

EMILY PFEIFFER

The Posthumous Critics of a Dead Poet, and Deathless Poetry

For now the poet cannot die,
Nor leave his music as of old,
But round him, 'ere he scarce be cold,
Begins the scandal and the cry.

A house in Cheyne Walk, which has long formed the quiet background to a life pre-eminently inward, thoughtful, and intense, is at the present moment laid bare to all comers, the careless, the reverend and the merely curious; and the ancient storied chambers which have painted themselves upon the consciousness of their late occupant, have been ringing for a week to the vulgar echoes which accompany a crowd brought together by a sale of house effects.

This profaning of the sanctities of home, so far as they can be profaned by outward accident, must always jar upon the reticent English mind, however homely in a different sense may have been the occupants of the desecrated place, however little they may have had it in them to animate its lifeless details with the breath of their own individuality. Proportionately greater is the sense of violation, when, as in the present case, a shaping spirit has passed from its accustomed haunt,—that haunt a house which in its time has given hospitality to many changing guests,—a poet who in the magic mirror of his mind has resumed those flitting shadows of the past, and stamped upon the scene of their passage the impress of a new and interesting personality.

But the intrusion of the money changers with their weights and scales of value, into the temple of home, is a light thing in comparison with the invasion which takes place, so soon as some prominent spirit is fled, into the in-

nermost shrine and sanctuary of his life. That this is a heavy price to pay for the recognition of which poetic genius is perhaps above all desirous, the sensitive lyric heart must be the quickest to feel. But it is inevitable. The world has a right to demand that the thing offered to its acceptance shall be duly appraised. It is a protest against some part of the testimony as to what has been seen in the invaded precincts, and seen, as it seems to the present writer, in the crude half-light of unblinded windows, torn from accustomed position and severed from harmonious relation, that is about to be offered in the following pages.

As a worker, according to my strength, and not an overseer of work, I should not venture upon critical estimate of the genius of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the wake of others better fitted for the task, even if the field had not already been closely gleaned. On this head much has already appeared, and more is probably forthcoming. Acknowledging therefore a deep sense of indebtedness for my personal share in the banquet of beauty offered to the world in these poems, it is proposed to leave on one side all examination into the nature of the gifts merely intellectual which secured to Rossetti a typical place among us, and to proceed to such an inquiry as is possible from a purely outside position into the quality of the spiritual impulse manifested in his writing, the effect of his creed poetical and other, upon his achievement, and the influence upon his work of his special surroundings.

None to whom the two volumes of poems, containing the "Sonnets of the House of Life," and others, Ballads and Lyrics, have come as a