4. Unsigned review, Tablet

April 1858, xix, 266

This favourable review was believed by Swinburne (No. 289) to be by J. H. Pollen (1820–1902), who was Professor of Fine Art in Dublin, and participated in the painting of the Oxford Union ceiling in 1857. But the attribution is not supported by Pollen’s biographer, Anne Pollen.

The final narrative section is omitted.

There are peculiarities both of thought and style in this volume which will not escape hostile criticism, but, in our judgment, it contains ample proof of the author’s title to the privileges of a poet.

Now, the poet has this right, that, in consideration of the gift of poetry that he has received, and which he spends for our benefit, we must simply accept him as he essentially is, and forbear from requiring him to be something wholly different. We may reject his claims to the poet’s wreath, or, granting that, we may point out faults and blemishes, the absence of which would be desirable. But our objections must not go to the very root and being of his nature and inspiration, for, had such objections prevailed, we should have been without his poem.

The dedication (‘to my friend Dante Gabriel Rossetti, painter, I dedicate these poems’) suggests already the Pre-Raphaelite sympathies of the author, and the book itself fully establishes them.

The conscientious rendering of the actual, in its minutest details, is observed not only in the description of gestures, attitudes, features, and garments, so that many passages read like descriptions of a Pre-Raphaelite picture, but the same ‘fidelity to nature’ is preserved in the language of the interlocutors (almost all the poems are in the first person singular), and we are free to admit that the result is in some few instances unsatisfactory. But The Defence of Guenever and other Poems (as a statistical fact we may note that the ‘Defence’ is one poem out of thirty, and 17 pages out of 248), are poetry beyond all question, and

we must c’en take them and be glad, for without their faults they would probably not have been in being. There is a grand roll in many of the verses, and a fine swing, which more than redeems a few bald lines and some which halt considerably; and if here and there the close copy of nature degenerates into caricature, in very many more instances the homely diction and quaint simplicity of the style not only satisfy the ear, but stir the heart.

Few volumes have been published of late years containing more passages which haunt the memory and constrain the tongue to unconscious repetition of them after one reading.

The first four poems are legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. We pass over ‘Guenever’ and ‘Lancelot,’ for ‘Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery.’

[narrates the story, with quotations]

‘The Chapel in Lyonesse’ is the legend of Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy—

Ozana of the hardy heart
Knight of the Table Round,
Pray for his soul, Lords, of your part,
A good knight he was found.

It is very beautiful, and not unworthy of the companionship of Tennyson’s ‘Morte d’Arthur’ and ‘Sir Galahad’.

The longest poem in the book is a drama, ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’.

[narrates the story, with quotations]

‘Rapunzel’ and her golden hair will be a stumbling-block to those who did not know her in their nursery days, or who have not read her authentic history told by the Brothers Grimm.

There are many of the ballads in this book that must be set to music.

On the eve of Greyc, Sir Lambert de Bois, a poverty-stricken knight, sings of Marguerite, and of the wealth tomorrow’s fight may bring him by the ransom of the knights he means to overthrow:—

Gold on her head, and gold on her feet,
And gold where the hems of her kirtle meet,
And a golden girdle round my sweet
Ahi qu’elle est belle La Marguerite.

[quotes next three stanzas]
THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

5. Unsigned review, Saturday Review

20 November 1858, vi, 566–7

The review which is most directly hostile to Morris as a Pre-Raphaelite.

Did we choose to chronicle them, there would be no lack of materials for illustrating the current poetical literature. The volcano of poetry is not now in a state of eruption as in the good old days of the Pope school, the Lake school, and the Byron school; but there are always little jets and puffs of smoke, if not of flame, that serve to show the existence rather than the activity of the central fire. Annually there are produced, to the great benefit of paper-makers and printers, at least fifty little volumes of English poetry. They are curiously alike. They are all little thin volumes of about 200 pages. Every volume contains from twenty to a hundred little pieces, all about nothing in particular—not remarkably good nor remarkably bad—with just no character at all, like Pope’s women. They give us very fair verse and generally correct imagery, not unpleasing nor yet striking, and yet we do not review them, simply because we cannot. When there is nothing to say, with Scriblerus we say ‘We can no more.’ What is the use either to the poet or to his reader, actual or possible, of saying that Mr. Jones has a correct ear, and has attained to certain smoothnesses in versification, and ripples out in a level current of poetical talk—or that Miss Brown has read Tennyson till she has acquired the same sort of likeness to her original that probably his colour-grinder had to Michael Angelo? If we select Mr. William Morris from the crowd, it is not for his surpassing merits, because we do not think that he has such, but partly because he has some real and substantial poetical merits—much of which, however, may be resolved into conceits and affectation and extravagance—and partly because he represents, we suppose for the first time, in one department of art, what has made a very great substantial revolution in another of its kingdoms—and partly because he writes upon a principle which, true enough in itself, he contrives wilfully and carefully to spoil by overdoing it.

Mr. Morris is the pre-Raffaelite poet. So he is hailed, we believe, by himself and the brotherhood. Now, in point of fact, if we trace the genesis of what is affectingly called pre-Raffaelism, it is the offspring rather than the progenitor of a certain poetical school and principle. Pre-Raffaelitism is the product of the principle which was first preached by Wordsworth, and has culminated in Tennyson through Keats. The poet, prophet-like, preceded the painter—the plastic, or rather pictorial, development of art followed upon its poetical. Millais and Holman Hunt have but repeated the revolt against false taste which Wordsworth’s Poetical Ballads inaugurated. It is odd enough that Wordsworth’s personal influence with his friend Sir George Beaumont did not lead him to see—or if he saw, to repent of—the falsity of the conventional brown tree, for Wordsworth’s was a life-long protest against the brown tree in poetry. But whether Wordsworth saw or did not see the application of his own principle, it is at the Lake’s turn that pre-Raffaelitism first drank inspiration. If, therefore, Mr. Morris really wished to show us what pre-Raffaelitism in poetry was, he should have gone back to its beginnings, not to its recent developments. He has overlooked or neglected this truth; and because pre-