



ROSSETTI AS A PRE-RAPHAELITE POET

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Throughout all the vicissitudes of his life , Rossetti retained in its pre-eminence, nearest to his heart , his love for poetry . Only upon Leigh Hunt's advice had he abandoned it for painting as career, accepting his well-justified opinion that while painting might possibly be a means of existence, poetry quite certainly was not . to the end of his life both arts maintained their hold upon Rossetti, creating, through their rival demands upon his talents and time additional tensions .

His first published volume, *The Early Italian Poets* together with Dante's *Vita Nuova* revealed that interest in medieval lyric which, emanating from his father's studies, had claimed much of Rossetti's leisure from adolescence to early manhood. The belated result, this admirable translation of Provençal and Italian love-poetry into English verse, was almost entirely ignored by English critics, few of whom were qualified to judge it. In several quarters, however, it evoked such praise as encouraged Rossetti to overcome his congenital fear of criticism and publish his own verse accumulated through the year. It appeared in 1870 , entitled simply *Poems*.

The influences which had produced his previous volume were very evident in his original verse. The medieval world, particularly as expressed in the early thought and imagery of Dante, largely dominated Rossetti's poetic vision, his ideas, form and imagery. Idealistic yet sensuous, it presented at times with hitherto unique emotional intimacy to the middle classes of Victorian England , circumscribed by taboos, religious dogmas, and moral conventions, the semi-religious but morally dubious canons of medieval chivalry and romantic love. Much of the volume inevitably antagonized the more prudish and puritanical of Rossetti's readers, while others, especially those of the rising generation , delightedly hailed the poet as a liberator of art and letters from the petty restrictions of contemporary provincialism. the vulgar and insincere attack made by the journalist Robert Buchanan (1841-1901) , in his *Fleshly School of Poetry*,

with other personal anxieties already mentioned, drove Rossetti to attempt suicide in 1872, by the same poison that had killed his wife. Nevertheless, Buchanan's attack failed, wilting away into hypocritical recantations and fawning adulation as Rossetti's friends overwhelmed Buchanan, whose reputation both as a man and a writer fell low in public esteem.

Many of the poem published in 1870 Rossetti had buried in his wife's coffin at the time of her death in 1862, in a mood of exaggerated remorse and sentimental self-sacrifice. But seven years later, when the desire for publication returned with increase intensity, he recovered the buried manuscript. By this time the strain of his many anxieties had brought on insomnia, which unfortunately led to ever-increasing reliance upon chloral and whisky as a sedative, until the end of his life. What little real happiness he found in these later years came principally during his residence with Mrs. Morris and her young daughters at Kelmscott Manor near Oxford, in 1871 and again from 1872 to 1874.

Since his breakdown in 1872, Rossetti had never recovered his former health two years another nervous crisis finally disrupted the Kelmscott ménage, and henceforth except for several absences due to illness, Cheyne Walk remained his permanent home. There in increasing isolation and dejection he lived for these last eight years of his life, while his reputation as a strange, mysterious, and romantic genius gradually rose towards its zenith amongst the general public. In the last year of his life he published two more volumes: *Poems and Ballads and Sonnets*, each largely composed of verse from his volume of 1870. On Easter Day, 9th April 1882, at Birchington whither Rossetti had gone in a vain effort to arrest his physical and mental decline he died.

Dante and the early Provençal and Italian poets exercised a profound influence upon Rossetti's life, painting, and poetry. To them he owed his sentimentalized pseudo medievalism, a new, decorative form of the Gothic Movement of the later eighteenth century and Romantic Revolt. Their medieval, chivalric conventions drew him to that imaginative and emotional idealization of women as evident in his own life as in the two arts he practiced. In both these, indeed, Rossetti closely followed Tennyson's decorative medievalism, for although "The Lady of Shalott" appeared in 1832, and the 'Morte d'Arthur' and 'Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere' nine years later, the *Idylls of the King* began to appear only in 1859 while Rossetti's *Blessed Damozel* was written in 1847, the *Bride's Prelude* in the following years, and 'The Staff and Scrip' in 1851. In painting, Rossetti's medievalism, both Dantesque and Malorian, similarly extends from about 1849 to the end of his life, while the famous Arthurian murals on the walls of the Oxford Union preceded Tennyson's first 'Idylls' by two years. In all this Rossetti partly followed, partly led contemporary fashion, and as such is a period poet.

