he was advised to have his appendix out, he had to borrow money from Lane to pay for the operation. He needed more money by January, 1901, and began planning a "considerable literary work" in the hope of earning some, though in 1899 he had thought his

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1. Letter from Shield to Lane, January 20, 1899, Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.24.
2. Letter from Watson to Lane, May 1, 1902, Bodleian, Walpole MS., e.9.

writing career "finally closed".[1] It took him over a year to get started on anything serious and he did so then partly because the few poems he had contributed to English and American magazines during this year earned him barely enough to live on. He had also become more settled by 1902, having found lodgings at Clifton, Bristol, which suited him so well that he stayed there for the next seven years. "I live by choice quite out of touch with 'society'", he told Cornelius Weygandt, "and spend more than eleven-twelfths of the year in the country, mostly alone".[2] He felt settled enough by March, 1902, to start writing an 'Ode on the Day of the Coronation of King Edward VII'. Queen Victoria had been dead a year and two months and Edward's coronation was arranged for the end of June. Watson had finished and published his ode two weeks before it was due to take place. The poem sold well, after an expensive advertising campaign of which he shared the cost, and the first edition of 4,000 copies soon went. Lane immediately ordered another 4,000 to be printed, but before the sheets were bound Edward fell ill and the ceremony had to be postponed until August. Unfortunately, the third section of the ode began: "High on the noon and summit of the year / Thou art anointed King". This was no longer strictly true and Watson felt that a revised edition was needed. Lane did not believe that such a slight inaccuracy would affect the sale of the

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1. Letter to Lane, July 20th, 1899, UC.
2. Letter dated May 21, 1904, UC.

book. He objected that, if a new version were brought out, the coronation might be postponed again; there would also be 4,000 unbound copies wasted and booksellers might claim compensation for unsold copies of the obsolete edition. After long argument Lane and Watson asked a mutual friend, Henry Norman, to arbitrate.[1] Norman decided in favour of Lane, a verdict Watson accepted as "thoroughly sound and right", though he could not help feeling that Norman had ignored the aesthetic side of the question.

Reading the 'Coronation Ode' today, it is difficult to see why Watson and Lane made such an issue of it.But it was important to both of them at the time, especially to Watson, who hoped it might bolster up his failing reputation. He was delighted when it got glowing reviews in all the main papers. There were also letters of praise from Robert Bridges, Richard Garnett, James Bryce, Churton Collins, W.L. Courthope, W.L. Courtney, Francis Coutts, the Bishop of Hereford and others. George Meredith wrote:

> Although you have done me the honour to send me your book of the Ode, I shall not take it as a licence to afflict you with eulogy of the achievement, further than to say that I thought it as impossible as the inspiring of a ship's trumpet with music. So imperatively was rhetoric demanded that I could not expect the finer air of poetry to animate it. Well, I have just closed the book, and feel prouder of our country than a view of the Procession could make me.[2]

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1. Watson and Lane's letters to each other and their statements to Henry Norman on July 18, 1902, are contained in Walpole MS., c.22, f.22 at the Bodleian.

2. Letter dated June 17, 1902, UC.

Meredith's prose is far better than the poetry it praises, especially in its use of metaphor. Watson's imagery is rather commonplace; he sees the British Empire, for instance, as a robed person, Ireland as England's "lonely bride" and England's past kings as ghosts. Only one image stands out with any freshness: "And yonder march the nations full of eyes". Watson told William Archer, a theatre critic Mrs Norman had introduced him to in 1897, that the 'Ode' was "not much of a ceremonial performance but rather a song of Britain's imperial greatness & historical & legendary picturesqueness, as also of her moral mission & natural beauty".[1] Of its five sections only the first half of the third section refers directly to the coronation, in spite of its title. The first section glorifies the Empire, the second gives a potted history of English kings similar to that given in 'The Father of the Forest', the fourth describes the natural beauties of Scotland and Wales and the fifth warns against the "doom of overlordships to decay". Technically the 'Ode' is almost perfect, as most of Watson's reviewers emphasised. His highly inflated and exaggerated language is for once admirably suited to his subject, as the opening lines will show:

> Sire, we have looked on many and mighty things
> In these eight hundred summers of renown
> Since the Gold Dragon of the Wessex Kings
> On Hastings field went down;

1. Letter dated March 25, 1902.

And slowly in the ambience of this crown
Have many crowns been gathered, till, today,
How many peoples crown thee, who shall say?
Time, and the ocean, and some fostering star,
In high cabal have made us what we are---.[1]

This is not great poetry, but it is good public verse. Many critics saw it as proof that Watson would have made a better poet-laureate than Austin. His next book, For England, made them doubt it, for most of the poems in it were highly critical of the government and strongly anti-imperialist. Lane told Norman that Watson alienated a large part of his public by siding with the Boers against the British government when he first published his poems serially in The Daily News, The Speaker, The Westminster Gazette, The Saturday Review, The Fortnightly and The Cornhill Magazine throughout 1901 and 1902. Watson had not taken Lane's advice not to publish the more vehement pieces, for his main concern was to make his protest public. He had been indignant about Britain's policy in South Africa since the Jameson raid in 1896 and could quite understand the increasing resentment of the Transvaal government. He supported Kruger's decision to fight Britain when she continued to refuse him independence in 1899. Even when the colonies joined in with the British, in response to Natal's and the Orange Free State's support of the Transvaal, Watson went on opposing his own government. He admired the courage of the Boers, who continued their guerrilla warfare for two and a half years, though Britain's

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1. Poems, ii, p.95.

troops outnumbered their entire population and had annexed both the Transvaal and the Orange Free State to the "queen's dominions" after the first year. When Britain started burning the country-side and putting all civilians in concentration camps Watson's indignation increased and, when he learnt that twenty thousand women and children had been killed by their appalling conditions, he could no longer contain himself. He started writing poems in which he stressed the inhumanity of the British war-leaders,[1] the courage of the Boers,[2] the waste of human lives on both sides[3] and the dangers of opposing a wish for Independence.[4] He warned Britain, as he had done before in The Purple East, that her greatness depended on a love of justice and that her empire would quickly decay if she forgot it.[5] He was anxious to point out that the harshness of his criticism did not stem from a lack of patriotism:

> For what is Patriotism but noble care
> For our own country's honour in men's eyes,
> And zeal for the just glory of her arms?
> If it be aught but this we'll none of it.[6]

In his dedication to Leonard Courtney, the leader of the anti-war faction in the Liberal party, Watson says that a charge of "anti-patriotism" is especially "odious to one who has prided himself on being peculiarly English in his sympathies and sentiments"(6). It

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1. e.g. 'Leniency', For England, London, 1903, pp.22-4.
2. e.g. 'The Enemy'(17-18); 'The Unsubdued'(39-40).
3. e.g. 'Lamentation'(29); 'The Slain'(51-2).
4. e.g. 'Force and Freedom'(25-6).
5. e.g. 'Rome and Another'(35); 'The Inexorable Law'(36-7); 'Greeting' (42-3).
6. 'Greeting', For England, p.42.

is obvious from this dedication that he hoped his poems would bring him once more to the notice of leading Liberals and he was delighted when several wrote to congratulate him on them. He was particularly flattered by the attention of James Bryce, to whom he replied publicly:

> Thanks for your heartening word, that came to one
> Fated to hoist a somewhat lonely sail,
> Against the wind and tide; that came to one
> Fated to be at variance with the time,
> Touching the parts it hisses or applauds;
> Who liefer would sit mute, and be withdrawn
> Far into some consolatory Past,
> Among old voices, the unperishing,
> Save that such words of cheer the courier Hours
> Bring when most needed, words restorative,
> Coming across the silence or dispraise,
> Coming across the welter and the gloom.[1]

G.K. Chesterton, who made For England an excuse to examine 'The Political Poetry of Mr William Watson', agreed that he stood alone - "the last of the ancient poets of England", who represented "the union of a democratic policy with a classical style".[2] Few other critics shared Chesterton's admiration. Francis Coutts thought the verses positively "bad".[3] Though For England sold over 1,000 copies within ten days of its publication in October, 1903, it was much less popular than Kipling's collection of poems on the Boer war, Five Nations, which came out the same month. Watson regarded Kipling as a "vehement and voluble glorifier of Britannic ideals"[4]

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1. 'Lines to Mr James Bryce', For England, p.55.
2. The Fortnightly Review, LXXIV, November, 1903, p.768.
3. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.24, ff.15-16.
4. The Muse in Exile, p.20.

and a Spokesman for the Tories, whom he had described to his mother in the following terms in 1896:

> ...Salisbury and Balfour and the rest of this Tory government and all Tory governments, are quite ignorant of the best contemporary literature, whereas among the leading Liberals I can number among my warm appreciators Gladstone, Rosebery, Morley, Asquith and Bryce, not to mention lesser men. The Tory government is and always has been the party of ignorance, the party that is ignorant of what the people are really thinking and feeling at any critical time, and the party of indifference, the party that is indifferent to human suffering and human aspirations.[1]

Part of Watson's undoubted scorn for Kipling's later work[2] stemmed from a dislike of his politics. He also found Kipling very long-winded; comparing two poems they had each written on Ireland, he felt that his own had "put the Unionist case in a nutshell as yards and yards of Kipling had failed miserably to do".[3] He could find no ideals at all in Kipling's poetry and objected very strongly when The Tribune awarded Kipling £8,000 for the most "idealistic" poem of the year. Watson almost certainly felt threatened by Kipling. In the early nineties they had both been rising young "stars" at Macmillan's, where their portraits hung side by side in the main office, but by 1900 Kipling had definitely become the more popular. Yeats, who emphasises their mutual dominance during the nineties in his preface to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (pp.xi-xii), accounts for Watson's fall from popularity by referring to his use of "rhetoric", which became very unfashionable

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1. Undated letter in the possession of Walter Swayze.
2. Watson told Lane in 1917 that he thought Kipling's verse the worst thing in Lane's anthology of first world war poetry.
3. Letter to Basil Willett, December 15, 1916, UC.

towards the end of the century. Whereas Watson still followed the old tradition of addressing the public rhetorically on public affairs, he argues, Kipling anticipated the new by speaking to them colloquially on similar matters.

Watson's 'Lines to Mr James Bryce' shows that he was very conscious of the decline in his reputation, which he had made some effort to restore in 1902 with a volume of Selected Poems. He hoped this selection would represent him better than the Collected Poems he had brought out in 1898, in an earlier attempt to popularise himself. As one contemporary critic put it, Collected Poems "represents all that the poet cares to save of his own work" and Selected Poems "what, in the poet's judgement, posterity may be expected to save".[1] But by 1904 Watson felt that neither of these collections were really representative and he and Lane began to discuss the possibility of a new selection in two volumes. Watson thought that J.A. Spender, who had published some of his work in The Westminster Gazette, would be an "ideal man" to edit it[2] and Lane got Spender to agree.

In his introduction to The Poems of William Watson Spender explained that the pieces had been chosen to illustrate Watson's thought and style. The arrangement had been more difficult. He had wanted to divide the work, according to Watson's "two distinctive qualities", into "illuminative criticism in poetical form" and

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1. The Edinburgh Review, 198, October, 1903, p.489.
2. Letter to Lane, July 20, 1904, UC.

"descriptive and meditative kind of poetry"(viii), but this would have meant forcing some poems into false categories, so he had kept to "the simpler groups of the old collected editions"(ix). The first volume is split up into 'Elegiac Poems', 'Odes and Lyrics', 'Miscellaneous' and 'Narrative Poems', the second into 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', 'Sonnets on Public Affairs', 'Poems (other than Sonnets) on Public Affairs', 'Epigrams' and 'Early Poems'. It is difficult to see any plan behind such a plan, unless it be order of merit. For the 'Public' and 'Early' poems are placed last and these are the only sections Spender feels compelled to justify. The public ones, he argues, show Watson's "power to present an ideal, and to contrast it with the accepted creed of so-called practical people"(xi-xii), while 'The Prince's Quest' is interesting not only for its imaginative qualities, but because it is "curiously unprophetic" of his later, more "ethical and intellectual" work(ix-x).

Spender emphasises that the first part of 'The Prince's Quest' has been thoroughly revised; he also mentions "considerable alterations"(vii) in 'The Dream of Man', 'The Hope of the World' and 'Lachrymae Musarum'. Watson explained these changes to William Archer, one of the few critics he felt gave "just attention to verbal minutiae":

> In most cases, although the change has been effected recently, the origin of the change is by no means recent as regards intention. In some cases a poem, dropped out of my last 'Collected Edition' because of some blemish which then distressed me, has now undergone what I thought the needed rectification & been admitted to this new collection. In other cases the amputation of what seemed to me an excrescence in some poem hitherto reprinted without such surgery has, in

> my own by no means hastily formed opinion, been necessary. In yet other instances, additions of new matter have been made.[1]

Most of the revisions are minor ones and make very little difference to the poems, but there are some more radical ones which definitely improve them. The argument of 'The Hope of the World', for instance, is much clearer for the addition of a prose preface and omission of a whole stanza which had previously interrupted the development of the thought.

Watson not only revised old poems for his collection, he also included twenty new ones, thirteen of which were sonnets. None of these have much literary merit, but one, 'To Aberdeen', is of some biographical interest. It celebrates Watson's visit there in April, 1904, to receive an honorary doctorate from Aberdeen University. Watson had been complaining two months earlier, in 'The State Discouragement of Literature',[2] of the writer's lack of public recognition. Not only was he now being given this, he was also getting it from a respected academic institution, some slight consolation for his own poor education. He was so proud of his 'Ll.D.' title that he insisted Lane used it on all his letters for a time.

