

J. A. Harrison: An Extraordinary Victorian Scholar

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Mythology teaches you what's behind literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life.

(Campbell 1988: 14)

This spring, when I was looking for a research project, I was advised to examine materials dealing with the life and work of a Victorian scholar Jane Ellen Harrison and see if the subject would interest me. Everything I learned about her and about Cambridge Ritualist Circle seemed interesting. However, as late as when I came across a critical statement, that she was 'utterly uncontrolled by anything resembling careful logic' (Versnel 1993: 24), for some obscure reason, I sensed that I had found an ideal subject.

Except for Jane Harrison's works I have studied three biographies: Sandra J. Peacock's *Jane Ellen Harrison: The Mask and The Self*, published in 1988, Mary Beard's *The Invention of Jane Harrison*, published in 2000, and the most recent one *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison*, written by Annabel Robinson and published in 2002. In this initial stage of my research I would like to share with you the information gained as well as—and foremost—the impression Miss Harrison made on me.

Firstly, I will try to sketch the social and spiritual atmosphere of her lifetime. Secondly, I will talk about her professional career and her central works as well as about the development of her thoughts and ideas. Last, but not least, as I am a teacher myself, I would like to mention her teaching practice.

Jane Ellen Harrison lived between the years 1850 and 1928. Knowing these dates it is easy to imagine the social and intellectual atmosphere in which she lived and worked. Victorian girls were supposed only to dream of careers of patient and submissive wives and the education, which was in the hands of more or less incompetent governesses, was aimed at reaching this ideal. Even ambitious girls, the early students of the newly established colleges for women, were not expected (and in many cases did not want) to participate in academic life. It was considered a domain of learned men. All these facts contradicted Jane Harrison's brilliant mind and her strong desire to learn...

Her life was not easy. Not only did she feel handicapped by the education available for girls at that time, but also her mother's death after her birth and her father's consequent remarriage overshadowed her whole life and work. Her father and her stepmother refused or, maybe, were unable to recognize her talents. They also did not comprehend her desire to travel, to see something of the world, and acting according to one's desire they considered selfish.

In 1874 this young, extraordinarily bright woman leaves Yorkshire, her provincial home, and becomes one of the earliest students at Newnham College, Cambridge. She immediately creates a new family there, an intellectual circle of fellow students, naturally establishing herself its centre...

In 1879 she received a second in the classical tripos, and, disappointed by this result as well as by not being offered a teaching position at Newnham, she left for London. During the twenty years she spent there, she was studying archaeology, lecturing at the British museum and writing her early works. These books reflect her intensive study of Greek vase paintings and their connection with myths and rituals. They also show the influence of the aesthetic movement in London intellectual culture in the 1880s. However, step by step (and especially after a harsh criticism of her colleague and friend Sutherland McColl) she liberates herself from this influence; she moderates her admiration for the Olympian gods and begins to discover a world much older than this, a world that Victorian scholars tried to ignore. It was a world of demons, spirits, monsters and powerful goddesses. Already her first work, *Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature*, published in 1881, contained hints of her later fascination with ritual and religion. As expressed by herself: 'Happily [...] bit by bit, art and archaeology led to mythology, mythology merged in religion; there I was at home' (Peacock 1988: 55).

Despite the fact, that her lecturing on Greek art (lectures and Greek art were very popular at that time) made her quite famous, she longed for the return to academic life. Her chance came in 1898, when she was awarded Newnham College's first research fellowship, and what is more, under conditions that indeed met her needs and desires. She was required to give one lecture a week and when she wanted to travel, she was freed even from this duty. Thus she could focus her mind on the subject, which fascinated her more and more, and that was ancient Greek religion.

At this period of her life she met two figures that were going to influence her work as well as her private life remarkably. They were the Oxford classicist Gilbert Murray and the Trinity college philosopher Francis Conford. Due to their frequent cooperation and shared interest in ancient Greece, these three are known as the Cambridge Ritualist Circle, Jane E. Harrison being the centre of it. They rejected the traditional Victorian views of the ancient Greek culture that limited the classical scholars only to the study of its classical period. They crossed these boundaries by looking beyond this period, far back into the archaic times. Jane Harrison's primary quest becomes the search for origins.

In 1903 she publishes one of her major works, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, and nine years after that the second one, *Themis: Study of the Social Origins of Greek Culture*. In them she passionately defends the Cambridge Ritualists' theory of the ritual origin of mythology, religion, theology and drama. In *Themis* she gives her interpretation of primitive religion and suggests that it

was not, [...] a tissue of errors leading to mistaken conduct; rather it was a web of practices emphasizing particular parts of life, issuing necessarily in representations and ultimately dying out into abstract conceptions. (Harrison 1912: 12)

She believes that the most important part of a ritual is the participant's personal experience, his emotion. In *Themis* she suddenly emphasizes the social component of the myth-making process. According to her, myths are results of a spontaneous, collective emotion.

