

# Victorian Poetry

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William Morris



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## Refocillations

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### Morris on Swinburne

I never could really sympathize with Swinburne's work; it always seemed to me to be founded on literature, not on nature. In saying this I really cannot accuse myself of any jealousy on the subject, as I think also you will not. Now I believe that Swinburne's sympathy with literature is most genuine and complete; and it is a pleasure to hear him talk about it, which he does in the best vein possible; he is most steadily enthusiastic about it. Now time was when the poetry resulting merely from this intense study and love of literature might have been, if not the best, yet at any rate very worthy and enduring: but in these days when all the arts, even poetry, are like to be overwhelmed under the mass of material riches which civilization has made and is making more and more hastily every day; riches which the world has made indeed, but cannot use to any good purpose: in these days the issue between art, that is, the godlike part of man, and mere bestiality, is so momentous, and the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deepest in reality and is quite at first hand: there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling, because of its innate strength and vision.

(From Morris' letter to Mrs. Burne-Jones,  
1882. *Letters*, p. 158)

### Morris on Browning

Though Browning was a poet, he had not a *non-* but an *anti-*poetical side to him: and this is why he has achieved a popularity amongst the 'educated middle-classes', who though they are badly educated are probably over-educated for their intellect. Yes the Briton has no interest in a book if it is merely a work of art, i.e. if it is meant to endure, the ephemeral is all he cares about: as he naturally thinks his own life so damned important. And yet though I am not a patriot (as you know) I doubt if said Briton is more anti-poetical than the men of other nations. Only he seems more anti-artistic, I think, because he has gone further through the mill of modernism; some survivals of the old artistic spirit still cling in a queer paradoxical way to Frenchmen & Germans: to Englishmen none, unless they have gone through the mill and come out at the other [end].

(From Morris' letter to Watts Dunton,  
March 25, 1892. *Letters*, pp. 349-350)

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## Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb"

DENNIS R. BALCH

**W**ILLIAM MORRIS' "Defence of Guenevere" is at once one of the most discussed and one of the most baffling of his poems. While recent critics agree that Guenevere is generally guilty of adultery, if not guilty of the specific charges Gauwaine advances, and that her defense is genuinely intended to help her escape the punishment she faces, there is still the disquieting acknowledgment that Guenevere's denial of guilt carries with it an admission of guilt.<sup>1</sup> In short Guenevere's defense seems to have some internal contradictions which are not easily explained by the standard view that Guenevere's defense has a simple motive of self-preservation. An examination of "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb" as complementary poems and a homogeneous poetic construct will demonstrate that Guenevere's motives in "Defence" are much more complex than a simple concern with saving her life, that her actions in both poems are in large part self-destructive as well as self-preservative, and that the Guenevere of the "Defence" is far more faithful to Arthur than any critic has yet suggested.

<sup>1</sup>Five recent articles deal intensively with "The Defence of Guenevere": Lawrence Perrine, "Morris' Guenevere: An Interpretation," *PQ*, 39 (1960), 234-241; Angela Carson, "Morris' Guenevere: A Further Note," *PQ*, 42 (1963), 131-134; Meredith B. Raymond, "The Arthurian Group in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," *VP*, 4 (1966), 213-218; John Walter Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God," *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 446-451; and Carole G. Silver, "The Defence of Guenevere": A Further Interpretation," *SEL*, 9 (1969), 695-702. Perrine and Carson agree that Guenevere is guilty of adultery, though perhaps not in the specific instance Gauwaine charges her with; Carson points out the ambiguity of Guenevere's denial of guilt which also admits guilt. Silver demonstrates the self-incriminating nature of Guenevere's defense, taking a firmer stand than Carson. Hollow points out that Guenevere does not so much deny guilt as deny the ability of her accusers to judge her. Raymond treats "Defence" and "King Arthur's Tomb" as complementary poems but traces a radical change in Guenevere's attitude instead of the continuity of her attitude through its fluctuations. All agree that Guenevere is guilty of some betrayal of Arthur, though her overpowering love for Launcelot does enlist our sympathy.

