POEMS
BY THE WAY

William Morris

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY
DAVID LATHAM
INTRODUCTION

The beauty of lovers prolonging their night to hush the sleigh bells of time’s chariot; the tragedy of spear-shafts rising over the harvested fields; the humour of the crone’s voice sounding ‘like an unoiled wheel at work’; the irony of the fowl of death singing of the fair summer on many a shield; the prophecy of the pall-bearers knocking at the gate of the rich; the sublimity of surveying the fire and ice of the legendary Iceland; the charm of the tapestry pear-tree whose wood is carved to engrave a tale; William Morris’s last book of poetry presents his widest range. Poems by the Way is a collection of ballads and lyrics selected from the manuscripts he wrote between 1860 and 1891. It includes the best-known passage from The Life and Death of Jason; the most popular political poems from the penny pamphlet Chants for Socialists and the serialized ‘Pilgrims of Hope’; the songs of personal love first copied for ‘A Book of Verse’, his gift of calligraphy to Georgiana Burne-Jones; the poems and translations celebrating his faith in Icelandic and Gothic mythology; the delightful verses for tapestries, embroideries, and woven wools; and some of his most haunting medieval ballads.

This most diversified collection is also his most disarmingly subversive. Poems by the Way presents the responses of a Victorian author to a social order so degraded that he longed for the temporary death of
art and the permanent destruction of civilization. A political activist committed to socialist revolution, Morris considered himself foremost as a poet committed to establishing the conditions for useful discourse. Moving beyond the Pre-Raphaelite principles of poetry and the Marxist analysis of society, he challenged the codes of both poetry and politics in his attempt to renew the literary conventions and cultural codes of art, as he explained in a letter to a prospective writer:

Things have very much changed since the early days of language: once everybody who could express himself at all did so beautifully, was a poet for that occasion, because all language was beautiful. But now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself: before he can even begin his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it. And this is given to few to be able to do, since amongst other things it implies an enthusiastic appreciation of mere language, which I think few people feel nowadays. Study early literature – Homer, Beowulf, & the Anglo-Saxon fragments; the Edda & other old Norse poetry & I think you will understand what I mean, and how rare the gifts must be which make a man a poet nowadays.

(Letters, 6 November 1885)

To establish a new language, to find one's own tongue, is to elevate language not to the sophisticated posturing of the English literati responsible for its degradation, but to the dignity and sincerity of the primitive bards whose story-telling and picture-
making conventions made art universal. For Morris, the universality of art depends upon the original expression of traditional sources. In another letter to the same apprentice, he explains this relationship between the original and the universal voice:

Every real poet can do something which no other poet can even attempt.... Indeed one must say this of all art, if any one else could have done the thing, it was not worth doing: nay nothing has been done. This is what is meant by the much abused word 'originality' which by no means signifies that the idea expressed is the sole property of the author....; but that the author has been able to express it in his own way, and become the voice through which the poetry of mankind speaks so far.

(Letters, 19 October 1885)

How does Morris's own poetry fulfill this demand for elevating language above its present degradation and for finding a voice of his own to articulate the desire of an age? As early as 1912, John Drinkwater recognized Morris's revolutionary approach to language: rather than use poetic words, Morris 'threw poetry over words that had hitherto gone naked' (William Morris: A Critical Study). Morris thus found his unique voice by eschewing the mellifluous Norman and Latinate diction for a blunt and bristling Anglo-Saxon diction. Much less understood, however, was the integral part this redemption of words played in his revolutionary approach to art, to culture, to life. When we understand his role within the Pre-Raphaelite, Gothic revival, and Socialist movements through which he directed his lifelong critique of the culture of western civilization, we then
discover how Poems by the Way conforms with his unusual political vision. The poems in this collection are best read not in the context of his other poetry, but rather alongside his prose romances and his political lectures, as a mediation between the two directions of his prose. For Morris speaks for humanity in the present by turning to the past in order to redirect our intentions for the future. He attempts to do so by subverting the bonds with our officially selected origins in civilization and legitimizing the continuity with our suppressed origins in barbarism.

His subtle politicization of poetry began with his rapid development as a versatile master at the forefront of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Defining Pre-Raphaelitism as a ‘revolt against Academicism’, Morris was modest about his own contribution to a movement that was begun in 1848 by the painters William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in rebellion against the Royal Academy for its adoption of Reynold’s Discourses as the mandatory rules for all artists to learn. As a term for art, Pre-Raphaelite came to denote the paradoxical fashion of presenting a literary or moral subject in a naturalistic setting with a decorative style. Morris’s oil painting of ‘La Belle Iseult’ is typical: an Arthurian heroine stands before her rumpled bed sheets and cluttered dressing table, tying the belt around her embroidered gown whose pattern is complemented by the surrounding tapestries. In literature, the ballads, medieval subjects, vivid details, and pervading sense of degeneration from an idealized past make Morris’s The Defence of Guenevere the first and most exemplary collection of Pre-Raphaelite poetry. In his
subsequent work, he established his own course for the movement by bringing a social consciousness to what was otherwise an essentially aesthetic movement. Rossetti had hoped to change the course of art; Morris hoped to change the course of civilization. Morris understood that there can be no real change in art until change is achieved in people’s lives. His interest in the Arthurian age of Britain, the Classical age of Greece, the Saga age of Iceland, and the Barbarian age of Europe is an interest in heritage, in the mythical origin of each age when art was central to everyone’s life. But obsessed as he was with his fears for the present and his hopes for the future condition of art, he turned to the past to study the decay of the heroic social orders, when the consequential loss of art was still a desperate threat to life rather than the factual condition we endure.