Her biographers trace this transition in the circumstances of her life and connect it with her disappointment when 'losing' some of her close friends by marriage. She begins to see the world differently. The relationship of lovers she views as a selfish one, and sexual partners as completely lost to the world. She is warmly welcomed in her friends' families, however, she remains outside these relationships and, despite a number of friends, she often feels lonely. Miss Harrison believes now that a community is more important than a selfish

individual and an emotion shared in a society more significant than the one felt individually. As expressed by herself:

Strong emotion collectively experienced begets this illusion of objective reality; each worshipper is conscious of something in his emotion not himself, stronger than himself. He does not know it is the force of collective suggestion, he calls it a god. (Harrison 1912: 46—47)

Prolegomena and *Themis* are the two central books in which Miss Harrison brought her fascination with ‘primitive’ religion to its height. However, to understand her thoughts in these books, we have to accept the fact, that her life was her work and the other way around. She used her work to make sense of her life. Very early she decided never to get married and have children and, despite the fact that she was frequently falling in love with her male colleagues, she kept to this decision and remained single all her life. She enjoyed intellectual freedom, freedom from family duties, freedom from subordination to a man but she had to face loneliness as well. When studying and thinking about the ancient past she tried to work out her complicated feelings and emotions about her own life and the society she lived in. She thought it safe to discuss in her books the issues like family, friendship, motherhood and womanhood, relationship of lovers, sexuality [...] issues that she viewed as threatening her autonomy and thus wanted to keep them under control...

It is possible that this is the core of Jane Harrison’s exceptional nature. She succeeded in a male field while using a distinctively female voice. Of course, she was not only praised but also sharply criticized, as I foreshadowed at the beginning of this paper. She was often accused of dealing with evidence uncritically and illogically. The evidence, that she intuitively sensed was true, she used in her research while she ignored that which did not touch her emotions. It is true that some of her theories proved wrong in the course of time but the same thing happened to her male colleagues as well. However, the fact remains that she was original and exceptional in her rejecting cold rationality, so admired at that time, and coming to her conclusions using her emotions and her intuition. Looking into the past in this way, as she believed, she could get at the core of human emotional experience. The centre of this experience she found in the religious impulse and its expression in ritual.

That it is possible to do so is obvious to anyone using intuition and it is simply and accurately expressed by Ellis Davidson:

The study of mythology need no longer be looked on as an escape from reality into the fantasies of primitive peoples, but as a search for the deeper understanding of the human mind. In reaching out to explore the distant hills where the gods dwell and the deeps where the monsters are lurking, we are perhaps discovering the way home. (Quoted in Peacock 1988: 179)

My presentation could naturally end here. However, I am a teacher, and I am sure Jane Harrison was a brilliant teacher. I have decided to add one extra paragraph; a paragraph about her lecturing. Without mentioning this, I believe, a picture of her would not be complete. Her lectures were very popular not only because the popularity of lectures and Greek art at that time. It was mainly due to her distinctive style and her teaching aids like magic lanterns—lantern photographs shown by means of an oxy-hydrogen light, which she used during her lectures; not talking about her aesthetic blue-green satin dresses she wore. She is remembered to be very dramatic, incorporating dramatic bursts of light and sound in order to stir up her audience. To someone her lectures, however, seemed theatrical, over-heated and even sensationalistic.

Now it is possible to read her books but we can no longer experience the undoubtedly powerful atmosphere of her lectures. However, Annabel Robinson believes that Jane Harrison's work *Introductory Studies in Greek Art* 'preserves for us in written form what must have been not only the content but also the style of her lectures' (Robinson 2002: 79). Listen to this:

It is time we left the hill of Athene to pass into a presence even greater than hers. The festival we may fancy is over, she has crowned the happy victor, the hymn has been chanted, the dance is ended, the peplos has been offered, the victim slain, the youths and maidens and old men, the chariots and horsemen are gone home till another year comes round. The gates are shut and sealed, what for a few hours had been a hall of solemn worship is once more but a treasure-house. The golden Victory is taken down from the hand of Athene, she is stripped of her golden drapery, closely covered, and all is silent. Only outside, the stone gods are still above in the pediments; Athene is born anew each morning; every day is renewed her triumph over Poseidon. In the metopes all day long, Greek struggles with barbarian; along the frieze from morning till night the panorama of worship is unrolled. (Harrison 1885: 215-216)

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