Apart from 'To Aberdeen', Watson's other new sonnets are on familiar themes; in two he condemns contemporary poetry, in two broods on his own melancholy, in two criticises Christianity, in

1. Letter dated December 10, 1904.

2. The Fortnightly Review, 75, February 1, 1904.

two describes the political corruption of the age and in three praises three great men. All of them show his usual technical competence. 'Shelley', for instance, falls neatly into three separate, yet linked parts - an account of a Greek legend, which takes up the first quatrain, a criticism of Shelley's poetry, which fills the second, and a general conclusion, which rounds out the sestet:

> 'Twas said the gods, when they Porphyrion slew,
> And vast Enceladus under Etna laid,
> Could conquer only with a mortal's aid
> These mortal giants and their snakish crew.
> Behold a spirit all fire and air and dew,
> Who, being of heaven, a heavenly error made:
> To crush the earthborn giants he essayed,
> Wholly without ally of earthborn thew.
> Therefore he conquered not. For in man's mind,
> The wrath celestial that would monsters slay
> Must needs a lowlier-sprung confederate find,
> And charge with an auxiliary of clay.
> Then only are these Powers, their might combined,
> Then only and thus, invincible as Day.[1]

The reference to Greek mythology is something new and another of the additional sonnets suggests that he came to it through John Churton Collins, who had almost certainly introduced him to Latin literature ten years earlier:[2]

> Collins, that with the elect of Greece and Rome
> Dost daily in familiar converse dwell -
> Have I not sat, long after bell on bell
> Hath tolled the noon of night from spire and dome,
> To hear you summon from their shadowy home
> The laurelled ghosts obedient to your spell?
> Bards from the fields of deathless asphodel,
> And one with locks white as the Chian foam.[3]

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1. Poems, ii, 26.
2. See chap.7, p.160, footnote 2.
3. 'To John Churton Collins', Poems, ii, 13.

Watson's use of Greek myth in 'Shelley' illuminates his criticism, but when he combines it with Nordic and Jewish legends in 'Night and Time' he is less successful, partly because three mythologies are confused and partly because they are not well integrated.

The most interesting new poems in the collected edition are not sonnets, but two short lyrics and two epigrams. The sarcastic tone of the second epigram 'To a Slovenly Versifier' shows that Watson was becoming very resentful of being seen as a mere craftsman:

> Your gems, I take it, even in the rough,
> For this rude age are more than good enough?
> Too mean were lapidarian toil for you;
> 'Tis work we drudges may be left to do:
> Poor painful slaves of our own paltry skill,
> Doting uxorious on Perfection still.[1]

Yet it is skilled craftsmanship, rather than powerful imagination that emerges from a reading of Watson's poetry in the collected edition of 1904. The book was favourably reviewed in most of the main papers, however,[2] and was extravagantly praised by Alfred Gardiner, Churton Collins, James Douglas, William Archer and Sidney Low. An anonymous critic in The Bookman felt that Poems established Watson's "right to the foremost place among our living poets".[3]

"Why I am not a widely popular poet, read by tens of thousands is to me a perpetual mystery", Watson wrote to Lane only two years

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1. Poems, i, p.155.
2. e.g. The Star, The Daily Chronicle, The Standard, The Spectator, The Bookman, The Leader, The St. James' Gazette.
3. The Bookman, vol.27, February, 1905, p.211.

later. "So you must forgive me for feeling no extravagant gratitude towards a public that buys 2,000 copies of my collected work.[1] . . . I have never written for a mere literary circle; I have aimed consciously at the largest of audiences, and am today the most bitterly disappointed of living men because the aim has been so pitifully futile and so miserably defeated. To congratulate me on a sale of 2,000 copies seems to me a little grotesque".[2] His collected edition of 1904 had not restored his reputation as he hoped, though it had caused a temporary rise in his yearly earnings from £87 to £104. In 1906 and 1907 they fell sharply again to £38 and £46 respectively - almost fourteen times less than the £544 he had earned at the height of his fame in 1895.[3]

To add to Watson's depression and financial worry, Robinson had started troubling him again early in 1905, when he began sending him "libellous" postcards in an attempt at blackmail. After serving a writ on Robinson for £200 to no effect, William decided to try to get him out of the country, as he had wanted to do since 1897. By borrowing money from Lane, who had already lent Robinson some in 1895, William was able to raise £400 and send Robinson and his large family to Canada. He was very relieved when Robinson settled down with an antique shop in Montreal, but not for long. By September, 1907, Robinson was back in England, hoping to raise

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1. Watson reminds Lane that Tennyson's Enoch Arden sold 60,000 copies.

2. Letter from Watson to Lane, June 5, 1907, UC.

3. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23 contains Lane's account of Watson's earnings from 1896 - 1909.

£500 to keep his shop going. William was horrified to learn that he had been writing begging letters to influential friends like the Bishop of Hereford and A.C. Benson and immediately disowned him. He refused to lend money to Robinson's son, who followed his father over in 1908, and finally instructed Lane to destroy all letters which arrived at the Bodley Head from Robinson. His dislike of Robinson had become almost pathological by this time; he could not bear even to hear his name mentioned. Robinson's existence was "an unmixed misfortune" to him, he told Lane, and he had gradually "alienated the last particle of sympathy" he might otherwise have felt for him.

It was not only Robinson who made Watson feel persecuted. He was convinced that the critics, too, had a personal "animus" against him.[1] Judging from their reaction to Churton Collins' "generous championship of [his] literary claims" in Studies in Poetry and Criticism (1905), it seemed to him that anyone who admired his work would be "pilloried" for it. Far from causing him any self-doubt - he still thought he had "no living superior"[2] - this hostility only confirmed his low opinion of contemporary poetry: "the kind of things I see praised in reviews", he told Lane, "are the sort of stuff which it has been the main purpose of my existence not to write". The immediate popularity of such

1. Letter to Lane, October 4, 1906, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, June 5, 1907, UC.

"utter rubbish" as Hardy's Dynasts in 1906 convinced him that something had gone "radically wrong" with poetry, beginning with Alfred Austin's appointment to the laureatship.[1] The continued public worship of Swinburne's "sonorous verbosity" seemed to him even stronger proof of the "debauched state of contemporary taste".[2] In 'The State Discouragement of Literature' he blamed the government for not teaching the masses to appreciate good literature, though he gave no concrete suggestions as to how this could be done. The State's slowness to reward the best writers with public recognition was another reason for the low standard of contemporary literature, he argued; it had certainly discouraged him personally.

Watson's situation was not quite so bad as he suggested. The Saturday Review, mainly hostile towards him during the 'nineties, was now supporting him, as The Spectator once had. Since the two magazines were close rivals, this may explain why The Spectator withdrew its support at the turn of the century. Or it may be, as Watson thought, that Strachey "subjected [him] to something of a boycott" on account of his anti-war policy. Once the Boer war was over, Strachey started accepting his work again. Massingham, too, was still anxious to publish him in The Tribune. Then there was his popularity in more reactionary circles. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool, for instance, wanted him to write an "ode, to be set to music for the Public Service" of Liverpool's seventh centenary

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1. Letter to Lane, March 19, 1907, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, January 4, 1905, UC.

celebrations in 1907. Watson's piece, produced in less than two weeks was appropriate, but hardly his best poetry, as the first stanza will show:

> Deep in memory, deep in time;
> Rooted far in England's prime;
> Proud she stands amid her peers,
> Clothed with her seven hundred years.

The Lord Mayor wired an enthusiastic acknowledgement of the ode, but the incident did not end there. Two days later James Bromley sent Watson a cutting from The Liverpool Post "stating that the authorities connected with the forthcoming anniversary had offered a prize of five guineas for the best triumphal song to be used on that occasion".[1] Watson, who felt humiliated by what he thought was open competition, telegraphed for his piece to be returned to him immediately, though the Lord Mayor explained that the "poem invited" was "on a totally different basis" from his. Being "somewhat mollified" by a further letter of explanation from the Lord Mayor he wired permission for the poem to be used - "rather too hastily", he afterwards felt. He then "read comments in the London press, which awoke afresh [his] full sense of the ludicrous aspects of the matter", and sent a third telegram and fourth letter, again demanding his ode back. When the Lord Mayor asked if the chairman of the Executive Committee could "wait on" him in London, he wired "No"! His ode was returned the next day. Three weeks

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1. This and the following quotations come from Watson's detailed account of the incident to Lane in Walpole MS., c.23 at the Bodleian.

later H.A. Thew, assistant honorary secretary to the pageant, offered to arbitrate, and after another three weeks, had persuaded Watson to let the committee use his poem, on certain strict conditions which Lane would explain. Watson also allowed it to be printed in The Times and other main papers, though not before it had been sung at the pageant.

Watson wrote one or two other 'occasional' poems during the next two years[1] and a number of sonnets. The most interesting of the sonnets are the seventeen he dedicated "to Miranda". Lane told Robinson that Miranda was "a certain duchess who patronises art and letters"[2] and it is clear from Watson's letters to the Duchess of Sutherland in 1909 that she was the duchess concerned. He had known Millicent Fanny Sutherland Leveson Gower at least six years, for in 1903 he had contributed a sonnet to her anthology of verse in aid of the Staffordshire pottery-workers.[3] Watson admired her effort to help "cheer the halt and the maimed",[4] and was also, E.H. Dixon says, "a great admirer of [her] beauty and intelligence".[5] According to Dixon, the duchess returned his admiration and made him one of the "lions" of her celebrated Friday nights at Stafford House. "I move amid your throng", Watson wrote in his sixth sonnet to her:

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1. e.g. 'To the Invincible Republic', New York [Lane] 1908; 'Wales: a Greeting', London, 1909.

2. Copy of letter dated December 21, 1909, Yale, box 6.

3. i.e. Wayfarer's Love, London, 1904.

4. New Poems, p.41.

5. As I Knew Them, London, 1930, p.53.

--- I watch you hold
Converse with many who are noble and fair,
Yourself the noblest and the fairest there,
Reigning supreme, crowned with that living gold.
I talk with men whose names have been enrolled
In England's book of honour; and I share
With these one honour - your regard; and wear
Your friendship as a jewel of worth untold.[1]

His strong feelings of social inferiority came out in an image he had already used in 'The Lute Player':

I dare but sing of you in such a strain
As may beseem the wandering harper's tongue,
Who of the glory of his Queen hath sung,
Outside her castle gates in wind and rain.
She, seated mid the noblest of her train,
In her great halls with pictured arras hung,
Hardly can know what melody hath rung
Through the forgetting night, and rung in vain.
He, with one word from her to whom he brings
The loyal heart that she alone can sway,
Would be made rich for ever; but he sings
Of queenhood too aloof, too great, to say
"Sing on, sing on, O minstrel" - though he flings
His soul to the winds that whirl his songs away.(25-6)

There was no need for Watson to resign himself to aloofness in real life. The duchess wrote to him often. At the beginning of July, for instance, he received a letter, addressed "dear poet", in which she asked him to dedicate his sonnets "to M.S." Before he had time to reply, she sent him two more. Her letters continued throughout July, even when she left London for Stafford at the end of the month. "Your written words bring life", Watson tells her, "and I can see / Those woodlands, and that terrace whence you gaze / On the loved hills that were my early friends" (51-2). He wants

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1. New Poems, London, 1909, p.31.

He wants his own words to have more "pomp and ritual", to match her "lofty air" and "high-born grace"(29), but at the end of his sonnet sequence he realises that his "woof of silken words" may have concealed his true feelings, so he tells her plainly: "I loved and love you"(47). In spite of her willingness to let him dedicate the sonnets with her initials, he feels that to take advantage of her kindness would be to do her wrong; "if published at all they must be accompanied by other verse which would effectually prevent any identification of their Addressee" with the duchess.[1]

Watson kept up other social contacts, though he usually denied the attractions of society and paid "progressively fewer and briefer" visits to London. In 1905, for instance, he spent a long weekend with the Honourable Mrs Henniker's brother, the Marquis of Crewe, at Crewe Hall, and another with the Bishop of Hereford in 1906. In the same month that he visited the Bishop he was writing verses to thank Lady Buller for her hospitality. As in the late nineties many of his invitations were from the wives of Liberal peers,[2] who held regular political 'receptions' and it was at one of these, given by Lady Allendale, that he made a most important contact in 1909:

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1. Letter from Watson to Duchess of Sutherland, July 13, 1909, UC.
2. e.g. Lady Portsmouth; Lady Granard.

