# 81. W. B. Yeats, review, *Bookman*

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William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), the great Irish poet, produced a good deal of literary journalism in his early years.

That Mr. William Morris was the greatest poet of his time one may doubt, remembering more impassioned numbers than his, but one need not doubt at all that he was the poet of his time who was most perfectly a poet. Certain men impress themselves on the imagination of the world as types, and Shelley, with his wayward desires, his unavailing protest, has become the type of the poet to most men and to all women, and perhaps because he seemed to illustrate that English dream, which holds the poet and the artist unfitted for practical life: laughable and lovable children whose stories and angers one may listen

to when the day's work is done. If, however, a time come when the world recognises that the day's work, that practical life, become noble just in so far as they are subordinated to the sense of beauty, the sense of the perfect, just in so far as they approach the dream of the poet and the artist, then Mr. William Morris may become, instead of Shelley, the type of the poet: for he more than any man of modern days tried to change the life of his time into the life of his dream. To others beauty was a solitary vision, a gift coming from God they knew not how; but to him it was always some golden fleece or happy island, some well at the world's end, found after many perils and many labours in the world, and in all his later books, at any rate, found for the world's sake. Almost alone among the dreamers of our time, he accepted life and called it good; and because almost alone among them he saw, amid its incompleteness and triviality, the Earthly Paradise that shall blossom at the end of the ages.

When Ralph, the pilgrim to the well at the world's end, is setting out upon his journey, he meets with a monk who bids him renounce the world. ' "Now, lord, I can see by thy face that thou art set on beholding the fashion of this world, and most like it will give thee the rue."

'Then came a word into Ralph's mouth, and he said: "Wilt thou tell me, father, whose work was the world's fashion?"

'The monk reddened, but answered nought, and Ralph spake again: "Forsooth, did the craftsman of it fumble over his work?"

'Then the monk scowled, but presently he enforced himself to speak blithely, and said, "Such matters are over high for my speech or thine, lord; but I tell thee, who knoweth, that there are men in this House who have tried the world and found it wanting."

'Ralph smiled and said, stammering: "Father, did the world try them, and find them wanting perchance?" '

And later on it is said to the seekers of the well, 'If you love not the earth and the world with all your souls, and will not strive all ye may to be frank and happy therein, your toil and peril aforesaid shall win you no blessing, but a curse.'

In the literal sense of the word, and in the only high sense, he was a prophet; and it was his vision of that perfect life, which the world is always trying, as Jacob Behmen taught, to bring forth, that awakened every activity of his laborious life—his revival of mediæval tapestry and stained glass, his archaic printing, his dreams of Sigurd and of Gudrun and of Guinevere, his essays upon the unloveliness of our life





and art, his preaching in parks and at the corners of streets, his praise of revolutions, his marchings at the head of crowds, and his fierce anger against most things that we delight to honour. We sometimes call him 'melancholy,' and speak of the 'melancholy' of his poems, and I know not well why, unless it be that we mistake the pensiveness of his early verse, a pensiveness for noble things once had and lost, or for noble things too great not to be nearly beyond hope, for his permanent mood, which was one of delight in the beauty of noon peace, of rest after labour, of orchards in blossom, of the desire of the body and of the desire of the spirit. Like Blake, he held nothing that gave joy unworthy, and might have said with Ruysbroeck, 'I must rejoice without ceasing, even though the world shudder at my joy,' except that he would have had the world share his joy. There is no picture of him more permanent in my mind than that of him sitting at one of those suppers at Hammersmith to which he gathered so singular a company of artists and workmen, and crying out on those who held it unworthy to be inspired by a cup of wine: for had not wine come out of the sap and out of the leaves and out of the heat of the sunlight? It was this vision of happiness that made him hate rhetoric, for rhetoric is the triumph of the desire to convince over the desire to reveal. His definition of good writing would have been writing full of pictures of beautiful things and beautiful moments. 'My masters,' he said once, 'are Keats and Chaucer, because Keats and Chaucer make pictures.' Dante he held for a like reason to be more a poet than Milton, who, despite his 'great, earnest mind, expressed himself as a rhetorician.' These pictures were not, I imagine, to be so much in great masses as in minute detail. 'The beauty of Dante,' he said to me once, 'is in his detail'; and in all his art one notices nothing more constant than the way in which it heaps up, and often in the midst of tragedy, little details of happiness. This book is full of them, and there is scarcely a chapter in which there is not some moment for which one might almost give one's soul.