

**THE POEMS OF
WILLIAM
WATSON, VOL. 1**

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The poems of William Watson, Vol. 1 by William Watson

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William Watson

THE POEMS OF
WILLIAM WATSON

IN TWO VOLUMES
VOLUME ONE

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INTRODUCTION

FOR any third person to stand between the public and a poet of Mr. Watson's eminence would be an impertinence of which I have no desire to be guilty. Since, however, I have played a subordinate part in preparing this collected edition of his works, it has fallen to me to say a few words in explanation of its design and of certain features which may commend it to readers and critics as something more than an ordinary reprint.

Mr. Watson has hitherto been slow to sanction any complete edition of his works. The 'Collected Poems' of 1898 made so many omissions that it became in effect a volume of selections. It excluded not only 'The Prince's Quest' and other early pieces to which a special

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INTRODUCTION

section is devoted in this edition, but a considerable number of later pieces which seem to me to have value and significance. Moreover, not a little of Mr. Watson's most powerful work belongs to a later date than 1898. There are writers of a copious and diffuse habit whose best is arrived at by a rigorous process of selection ; but Mr. Watson is certainly not of these. He writes at long intervals, refines, rejects, condenses with a fastidiousness of self-criticism which is too rare among modern authors. He has, of course, his degrees of excellence, but his work is from the beginning a selection, and comparatively little of it falls below the standard which may properly be exacted in a new edition.

The guiding principle, it seems to me, in preparing a complete edition of any man's work, especially of any poet's work, should be not to ask whether reasons can be found for rejecting this or that poem—reasons seldom fail, if the criticism is sufficiently minute—but to consider rather whether the poem in question falls into its place in the general scheme, whether it illustrates

INTRODUCTION

the writer's thought and style, or the development of his thought and style, whether, in short, it lends itself to the total effect. Here possibly the outside adviser may be of some slight assistance.

The poems here included have throughout been subjected to a careful revision, and in a few, notably 'The Dream of Man,' 'The Hope of the World,' 'Domine, quo Vadis?' 'Lakeland once more,' the last part of 'Lacrimæ Musarum,' and the first part of 'The Prince's Quest,' there are considerable alterations. I am well aware of the questions which may arise concerning these changes. Is a poet entitled to recall and refashion the offspring which have gone from under his roof, and made friends of their own who have possibly become attached even to their imperfections? Many of Mr. Watson's poems are thus affectionately regarded, but if the poet is convinced that he can remove blemishes and add to the beauty of his work, the prejudice which prefers a familiar imperfection must not be allowed to prevail. His right to do what he will with

INTRODUCTION

his own extends at least to the point of presenting it in the form which best realises his intention and satisfies his taste. Mr. Watson's alterations are for the most part the result of long reflection on passages which he has felt to be capable of improvement. There are some poets of whom one might hesitate to say so much, but in the present case the utmost confidence may, I think, be placed in the author's faculty of self-criticism.

The arrangement of this volume purposely follows the simplest lines. Mr. Watson has two distinctive qualities which I would gladly have seen brought out in the grouping, had it been possible. One is the power of conveying illuminative criticism in poetical form, as, incidentally, in his *Elegiac Poems*, in many of his *Sonnets*, and in the *Epigrams*, which last, despite the work of other writers who have practised the aphoristic quatrain, assume in his hands an original and characteristic form. The other is a descriptive and meditative kind of poetry which, though in subject it derives from Wordsworth, departs