> While I was talking to [Spender, he told Lane] I saw the Prime Minister standing not far away and asked Spender to introduce me, which he did. The P.M. asked me when I could come to lunch with him & Mrs Asquith: not wishing to appear over eager, I said "Whenever I may - any day after Sunday". So he fixed Tuesday. He must be something of a humorist, for he said "Send a word - Asquith, Coming, Watson".[1]

Watson had already been invited to Downing Street the previous year and Lady Granard had wanted him to meet the Prime Minister in March, 1909, but he had been too ill to accept either invitation. He was well enough to lunch with the Asquiths in May, however, and was invited again for tea with Mrs Asquith and her step-daughter Violet in June. He described, in an account written a week after this tea, how Violet had received him alone and taken him out to a little conservatory, where she had talked to him about Alfred Austin and the former Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, until her step-mother arrived. When Watson left, a few hours later, he was determined to "break entirely with those persons at 10 Downing St.".[2]

His decision was based on a number of factors, the most immediate being anger at Violet's criticism of Campbell-Bannerman; it was well known, she said, that his secretary had written all his speeches for him. Watson, who had shared Campbell-Bannerman's Pro-Boer views and despised Asquith's "Imperialistic" ones, believed that "the Asquiths, being a literary family,...knew perfectly well what had been my opinions, and therefore the way in which they spoke of C.B., their predecessor, was a case of insulting me over my well-known

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1. Letter c. April, 1909, UC.
2. Letter to Lane, June 22, 1909, UC.

opinions, which they knew because they had all of my works".[1] It was also from self-defence that he objected to Violet's criticism of Alfred Austin, whom he otherwise despised; he took her slighting reference to the laureateship as an indirect insult against himself. Lane thought his antagonism was based wholly on personal pique of a different kind. Directly Watson realised that Asquith was not going to give him a knighthood that year, Lane said, "you started on your campaign of traducing the Asquiths".[2] Some of Watson's motives seem to have been more altruistic than Lane suggests. When John Davidson committed suicide earlier in the year, Watson had written several indignant letters to The Times and The Westminster Gazette, condemning both the government and the public for their neglect of a poet who, though not great, had "something of the divine fire in him".[3] He considered it his duty, "as a brother-poet with whom God has dealt a little less villainously and damnably, to help poor Mrs Davidson in the sore straits to which . . . she may be reduced", and was ready to give her anything from ten to fifty pounds "as a pure gift".[4] He also asked Asquith personally to grant her a regular pension. When he refused, Watson was genuinely shocked and again took it as a personal affront. He reacted in a similar way when Asquith failed to make his friend, the Bishop of Hereford, Archbishop of York the same year.

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1. The New York Sun, December 5, 1909.
2. Letter from Lane to Watson, January 21, 1910, Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, f.61.
3. The Times, April 26, 1909.
4. Letter to Lane, March 29, 1909, UC.

Watson had managed to control his resentment over Davidson and the Bishop until Violet Asquith started attacking him personally, as he thought. When she requested some lines for her commonplace book, he composed her a quatrain in praise of Campbell-Bannerman. Instead of taking offence at this deliberate insult to her step-daughter, Mrs Asquith wrote to thank him for his quatrain, and asked him to send her his favourite lines from Wordsworth. He immediately chose a sonnet on political integrity, with obvious reference to the Asquiths' lack of it, but there was still no retaliation from them. Infuriated by their apparent indifference, Watson then wrote a "satiric portrait" in the style of Pope. 'The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue', he admitted later, "is a composite photograph of Mrs Asquith and her step-daughter Violet. The poem is a portrait of the physical characteristics of Mrs Asquith and the mentality of Violet Asquith".[1] The first eight of its thirty lines will show how vindictive he felt towards them both:

> She is not old, she is not young,
> The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue,
> The haggard cheek, the hungering eye,
> The poisoned words that wildly fly,
> The famished face, the fevered hand, -
> Who slights the worthiest in the land,
> Sneers at the just, contemns the brave,
> And blackens goodness in its grave.[2]

By insulting Asquith's wife and daughter personally, Watson also hoped to harm him politically. "I have written this poem", he told Lane, "in the hope of destroying a government; of making

1. New York Times, December 3, 1909.

2. New Poems, p.64.

history; of scandalising two continents; and of making the whole world ring".[1] For this reason he wanted to get it published before the General Election in September. This left him three months, but his plans were unexpectedly upset in July.

On July 27th, in the afternoon, Watson "made the acquaintance of an exceedingly pretty Irish girl" at Bath, where he had gone for a short holiday. He told Lane that he was "after her" again that evening at a local concert. The young Irish girl's first impression of him must not have been so strong, for she does not remember meeting him until the evening, when he sat next to her at the concert and asked to borrow her programme.[2] While returning this at the end he offered to walk her back to her aunt's, with whom she was staying. On the way he asked her about her interests, and she mentioned that the only prize she had won at school was for a collection of nineteenth-century poetry. Her favourite piece in it, she said, was 'The Lute Player', which she knew by heart. When Watson told her he had written it, she was very impressed and invited him in for a cup of tea, though she warned him he would get nothing to eat from her mean Welsh aunt. The visit was a great success, in spite of the lack of food; Watson played the piano while her uncle, a tax-collector, sang. It was midnight before Watson got back to his hotel, but he was so excited that he sat down immediately to write a second letter to Lane:

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1. Letter of October 31, 1909, UC.
2. Statement made to me by Lady Watson in Asheville, North Carolina in July, 1966.

My Irish girl with whom I scraped acquaintance - her name is Adeline /Maureen/ Pring, she lives at Howth (- a place I know well) near Dublin, is quite middle-class (though she dresses very prettily...but she is a genuine young romantic-looking Irish beauty, perfectly lovely, (such hair!) & Celtic as she can be in temperament. O God, such eyes! She used to study art in London & was a pupil of Herkomer some three years ago. (UC)

Two days later he is writing about his fear of "being drawn into matrimonial entanglements", but only three days after that he tells Lane that he is "going to marry Adeline /Maureen/ Pring, privately, . . . at the earliest date possible".[1] Lane "simply can't believe it":

> To think that you, W.W., should run away for a few days from London, which is full of lovely and brilliant women who are only too ready to capture you, and, behold, you go to Bath and there you meet your fate in the shape of a lovely daughter of Erin. Was it the artillery of her eyes or the shafts of her brilliant wit that captivated you - an old stager like you! I am convinced that Miss Pring has all kinds of irresistible charms to have bowled over a wily old Fox of your experience. The whole thing is inexplicable.[2]

Watson's decision to marry Maureen was precipitated partly by his fear of becoming too involved with another woman, Monica Saleeby. Her husband was a friend of the Meynells, who had probably introduced her to Watson. She began writing to him regularly and on the day he met Maureen had sent him a poem:

> "Sometimes I think that life's too vast a thing
> Through which to soar unanguished to the end.
> Strengthen me, friend, and mend my broken wing!
> To your blue skies, friend, help me to ascend."

1. Letter of August 3, 1909, UC.

2. Letter of August 9, 1909, UC.

Watson was not sure what she meant but feared she was thinking of leaving her husband for him. Maureen came as a "Godsend" to him for without her he "might have given in to Monica - just for a day or two, courting destruction".[1] Anxious to marry Maureen as quickly as possible, he fixed the wedding for August 11th. The arrangements were kept secret and only Lane and Maureen's nearest relatives were present at the ceremony, which took place in a small Anglican church at Bath. On the following day Watson wrote to tell Mrs Lane that he loved his wife as he had "never yet loved a woman; - with reverence for her purity & innocence, such reverence as perhaps a young man could hardly feel" (UC).

It was, perhaps, "reverence for her purity & innocence" which made Watson tell Maureen about another affair - his "romantic friendship" with the Duchess of Sutherland. Maureen must have realised, on reading the unpublished 'Miranda' sonnets he sent her, that they might never have met in Bath, had the duchess not left London towards the end of July. One of the sonnets, addressed to the duchess, refers to yet a third intimate relationship he was carrying on this year with his Bristol landlady, Pattie Warren:

> I should have cleaved to her who did not dwell
> In splendour, was not hostess unto kings,
> But lived contented among simple things,
> And had a heart, and loved me long and well.
> Her, too, I loved; and left her - need I tell? -
> For the triumphant light that round you clings;
> I left her for the Heaven your presence brings;
> I left her also for the pangs of Hell.[2]

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1. Letter from Watson to Lane, July 27, 1909, UC.

2. New Poems, p.49.

Watson had left Pattie Warren for much more pedestrian reasons than his passion for the duchess, initially. In March she had become very ill and when her relations had taken over the management of the house, there was no longer the usual "comfort about the place",[1] so Watson had left. Lane, who thought Miss Warren "a very superior woman both in her character and her education",[2] felt Watson had "behaved badly" in leaving her "when she was on a sick-bed"; he told Robinson that William's motive "in marrying secretly was that the announcement of his marriage to Miss Pring would probably be the cause of Miss Warren's death". Watson admitted that Pattie Warren was "very much on [his] conscience", for he had definitely promised to marry her.[3] His greatest fear was that she might sue him for breach of promise, so he wrote to her, four days after his marriage, offering her money. Lane, who had known her since Watson first moved into her lodgings in 1901, was sent down to Bristol to arbitrate and to collect the books, clothes and jewelry Watson did not dare collect himself.

Once Watson had told Miss Warren of his marriage, he felt free to make it public, though he had originally agreed to wait until Lane brought out New Poems, a collection he had been working on since February. Lane was annoyed at him spoiling his plan to announce both together, but when the book eventually came out in late October it had no need of publicity. Watson had insisted on including his

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1. Letter from Watson to Lane, March 18, 1909, UC.
2. Letter to Robinson Watson, December 21, 1909, UC.
3. Letter to Lane, August 3, 1909, UC.

savage satire on the Prime Minister's wife and the book had an immediate succès de scandale. Lane wired to Watson on November 3rd that "Chapman was lunching yesterday at a Soho Restaurant when 'The Woman With The Serpent's Tongue' was the topic of conversation; also the identification of 'Miranda'". When asked by a reporter from The New York Times if 'The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue' was Mrs Asquith, Lane publicly denied it. He was frightened at the "vast proportions" the affair was taking, but Watson was delighted by the stir his poem had caused and wanted the affair "to assume the vastest proportions possible"; he agreed to deny the rumour only in the hope of spreading, not killing it.[1] When he realised that by denying the rumour they were "ruining [his] prospect of having the most magnificent literary success of [his] life", however, he ordered Lane to withdraw both their denials. Lane's refusal to do so probably stemmed from a fear of being sued, for when Pritchard, a mutual friend, withdrew the denials for him and nothing happened, Lane sent Watson a conciliatory letter, explaining why he had not done it himself. Three weeks later he was writing to his New York manager, Jewett, to warn him that Watson had just left for America with Maureen - "to face the music, & to see that justice is done to his book, not only by the press but by the publisher". New Poems had already sold 1,500 copies in England and might sell more in America, if Jewett could manage to get Watson "lionised".[2]

1. Letters from Lane to Watson, October 30, and from Watson to Lane, October 31, 1909, UC.

2. Letter of November 26, 1909, Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23.

The Watsons were met at New York by a representative from The New York Times, which was paying their expenses, and by reporters from all the other main papers. When asked outright if 'The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue' referred to Mrs Asquith, Watson's reply was deliberately ambiguous: "Does anyone imagine that the wife of the Prime Minister of such a great country as England could be such a woman?"[1] But the next day he confirmed the rumour in a full-length statement to The New York Times and the American public, who had welcomed him as a celebrity, began to turn against him. There were disgusted letters to the papers. One indignant Senator wrote from Washington to say that they did not want a treacherous man like Watson in the capital. Almost all Watson's lecture-engagements were cancelled. On December 12th, he disappeared from his hotel with Maureen and Robinson, who had left his business in Montreal to come to his brother's rescue, took advantage of his absence to announce that he was suffering from another breakdown and was temporarily "insane".[2]

Lane had feared a breakdown from the time Watson decided to visit America, but Jewett, who had seen Watson more recently in New York, found him perfectly normal. Watson himself, who was by now in Havana with Maureen, denied Robinson's statement flatly and threatened to sue him and the papers for libel. In spite of his denial his former critics began to soften towards him, as Robinson had hoped.

1. The Globe, December 3, 1909.
2. The Evening Mail, December 18, 1909.

Richard Le Gallienne, who had written a biting reply to Watson's satire - 'The Poet with the Coward's Tongue' - publicly withdrew his harsh words. But Watson was still bitter about the "hostile criticism" he had received and on January 12th, 1910, he and Maureen left for England. Once back, he immediately started threatening legal action against English newspapers which had published Robinson's statement. Most of them apologised at once and the affair seemed finally over. Watson had not been sued by the Asquiths, as Lane had feared; the worst he suffered was to be publicly ignored by them when they met by accident at a political reception in February, 1910.

The most serious result of the whole incident was Lane's decision to end their "connection as publisher and client".[1] He was very sorry that they should have to separate after "eighteen years close friendship and good fellowship", but Watson had finally provoked him too far. He had blamed Lane when his bank-manager had refused to give him £100 in cash without his signature, just before his wedding, and had sent seven telegrams,[2] threatening "to have no further transactions" with Lane until he managed to put things right. On the same day that Lane got the money for him he told Maureen of another argument they were having "about something which I intend to include in my new volume".[3] 'The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue',

1. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, ff.49-53.
2. These and the following telegrams referred to are all from the UC collection.
3. Letter of August 5, 1909, Yale, box 3.

the poem referred to, was to cause much more trouble between them later on, but for the moment they were reconciled and Watson invited Lane to be his sole guest at the wedding. Lane replied:

> I have enjoyed your intimate friendship and confidence for well-nigh 20 yrs, during which time you have revealed yourself to me as no other man has. I cannot say you are without faults or without tricks of temper (even I am not perfect), but I can say that your bark is worse than your bite, and I can say more, that I have always found you an honourable man, always intensely human, with only some of the faults that flesh is heir to; but underlying all these traits I have found a rare understanding and a great heart pulsing with emotion and affection.[1]

Five days after the wedding, however, Watson was sending more furious telegrams; he felt Lane was neglecting him when he badly needed advice about Pattie Warren. He wanted "no further business relations" and ordered him to return all his manuscripts. He repeated this command a month later, when they had their next serious quarrel over Mrs Lane's behaviour to Maureen, which Watson thought insulting. This was followed by more arguments about the contents of New Poems, its date of publication and its production. After another fierce quarrel about American sales, Watson set off for America, to prove that Lane was cheating him. When he heard that Lane had decided to withdraw 'The Woman with the Serpent's Tongue' from the next edition of New Poems, he threatened to take him to court. As Lane told Robinson in February, 1910, William regarded them both as his greatest enemies and there seemed only one thing to do:

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1. Letter of August 9, 1909, UC.

