

THE MEDIEVALISM OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Department of  
English for the degree of Master of Arts.

*Approved.*

*7 October, 1935.*

The University of British Columbia

October - 1935.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

"Thou knew'st that island far away and lone  
Whose shores are as a harp, where billows break  
In spray of music and the breezes shake  
O'er spicy seas a woof of colour and tone,  
While that sweet music echoes like a moan  
In the island's heart, and sighs around the lake  
Where, watching fearfully a watchful snake,  
A Damsel weeps upon her emerald throne.

Life's ocean, breaking round thy senses shore,  
Struck golden song as from the strand of day:  
For us the joy, for thee the fell foe lay;--  
Pain's blinking snake around the fair isle's core,  
Turning to sighs the enchanted sounds that play  
Around thy lovely island evermore."

This sonnet was written by Mr. Theodore Watts for Rossetti shortly before the latter's death, but addressed, for the sake of disguise, to Heine. It describes with extraordinary charm the regions of romance to which we are transported by the magic of Rossetti's art. Not for him the social and industrial struggles, the political controversies, or the scientific arguments which occupied the attention of so many men of the Victorian era. What mattered it if Gladstone passed mild reform bills, if Queen Victoria objected to the entry of women into the medical profession, or if man were proved to be descended from an ape? His brain was haunted with dreams of beauty,--visions of slender damsels, gallant knights, and radiant angels,--which he must capture on paper or canvas before they escaped him forever.

So, absorbed in his painting and his poetry, he was

content to forget the great city and indeed the whole world outside his own gates. Politicians, reformers, and scientists meant nothing to him. He must catch the last rays of the setting sun as they poured in through his studio window, changing the golden tints on his canvas to a blood red. He turned again to the flaming sky, spellbound by the glory that met his gaze. And then, as he looked, slowly a face seemed to form itself against the glass--a white, upturned face framed in the halo of its coppery-golden hair. Lizzie, of course, watching him at work as she so often did at the end of the day. So natural was it to see her there that for a full moment the truth did not come to him. Lizzie! But Lizzie was dead! It was a full year since he had come home to find that loved face lifeless on the pillow with the empty bottle of laudanum nearby. Lizzie! And he stood staring, awe-struck, afraid even to move. Then as he looked it seemed to him that it was no longer Lizzie seated before a window in London which he saw, but Dante's Beatrice, on a balcony overlooking a street in Florence. Lizzie--Beatrice. Were they the same? And if so, who was he who bore the name of Dante? Overpowered by his thoughts, he closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again there was only the sunlight streaming into the room. But she had been there! He had seen his Lizzie just as she had looked in life; and whether it had been merely a trick of his imagination or whether her spirit had truly taken back



its human form for a few brief moments, he could not tell--  
"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio----."--The  
dead Beatrice, the dead Lizzie, his love for her, and their  
"dead deathless hours" spent together--all were so inextricably  
mingled in his mind that the past and the present, the living  
and the dead seemed all one to him. But something he could do  
to commemorate the strangely sweet experience. He painted  
Lizzie's face as he had seen it that afternoon, with lips half  
parted and heavy eyelids covering the tired eyes. He added a  
dove bringing to her quiet hands the scarlet poppy of eternal  
sleep, and, in the background, little figures of Love and  
Dante watching sadly. It was called Beata Beatrix.

In such visions of love and beauty were centered all  
Rossetti's interests. To him the present was merely a place  
for living, not for dreaming. But the Middle Ages with their  
mystic faith, their recognition of the lordship of love, and  
their gallant knights and lovely ladies, were as a magic land  
of faerie. To the Middle Ages belonged his beloved Dante and  
"that Paradisal Love of his" which glorified Beatrice into a  
creature almost divine. And there too were found the impress-  
ive ritual and the quaint legends of a medieval Church which,  
with its insistence on the dualism of life, the complete  
fusion of the physical and the spiritual, appealed to him far  
more strongly than the conventional Protestantism of his own  
day. As for the utterly selfish materialism of the Victorian

Middle Class, (obsessed, as Matthew Arnold remarked, by two fears--the fear of bankruptcy and the fear of eternal damnation) he had for it neither sympathy nor understanding. He sought not wealth but beauty; and to him it was to be found in its highest form in the romance and mysticism of the Middle Ages.

His work, therefore, constantly harks back to Medieval times. Settings, characters, imagery, thought,--all belong much more truly to the days of Chivalry than to the Victorian era. It is this feeling of antiquity in his work which is termed "medievalism". In the following pages I shall endeavour to show the sources of this characteristic and to demonstrate how completely it permeated all his work.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY TENDENCIES TOWARD MEDIEVALISM

"Large oaks from little acorns grow", says the old proverb; and the medievalism of Rossetti, though apparently strangely incongruous in Victorian England, really developed as naturally as does the great tree from the tiny seed. In this case, it seems to me, Rossetti's childhood surroundings and especially his reading were responsible for the medieval trend of his mind. The son of an Italian patriot and exile, Gabriele Pasquale Giuseppe Rossetti, and Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, nee Polidori, who was also half Italian, he was born on 12 May, 1828, at No. 38 Charlotte Street, Portland Place, London. His father was a professor of Italian at King's College and an ardent student of Dante; his mother, in the words of William Michael Rossetti,<sup>1</sup> was "well bred and well educated, a constant reader, full of clear perception and sound sense on a variety of subjects, and perfectly qualified to hold her own in any society." The boy's surroundings, then, were distinctly such as to encourage literary gifts.

From his parents, especially his mother, Dante Gabriel, his brother, William Michael, and his two sisters, Lucy and Christina, received all their early education. Italian they learned as easily as English, for it was spoken

1. Rossetti, W.M., Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, (Ellis and Elvey, London, 1895) vol. I, p. 21.

constantly in the home. The rudiments of Christian knowledge they received from their mother who was a deeply religious woman. And under her guidance little Dante Gabriel began the reading which influenced his mind so profoundly in later years.

His earliest favourite, according to his brother, was Hamlet; that is, certain scenes from the play which were printed along with an outline of the story. This was when he was four or five years of age. Soon other Shakespearian plays followed of which the best loved were, perhaps, the trilogy of Henry VI, The Tempest, Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Henry IV, Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, and Macbeth. At about the same time he read and greatly admired Goethe's Faust, a translation of Schiller's Fridolin, (which, William Michael remarks, they thought "feeble stuff") and the Dragon of Rhodes. Surely this was no bad beginning for a future poet; and it is interesting to observe that the medieval interest was already present.

It was farther developed in the next "immense favourite"--the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott. A relative gave the boy a pocket edition of Marmion and, to quote his brother again, "he ramped through it, and recited whole pages at a stretch". Then came the Lay of the Last Minstrel, Lady of the Lake, Lord of the Isles, and Rokeby, all of which were beloved only less than Marmion. At the same time he was devouring the Arabian Nights; and soon after, the Waverly

Novels--Ivanhoe, Kennilworth, Quentin Durward and the others. As if these were not enough to develop his taste for romance and adventure in the fascinating Middle Ages, he was enjoying along with them such alluring books as Keightley's Fairy Mythology, Monk Lewis' verse-collection Tales of Wonder, and the old ballad Chevy Chase. Small wonder that his poetry is so filled with medieval tales of magic and supernatural events.

Perhaps to counteract this sort of reading, he also became familiar with books of another sort--Carleton's Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Gay's Fables, Pascal Bruno (translated from Dumas), and a short poem by Fitzgreene Halleck, Marco Bozaris, concerning an incident in the Greek war of independence. Burns' poems he did not enjoy because of the dialect; Lamb's Tales he "skimmed and slighted". But there was John Gilpin, and, of the usual literature of childhood, nursery rhymes, The Peacock at Home, and all the old fairy tales. His mother kept the children supplied with the regulation stories of good little boys and girls who were rewarded and naughty ones who were punished--which tales William Michael records that they enjoyed about as much as most children do. Also they read some of Miss Edgeworth's stories for children, Day's Sandford and Merton, Mrs. Sherwood's The Fairchild Family, The Son of a Genius by Mrs. Holland, and an illustrated edition of Stories from English History.

In the early days, it is to be noted, Dante was read not at all. He was one of the "libri mistici" which the children's father studied. Although constantly referred to and spoken of he could not, they believed, be read and enjoyed as were Shakespeare and Scott. It was not until Dante Gabriel was considerably older that he discovered for himself the beauties of his great namesake. As he relates in the Preface to Dante and his Circle<sup>1</sup>: "The first associations I have are connected with my father's devoted studies, which, from his own point of view, have done so much towards the general investigation of Dante's writings. Thus, in those early days, all around me partook of the influence of the great Florentine; till, from viewing it as a natural element, I also, growing older, was drawn within the circle." And in the words of William Michael<sup>2</sup>: "Dante Alighieri was a sort of banshee in the Charlotte Street houses; his shriek audible even to familiarity, but the message thereof not scrutinized." With this important exception, however, it is clear that Dante Gabriel's fondness for things medieval was already receiving definite development from the bulk of his early reading.

In 1836 Rossetti first went to school. But although he doubtless developed new interests through his associates there, his love for books did not diminish. All through his

1. Rossetti, D.G., Collected Works, (Ellis and Elvey, London, 1890) vol. II, p. XV.

2. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 64.

boyhood years his taste continued to develop in the direction it had already taken. The great favourite after Scott was, we are told, Byron with his marvelous tales of romance. The Seige of Corinth came first, then Mazeppa, Manfred, The Corsair, and others. Childe Harold, with its long descriptive and reflective passages, did not particularly appeal to him. At about the same time he was enjoying the Iliad, though later the Odessey was his favourite. Nor were contemporary authors neglected. Dickens' Nicholas Nickleby which appeared in 1838-9 was greatly appreciated; it was followed by Oliver Twist, The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge, and the rest. Then there was a fascinating serial named Chivalry and another called Legends of Terror; likewise The Seven Champions of Christendom filled with the marvels of pseudo-chivalry. Home's Every-day Book and the Newgate Calendar were also very popular--especially the latter with its accounts of murderers and other interesting criminals. Of well-known novels there were Bulwer's Rienzi and Last Days of Pompeii; and of minor romances, three serials, Robin Hood and Wat Tyler, both by Pierce Egan the younger, and Ada the Betrayed or Murder at the Smithy by some author whose name was not revealed. Gil Blas and Don Quixote were read but not particularly admired. But in his early school days perhaps his greatest favourite was a series entitled Brigand Tales, with coloured illustrations. These were followed by Dramatic Tales, also highly appreciated.



These books, his brother tells us, practically constituted his reading up to the time he left school at the age of fourteen. We notice that they are practically all English; in Italian he had read little beyond Ariosto; in French perhaps Hugo's Notre Dame de Paris. At any rate, soon after, he became very fond of Hugo's prose and verse. Likewise we may observe that there was practically no "solid" reading. Good poetry, however, there was in plenty, and a wide selection of the medieval and chivalric tales which left their imprint so clearly upon his work.

Nor were the years of his life as a student, first at Cary's Art Academy, later at the Royal Academy, devoid of development for the same interest. During his Byronic period he became acquainted with the poems of Shelley. His brother tells us that<sup>1</sup>. "He bought a small pirated Shelley and surged through its pages like a flame." Keats followed; also old British Ballads, Mrs. Browning, Alfred de Musset, Dumas, Tennyson, Edgar Poe, Coleridge, Blake, Sir Henry Taylor's Phillip Van Artevelde, and Thomas Hood. Dr. Hake's romance Vates, Hoffmann's Contes Fantastiques in French, in English, Chamisso's Peter Schlemihel and Lamotte-Fouqué's Undine and other stories supplied the Teutonic element in legend and romance. About 1846 he became acquainted with the prose Stories after Nature of Charles Wells and his drama Joseph

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit. vol. I, p. 100.



and his Brethren, both of which he admired enormously.

Earlier than most of these the gloomy horrors of Melmoth the Wanderer by the Irish writer Manturin held him spellbound; and in the same tone were his Montorio, Women, The Wild Irish Boy, The Albigenses, and the drama Bertram. Although in a different strain from his other reading and lacking the medieval interest Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Richard Savage by Charles Whitehead were also immensely enjoyed. At this time, too, Thackery began to succeed Dickens in interest (though afterwards the Tale of Two Cities attracted Rossetti greatly); he had read the early tales such as Fitzboodle's Confessions, Barry Lyndon, and The Paris Sketchbook before Vanity Fair appeared in 1846. Later a novel of Lady Malet, Violet or the Danseuse was a favourite, and a translation of Meinhold's Sidonia the Sorceress which was preferred to the Amber Witch by the same author. At length everything took a secondary place to Browning whose poems he read with tireless interest, finding in them not only the romance and medievalism which he so loved, but also passion, perception of character, art, and interest. His brother tells us that<sup>1</sup>. "Allowing for a labarynthine passage here and there, Rossetti never seemed to find this poet difficult to understand; he discovered in him plenty of sonorous rhythmical effects, and revelled in what, to some other readers, was mere crabbedness." Three years before this he had come under the influence of Dante, for whose poetry his

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 102.

love steadily increased. And about 1845 he began his translations of the early Italian poets.

With Rossetti's reading during his years as an art student we may reasonably conclude an account of books which must have had a formative influence upon his mind and therefore upon his work. That the medieval quality of his writing was clearly inspired by his literary background is proved by the account, as given by his brother, of some of his earliest compositions. His first "poem", William Rossetti tells us, was written when the boy was five or six years of age. At that time, as we have said, he had been reading Shakespeare; and so he wrote a "drama" entitled The Slave in three scenes and two acts. The characters were "Don Manuel, a Spanish Lord; Traitor, an officer; Slave, a Servant to Traitor; Mortimer, an English knight; Guards, Messengers, etc." <sup>1</sup> "No plot is apparent", remarks William Rossetti, "only constant objurgation and fighting." <sup>2</sup> But the blank verse in which it is written is correct and has a faint echo of some of Shakespeare's lines:

"Ho, if thou be alive, come out and fight me!"

"Down, slave, I dare thee on! Coward thou diest!"

"But yet I will not live to see thee thus -" <sup>3</sup>

Just as he first echoed Shakespeare his earliest love, he next found inspiration in the medieval tales of Scott.

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., Vol. I, p. 66.

2. Ibid, p. 66.

3. Ibid, p. 65.

In 1840 he wrote a prose tale entitled Roderick and Rosabella--a Story of the Round Table--an account of a lady captured by a wicked "Marauder" and finally rescued by her own knight. His first printed poem, Sir Hugh the Heron, was apparently begun and almost completed not much later than the tale--about 1841. It was finished in 1843 at the urgency of his grandfather Polidori who promised that it should be printed on his private printing press. So it was concluded and made its formal appearance marked on the title page "for private circulation only". Rossetti later destroyed all the remaining copies available and left behind him a memorandum to the effect that the poem was only a childish effusion and not to be included among his printed works. But as it too tells a tale of medieval romance it is interesting as showing how strongly his mind was influenced in this one direction.

The only other composition to be noticed is another poem, William and Mary, written when the boy was fifteen. "Its style", says his brother, "is compounded of Walter Scott and the old Scottish ballads; it may also present some trace of Burger's Lenore." <sup>1</sup>. At any rate we are again in the Middle Ages where a wicked knight slays a good one, hurls the good one's lady-love into a moat, and is killed by an avenging bolt of lightning. Once more, we see, the medieval interest.

Having attempted to discover from what sources and

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 85.

by what influences Rossetti acquired his medievalism, we may now turn to the poems themselves in an effort to find in what respects this love of the romance and mystery of long ago manifested itself, and how, in his own inimitable way, he unbars those

"Charm'd magic casements, opening on  
the foam  
Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn."

### CHAPTER III

#### OBVIOUS EVIDENCES OF ROSSETTI'S MEDIEVALISM

What I have termed Rossetti's Medievalism first makes itself evident to the reader in certain very obvious, one might almost say superficial, aspects, such as old verse forms and the use of archaic words and quaint figures of speech. It is only after a while that we discover such things to be merely the outward signs of the poet's entire mental outlook. His whole mind was permeated with the dreams and ideas of a bygone age, and it is in this abstraction and mysticism that his true medievalism lies. But since the outward evidences first occupy one's attention we shall consider them now and discuss the deeper, truer medievalism at greater length later.

We notice at once that Rossetti employs verse forms which link him to the poets of the Middle Ages--the sonnet, the ballad, the metrical romance. In order to show clearly that they do so link him, I shall briefly trace the development of each of these forms and then discuss our poet's use of it. He is, of course, outstanding for his many exquisite sonnets, especially those of the House of Life sequence. And the sonnet is distinctly a medieval form. It was used first in Italy as early as the middle of the thirteenth century. Dante's contemporaries and his immediate predecessors, such as Guido Guinicelli of Bologna, Jacopo da Lentino, and Rustico

di Fillipo, employed it frequently. The Italian sonnet consists of two parts: an octet formed by a two rhyme double quatrain with closed rhyme scheme--that is, a b b a a b b a; and a sestet with either two or three rhymes, as c d c d c d, c d d c c d, c d e c d e, or c d e e d c. The true Italian form never closes with a couplet. A sonnet by Dante's friend, Guido Cavalcanti, and translated by Rossetti will serve as an illustration:

Sonnet

"He interprets Dante's Dream, related in the first sonnet of the Vita Nuova".

"Unto my thinking, thou beheld'st all worth,  
All joy, as much of good as man may know,  
If thou wert in his power who here below  
Is honour's righteous lord throughout this earth.  
Where evil dies, even there he has his birth,  
Whose justice out of pity's self doth grow.  
Softly to sleeping persons he will go,  
And, with no pain to them, their hearts draw forth.  
Thy heart he took, as knowing well, alas!  
That Death had claimed thy lady for a prey:  
In fear whereof he fed her with thy heart.  
But when he seemed in sorrow to depart,  
Sweet was thy dream; for by that sign, I say,  
Surely the opposite shall come to pass."