This is the subtext of his first book, *The Defence of Guenevere*, his first *apologia*: a defence of poetry waged during its initial demise in the late medieval age. Set within the decayed orders of walled gardens in autumn and lands lost in war, the poems depict physical and psychological imprisonment. Framed with singers and story-tellers, with old men’s memories and young women’s dreams, lives can be turned into legends and visions turned into chronicles. A pair of skeletons stirs the teller of the tale ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noire’ to imagine the story behind the bones, until he no longer sees ‘the small white bones that lay upon the flowers/But evermore...saw the lady’. Geffray is merely an incidental concern as the imagined lives of the lovers become a tale to tell John Froissart who ‘knoweth not this tale just past’. Too often the artists lose their way
amidst decay. Oppressed by the conventional social order, struggling to rise above the timid, some fail to sustain their artistic integrity, others confuse art with dream and thereby awaken to a nightmarish world. Art is reduced to the fragments of literary conventions, to the allusions that mock lives as 'fittes' to be read. The sense of loss is thereby intensified in a world so newly fallen from the ideal of society, defined by Morris in his lecture on 'The Society of the Future' as starting with 'the freedom and cultivation of the individual will, which civilization ignores, or even denies the existence of' (1889).

From the dying world of Camelot to the dead society of The Earthly Paradise, Morris progresses from the loss of paradise to the attempt to rediscover it. The gathering of Nordic sailors and Greek settlers results in a mutual exchange of tales from Classical and Gothic mythology that provides a framework for Morris to explore the relation between personal vision and cultural tradition. The tales reveal the difference between a culture that has maintained its heritage and one that has lost it. The Greek settlers told of accomplished quests while the discontented Nordic wanderers tell of failed quests. The contrast serves to demonstrate that an earthly paradise must be based on the renewal of traditions through songs and stories developed from cultural roots. The Greek settlers represent a society in touch with its ancient culture despite its isolation in order to demonstrate that paradise is not a geographical location but a state of mind.

The way to reach that state of mind is to replace the Victorian ideal (based on technological progress toward leisure) with a Gothic ideal (based on the craftsperson's unified sensibility). In his lecture on
The Gothic Revival' (1884), Morris distinguishes between the sentimental Gothic taste (derived from landscape design for English gardens and from ecclesiastical architecture by Augustus Pugin and Gilbert Scott) and the artistic Gothic spirit (which he aligns with the revolutionary Socialist vision). He attributes the return of the Gothic spirit to the modern study of history. Eighteenth-century philologists 'discovered the true relations of one language to another' and thereby 'demonstrated the unity of man'. Greek and Latin were no longer considered as the only languages representing distinct cultures as opposed to the 'accidental jargons' of barbarians. As knowledge of these other societies increased, 'the earliest of our ancestors became visible to us no longer as esurient sword-wielding machines but men of like passions to ourselves'. The poets recognized their brotherhood 'not only with Shakespeare and Spenser, nay not only with Chaucer or even William Langland but yet more perhaps with that forgotten man who sang of the meeting of the fallow blades at Brunnanburg...or he who sang so touchingly of the friendless, lonely man the Wanderer'.

The discovery of such continuity with our ancestors leads to a reversal of the neoclassicist's upward curve of civilization as an alleged progression from the primitive to the academic. The new mythical golden age of artistry is one that extends from the Gothic tribal culture to the medieval craft guilds. During this Gothic age the imaginative picture-making, singing, and story-telling principles were common to all in a society of free individuals. In Morris's Tale of The House of the Wolfings and all the Kindreds of the Mark (1889), the 'kindreds of the mark' refers to the
Mark system practised by the Germanic tribes since the first century. Marks may be described as farmer commonwealths wherein a kinship group, or gens, clears and settles a communal property. An ‘isle in the sea of woodland’ is how Morris describes one of these clearings known not as a farm nor as a village but simply as ‘a dwelling of men’. Liberty, equality, and fraternity are the ideals identified with these socialist paradises, and were credited as the factors responsible for inspiring the heroic resistance of such isolated communities to the concerted advances of the Roman armies.

Morris described the House of the Wolfings as an illustration of their socialist ideal: ‘It is a story of the life of the Gothic tribes on their way through middle Europe, and their first meeting with the Romans in war. It is meant to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes’ (Letters, 17 November 1888). The socialist conception of barbarism may be derived from the utopian Germania of Tacitus who contrasted the communal virtues of the Germani with the vices of the decadent Romans. Morris drew similar comparisons for the purpose of establishing the parallel with his own age: in his lecture on ‘Art and Socialism’ (1884) he reviews the Northern Fury of the Barbarians overthrowing Rome as a ‘parable of the days to come, of the change in store for us hidden in the breast of the Barbarism of civilization – the Proletariat’ who will overthrow ‘the mighty but monstrous system of competitive Commerce’.