> I have asked him to remove his books, and I heard on Friday from the Author's Society that they were making arrangements to take them over. I have not seen your brother, nor am I likely to see him, and I do not wish to give any expression to my feelings about his treatment of you or myself.[1]

Judging from Watson's relations with Lane up to 1909, it is unlikely that he would have allowed the quarrel to go this far without added external pressure. Wallace Nichols says that Mrs Watson made enemies of nearly all Watson's friends and she may well have started with Lane. In her unpublished biography of her husband, she accuses Lane of trying to poison her mother's mind about him on the way back from their wedding. Whether this is true or not, the story had a violent effect on Watson, sho expressed his feelings in a vicious satire:

> With dull, dead eye; with damp, fat hand, with smile
> That covers whole abysms of greed and guile;
> Not without knowledge of Art's dustier nooks,
> And deeply versed in the outside of books,
> But else a fount of ignorance wildly strange
> In its variety, amplitude, and range;
> A man of business, half whose best hours glide
> 'Twixt couch at home and cure at the seaside;
> A disputant so hopelessly thick-pated
> He never knows when he's annihilated;
> Vulpine in cunning, yet with brain so small
> You marvel how he rose from mire at all; etc.[2]

There was a slight element of truth in Watson's charges, but on the whole he seems to have judged Lane most unfairly. This was partly because he did not understand him. Except for a mutual

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1. Letter of February 28, 1910, Yale, box 6.

2. England, Are You Proud?, Lady Watson, p.126, Yale.

"love of the ladies" (Lane's nickname was 'Petticoat' Lane) and a tendency towards hypochondria, they had very little in common. "Of all the men I know", Watson wrote to Lane ten years after they first met, "you are the uneasiest devil. I like to lounge and loafe [sic] - you are forever bustling and flying about. It kills me. Damn".[1] He did not approve of Lane's disciplined, puritanical régime, particularly his abstention from "stimulants" and his cold baths. If anything, he himself drank excessively and hated the slightest "discomfort in the way of housing and sleeping". Lane's energy and industriousness made him feel as guilty about his own indolence as Dowden's had,[2] and he told him on several occasions that he could not keep up with his pace. "I plead guilty to being a lazy man", he wrote, "but when I do attend to any piece of work, no one could be more careful and punctilious than I habitually am". Lane is more careless, Watson argues, mainly because he is "not a man of letters". This carelessness over details of printing, advertising and revision led to many violent arguments. Lane was usually the first to give way, partly because he was the more practical of the two and wanted to get books published as quickly as possible, partly because he genuinely respected Watson's literary judgement. Lewis May has described Lane's reaction when Watson objected to the inadequate way he was advertising For England:

1. This and the following quotations about Lane and Watson's characters come from letters in the UC collection between 1894 and 1908.

2. See chap.3, p.61.

> One day there was an alarming commotion in Lane's room; a ringing voice raised in anger, answered by mild expostulatory tones, and finally a noise of crashing furniture followed by the exit of an indignant poet, his "eye in a fine frenzy rolling". "Ah well", said Lane philosophically as he surveyed the disjecta membra of a little table that the poet had hurled against the opposite wall, "that is the sort of sacrifice ordinary folk have to pay to genius".[1]

As with most of their disagreements, Watson quickly apologised and Lane immediately forgave. Lane also accepted Watson's extravagance, which increased over the years. He paid him generously, though Watson often accused him of meanness, and was usually willing to advance him more money when he demanded it. He seems to have understood Watson well and lost patience with him only once or twice under extreme pressure. Watson was very grateful for Lane's "disinterested friendliness and helpfulness" in the early years of their relationship, but gradually became less appreciative. In 1906 he reminded Lane that "authors could exist . . . without publishers, whereas publishers could not exist without authors", and claimed to have played a greater part in establishing Lane's success than Lane in his. His change of attitude was probably due partly to Lane's marriage. They were never so close after it as before, when they had taken their bachelor holidays together. With Watson's own marriage the gap became even wider.

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1. John Lane and the Nineties, p.175.

Lane admired Watson far more than Watson admired him. He told Robinson in December, 1909, that he had thought for some time of writing a biography of William and had "preserved most of his letters" and "written down statements of interesting conversations by him regarding his connection with distinguished persons". Though he gave up the idea after their disagreement, no-one had more "admiration for the splendour of [his] work and many of [his] ideals". He was still "interested in his work - past, present and future" in 1910[1] and was to publish several more of his books later on.

1. Bodleian, Walpole MS., c.23, ff.49-53 & Letter to Robinson, February 28, 1910, Yale, box 6.

Chapter 10

Drama, First World War Poetry and the Georgians

Watson and Lane were still not reconciled by the time Watson was ready to bring out his next collection of poems in 1910. He had no difficulty in finding another publisher, however, and Sable and Purple was published by Eveleigh Nash in June. The title, reflected in the black and purple cover, refers to the colours worn for royal mourning and the main poem commemorates the death of King Edward VII. Like Watson's 'Ode on the Day of the Coronation' of the same king, his elegy makes good occasional verse, but mediocre poetry. Edward's rakishness, which could hardly be ignored, is handled with appropriate decorum:

> Born with a nature that demanded joy,
> He took full draughts of life, nor did the vintage cloy ---[1]

'Sable and Purple' is written mainly in blank verse and so, too, is the only other poem worth comment - 'King Alfred'. With his yearning for scholarship, Watson had read "pretty nearly everything that bore on the subject directly or indirectly - Asser, the Saxon Chronicle, W/illia/m of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, Florence of Worcester, & the Lord knows who" and found those "old chroniclers . . . far more vividly interesting than the modern historians who

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1. Sable and Purple with Other Poems, London, 1910, p.9.

delve in them for material". He had helped himself "unblushingly to phrases from at least a dozen of such sources".[1] The short lyric sung by Alfred's minstrel contains several obvious examples of the influence of Old English, especially its use of alliteration and compounds and its choice of imagery:

> Now were their wounded
> Weary and war-sad,
> Kings with their kindred
>   From battle-stead borne.
>
> Now were their spear-men
> Taken and spared not:
> Death-sickle reaped them:
>   Swift fell the swathes.
>
> Lagged not the ravens,
> Flying to flesh-fare:
> Blithe came the war-kites,
>   Glad the grey wolves.(29)

The most interesting fact about 'King Alfred' is its form - a dialogue between Alfred and Asser. Though there is very little action in it, William Archer, a sound dramatic critic, thought it had some "dramatic quality". This may have been the reason George Alexander asked Watson to write a verse-play for his St. James's theatre a month after 'King Alfred' was published in Sable and Purple. Watson had been wanting to write a drama since 1882. He had started work on one in 1898, but had been forced to stop a year later because of bad heart-symptoms. It was 1908 before he became interested in drama again. He had "no intention of ever appealing to a theatrical audience" when Alexander wrote to him in 1910, but by April, 1911,

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1. Letter to William Archer, June 6, 1909.

he was hard at work on a "poetical play" which was aimed at a "double target, the study & the stage".[1]

The Heralds of the Dawn, as Watson finally named his play, with a phrase from his own 'Prince's Quest', shows that his tastes in drama were similar to his mature tastes in poetry. His first love was Shakespeare, whom he knew almost by heart. Unfortunately his play, which is typical of the pseudo-Shakespearian drama of the nineteenth century, shows only the ill-effects of Shakespeare. One of the most obvious of these is Watson's direct borrowing of incidents. The third of his eight scenes - a dialogue between a king and gardener - is almost certainly based on the garden scene in Richard II and his second scene has an even closer likeness to the opening of Julius Caesar, in the way a crowd gathers to welcome home a conqueror, only to see him murdered shortly afterwards, according to omens and prophecies.

But Watson thought Julius Caesar and most of Shakespeare's other plays "ill-made".[2] He preferred the form of "well-made" Restoration dramas, such as Otway's Venice Preserved, though there is no sign that they taught him how to construct a play himself. On the other hand, he did not like the seventeenth century dramatists' "flippant & cynical treatment of moral questions".[3] He criticised Marlowe, too, for a "total want of moral beauty".[4] Watson's own

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1. Letter to Lane, April 15, 1911, UC, and letter to Archer, October 23, 1911.
2. Pencraft, p.63.
3. Letter to Archer, December 3, 1907.
4. Letter to Dowden, March 4, 1884.

preoccupation with a "moral" is only too obvious in The Heralds, where a victorious general is punished for past villainy, his killer pardoned and his weak king deposed in favour of a strong yet merciful prince. The characters seldom rise above the crudeness of Vices and Virtues in Morality plays. Watson seems to have done what he accused Ibsen of doing - "turn[ing] the House of Life into a moral hospital, and see[ing] nothing in men and women but interesting cases".[1] Five years before writing The Heralds he told Archer, whose edition of Ibsen he had reviewed in 1893,[2] that he could not accept Ibsen's "realistic" approach:

> I felt...with respect to what you lately said about the avidity with which plays were read in the 18th century, that the explanation lay very largely in the 'literary diction' which you deprecate on the stage. I fancy my own pleasure in reading a play would be almost in inverse ratio to the life-likeness of the dialogue or colloquy. The blaze of wit in Sheridan, or the glow of poetry in Shakespeare, is quite unlife-like & is delightful in proportion to its infidelity to nature. After all, as 'somebody' says, art is art chiefly because it is not nature---.[3]

Watson's comment is reasonable, but his conclusions are dubious. He seems to think that by modelling himself on Shakespeare, he will make his language witty and poetic as opposed to "realistic". This shows a very superficial view of realism and unrealism and suggests that he is ignoring the problems involved in imitating the language of another age. For what is "unrealistic" in the early twentieth century was not necessarily so in the sixteenth, as Shakespearian

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1. Excursions in Criticism, p.130.
2. See chap. 6, pp.133-4.
3. Letter dated December 3, 1907: C. Archer, William Archer, London, 1931, p.301.

scholars have pointed out. More importantly, what was alive in the sixteenth century has often become dead by the twentieth, as the following extract from The Heralds will show; Watson obviously has Hamlet's teasing of Polonius in mind:

ERMINIUS

Sir, during this your ever blessed reign,
I have unearthed in all ten several plots
Against your Majesty's most sacred life.

POLITIAN
(aside)

After inventing at least nine of them.

ERMINIUS

I wait not the full hatching of these treasons,
But crush them as it were in the very egg,
Almost before there is —

POLITIAN
(aside)

A hen to lay it.

ERMINIUS (to POLITIAN)

My lord, I wish you nobler occupation
Than piecing out another's sentences.

POLITIAN

Forgive me; it was a crude attempt to show
How I esteem the diligence and despatch
That under your direction have so marked
Our judicature.

ERMINIUS

If this be irony,
I understand it not; for none denies
That in our courts Conviction with all promptness
Follows upon the heels of Accusation,
While Execution lags not far behind.[1]

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1. The Heralds of the Dawn, London, 1912, pp.42-3.

Watson's belief in the need for poetry as well as wit made him appreciate nineteenth century verse-drama, though he realised that a play like Shelley's Cenci would never be a "popular success on the stage".[1] He saw that the public received even Tennyson's plays with "respectful coldness",[2] but this did not prevent him praising their "lyricism". He felt that their themes should have been more political and less awkwardly historical. He begins his own drama by describing a struggle between a parliament and its people, but strays off on to other themes, and fails to bring the political one to a satisfactory conclusion. When Archer suggested ways of improving the plot, Watson replied:

> It...seems to me that the plot you suggest, & which, as compared with mine, you think "a rather good" one, would tend to make the greater part of the play a mere prolonged discussion, a wrangle of arguments, and though I am aware that the great Mr Shaw, who looks down on romance and Shakespeare, considers discussion to be the soul of drama, I have my doubts as to whether that view of dramatic art will ultimately prevail.[3]

Shaw was not the only contemporary playwright Watson objected to. In fact, he approved of none after Tennyson except Stephen Phillips,[4] another Shakespearian imitator, whose verse plays he found neither too intellectual, like Shaw's, nor too "realistic", like Ibsen's. But poetic drama was out of fashion at the time Watson wrote his and, though Gordon Bottomley, T.S. Eliot, Auden and others

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1. The Illustrated London News, 101, August 13, 1892, p.195.

2. This and the following references to Tennyson come from Watson's review of The Foresters (Academy, 41, April 9, 1892, pp.341-2.).