This sonnet, it will be noticed, has the two distinct parts and the required rhyme scheme, the octet being a b b a a b b a and the sestet, c d e e d c.

It was this form of the sonnet which Sir Thomas Wyatt brought to England about the Middle of the sixteenth Century. But both he and his fellow worker, the Earl of Surrey, quickly realized that to follow the rules of the sonnet in every

particular was a difficult task in the English language. Both, therefore, introduced such irregularities as a final rhymed couplet in the sestet. The lesser sonnet writers who followed them all did the same; and even Sir Phillip Sidney, much of whose reputation depends on his work as a sonnet writer, did not use the pure Italian form. His rhyme scheme for the Astrophel and Stella sonnets is, for the octet, a b b a a b b a; and for the sestet, c d c d e e or c c d e e d; which is an Italian octet with either a regular Shakespearian or an irregular Italian sestet. Michael Drayton, whose sonnets may almost rank with those of Shakespeare himself, used chiefly what has since become known as the Shakespearian sonnet. It consists of three alternately rhyming quatrains and a couplet, thus: a b a b c d c d e f e f g g.

"Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part;  
Nay, I have done: You get no more of me;  
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,  
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.  
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,  
And when we meet at any time again,  
Be it not seen in either of our brows,  
That we one jot of former love retain.  
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,  
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,  
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of Death,  
And Innocence is closing up his eyes,  
Now if thou woulds't, when all have given him over,  
From Death to Life thou might'st him yet recover."

Then came Edmund Spencer with his beautiful sequence of eighty-eight sonnets. He too used the Shakespearian form but made a variation in the octet, using only three rhymes, thus: a b a b b c b c. The sestet was regular. But it was

Shakespeare who finally established the sonnet which now bears his name. Discussion may still rage over the Italian form, but since his Sonnets there is only one form of the Shakespearian sonnet: a b a b c d c d e f e f g g.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds  
Or bends with the remover to remove:-  
O no! it is an ever fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star of every wandering bark  
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the end of doom:-  
If this be error, and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

These early poets, we may notice, had love as their chief subject. So did the Italians. But Milton put the form to other uses. He wrote political and national sonnets and in his mighty hand the dainty love song became, on occasion, a sonorous war chant. One can hardly imagine a greater contrast in tone than that between his sonnet on the massacre in Piemont and Drayton's delicate farewell to his lady. In form too he brought a change. Influenced by his acquaintance with contemporary Italian poets and feeling perhaps that Shakespeare had reached the summit of achievement in his own form, he returned to the Italian sonnet, but frequently joined the octet and the sestet so that either there was no definite break between the two parts, or the division came in an unusual place. The result is an irregular but, in Milton's hand at



least, a powerful sonnet.

"Avenge O Lord thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones  
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;  
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old,  
When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,  
Forget not; in thy book record their groans  
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold  
Slain by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd  
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans  
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they  
To Heaven. Their martyr'd blood and ashes sow  
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway  
The triple tyrant; that from these may grow  
A hundred fold, who having learned thy way  
Early may fly the Babylonian woe."

After the lyrically arid period of the Neo-Classical Era, we find Wordsworth writing sonnets which, although frequently quite irregular in form, have a vision and a tenderness hitherto unknown in the English sonnet. He combined feeling and intellect, the sweetness of the Elizabethan writers with the austerity of Milton, to produce a sonnet of new power and beauty.

"The World is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The winds that will be howling at all hours  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not--Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,--  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

Keats, so admired by Rossetti, also wrote beautiful but quite irregular sonnets. So did Shelley and Byron. But

it is in the work of Rossetti, at least among the poets since the Romantic Movement, that the sonnet finds its greatest master. Fresh from his translations of the early Italian sonneteers, he began himself to write sonnets using quite naturally the Italian much more frequently than the Shakespearian form. He does at times, however, employ a final rhymed couplet. Love's Baubles, for example, has it; so have Winged Hours, Mid-Rapture, and Her Gifts. But many of the other two rhyme sestets have the first, fourth and fifth lines chiming against the second, third, and sixth, thus avoiding it. Such are The Love Letter, Passion and Worship, The Kiss, Love's Lovers and others.

It is in the great sequence, The House of Life, that some of Rossetti's most beautiful sonnets are to be found. Consisting of one hundred and one sonnets, it opens with what may be considered as an expression of the poet's idea of the purpose of a sonnet. As a sort of manifesto it perhaps deserves to be quoted:

"A sonnet is a moment's monument,--  
Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,  
Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,  
Of its own arduous fulness reverent:  
Carve it in ivory or in ebony,  
As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see  
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

A sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,--its converse, to what Power 'tis due:-  
Whether for tribute to august appeals  
Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,  
It serve; or 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,  
In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death."

To the "dead deathless" hours, then, did Rossetti dedicate his sonnets; and it is true that they cover most of the phases of life--visions of love and nature, ideas on art, beauty, and philosophy, thoughts on approaching death. But since to Rossetti the House of Life was almost the House of Love, we find more sonnets concerned with this subject than with any other; and by this characteristic too he is linked to the medieval poets. To prove that the early sonneteers, both Italian and English, did write almost exclusively of love, we may bring as evidence the sonnets of Dante--A Curse for a Fruitless Love, Of Beatrice de Potinari, and the sonnets of the Vita Nuova; those of Guido Cavalcanti--In Praise of Guido Orlando's Lady, Of his Pain from a New Love; and the sonnet sequences of the Earl of Surrey, Sir Phillip Sidney, and Edmund Spencer. Similarly, of the one hundred and one sonnets of the House of Life the first fifty-nine deal exclusively with love in all its phases. Moreover, in these poems love is credited with the same powers and addressed in the same terms as in the poems of the early sonneteers. In fact, Rossetti's sonnets place him in the direct line of the medieval Italian sonnet writers and their followers in England.

The ballad too, with its sources lost in the mists of tradition, attracted Rossetti greatly and he made several brilliant imitations of the old form. The exact origin of the ballads has been the subject of considerable discussion

among scholars. But whether they were composed by the community as a whole as an accompaniment to a choral dance, or were the work of individual poets whose identity has entirely disappeared, the fact remains that they existed and were transmitted by word of mouth long before they were ever put into manuscript form. They have, therefore, a directness and simplicity not found in any other form of verse. They are not consciously artistic; they merely tell their story in the shortest and most effective way possible. Modern poets think about their subject--stand off and view it first from one angle and then from another, enriching it with vivid and unexpected comparisons and figures of speech. But the ballads are chiefly concerned with their action; they "only speak right on" without reflection or description and tell their story in the way best to be remembered, for it was only in the memory of the people that they lived.

The outstanding characteristics of the ballad,--the repetition, the refrain found so often, and the, to us, quaint diction--have many times been imitated by later writers, but never with perfect success. Sir Walter Scott came perhaps the closest to the old form, but even he failed to capture completely the simplicity and artlessness of the traditional ballad. And Keats' famous La Belle Dame sans Merci, although undoubtedly a charming poem, is clearly only an imitation ballad.

"She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna dew;  
And sure in language strange she said,  
'I love thee true'."

The underlined words are all beautiful, suggestive, and therefore deliberately artistic; but a true ballad has no deliberate art.

Rossetti's imitation ballads are also very effective. Sister Helen has as its theme the revenge of a deserted woman and is based on a popular superstition--common features of the ballad. It uses incremental repetition in the successive arrivals of the two brothers, the father, and the bride of the doomed man, and also in the weird refrain which, with slight variations, sounds like the tolling of a bell across the entire poem.

"O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Three days today between Hell and Heaven!"

Also the story is told all in dialogue, another frequent characteristic of the traditional ballad. The bride is fair, as medieval beauties always were, and the knights are typical figures with their white plumes and galloping steeds. But the poem is obviously artistic. The mere use of the strange echo of the girl's name in the refrain--"Hell and Heaven"--shows this. Some of Helen's replies are sarcastic,-

"O tell him I fear the frozen dew,  
Little brother."

Others carry a double meaning-

"The way is long to his son's abode,  
Little brother."

While the slightly changing refrain echoes the girl's words and the sense of the verse. At the tolling of the bell we find:

"His dying Knell, between Hell and Heaven."

And after her question as to where the horsemen ride from:

"Whence should they come, between Hell  
and Heaven?"

All this is deliberate art and as such is alien to the traditional ballad. But the poem is, nevertheless, an extremely powerful and brilliantly clever imitation of the ballad form.

Stratton Water with its tale of the deserted girl and its typical ballad metre also brings us close to the old ballad, though the happy ending is seldom found in the traditional form. There is no refrain here, but there is repetition in the telling of the tale:

"What's yonder far below that lies  
So white against the slope?  
'O it's a sail o' your bonny barks  
The waters have washed up.'

'But I have never a sail so white  
And the water's not yet there!'  
'O it's the swans o' your bonny lake  
The rising flood doth scare.'"

Moreover Lord Sands is looking out from the castle in the traditional way and he wraps the girl in a green mantle--the most approved colour for women's clothes. The opposition of the family to the union of the lovers was also a commonplace of the ballads. But there is rather more description and

explanation here than would be found in a traditional ballad; while such a verse as the following definitely marks the poem as a modern composition:

"O pleasant is the gaze of life  
And sad is death's blind head;  
But awful are the living eyes  
In the face of one thought dead!"

The true ballad would merely have told what it saw without reasoning about it.

Eden Bower and Troy Town are ballad imitations only in form. They have the usual four beat line, the frequently found refrain, and are told chiefly in dialogue as are so many of the traditional ballads. But the refrains in both have an artificial ring and the rhyme schemes are not particularly simple; in Troy Town a b c a b c and in Eden Bower, a b c c. Moreover the refrain--like repetition of the words "heart's desire" in the fourth line of every verse of Troy Town, while effective, is obviously a poetic trick. So is the ending of the first line of every verse of Eden Bower with a proper name--Adam, Lilith, Eve, Abel. The themes too are hardly such as would be found in the traditional ballad which told of events familiar to the common people. Troy Town has a purely literary and classical source and Eden Bower is based on a legend of Jewish mythology. Also the characters are more clearly designated than they would be in a true ballad. "Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen," begins Troy Town; and Eden Bower opens with

"It was Lilith, the wife of Adam,  
    (Sing Eden Bower!)  
Not a drop of her blood was human,  
But she was made like a soft sweet  
    woman."

The old ballads would have gone right into the story without any explanation.

In short, Rossetti's poems are clever and very artistic imitations of the ballad form. They are without question far more beautiful, more polished than the simple old traditional ballads; but they lack spontaneity. They might be termed synthetic ballads--the productions of art, not of the people. As Professor Gummere remarks:<sup>1</sup>. "Art can create far beyond the beauty of sea-shells, and on occasion can exactly reproduce them; but it cannot fashion or imitate their murmur of the sea."

Still another form especially popular in the Middle Ages and employed by Rossetti is the metrical romance. These tales of adventure told in verse can trace their origin back to the wonderful poems of Homer. They are to be found in all ages and all nations, but seemed to flourish particularly, in Europe, during and just after the Crusades. It has therefore been argued that the Crusaders themselves brought back with them many tales of wonder heard in the East. By others such romances are attributed to the Scandinavians and by still

1. Gummere, F.B., The Popular Ballad, (Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York, 1907), p. 321.



others to the Provencals. But it is impossible to say exactly how they arose in Europe. Although usually termed an epic, the famous Chanson de Roland is considered by certain scholars to be the first European metrical romance. It is mentioned by a monk who, apparently, died in 1142. Numerous others followed, chiefly in France. The earliest romance in English is Horn-child which appeared towards the end of the reign of Edward I and is an abridgement of a French original of two centuries earlier. Two of the most famous of English romances are Guy of Warwick, which is first mentioned about 1340, and Bevis of Southampton, from a thirteenth century French poem. By some authorities Chaucer is considered to be the first to have written original romances in English. The Knight's Tale is an outstanding example of his skill in this field; while in the Rhyme of Sir Thopas he burlesques the ridiculous features of the form. The number of metrical romances is great; in almost every European nation they are to be found telling tales of marvelous adventure in days long past. Le Mort Arthure, Sir Cauline, John the Reve, Sir Lionel, The Greene Knight, Merlin, The Marriage of Sir Gawaine--their very names sound like bugle calls summoning us back across the years to "old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago."

Perhaps Rossetti's most typical metrical romance is Rose Mary--the story of Rose Mary, her faithless lover, and her two struggles with the spirits of the magic beryl stone,

which would foretell the future, but only to those without sin. The faithless lover is, of course, a common figure in all romances, while the supernatural element here supplied by the mystic stone with its powers of life and death is found in numerous tales--The Marriage of Sir Gawain, The Greene Knight, Chaucer's incompleated Squire's Tale, to mention only a few. The medieval setting too, with its knights and ladies, is typical of the old romances. Even the exquisite descriptions--that of the beryl, for instance, or the wondrous chapel where it lay--call to mind such detailed descriptive passages as those telling of the three shrines in Chaucer's Knight's Tale. But there is in Rossetti's poem a use of delicately beautiful words, figures, and images which show it to be, like his ballads, a modern imitation of the old form. The following verse, for example, would never have been found in a poem actually written in the Middle Ages,

"With shuddering light 'twas stirred  
and strewn  
Like the cloud nest of the wading moon:  
Freaked it was as the bubble's ball,  
Rainbow hued through a misty pall  
Like the middle light of the waterfall."

Compare this with such a medieval description as that of the shrine of Venus in Chaucer's Knight's Tale:

"First in the temple of Venus maystow se  
Wroght on the wal, ful pitous to biholde,  
The broken slepes, and the sikes colde,  
The sacred teeris, and the waymentinge,  
The firy strokes of the desiryng  
That loves servantz in this lyf enduren.  
The othes that hir covenantz assuren:"

The difference is obvious. The second passage is simply a catalogue of things seen while the first describes through comparisons, attempting to bring the whole picture before the mind's eye by means of connotative words, similies and half truths. In other words, one description is elaborately artistic, the other simple and natural; and it is this which differentiates Rossetti's modern romance from those of the Middle Ages. The same is true of his Staff and Scrip, The Bride's Prelude, and The King's Tragedy. All, because they tell tales of romance and adventure in verse form, deserve to be termed metrical romances; but equally all, by their artistic treatment, their polished perfection, show themselves to be modern imitations of an old form.

In his choice of subjects too we notice at once Rossetti's interest in mediæval days. Not for him the contention for political and social freedom which occupied the interest of such poets as Wordsworth, Shelley, and, in his later days, Swinburne. Of the momentous political changes which in his day were sweeping all Europe, of England's great imperial and commercial advancement then taking place, we find no echo in his poetry; not even the new scientific discoveries so rapidly changing the life of Victorian England are referred to in any way. Indeed only two of all his poems can be considered as at all reflective of contemporary events. The first of these is a sonnet written in his youth, about 1848 or

9, his brother believes, entitled On the Refusal of Aid Between Nations. It laments the apathy with which other countries watched the struggles of Italy and Hungary against Austria. The other is Wellington's Funeral, dated November 1852 and written on the occasion of the burial of the famous man. But, with these exceptions, one might almost read the whole of Rossetti's poetry without receiving a hint of the time or place in which he lived. For instead of writing of his own age and country, he transports us to a medieval world built upon his reading of old tales of chivalry, of the visions of the great Dante, and of the beautiful old tales of Scripture and Church legend. And here we dream with him his beautiful dreams, see his visions of romance, and almost forget, in the joys and sorrows of yesterday's world, the worries and problems of a very troubled today.

The truth of this statement may be proved by a consideration of the subjects and settings of his poems. Of the longer narratives, only one, A Last Confession, can be cited as occurring anywhere but in the Middle Ages. As for the others, Dante at Verona, with its description of the poet in exile, belongs to the beginning of the fourteenth century; The Bride's Prelude, Sister Helen, The Staff and Scrip, and Rose Mary all take us back to the days of chivalry; though exactly when or where the events therein narrated took place does not transpire; while The White Ship and The King's Tragedy come

directly from the pages of medieval history. None, we observe, is modern in its setting.

Of the shorter poems, many give an impression of medievalism through their words and imagery. Such are The Blessed Damozel and Stratton Water. While the love poems--many of the House of Life sonnets and various other poems as Love Lily, A New Year's Burden, Love's Nocturn--although without definite period breath the spirit of Courtly Love glorified in the writings of Dante. Though timeless they seem, in their insistence on the lordship of love, to belong much more to the Middle Ages than to the Victorian era. Love is regarded as the master of life, the bearer of all hope or despair, the ultimate goal of existence. And the poet prays,

"Ah, when the wan soul in that  
    golden air  
Between the scripted petals  
    softly blown  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace  
    unknown,--  
Ah! let none other alien spell see'er  
But only the one Hope's one name be there,--  
Not less nor more, but even that word  
    alone."

This adoration of love is not Victorian at all. It is simply an echo of Dante and the love conventions of the Middle Ages. And therefore we are surely justified in considering Rossetti's numerous poems reflecting this feeling as medieval in subject.

Moreover, simply in his use of words, Rossetti shows the medieval trend of his mind. The usual, commonly known words of his own day did not suffice for his requirements. To

create a desired atmosphere, he often deliberately employed words which were archaic or those whose connotation was of the days of old. To the first group belong such as the quaint, manufactured form "herseemed" in the third verse of the Blessed Damozel; the old plural "eyne" for eyes in Dante at Verona; in The Bride's Prelude, "meet" for fitting or suitable, "rood" for cross, "leechcraft" for medicine or surgery, "pleasaunce" for pleasure-ground, and the interjection "grammercy". In Rose Mary we find "zone" for girdle and "oakenshaw" for thicket of oak; in the White Ship, "maugre" for in spite of and "rede" for tale; in The King's Tragedy, "teen" for woe, "stark" for resolute or strong, "bale" for evil, and "ban" for curse. "Ruth" occurs for compassion in Sleepless Dreams; the cherubim in Ave are spoken of as "succinct"; and "soothly" stands for truly in Love's Nocturn.

