

The Immortals



Alexandre de Riquer

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Introductory Note by Mariano Martín Rodríguez

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Alexandre de Riquer (1856-1920) was one of the main writers of the Aesthetic Movement in Catalonia, known as *Modernisme* in the Catalan language, as well as being one of its great symbolist writers and painters. Among his main literary works, his *Poem of the Forest* (*Poema del bosc*, 1910) deserves special mention. It is an episodic epic poem about an unnamed symbolic forest. Each of its parts, all of them self-contained, is devoted to a particular epoch, from prehistory to modern times. Its approach is almost always fabulous, for supernatural events occur in almost every period, ancient, medieval or modern. Moreover, quite a few of its characters are preternatural beings such as fairies or undines. The other most significant literary work by Riquer is a collection of symbolist prose poems entitled *Chrysanthemums* (*Crisantemes*, 1899), of which none has a title. These poems are mostly lyrical descriptions of natural and mental scenes, but there are a couple of poetic tales as well. One of them is an allegoric fantasy about a theological Dragon, while the other is about a society of immortal human beings. This is the one translated below¹ with the title “The

Immortals,” which is based on its main concept.

“The Immortals” is a speculation on the future that is both science-fictional and symbolic, although it can be considered that this last dimension prevails in it. Indeed, the story opens and closes with the poetic image of Death personified as a female figure. She has been banished to a space that, while keeping its symbolic appearance and function, is presented with great descriptive clarity as a black lake surrounded by high walls. Death appears to be voluntarily asleep in it, as if she were resting. The result of this extraordinary occurrence, which could be understood both as something that really happened and as a metaphor for an implied scientific breakthrough, is the ensuing annulment of life. The latter is understood as a succession of lives compensating for the succession of deaths. Once Death retires, nothing is then renewed; everything remains unchanged as it was once immortality is attained everywhere. From then on, human beings, who are now both immortal and unable to reproduce, have enough time to expand knowledge and to build a utopian society, in which the

¹ The translation is based on the text edited by Maria Àngela Cerdà in the following anthology of Catalan symbolist prose poems: *Boires i crisantemes: El poema en prosa*

modernista, Barcelona, Edicions de la Magrana, 1990, p. 105-107.

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ideals of the Aesthetic Movement have come to fruition. In addition to having banished inequality among its members, this immortal superhumanity ends up knowing all that is knowable and exploring all that can be explored, both in matter and in spirit, for immortality also ends up allowing all people a perfect and reciprocal knowledge about their fellows. The result of this all-embracing science is the disappearance of literature and art, according to the author, who follows here a common idea among writers and artists of the Aesthetic Movement, that of the incompatibility between poetry and positive science. Indeed, following the disappearance of mystery through knowledge, poetry was left without matter to nourish it, having lost its meaning and its role, which is for Symbolist writers the intuitive expression of the mystery of things. At the same time, with the disappearance of reproduction, love also seems to have disappeared.

The survival of the curious mind, but not of love or art or other non-rational emotions, ultimately entails such despair that the immortals even cry out for the return not only of Death, but also of suffering, because this would make them

feel again. Unfortunately, the doom of immortality seems set to continue, for Death seems to be unable to wake up. Human despair appears, then, to be immortal as well. There is no way out: Life has come to an unending, closed circle, as it is masterly suggested by the reappearance of the image of dreaming Death at the end of the tale, although with a new and more specific detail: the gigantic black lilies that surround her, maybe even causing her slumber. These ominous flowers intensify the mysterious effect of “The Immortals” as both prose poetry and anticipation. Both elements are intertwined in the text, the symbolic nature of which helps to intuitively convey a bleak vision of humankind in future times. Thus, “The Immortals” is rather poetry than science fiction in the usual sense or, if we wish to be historically more accurate, it belongs to the poetic strand of Symbolist science fiction illustrated, among others, by Stéphane Mallarmé’s narrative prose poem “The Future Phenomenon” (“Le phénomène future,” 1875). Riquer’s “The Immortals” is a further masterful example of this particular variety of poetic (and pessimistic) speculation about the human destiny in times to come.

