

POEMS BY THE WAY

1892

64. Richard Garnett, review, *Illustrated London News*

9 January 1892, c, 50

Garnett had reviewed *The Defence of Guenevere* in 1858; see No. 2.

Thirty-three years ago *The Defence of Guenevere and other Poems*, by William Morris, aroused profound interest and lofty hopes in such lovers of poetry as valued song for itself rather than as the exponent of ideas equally or better adapted for the medium of prose. Mr. Morris had no ideas in those days; he was a poet or he was nothing. The same cannot be said now, nor would it be well that it could be said. The experience of life has not failed, nor ought it to have failed, to furnish Mr. Morris with a creed by which his later verse is in great measure leavened, and contributes much to its enrichment so long as it is the leaven and not the loaf. We can allow but little poetic worth to Mr. Morris's purely socialistic poetry, so far as we are acquainted with it, in this volume or elsewhere. But the general spirit of humanity imported into his verse animates it with new beauty and significance, and vindicates the poet from the imputation, to which he once pronounced himself obnoxious, of being the mere 'idle singer of an empty day'. Mr. Morris's verse is no more idle than the nineteenth century is frivolous. 'The still, sad music of humanity' is audible throughout his more fanciful compositions, almost, we might even venture to deem, in proportion to their fancifulness. He is far more pathetic, far nearer the heart of mankind, in singing of the imaginary burghers of 'The Burghers' Battle' than of the Cockney victim of an actual scuffle in Trafalgar Square.

This pervading intensity of human feeling marks Mr. Morris's last

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

volume as in one respect a great advance upon his first. As regards more strictly poetical qualities, the fact is otherwise, but this must not be interpreted as indicating any abatement of the author's poetical power. He has simply, since his venture of 1858, given his power a new application; he has forsaken lyric for epic, and produced work immensely transcending in scope and importance not merely his early ballads but the promise of them. It would take many such volumes as that of 1858 to rival *The Earthly Paradise*, that cyclopaedia of poetical romance which, without disparagement to the almost equally beautiful *Jason and Sigurd*, chiefly guarantees Mr. Morris's renown with the latest ages of our literature. *Poems by the Way*, as the title imports, are casual visitations of the Muse, a mere backwater in the majestic river of sonorous song. This promised, it may be frankly admitted that, while always dramatic and picturesque, the new pieces are in the former point of view less concentrated, in the latter less vivid, than the poems of 1858. The poet is everywhere; the master is seen in only two pieces, to which we should assign a first-class rank, not only among Mr. Morris's productions, but among all productions of contemporary poetry. One is the above-mentioned 'Burghers' Battle', a poem peculiar and almost unique in its pathos as the pathos of anticipation, the sorrow of strong men whom calamity has not yet reached, but who mark its inevitable approach, and realise it as if it were actually upon them; fore-boding blended with resignation, lamentation without complaint. It is marvellous, too, how the pathos is helped by the burden continually recurrent throughout the poem, and giving it a key-note. The other is 'The Message of the March Wind', where the wind brings to the poet and his love in their country village the murmurs and the moans of the great far-off city—

Hark the wind in the elm-boughs! from London it bloweth
And telleth of gold, and of hope and unrest;
Of power that helps not; of wisdom that knoweth
But teacheth not aught of the worst and the best.

[quotes next five stanzas]

It will be seen that Mr. Morris can give forcible expression to his ideas so long as he is permitted to resort to the concrete. Imagery is essential to him; he is the craftsman who carves his sermon on the pulpit rather than the preacher who enforces it by word of mouth. The success of his pieces is generally almost in the ratio of the opportunity afforded

for pictorial illustration and for his other great distinguishing faculty of poetical narrative. He is distinctly the story-teller among modern poets, the antitype not of the medieval troubadour, but of the medieval romantic minstrel. Brevity is not a note of his order of singer, and for a sufficient reason: lords and ladies wanted to be amused through winter evenings, and winter evenings were long. Their modern representative loves to expatiate over a story, and has nothing of the tremendous energy of Rossetti's ballads. Flowers spring up in his way and he stops to gather them; he unrolls a panorama as with a wand; Rossetti reveals a landscape as with a flash. Both methods have their advantages; one disadvantage of Mr. Morris's, of which we are at this moment acutely conscious, is the impediment it imposes to quotation. No justice is possible within our limits, and we can only declare that the varied contents of this volume comprise admirable specimens of narrative ballad. 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks', in particular, is a lovely picture of the innocence of the young world, when all the iniquity was concentrated among witches and dragons. We do not find 'Winter Weather', which we had hoped to have seen reprinted from the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.

Typographically, this volume is an apotheosis—the poet's fame certified, and his spirit externalised, in the superb type designed by himself, characters and paper respectively black, red and white as the three perfections of Little Snowflake, and with initial letters intricate as the artificial foliage at Lamia's marriage feast. It is a goodly sight. We only venture to suggest that the lines are somewhat too closely set, especially in the first page of the text. Where there is no printing in red but the ever-present marginal reference to the title of the poem, the massiveness of the type and blackness of the ink—excellent things in themselves—give a heavy aspect to the page. The ancient scribes and printers whom Mr. Morris has followed had sound reasons for economy of space in the dearness of paper and vellum. These have ceased to operate, and Mr. Morris could afford to make us 'windows in heaven'.