Barbarism is the true spirit of the Gothic Revival and promises again to be our saviour in the form of revolution against a decadent civilization and the resurrection of a culture wherein art is central to our
lives. This was the conviction expressed in his personal letters as well as the rhetoric of his public lectures. In letters to Georgiana Burne-Jones, he overcomes his despair with the present system – ‘the arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again’ (Letters, 21 August 1883) – and declares his faith in the cleansing flood of barbarism: ‘I have [no] more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of “civilization”, which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. With this thought in my mind all the history of the past is lighted up and lives again to me’ (13 May 1885). As his commitment to the social issues of art advanced beyond Rossetti’s Pre-Raphaelite movement, his commitment to political revolution advanced beyond Ruskin’s Gothic Revival. ‘Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion in my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization’ (‘How I Became a Socialist’, 1894). ‘My special leading motive as a Socialist is hatred of civilization; my ideal of the new Society would not be satisfied unless that Society destroyed civilization’ (‘The Society of the Future’, 1889).

If the arts had to die before they could be reborn, did Morris not conclude that his own poetic endeavors should end in order to resist prolonging a dying art? His first full book of poetry in fifteen years, Poems by the Way was also his last. It provides his six published books of poetry with a definitive shape: four long poems – The Life and Death of Jason (1867), The Earthly Paradise (1868–70), Love is
Enough (1873), and The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (1876) are bracketed by two collections of short poems – The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems (1858) and Poems by the Way (1891). This last collection does not represent a sudden outpouring of poetic inspiration. Rather it is a selection of poems composed over a period of thirty years, poems that did not fit the framework of the other five books. It is this last fact that ties Poems by the Way closer to the political lectures and prose romances than with most of his other poetry. Rather than representing the conclusion to his poetic canon, it provides poems that share the concerns of his lectures, romances, and designs. Though all of Morris’s poetry is an expression of his hopes and fears for redirecting the decadent culture of his age, in Poems by the Way he shifts his hopes and fears from love to art.

This shift gives the ballads and lyrics selected for Poems by the Way a generally different tone from the vivid, brutal, psychological dramas of The Defence of Guenevere volume and from the languid, melancholy tales of The Earthly Paradise, wherein the root-words ‘love’ and ‘lone’ are so often interchangeable. By shifting its emphasis from love to art, Poems by the Way inspires hope, encouraging the reader to share through the tale-telling, to embrace others not for consummation through love during one’s own life, but to inspire faith in a community spirit. Individual defeats will lead to communal victories for future generations. The subtext is not the urgency of personal renewal through love, but the resolve for social renewal through revolution.

If Poems by the Way appears as a disarming introduction to Morris’s political vision, it is so only
because he recognizes that the personal is what is absent in the conventional codes of political discourse. Poetry is the essential means of saving the political from abstractions that forsake the personal. Thus the transition from love to art is not immediate. The first poem of the collection, ‘From the Upland to the Sea’, acts as an introduction, inviting us to an awakening within this literary house of life. The most personal lyric of the volume, it shares the elegiac tone of the lyrical sections of The Earthly Paradise, characterized by Walter Pater in 1868 as ‘the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death’, but its complexity of conflicting image patterns prepares us for the complexity of conflicting ideologies represented by the various poems that follow it. The premise of this poem is one of pure love, an erotic devotion to the physical love of two people, the microcosm of heavenly paradise. Not the fruit of experience but the sensual experience itself is to be celebrated. Such purity, however, leaves nothing else to redeem its eventual decline or loss.

The temporal and geographical movement of ‘From the Upland to the Sea’ is clear; its correspondence with the emotional movement is complex. Why do the two lovers think of evening in the morning? Why is the upland sloping down to the sea? Why is the garden contrasted with the desert? While the two lovers find they need rest from too much joy over the beauty of the world (I. 9), they conclude that they cannot have enough of each other, that they yearn even more for each other when together than when apart (II. 48–49). With the beloved’s gown half disrobed below her bosom, her hair blown softly across his cheek, their passions are too stirred for them to touch, to move, to look at each other. They
then rise as the daffodils are downcast. As nature fades in beauty, as 'the spring day “gins to lack/ That fresh hope that it once had”, the lovers “grow yet more glad”, recognizing their love as the source of beauty. “Yet more glad”, but still more anxious. The day passes, the meads fade, and the “grassy slope...Dieth in the shingly sand” down to the engulfing sea. Their blissful, paradisal love cannot last forever; death will one day separate them with a desert of oblivion.

The sequence of the poems that follow defies a clear pattern that would enable the reader to label and categorize the poems according to shared themes, issues, or even genres. Rather, the sequence proceeds by shifting to and fro between personal introspection and public commitment. This sequence obscures the five categories into which the fifty-five poems divide. Three of the categories are identified by the subject of their poems and two are identified by the style. The three subject categories are the Scandinavian, the Socialist, and the Verses for Pictures. The two style categories are the Concrete Narratives and the Abstract Lyrics.