Laurence Perrine's "Morris' Guenevere: An Interpretation" is the most complete explanation of the "Defence" as a straightforward attempt at self-preservation. Perrine regards the parable of the choosing cloths as the heart of Guenevere's defense—the only "genuine and sincere" portion of the defense, the only part of her argument that is logically sound—and views the other defenses she presents as bold, sophisticated attempts to delay execution until Launcelot can arrive to save her. Both Perrine and John Hollow ("William Morris and the Judgment of God") have explained the parable of choosing cloths as Guenevere's plea for a larger moral context in which to judge her actions, a plea designed to explain how she through no fault of her own chose the blue cloth, chose to love Launcelot, only to discover that "heaven's color" really represents hell. Superficially, the identification of the choice of blue with Launcelot is an obvious interpretation, one that Guenevere meant her accusers to arrive at, for reasons which will be discussed later. However, this is not the only plausible interpretation of the parable of the cloths. Guenevere may be acting on motives of which she is not totally aware but which she is struggling to bring to the surface, and these dimly perceived motives are revealed in the parable of the cloths simultaneously with the more overt motive of self-preservation. In fact, there is good reason to consider a second interpretation of the parable of the cloths and to identify her choice of the blue as a choosing of Arthur as husband.

The choice of the blue cloth and hell does not seem strictly consistent with Guenevere's choice of Launcelot. Because the choice between the cloths is a blind one, a matter of chance, the possible outcome ought to be uncertain. However, as Arthur's wife, Guenevere could hardly expect to escape the consequences of her liaison with Launcelot if the adultery were discovered; technically, therefore, to choose Launcelot would invite disaster. Whether Guenevere herself accepts the existing mores, she certainly would have been aware that in violating them she placed her fate in jeopardy. Her awareness of the possible consequences of choosing Launcelot, then, contradicts both her own sense of her situation and the blind-chance alternative posed by the test itself.

There is more compelling reason for questioning the strict association of the blue cloth with Launcelot. The choice of the parable is between a red cloth and a blue one. Launcelot and his relationship with Guenevere are consistently described with images involving redness, making the red cloth the appropriate one to be identified with Launcelot. Launcelot rides a roan charger, the red drops of his blood are found on Guenevere's bed at Mellyagraunce's castle, Launcelot's defense of Guenevere against Mellyagraunce results in "a spout of [Mellyagraunce's] blood on the hot land," and Guenevere's cheek grows crimson when she hears Launcelot's approach at the end of "Defence." This color association continues in "King Arthur's Tomb": while riding to Glastonbury Launcelot remembers how Guenevere

"would let me wind  
Her hair around my neck, so that it fell  
Upon my red robe." (ll. 44-46)

He remembers how, after one of their nights together, he awoke to see her holding scarlet lilies and arose to walk with her and talk of love. Guenevere recounts how in past times

"Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,  
Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,  
Mingled with dreams of what the priest did say;" (ll. 306-308)

she also recalls how other men exhibited respect for Launcelot's fame

"So that Breuse even, as he rode, fear'd lest  
At turning of the way your shield should flame." (ll. 259-260)

In view of these associations, it seems likely, especially if one supposes that Guenevere could remember the same vivid images of the red robe and the scarlet lilies that Launcelot does, that Guenevere would herself privately, perhaps unconsciously, identify the red cloth rather than the blue with Launcelot. At any rate, there is sufficient evidence to make the strict identification of the blue cloth with Launcelot a more tenuous affair than is generally thought.

There are also reasons why the choice of the blue cloth should be associated with the earlier choice of Arthur as husband: the unforeseeable consequences of marriage with Arthur, Arthur's Christian character and the straitness of the marriage bond with Arthur correspond to the circumstances surrounding the choice of the blue cloth. Unlike the possible consequences of adultery with Launcelot, the possible consequences of marriage with Arthur would have been uncertain, as the consequences of the choice between the cloths is. The choice of Arthur would have been uncertain not only because Guenevere could not know how the marriage would turn out but also because she could not know the true nature of what she refused as an alternative to Arthur, as Launcelot was not available for comparison when she chose Arthur. It might be objected that if Launcelot was not available for comparison with Arthur, then the notion of the parable describing the choice of Arthur as husband is illogical, since the parable describes a choice between two things. But on reflection, who can deny that many choices one makes are not recognized as choices until after decisive action has been taken, that only later does one realize that in taking up one thing he has voided the option of taking up other things which he was not even aware of at the time of the initial action? In choosing Arthur as husband, Guenevere unwittingly denied herself the free adoption of the approach to life that Launcelot represents and did what she thought was best, choosing "heaven's color," which one might reasonably associate with Arthur the Christian king. The connection between "heaven's color" and Arthur