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Tired of so many centuries working, Death, exhausted, decided to rest.

Her formidable army of diseases and grievances became stuck in the country of silence, near the endless black lagoons, walled in by the quiet rocks that the Moon colours silver; and the whole world lived on, without dying.

Since the new life was the complement of death and this had disappeared, life itself disappeared at the same time. Breasts sagged, the seed dried up, and all paternity stopped.

The *eternal man*, on pilgrimage, knew the most inaccessible places of the world, and neither on the ground, nor in the deep, not even in the heights were any mysterious secrets kept from him.

Experience and study revealed to him the *reason* for all things, until the day came when all the men, levelled up by the same rights and the same knowledge, became equal.

The trees kept forever their leaves, the immortal flowers oriented their wide corollas towards the Sun; an endless spring bloomed in the world with no flower withering; yet all perfumes had disappeared and the eternal buds were wasted.

No new leave or flower bloomed, the unbreakable regularity of existence proceeded with tiring immutability.

The woods spread enormous, enchanted; the birds plunged into the throat of the war bronzes and the deer that quenched their thirst in the lagoons where the panthers also drunk, as well as the women rolling around playing with the lions and tigers, were spectacles that had surprised all in the distant beginnings of this life without end.

Humankind had gone down the crater

of the volcanoes, checking the innards of Earth; at the bottom of the emerald sea, it had built palaces of porphyry and blocks of turquoises which shadowed the coral woods and the traveling algae, chasing unextinguishable dreams, evoked in the dim light of the liquid depths, and which always had as their supreme idea the memory of death or of a new life.

They felt the tiredness of the eternal walker who always sees the same lands, asleep under the branches stretched out like immense ships of the prodigious woods, without the appearance, the fresh laughter, the unexpected visit of an unknown companion being really able to surprise the nostalgia of life.

The reality of an endless existence had erased all mystery with its *omni scientiae*, And gone the mystery, the arts and poetry had been lost.

The ideals of an eternal beyond disappeared with the possession of eternity that they had been granted.

The hope for a tomorrow only composed of the life of the soul, with the exclusion of the beast, had died, and without Death being guilty at all, faith died, as love died, the sacred flame that nourishes the spirit.

Wandering caravans, chasers of an indefinable *I don't know what*, followed each other, silent and brooding; a group of errant beings like a vision in a dream, seeking in their unconscious profession what they needed, seeking an indefinite something that could free them from the emptiness they felt; and these silent wanderers came across other other wanderers who, frightened, carried the same emptiness inside.

The ageing world could beget not a single new idea. With only a look, the



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immortals could guess the thoughts that occupied the brains of the others, a tired thinking which could not hold an expression which had not been vulgarised centuries before.

Humankind carried with it the heaviness of existence, the nostalgia for life, the thirst of *not being*, of an always laughing beyond, eternally variable and eternally virginal, made of mysteries, ignorance, and unexpected sensations.

* * *

Suddenly, like a fresh wind coming from far away planets, a tremendous tremor spread as fast as lightning, and from one end of the Earth to the other a complaint rose calling for mercy.

Every single living being that possessed a soul, raised their fervent voices asking the God of battles to allow death to come to them, and the

formidable diseases, grievances, and mysteries; that the dormant loudspeakers of the mountains could again relay the sounds of war, and respond to the smell of powder, the bursts of dynamite, and the menacing sounds of the war horns, like to the deaf earthquake of the devastating armies and the evil people.

They wanted blood to cool outside the veins, that the whimpering of those affected by the plague could kill with fear, that the flowers withered, that the high sun shattered the plains, that the weight of ice buried the villages, and that Death triumphantly spread her black wings above the whole world and woke Earth from the lethargic dream that had her asleep, as if possessed by herself at the bottom of the impenetrable valley, by the foot of the stagnant waters of the pestilent lakes of the yellow water lilies, surrounded by black irises, gigantic, which opened their dreaming corollas over Death.