Even more numerous are the words with a medieval connotation. The passage describing the costumes of Aloyse and her sister in The Bride's Prelude is particularly rich in such forms:

"Against the haloed lattice-panes  
The bridesmaid sunned her breast;  
Then to the glass turned tall and free,  
And braced and shifted daintily  
Her loin-belt through her cote-hardie.

The belt was silver, and the clasp  
Of lozenged arm-bearings;  
A world of mirrored tints minute  
The rippling sunshine wrought intot,  
That flushed her hand and warmed  
her foot.

. . . . .  
"Over her bosom, that lay still,  
The vest was rich in grain,  
With close pearls wholly overset:  
Around her throat the fastenings met  
Of chevasayle and mantelet."

"Cote-hardie", "chevasayle", "mantelet"--what exactly do they mean? Some part of the dress, no doubt, but just what only a student of medievalism such as Rossetti could tell. To the ordinary reader, however, they create the sense of strange richness and antiquity which the poet wished to convey. In The Blessed Damozel, the angels play upon "citherns and citoles", evidently musical instruments of the Middle Ages. In Rose Mary the knight lying in wait for Sir James holds a lance with "blazoned scroll". Moreover

"He seems some lord of title and toll  
With seven squires to his bannerole."

And at once we imagine a powerful medieval baron with power to tax travellers over his roads and numerous retainers to follow him into battle. Even in the House of Life sonnets a medieval atmosphere is produced by the poet's constantly speaking of his beloved as "my lady"--surely an echo of Dante and of the days of Courtly Love. "Even so," he says in Bridal Birth, "my lady stood at gaze"; in Love's Lovers, "my lady only loves the heart of Love"; and in The Portrait, "O Love! let this my lady's picture glow". Always the words bring a vision, not of a girl of the Victorian era with her fashionable frills and bustle, but of a slender damsel in the simple straight gown



worn by women of the Middle Ages, her long hair rippling over her shoulders. Words, mere words, yet the magic of their unspoken meanings transports us momentarily to the world of romance and mystic beauty which is found only in the heart of a dreamer.

The imagery found in these poems is as remarkably medieval as are the words themselves. Constantly the poet creates in the minds of his readers those pictures of the fascinating past which he himself saw so clearly. And so in The Blessed Damozel the maiden is standing on "the rampart of God's house"--evidently a medieval castle; and the Madonna is "the lady Mary" sitting surrounded by her maidens who are engaged in spinning. While the heaven of The Staff and Scrip belongs even more definitely to the Middle Ages, for a tournament takes place there:

"The lists are set in Heaven today,  
The bright pavilions shine;  
Fair hangs thy shield, and none gainsay  
The trumpets sound in sign  
That she is thine."

In The Bride's Prelude we are constantly given little flashes of medieval life as a background to the tale itself.

"By fits there boomed a dull report  
From where i'the hanging tennis-court  
The Bridegroom's retinue made sport."

And we see the quaint figures at play in the summer sun. Later we read,

"I'the almonry, the almoner  
Hard by, had just dispensed



Church dole and march dole."

This was the giving of alms, one of the duties expected of any great medieval family. In The Portrait, not itself a poem concerned with the Middle Ages, there is rather a remarkable image in the comparison of the poet's dead dreams of life with his beloved to the graves of Crusaders in the Holy Land:

"While hopes and aims long lost with her  
Stand round her image side by side,  
Like tombs of pilgrims that have died  
About the Holy Sepulchre."

Quite as characteristically medieval is the imagery found in The House of Life sonnets and other love poems.

"O thou who at Love's hour ecstatically  
Unto my heart dost evermore present  
Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament."

we find in Love's Testament. And in The Dark Glass:

"Lo! what am I to love the lord of all?  
One murmuring shell he gathers from the  
sand,--  
One little heart-flame sheltered in his  
hand."

Both passages recall Dante's famous dream in which he sees Love holding in his hand a flaming heart. The personification of death in Dante's canzone beseeching Death for the life of Beatrice has an echo in Lovesight:

"How then should sound upon Life's  
darkening slope  
The ground whirl of the perished leaves of  
Hope,  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?"

This passage too, though it cannot be traced to any definite source, undoubtedly was inspired by the visions of Dante. It

occurs in Pride of Youth:

"Alas for hourly change! Alas for all  
The loves that from his hand proud  
Youth lets fall,  
Even as the beads of a told rosary!"

And the following, from Through Death to Love, with its conception of love as the ultimate goal of death, must surely be derived from the poet's memory of Dante's meeting with his beloved Beatrice in Paradise:

"Howbeit athwart Death's imminent  
shade doth soar  
One power, than flow of stream or flight  
of dove  
Sweeter to glide around, to brood above.  
Tell me, my heart,--what angel greeted door  
Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing floor  
Hath guest fire fledged as thine whose  
name is Love?"

Such passages, such visions of love and death are reflections of the mysticism of the Middle Ages. They do not belong to the practical, material, and prosaic Victorian era at all, but hark back to an age when the Church insisted upon the most complete fusion of soul and body, the spiritual and the physical. And the personification of love, with his bow and arrows, often holding a flaming heart, and always regarded as a lord, is derived directly from Dante whose love for Beatrice was in itself a mystic union of the purely human passion with which the medieval game of Courtly Love was concerned, and the spiritual adoration which might be bestowed upon a saint. These points will be considered at greater length elsewhere. It is here only necessary to notice the numerous passages

clearly deriving their inspiration from the medieval mysticism of Dante. Having done so, we realize that it is by means of imagery as well as by the use of singly effective words that Rossetti creates for us in his poetry that dream world of romance whose people, with their medieval background, he delighted to portray in glowing colours on his canvass.

But such aspects of Rossetti's medievalism are, as has already been pointed out, merely superficial reflections of his entire outlook. The medievalism which affected so much of his thought forms, as some one has remarked, the keynote of his poetry. In the following sections I shall consider the various aspects of this deeper medievalism and attempt to show how it was reflected in his work.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INFLUENCE OF DANTE AND HIS CIRCLE

Among the various influences which, combined, produce in the work of Rossetti that peculiar quality I have termed "Medievalism", perhaps none is so strong and so widely diffused as that of Dante and the contemporary sonnet writers whose poems Rossetti translated. Not only do we constantly find in his work expressions and imagery which these men might themselves have employed, and which were doubtless inspired by Rossetti's careful study of their work, but often his whole mental outlook seems to come straight from a twelfth century world. Often, of course, as we shall notice, such a state of mind is overlaid with certain modern ideas; but the background still retains its identity and is immediately recognizable. And this medieval attitude to life and love is the really important element of Dante's influence on Rossetti, of which the quaint words and images are merely, so to speak, the symptoms. He also based certain of his poems directly on Dante's life and work. These we shall discuss before considering the effect of the Italian's ~~thought~~ thought upon the mind of Rossetti.

The most important among them, Dante at Verona, is an imaginative picture of Dante's sojourn at the court of Can Grande della Scala at Verona, after his banishment from his beloved Florence. With the insight and sympathy of understanding, Rossetti paints his scornful acceptance of his fate--

"'And if I go, who stays?'--so rose  
His scorn:--'and if I stay, who goes?'"

Then followed his long years of wandering and the early part of his stay at Verona where at first he was held in high esteem.

"At Can La Scala's court, no doubt,  
Due reverence did his steps attend;  
The ushers on his path would bend  
At ingoing as at going out;  
The penmen waited on his call  
At council-board, the grooms in hall."

Pages hushed their chattering at his approach, but the priests

"Grudged ghostly greeting to the man  
By whom, though not of ghostly guild,  
With Heaven and Hell men's hearts were filled."

And the court poets "had for his scorn their hates retort..... like noon flies they vexed him in the ears and eyes." So he lived among the courtiers yet not of them, for always and everywhere his heart and mind were filled with thoughts of Beatrice, of his wonderful vision of Heaven and Hell and of the City which seemed so closely linked to her memory. Until gradually, because he seemed a man set apart, and because as "he spared not to rebuke the mirth, so oft in council he to bitter truth bore testimony" Can La Scala began to resent his presence and changed his friendly attitude for one of "peevish sufference"--a change quickly imitated by the courtiers. But in spite of the constant small insults and even deliberate annoyances, Dante refused to humble himself by complying with the shameful terms imposed by the state upon his return to

Florence. He remained an exile, devoting himself to the task of enshrining his lady forever in the hearts of men. And as the years advanced he still heard the voice which first came to his ears in his ninth year--"Even I, even I am Beatrice." Until at last, his great task completed "he rose and went his way".

As a whole the poem seems to lack a certain fire and vigour which we might expect to find in a poem so closely related to Rossetti's own experiences as this, for was not his father an exile from his beloved Italy and, like Dante, for purely political reasons? Instead we find, as Mr. Cary observes, a "reflective tone rising to a height of dignity and calm seldom shown by Rossetti in his poetry, but conspicuous in his letters on subjects involving deep feeling."<sup>1</sup> We notice also a wandering from the main theme, as in the three bracketed verses discussing the political state of Florence. It seems possible that a more powerful single effect might have been obtained by condensation. Certain passages, however, are unforgettable in their vividness and reality; such is the scene where Can Grande openly declared to Dante his preference for the coarse wit of the jester; and the other where bones were piled beneath Dante's place at table. We see in our minds the tall, proud figure with its greying beard, hated by

1. Cary, E.L., The Rossettis, (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1900) pp. 132-3.

some yet held in a certain awe, taking its lonely way through the crowded streets. The body may be exiled from its home and sentenced to be burned if it return to the city of its birth, but the mind is so busy with its dream "that all ended with her eyes, Hell, Purgatory, Paradise," that the man can bear to eat the brackish bread that seemed less corn than tares and to tread those stairs "which of all paths his feet knew well, were steeper found than Heaven or Hell". Nor can we quickly forget his meeting with certain women who remarked that his whitening beard and hair had been singed by the fires of Hell which he had visited. He smiled in the pride of his fame, said Boccaccio, but, remarks Rossetti

"We cannot know  
If haply he were not beguil'd  
To bitter mirth, who scarce could tell  
If he indeed were back from Hell."

Such scenes seem to flash before us the real Dante clothed in human flesh, and a living man takes the place of the shadowy figure of the Vita Nuova and the Divine Comedy.

In addition to this long poem there are two sonnets of which Dante is the theme. The first, Dantis Tenebrae, was written in memory of the poet's father and asks whether, when Gabriele Rossetti gave him the name of Dante, he had any idea "that also on thy son must Beatrice decline her eyes according to her wont" and that he should follow in the footsteps of his great namesake to where "wisdom's living fountain to his chaunt trembles in music". In the second, entitled On the Vita Nuova

of Dante, Rossetti gives to Dante's beautiful story the credit for his own understanding of love and the perfection and purity to which it can attain:

"At length within this book I found portrayed  
Newborn that Paradisal Love of his,  
And simple like a child; with whose clear aid  
I understood. To such a child as this  
Christ, charging well his chosen ones forbade  
Offence: 'for lo! of such my kingdom is'."

The imagery in the last two lines, exceptionally striking and beautiful, is surely worthy of the wonderful love of Dante and its history as related in his New Life.

Knowing that Rossetti translated the compositions of Dante and his contemporaries, and wrote such poems as those just discussed, we shall not be surprised to find through his entire work, but especially in the House of Life sonnets, echoes of these men's verses. One of the most noticeable is that of a very medieval feature of the Italian writers' poetry--the reflection of the amusement of the upper classes known as Courtly Love. In a society where marriage was practically a business affair, settled often without reference to the wishes of the two principals, it became, as an escape from much unhappiness, a sort of game with definite regulations which lovers were supposed to follow. Every young man of noble birth must have a lady who was, to him, the ideal of all beauty and goodness. The winning of her heart was the central aim of his life, and to this end were dedicated all his achievements. There were even supposed to have been



institutions known as Courts of Love before which all sorts of questions pertaining to love were discussed. Whether such assemblies really took place or whether they were simply literary fiction is still a disputed point; but tables of rules for lovers did, apparently, actually exist. Many of the regulations found therein are reflected in the work of Dante and in that of almost every writer of the Middle Ages who dealt with the subject of love; and it is these which we shall now consider as being reflected in the work of Rossetti.

One of the most rigid rules required that the lady must always be cold to her lover in spite of her kindness to everyone else. If she yielded to him it must only be after a long period of the most complete devotion on his part. Dante's Beatrice fulfills this requirement quite satisfactorily. She never grants him more than a passing greeting and in all the Vita Nuova there is no record of a real conversation between them. She is either totally unaware of the poet's affection for her or ignores it deliberately and completely. Even her salutation is, on one occasion, refused to the unhappy Dante. He tells us that "by this it happened (to wit; by this false and evil rumour which seemed to misfame me of vice) that she who was the destroyer of all evil and the queen of all good, coming where I was, denied me her most sweet salutation in the which alone was my blessedness"<sup>1</sup>. He also wrote a Canzone

1. Dante, Alighieri, "Vita Nuova", translation of Rossetti, D.G., Collected Works, (Ellis and Elvey, London, 1890) Vol. I, p. 41.

"In Complaint of his Lady's Scorn" which Rossetti thinks probably refers to the same occurrence. It is too long to quote in full, but its general import may be gathered from the opening lines:

"Love, since it is thy will that I return  
Neath her usurped control  
Who is thou know'st how beautiful and proud,  
Enlighten thou her heart, so bidding burn  
Thy flame within her soul  
That she rejoice not when my cry is loud."

In a Sestina entitled "Of the Lady Pietra degli Scrovigni", we find this verse:

"Utterly frozen is this youthful lady,  
Even as the snow that lies within the shade;  
For she is no more moved than is the stone  
By the sweet season which makes warm the hills  
And alters them afresh from white to green,  
Covering their sides again with flowers and grass."

Such was the correct attitude of the heroine of a tale of Courtly Love. In contrast to it was the humility of the lover, constantly on his spiritual knees before the lady, pleading for her favours. Dante never seems to expect more than a passing smile or word from Beatrice and is completely happy when these are granted. He is always conscious of inferiority in her presence and feels that he is unworthy to receive much attention from her. When he had determined to write in praise of her, he tells us that "it seemed to me that I had taken to myself a theme which was much too lofty, so that I dared not begin; and I remained during several days in

the desire of speaking and in the fear of beginning".<sup>1</sup> Dino Campagni expresses a similar sentiment in a sonnet where he says:<sup>2</sup>

"No man may mount upon a golden stair  
Guido, my master, to Love's palace sill;  
No key of gold will fit the lock that's there,  
Nor heart there enter without pure goodwill.  
Not if he miss one courteous duty, dare  
A lover hope he should his love fulfil;  
But to his lady must make meek repair,  
Reaping with husbandry her favours still."

The reason for this humility on the part of the lover was, of course, the surpassing goodness and beauty of the lady. She was always the fairest of the fair, a criterion of female excellence, for her virtue was as great as her beauty. Only to the lover was she cold and cruel; to all others she was the embodiment of kindness, sweetness and grace; and her mere presence brought happiness to all about her. This idea is repeated again and again in the sonnets as well as in the Vita Nuova. Says Dante after first seeing Beatrice: "Wherefore I in my boyhood often went in search of her, and found her so noble and praiseworthy that certainly of her might have been said the words of the poet Homer, 'She seemed not to be the daughter of a mortal man, but of God'".<sup>3</sup> So great was the virtue of her salutation that "when she appeared to me in any place, it seemed to me, by the hope of her excellent

1. Danti, Alighieri, op. cit., pp. 53-4.

2. Campagni, Dino, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit. p. 141.

3. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 31.

salutation, that there was no man mine enemy any longer; and such warmth of charity came upon me that most certainly in that moment I would have pardoned whosoever had done me an injury; and if one should then have questioned me concerning any matter, I could only have said unto him, 'Love', with a countenance clothed with humbleness."<sup>1</sup> Again he says:

"She hath that paleness of the pearl that's fit  
In a fair woman, so much and not more;  
She is as high as nature's skill can soar;  
Beauty is tried by her comparison."<sup>2</sup>

Among the sonnet writers Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's friend, speaks in very similar terms concerning his lady:

"Lady she seems of such high benison  
As makes all others graceless in men's sight,  
The honour which is hers cannot be said:  
To whom are subject all things virtuous  
While all things beauteous own her deity."<sup>3</sup>

Such were the conventional characteristics of the courtly lover and his lady. But the regulations of the love game did not stop with a statement of the correct attitude of the two principals. They went on to describe the way in which love should be kindled in the heart of the lover. This was to be accomplished by a glance from the lady's eyes, which, being received by the eyes of the lover, was to pierce through them to the heart and there to arouse in him the fatal passion.

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 41.

2. Ibid, p. 55.

3. Cavalcanti, Guido, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D. G., op. cit., p. 119.

Says Dante:

"Then beauty seen in virtuous womankind  
Will make the eyes desire, and through the heart  
Send the desiring of the eyes again;  
Where often it abides so long enshrined  
That Love at length out of his sleep will start."<sup>1</sup>.

Guido Cavalcanti refers to the same conceit in one of his sonnets:

"A certain youthful lady in Thoulouse,  
Gentle and fair, of cheerful modesty,  
Is in her eyes, with such exact degree,  
Of likeness unto mine own lady, whose  
I am, that through the heart she doth abuse  
The soul to sweet desire. It goes from me  
To her; yet, fearing, saith not who is she  
That of a truth its essence thus subdues.  
This lady looks on it with the sweet eyes  
Whose glance did erst the wounds of Love annoint  
Through its true lady's eyes which are as they.  
Then to the heart returns it, full of sighs,  
Wounded to death by a sharp arrow's point  
Wherewith this lady speeds it on its way."<sup>2</sup>.

So does Cino da Pistoia:

"This fairest lady, who, as well I wot,  
Found entrance by her beauty to my soul,  
Pierced through mine eyes my heart, which  
erst was whole,  
Sorely, yet makes as though she knew it not;"<sup>3</sup>.