In maturity Rossetti recalled as dominant amongst his childhood's influences his father's endless studies of Dante and of the Platonic Love of the Middle Ages. He never forgot the feeling of awe, even of fear, which they inspired. And love, whether in medieval or modern guise, is every Rossetti's inspiration. His early love for Elizabeth Siddal inspires his first personal, individual poems, that for Mrs. Morris his later poems of mature passion;

between the passing of the first and the coming of the second experience his poetic inspiration almost dies away.

Another element in Rossetti's medieval dream-word is the so-called 'religious' and 'mystical' quality, which finds expression in much of his painting and poetry. Here again influence from his childhood were dominant; this time emanating from both parents. Dante and Professor Gabriele's studies were very evidently one source, while the more ecclesiastical element came to him from his strict, devout High-Anglican mother and sisters, and the ornate, musical, and ritualistic services of the church they attended, often accompanied by Rossetti himself. These influences and his natural Latin inclination towards the aesthetic aspects of Catholicism despite his intellectual rationalism are the source as such poems as 'Ave', and as such painting and poems as *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and the so overgrazed 'Blessed Damozel'. This last, indeed, whether in its poetic, or pictorial form, suggests a Victorian church window rather than a medieval illumination or vision. In fact, as Rossetti soon discovered and expressed in his prose tale 'Hand and Soule' much of that reverence which he had mistaken for faith had been no more than the worship of beauty.

Certainly if mysticism be a faith, Rossetti was no mystic. He had, like all intelligent persons, a sense of the mystery of the Universe (which had not yet become 'Finite') and of life, particularly of human life, then still largely formal and signified, and he intimately experienced the feeling of reverence which in his day so markedly accompanied it.

Gather a shell from the strewn beach

And listen at its lips : they sigh

The same desire and mystery ,

The echo of the whole sea's speech.

And all mankind is thus at heart

Not anything but what thou art ;

And Earth , Sea, Man are all in each .¹

The qualities in Rossetti's poetry which in the years of his greatest fame were almost universally accepted as 'religious' and 'mystical' were in fact -*apart from those due to his sincere reverence for the nobility of Christ's life really aspects of his innate romanticism. As his romanticism largely disintegrated with the passages of time and an increasing experience of life, these particular elements in his work declined also, except when associated with his deepest emotional and artistic stimulus, romantic love.

Rossetti indeed, like his father, long oscillated between his natural rationalism and the emotional and aesthetic attraction of the church, which had largely influenced his early and adolescent life. In his two sonnets. " *The Church Porches*, he clearly expresses the spiritual attraction he finds in the peace, calm, and beauty of the church. But he also describes how the rival claims of the noisy, vulgar, but vital world outside withdraw him from its precincts, and

in the early version of 'Words Worth, entitled 'Pax Vobis, he tells the same story , although in its later version it is the church that wins its battle against the world.

In these three poems indeed we have the clue to the deep division in Rossetti's nature and to the inner conflict it created, however submerged and unconscious as the year passed. It was in fact his own closest personal experience of a typically and genuinely medieval psychology. In actual life, as often in his art, Rossetti's rational, practical , objective qualities are generally dominant. In such moods he escaped from his pseudo-medieval, idealistic, romantic dreams , to express with Latin realism the world about him , as in 'My Sister 's Sleep, and with the evident influence of Browning, A Last Confession had he written more objective poetry of this kind, his popularity greater to -day, but he much underestimated 'My Sister's Sleep , and apart from a few objective representations of himself and his moods, such as The Woodspurge and 'And old Song Ended, or the excellent and overlooked , 'Antwerp and Bruges, he preferred to emphasize in the fashion of the day , as more 'poetic, the emotional, subjective element, even in this more objective kind of verse , as in 'Dante at Verona, or , also in the manner of the time , as in the otherwise excellent 'Jenny', to blur his realism with sentimentality.

Indeed if we include 'The House of Life' we must say that the great majority of Rossetti's poems are of this personal, objective subjective kind, a mingling of external descriptive details with a restrained or as often unrestrained emotional element forming the main them. Sometimes, as in 'The Hill Summit, the personal , emotional element is suggested in the Wordsworthian manner, rather than described, and then Rossetti acquires a delicacy of poetic quality usually absent from his verse. In an age, which as Macaulay shrewdly saw, usually confused pathos with poetry, Rossetti's Latin temperament generally protects him from such popular lapses into the obviously pathetic.

It is in his simple yet intimate lyrics, which increase in his later years as sentimentality and the dream worlds disintegrate to leave only a permanent undertone of regret amidst the real worlds of personal experience, that Rossetti achieves some of his happiest examples of self-expression 'Suddent Light' The Portrait, 'A Little while , A New years Burden, Even So . All are touched with the later sadness which deepens in the poems written amidst the loneliness and dejection of his last years : 'Parted Presence , A Death Parting Alas, So Long, Insomnia, Spheral Change of his last years, Parted Presence , A Death -Parting, Alas, So Long Insomnia Spheral Change.