The twelve Scandinavian poems were considered by Morris as Northern poems, and were nearly all written between 1869 and 1872. They include four translations of Danish ballads – ‘Hildebrand and Hellelil’, ‘Agnes and the Hill-Man’, ‘Knight Aagen and Maiden Else’, and ‘Hafbur and Signey’ (from Svend Grundtvig’s Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser [Copenhagen, 1856]); two translations from Old Icelandic ballads – ‘The Lay of Christine’ and ‘The Son’s Sorrow’ (from Svend Grundtvig and Jon Sigurdsson’s Nordiske Oldskrifter, vol. 19
[Copenhagen, 1854]; both poems were included in ‘A Book of Verse’, 1870); one ballad adapted from Old Icelandic – ‘The Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong’ (from Ari Dorgilsson’s Lándnámabok); three original poems written in the Northern style of his translations – ‘The Raven and the King’s Daughter’, ‘The King of Denmark’s Sons’, and ‘Gunnar’s Howe above the House at Lithend’; and two lyrics revealing his personal engagement with the northern muse and land – ‘To the Muse of the North’ (Grettis Saga, 1869; ‘A Book of Verse’, 1870) and ‘Iceland First Seen’.


The ten Socialist poems include three that were first published as part of ‘The Pilgrims of Hope’ which was serialized in Commonweal in 1885–86 – ‘The Message of the March Wind’, ‘Mother and Son’, and ‘Half of Life Gone’; four that were published in the penny pamphlet Chants for Socialists (1885) – ‘The Day of Days’, ‘The Voice of Toil’, ‘The Day is Coming’, ‘All for the Cause’ (as well as ‘The Message of the March Wind’); another that was published in a similar pamphlet as an elegy for Alfred Linnell Killed in Trafalgar Square, November 20, 1887 – ‘A Death Song’; and two published in Commonweal – ‘Drawing Near the Light’ (1888) and ‘Mine and Thine’ (1889, translated from a medieval Flemish poem).
The thirteen Concrete Narratives might be considered as lyrical ballads. Three of them are primarily lyrics: 'From the Upland to the Sea' and 'Meeting in Winter' (songs from 'The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice', 1869) and 'A Garden by the Sea' (Jason, 1867; 'A Book of Verse', 1870). But what distinguishes all of them is their focus on descriptive details of a narrative situation. Unlike most of the Scandinavian ballads of tragically suffering lovers thwarted by murder, by execution, by suicide, the concrete narratives are more ambiguous as they often resist clear closures. The other ten are 'The Burghers' Battle' (Athenaeum, 1888; draft on 1886 watermarked paper), 'The Hall of the Wood' (English Illustrated Magazine, 1890), 'Of the Three Seekers' (Today, 1884), 'The Two Sides of the River' (Fortnightly Review, 1868; 'A Book of Verse'), 'On the Edge of the Wilderness' (Fortnightly Review, 1869), 'Thunder in the Garden' (draft on 1888 watermarked paper), 'The God of the Poor' (1862 watermarked paper; Fortnightly Review, 1868), 'Love's Reward' (draft signed 'Kelmscott April 21st 1871'), 'The Folk-Mote by the River' (1888 watermarked draft), and 'Goldilocks and Goldilocks' (1888 watermarked draft; letter identifies composition in 1891).

The nine Abstract Lyrics are characterized by their personification of love and by their reduction of the narrative situation to rhetorical apostrophes and personal introspection. In 'Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper' (1888 watermarked draft) this reduction weakens the poem: it seems to begin as a ballad but its rhetorical address in the second-person voice, despite three references to tales, remains abstract with no tale told. In 'Error and Loss' (titled 'Missing' in 'A
Book of Verse’ and as ‘A Dark Wood’ in *Fortnightly Review*, 1871) the introspection strengthens the poem: the maiden and lost lover read as projections of the speaker’s own sorrow, his failure to love another making his self-absorption more poignantly pathetic. (‘Let us go, you and I’ is a phrase Prufrock repeats from Morris’s ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’.) The seven other Abstract Lyrics are ‘Echoes of Love’s House’ (draft dated 10 March 1873), ‘Hope Dieth: Love Liveth’ (‘A Book of Verse’), ‘Love’s Gleaming Tide’ (*Athenaeum*, 1874), ‘Spring’s Bedfellow’ (draft dated 8 March 1873), ‘Love Fulfilled’ (‘A Book of Verse’), ‘Pain and Time Strive Not’ (1869 watermarked draft), and ‘The End of May’.

By shifting between personal introspection in one poem and public commitment in another poem, Morris has succeeded in integrating the five categories so that an Icelandic ballad, a Socialist chant, and a personal love lyric approach common concerns from different perspectives. The first poem, ‘From the Upland to the Sea’, is a lyrical digression from its classical source (a song from ‘The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice’); the second poem, ‘Of the Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong’, is a free translation of its Icelandic source (a tale from the *Ládnámaðabok*). Morris’s commitment to Icelandic mythology is introduced within the framework of the triangular love affair that meets a tragic end, thus uniting the Icelandic material with the personal conflict that is common throughout his poetry. The inevitable loss of individual will within a triangular relationship is emphasized by the prophetic images of impending brutality. When Hallbiorn questions his beloved Hallgerd who has not yet admitted to her affair with a
rival lover, he asks if he is 'wedded to death'. She responds by singing the rival lover's song about 'sharp sword and death'. She laughs in Hallbiorn's face, knowing that his sharp sword must kill her and that her family will then, in turn, avenge her death. After slaying her and fleeing with his friends who ask where they'll lay their heads for sleep, he answers: 'under the stones of the waste.' When attacked, he slays three of the avengers before his foot is smote off by the rival lover. But still standing, he staggers on foot and stump towards the sun where he slays two more avengers. With Hallbiorn dead at last, but Hallgerd dead as well, the rival lover sails for the Greenland snow where his lifeless soul may feel at home in the cold. Each character is a powerless victim of the triangular love force.