And, Dino Frescobaldi explains,

"This is the damsel by whom love is brought  
To enter at his eyes that looks on her."<sup>4</sup>.

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 58.

2. Cavalcanti, Guido, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit. p. 123.

3. Pistoia, Cino da, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 170.

4. Frescobaldi, Dino, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 210.

These few examples give some idea of the power with which ladies' eyes were credited and the important place they occupied in the love literature of the period. Constantly we find references to them and praises of their beauty.

The love sickness, being once caught, was expected to show definite physical effects in its victim. The devoted lover became thin, pale, and abstracted, lost his appetite, was unable to sleep, and turned faint and giddy if he saw his lady or if she suddenly looked at him. As W. S. Gilbert expresses it (for the same symptoms, we must suppose, manifest themselves in a woman if she is infected with the disease):

"When maiden loves she sits and sighs  
Or wanders to and fro;  
Unbidden tear-drops fill her eyes,  
And to all questions she replies  
With a sad 'Heigh-ho!'"

That Dante and contemporary lovers were affected in this distressing way, we may infer from numerous passages in their writings. After his dream of Love and Beatrice, Dante tells us that "From that night forth, the natural functions of my body began to be vexed and impeded, for I was given up wholly to thinking of this most gracious creature. Whereby in a short space I became so weak and so reduced that it was irksome to many of my friends to look upon me".<sup>1</sup> On one occasion the mere presence of Beatrice seemed to affect him, for even before he had seen her he "began to feel a faintness

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 34.

and a throbbing at my left side, which, soon took possession of my whole body".<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in one place he speaks of "the sore change in mine aspect" which had overtaken him since Love had taken possession of his soul. And one day it happened, he says, "that I was taken with such a strong trembling at the heart, that it could not have been otherwise in the presence of my lady".<sup>2</sup>

But these were not the only results produced by Love upon one under its sway. It was supposed to have an ennobling effect upon the sufferer. It inspired him to act with such nobility as might be expected to win the approval of his lady and also to attempt difficult tasks in her honour--in short, to become a "verray, parfit gentil knyght". Thus Dante's adoration of Beatrice inspired him first to write the beautiful Vita Nuova, in which he tells the story of his love for her, and later the Divine Comedy of which she is the inspiration and goal--"So that all ended with her eyes, Hell, Purgatory, Paradise." In these compositions he has glorified her as never woman has been glorified before or since; and to her the world owes some of the loveliest poetry and the most wonderful vision which the brain of man has ever conceived and the hand of man penned. Cecco Angiolieri bears witness to the fact that:

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 47.

2. Ibid, p. 68.

"Whatever good is naturally done  
Is born of Love as fruit is born of flower;  
By Love all good is brought to its full power;  
Yea, Love does more than this; for he finds none  
So coarse but from his touch some grace is won,  
And the poor wretch is altered in an hour."<sup>1</sup>

And Dino Frescobaldi says of his lady:

"Glad I am therefore that her grace should fall  
Not otherwise than thus; whose rich increase  
Is such a power as evil cannot dim.  
My sins within an instant perished all  
When I inhaled the light of so much peace.  
And this Love knows; for I have told it him."<sup>2</sup>

Such is the influence of the lady upon her lover.

But since the effects mentioned are brought about by the power of love, he is frequently regarded, in medieval erotic literature, as a lord, a master, a god. There seem to have been at least two distinct conceptions employed. The first considers love as a feudal lord, a mighty ruler with power of life and death over his subjects. Dante constantly speaks of him in this way. "Love", he says, "Quite governed my soul; which was immediately espoused to him, and with so safe and indisputable a lordship . . . . that I had nothing left for it but to do all his bidding continually." And again he speaks of him as "he who ruled me by virtue of my most gentle lady." In one of the sonnets of the Vita Nuova he addresses him as "master of all ruth"; and in still another sonnet, says: "A king Love is

1. Angiolieri, Cecco, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 186.

2. Frescobaldi, Dino, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 211.



whose palace where he reigns is called the Heart". The other conceit is that wherein love is pictured as a god--Eros, the little winged boy with his bow and arrows. This conception, however, is found rather more frequently in the sonnet writers than in Dante; Cino da Pistoia, for example, says:

"Yet meeting Love, Death's neighbour, I declare,  
That still his arrows hold my heart in chase."<sup>1</sup>

Obviously the image here called up is that of Cupid. Guido Cavalcanti employs the same figure when he says:

"This Lady looks on it with the sweet eyes  
Whose glance did erst the wounds of Love anoint,  
Through its true lady's eyes which are as they.  
Then to the heart returns it, full of sighs,  
Wounded to death by a sharp arrow's point,  
Wherewith this lady speeds it on its way."<sup>2</sup>

So strongly did these two conceptions of love take hold on men's imaginations that we find them referred to in the literature of practically every age right down to our own; while in the other direction the deistic conception may be traced back to the classical writers of Greece and Rome. But during the Middle Ages such personification seemed to have a vividness and life which subsequently became less and less until today these images are merely conventional figures of speech.

Two other laws of Courtly Love remain to be dealt with. The first of these required fidelity between the lovers;

1. Pistoia, Cino da, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 111.

2. Cavalcanti, Guido, "Sonnet", translation of Rossetti, D.G., op. cit., p. 123.

the second, complete secrecy. Faithlessness was the unforgiveable sin. Dante recognizes this when he condemns so completely his passing affection for the pitiful "lady of the window". After a vision of Beatrice had appeared to him, he tells us that his "heart began painfully to repent of the desire by which it had so basely let itself be possessed during so many days, contrary to the constancy of reason. And then, this evil desire being gone from me, all my thoughts turned again unto their excellent Beatrice. And I say most truly that from that hour I thought constantly of her with the whole humbled and ashamed heart".<sup>1</sup> That he did so is evidenced by the fact that it is she who is enshrined forever in the Divine Comedy.

In addition, the regulations of Courtly Love required that the affair be kept a complete secret. This, of course, arose from the fact that it was usually illicit and had to be kept quiet in order to preserve the lady's good name. Dante was complying with this convention when he pretended to be interested in a lady other than Beatrice and when, on the death of his first "protector", he chose another on the advice of Love. This second one proved so effective a screen that, as he relates rather ruefully "the matter was spoken of by many in terms scarcely courteous; through the which I had

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 90.

oftenwhiles many troublesome hours",<sup>1.</sup> and on account of gossip was refused the salutation of his true lady. He, however, took her rebuke with the meekness required of a true lover, satisfied that he was suffering these things in the service of his beloved, that her name might remain above reproach on the tongues of men.

Such were the chief characteristics of Courtly Love as exemplified in the work of Dante and his contemporaries. To us, of course, it all seems rather foolish and artificial, but to those men it was a vital and quite serious matter, not to be laughed at or treated disrespectfully; for love was to them a serious business and its regulations must be observed.

The poetry of Rossetti reflects many of the conventions of Courtly Love, with which, doubtless, he became familiar largely through his reading and translation of Dante and the other Italian poets. There is, for example, an insistence on the beauty and virtue of his lady. The whole of the lovely sonnet in the House of Life entitled Beauty's Pageant expresses this idea; so does Genius in Beauty which begins:

"Beauty like hers is genius. Not the call  
Of Homer's or of Dante's heart sublime,--  
Not Michael's hand furrowing the zones of time,--  
Is more with compassed mysteries musical."

In Gracious Moonlight we find:

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., p. 41

"Even as the moon grows queenlier in mid-space  
When the sky darkens, and her cloud-rapt car  
Thrills with intenser radiance from afar,--  
So lambant, lady, beams thy sovereign grace  
When the drear soul desires thee. Of that face  
What shall be said,--which, like a governing star,  
Gathers and garners from all things that are  
Their silent, penetrative loveliness!"

The Moonstar too is written in praise of his lady's beauty:

"Lady, I thank thee for thy loveliness  
Because my lady is more lovely still.  
Glorying I gaze, and yield with glad goodwill  
To thee thy tribute; by whose sweet-spun dress  
Of delicate life Love labors to assess  
My lady's absolute queendom; saying, 'Lo!  
How high this beauty is, which yet doth show  
But as that beauty's sovereign votaress'."

Finally, Her Gifts endows his beloved with all the loveliness possible to a woman:

"High grace, the dower of queens; and therewithal  
Some wood-born wonder's sweet simplicity;  
A glance like water brimming with the sky,  
Or hyacinth-light where forest shadows fall:  
Such thrilling pallor of cheek as doth enthrall  
The heart; a mouth whose passionate forms imply  
All music and all silence held thereby;  
Deep golden locks, her sovereign coronal;  
A round reared neck, meet column of Love's shrine  
To cling to when the heart takes sanctuary,  
Hands which forever at Love's bidding be,  
And soft stirred feet still answering to his sign."

We find too that Rossetti has various references to the old conceit of love being aroused by a glance from the lady, which, entering at the eyes of the lover, pierces his heart. In The Stream's Secret he says that at last they will speak "what eyes so oft had told to eyes"; in Love's Testament, that her eyes will draw up his prisoned spirit to her soul; and in The Dark Glass:

"Lo! What am I to Love, the lord of all?  
One murmuring shell he gathers from  
the sand,--  
One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand.  
Yet through thine eyes he grants me  
clearest call  
And variest touch of powers primordial  
That any hour-girt life may understand."

The conception of love as a god and as a lord is also very frequent in Rossetti. In The Stream's Secret, for example, he speaks of Love

"Murmuring with curls all dappled in thy flow  
And masked lips rosy red"--

clearly imagining him as Cupid. In Love's Lovers, too, love is pictured as the little winged god with his bow and arrows:

"Some ladies love the jewels in Love's zone,  
And gold-tipped darts he has for harmless play  
In idle scornful hours he flings away;  
And some that listen to his lute's soft tone  
Do love to vaunt the silver praise their own;  
Some praise his blindfold sight; and there be they  
Who kissed his wings which brought him yesterday  
And thank his wings today that he is flown."

The same imagery is found in the first sonnet of Willowwood when Love "with his wing feathers" ruffled the surface of the spring. While in the sonnet The Portrait he is regarded as a ruler--"O Lord of all compassionate control" Rossetti addresses him. The Lover's Walk speaks of "Love's high decree" and in The Dark Glass is the expression "Love, the lord of all". Similar images indeed are very nearly as frequent in the poetry of Rossetti as in that of the early Italian poets who influenced him so strongly.

Moreover Rossetti recognized the requirement of

fidelity between lovers. Dante's utter devotion to Beatrice was his conception of the ideal relationship between them. In his own life, it was, of course, his wife, Elizabeth Sidal, who stood in the place of Beatrice. But just as Dante succumbed to the charms of the "lady of the window", so Rossetti, in spite of his great affection for his wife, at various times, as his brother's memoir states in veiled terms, found other women attractive to him. And one of these, Fanny Cornforth, whom he discovered eating nuts in the Strand, apparently became his ideal of sensuous physical beauty. It is she who was first painted as Lady Lilith. But such wanderings from his ideal seemed to cause him much distress and in one sonnet, The Love-Moon, we find him apparently attempting to justify his fancy for another woman after the death of his true lady, with the plea that the new love is only a reflection of the old and will ultimately light him to the source of all love. Though rather obscure, I think it deserves to be quoted in full:

"When that dead face, bowered in the furthest years,  
Which once was all the life years held for thee,  
Can now scarce bid the tides of memory  
Cast on thy soul a little spray of tears,--  
How canst thou gaze into these eyes of hers  
Whom now thy heart delights in, and not see  
Within each orb Love's philtered euphrasy  
Making them of buried troth remembrancers.'  
'Nay, pitiful Love, nay loving Pity! Well  
Thou knowest that in these twain I have confess'd  
Two very voices of thy summoning bell.  
Nay, Master, shall not Death make manifest  
In these culminant changes which approve  
The love-moon that must light my soul to Love?'"

In Rossetti's narrative poems too, infidelity is regarded as a serious crime. It is for this offence that Sister Helen takes her dreadful revenge upon her former lover; while the faithless knight in Rose Mary is condemned to the "Hell of Treason". Conversely, Rose Mary herself, who was true to her love even in death, is admitted to the "Heaven of Love"; and the faithful lovers in The Staff and Scrip are finally united in a life after death.

Finally, the sickness of the lover is, on one occasion at least, referred to by Rossetti. The first verse of Love-Lily runs thus:

"Between the hands, between the brows,  
Between the lips of Love-Lily,  
A spirit is born whose birth endows  
My blood with fire to burn through me:  
Who breathes upon my gazing eyes  
Who laughs and murmurs in mine ear,  
At whose least touch my colour flies,  
And whom my life grows faint to hear."

Clearly this is an echo of the Courtly Love convention observed by Dante and the other early Italian poets. So we gather that the game of love and its rules, as interpreted by these men, occupy an important place in the work of Rossetti. He is perhaps the only modern English writer to employ them in utter seriousness with no trace of amusement or ridicule; they seem, indeed, as vital to him as they were to the writers of the Middle Ages; and in this respect he is entirely medieval.

Next to the elements of Courtly Love which are to be found in Dante, perhaps the most noticeable feature of his poetry is his idealization of Beatrice. In fact it is this characteristic which sets his work apart from the bulk of erotic literature of his day. Beatrice is more than a woman to him. She is a soul set apart, a thing "ensky'd and sainted", almost an angel on earth. That he so regards her is clearly shown in several passages of the Vita Nuova. In one place, speaking of her effect upon others, he says, "She went along crowned and clothed with humility, showing no whit of pride in all that she heard and saw: and when she had gone by it was said of many, 'This is not a woman, but one of the beautiful angels of Heaven': and there were some that said: 'This is surely a miracle; blessed be the Lord who hath the power to work thus marvelously': I say, of very sooth, that she showed herself so gentle and so full of all perfection that she bred in those who looked upon her a soothing quiet beyond any speech; neither could any look upon her without sighing immediately. These things, and things yet more wonderful, were brought to pass through her miraculous virtue." The same idea is expressed in a sonnet following, where these lines occur:

"And still, amid the praise she hears secure,  
She walks with holiness for her array;  
Seeming a creature sent by Heaven to stay  
On earth and show a miracle made sure."

More evidence of her divine nature seemed, to Dante,



to be found in her strange connection with the number nine. He first saw her almost at the beginning of her ninth year and at the end of his; the second time he encountered her was exactly nine years after the first meeting; and "The hour of her most sweet salutation was exactly the ninth of that day." Again, when he made a list of the sixty most beautiful ladies of Florence, he found that "my lady's name would not stand otherwise than ninth in order among the names of these ladies". Finally and most remarkably, "according to the division of time in Italy her most noble spirit departed from among us in the first hour of the ninth day of the month; and according to the division of time in Syria, in the ninth month of the year; seeing that Tismin, which with us is October, is there the first month. Also she was taken from us in that year of our reckoning (to wit, of the years of our Lord) in which the perfect number was nine times multiplied within that century wherein she was born into the world; which is to say, the thirteenth century of Christians." Dante, considering all these facts, comes to the conclusion that "this lady was accompanied by the number nine to the end that men might clearly perceive her to be a nine, that is, a miracle, whose only root is in the Holy Trinity."

It is clear, therefore, that, to Dante, Beatrice, during her life, was far more than a woman who attracted him by her physical loveliness; it was the divine purity of her

soul, her sweetness and gentleness which called forth his devotion. And if during her life he regarded her as a miracle, as almost a saint, it was natural that he should idealize her still more highly after her death. He pictures her then as a radiant being adored by the very angels.

"But from the height of woman's fairness, she,  
Going up from us with the joy we had,  
Grew perfectly and spiritually fair;  
That so she spreads even there  
A light of love which makes the angels glad  
And even unto their subtle minds can bring  
A certain awe of profound marvelling."<sup>1</sup>

Again in a Canzone beseeching Death for the life of Beatrice, he pictures the angels as singing her praises:

"I seem to see Heaven's gate, that is shut fast,  
Open, and angels filling all the space  
About me,--come to fetch her soul whose laud  
Is sung by saints and angels before God."

This idealization of the beloved into something which, while still human, approaches the divine, or perhaps one should say the angelic, is also an important element in Rossetti's poetry. It is perhaps most clearly exemplified in The Blessed Damozel. In this poem, the girl's spirit in Heaven watches and longs for her lover who is still in the world. Rossetti himself has told us that it was inspired by Poe's poem The Raven, which describes the grief of the lover left on earth. But one cannot help feeling that the shadow of Dante has fallen very heavily upon it and that the damozel is

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., pp. 83-4.

a sister or at most a cousin of Beatrice--indeed even her designation seems an echo of the name "She who confers blessing". At any rate, in the two beautiful first verses Rossetti describes the celestial loveliness of the maiden who is now "one of God's choristers".

"The Blessed Damozel leaned out,  
From the gold bar of Heaven;  
Her eyes were deeper than the depths  
Of waters stilled at even;  
She had three lilies in her hand  
And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe ungirt from clasp to hem  
No wrought flowers did adorn,  
But a white rose of Mary's gift,  
For service meetly worn;  
Her hair that lay along her back  
Was yellow like ripe corn."

In the sonnet Heart's Compass we find Rossetti idealizing his lady into an expression of the very meaning of life:

"Sometimes thou seemest not as thyself alone,  
But as the meaning of all things that are;  
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar  
Some heavenly solstice, hushed, and halcyon;  
Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;  
Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,  
Being of its farthest fires oracular;--  
The evident heart of all things sown and mown."

And in True Woman-Herself, he speaks of the beloved as the embodiment of all that is beautiful and mysterious in nature:

"To be a sweetness more desired than Spring;  
A bodily beauty more acceptable  
Than the wild rose-tree's arch that crowns the fell;  
To be an essence more environing  
Than wine's drained juice; a music ravishing  
More than the passionate pulse of Philomel;--  
To be all this 'neath one soft bosom's swell  
That is the flower of life:--how strange a thing!

How strange to be what man can know  
But as a sacred secret! Heaven's own screen  
Hides her soul's purest depth and loveliest glow;  
Closely withheld as all things most unseen,--  
The wave-bowered pearl,--the heart-shaped seal  
of green  
That flecks the snowdrop underneath the snow."