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strengthened when one considers Guenevere's situation in "King Arthur's Tomb." The problem of choice is still present in "King Arthur's Tomb," though the choice has been transformed from a choice between Arthur and Launcelot into a choice between Christ and Launcelot:

"I cannot choose  
But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep  
From loving Launcelot; O Christ! must I lose  
My own heart's love?" (ll. 173-176)

The new form of the choice obliquely identifies Arthur with Christ, especially as Guenevere's struggle to quell her love for Launcelot and strengthen her love for Christ takes place over Arthur's tomb. Indeed, she uses her love for Arthur as a weapon in that struggle to send Launcelot away:

"nay, I saw you not,  
But rather Arthur, God would not let die,  
I hoped, these many years; he should grow great,  
And in his great arms still encircle me,  
Kissing my face, half blinded with the heat  
Of king's love for the queen I used to be." (ll. 239-244)

In attempting to strengthen her love for Christ and renounce Launcelot, Guenevere resorts to rekindling her love for Arthur, so that love for Christ and love for Arthur are linked and perhaps identical, making plausible the association of "heaven's color" with Arthur. This linkage of Arthur with Christ prompts another corroborative point. The voice of the parable commands the choice of "one cloth for ever." Guenevere's choice of husband, like her choice of Christ, would be eternally binding morally, but her choice of adulterous love with Launcelot would not be. Guenevere herself makes clear that the permanent nature of her bond to Arthur oppresses her. After she meets Launcelot she begins to think of the time before she "was bought / By Arthur's great name and his little love" and begins to realize exactly what her choice of Arthur might imply:

"Must I give up for ever then, I thought,  
That which I deemed would ever round me move  
Glorifying all things; for a little word,  
Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove  
Stone-cold for ever?" (ll. 84-88)

Two significant points are made by this quotation: Guenevere's vow to Arthur, the "little word," was undertaken rather casually ("scarce ever meant at all") and in this respect resembles the haphazard, ill-formed choice between the cloths; also, this vow is permanently binding, like the choice of the blue cloth, and threatens to make Guenevere "prove stone-cold for ever."

In "King Arthur's Tomb," the vow to Arthur does prevail and make Guenevere "prove stone-cold" to Launcelot as she renounces him and turns back to that earlier choice of "heaven's color"—Arthur and Christ.

The interpretation of the blue cloth as representing, at one level, Arthur rather than Launcelot places the choice described in the parable prior to Launcelot's arrival in Camelot, and this placement of the choice presents an interpretive problem. As Guenevere explains the confusions she felt after Launcelot comes to Arthur's court, she proclaims,

"Behold my judges, then the cloths were brought;  
While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would crowd,  
Belonging to the time ere I was bought  
By Arthur's great name and his little love." (ll. 80-83)

These lines could mean that the cloths were brought and the choice made after Launcelot's arrival (the obvious interpretation that Guenevere's accusation would reach); or they could mean that it is not until Guenevere meets Launcelot that the "old thoughts" began to coalesce into the realization that the limiting, hellish choice was made long before she met Launcelot. The alternative interpretation is supported by Guenevere's rather bitter comment about "Arthur's great name and his little love," which implies that in retrospect Guenevere sees herself as already in hell, having chosen Arthur before she meets Launcelot. The lines cited are ambiguous enough to permit the placement of the choice either before or after Launcelot's arrival, making possible the understanding of the parable of the cloths as explaining either the choice of Launcelot or a choice of Arthur. Both interpretations of the parable are necessary for the satisfactory explanation of the complexity of Guenevere's situation and the motives for her "defense."