The third poem, 'Echoes from Love's House', reduces love to a personified abstraction, the subject of a rhetorical debate between positive and negative views of love. With each couplet composed of a claim for love followed by its echoing denial, the poem not only prepares us for the divergent sentiments of the collection. Its unreconcilable views of love, presented in a manner so self-consciously rhetorical, leave the poet silenced on such personal matters, thus preparing us for his turn from exploring identity through love to establishing identity through art.

The fourth poem is a ballad whose style is most like the less psychologically personal poems of The Defence of Guenevere volume. 'The Burghers' Battle' presents stark but evocative images of farmers riding to war, their spears and emblematic banners held high. They imagine the dogs dozing, the birds chatter-
ing with the church chimes, their wives no longer waiting for them, as the battle they once anticipated with heroic dreams of glory will be forgotten. This discourse on the futility and folly of war is negated in the next ballad, ‘The Hall of the Wood’. This medieval ballad bears more in common with the all-for-the-cause ideology of Chants for Socialists. It tells of a burgher’s return to his rural home where he leads a war against the corrupt king and lords. Its link with the Chants is established in the next poem, ‘The Day of Days’, wherein the cause itself bestows the crown.

‘The Muse of the North’, with its invocation to the inspirational muse, is a conventional introductory poem. Its placement at this point in the collection, long after we have already been introduced to the northern muse, demonstrates what J. W. Mackail called the ‘studied disarrangement’ of the poems (Life of William Morris, 1899). The muse is thus dissociated from any specific agenda other than the one that transcends all others: the importance of singing songs, telling tales, and making pictures. By reminding us that the arrival of the ‘day of days’ may depend upon our reevaluation of history, it links the large group of Icelandic poems with the nearly equally large group of Socialist poems. The northern muse insists that between wrong and pity, between love and death, lies hope. However deep our sorrow remains for the dead, it has failed to stain the greatness of souls that shine through the tangled world. The muse is mother, sister, and love, but again, rather than personal love, this love is a communal empathy that enables the selfish individual to share the concerns of others. To be embraced by the northern muse is to be wrapped in the ‘grief of long ago’. But, as already
seen in ‘Of the Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong’, none of the grief is sentimentalized; the stark brutality of the Northern ballads challenges Morris’s own romantic vision of heritage and culture.

Still another introductory poem is ‘Iceland First Seen’. On his voyage to the frontier of the new world, Morris, like Tennyson in ‘Timbuctoo’, is uneasy about seeing the new world of old legend as a physical geography. (He may also have had in mind a variation of Keats’ sonnet on Chapman’s Homer.) The voyager wonders why this land is so alluring? What has the voyager come to see? Not so much the land itself, but its long-lived tale, its undying glory of dreams. With its toothed rocks, scarred by streams, is this a land created by God or a mythology created by artists? Hoping to envision the world of heroic tales, the voyager finds an Iceland of people who epitomize the condition of the literary heroes of the sagas: victims of fate but clinging to hope as dreamers of paradise.

If Iceland is unchanged from a thousand years ago, England, as shown in the Socialist poems, has deteriorated. ‘The Message of the March Wind’ is typical of the poems Morris wrote to be chanted as inspiring hymns at political meetings. The contrast between the idyllic pastoral scene and the sordid city scene serves a number of purposes. First, nature provides a model that inspires the downtrodden to reject their own condition as universal. The poem begins with the countryside awakening from the winter with the reborn eyes of a lover. Hope rises as mysteriously and as powerfully as love. Like the seed beneath the snow and the babe within the womb, ‘so the hope of the people now buddeth and groweth’.
Social revolution is as natural as seasonal regeneration. Second, nature inspires the down-trodden to envision a better world, rather than covet the luxury of the privileged rich. Obsessed with keeping the poor submerged in blackened squalor, the rich remain themselves oblivious to the earth's beauty. The discord found in the city between the depraved rich and the wretched poor is contrasted by the harmony envisioned between farm and village, fiddler and dancer, innkeeper and guest, and 'lover and lover'. Yet, as the 'straw from the ox-yard is blowing about' and the weather vane sways in uncertain directions, the vortex of inevitable change is rising and swirling across the land so that the pastoral scene of the fire warming the hearth of the inn is at once the envisioned fulfillment of desire and the promise that 'tomorrow's uprising to deeds' begins here with 'the shuffling of feet' to 'the fiddler's old tune'.

Morris wrote the forerunner of his Socialist poems, 'Wake, London Lads', in 1877 for the first assembly of the Eastern Question Association, described by its organizer Henry Broadhurst as the 'first occasion on which music and singing were introduced at a political meeting' (Henry Broadhurst, MP. 1901). Morris, however, would be the first to dismiss the claim, rejecting above all so narrow a definition of a political meeting. As well, a political poem may extend beyond the Socialist chants to include not only such ballads as 'The Folk-Mote by the River' (wherein a rebel urges his rural village community to continue resisting the Earl who lords over them), but such Verses for Pictures as 'The Woodpecker' (wherein the king has become a scavenging thief) and 'The Flower Orchard' (wherein the worm weaned on the mulberry
leafage provides a silk garden with apple boughs woven in a peasant’s sweltering cot).