But we may notice that there is a difference in the idealizing of the two poets. To Dante, Beatrice, through her goodness and beauty, becomes almost a saint--a miracle he calls her; that is, a contradiction of the laws of nature. But when Rossetti idealizes his beloved he describes her not as a contradiction of nature, but as the supreme expression of its beauty and mystery; a thing almost super-human but not super-natural. It is still idealization but with the difference which we might expect to find between a mind of the thirteenth century and one of the nineteenth. The former, with its limited knowledge of the universe and its workings, regards the wonderful and inexplicable as a contradiction to or a breaking of natural laws; the latter, in the light of scientific research, sees such phenomena as a perfect and complete fulfilment of such laws; for what exists in nature is quite as wonderful as anything that can exist outside of nature. This attitude is exemplified by the quotations already given from the sonnets Heart's Compass and True Woman--Herself. In only a few instances do we find the beloved idealized in the strictly Dantesque spirit--that is, regarded as a being almost angelic. One such occurs in the sonnet

Love's Testament in which the eyes of the lady are credited with a divine power similar to that by which, as Dante tells us, Christ rescued certain souls from Hell:

"O what from thee the grace, to me the prize,  
And what to Love the glory,--when the whole  
Of the deep stair thou treads't to the dim shoal  
And weary water of the place of sighs,  
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes  
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul."

It is interesting to find a tinge of difference even between Dante's description of Beatrice in Heaven and Rossetti's picture of the Blessed Damozel--perhaps his most purely Dantesque creation. Both women are represented as angels; but examine the two descriptions. Dante says in one place:

"I was among the tribe  
Who rest suspended, when a dame, so blest  
And lovely, I besought her to command,  
Call'd me; her eyes were brighter than the star  
Of day; and she, with gentle voice and soft,  
Angelically turned, her speech address'd;"

Here much is suggested but only two definite physical characteristics named--her eyes and voice; and we really feel that Beatrice is a spirit. Now contrast this with the two verses from the Blessed Damozel already quoted. The difference is obvious. The Damozel, although an angel, still retains the attributes of a woman. It is as if the soul, shadowy to Dante, took definite human shape to Rossetti and expressed its heavenly beauty in earthly form. Indeed, this particular instance of idealization of the beloved illustrates

excellently the peculiar mixture of the physical and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen, so characteristic of Rossetti.

And this leads us on to the consideration of our next point--that idealization of love which Rossetti likewise derives from Dante and treats with the same slightly different outlook which we perceived in his idealization of the beloved. Let us consider first the manner in which Dante idealized his love for Beatrice. Since, as has been shown, he regards her almost as a divine being, it is natural that his love for her should approach adoration, the emotion of the worshipper rather than that of the lover. It is clearly her beauty of body as well as of soul which appealed to him in the first place--he speaks of her constantly as a "most gracious creature" and frequently refers to her loveliness--but he is content to adore her from afar as he might a saint enshrined in a church window, until finally it is a union of souls which he dreams of, to the almost complete exclusion of any physical or passionate element. In proof of this I quote the closing sentences of the Vita Nuova: "Wherefore if it be his pleasure through whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me a few years, it is my hope that I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman. After the which, may it seem good unto him who is the Master of Grace, that my spirit should go hence to behold the glory

of its lady: to wit, of that blessed Beatrice who now gazeth continually on his countenance qui est per omnia saecula benedictus." This is no ordinary human passion but love purified by suffering into the highest form of spiritual emotion.

Now let us look at Rossetti's idealization of love. To him too it is a union of soul with soul--"my soul's birth-partner"<sup>1</sup>--he calls his beloved; and in another place exclaims, "And my soul only sees thy soul its own"<sup>2</sup>--But this mystic spiritual union is achieved through the physical with which it is inextricably mingled; it is a result not of a suppression of the physical but of a fulfilment. And again, as in the idealization of the beloved, we are conscious of the difference between the outlook of the thirteenth century and that of the nineteenth. To the one, still influenced by the aesceticism of many holy men, the highest form of life and love is to be achieved by the complete suppression of the physical; to the other, by means of the doctrines of classical writers combined with recent scientific research, it has begun to be evident that no side of human nature can be safely ignored and that the highest love is that which satisfies

1. Rossetti, D.G., "The Birth-Bond", Poetical Works, (P.F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 187.

2. Rossetti, D.G., "Lovesight", Poetical Works, (P. F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 181.

both the spiritual and the physical. Thus we find that Rossetti identifies his love of his lady with his love of God, and so mingles his ideas of the union of the flesh and the union of souls, that it is a little hard at times to arrive at his exact meaning, as in the following lines:

"Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God."<sup>1</sup>.

Similarly in The Portrait when his soul is finally united with his lady's it "knows the silence there for God". In The Stream's Secret, too, this spiritual union is emphasized.

After dealing with the physical aspect of his love he says:

"Yet most with the sweet soul  
Shall love's espousals then be knit."

While in Love-Lily he speaks of his lady as one

"Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought  
Nor Love her body from her soul."

Consider too the sonnet Love and Worship in which two radiant figures appear to the poet and his lady. She says to them:

"Thou art Passion of Love,  
And this Love's Worship; both he plights to me."

Again we see that an equal importance is attached to the two sides of man's nature.

In short then we may say that Dante influences Rossetti in the idealization of love, but that whereas Dante arrives at a spiritual emotion by the suppression of the

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Heart's Hope", Poetical Works, (P.F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 181.



physical, Rossetti does so by its expression.

Closely allied to Dante's idealization of his lady and of love is his identification of the beloved with love itself. This is to be found in several places in the Vita Nuova. After the poet had seen Beatrice with another lady named Joan, Love explains to him why the second lady is so called. And then he adds, "He who should enquire delicately touching this matter, could not but call Beatrice by mine own name, which is to say, Love; beholding her so like unto me." And in the sonnet following we find these lines:

"And even as my memory speaketh this,  
Love spake it them: 'The first is christen'd Spring;  
The second Love, she is so like to me.'"

Also in the poem beginning "Ladies who have intelligence in Love" this passage occurs:

"And in her smile Love's image you may see,  
Whence none can gaze upon her steadfastly."

We are justified in saying, then, that Dante at times regards Beatrice as something very closely allied to Love himself.

The same thought is to be found in Rossetti. In Heart's Compass, after describing his beloved, he says:

"Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?"

While in Hope Overtaken we find this:

"O Hope of mine whose eyes are living love,  
No eyes but hers,--O Love and Hope the same!"

And in True Woman--Her Love:

"She loves him; for her infinite soul is Love."

Practically the same idea is found in Venus Victrix when we remember that Venus was the goddess of Love:

"Then Love breaths low the sweetest of thy names;  
And Venus Victrix to my heart doth bring  
Herself, the Helen of her guerdoning."

Still another phase of Dante's influence on Rossetti is to be found in the visions of life and love and death personified which occur so frequently in both writers. There is, for example, Dante's famous dream in the Vita Nuova: "And betaking me to the loneliness of mine own room, I fell to thinking of this most courteous lady, thinking of whom I was overtaken by a pleasant slumber, wherein a marvelous vision was presented for me: for there appeared to be in my room a mist of the colour of fire within the which I discerned the figure of a lord of terrible aspect to such as should gaze upon him, but who seemed therewithal to rejoice inwardly that it was a marvel to see. Speaking he said many things, among the which I could understand but few, and of these, this; 'Ego dominus tuus'. In his arms it seemed that a person was sleeping, covered only with a blood-coloured cloth; upon whom looking very attentively, I knew that it was the lady of the salutation who had deigned the day before to salute me. And he who held her held also in his hand a thing that was burning in flames; and he said to me, 'Vide cor tuum'. But when he had remained with me a little while, I thought that he set himself to awaken her that slept; after the which he made her

eat that thing which flamed in his hand; and she ate as one fearing. Then, having waited a space, all his joy was turned into most bitter weeping; and as he wept he gathered the lady into his arms, and it seemed to me that he went with her up towards heaven; whereupon such a great anguish came upon me that my light slumber could not endure through it, but was suddenly broken." On another occasion Dante tells us that Love appeared to him as a traveller, advising him to take another lady as a protection against the discovery of his affection for Beatrice. Again Love took the likeness of a youth "in very white raiment, who kept his eyes fixed on me in deep thought."<sup>1</sup>.

Such passages and the famous vision of the death of Beatrice, which Dante saw in a trance during his sickness, appear to have taken a strong hold upon Rossetti's imagination. Again and again, especially in the sonnets of the House of Life, we find what can only be considered as shadows of Dante's visions. The entire sonnet Death-in-Love is an example of this:

"There came an image in Life's retinue  
That had Love's wings and bore his gonfalon;  
Fair was the web and nobly wrought thereon,  
O soul-sequestered face, thy form and hue!  
Bewildering sounds, such as spring wakens to  
Shook in its folds; and through my heart its power  
Sped trackless as the immemorable hour  
When birth's dark portal groaned and all was new.

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit. p. 42.

But a veiled woman followed, and she caught  
The banner round its staff, to furl and cling--  
Then plucked a feather from the bearer's wing,  
And held it to his lips that stirred it not,  
And said to me, 'Behold, there is no breath:  
I and this Love are one, and I am Death'."

It is not that Rossetti has here consciously imitated Dante, but simply that the great Italian's mode of thought and expression have so pervaded the mind of the Englishman that he naturally speaks in the same idiom. In the Willowwood sonnets we feel again that the Love who sweeps the waters with his wing-feathers to conjure up the face of the beloved is the same who, as a youth in white raiment, commanded Dante to write in praise of Beatrice.

"I sat with love upon a woodside well,  
Leaning across the water, I and he;  
Nor ever did he speak or look at me,  
But touched his lute, wherein was audible  
The certain secret thing he had to tell:  
Only our mirrored eyes met silently  
In the low wave; and that sound came to be  
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell."<sup>1</sup>.

But perhaps the most Dantesque vision of all is that in Passion and Worship where:

"One flame winged brought a white winged harp player  
Even where my lady and I lay all alone;  
Saying: 'Behold, this minstrel is unknown;  
Bid him depart, for I am minstrel here;  
Only my strains are to Love's dear one's dear'."

This passage seems almost to combine two of Dante's visions, in one of which Love appeared in a flame-coloured mist, in the

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Willowwood" I, Poetical Works, (P.F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 204.

other, clothed in white. Like the other examples, it is clear evidence of how strongly Rossetti was influenced by Dante in respect of such visions.

Dante's separation from Beatrice by death seems also to have impressed Rossetti very greatly and in his poetry the idea of the union of parted lovers in some future existence is almost as important a theme as it is in Dante. It receives its fullest treatment in The Blessed Damozel which was composed when Rossetti was only nineteen years of age and had just been steeping himself in the writings of Dante. As has been previously mentioned, this poem is attributed by its author to an idea derived from Poe's The Raven. But if the inspiration came from Poe, the heaven described surely comes from Dante. Among numerous points which might be mentioned as indicative of its source, the following are worthy of notice: It was ten years after the death of Beatrice that Dante had his marvelous vision described in the Divine Comedy; in this poem the maiden has been dead for the same length of time. As Rossetti expresses it:

"Herseemed she scarce had been a day  
One of God's choristers;  
The wonder was not yet quite gone  
From that still look of hers;  
Albeit, to them she left, her day  
Had counted as ten years."

In the second place, the medieval town of Dis described in the eighth canto of Hell, with its towers, its moats, and iron walls, seems possibly the source of Rossetti's lines concern-

ing "the rampart of God's house--By God built over the sheer depth the which is space begun". Moreover, the Heaven of Dante, removed from earth by an immeasurable distance is also the Heaven of Rossetti. In speaking of God's house he says:

"It lies in Heaven, across the flood  
Of ether, as a bridge  
Beneath, the tides of day and night  
With flame and darkness ridge  
The void, as low as where this earth  
Spins like a fretful midge."

And the maiden saw that

"the curled moon  
Was like a little feather  
Fluttering far down the gulf."

The souls that "mounting up to God went by her like thin flames" are surely reminiscent of Dante's spirits of dazzling light that shone like many coloured jewels. The "deep wells of light" must also have been suggested by Dante's glowing Paradise--"mystic, wonderful"; and the stream to which the two will "step down and bathe there in God's sight" may have its origin in the passage of the Paradise concerning light flowing in the likeness of a river "from whose amber-seeming waves flashed up effulgence as they glided on twixt banks on either side, painted with spring, incredible how fair."<sup>1</sup>. The "living mystic tree" and the "Lady Mary" surrounded by her court of ladies may likewise be traced to Dante's heavenly vision. While the songs of the angels with their citherns and

1. Dante, Alighieri, "Paradiso" Canto XXX, "Divine Comedy", Poems of Dante, (P.F. Collier and Sons, New York, 1902), p. 468.

citoles, undoubtedly have their origin in Dante's hosts of souls chanting praises to their creator. Even the symbolic rose and lilies mentioned in connection with the Blessed Damozel are to be found in Dante; for, says Beatrice, speaking of the virgin and the Apostles: "Here is the rose, wherein the word divine was made incarnate; and here the lilies by whose odour known the way of life was followed."<sup>1</sup>.

In drawing such parallels, however, we should remember that behind both poets were the Apocrypha and the Scriptures, especially Revelations. It is almost impossible to say just how much these influenced Rossetti directly and how much he interpreted them through the writings of Dante. But though the exact extent of Dante's influence in this poem cannot be determined, it is clear from the foregoing discussion, that he was at least a powerful factor in the shaping of Rossetti's imaginative experience.

It is interesting to notice in this connection that insistence on the physical and human which I have formerly noted as differentiating Rossetti's glorification of love from that of Dante. The Paradise of the latter is a purely spiritual region filled with glowing light and sound and the beings who inhabit it are etherial, sexless creatures of fiery brilliance. But the Blessed Damozel is still a woman--

1. Dante, Alighieri, op. cit., "Paradiso", Canto XVIII, p. 436.

"the hair that lay along her back was yellow like ripe corn,"  
and as she stoops earthward "her bosom must have made the bar  
she leaned on warm." Nor does divine love banish the old love  
known on earth:

"Around her, lovers newly met  
'Mid deathless love's acclaims,  
Spoke evermore among themselves  
Their heart-remembered names."

Heavenly joys, moreover, do not entirely silence human longing  
and loneliness, for when the maiden has dreamed of the happy  
time when she and her lover will be forever together, the  
"angels in strong level flight" somehow cease to satisfy her

"And then she cast her arms along  
The golden barriers,  
And laid her face between her hands  
And wept. (I heard her tears.)"

All this is alien to the spirit of Dante, whose Heaven is a  
place of complete spiritual joy. Nor would Beatrice have  
prayed

"Only to live as once on earth  
With Love; only to be  
As then awhile, forever now  
Together, I and he."

Beatrice, seated near the lady Mary, is still far above her  
lover. But this is Dante's heaven humanized, its souls men  
and women instead of beatified spirits. And one is tempted  
to think that although Dante's Paradise is a marvelous  
creation of the imagination as a place of purely spiritual  
beauty and love, the Heaven of Rossetti is rather more live-  
able. One is reminded of the song in which a little girl says



that she has never heard of birds and flowers in Paradise and is sure she would get tired of playing on a golden lyre, so when she gets there she intends to plant some hollyhocks:

"And soon as they begin to grow  
I'll tend them with a golden hoe,  
And as the limbs begin to climb  
The birds will come at blossom-time.  
If Gabriel should pass my way  
I'm certain he'd sit down and stay."

Rossetti has, figuratively, planted hollyhocks and other homely garden flowers in the shining fields of Dante's Paradise and the resulting bower is one where any earth-sick spirit would be glad to "sit down and stay."

This theme,--the reunion of parted lovers,--is dealt with much less elaborately in Rossetti's other poems. In The Portrait, written, probably, not long after The Blessed Damozel, it is treated in an almost purely Dantesque spirit with the physical element entirely lacking:

"Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears  
The beating heart of Love's own breast;--  
Where round the secret of all spheres  
All angels lay their wings to rest,--  
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,  
When, by the new birth born abroad  
Throughout the music of the suns,  
It enters in her soul at once  
And knows the silence there for God."

This passage must have been inspired by Dante and his glimpse of the great mystery of the Holy Trinity "in its great abyss clear and lofty". In The Staff and Scrip the theme is again used, this time with the touch of materialism noticed in The Blessed Damozel:



In Spheral Change he exclaims:

"O nearest, furthest! Can there be  
At length some hard-earned, heart-won home,  
Where,--exile changed for sanctuary--  
Our lot may fill indeed its sum,  
And you may wait and I may come?"

And in Insomnia:

"Is there a home where heavy earth  
Melts to bright air that breathes no pain,  
Where water leaves no thirst again  
And springing fire is Love's new birth?"

The same uncertainty, the doubt which is yet mingled with hope  
is found in the sonnet Untimely written in memory of Oliver  
Madox Brown:

"A mist has risen; we see the youth no more;  
Does he see on and strive on? And may we  
Late-tottering world-worn hence, find his to be  
The young strong hand which helps us up that shore?  
Or, echoing the No more with Nevermore,  
Must night be ours and his? We hope: and he?"

When we consider the story of Rossetti's life it is  
perhaps natural that this idea of the final union of parted  
souls should be such an outstanding element in his poetry.  
The untimely death of his wife affected him very strongly;  
and the history of Dante and Beatrice, which he loved so  
dearly, turned his mind in the same direction even before a  
similar grief entered his own life. It is, however, a little  
remarkable that his love story should so closely have  
paralleled that of Dante, and that in The Blessed Damozel and  
The Portrait he should have dealt so sympathetically with the  
very sorrow which was eventually to overtake him. It almost  
seemed that the spirit of Dante had fallen upon him with the

name so that the sorrow and glory of love inspired the Victorian along the same lines as they did the medieval Dante. Dante and Beatrice--Rossetti and Elizabeth--the last two names are linked as firmly as the first two. Rossetti himself seems to feel something of this when he addresses his father in Dantis Tenebrae:

"And didst thou know indeed when at the font  
Together with thy name thou gav'st me his;  
That also on thy son must Beatrice  
Decline her eyes according to her wont,  
Accepting me to be of those that haunt  
The vale of magical dark mysteries  
Where to the hills her poet's foot-track lies  
And wisdom's living fountain to his chaunt  
Trembles in music?"