3. Letter dated November 13, 1911.

4. Watson had praised Phillips' dramatic poetry fourteen years earlier in 'Tragedy and Mr Stephen Phillips', The Fortnightly Review, 63, March, 1898, pp.432-5.

helped to revive interest in it later, the main tradition in the first part of the century was the one Watson rejected - prose "realism". It is not surprising that the general criticism of The Heralds of the Dawn took the form Watson describes:

> A poet wrote a little book, and rashly called it a play,
> And some were wroth with the little book, for they said,
> "It is not a play;
> A poem, a passable poem perhaps, but oh dear not a play;
> Not anything like a play!"[1]

Watson went back to Lane for the publication of The Heralds of the Dawn. After their break in February, 1910, he had addressed his letters to Lane "Dear Sir", until he heard of the death of Lane's mother in November, when he dropped the "sir" and wrote to offer his deepest sympathy as an "old friend".[2] Lane was "touched by [his] remembrance" and they were reconciled long enough to bring out the play together in May, 1912. By this time Watson was in America on a second, more successful lecturing-tour. He and Maureen had rented his friend Shorter's cottage at Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire, for the first year of their marriage, then moved to 'Old Hollies', Buckden, Huntingdon, for the next three and a half years. They had had several long holidays in Ireland, as well as their two trips to America. Watson described some of these personal aspects of his life in The Muse in Exile, which was published a month after the birth of his first child, Rhona, in April, 1913. In 'Part of My Story', for instance, he

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1. 'The Rash Poet', The Muse in Exile, p.97.
2. Letter dated November 8, 1910, UC.

looks back over his four years with Maureen, and beyond:

> We met when you were in the May of life,
>   And I had left its June behind me far.
> Some barren victories, - much defeat and strife, -
>   Had marked my soul with many a hidden scar.
>
> I was a man hurt deep with blows that men
>   Ne'er guessed at; strangely weak - more strangely strong;
> Daring at times; and uttering now and then,
>   Out of a turbid heart, a limpid song.
>
> Fitful in effort, - fixed and clear in aim;
>   Poor, but not envious of the wealth I lack;
> Ever half-scaling the hard hill of fame,
>   And ever by some evil fate flung back, -
>
> Such did you find me, in that city grey
>   Where we were plighted, O my comrade true:
> My wife, now dearer far than on the day
>   When this our love was new.(71-2)

Watson's main concern in The Muse in Exile, however, is not personal; it is to defend "the literary aspects of literature" which "criticism is falling into a habit of passing neglectfully over"(14). He had been complaining about the state of contemporary literature since 'Wordsworth's Grave' in 1887, but this particular attack started in 1909, with the writing of 'The Orgy on Parnassus': "Into the writing of this satire", he told Lane, "no personal feelings whatever have entered. Its target is neither an individual writer nor even a group of writers so much as a group of tendencies - tendencies which, vociferously applauded by a school of so-called critics, threaten everything in literature which I most care for".[1] In spite of what he says, Watson seems to have been attacking a specific group when he wrote, in his copy of Tennyson:

1. Letter dated March 15, 1908, UC.

You prance on language, you force, you strain it,
You rack and you rive it, you twist it
and maul.
Form, you abhor it, and taste, you disdain it, -
And here was a bard shall outlast you all.

'The Orgy on Parnassus' first appeared in New Poems (1909), which also contained a satire on three contemporary critics nicknamed Slip, Slop and Slapdash. Watson continued to condemn the critics in his introduction to The Muse in Exile, particularly those who set "an inordinate value on a certain kind of simplicity, - a simplicity often as self-conscious and deliberate as the most highly elaborated ornateness",[1] those "who frankly dislike and resent sound and solid workmanship"(22-3) and those "to whom progress means a kicking against tradition and a violent breach with the past"(23). He had already told Lane that the "tendencies" he disliked reach "a kind of climax" in the work of Lascelles Abercrombie,[2] one of the leaders of the "Georgians" and he is almost certainly referring to the "Georgian" movement in 'The Poet's Place in the Scheme of Life' and later criticism. Literature rarely fits into neat categories, and it is perhaps misleading to talk of a "Georgian" movement. For practical purposes, however, I shall use the term to describe a group of poets writing between 1911 and 1922, the period covered by Edward Marsh's five Georgian Poetry anthologies. I shall further limit the term, with a few exceptions, to those published in Marsh's first two volumes - Lascelles Abercrombie,

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1. 'The Poet's Place in the Scheme of Life', The Muse in Exile, p.22.
2. Letter dated March 15, 1908, UC.

Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke, W.H. Davies, Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker, Wilfrid Gibson, D.H. Lawrence, John Masefield, Harold Monro and James Stephens.[1] For Watson's main attack on the movement was made before the later, or Neo-Georgians, John Freeman, Edward Shanks, J.C. Squire and W.J. Turner, began to appear in Marsh's third volume. Another distinct, yet related group - the war-poets - will be discussed later.[2]

Watson made his heaviest attack on the Georgians in Pencraft, a prose-work published in November, 1916. He set out to be deliberately aggressive, in the hope of provoking comment and thus helping to restore his reputation. But his criticism was not nearly so "provocative" as he liked to think and some of it was not even sound. Literature, he argued, consists of "three orders" - the "cantative", "scriptive" and "loquitive"(9). The Georgians have ignored the central "scriptive" tradition and "treat the language of literature as something to be apologised for, with secret blushes, something to be cravenly disowned in public . . . something which, as compared with the language of real life, is a shadowy and spectral counterfeit or substitute, born of the dead air which is supposed to stagnate behind never-opened study windows"(19). There is a certain amount of truth in this and Watson's other charges if they are applied

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1. Marsh does not include two important Georgians - Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas - in any of his volumes, but on the whole his selection is representative.

2. See pp.263-5.

specifically to Georgian war-poetry, as we shall see, but in general they do not hold water. W.H. Davies, for instance, though often writing in relatively simple English, never completely rejects "the language of literature". In his best work his language is far from colloquial, as an examination of 'The Kingfisher' alone would show. Watson's criticism, which is consistent with his attack on "realistic" drama, points once more to the relativity of "realism". For the majority of Georgian poets seem far from "unrealistic" or "unliterary" to the modern reader. Even Rupert Brooke's defiantly "realistic" 'A Channel Passage' sounds rather mild nowadays; it certainly does not shock us as it did its first readers. Most of us would agree with Watson's charge that the Georgians' "unliterariness" is often a pose(25), though not for the reasons he puts forward.

Few would agree with Watson's second charge, however, that Georgian poetry has "an atmosphere of almost violent reality"(25). He must have based his conclusions on a poem like 'A Channel Passage', one or two others by Wilfrid Gibson and some war-poems, for many of the Georgians - Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, James Elroy Flecker and Harold Monro, for instance - are further at times from "violent reality" than Watson himself.[1] There is more truth in his suggestion that the Georgians were "so haunted by a dread of smoothness that they . . . very nearly erected cacophony into a cult"(50). Wilfrid Gibson's 'The Hare' and 'Geraniums', for instance, could

1. e.g. Harold Monro's 'Overheard on a Saltmarsh' is pure fantasy.

be used to support such a charge. But another, much "smoother", poem by Gibson - 'The Devil's Edge' - shows the limitedness of Watson's generalisation. Walter de la Mare, too, can be as "smooth' as Tennyson, in a poem like 'Arabia', and if he is not, it is usually for good reasons. In 'The Listeners', for instance, he deliberately uses irregular rhythms to convey the various movements of the Traveller, his horse and a bird. James Elroy Flecker's and James Stephens' work is strikingly non-"cacophonous". Watson also generalises rashly about the Georgians' use of form. D.H. Lawrence, Harold Monro, John Drinkwater and some of the war-poets do, as he says, reject traditional verse-forms, but there are many more who keep to them. Gordon Bottomley, Rupert Brooke, W.H. Davies and John Masefield, for instance, rarely depart from the traditional forms of the couplet, quatrain and blank verse.

However unbalanced the criticisms we have examined so far, they have all contained an element of truth, but there are two which are completely unfounded. The Georgians' greatest literary appeal, Watson argues, is to the "ultra-literary"(32). Robert Ross, in a first-hand account of the period, gives a very different picture.

> As orders for Georgian Poetry I poured in to the offices of [Harold Monro's] Poetry Bookshop at a rate which surprised Marsh and even Monro, sceptical critics and well-wishers alike were forced to admit with pleased surprise that there existed an audience for poetry the extent and size of which had hitherto been underestimated, if not unsuspected, by all but the most optimistic. The sales of Georgian Poetry I were the first tangible evidence that the fact of a poetic renaissance had finally impressed itself upon the public consciousness and that there existed a sizeable public whose poetic taste had not stopped with Tennyson or Dowson.[1]

1. The Georgian Revolt, 1967, p.126.

Marsh's second volume was even more popular, selling 19,000 copies, 4,000 more than his first. Watson was either unaware of these facts or ignoring them. He was guilty of even greater inaccuracy and ignorance when he accused the Georgians of despising craftsmanship. If there is one thing which binds these widely-differing poets together as a group, it is their strong, though sometimes superficial concern for technique. By "craftsmanship" Watson obviously means a specifically Tennysonian technique. His whole case against the Georgians shows that he has closed himself to any different approach to poetry and, therefore, to the possibility of developing beyond a certain point. His beliefs also force him to reject many important English poets, as his dismissal of Donne, Blake, Byron and Browning in Pencraft proves, since in his Tennysonian terms they are careless craftsmen.

Pencraft was first intended as a "'supportive' preface" to some poems Watson started writing in 1915. These poems were finally published separately, though at the same time as the prose-work, in November, 1916, under the title Retrogression and Other Poems. One critic saw them as "versifications of passages in Pencraft",[1] and there is no doubt that the two are closely related. Most of the "Literary" poems (there is also a small group of "Personal and General" ones) are aimed at the Georgians and, like Pencraft, are meant to "constitute a sort of body of critical doctrine".[2]

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1. Literary Digest, LIV, March 10, 1917.
2. Letter to Lane, October 8, 1915, Yale, box 4.

Retrogression raises no new points, but its criticism is more bitter and satirical than that of Pencraft. Watson is highly sarcastic, for instance, about the Georgians' choice of vocabulary:

> And shouldst thou have in thee today
> Aught thou canst better sing than say,
> Shun, if thou wouldst by men be heard,
> The comely phrase, the wellborn word,
> And use, as for their ears more meet,
> The loose-lipped lingo of the street,
> A language Milton's kin have long
> Accounted good enough for song.[1]

In the same poem he praises Dryden and Gray for an almost perfect technique, which he tries rather unhappily to copy. He uses the heroic couplet again in the next poem, 'The Mossgrown Porches', where he laments the rejection of old traditions for "new faiths"(19). Tradition, he argues in 'Art and Letters', is not a "custodian", but a "sentinel":

> Therefore I keep, or strive to keep, her law,
> While some break from her with insurgence rude;
> And as for these, when I looked forth and saw
> Their liberty, then chose I servitude.(25)

He goes on to explain what he means by "their liberty" in 'Nature's Way':

> "Faultily faultless" may be ill -
> "Carefully careless" is worse still.
> I bought one day a book of rhyme -
> One long, fierce flout at tune and time;
> Ragged and jagged by intent,
> As if each line were earthquake-rent;
> Leagues on seismal leagues of it,
> Not unheroically writ,...(26)

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1. 'Retrogression', Retrogression, p.15.

He makes another attempt to reduce the Georgians to absurdity in 'The Ballad of the Bootmaker' by likening their attitude towards craftsmanship to a certain cobbler's scorn for the traditional art of shoemaking.

Watson is even more vituperative about contemporary critics, whom he accuses of "lauding" young poets one day, then "stoning" them the next(44). His bitterness obviously springs from his own experience of attack and neglect:

> When criticasters of a day
> Seem to have sneered me quite away;
>   When with a pontiff's frown
>   Some dabbler puts me down;
>
> -------------------------------------
>
> When they who could bestow, refuse
> With deathless spite the admitted dues;
>   When slanderous lips aver
>   I am the slanderer
>
> Then, draining mine appointed cup,
> In patience do I gird me up,
>   Knowing that Time, one day,
>   All his arrears will pay.[1]

There are few poems, or even passages in Retrogression to justify such confidence in his eventual reinstatement, but many which show how unfounded it is. 'An Unsoluble Problem', for instance, though it gives an interesting if slightly embarrassing glimpse into Watson's domestic life in 1916, is very poor poetry:

> Rhona, as yet a tiny mite
> Not three years old, looked up tonight
> At the resplendent heavens, and said:
> "What are 'ose 'tars for?"
>   Little maid,
> I cannot tell, I ne'er have known -
> Not being God upon His throne.(83)

1. 'Confidence', pp.53-4.

Watson had had a second daughter, Geraldine, by this time and it was the thought of his family's material needs that made him bitter enough to publish Retrogression, not jealousy as many people thought:

> It is notorious [he wrote to Lane] that I have been badly treated and that on the threshold of age I am still persistently passed over when other men are rewarded and honoured. Do you expect me to bottle up all my natural feelings for ever? You must admit them to be natural, as you yourself think me the greatest living poet. I had not such feelings in former days when my practical failure affected none but myself. Now the case is altogether different.[1]

Many people thought it was jealousy that made Watson write Retrogression and, though he denied it, his accusations sound suspiciously like it. He dismissed Rupert Brooke, one of the youngest and most popular Georgians, and accused the whole group of "something like an organised conspiracy" against himself.[2] If Robert Ross is to be trusted, Watson had reason to feel threatened:

> By late 1911 the Poetic Right Wing had become negligible. It comprised a group of traditionalists, like Watson and Phillips, who denied 'that there [was] anything seriously wrong with the tradition of English verse that [had] its roots in Ovid, Vergil, Sophocles, and Homer, and whose poetic charter was drawn up by Aristotle'. In their poetry emotion was only to be recollected in tranquillity; the True, the Beautiful, and the Good were inevitably and ultimately triumphant in a world of sin and error. The Rightist was more or less violently opposed to new forms and subjects in art most frequently, one suspects, simply because they were new. Failing to adjust to his environment, he tended to become increasingly rare, until at the end of the second decade his species survived only in the sanctuaries afforded by the pages of a few conservative literary journals.[3]

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1. Letter dated December 1, 1916, UC.
2. Letter to H.C. Montgomery, December 30, 1923, Yale, box 4.
3. The Georgian Revolt, p.46.