‘Verses for Pictures’ introduces the one group of poems that stands sequentially together as an integral section. The introductory poem begins with ‘Day’ heralding the audience to awaken and arise with the world’s tale. The cyclical progression from the spring day to the winter night passes through the summer’s wearisome bliss, which is too much taken for granted, to the winter’s peaceful sleep, which may threaten with oblivion. The day’s tale is subsumed by the night’s silence of unsaid thoughts, a silence celebrated here as the realm of hope and of rest found amidst those idle, random, unarticulated thoughts that offer the promise of a wonderfully ordered tale.

A similar scenario is threatening rather than promising in the next poem, ‘For the Briar Rose’. Where no hand stirs the stillness and no voice breaks the silence, all remain asleep as passive lives with no control. Fate may intervene but is not even anticipated. ‘Another for the Briar Rose’ is an apostrophe to the rose that seduces us to dream of rest instead of love. A world that chooses war risks succumbing to the weary lotos dreams of rest, forsaking the ideals of love. Yet such silence proves the world must change: their eyes and lips and silence are the signs that light and life are not lost to this dark world of strife and corruption. ‘The Woodpecker’ continues this political shift from love to art. Morris democratizes Ovid’s myth of Circe spitefully turning the king into a bird for refusing her love. The king’s appearance as a lowly thief in pursuit of its prey is not a physical transformation but rather a revelation of the king’s true nature.
Some of the Concrete Narratives are among the most intriguing poems of the collection. A comparison of the Concrete Narrative ‘Meeting in Winter’ with its abstract counterpart is instructive. ‘Meeting in Winter’ is the narrative bedfellow of the abstract lyric ‘Spring’s Bedfellow’. In the abstract lyric, spring and sorrow are lovers who beget earthly bliss. Spring is credited with the regenerative power to transform sorrow. In the second poem, when love and loneliness meet in winter, love can console but not transform life. Moreover, the transformation of life in spring was no more than an alleged assertion, while the consolation through love in winter is effectively demonstrated. The word ‘round’ is repeated until it emerges as the controlling image, turning from ‘round about’ the beloved’s lips to ‘wrapped about’ in the wheeled chariot of time. Life’s journey is depicted not as linear and chronological but as cyclical and topological. South yields to north, tomb yields to womb, the kiss of death’s mistress yields to the kiss of love, as the lovers pass through death’s burning hall to enlighten the night with their love.

‘Thunder in the Garden’ is equally intriguing. It is a powerful ballad that exemplifies Morris’s recurring concern with the walled garden and the nature of paradise, the word ‘paradise’ originating from the Persian word for ‘walled garden’. The ballad begins with the speaker remembering a romantic affair as ‘the ending of wrong’, when their love made the world seem heavenly. The lovers’ passions grow as the spring afternoon turns stormy. But the recognition that external nature serves as a metaphorical reflection of the characters’ inner nature does little to explain the complexity of this poem.
For instance, do they love once or love twice? Their passions first explode when the storm suddenly strikes dark 'e'en as the night,/ When first brake out our love like the storm'. Here in the seventh stanza they embrace and kiss for the first time. But with the storm subsiding and the light returning, the beloved's smile replaces her passionate tears. As the two lovers stroll through the garden, 'earth's fragrance went with her', the lily wetting her arm, the roses joining the lilies. Purity is thus linked with passion, as the lover, the beloved, and the earth are at one with each other. By the end of the poem, the lovers clearly consummate their love, but do so now in contrast to the dying thunder, the cooling blossoms, and the darkening house.

Will the dark house of the world be enlightened by their love, turning the world heavenly? Or is the rest of the world dark and cold in comparison to their love, the blossoms paling in comparison to the warmth the lovers find in each other? The question may be the wrong one to ask. While other poems may dwell on the subjective nature of perception ('On the Edge of the Wilderness' suggests that paradise may become a wilderness without love, or alternatively, that love may render paradise as the hellish edge of death), 'Thunder in the Garden' turns from the personal to the public by contrasting the garden with the house, the natural with the social order, wherein personal perception is suppressed by social decorum. The thunderous and lightning passions of the lovers are but gleams of expression amidst the dusk and darkness, their powerful love suppressed by the mannered smiles of social decorum. The poem may first appear to be breaking through the restrictive
code of social conventions, but its adherence to the literary conventions of its genre denies such release: the cyclical structure and tragic ending of conventional ballads remind us that we are engaged here with a memory: 'I remember', 'I call back.' The power of this ballad lies in what is lost, in the recollection of lost love. The tragic ending is here left unsaid: the best of life is lost in the past.