Whatever the answer, it is certain that not only has Rossetti written of the final union of lovers in the spirit of Dante, but he has given to the theme of love a place of such importance as perhaps only his great namesake has done. This characteristic, be it noted, is typically Italian: To the Frenchman love is a pastime--a gay affair as light and evanescent as the froth on a glass of his own champagne. To the Englishman it is a secret emotion which he does his best to hide and is almost ashamed to confess; but to the Italian it is a triumph and a glory into which he throws himself with all the warmth of his southern nature. No English poet at least has ever written of love as has Rossetti. Chaucer, understanding the conventions of Courtly Love, regarded it with a wise smile of amused tolerance; to Shakespeare it was

only one emotion among others; nor did he consider the sorrows of "the lover sighing like furnace with a woeful ballad made to 'his mistress' eyebrow" a subject of sufficient seriousness to constitute the main theme of any of his great tragedies; Milton was too engrossed with his great epic of the fall of man to give it any consideration worth mentioning. During the Neo-Classical period it was either ignored in the interest of "reason" or treated in a purely artificial manner. The Romantic Revival, when it came, was more interested in nature, the supernatural, and the gothic than in love. While of the later Romantics, Wordsworth devoted himself chiefly to nature and her lessons, Coleridge especially to the weird and supernatural, Shelley to his "passion for reforming the world" and Keats primarily to his search for beauty. Byron, to be sure, wrote of love but often in a tone of satire and with an emphasis upon the purely sensuous which is very different from the treatment of Dante or Rossetti. In short, it is only when we go back to the poetry of Dante and his contemporaries that we find love given that position of supreme importance which it occupies in the work of Rossetti. It may, of course, be objected that the sonnet writers of the Elizabethan era were also much concerned with this subject. But they treated it with a graceful lightness and sometimes with a touch of humour that contrast markedly with the "high seriousness" of Dante and Rossetti. Says Sir Phillip Sidney:

"Ring out your bells, let mourning shows be spread;  
For Love is dead.  
All love is dead, infected  
With plague of deep distain;  
Worth, as not worth, rejected,  
And Faith, fair scorn doth gain.  
From so ungrateful fancy,  
From such a female frenzy,  
From men that use men thus,  
Good lord, deliver us!"<sup>1</sup>.

This verse, with its word play and its parody is surely written in no very serious tone. Yet it is typical of much of the love poetry of the period. Dante's devotion to Beatrice, however, was the central fact of his life; all his other interests revolved about it and were dependent upon it. As he says after first meeting her: "I say that from that time forward, Love quite gov<sup>e</sup>rn<sup>e</sup>d my soul; which was immediately espoused to him, and with so safe and undisputed a lordship (by virtue of strong imagination) that I had nothing left for it but to do all his bidding continually."<sup>2</sup>. Love is his lord and master and forms the chief interest and motive power in his life and in the lives of many men who lived in his day.

This attitude we find faithfully reflected in Rossetti's poetry. Instead of attempting to hide his love, as the average Englishman might do, or speaking of it in veiled and stilted phrases, as the average Victorian would almost

1. Sidney, Sir Phillip, "Ring Out Your Bells", A Pageant of Elizabethan Poetry, (Blackie and Sons, Limited, London, n.d.), p. 224.

2. Dante, Alighieri, "Vita Nuova", translation of Rossetti, D.G., Collected Works, (Ellis and Elvey, London, 1890), vol. I, p. 31.

certainly have done, he passionately proclaims its sovereignty with complete frankness. The importance he attaches to it is shown by the fact that of the one hundred and one sonnets of the House of Life, the first fifty-nine deal exclusively with love. His own expression of its place in life is found in the sonnet Love Enthroned:

"I marked all kindred powers the heart finds fair:  
Truth, with awed lips; and Hope, with eyes upcast;  
And Fame, whose loud wings fan the ashen Past  
To signal fires, oblivion's flight to scare;  
And Youth, with still some single golden hair  
Unto his shoulder clinging, since the last  
Embrace, wherein two sweet arms held him fast;  
And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear.

Love's throne was not with these; but far above  
All passionate wind of welcome and farewell  
He sat in breathless bowers they dream not of;  
Though Truth foreknow Love's heart, and Hope foretell,  
And Fame be for Love's sake desirable,  
And Youth be dear and Life be sweet to Love."

To this doctrine he remained true throughout his life, for the theme of the lordship of love is found through all his work. He is undoubtedly most worthy to be termed the love poet supreme of the Victorian Period.

This being so, it was quite natural that much of his work should have seemed strange, not to say actually shocking, to a section of the Phillistine public who so greatly admired the moralizing of Ruskin and the "purity" of Tennyson's poetry. It is little wonder that he called forth such an indignant and hostile criticism as that expressed in Buchanan's Fleshly School of Poetry. In our own day it is

almost impossible to appreciate the sensation which some of his poems must have made. Today love is the theme by far the most frequently employed by almost all writers; and modern movies and popular songs seem, in one way, to carry on the tradition of the Italian sonneteers and Rossetti in that they are concerned with this subject practically to the exclusion of all others. The mere recollection of a few titles indicates this fact--"One Night of Love", "Love in Bloom", "Song of Love", "Break of Hearts", "Love Me Forever". And certainly the theme is treated with the most complete frankness. But at the time when Rossetti was writing such things were still safe in the sealed seed pot of the future and the Victorian present was inclined to mingle condemnation of his frank discussion of love in all its phases with its praise of his many very evident beauties.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that the influence of Dante on the work of Rossetti is very strong; we might indeed be justified in concluding that it is quite the most important single element to be discovered in his poetry. It is not confined to half a dozen poems, but finds expression and sounds echoes throughout the whole body of Rossetti's work. It does not limit its influence to a single line of thought, but colours the poet's entire mental outlook so that in many respects Rossetti seems another Dante expressing in a modern world the ideas and ideals of the medieval poet,



influenced to an extent by the thought of his day, it is true, but still imbued throughout with the spirit of the Past. Small wonder then that he took little interest in politics or international affairs; his heart and mind inhabited a world of yesterday with Dante and his visions, with the gentle Beatrice, and the "ladies who have intelligence in love".

CHAPTER V  
TREATMENT OF CHIVALRY

Chivalry--the traditions and customs of knighthood--was another aspect of medievalism which left a strong impression upon Rossetti's mind and work. He delighted in creating a picture of the ideal medieval knight, fearless and loyal, who, splendid in the glitter of armour and flaunting of plumes, rides forth to serve his lady and his king. As we have already noted, tales of knightly adventure appealed to him from childhood, and it is therefore not surprising that such stories should very frequently find an echo in his own work. Of his eight narrative poems, six are tales of chivalry--stories of lovely ladies and brave men who fight and love, and revenge themselves and sacrifice themselves according to the truest traditions of knighthood. There is little reality about them, but they are gallant figures brilliantly conceived in a beautiful old world vision. And apparently they are as powerless to enter real life as any other dream figures, for with one or two exceptions we find all the references to chivalry contained in these few poems. One such exception, of course, the convention of Courtly Love, pervades almost the whole body of Rossetti's work. This subject has been discussed in the section concerning the influence of Dante and will be considered later in connection with the poems of chivalry.

The other aspects of chivalry are, as already stated, confined to about half a dozen poems, which, however, are numbered among his most important compositions. In order to make my references clear, it is worth while, perhaps, to give a brief summary of each before considering the chivalric elements to be found in them. There is first, the long, incomplete poem, The Bride's Prelude. Originally named Bride Chamber Talk, it was begun at quite an early date, but never finished. It is a tale of illicit love between Aloyse, a lady of noble family, and Urscelyn, who lives at the castle and of whom she says, "He was akin to us in part, and bore our shield, but barred athwart." Reverses of fortune come upon the family, he deserts them. But on the journey to a place of safety, Aloyse, hearing of her lover's falsity, tells her secret to her brothers almost without knowing what she is doing. They threaten her with death, but she is saved by her father; then when her baby is born it is taken from her while she is still unconscious, and the utmost secrecy is imposed on those who know her history. Later her younger sister returns from the convent; and here the poem breaks off. But as it begins with the preparations for the marriage of Aloyse to her former lover whom she now hates, we are left with at least a hint of the working out of the tale.

Next is the wonderful imitation ballad, Sister Helen. Here we have the weird tale of a girl deserted by her

knightly lover and the terrible revenge of her "Hate born of Love." It is told entirely by the conversation between the girl and her little brother, whose utter innocence serves to accentuate the grief and horror of the story. Helen, on the marriage day of her former lover to another woman, determines to destroy him by melting his waxen image over a slow fire. The poem opens with the childlike question of the little boy:

"Why did you melt your waxen man, sister Helen?  
Today is the third since you began'.  
'The time was long, yet the time ran, Little Brother'  
(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Three days today, between Hell and Heaven )."

After describing how the figure of wax has dropped away "like dead folk", the boy goes out to play on the balcony, whence he soon sees three horsemen approaching. The first is Keith of Eastholm come to plead for the life of his brother who lies dying: but the girl gives him an answer of cold scorn:

"The wind is loud but I hear him cry,  
Sister Helen,  
That Keith of Ewern's like to die.'  
And he and thou and thou and I,  
Little brother.'  
(O Mother, Mary Mother  
And they and we, between Hell and Heaven!)"

Then comes Keith of Westholme with the message that his brother continually cries to see her before he dies. But she answers him bitterly that "In all that his soul sees, there am I". Next rides the father, begging her to forgive his son that his soul may live though his body die, and she replies "Fire cannot slay it, it shall thrive." Finally the dying

man's bride comes to plead for mercy, but "she may not speak, she sinks in a swoon" and they catch her to a saddle-bow and ride silently away as the tolling of a bell is born on the chill of the winter wind. And so Helen achieves her revenge although her soul is lost with that of her lover:

"'Ah! what white thing at the door has crossed,  
Sister Helen,  
Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?'  
'A soul that's lost as mine is lost,  
Little Brother.'  
(O Mother, Mary Mother  
Lost, lost, all lost between Hell and Heaven!)"

The next poem, The Staff and Scrip has the source of its story in the Gesta Romanorum, as William Rossetti tells us, and seems to have been composed about 1853. It is the tale of a knight who, returning as a pilgrim from the Holy Land, finds the realm of a certain Queen Blanchelys harried by the wicked Duke Luke. He goes to see the Queen and as he looks at her

"... he knew that he saw weep  
Each night through every dream  
The Queen's own face, confused in sleep  
With visages supreme,  
Not known to him."

He offers to go to fight for her, but leaves with one of her women his staff and scrip. The Queen sends him a sword, banner and shield, and all the next day waits with her maidens for news of the battle. When messengers come at last they bring with them her knight lying lifeless on the shield, with the broken sword in his hand, and the bloodied banner across his mouth. Then the maidens give the Queen the staff and scrip which he had left for her. Through all her life they

hang above her bed and are finally buried with her when she dies. The poem ends with the union of the lovers in a beautiful medieval paradise where the knight wins her in a tournament.

"The lists are set in Heaven today,  
The bright pavilion's shine;  
Fair hangs thy shield, and none gainsay  
The trumpet's sound in sign  
That she is thine."

In Rose Mary we find a tale of magic and of sin and its punishment. Rose Mary, three days before her wedding, is commanded by her mother to gaze into the Beryl stone and discover what dangers will threaten her knight, Sir James of Heronhaye, as he rides to seek shrift before his marriage. Now the Beryl stone had a special condition attached to its reading:

"None sees here but the pure alone.  
'And oh!', she said, 'what rose may be  
In Mary's bower more pure to see  
Than my own sweet maiden Rose Mary?!"

But alas, the girl and her lover have already sinned together. So when she gazes into the stone, although she believes she is seeing clearly, the places of danger are reversed from their actual positions. So when the knight rides forth, he is unexpectedly attacked and killed by his enemy the Warden of Holycleugh. By this the mother learns of her daughter's sin; but both mother and daughter still believe the knight to be faithful to his love. As he lies in state in the chapel, however, the mother discovers in his breast a packet containing

a folded paper wound around with a tress of golden hair. And

"Even as she looked, she saw again  
The dark-haired face in its swoon of pain;  
It seemed a snake with a golden sheath  
Crept near, as a slow flame flickereth,  
And stung her daughter's heart to death."

In the paper is a note revealing the fact that Sir James was in love with the sister of his enemy. Only when she reads it does the lady realize the full extent of his perfidy.

"She lifted the lock of gleaming hair  
And smote the lips and left it there.  
'Here is gold that Hell shall take for thy toil!  
Full well thy treason has found its goal,  
O thou dead body and damned soul!'"

But Rose Mary, aroused from her swoon, finds the door of a secret stairway open and ascends it, scarcely knowing yet what she does. It leads to the hiding place of the Beryl-- a marvelous chapel where upon an alter "in a coiling serpent's life-likeness", "twixt the wings of a sculptured beast unknown, Rose Mary saw the Beryl stone." As she gazed at the stone, it seemed to her that the evil spirits in it were brought there by her sin; that it was her task to drive them out, and that in so doing she might find her lover again. So seizing her father's sword which hung there she struck the stone, cleaving it to the heart. There was a crash and when silence fell again Rose Mary lay lifeless beside the shattered stone. But the soft voice of the good spirit, banished by her sin from the jewel, whispered softly:

"Already thy heart remembreth  
No more his name thou soughtst in death :

For under all deeps, all heights above,--  
So wide the gulf in the midst thereof,--  
Are Hell of Treason and Heart of Love."  
"Thee, true soul, shall thy truth prefer  
To blessed Mary's rose-bower:  
Warmed and lit is thy place afar  
With the guerdon fires of the sweet Love-star  
Where hearts of steadfast lovers are."

After these two imaginative tales of romance and mystery, we come to a much more realistic poem, The White Ship. It tells the famous story of how the Prince of Wales and all his company set sail for England in the White Ship, and how, after a night of carousing, the ship was driven on the rocks and immediately went to pieces. The Prince with a few friends managed to escape in a small boat; but hearing his sister's cry, he insisted on turning back and was drowned in attempting to save her. And remarks the narrator,

"He was a Prince of lust and pride;  
He showed no grace till the hour he died"  
". . . . ."  
"God only knows where his soul did wake,  
But I saw him die for his sister's sake."

The entire tale is related by Berold, a poor butcher of Rouen who is the sole survivor of the disaster. Rossetti, in one of his letters, says that the events all occur in one historical version of the tale or another, even to the golden haired boy in black velvet who breaks the news to King Henry and to the fact that the King never smiled again.

The last poem in the group, The King's Tragedy, tells another well known story, this time from the pages of Scottish history--the tale of how Catherine Douglas, better



known as Kate Barlass, bravely but vainly attempted to save King James from assassination, by thrusting her arm through the bolts of a door from which the bar had been removed by the faithless chamberlain, Robert Stuart. Again the tale is told with the vividness and realism of an eye-witness. The terrible scene of the assassination lives before us in all its horror as we share with Catherine her terrible vigil when, although injured and suffering, she could not faint:

"And under the litters and through the bed,  
And within the presses all:  
The traitors sought for the King and pierced  
The arras around the wall.  
And through the chamber they ramped and stormed  
Like lions loose in the lair,  
And scarce could trust their very eyes  
For behold! no King was there."

And then, when led to the hiding place by the traitrous chamberlain they leap down to kill him, we watch the struggle in terror, till at last the King falls "with sixteen wounds in his breast". Nor can we soon forget the figure of the widowed Queen, watching day after day beside the body of her beloved lord as

"Her pallor changed to sight,  
And the frost grew to a furnace-flame  
That burnt her visage white."

Until at last the traitors had all paid for their crime and we hear her whisper in his ear "with a strange, proud smile;- James, James they suffered more."

"And 'O James!' she said--'My James!' she said,--  
Alas for the woeful thing,

That a poet true and a friend of man  
In desperate days of bale and ban  
Should needs be born a King!"

Such, briefly, are the poems in which Rossetti treats the subject of chivalry. Their scope, be it noted, is wide. They include tales of revenge, tales of magic, tales of heroic sacrifice, and stories from history. But all are concerned with the lives of knights and ladies, and all show clear evidence of the influence of chivalry and its traditions upon the mind and work of Rossetti. Let us attempt now to discover what elements of chivalry he has incorporated into these compositions.

We notice first the frequent references to the picturesque in the Middle Ages. The trappings of knighthood,-- the rich armour, the gay plumes and fluttering banners,-- appealed strongly to Rossetti's sense of beauty. So we are told that Keith of Eastholm in Sister Helen rides a white horse, for the girl's brother sees a "white plume on the blast"; and when Keith of Westholm arrives the child cries that he knows "the white plume on the blast". The pilgrim knight in The Staff and Scrip, we are informed, wore into battle the Queen's three gifts--"a sharp sword, whose belt about his body there as sweet as her own arms he felt", "a green banner wrought with one white lily stem", and

" . . . . . a white shield whereon  
She bade that he should trace  
His will. He blent fair hues that shone

And in a golden space  
He kissed her face."

Moreover the poet describes in detail the pennant of the  
Warden of Holycleugh in Rose Mary:

"The little pennon quakes in the air  
I cannot trace the blazon there:-  
Ah! now I can see the field of blue,  
The spurs and merlins two and two."

And Sir James of Heronhaye, in the same poem, wears a  
"blazoned coat" embroidered with "the heron wings of Heron-  
haye". Such details help to create the splendid pageantry of  
Chivalry which Rossetti so loved and therefore they are an  
important feature in his treatment of the subject.