Guenevere's motives in "The Defence of Guenevere" are more complex than the simple desire to save her life. As a matter of fact, Guenevere's desire to save herself from burning coexists with the contradictory desire to insist on punishment and thereby make some amends for her sin against Arthur. There is also one other important motive, which strictly speaking has nothing to do with defense but simply with explanation that seeks neither to justify actions nor escape the punishment for them. Of these three basic motives, critical attention has been devoted only to the most obvious motive, a probably for Guenevere the most conscious motive, the desire to escape punishment. Considerations of this motive have shown how Guenevere attempts, through logical and sophistical arguments, through pleas of sympathy and bursts of defiance, to sway her accusers. And surely there is this element in Guenevere's defense—there is a part of her that does not wish to suffer and die—but there is also the contradictory element which springs from a part of her nature that is self-destructive and seeks punishment. The illustration of these contradictory elements is again centered on the parable

of the choosing cloths. Viewed as explaining her choice of Launcelot, the parable may well be an appeal for consideration of the limitations of human judgment, but it is also an incriminating admission that a liason does exist between her and Launcelot. Likewise, Guenevere's "hewing down" of Gauwaine's proofs is in one sense a genuine attempt at defense, in that she does succeed in disposing of Gauwaine's proofs after a fashion; however, her manner of refuting Gauwaine hardly seems suited to evoking a favorable response from her chief accuser but seems rather more likely to provoke and insult. Guenevere repeatedly attacks Gauwaine's credibility:

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,  
Whatever may have happen'd these long years,  
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie!" (ll. 283-285)

She casts a slur on his judgment in the Mellyagraunce affair (l. 172), and, in another instance unrelated to the refutation of Gauwaine's proofs, Guenevere bids Gauwaine, "Remember in what grave your mother sleeps" (l. 153), referring to the adultery of his mother in an ostensible attempt to win sympathy, but also perhaps in an attempt to undermine Gauwaine's position as an accuser, which would have a provocative effect. Finally, Guenevere's contemptuous description of the conclusion of the incident when she and Launcelot were surprised together is a further attack on Gauwaine's fitness as an accuser, portraying him as beside himself with anger:

"You know quite well the story of that fray,  
How Launcelot still'd their bawling, the mad fit  
That caught up Gauwaine." (ll. 279-281)

However obviously the initial motive of self-preservation presents itself, it seems clear that the contrary motive of self-destruction should also be taken into account, for Guenevere by no means always speaks in her own best interests. The extent to which Guenevere consciously acts on either of these conflicting motives is indeterminable, though it seems likely that the motive of self-preservation is the most conscious. The important point is that the form of her defense reveals two motives, and, whether consciously or not, she does act upon both.

The first two motives of self-preservation and self-destruction depend on the obvious interpretation of the parable of the cloths (choice of blue/hell equals choice of Launcelot) for their effects, the evocation of sympathy and the provocation of wrath. The third motive of explanation depends on the other interpretation of the parable (choice of blue equals choice of Arthur) for its intelligibility. While Guenevere struggles with her impulses toward self-preservation and self-destruction, she also struggles with the problem of understanding her situation. This motive of explanation is a pure motive—it is not concerned with escape or punishment, and for this reason it is

appropriate that the explanation be inaccessible to Guenevere's immediate audience. The explanation is a private affair, something too complex and truthful to be presented as a legal defense. It should not be surprising that the implied explanation should be at odds with the other defenses based on motives concerned with escape or punishment—the ambiguous nature of her defense strongly suggests that she is grasping for something which will more satisfactorily explain her situation than a mere admission or denial of guilt both of which are incomplete truths. The explanation embedded in Guenevere's defense may be paraphrased as follows: "I married Arthur before I was fully aware of the alternative that a man like Launcelot provided indeed, before I fully realized even the implications of marriage with Arthur. On meeting Launcelot I realized for the first time how binding and limiting my scarcely meant marriage vow really was, how my naïve choice of 'heaven' color' turned out to be hell. I could not resist Launcelot's appeal, yet at the same time I could not forsake my vow to Arthur, no matter how casually it was taken. Therefore, though part of me, the part which responds to the appeal of Launcelot, longs to live and compels me to seek escape from the punishment for my adultery, another part of me, the part which is bound to Arthur, feels deep guilt and desires punishment so that I may make amends for my sin. Suffering is the only way I have of proving my real fidelity to Arthur." The key points in this explanation as I have described it are: Arthur is the real hellish choice, not Launcelot—the choice of Arthur is self-destructive from the beginning; Guenevere, in spite of her attraction to Launcelot, recognizes her bond to Arthur and wishes to remain true to him; Guenevere's only way of remaining true to Arthur is through self-destruction of one kind or another. If this explanation seems far-fetched, a few particulars from the two poems under consideration will make the point.