'The Two Sides of the River' is another Concrete Narrative with none of the physical brutality found in the Scandinavian poems. The reunion of separated lovers is promised, and a tragic ending is only implied. The lovers' prolonged separation by a metaphorical river's ever-widening gulf is accentuated by the structural division of the poem into odd- and even-lined stanzas narrated by youths and by maidens respectively. The youth's lamentation over being separated for so long is countered by the maiden's anticipation of being reunited soon. As the youth laments the wintry snow, the king's war, the spring rain, the summer toil, the long road, the long night, and finally the long day that in succession prolongs their separation, the maiden asserts her faith that all shall pass. Yet the last three stanzas of the poem may be denying their reunion, as the hours turn to years, the day returns to night, and the poem can only return to the white winter of its origin. The youth now yearns to die, concluding that life is too long to bear without his beloved maiden: 'O day so longed for, would that thou wert gone.'

As the maiden observes the light failing, the imagery suggests how difficult it has been to remain joyful, fearless, and patient in the anticipation of a love that is never fulfilled. The maiden dies with the consolation that her life is blessed, not with the
personal fulfillment of love, but ‘blessed for the tales it told to thee and me’, tales sung here by a chorus of youths and maidens.

One more Concrete Narrative that must be singled out is ‘A Garden by the Sea’. May Morris tells us that this ‘lovely lyric...was a favourite with the poet himself’. Described by J. W. Mackail as ‘one of the most haunting and exquisitely finished of all his lyrics’ (II, 272), it has attracted more critical attention than the rest of the volume, yet most of its critics have read it as ‘The Nymph’s Song to Hylas’, a title derived from anthologists unaware of the revisions Morris made in the third and fourth stanzas long after its initial appearance twenty-four years earlier in the fourth book of *The Life and Death of Jason*. T. S. Eliot anticipates in 1921 the agenda of the new critics when he compares Morris’s ‘Nymph’s Song’ with Andrew Marvell’s ‘Nymph and the Fawn’. Eliot notes Morris’s indecisive focus, ‘the vagueness of allusion...to some indefinite person, form, or phantom.... The effect of Morris’s charming poem depends upon the mistiness of the feeling and the vagueness of its object, the effect of Marvell’s upon its bright, hard precision.’ In the verses of Marvell, Eliot finds the ‘suggestiveness of true poetry’. But ‘the verses of Morris, which are nothing if not an attempt to suggest, really suggest nothing’. Eliot would thus have us conclude that Morris’s verses, because they do not deal ‘with that inexhaustive and terrible rebuke of emotion which surrounds all our exact and practical passions’, are not ‘true poetry’ (TLS, 31 March 1921; *Selected Essays 1917–1932*). Another critic defends Morris with an anti-critical argument: ‘The world of Morris’s poem...appears to have no meaning or precise symbolic value’; any attempt to analyze the poem,
Andrew Rutherford concludes, only emphasizes its weaknesses and destroys its charm (*Explicator*, March 1956).

But the poem can be defended both as a song from *Jason* and as a poem from *Poems by the Way*. Within the context of *Jason* it should be read as an integral segment in the series of juxtapositions that comprise Book IV, entitled ‘The quest begun’. The nymph’s song of rest is contrasted with Orpheus’s song of the quest (ll. 109–70). Orpheus appeals to the ambitious worker. He sings of the hearty, the defiant, the immortal. The nymph appeals to the contented sleeper. She sings of the dreaming, the passive, the vague state of oblivion. The two songs represent a gain and a loss for the Argonauts. At the first island they pick up an islander who leaves the land in search of a life of active commitment. At the second island they lose a sailor who opts for a passive submission to slumber.

When the sea-nymph promises to ‘soothe [Hylas] with some gentle murmuring song’ (569), Hylas assents, and thereupon turns from ambitions for the future to nostalgia for the present which he imagines to be already receding into the past:

‘Sing on,’ he said, ‘but let me dream of bliss
If I should sleep, nor yet forget this kiss.’
She touched his lips with hers, and then began
A sweet song sung not to any man. (573–6)

The song she sings is meant to relax Hylas rather than stir Eliot. It is meant to cast Hylas into a deep sleep in which he will be ‘quick to lose what all men seek’.

But a careful reading of the song on its own, as it was printed in *Poems by the Way*, reveals the
murmuring threats that emerge from beneath the gentle surface. ‘A Garden by the Sea’ presents an image of paradise as the walled garden increasingly threatened by the flooding sea. The seductive imagery of the first three stanzas obscures the nature of this paradise whose forbidden fruit grows beyond reach. Its nature is foreshadowed in the first stanza by the speaker’s grammatical fall from the declarative ‘I know’ to the subjunctive ‘I would...if I might’. The imagery arouses suspicion in the second stanza as ‘no birds sing’, ‘no pillared house is there’, and neither blossoms nor fruit grace the bare apple-boughs. The allusion to Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ reminds us that a dream of an illusive ideal can destroy such real delights of life as the beauty of the spring blossoms and the nourishing full granary of autumn fruit. With the sea murmuring its ceaseless whispers of mortality, the fall is completed as paradise is lost in the past with time forever passing. The speaker has suffered a visibly physical fall from his wish to ‘wander’ blissfully with a lover in the first stanza to his ‘tottering’ grievously alone with the ‘unforgotten face once seen, once kissed, once reft from me’ in the last stanza. Paradise is revealed to be not a presence but an absence, the ultimate release from life through death. When life is reduced to a memory of what is lost, then the garden-close becomes but a grave.