Then, of course, there is the element of Courtly  
Love, which has already been discussed. But since this sub-  
ject is such an important aspect of chivalry, it is perhaps  
worth while to notice the place its conventions occupy in  
these particular poems. Faithlessness, for example, is the  
unforgiveable crime in these tales, and as such is revenged  
by the deserted girl in Sister Helen and condemned by the  
mother in Rose Mary:

"Full well hath thy treason found its goal,  
O thou dead body and damned soul!"

she exclaims. While Helen is implacable in what she regards  
as her just vengeance--

"Hate born of Love, is blind as he,  
Little brother."

And when the boy pleads that her lover says that he melts

before a fire, she replies simply,

"My heart for his pleasure fared the same,  
Little brother."

On the other hand, the fidelity of lovers is rewarded as the highest virtue. So, in The Staff and Scrip, the pilgrim-knight who had kept his vow, and the Queen, who remained true to him and their unspoken love through all her busy life, are finally united in their medieval heaven:

"Not tithed with days' and years' decease  
He pays thy wage He owed,  
But with imperishable peace  
Here in his own abode,  
Thy jealous God."

Rose Mary too is finally justified because she is true to her faithless lover. For she destroys the stone believing that they two will be united after her death. And so for her

"'tis a blessed thing  
To work hereby our ransoming."

And as she lies beside the shattered Beryl, a sweet, clear voice is heard through the room:

"O come--for thy bitter love's sake blest;  
By a sweet path now thou journeyest,  
And I will lead thee to thy rest."

In The King's Tragedy as well, the mutual deathless devotion of the royal pair is constantly praised. This element of Courtly Love, by the way, has not, like many of the others, become an artificiality at which we are inclined to smile. It is a subject common to all romance and has been since the time of classical legend--witness its importance in the tales of

Greek mythology-, while the fidelity or infidelity of lovers constitutes one of the commonest themes of the modern novel. But in the days of Courtly Love faithlessness was regarded very seriously and termed the greatest of all crimes, as fidelity was considered the highest of virtues.

In these poems we also find a frequent insistence on the beauty and virtue of the heroine. The Queen in The Staff and Scrip is described thus:

"Her eyes were like the wave within:  
Like water-reeds the poise  
Of her soft body, dainty-thin;  
And like the water's noise  
Her plaintive voice."

Rose Mary is addressed by her mother as "Mary mine that art Mary's Rose." And as she lay in death, we are told,

"The death she had won might leave no trace  
On the soft sweet form and the gentle face:  
In a gracious sleep she seemed to lie."

While of the Queen in The King's Tragedy, Catherine Douglas says:

"And the Queen was there more stately fair  
Than a lily in garden set."

The traditional love sickness, the faintness at sight of the loved one, is likewise referred to at least once when the Pilgrim in The Staff and Scrip first sees the Queen,

"For him the stream had never well'd  
In desert tracks, malign  
So sweet; nor had he ever felt  
So faint in the sunshine  
Of Palestine."

So we see that the conventions of Courtly Love play quite an

important part in the tales of Chivalry; not, of course, that they are all observed in every tale or even in all the tales combined, but that there are sufficient traces of them to show that they had at least some influence on Rossetti's treatment of love in these poems.

We may notice next that in his presentation of knighthood, especially when the knights are heroes, Rossetti observes the ethics of Chivalry; These required, first, the most complete bravery in the face of danger. Any trace of cowardice at once branded a knight as utterly ignoble. Accordingly, the knight in The Staff and Scrip does not waver in his determination to fight for the Queen, although he knows the cause is hopeless.

"'Sir, you are thanked. My cause is dead.  
Why should you toil to break  
A grave and fall therein?' she said.  
He did not pause but spoke:  
'For my vow's sake.'"

And in The King's Tragedy, King James will pay no attention to the old woman's warning although it is his own life which is threatened. Rather than appearing disturbed by her words, he resigns his fate calmly into the hands of his maker:

"And if God in his wisdom have brought close  
The day when I must die,  
That day by water or fire or air  
My feet shall fall in the destined snare  
Wherever my road may lie."

While his fearlessness in facing his enemies--one man alone and unarmed against many--was such that more than one bore the

mark of the King's hands on his throat long after, and that when he fell at last, it was with the sixteen wounds all in his breast. Even the Prince in The White Ship, in spite of being "a lawless, shameless youth", was, after all, a knight and a gentleman and at the moment of trial did not hesitate to give his life in an attempt to save that of his sister.

"He knew her face and he heard her cry  
And he said, Put back! she must not die!"

So he returned to his doom and in his death showed that nobility of which there had been so little evidence in his life.

The ethics of Chivalry also required that knights display perfect courtesy to all women. This finds its literary echo, of course, in the numerous tales concerning the rescue of a beautiful lady by a bold and handsome knight. Thus the pilgrim-knight of The Staff and Scrip comes to the aid of the distressed Queen in true chivalric manner; while the Prince, in The White Ship, upon hearing the cry of his sister, returns to rescue her at the expense of his own life. Though in practice this courtesy was often displayed only to ladies of noble rank, theoretically at least, it was to be shown to all women, however poor, old or ugly. So King James while he does not follow the advice of the old woman, gives her words thoughtful attention and displays no anger at being suddenly faced by one who bore a message of impending disaster. She was a woman and as such must be treated with a

certain respect.

The code of Chivalry insisted too on the sanctity of a knight's vow. His word, once given, especially among equals, must be kept at all costs; and the failure to comply with such an obligation was almost as shameful as a display of cowardice; it was a serious reflection upon the honour of the knight. This too is reflected in Rossetti's poems of Chivalry. The Pilgrim knight must fight for the Queen, in spite of the hopelessness of his cause, for the sake of the vow he has made. The crime of the faithless lover in Sister Helen is that he has broken his plighted word:

"He sends a ring and a broken coin,  
Sister Helen,  
And bids you mind the banks of Boyne!'  
'What else he broke will he ever join,  
Little brother?'"

Similarly Sir James of Heronhaye has broken faith with Rose Mary and thereby earns the scorn and hatred of all who know of his crime. To the mother his dead face seems "A mask that hung on the gates of Hell!"; and by the good spirit of the Beryl he is condemned to "Hell of Treason". He has broken his word and therefore is banished to outer darkness.

Closely associated with the sanctity of the given word, was loyalty to the leige lord--the keeping of the vows of fealty. To break these vows was quite as serious as to break any others, for a powerful lord held his position by means of the lesser nobles pledged to his service and dis-



loyalty on their part might have very serious consequences. Even the king held his power through the great under lords and their disaffection or that of their followers might result in a civil war. The robber barons of Europe, of course, were constantly fighting among themselves and were quite independent of kings. The power of such families is indicated by the arrogance of their mottoes. Boast the Rohans:

"Dukes we disdain;  
Kings we can't be;  
Rohans are we!"<sup>1</sup>.

And the mighty Sire of Coucy: "No king am I, no prince, no duke: I'm just the Sire of Coucy."<sup>2</sup>. With such power upheld by the oath of fealty it is clear that the breaking of it was not to be lightly regarded. So Lord Urscelyn in The Bride's Prelude is termed a traitor for his desertion of the family in its time of need. And the faithless barons in The King's Tragedy are guilty of treason as well as of murder; for they broke their oaths of fealty; and each day as the Queen watched beside the body of her husband, "in the cold ear with fire-drawn breath, she spake the traitors' names." But their punishment was as heavy as their crime, and at last, "James, James, they suffered more," she said. To break the oath of fealty given to one's leige lord was an unforgivable crime and

1. Davis, W.S., Life on a Medieval Barony, (Harper and Brothers, New York and London, 1923), p. 150.

2. Ibid, p. 151.

as such Rossetti regarded it.

Even the sports of Chivalry have left their mark in these poems. Chief among them were hunting and hawking in both of which ladies as well as knights took part. Indeed the dogs, horses, and birds for these amusements were important inmates of every medieval household of noble rank, with special quarters set aside for them and special men to train them. These were, in fact, two of the three principal outdoor amusements of peace time; and we find numerous references to them in all authors writing of the Middle Ages. Our poet, in The Bride's Prelude, makes a hunt the occasion on which Aloyse, who, because of her girlhood spent in a convent, was no expert horsewoman, falls from her horse and by so doing meets her future lover who, being skilled in medicine, is called in during the absence of the priest. And when the family fortunes have fallen and they have fled to a strong place of safety, Aloyse relates that:

"My hounds I had not; and my hawk,  
Which they had saved for me,  
Wanting the sun and rain to beat  
His wings, soon lay with gathered feet."

But of course by far the most popular sport was that imitation of warfare, the tournament, in which knights fought, often to the death, before the eyes of their fellows and of fair ladies. The excitement caused by these gatherings can perhaps hardly be paralleled in our own day. They were held often to celebrate a marriage or the creation of a knight and

lasted frequently for a week, accompanied by the greatest festivity and attended by everyone for miles around. The death or maiming of numerous men was regarded simply as a matter of course, as at "the Gentle and Joyous Passage of Arms of Ashby" in which "although only four knights, including one who was smothered by the heat of his armour, had died upon the field, yet upwards of thirty were desperately wounded, four or five of whom never recovered. Several more were disabled for life; and those who escaped best, carried the marks of the conflict to the grave with them."<sup>1</sup>. But in spite of the roughness and cruelty of the sport, perhaps even because of it, no amusement was more popular among people of all ranks during the Middle Ages. In Rossetti's poems of Chivalry then, it is rather surprising to find only one important reference to what might be termed the Chivalric Sport of Kings. This reference occurs in the conclusion of The Staff and Scrip in which the poet imagines the Knight winning his Queen as the reward of victory in a celestial tournament.

"The lists are set in Heaven today,  
The bright pavilions shine,  
Fair hangs thy shield, and none gainsay  
The trumpets sound in sign  
That she is thine."

But the days of Chivalry had also their indoor

1. Scott, Sir Walter, Ivanhoe, (Collins Clear Type Press, London and Glasgow, n.d.), p. 115.

amusements. Knights must be able to shine in the great hall as well as in the tilt yard or hunting field. Hence most of them were able to play various games, to sing, and some even to recite poetry of their own composing while the ladies worked their endless embroideries. In The King's Tragedy, we find King James and his friend playing chess; and later the King sings a song which he himself had written, accompanying himself on the harp:

"And he kissed her hand and took his harp,  
And the music sweetly rang;  
And when the song burst forth, it seemed  
'Twas the nightingale that sang."

They danced too, to while away the long winter evenings.

Aloyse in The Bride's Prelude, tells how, with her sense of shame upon her

"The endless changes of the dance  
Bewildered me: the tones  
Of lute and cithern struggled tow'rd  
Some sense; and still in the last chords  
The music seemed to sing wild words."

A final feature of the days of Chivalry to be referred to by Rossetti is the Crusades. These Holy Wars against the Mohammedans in Palestine were extremely popular in Europe during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It would be almost impossible to calculate the number of men who, during these years, travelled to the East to give up their lives in the cause of Christ. Frequently knights who felt themselves guilty of great sin chose this means of gaining absolution--and perhaps glory. In the Crusade led by

Peter the Hermit even women and children left their homes and started on the long, hard march which after all ended in disaster. On the whole there was perhaps no movement during the Middle Ages which took such a hold upon the minds and imaginations of people of all ranks as did these wars for the land of the Holy Sepulchre. It is only natural, then, that our poet should speak of them on several occasions. In Rose Mary, the mother, in speaking of the Beryl stone and the spirits who inhabit it, says:

"But Moslem blood poured forth like wine  
Can hallow Hell, 'neath the Sacred Sign;  
And my lord brought this from Palestine."

While in the description of the chapel where the Beryl lay, we find another reference to the father who fought in the Holy Wars.

"O'er the alter-sides on either hand  
There hung a dented helm and brand;  
By strength thereof, 'neath the Sacred Sign,  
That better gift, o'er the salt sea-brine  
Her father brought from Palestine."

While a third reference is found, not in the poems dealing directly with Chivalry, but in the shorter poem entitled The Portrait. Speaking of the painted face of his lady now dead, the poet says:

"Here with her face doth memory sit  
Meanwhile and wait the days decline,  
Till other eyes shall look from it,  
Eyes of the spirit's Palestine,  
Even than the old gaze tenderer:  
While hopes and aims long dead with her  
Stand round her image side by side,

Like tombs of pilgrims that have died  
About the Holy Sepulchre."

The pilgrim knight in The Staff and Scrip may perhaps be regarded as Rossetti's portrait of the ideal knight. As we have shown, he lives up to all the chivalric ideals: he is fearless in battle, gentle, and faithful even unto death. While as a companion portrait we find, in The King's Tragedy, a picture of the ideal king of chivalry. King James was equally a perfect knight; utterly fearless, as proved by the manner of his death; accomplished--he was a poet and musician; devoted to his Queen; and considerate of inferiors as exemplified by his treatment of the old woman who warned him of his death. But he was more than this; he was a king. Now the king in days of chivalry occupied a singularly difficult position. It was his task to hold the throne between the jealous and powerful nobles on the one hand, and the ever discontented people on the other. Generally he feared most the strength of the nobles who might, if they became too strong, overthrow his rule entirely. And so he often did his best to limit it by taking from them some of their lands and prerogatives and granting greater rights to the people. He was therefore often regarded by the people as their champion and by the nobles as their enemy. This is exactly the position of King James. Because he attempted to limit the power of the great barons, they plotted against his life and finally killed him. And the common people of Scotland whom he

had helped felt with Catherine Douglas that

" . . . if all had come to pass in the brain  
That throbbed beneath those curls,  
Then Scots had said in days to come  
That this their soil was a different home  
And a different Scotland, girls!"

His life then may be regarded as typical of that of the ideal king of chivalry; his death was that of a brave and true gentleman.

But although all these elements of Chivalry are to be found in these poems, it is, after all, the pictures of knighthood which the poet creates that remain longest in our memories;--the pilgrim knight brought back to the Queen upon his shield, the "three horsemen riding terribly" to Sister Helen, Sir James of Heronhaye after his last battle:

"The blazoned coat was rent on his breast  
Where the golden field was goodliest;  
But the shivered sword, close-gripped,  
could tell  
That the blood shed round him where  
he fell  
Was not all his in the distant dell."

We are left with an impression of men who laugh as they quaff a stirrup-cup, who wear "steel shoes", who carry swords and bear a lance with "a blazoned scroll", and who smile in the face of death; of slender women in white gowns "quartered in silver at each side" and rich with jewels, who "eke out upon silken cloth Christ's visage, or the long bright growth of Mary's hair or Satan's wroth", who die for their love's sake and lose their souls to achieve their revenge. We hear the

noise of battles, the "cries of hostile lords and crash of spears and grind of swords", and the ring of mailed feet upon a stone floor. Not quickly can we forget such a scene as the gallant struggle of King James, alone and unarmed against the assassins:

"And he smote and trampled them under him;  
And a long month thence they bare  
All black their throats with the grip  
    of his hands  
When the hangman's hand came there."

Such pictures represent the essence of Chivalry, its bravery, its beauty, its romance. As we read them we live again in "days of old when knights were bold and barons held their sway".

As such scenes and such details are the most memorable feature in Rossetti's treatment of Chivalry, it is natural to suppose that it was this picturesque element which appealed to him most strongly. He did not, like Tennyson, turn legends of knighthood into a parable to be applied to the changing social conditions of his day; a moral or philosophical interpretation interested him not at all. Nor did he, like Morris, attempt to catch the joyous and daring spirit of the medieval knight, to recreate the psychology of Chivalry. No, it was rather the glamour and beauty of the old days which appealed to him--the glitter of armour, the flutter of plumes and pennons. And as we read his poems we are reminded of Chesterton's sentence concerning Sir Walter



Scott, who also loved the picturesque trappings of knight-hood: "A two-handed sword might be carried only by a menial in a procession, but it was something important and immeasurably fascinating--it was a two handed sword."<sup>1</sup>.

1. Chesterton, G.K., Twelve Types, (A.S.Humphreys, London, 1910), p. 192.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE INFLUENCE OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

"The medieval mind", says Mr. Root, "has its gaze primarily fixed on the spiritual and abstract."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he continues, in its dealings with society and humanity in general, the medieval tends to communism, for the community is an abstract ideal. While in its dealings with God, "to the medieval mind, man is a member of a great spiritual family, the body of Christ, the Church Catholic and Universal."<sup>2</sup> Protestantism, with its insistence on direct and personal relation with the Deity and its tendency to break into sects as a result of individual freedom of thought, is utterly foreign to the mind of the Middle Ages. It is individualism in religion--an expression of the creed of the Renaissance and the present day. "Every man," we say, "has a right to his own opinion." Not so the medieval world. In an era where men were content to spend their lives working at, perhaps, a small piece of carving on the wall of a cathedral; and to die unknown and unremembered except for the eternal beauty of their work; where not one year or even one generation, but hundreds of years and scores of generations were required for the completion of a building considered worthy

1. Root, R.K., The Poetry of Chaucer, (Houghton and Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1906),

2. Ibid

to honour God;--in such a world the individual man and his opinions could matter little in comparison to the great ideal. And so Roman Catholicism, insisting upon the same beliefs for all men and stressing the spiritual and eternal as strongly as the material and temporal things of life, was, quite naturally, the religion of the Middle Ages.