As noted earlier, the choice of Arthur is self-destructive from the beginning. One manifestation of this self-destructiveness is Guenevere's involvement with Launcelot, which is in part owing to her fidelity to Arthur's wishes. In "King Arthur's Tomb," Guenevere recalls how Arthur charged her to cherish Launcelot and thus reveals the hidden danger of her choice of Arthur—fidelity to Arthur's wishes carries with it the seed of destruction. The second major point in the explanation concerns Guenevere's desire to remain true to Arthur even though she is attracted by Launcelot. This point is born out early in the "Defence" when the tensions of Guenevere's loyalties are summarized in her sense that it is "shameful to feel ought but shame / A through her heart." These lines indicate not so much a lack of guilt as the complexity of Guenevere's situation—one part of her nature feels no shame for her love with Launcelot, another does. Furthermore, that part faithful to Arthur feels it shameful that her whole being does not feel shame. Contrary to the prevailing opinion that Guenevere is more or less emotionally detached

from Arthur in the "Defence," she has a strong attraction to him. According to the argument already outlined, Guenevere could maintain her ties with Arthur only through self-destructive means, which is borne out by her speech when it becomes clear to her what the choice of the blue cloth means:

"then I could tell,  
Like wisest man how all things would be, moan,  
And roll and hurt myself, and long to die,  
And yet fear much to die for what was sown." (ll. 42-45)

"King Arthur's Tomb" makes it clear that the longing for death wins out. Guenevere proves true to Arthur and renounces Launcelot, in effect dying to the world by taking up religious life. Of course, even in this renunciation of Launcelot, Guenevere's struggle to decide between Arthur and Launcelot has an ironic twist—she is still strongly attracted to Launcelot, but the old choice of Arthur makes her "prove stone-cold" and deny the essential part of her nature that Launcelot appeals to, thus destroying an important part of herself. It is not by mere chance that Guenevere's fidelity to Arthur should take a self-destructive form. According to the parable of the choosing cloths, Guenevere's choice turns out to be hell. It has been suggested that elements in Guenevere's defense and her meeting with Launcelot at Arthur's tomb indicate that Arthur rather than Launcelot is really the destructive choice. But the reader might wonder why, in the context of Morris' thought, Arthur would logically represent a hellish alternative.

Morris was, of course, the poet of the *earthly* paradise, a poet grounded in the concrete world of sense, as the descriptive color of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* illustrates. In "The Society of the Future," an essay of 1888, Morris decried the "intellectual paunch" he saw his own society developing and defined happiness as "the pleasurable exercise of our energies, and the enjoyment of the rest which that exercise or expenditure of energy makes necessary to us." He then goes on to make the rather Blakean assertion that "whatever interferes with that freedom and fulness of life . . . is an evil" (*AWS*, II, 456). In the same essay Morris presents the "freedom and cultivation of the individual will" as the ideal on which his society of the future is to be based; necessary to this ideal is "a free and unfettered animal life for man" and "the utter extinction of all asceticism" (p. 457). The values expressed in this late essay are already present in 1858 in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb." Arthur, finally identified in this interpretation with the blue choosing cloth, is a force for asceticism and as such interferes with the "freedom and fulness of life" which is partly based on "a free and unfettered animal life for man." In this respect, Arthur is very properly identified with hell, as he is an impediment to Guenevere's ability to