All these show how essentially lyrical was Rossetti's poetic genius. But despite Shelly's hold upon his early enthusiasms, and the frequency evident of Sheelley's influence upon his poetic though, subjects and emotional attitudes, despite also his enthusiasm for Browning, the poets whom , in his decorative, detailed poetice imagery Rossetti most resembles are Tennyson and, above all, Keats. his enthusiasm for Keats carried into his painting and poetry, led Rossetti to be an unconscious but important influence upon the later Aesthetic Movement at the close of the century. The aesthetes, Pater Wilde, and the rent, were

not mistaken in paying homage to Rossetti as one of their founders, although he intensely disliked the Aesthetic Movement and what he considered to be their self-conscious, effeminate aestheticism.

Although Rossetti's attitude to painting, poetry and life itself is essentially aesthetic, his imagery, décor character, and even his language, are essentially solid and real, like those of Wordsworth and Keats. Nowhere do we find in his work the flame like, delicate, elusive quality of Shelley, or the more solid but still dream like quality of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Only, if anywhere, in a stanza or two of *Loves Nocturn*, does Rossetti attempt to create that visionary, fairy tale atmosphere. Elsewhere his dream worlds and its inhabitants, however idealized or romantic their emotions are never of such stuff as dreams are made of. The Blessed Damozel in heaven is no spirit, as substantial, as fleshly as those baroque angels who, on the roofs of Italian Churches, so daringly and glaringly defy the laws of gravitation, she unwittingly, in her too evident corporeality which made the bar she leaned on warm counteracts the spiritual intention of the poem. This is a frequent defect in Rossetti's love poetry. Although he asserted with complete sincerity, in *Hearts Hope*.

The soul I know not from thy body, nor

Three from myself, neither our love from God,²

'Body's Beauty' is often more evident in his imagery than 'Soul's Beauty': to borrow the titles of two of his sonnets. Throughout *The House of Life* particularly there is a heaviness of line which reminds us of the same quality in his nude drawing, *The Rainbow*.

Thus, Rossetti's preference for such solid and substantial form of lyric as the ballad and sonnet is not surprising. Like his medievalism, his ballads like him to the Gothicism of the late eighteenth century and Romantic Movement with its ballad revival. But there is nothing really medieval in Rossetti's ballads. His nearest imitation in actual, of bluff comedy and sentiment, *Sister Helen* overpraised like Rossetti's ballads, though it suffers from Rossetti's tendency dramatic, and also from evident immaturities of organization and technique. It is however a powerful and memorable poem *Eden Bower* and *Troy Town*, both composed in 1869 are somewhat overburdened like *Sister Helen*, by too monotonous and frequently repetitive a refrain. The so-called *Ship* and *The King's Tragedy* are really long narrative poems such as were especially popular in Rossetti's day but in general the modern reader will find little reasons why, in telling these tales, verse was preferred to prose. Nevertheless one modern critic who is also a poet of distinction still finds them exciting which is what Rossetti intended them to be. Two of them, as their titles indicate, are historical, but remind us of Campbell rather than of Scott. The third *Rose Mary* is passion and the punishment of unchastity. The signs of evident, particularly in the songs of the spirits of the magic *Beryl*. His attempt of emulate the admired Coleridge as a creator of the supernatural here falls far below its earlier and obvious parallel.

In this final volume *Ballads and Sonnets*, published in 1881 there appeared the complete "The House of Life, in which all but one of the series of 1870 were incorporated sequence. Swinburne was not mistaken where he was in the House of Life Rossetti's finest poetic achievement. In it he gave expression to his most profound experience, his deepest personal emotions and aspirations. Its theme and inspiration are the two most passionate relationship of his life his early love for Elizabeth Siddal and his late love for Mrs Morris. The sequence is obscure, as indeed it was meant to be within reason, but in fact, without biographical illumination even its general poetic significance is lost.

Rossetti was one of the leading poets of Pre Raphaelite Movement of English literature. He was sun all the other poets of of the Romantic poets and the ancient Italian Poet Dante. But his originality lies in the treatment, which he gave to his poetry and his painting. he covered many things in his poetry and today he stands alone at the top as the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement.

1. *The Seal Limits Poems 1870*, G.D. Rossetti.
2. *Hearts Hope Poems 1870*, G.D. Rossetti