The "Poetic Right Wing" was not so "negligible" as Ross suggests, unless he is referring only to its limited output. He seems to have forgotten that he himself still believed in Watson's tradition enough in 1916 to describe Pencraft as "the most important piece of literary criticism that has appeared in England during this present century".[1] Many other reputable critics agreed with him. Frederic Chapman, for instance, thought it "one of the most moving things he had ever read" and William Archer and J.A. Spender both wrote to congratulate Watson on it personally. Edmund Gosse was equally enthusiastic about Retrogression; he found it "refreshing once more to read poetry which is not a mere cinematograph of visual impressions . . . or a Dubussy [sic] discord of emotions, but is occupied by and addressed to the human mind".[2] In spite of such approval the two books together sold only between five and seven hundred in four months.

Watson blamed Lane, as he often did, for their "miserable sales" and took his next book, The Man Who Saw, to Murray. He may have attributed its immediate success to his change of publishers, but it is far more likely to have come from its contents. For The Man Who Saw is a collection of war-poems, most of which had already appeared in the main dailies and magazines.[3] Watson, who had been

1. The Saturday Westminster, November, 1916.
2. Letter dated December 8, 1916, BCL.
3. i.e. The Times, Daily News, Morning Post, Manchester Guardian, Daily Telegraph, Daily Chronicle, Evening News, Westminster Gazette, Observer, English Review, Weekly Dispatch, Sunday Pictorial, New York Herald, New York Independent, Nineteenth Century, Saturday Review and King Albert's Book.

"prophesying war" since 1909, when he saw "On Europe, east and west, the dim clouds brood, / Disperse, and gather again",[1] started writing these poems as soon as war was declared on August 2, 1914. Earlier in the year he had gone to stay at a nursing-home in Dumfriesshire, to recover from a third nervous breakdown. By August he was well enough to join his family, who had moved from Huntingdon to a small cottage near Dumfries. Getting his poems published in London newspapers was a complicated business, involving daily telegrams and letters to the Bodley Head, but Watson wanted his "poems on war-themes" to be "so much in evidence that people [would] be saying that W.W. is the real national poet in this crisis".[2] He was determined "never to miss poblicity for pence, when publicity [could] be had and pence [could] not". By September 16th, only one and a half months after he started, he had sixteen poems published and ten more ready for the editors. In March, 1915, the month the Watson family moved down to Syresham, Brackley, Northamptonshire, he also began writing prose pieces on the war for <u>The Evening News</u>. There are signs that his deliberate bid for publicity had begun to work by this time, for the April number of <u>The Bookman</u> ran a full-length article in praise of his work. He continued writing war-poetry throughout 1915 and 1916 and published <u>The Man Who Saw</u> in May, 1917, just as he and his family were in the process

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1. 'Wales: a Greeting', <u>New Poems</u>, p.62.
2. Letter to Lane, September 16, 1914, Yale, box 4.

of moving house for the third time in one and a half years.[1] Watson had wanted to bring it out before Retrogression and Pencraft, but had delayed publication on the advice of Lane, who argued that the market was already flooded with war-poetry in 1916.

Watson benefited from the delay in a quite different way ~~than~~ from that which Lane had intended, for, while waiting, he added a poem which helped him to get a knighthood. The title-poem, a eulogy on Lloyd George's qualities as a Prime Minister, must have been written after December, 1916, since Lloyd George did not replace Asquith as Leader of the Coalition government until that month. It is hard to believe that Lloyd George was not influenced in his choice of Birthday Honours by Watson's flattering comparison of him to the Welsh wizard, Merlin, who had once saved the Britons from ruin:

> And now,
> Out of that land where Snowdon night by night
> Receives the confidences of lonesome stars,
> And where Caernarvon's ruthless battlements
> Magnificently oppress the daunted tide,
> There comes - no faded Merlin, son of mist,
> And brother to the twilight, but a man
> Who in a time terrifically real
> Is real as the time; formed for the time;
> Not much beholden to the munificent Past,
> In mind or spirit, but frankly of this hour;
> No faggot of perfections, angel or saint,
> Created faultless and intolerable;
> No meeting-place of all the heavenlinesses;
> But eminently a man to stir and spur
> Men, to afflict them with benign alarm,

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1. The Watsons had moved to 'Ivy House', Wappenham, Towcester in December, 1915, 'Endicott', Cavendish Avenue, Cambridge in August, 1916, and 'The Cottage', Holbeck, Windermere in May, 1917.

Harass their sluggish and uneager blood,
Till, like himself, they are hungry for the goal;
A man with something of the cragginess
Of his own mountains, something of the force
That goads to their loud leap the mountain streams.[1]

It was not only his praise of Lloyd George that helped to get Watson a knighthood in 1917. As the writer of The Bookman article had pointed out two years earlier, his poems on the "great war", unlike those on the Armenian massacres and the Boer war, were "in accord with public policy and with popular sentiment".[2] There was no doubt of Watson's patriotism in The Man Who Saw, as there had been in For England. In fervent verse he praised Britain's allies and colonies[3] and fiercely condemned her enemies, the Kaiser in particular.[4] Herbert Palmer rightly describes The Man Who Saw as a book "that would have disgraced the Muse of many lesser men",[5] but a number of intelligent people admired it. Admiral Lord Fisher was particularly appreciative. "The most important thing to be desired at this moment", he wrote in The Times, where he had already praised Watson as Britain's "greatest living poet", "is that a hundred million people in the United States should read William Watson's sonnet 'To America, concerning England'". Of this sonnet, an urgent appeal for help in the war, one American

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1. 'The Man Who Saw', The Man Who Saw, pp.18-19.
2. The Bookman, XLVIII, p.10.
3. e.g. 'Belgium', 'To King Albert', 'Liège', 'Kindred', 'The Gifts of Hindustan', 'Arabia Felix'.
4. e.g. 'To the German Emperor', 'Crossing the Rubicon', '"A Place in the Sun"', 'Kultur: a Dialogue', 'The Kaiser's Dirge'.
5. Post-Victorian Poetry, p.31.

poetess said that "it went home to them in a way that much that was said by your politicians never did".[1] Lord Fisher asked Watson's advice on several matters during the war. Replying to Watson's suggestion that he should tell the Admiralty of his "undivulged scheme or plan for defeating the German submarines" in 1917, he wrote, in a letter full of secret details, "I VALUE EXTREMELY ALL YOU SAY!"[2] Fisher also asked him to write a "Federation Hymn" in 1919 for the "great Commonwealth of Free Nations" he hoped to create. The two knew each other personally by this time and became even better acquainted in January, 1920, when Watson and his family were invited to spend a few weeks with Fisher's close friends, the Duke and Duchess of Hamilton. When the Admiral died a few months later, Watson felt he had lost an "extraordinarily interesting and sympathetic friend" and treasured the "drawerful of remarkable letters" he had received from that "lovable" old man.[3] He wrote a poem to the Duchess 'In Memory of Lord Fisher', whom he described as:

> A seer of signs, few had he read amiss
> In those blind days ere yet the strong Foe braved us.
> Ah, be his epitaph, dear Mourner, this -
> He built the Fleet that saved us.[4]

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1. Coulson Kernahan, Five More Famous Living Poets, pp.276-7. Watson also appealed to America in 'To the United States', 'To Roosevelt' and 'The Voice from the Sunset', all of which he included in The Man Who Saw.
2. Letter dated June 24, 1917, UC.
3. Letter to Lane, July 23, 1920, UC.
4. The Nineteenth Century, September, 1920, p.552.

Watson had included at least two poems on the courage of Fisher's "Fleet" in The Man Who Saw.[1] He had also described the courage of the British army in poems like 'The Charge of the 9th Lancers', which contains unmistakeable echoes from Tennyson:

> Melinite, lyddite, darkened heaven,
> But straight at the guns the Lancers rode
> By the light of the rage that in them glowed -
> Straight at the guns, the deadly Eleven
> That had raked and shelled them seven times seven.(62)

Then there were more general poems on the "glory" of war:

> Heroic Youth and Knightly Valour, gone
> Where, after clangorous day, is evenfall;
> Love's requiescat after battle's throes;
> After the cannonade and bugle call,
> Earth's whispered leave, in pace to repose;
> Lull after hurricane; and crowning all,
> Glory's white lily after war's red rose.[2]

One or two Georgian poets, like Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell, also produced war-poetry in what Watson called the "Grand Style". But both Brooke and Grenfell were writing before the grim battles of Verdun and the Somme brought the realisation that there was little glory attached to dying in the trenches. Arthur Graeme, who had fought in them himself, sums up the more usual attitude of the Georgians in the opening lines of a poem typical in its bitter, satiric tone, realistic details and lack of patriotism:

> God! how I hate you, you young cheerful men,
> Whose pious poetry blossoms on your graves
> As soon as you are in them---.[3]

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1. i.e. 'The Battle of the Bight' and 'The Fighting Five'.
2. 'Commemorative', p.36.
3. 'God, How I Hate You', Men Who March Away, edited I. Parsons, London, 1966, p.84.

Graeme describes the trenches, with their "huddled dead . . . hung on the rusty wire", in particular the head of a corpse "smashed like an eggshell and the warm grey brain / Scattered all bloody on the parados". Instead of praising the courage of the British army, he accuses them of killing their fellow-men, ending his poem with fierce irony:

> ...Ah how good God is
> To suffer us to be born just now, when youth
> That else would rust, can slake his blade in gore
> Where very God himself does seem to walk
> The bloody fields of Flanders He loves so.(85)

Most of the Georgian poets wrote from a similar first-hand experience of war, unlike Watson, and from a similar desire to report its grim reality. Their sense of its physical sordidness and brutality was reflected in what Watson called their "verbal ugliness".[1] He objected to their "squalid colloquialism[s]" and "baseborn neologism[s]"(95) for the very reason they chose them - because such language did not beautify war. Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, to mention only the most well-known, saw no fitness in using elegant "poetic" diction to describe the horrors of trench-warfare. Watson's criticism of the atmosphere of "violent reality" in Georgian poetry generally is true of this particular branch of it. So too is his charge that they rejected "smoothness" and traditional forms. Isaac Rosenberg's 'Returning We Hear the Lark', for instance, has no precedent in English poetic forms.

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1. Pencraft, p.94.

Watson's criticism of the Georgian war-poets shows even more clearly than his criticism of the group in general that he had cut himself off from any possibility of change. His next book, The Superhuman Antagonists (1919), proves this beyond doubt. His poem to America in December, 1917, for instance, differs very little in attitude or technique from his earlier war-poems:

> But mighty in heave of sound, all dissonance hushed,
> A new Heroic Symphony of war;
> Heard throughout Earth with a grave thankfulness
> By such as love great music; and perhaps
> Ev'n on an ear divine not wholly lost,
> Not utterly unacceptable to Heaven.[1]

Watson's philosophy throughout The Superhuman Antagonists is "melioristic" - his own word for it. The main, title poem describes how Ormazd, the Spirit of Good, refuses to divide the world with Ahriman, the Spirit of Evil, when he discovers that the world is gradually improving and will belong to him completely one day. Watson admitted in his preface to the poem that he took its "fundamental idea" from "ancient Persian mythology",[2] but he also warned his readers later "against assuming that [its] melioristic doctrine necessarily represents the author's personal creed".[3] It is doubtful whether he had any consistent or intelligible religious beliefs. His early 'Dream of Man', in spite of its apparent dogmatism, is no more representative than a number of other poems which appear to contradict it. 'The Unknown God' and 'The Great Misgiving', for

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1. 'Americans, Hail!' The Superhuman Antagonists and Other Poems, London, 1919, p.64.
2. The Superhuman Antagonists, p.v.
3. 'Notes', Selected Poems, London, 1928, p.323.

instance, are written from an agnostic viewpoint, 'Lachrymae Musarum' from a pantheistic one, while 'The Hope of the World' is frankly atheistic. Though Watson boasted of having "shaken off the shackles of what is commonly called 'Faith'" before he was out of his teens,[1] he thanked God on his fifty-fifth birthday that he had regained faith in Him,[2] a change almost certainly due to his conventionally pious wife. Four years later, however, he gave Gosse a description which is much nearer to his predominant attitude: "I myself cling to a kind of 18th century Theism as being philosophically the most tenable position, but I have to keep it clear of all emotional elements, and am very cautious even of allowing it an ethical side".[3]

Beside studying the eighteenth century Theists, Watson had also been re-reading Milton while writing 'The Superhuman Antagonists' and he relied heavily on Paradise Lost for many of its incidental features.[4] His use of epic similes and archaic diction and syntax also owes something to Milton, but for his metre he returns to the heroic couplets of his own 'Prince's Quest'. Like this early work, too, 'The Superhuman Antagonists' belongs to "the region of fantasy", as Watson points out:

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1. Note 'Re W.B. N[ichol]'s proposed introduction to a selection from my lyrics', Yale, box 3.
2. See 'On the Author's 55th Birthday', A Hundred Poems, London, 1922.
3. Letter dated January 3, 1917, BCL.
4. Ahriman, the Spirit of Evil, crosses "interstellar...vasts" on a "secret highway", for instance, as Satan crosses Chaos on a firm pathway, and has several discussions with Ormazd which resemble Satan's with Adam and Eve. Ormazd's council with his chief lords, Rashu, Vayu and Mithra, though held in the cause of good not evil, has similarities to Satan's "Stygian council", and his prophecy that good will finally triumph is reminiscent of Michael's vision of Man's redemption through Christ.