lead a satisfactory, unashamed animal life. It is paradoxical but fitting that "heaven's color" turns out to be hell in Guenevere's choice, for to a man like Morris who values the concrete, earthly existence more than intellectual abstractions, heaven and hell are equivalent evils; they are abstract conceptions which distract men from their essential animal nature and prevent them from living an adequate earthly life. In earlier discussion the linkage of Arthur and Christ has been pointed out—this linkage reinforces the interpretation of Arthur as an ascetic force. Arthur as a Christian force opposes the "freedom and cultivation of the individual will" which is the basis for Morris' idea of society, for Christian hope is based on the prospect of annihilation or absorption of the individual will by the will of God, the destruction or denial of self. Arthur and Christ, representing as they do the destruction and denial of individual experience, are figures of death, as "King Arthur's Tomb" makes clear—Arthur's power to make Guenevere turn from Launcelot and back to himself is greater after his death than ever before. Guenevere seems to draw the strength she needs to renounce Launcelot from the tomb itself, which she strokes as Launcelot watches her:

"To you her thin hand,  
That on the carven stone can not keep still,  
Because she loves me against God's command." (ll. 274-276)

Not only does Guenevere deny that vital part of herself that Launcelot appeals to, but she also forces Launcelot to deny his animal nature too. When Guenevere delivers her final devastating speech in "King Arthur's Tomb," Launcelot swoons; when he awakens, Launcelot delivers a short speech which concludes, "When I rose up, also I heard a bell." Launcelot, according to Malory, Morris' source, followed Guenevere's example and ended his days in religious life. This last line suggests that turn in his life, indicating that like Guenevere ("also I") he now hearkens to a holy bell rather than to the wa bells of Camelot, which were mentioned earlier in the retrospective conversation between him and Guenevere. In short, with the conclusion of "King Arthur's Tomb," the culmination of a conflict between two different approaches to life—Arthur's way and Launcelot's way—becomes apparent. The spirit of Christian asceticism appears triumphant amid the ruins of earthly happiness. It is finally clear that Guenevere's choice of the blue cloth most truly represents the choice of Arthur, not Launcelot. Guenevere is thus truer to Arthur than her accusers in the "Defence" ever realize. The veiling of Guenevere's real explanation in her ambiguous series of defenses generates a terrible irony: Guenevere faces punishment for betraying what she is really most true to.

That Arthur and Christian asceticism not only can but must, within the context of Arthurian legend, overcome Launcelot and the sensuous life he represents may be one reason why Morris did not utilize Arthurian material in a major way during his poetic career. Perhaps he realized that the Arthurian legends embodied a system of values contrary to the values he himself was developing which would depend on the central importance of the individual sensual experience rather than a denial of man's animal nature.

## The Crisis of *The Earthly Paradise*: Morris and Keats

ELIZABETH STRODE

**I**T WOULD APPEAR from the self-confessed escapism of *The Earthly Paradise*, that Morris has abandoned the struggle to make the best of life, as manifested in the early romances and *Jason*, the latter itself a diversion originally intended for *The Earthly Paradise* which assumed a wider importance. Nevertheless, it is a necessary stage in the development of Morris' thought, leading him on to the fortitude of the Icelandic Sagas. This desperate and hopeless sinking into sensation—desperate in its clutching of the opiate of illusion, and hopeless in the face of the inevitability of death and the shattering of illusion—must needs result in a complete despair verging on the existential, in a new perspective of life discovered, or in the prostration produced by any debauchery, whether physical or intellectual. The first two of these products may be discerned in *The Earthly Paradise*. The third is in neither Morris' character nor means, for had it been so, there would have been no socialist ideals, no tapestry weaving, no interest in translating the pragmatic ideas of the Sagas. Nor indeed, would there have been any other indications of the Morris energy and honesty, obvious in the preceding works.

What is, however, evident in *The Earthly Paradise* is a more intelligible and informed realization of the Absurdity of existence, which not only deepens the tone of the escapist tales but also informs Morris' later perception of his own role in lessening the Absurdity of the universe, pointing the way to his Socialism. This result is, nevertheless, apparent only at the end of the book. For all the indifferentism of the opening stanzas, the work is deeply disturbed. Its preoccupation with death, the irony of the Mariners' useless search for immortality, which ends in premature ageing, and the troubled emotions evident in every page, lead only gradually to a more balanced view. The old men's terror of earthly destruction is slowly lessened in the year the book covers and can be soothed solely by the parallel of Nature, dying in Winter, but with its annual promise of regeneration in Spring.