The rest of Poems by the Way has escaped the inattentive readings of ‘A Garden by the Sea’. Curiously, Poems by the Way is Morris’s most neglected book; no study has been made of the poetry during the past 100 years since the initial reviews. And the reviews were generally positive. The collection was praised for its concrete pictorial illustration and ‘poetical narrative’ (Illustrated
London News, 9 January 1892); for the strength and substance derived from Socialism and the ‘vigour and glory’ derived from Norse culture (Academy, 27 February 1892); for its evidence that the author’s poetic temper has ‘mellowed and perfected’ with age (Athenaeum, 12 March 1892); and for its return to Morris’s ‘earliest, divinest epoch’ with subtle Guenevere-like poems ‘full of the rare bewitchment’ of painful beauty (Arena, June 1892). Gueneverean poems, Norse narratives, Socialist chants: the critical reception to the virtuosity demonstrated in Poems by the Way made Morris a front runner for the office of the poet laureate, despite his having devoted most of the past decade to interior decorating and political lecturing.

‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ is the only other poem that has stirred any critical debate. However, it too has engendered only trifling and misleading commentary. Even May Morris, still the most indispensable scholar on Morris’s work, is at fault here. Her acceptance of a story told by Emery Walker has contributed to the myth of Morris as a hasty scribbler:

‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ dropped off the end of his pen in this way: during the printing of Poems by the Way Emery Walker went in to my father’s study and heard that the volume was all set up and only made so many pages; it was too thin, and Father a little bothered; he thought they ‘could not charge two guineas for that’. They parted and Walker came in to dinner the same night, and afterwards my father said: ‘Now I’ll read you what I’ve written to fill out the book’, and forthwith chanted this pretty fairy-poem of nearly 700 lines to his
wondering and amused crony’ (Collected Works, IX).

Walker’s story is next appropriated and embellished by W. B. Yeats, who laughed when he heard that George Moore had called ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ a perfect poem:

When I was down with William Morris at Kelmscott, in came the printer’s devil and said, ‘Excuse me, Mr Morris, but there are two blank pages at the end of your book of poems which we’d like filled in’. And Morris said, ‘Excuse me, Yeats!’ and with his left hand he scratched in that nonsense about Goldilocks, and that’s what Moore gave you as perfect poetry.

William S. Peterson, in his scholarly Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris’s Typographical Adventure (1991), includes detailed information on the printing of Poems by the Way, but his conclusion that ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ was written ‘especially for it on 20 May 1891’ must be derived from a conflation of these stories with the following letter from Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, dated 20 May 1891: ‘I am writing a short narrative poem to top up my new book with. My wig! but it is garrulous: I can’t help it, the short lines and my recollections lead me on.’

The facts are that Morris wrote to Georgiana on May 20 about the trouble he was having with the composition of the last poem for his new collection. The printing of Poems by the Way did not commence until July. Completed on 24 September, the printed pages were sent then for binding so that the book was
published on 20 October. Morris was a meticulous craftsman who wrote several drafts for even the simplest of his verses. The ‘garrulous’ poem that was ‘leading him on’ in May did not ‘drop off the end of his pen’ in a single day. Two long drafts of the poem survive, the first in pencil and incomplete. Future critics will want to consider what Morris means in his letter by ‘recollections’ and relate it to the narrative framework of the poem wherein Goldilocks is asked in the beginning to ‘come back with a tale...to tell’ and returns years later with a past that is ‘as a tale gone past’ but with a future that ‘shall be/ Of the merry tale’ itself. In the meantime, the myth of the scribbled poem should be put to rest so that the following lines from it – ‘These words seemed spoken not, but writ/ As foolish tales through night dreams flit’ – will be applied to the trifling criticism rather than to the carefully crafted poetry. Yeats, for example, told his tale not to discredit his old idol – Morris – but to discredit his old enemy – George Moore. Moore had made fun of Yeats’s dandy dressing, comparing Yeats to an ‘umbrella that somebody had forgotten at a picnic’. Yeats would later identify Morris (‘who gave us all the great stories, Homer and the Sagas included’) as among the four authors who moved him most (‘Louis Lambert’, London Mercury, July 1934).

Another myth to put to rest is the notion that Morris crossed a river of fire, abandoning ‘foolish tales’ in his dedication to political causes. Morris never abandoned poetry; Poems by the Way should not be considered as an exception to his political activities nor as the last of his poetry. In his search for a ‘new tongue’, a new language, a voice of his own to articulate the desire of an age, Morris established a
new genre: the prose romance as a prose poem. His prose romances are prose poems set within the poet's own imaginary world. With this development, Morris is most like Shakespeare. Serious artists abandon in their maturity the themes of tragedy and the techniques of verisimilitude for the imaginary realms of their own creation. What the prose romances most resemble – in subject, in structure, in diction, in all but their rhythm – is his fairy tale of ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’, the poem Moore considered perfect. Yeats praised Morris’s prose as the most beautiful he had ever read (‘Preface’, Cuchulain of Muirthemne, 1902). To recognize the affinity of Poems by the Way with The Story of the Glittering Plain (1891), The Wood Beyond the World (1894), The Well at the World’s End (1896), The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1897), and The Sundering Flood (1897) is to acknowledge the number of major poems Morris produced during the last years of his life.

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