> Forty years, as I have said, separate them: forty years of a far from bookish life, in which I have seen something of many countries, have counted among my friends many famous persons, have known very varied fortunes, have had memorable and great experiences, and have lived intensely through much peace and war. Yet at the end of these four decades, and in the poem now being put forth - a poem written with unhasty pen, mainly among the majestic English mountains, partly on the lovely Irish coast, with my young children growing beside me as it grew - I find myself once more dwelling in an atmosphere of romantic idealism akin to optimistic faith.[1]

He goes on to argue that 'The Superhuman Antagonists' is very different from 'The Prince's Quest' in workmanship, feeling and thought, yet in spite of these undeniable differences of technique, the two are closer to each other than any intervening work. The description of Ormazd's fairy-tale city, for instance, might easily have come from 'The Prince's Quest'. As Watson himself implies, he is becoming more "romantic" and idealistic the older he gets.

1. The Superhuman Antagonists, pp.viii-ix.

Chapter 11

The Last Years

The Superhuman Antagonists was published by Hodder and Stoughton in September, 1919. Its two main poems have already been discussed, but there is one more worth mentioning. 'The Unreconciled', in which Watson begs Ireland to forget her differences with England during the war, deals with a theme which had always interested him. He was rarely as neutral about Ireland, however, and even less consistent. "I cannot say", he admits in one of his last poems on the subject, "In all things that concerned / Thee and thy hopes I never swerved or turned, / Or held with stumbling mind a wavering creed", though he did consistently hope for "an Ireland Reconciled".[1] His views had changed many times over the years. His earliest comments, to his Irish friend, Edward Dowden, in 1885, show that he started with Unionist beliefs, but by 1888 he had become much more sympathetic towards Gladstone's Home Rule policy.[2] Two years later, however, he was deploring Ireland's "mad" desire for the "phantom goal" of Home Rule.[3] He had changed his mind again by 1897, when he wrote 'The Three Neighbours', an 'Apologue' which Justin McCarthy thought

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1. 'The Bound One', Ireland Unfreed, London, 1921, pp.11-12.
2. He expresses his Home Rule interests in 'England to Ireland', Wordsworth's Grave, pp.54-6.
3. 'Ireland', Poems (1892), p.65.

"put the Nationalist position better than he had ever known it put in a figurative way".[1] He was still a Home Ruler in 1903 and probably remained one until 1909, when he was won over to Unionism by Maureen:

> My Bride from Erin - thou in whom I wed
> Not only thee but surely her as well -
> Her of the ancient tears, the glories dead,
> The undying charm and spell, -
>
> Maureen my Love! we were her triple leaf, -
> At the altar steps her triple leaf we wore:
> We must not in our joy forget her grief,
> Maureen Asthore.[2]

A more "direct knowledge" of Ireland, he told Lane and Archer a year later, made him even more aware of "the inner unreality of the demand for Home Rule".[3] After the third Home Rule bill was introduced into Parliament in 1913, however, he was forced to realise that Home Rule might be best after all, though not for Ulster, whose "constancy", "faith" and "love" deserved special consideration.[4] His belief in Unionism was undermined still further by the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and the brutality of the "Black and Tans" in 1920. Horrified by Lloyd George's failure to stop British atrocities in Ireland, he began to sympathise with the Home Rulers once more. In Ireland Unfreed, his last book to be published by Lane, in 1921, he returned to his championship of the underdog, for which he was well-known:

1. Letter from Watson to Lane, September, 1903, UC.
2. 'Maureen Asthore', New Poems, p.133.
3. Letter to Lane, July 17, 1910, UC. & letter to Archer, July 20, 1910.
4. 'Ulster's Reward', The Muse in Exile, p.100.

Thee, wounded Ireland, thee I gratulate;
First on thy wounds; next, on that very fate
Whose malice hath yet spared thee one worse woe
Than even thou hast tasted. For although
Grievous is thraldom, in a world bethronged
With the proud wrongers and the prostrate wronged,
Far deeper is the unconscious misery
Of them that shackle those who would be free!
And though the thralled _seem_ hapless, theirs who thrall
Is the most dark, lost, heavenless state of all.[1]

"When lately I put forth a little book of verse wherein I associated myself with a cause unpopular amongst my countrymen - the cause of Irish Independence Complete and Untrammelled -" Watson wrote in his next volume, _Ireland Arisen_, "I found that for many persons in my native England I had wiped out at a stroke all that had ever been remembered to my credit. As to the great majority of my critics, their reception of my little book wavered between wrath and scorn. Almost the least withering of their comments was - 'Rhetoric'! . . . And now once more - this time in prose as lately in verse - I come to face their arrows".[2] The critics probably found _Ireland Arisen_ even more "rhetorical" than _Ireland Unfreed_, especially its conclusion:

> But [Ireland] will not perish. She has long had secret treaties and understandings with great moral and spiritual powers. She has laid up a mass of love for herself in every land that has been moved - and what land has not been moved? - by the epic of her misfortunes. The human spirit has been on her side. While England was conquering markets Ireland was conquering hearts.(22-3)

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1. 'A Glorious Immunity', pp.26-7.
2. _Ireland Arisen_, pp.5-6.

Watson's two books and his Irish poems generally were very popular in Ireland, but this was very little help to him in England, where his financial situation had become desperate by 1921. When he and his family had the chance to move from "the wilds of Windermere" to a "delightful old house" at Ambleside the same year,[1] he had to borrow money from the Duke and Duchess of Hamilton to pay for it, an action he "bitterly regretted . . . in after years".[2] In spite of all evidence that his work would no longer sell, he was planning to bring out another selected edition of his poems with Lane - "simply nothing but the very cream". When they failed to come to an agreement over the terms of the contract, Watson took the idea to Hodder and Stoughton, who published A Hundred Poems of Sir William Watson Selected from his Various Volumes in November, 1922. Lane had not been offended by Watson's decision; as far as he was concerned it made no difference to their friendship. He was very sympathetic when A Hundred Poems got bad reviews, for he had "never faltered in [his] admiration of [his] work".[3] But he could not resist suggesting that Watson had made a "mistake in selecting one of the Houses to issue the book who seem to have an incurable diarrhaea [sic] of issuing books all the time". When Watson protested that his book had been overshadowed by Housman's Last Poems, he replied: "the only poets of your generation who are selling today are Kipling, Ernest Dowson and Housman, but of course

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1. Letter from Watson to Lane, April 25, 1923, UC.
2. Lady Watson, England, Are You Proud?, p.168.
3. Letter dated April 12, 1923, UC.

it is quite comprehensible that the latter should sell as he has only written two volumes, with a long interval between them".[1] Watson preferred his own explanation of Housman's popularity:

> I like Housman personally - despite his curiously unmagnetic temperament [he wrote to Lane], and at Cambridge he was one of our most frequent callers, but when he informed me how he made a present of the copyright of "A Shropshire Lad" to its publishers I felt less astonishment at the vogue of that overrated work.[2]

Housman himself believed that "if Watson had gone on writing things like Wordsworth's Grave and some other things which he wrote when he was thirty, he would have been one of the first poets of the age".[3] But Watson had not and however much he and Lane rationalised the situation the fact remained that his poetry had not sold well for at least fourteen years.

Watson went on hoping, nevertheless, and in January, 1924, was asking Lane if he could help him to find a suitable home for some "good unpublished lyrics" he had written. Poems Brief and New was brought out nearly two years later by Jonathan Cape. "Excepting such fairly numerous pieces as all we men of rhyme habitually write and destroy", Watson explained in his Prefatory Note, "this little volume comprises everything that I have done in verse during these very latest years. . . . I reprint them here, not because I am under any delusions as to their literary importance, which is obviously nil, but because I think that a poet owes it to

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1. Letter dated May 10, 1923, UC.

2. Letter dated April 25, 1928, UC.

3. Letter to E.H. Blakeney, December 20, 1935, quoted in G. Richard's Housman, London, 1941, pp.340-1.

himself not to hide or suppress what he has once honestly written concerning aught that touches his country's welfare".[1] In this his last volume of new verse he returns to one of his earliest poetic concerns - brevity. Seventeen of his seventy-four pieces are epigrams and only two cover more than a page. As Watson himself recognised, the "literary importance" of the poems was "nil" and their main interest lies in their autobiographical content. His numerous lyrics to Maureen show that he was still deeply in love with her.[2] Other poems in the volume suggest that his personal happiness was marred by the knowledge that he was either ignored or dismissed by most contemporary critics. At the age of sixty-seven he could no longer deceive himself:

> The Summer that begrudged its honey,
>   And promised boons it never gave,
> Now, in its lean, mean parsimony,
>   Departs unto its dirgeless grave.
>
> Come, honest Winter! Thou at least
>   Wilt not thy lack of heart conceal,
> Or bid me to a monarch's feast
>   To mock me with a beggar's meal.(51)

In spite of this realisation Watson was still confident that there was "no new way of being right"[3] and that his poetry would survive his contemporaries'. Lane shared his confidence, but he was not alive to tell him so when Poems Brief and New met with

1. Poems Brief and New, London, 1925, p.9.
2. e.g. 'I Care Not If', 'The Unvanquished', 'O to Sail', 'Thy Passionate Breast'. Lady Watson sang me 'I Care Not If', which Watson had also set to music, when I visited her in Asheville, North Carolina in 1966.
3. 'An Impossible Novelty', Poems Brief and New, p.83.

inevitable failure, for he died of pneumonia on February 2, 1925, shortly before its publication. Watson's reaction was violent. Though he had been sending friendly letters to Lane only a few days before his death, three weeks after it he wrote to H.C. Montgomery: "Yes, John Lane has departed. You have heard the story of what I and mine have suffered from him, so you cannot very well expect that my predominating memories of him should be very pleasant ones. - - - John Lane is not a subject on which I can dwell, with any pleasure".[1] Watson might have been disappointed at not getting even a small legacy from Lane's £15,000, though he had no reason to expect one. It is more likely that he was responding to Lady Watson's dislike of Lane. She had tried to prejudice Watson against him since their marriage and continued to do so up to Lane's death: "Lane was not by a long way the benevolent 'Being' he is depicted", she wrote to a friend ten years later, "and the Jewess he married didn't improve him".[2] Lady Watson's reaction could be explained in a number of obvious ways, but Watson's is more difficult to understand. Lane had helped him a great deal since 1893, even after there was no profit in doing so. Watson seems to have taken this for granted, as he did most help that was offered him. His ingratitude almost certainly stemmed from a strong sense of his own importance and abilities. He began to complain of a lack of public recognition in 1880 and was still complaining in 1926, when he wrote

1. Letter dated February 22, 1925, Yale, box 4.

2. Letter to Dorothy Una Ratcliffe, December 7, 1936, BCL.

to a friend: "My country still allows me to be without exception the poorest man of letters, relatively to my reputation, now existing on this planet".[1] Yet he had been given a government grant of £200 for his elegy on Tennyson in 1892 and an annual pension of £100 from 1894, which had been raised to £200 in 1917, the year he was also granted a knighthood. Apart from government money, his friends and admirers had raised a fund for him shortly after his second nervous breakdown and another after he returned from convalescing abroad.

And now in 1927 Watson was again given help, this time by Lord Brotherton, who lent him a cottage for his family in Peacehaven. Watson himself had suggested to Lord Brotherton's niece, Dorothy Una Ratcliffe, that she ask her uncle to buy a house and let them live in it rent-free. He was not particularly grateful when Lord Brotherton made him a present of the title-deeds a few years later, though he wrote to thank Dorothy Ratcliffe for her probable part in it. Lady Watson was much more effusively thankful. She was, if possible, even more bitter about what she considered his lack of true recognition and felt it her duty to protect him from realising it fully. "I had urged him to collect the best of his poems and to publish them in a single volume", she told a reporter after the publication of his last book, Selected Poems, in 1928: "The volume fell flat. It did not bring us in £10 altogether, and I bought practically all the volumes myself. Sir

1. Letter to Dorothy Una Ratcliffe, December 21, 1926, BCL.

William does not know it now".[1] Watson told Dorothy Ratcliffe that Selected Poems had "been reviewed very 'spaciously' indeed, and on the whole quite handsomely",[2] but he finally realised, in spite of Lady Watson's efforts to shield him, that "nobody now read" him. He at last gave up trying to make money through poetry and asked a friend, F.C. Owlett, to start another fund for him instead. Wallace Nichols, whom Owlett first consulted, did not know how he and Watson met, nor whether Owlett was to get a percentage for himself. Nichol's part was to organise the fund and to be "part trustee for the money, the other trustee being the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna".[3] Lascelles Abercrombie, Arthur Machen and Clarence Winchester also helped to run the fund and together the six men drafted an appeal, in which they claimed:

> In nearly thirty volumes of poetry and prose, from 'The Prince's Quest' (1880) to the 'Selected Poems' (1928) [Watson] shows himself always the great craftsman, abhorring the casual and the slipshod and holding facility suspect. As a lord of language, he is in the Miltonic tradition.
>
> And now, after seventy-two years of life - fifty-eight years of it spent in the august but materially unremunerative service of his Muse - this oldest of our living poets lies ill and in poverty. We fear it must be accepted as a melancholy fact that the world is too often neglectful of its chief authentic singers until the shroud covers them; and we wish for our country that at least it shall have no cause here for final self-reproach.[4]

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1. The Evening Standard, November 3, 1930.
2. Letter dated July 18, 1928, BCL.
3. Letter to me, March 13, 1967.
4. The Bookman, LXXIX, December, 1930, p.191.

Housman found this appeal "so injudicious in its terms" that he could not bring himself to sign it and he was sure Masefield would feel the same.[1] Masefield signed, however, and so, too, did the Marquess of Crewe, Lloyd George, Sir James Barrie, John Galsworthy, Rudyard Kipling, John Drinkwater, Lawrence Binyon, Edmund Blunden, Gordon Bottomley, Walter de la Mare, Wilfrid Gibson, Cecil Harmsworth, André Maurois, Edward Elgar and many others. Owlett told a friend that a number of rich men of letters, Shaw, Wells and Bennett among them, had refused to contribute, but this was not so. Shaw, for instance, gave a pound publicly and a hundred pounds privately and Housman almost certainly contributed, in spite of his initial protest. On November 25th, a month after the fund was started, another branch was set up in America by Robert Underwood Johnson, to whom Watson had dedicated The Muse in Exile (1913), after meeting him there. Johnson had already persuaded The Academy of Arts and Letters, of which he was secretary, to elect Watson a member in October and he now did all he could to rouse the sympathy of the American public.[2] They responded as generously as the English and when the fund closed on April 6th, 1931, it amounted to nearly £4,000 in all.

Watson, who already had £200 a year pension and his own house, should now have been able to live comfortably for some time. But within four years he had spent all but £700 of the original £4,000.[3]

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1. Letter from A.E. Housman to E.H. Blakeney, November 25, 1930, included in a privately printed collection of the same, Winchester, 1941.

2. My information comes from a collection of letters, minutes and newspaper cuttings housed at The Academy of Arts and Letters, New York,

3. His effects at his death amounted to £733. 7s. 5d.

A lot of the money went on extravagances; he sent his eldest daughter to a French finishing-school, for instance, and moved to what The Brighton and Hove Herald describes as "the quaint Arlington cottage in the Rottingdean High-street".[1] Some was spent on more necessary things, like nursing-home fees. His heart-condition, which had troubled him since the nineties, had grown much worse during the twenties and by 1931 was very serious indeed. He became increasingly excitable and difficult to manage over the next four years, until his wife, who was in a weak state herself through nursing him, had to send him to the Limes Convalescent Home at Ditchling Common, Sussex. He died there, after only two weeks, on August 12, 1935, of Aortic Heart disease. His last words, to Lady Watson, concerned the arrangement of a collection of poems "which he wished to be regarded as his chief contribution to the world of poetry": "Will you number them?" he asked. She, of course, replied, "Yes".[2]

Watson was buried in the family vault at Childwall Abbey, Liverpool, on Friday, 16th August, his body having been driven up from Sussex the same day. Lady Watson, who accompanied the funeral procession, refused to let it pass through Liverpool, "as she considered that the city had slighted him" during the Centenary Ode controversy.[3] This did not stop the Lord Mayor and his wife

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1. August 17, 1935.
2. The Brighton and Hove Herald, August 17, 1935.
3. Letter from Lady Watson to Dorothy Ratcliffe, June 20, 1936, BCL. See pp. 222-4 for an account of Watson's quarrel with the Liverpool Council.

attending the funeral, nor several other Liverpool men, who admired Watson's work. The Irish High Commissioner, John Dulanty, also came and Leonard Gallatley travelled up from London to represent the Poetry Society. Apart from these there was a noticeable lack of celebrities, though Lloyd George did send a telegram: "A truly great poet has passed away". Like Watson's former friends, his relatives were also either dead or no longer interested in him, and only one distant cousin turned up. On Lady Watson's side there was her brother, who had just got back from the Transvaal. By coincidence Watson's coffin was draped in the South African flag, together with the Irish and Armenian ones, in recognition of his defence of those countries against their enemies. The burial itself was unremarkable, except for one curious detail - the inscription on Watson's family vault, which now ran:

In Loving Memory
of
JOHN WATSON
OF MERSEY AVENUE, AIGBURTH,
DIED MAY 23rd 1887,
AGED 63 YEARS,
ALSO OF DOROTHY, HIS WIFE,
DIED JUNE 27th 1896,
AGED 73 YEARS,
THEIR SON
WILLIAM WATSON, Kt
POET
AUGUST 1858 - AUGUST 1935
AND

Lady Watson was obviously not expected to survive her husband long! She herself had written to Dorothy Ratcliffe a few months before his death: "I shall be safely 'tucked in' beside my Poet in Chilwall [sic], years before your gay feet are at rest. I hope

and trust".[1] Watson had "been [her] life" for so long that she did not know what to do when he died. Her first act was to take a job as a housekeeper, mainly to show how inadequate she thought her Civil List pension of £120 per year. It was "not enough to be anything but Border-line Beggars", she told Dorothy Ratcliffe, who had been particularly kind after Watson's death. Partly at Dorothy's suggestion, and partly to show more bitter disapproval of England, Lady Watson decided to emigrate to South Africa with her two daughters in 1936. They were made very welcome by the government, who still remembered Watson's pro-Boer poems of 1902. General Smuts even invited them to tea, when he took Lady Watson aside to praise her husband's poetry and promised her to do his best to have her pension increased. As she left, "before <u>all</u> his guests, he said 'I consider your visit an honour'".[2] She was not happy in South Africa, however, and by December, 1939, had left to join her daughters in Asheville, North Carolina. Since both daughters married and settled down there, she decided to stay and for a time ran a 'Pie and Coffee Shop' in the town, doing all her own baking and serving. She eventually retired to a small cottage on a mountain-top, refusing to go and live with either of her daughters, and is still there today.

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1. Letter dated April 26, 1935, BCL.

2. Letter to Dorothy Ratcliffe, September 29, 1936, BCL.

Conclusion

Having looked at Watson's life in some detail, I find it extremely difficult to summarise his character, which is more contradictory than most. It is tempting to label him, as some critics have. Herbert Palmer, for instance, calls him a "pompous egoist", "megalomaniac" and "rabid conservative",[1] while Walter Swayze uses Watson's own "world-stranger" throughout his thesis.[2] Another temptation is to try to explain Watson in psychiatric jargon. Remembering his relations with his mother and women generally, for instance, he could be described in terms of an "oedipus complex", and his violent reaction to criticism might be called "paranoid"; his behaviour before his two nervous break-downs suggests words like "manic-depressive" and "schizophrenic". "Schizophrenic", though inadequate, is perhaps the only useful term here, for it points to the large number of contradictory traits in Watson's character, which is far more complex than any other single word can cover. For he was both kind and vindictive, generous and mean, lazy and hard-working, morbidly self-pitying, yet able to laugh at himself sometimes. Quick to forgive some people, he held grudges against others all his life. Though he

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1. <u>Post-Victorian Poetry</u>, pp.30-31.
2. Swayze's thesis on Watson's early life was submitted to Yale in 1952.

remained at heart a provincial, he made a successful entry into London society and travelled restlessly about the country till the age of fifty, when he settled down to a happy, married life. In many ways sybaritic, he also had a strong puritanical streak in him, which probably accounts for his ambivalent attitude towards sex. He thought himself a very "sensitive" man, yet behaved and wrote at times with a remarkable lack of sensitivity. Even his appearance has been variously described, as resembling Wellington, Keats, an "Ouida" guardsman, a Yorkshire businessman and a distinguished diplomat or MP. Another hint of his contradictory nature is the very different impressions he left on different people. Richard Le Gallienne's opinion - that "his arrogant conceit of himself was painful"[1] - contrasts strongly with Churton Collins' picture of "a manly, simple, hearty fellow, remarkably courteous, hospitable and kindly . . . wholly and absolutely devoid of vanity or side . . . singularly modest".[2] Between these two extremes there is Lewis Hind's more credible assessment:

> Magnanimous, courteous, touchy, forgiving, with a vast capacity for indignation and scorn, the foe of slippery thinking, and slipshod writing, something of a lonely figure, belonging to no clique or school, communing, I am sure, in his long, lonely walks through the Yorkshire dales, with the writers with whom he is most in sympathy - say

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1. Letter to Lewis May, November 11, 1936.
2. L.C. Collins, Life and Memoirs of J.C. Collins, p.254.

Samuel Johnson, John Milton, and Wordsworth - such is William Watson.[1]

But it is Watson himself, not usually a very good judge of his own character, who describes his own contradictoriness most clearly. "There are in me several persons potentially", he wrote to Lane in 1898, concerning a portrait by Watts:

> a saint, a murderer, a saviour of mankind, a bloody tyrant, a self-sacrificing revolutionary hero, a lying demagogue, a fanatical purist, a wallower in the foulest sensuality, a fossilised Tory, an anarchist & regicide; & many other people. - I forgot to say a poet. - A seer like Watts - and I am a great deal of that myself - would discover all these things in me & would portray my inmost Jekyll and Hyde: the result being that scarcely anybody who knows me well would think his picture a likeness: but it would be true nonetheless.[2]

Watson also had theories about his poetic role. He saw himself as a descendant of two main traditions - one of which culminated in Tennyson, who "touches hands with Keats, Keats with Spenser, Spenser with the Italians", and the other in Matthew Arnold, who "looks back to Wordsworth, Wordsworth to Milton, Milton to all the ancients".[3] Most poets, he argued, "even the greatest, are seen to be units in a long spiritual lineage; we can trace their genealogy; and to the lover of literature few things are more interesting than those ancestral traits which ever and anon

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1. Authors and I, London, 1921, p.294-5.
2. Letter c. November, 1898, UC.
3. 'Shelley as Poet', The Bookman, II, August, 1892, p.141.

flash out - phenomena which the more stupid sort of critic interprets as imitation or plagiarism, but which are as truly a natural inheritance as is some transmitted feature". But Watson's critics continued to call his "poetic echoes" plagiarism. They saw it not only in 'Lachrymae Musarum' and 'Shelley's Centenary', where his imitations of Tennyson and Shelley could possibly be justified, but in almost everything he wrote. W.E. Henley, a "dear friend" of Watson,[1] spoke for many when he described him as a "Distinguished Echo".[2]

Watson answered another criticism - that his poetry was full of an illusory "romantic idealism" - with an attempt to define his poetic aims:

> [Romantic idealism] has at all events nothing in it that can deaden or enervate, and while it does not chill, neither does it fever. Perhaps it may even brace and hearten, and to do so is surely Poetry's own noblest office. For Poetry should without doubt gratify the sense, but it should also fortify the soul, and the degree in which it harmonises these functions and performs them with power is the measure of its true and enduring worth.[3]

Watson's emphasis on the morally uplifting function of poetry had caused some critics to dismiss him from the start and by the twentieth century the dismissal was almost universal. At his death one reviewer suggested that he had lived a quarter of a

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1. Letter from Watson to Lane, October 1, 1894, UC.
2. J.L. May, The Path Through the Woods, London, 1931, p.173
3. The Superhuman Antagonists, p.ix.

century beyond his day "unmoved by any one of the literary influences which followed so swiftly in the new century, convinced that he, and he alone, among the living, was right, guarding the flame on his private altar".[1] While agreeing that Watson's "self-judgement completely deserted him in later volumes", Harold Williams implies that it is irrelevant and unfair to compare him with twentieth century poets: "The distinctive position he has won for himself he owes to the consistent faith with which he has pursued a method, style and ideal he evolved in early youth. That style, the return to classic restraint and dignity, was hardly in the ascendant when he adopted it; but he followed it with strong conviction. He has written slowly, at intervals, and with elaborate care, refusing to print a line which did not satisfy his own ideals of artistic form and the traditions of great poetry".[2] Within these ideals of "classic restraint and dignity" Watson wrote a number of good epigrams, political poetry which seriously affected public opinion and his own kind of elegy, in which eulogy was combined with concrete literary criticism. But as John Drinkwater pointed out, in a radio programme he devoted to Watson at his death, it is his lyrics, if anything, that will survive:

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1. The London Mercury, XXXII, September, 1935.
2. Modern English Writers, London, 1925, p.67.

"When the anthologists and the poetic historians in time to come are considering our age", he argued, "it will be impossible for them to disregard a poet who could write such lyrics as 'Leave-taking'".[1] Whether Drinkwater proves right or not, 'Leavetaking' is an appropriate poem with which to end this description of Watson's life:

> Pass, thou wild light,
> Wild light on peaks that so
> Grieve to let go
> The day.
> Lovely thy tarrying, lovely too is night:
> Pass thou away.
>
> Pass, thou wild heart,
> Wild heart of youth that still
> Hast half a will
> To stay.
> I grow too old a comrade, let us part.
> Pass thou away.[2]

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1. Brighton Gazette, August 17, 1935.
2. Poems, i, p.96.

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3. Manuscript Material

a) My main source - the Lane Archive, University College, London - is unknown to either Nelson or Swayze. So, too, is another important source - the Dowden Collection, Trinity College, Dublin.

The other main sources are:

i. Archer & Gosse Collections, British Museum, London.

ii. Gosse Letters in the Brotherton Collection, Leeds.

iii. Walpole Nineties Collection, Bodleian, Oxford.

iv. Sir William Watson Collection, Beinecke Rare Book Library, Yale University, New Haven.

b) Other sources

i. Academy of Arts & Letters, New York.

ii. Diaries of Edward Clodd.

iii. Garnett Collection, St. Ives, Huntingdonshire.

iv. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

v. Huntingdon Library, San Marino, California.

vi. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

vii. Liverpool University Library, Liverpool.

viii. Picton Library, Liverpool.