Was it also the religion of Rossetti, so much of whose mind was steeped in the ideas of a medieval world? In order to answer this question, let us examine the religious influences which were brought to bear upon him in his childhood. His father, as William Rossetti tells us, "was mainly a free-thinker, strongly anti-papal and anti-sacerdotal, but not inclined, in a Protestant country, to abjure the faith of his fathers. He never attended any place of worship. Spite of his free-thinking, he had the deepest respect for the moral and spiritual aspects of the Christian religion, and in his later years might almost be termed an unsectarian and undogmatic Christian."<sup>1</sup>. He was free from popular superstition and did not believe in ghosts, although his famous son, especially as a child, was quite willing to do so. Rossetti's mother was deeply though unpretentiously religious and belonged to the Anglican Church. From these two, especially his mother, the boy Dante Gabriel must have gained the rudiments of Christian

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 12.

knowledge and an acquaintance with sacred stories and myths, as well as at least some idea of Catholicism from his father. We are told that he got to know the whole Bible fairly well and regarded it with great reverence. His favourite sections were Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Apocalypse--a predilection which remained with him in manhood. He was also familiar with Martin and Westhall's Illustrations of the Bible and several other collections of reproductions of religious pictures. Besides these direct means of instruction, he must have become familiar with many of the beliefs and legends of the medieval Church through his extensive reading in the books concerned with the Middle Ages which he so dearly loved. Chief among these was, of course, Dante, whose acquaintance he made in his sixteenth or seventeenth year, and the wide extent of whose influence in his work has already been shown. As a result of these varied influences, Rossetti's later religious opinions were far from definite. To quote William Rossetti again: "My brother was unquestionably sceptical as to many alleged facts, and he disregarded formulated dogmas, and the practices founded upon them. For theological discussions of whatsoever kind he had not the faintest taste, nor yet the least degree of aptitude. On the other hand, his mind was naturally prone to the marvelous and supernatural, and he had an abiding and very deep reverence for the person of Christ."<sup>1</sup> As he him-

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 380.

self says in his poem Soothsay:

"Let lore of all Theology  
Be to thy soul what it can be;  
But know the Power that fashions man  
Measured not out thy little span  
For thee to take the meting-rod  
In turn, and so approve on God  
Thy science of Theometry."

For the disputed doctrines and creeds of the orthodox Roman Catholic Church, Rossetti cared nothing. But it was above all the picturesque and wonderful which appealed to him in the religious as in all other aspects of life. And so, naturally, it was to the Roman Catholicism of the Middle Ages with its mystic faith and its beautiful forms of worship that he turned for much of his religious inspiration.

As evidence of this fact, let us consider the several poems dealing with religious subjects to be found in Rossetti's work. One of the loveliest of these is entitled Ave and deals with the life of the Virgin Mary. We see her first as a young girl watering her flowers on a summer evening; and we hear with her the voice which spoke "without any noise, Being of the silence." Next we are shown the period of her Son's babyhood and boyhood, when she was, perhaps, learning something of "God's high secret" and the grief that was yet to be. Then came the "Long years when It was Finished"; and she devoted herself to caring for his poor, waiting, always waiting, with the beloved disciple, for His promise to be fulfilled; for "'Surely I come quickly,'" he

said. And they prayed night and day "'Amen: even so, Lord Jesus, come!'" Until at last dawned "that day when Michael came to break from the tir'd spirit, like a veil, its covenant with Gabriel endured at length unto the end." And the poet imagines her among the glories of the angels, a Queen clothed with stars--"O Mary Virgin, full of grace!" The viewpoint of the poem, let us notice, is purely Roman Catholic, for it approaches that adoration of the Virgin so prevalent in the Middle Ages and persisting down to the present day. This Mariolatry, as it has been termed by Protestants, considers the Virgin to be Queen of Heaven and Mother of God. As such her worship parallels and probably is derived from the worship of Juno, Venus and other goddesses of older religions. Her wide appeal as the female or mother element in religion was early recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. She was considered to be the gentle, pitying spirit who would intercede for lost souls at the throne of judgement. Moreover she was credited with miraculous powers which evidenced themselves to men, and the legends of her miracles are very numerous. It is with this background in mind that Rossetti wrote his poem. So conscious was he of the hostility which it might arouse, that at one time he considered omitting it from his published work, but it was finally included and is surely worthy of a place among his other writings.

Closely associated with this poem are the two

sonnets On Mary's Girlhood, which were written for Rossetti's oil paintings dealing with the same subject. The second was inscribed on the frame of this, his first picture. They represent Mary as she "dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee".

"From her mother's knee  
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;  
Strong in grave peace; in pity circumspect."

But the sextet of the first seems to refer more directly to Rossetti's second picture, Ecce Ancilla Domini or The Annunciation.

"She woke in her white bed, and had no fear  
At all--yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed  
Because the fullness of the time was come."

These lines exactly describe the painting in which Rossetti has represented the Virgin as crouching on her bed, facing, with a rapt expression of wonder in her eyes, a radiant white angel bearing a lily in his hand and having flames about his feet. The second sonnet explains the symbols used so effectively in Rossetti's picture of Mary's girlhood;--the tripoint in the embroidery at which the Virgin and her mother are working; the six books whose names are the virtues, guarded by a child angel; the lily of innocence standing upon them; the seven-thorned briar and the seven leaved palm representing her great sorrow and her great triumph. All are part of the life of her who is herself "An angel-watered lily that near God grows and is quiet." And again in these sonnets we find that veneration of the Virgin which is so definitely a

characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church.

The sonnet entitled The Passover in the Holy Family also illustrates one of Rossetti's drawings. In it Christ holds a bowl of blood from which Zacharias is sprinkling the posts and lintel; Joseph has brought the lamb, while Elizabeth lights the pyre as John binds the shoes of Christ and Mary gathers the bitter herbs, part of the ritual but symbolic of her sorrows. In the sonnet Rossetti explains that the feast of the Passover, ordained so long ago, represents, with the slaying of a pure and innocent lamb, the death of Christ, which itself occurred at the time of the great Jewish festival. Now "The slain lamb confronts the Lamb to slay" as the family celebrates the feast, ignorant of all that it portends.

Mary Magdelene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee, too, was written for a drawing of the same title. In this picture Mary has left a group of revellers and ascended the steps of a house in which she sees Jesus. Her lover, following, attempts to hold her back:

"'Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?  
Nay, be thou all a rose,--wreath, lips, and cheek.  
Nay, not this house, the banquet-house we seek;  
See how they kiss and enter; come thou there.'"

but she, resolute in her purpose, is not to be turned aside:

"'Oh loose me! Seest thou not my Bridegroom's face  
That draws me to him? For his feet my kiss,  
My hair, my tears He craves today:--and oh!  
What words can tell what other day and place  
Shall see me clasp those blood-stained feet of his?  
He needs me, calls me, loves me: let me go!'"



Five other sonnets are written on pictures representing religious subjects. The first is For an Annunciation, Early German. In the painting the Virgin kneels praying behind a screen of lilies. A Dove flies in to her, and at the low porch stands one "who looks as though deep awe made him to smile", there where the plants yield shadow from the sun and "the aisled pillars meet the poplar aisle". Seeing her thus--"Mary the Queen"--the poet reflects that

"She was faith's Present, parting what had been  
From what began with her, and is for aye.  
On either hand God's twofold system lay:  
With meek bowed face a Virgin prayed between."

The second sonnet was inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's Our Lady of the Rocks. As he looks at her represented with a dark background of rocks and sea, the poet wonders if the darkness is the Shadow of Death, and the outer sea, "infinite, imminent Eternity", to reach which man must pass through a death-pang as keen as the rocks themselves; "and the bewildered souls throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through", but her face is bent in prayer toward her Son as He Blesses the dead with his hand silently "to His long day where hours no more offend."

The next two sonnets both appeared originally in The Germ and are written on two pictures by Hans Memmelinck--A Virgin and Child and A Marriage of St. Catherine. The first begins, "Mystery: God, Man's life born into man of woman." It continues by speaking of the calm of the mother's

face which has come to it as "the ended pang of knowledge". For from the beginning of her task she has known all that must be accomplished; and though her son is only a baby now he is already "Perfect and Chosen". The second sonnet starts "Mystery: Catherine the bride of Christ", and concerns an old legend of the Church. In the picture the Holy Child sets the ring on the finger of the kneeling girl, while Mary reads the book and the two Johns listen and watch. So the maiden gives her life "hushed and mild" to her Master. Utter joy is hers and fittingly "Where'on soe'r thou look, the light is starred in gems and the gold burns."

The last poem in this group was written for Michael Angelo's Holy Family. In the picture the Virgin is shown withholding from the Child the prophetic writings in which ~~his~~ sufferings are foretold, while angels beside them examine a scroll. Their search for a clue to the divine mystery is useless, reflects the poet; only by Christ's manhood and suffering will the secret be made known.

"Still before Eden waves the fiery sword  
Her Tree of Life unransomed: whose sad tree  
Of Knowledge yet to growth of Calvary  
Must yield its Tempter--Hell the earliest dead  
Of Earth resign,--and yet, O Son and Lord,  
The seed o'the woman bruise the serpent's head."

We notice that of these ten religious poems, eight introduce legends of the Virgin characteristic of the Medieval Church.

Perhaps the Blessed Damozel may also be included among the poems dealing with religious themes. It contains

Rossetti's most elaborate picture of Paradise and, as has already been remarked, is a product of the Scriptures and the Apocrypha interpreted to a greater or lesser degree by the writings of Dante. The white clad souls with aureoles about their heads, singing praises to their Creator, are, of course, found in the Paradise; but Dante himself received his inspiration from the Scriptures. "And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold."<sup>1</sup>. And elsewhere, "And all the angels stood around about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>2</sup>. Such passages must surely have been in Rossetti's mind when he wrote his poem, in addition to his memories of Dante. The stream into which the lovers will step down and bathe, and

"That living mystic tree  
Within whose secret growth the Dove  
Is sometimes felt to be,"

may also be traced to the Bible. For we find: "And he showed me a pure river of water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it,

1. Revelations 4:4.

2. Revelations 7:11-12

and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits and yielded her fruits every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of nations."<sup>1</sup>.  The conception of the lady Mary as a queen surrounded by her maidens is, of course, purely Roman Catholic and Medieval. As we have already remarked in an earlier discussion of this poem, it is impossible to say how great is the single influence of Dante and how great that of Church legend and belief derived from other sources. It is at any rate clear that the Catholic conception of Heaven must have been as strong in Rossetti's mind when he wrote The Blessed Damozel as it was in Dante's when he wrote the Divine Comedy. So that the poem is probably best considered as an expression of Roman Catholicism as seen in the vision of Dante in the thirteenth Century and interpreted by Rossetti in the nineteenth century.

Although not, strictly speaking, a religious poem, the strange imitation ballad Eden Bower is perhaps worthy of discussion here because although the legend of Lilith, the first wife of Adam, is a Jewish myth, Rossetti has linked it to the story of the fall of man, which is, of course, Christian and therefore Catholic. Of Lilith legend tells us

"Not a drop of her blood was human,  
But she was made like a soft, sweet woman."

1. Revelations 22:1-2.

She is supposed still to exist and a man who falls under her spell is found, when he dies, to have a single golden hair bound firmly about his heart. Rossetti relates that it was this beautiful, golden-haired witch who tempted Eve in the shape of a serpent. He pictures Lilith's jealousy of Eve and shows that it was to revenge herself on her hated rival that she tempted the woman to eat the forbidden apple. Says Lilith, plotting with the serpent:

"Lo, Eve bends to the breath of Lilith!

(Sing Eden Bower!)

O How then shall my heart desire  
All her blood as food to its fire!"

"Then Eve shall eat and give unto Adam;

(Alas the hour!)

And then they both shall know they are naked  
And their hearts shall ache as my heart hath ached."

And she foretells the sorrows that shall come to the man and woman when, by her contriving, they shall have been cast out of Eden:

"Lo! two babes for Eve and for Adam!

(Alas the hour!)

Lo! sweet snake, the travail and treasure--  
Two men children born for their pleasure!

The first is Cain and the second Abel;

(Sing Eden Bower!)

The soul of one shall be made thy brother  
And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other  
(Alas the hour!)"

It is a strange poem with its sense of weird, evil power expressed in the vicious hatred of Lilith and her association with the snake. Her jealousy we can understand, for it is human; but that she should seek assistance from the loathsome

serpent is somehow unnatural and repellent. The suggestion of physical contact between the coils of a reptile and the body of a beautiful woman is particularly repulsive.

"O bright Snake, the Death-worm of Adam!  
(Sing Eden Bower!)  
Wreath thy neck with my hair's bright tether,  
And wear my gold and thy gold together!"

And again:

"O my love, come nearer to Lilith!  
(Sing Eden Bower!)  
In thy sweet folds bind me and bend me,  
And let me feel the shape thou shalt lend me."

Surely Rossetti has created a vivid and haunting poem by his union of old Jewish mythology with Christian tradition.

The quaint naivete and beauty of many ancient Church legends appealed to Rossetti as did so many old and lovely things. Nor are the references to them confined to the religious poems where we should naturally expect to find them. In this group, of course, they are numerous. In Ave, for example, is a reference to Mary's supposed summoning to death by the Archangel Michael:

"But oh! what human tongue can speak  
That day when Michael came to break  
From the tired spirit, like a veil,  
Its covenant with Gabriel  
Endured at length unto the end?"

According to tradition, Michael "the Great and Wonderful" is the angel of Death. On the day appointed he appeared to the Virgin Mother, bearing a palm branch and "clothed in light as with a garment" to warn her of her approaching end. The

sonnet for A Marriage of Saint Catherine is based on the legendary mystical union of St. Catherine to Christ. The myth tells us that she was the daughter of King Konetos of Alexandria, eighteen years old, wise, and beautiful. Having rejected many offers of marriage, she was taken to heaven in a vision and betrothed to Christ by the Virgin Mary. Later she was tortured for her faith by the command of a Roman general, but the wheel to which she was bound broke at her touch. She was finally beheaded and her body was borne by angels to Mt. Sinai where Justinian I founded a monastery in her honour.

In the non-religious poems Rossetti makes use of at least two other myths concerning "the lady Mary". In the sonnet, Beauty and the Bird, we find these lines:

"And like the child in Chaucer, on whose tongue  
The Blessed Mary laid, when he was dead,  
A grain--who straightway praised her name  
in song,--"

Here Rossetti is obviously referring to the miracle of the Virgin related by Chaucer's "Lady Prioresse". The story is of a little school boy who was murdered by the Jews because he always sang a hymn to the Virgin as he went to school and as he returned. The murderers hid his body, but searchers were led to it by a sound of singing. Nor would the child, although dead, cease his Alma Redemptoris until a grain which the Virgin had placed on his tongue was removed. This reference is interesting because, besides showing the appeal which such old tales made to Rossetti, it is one of the few traces

of Chaucer and his work to be found in our poet.

The second myth is employed in Sister Helen. One of the most remarkable features of this imitative ballad is the strange refrain which, with slight variations, recurs in each verse.

"(O Mother, Mary Mother,  
Three days today between Hell and Heaven!)"

The appeal to the Virgin, however, does not alter and seems to have been employed because, besides being the patron of women, she was supposed to have been the only power to whom those guilty of witchcraft dared to pray. It was her task to intercede at the throne of judgement for those who had committed this unforgiveable crime.

Still another legend employed by Rossetti is that which relates how Jesus, after his Crucifixion, spent the three days before his Resurrection, in Hell, and there saved certain souls of the dead, taking them up to Heaven with him. According to Dante, he so rescued Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, David, Israel, Rachel, and others whose greatest sin was that they had not been baptized. This so-called "Harrowing of Hell" is one of the most widely known of Church legends. It is apparently of this episode that Rossetti is thinking when in the sonnet Love's Testament he says:

"O what from ~~the~~ the grace, to me the prize,  
And what to Love the glory,---when the whole  
Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal  
And weary water of the place of sighs,



And there dost work delivrance as thine eyes  
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!"

It was not, however, merely the traditional legends of the Roman Catholic Church which left their impression on the mind of Rossetti. The medieval Church stressed constantly the importance of the spiritual and supernatural in the life of a material world. As Mr. Root remarks,<sup>1</sup> the medieval mind, through the influence of the Church, had its gaze primarily fixed upon the spiritual and abstract. Heaven came very near to earth in those days; shining ones bearing the Holy Grail might appear to worthy knights; the old men saw visions and the young men dreamed dreams of saints and angels; good and evil spirits walked the earth and might mingle in the affairs of men by taking human shape; and belief in miracles, such as the healing of the sick by a touch of a holy relic, was common. Such ideas were encouraged by a Church which, as Mr. Pater says,<sup>2</sup> "by its aesthetic worship, its sacramentalism, its real faith in the resurrection of the flesh, had set itself against the Manichean opposition of spirit and matter." So much did it insist upon the presence of the spiritual in the physical that, in the minds of many men, the actual world gradually diminished in importance and human emotions became spiritualized until, as in the case of Dante,

1. Root, R.K., op. cit. p.

2. Pater, W.H., Appreciations, (Macmillan and Company, Limited, London, 1918), p. 212.

"The soul could soar from earth's vain throng,  
And Heaven and Hell fulfil the song."1.

The existence of the unseen behind the seen, of vast powers moving in mysterious ways to affect the lives of men, was among the most characteristic teachings of the Church of the Middle Ages.

It was this mysticism, this recognition of the dualism of the world and of man's nature which impressed Rossetti so strongly. He was constantly attempting to reconcile the spiritual and the physical which, he realized, are so strangely mingled in human life. That this attitude is shown in his treatment of love, we have already demonstrated in the section dealing with the influence of Dante. Says his lady in Passion and Worship, "Thou art Passion of Love and this Love's Worship, both be plights to me." The ideal love must be a perfect union of both body and soul. And to Rossetti, so completely are flesh and spirit fused into one that the physical takes on a spiritual significance while spiritual experiences are interpreted by physical expression.

"Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God."

he says in the sonnet Heart's Hope. And in Love Lily:

"Whose speech truth knows not from her thought  
Nor Love her body from her soul."

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Dante at Verona", Poetical Works, (P.F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 1.

As Mr. Benson expresses it: "For him human passion was inextricably connected with its outward manifestations, in the emotions stirred by the apprehension of beauty alike definite and indefinite, the gracious mysteries of which human form and features, gesture, movement, and glance seem a sacramental expression."<sup>1</sup>.

But it is not only in his attitude toward Love that we are conscious of this fusion of the two elements of life. The poem Troy Town, for instance, is entirely visionary, yet it contains imagery which is perfectly vivid and essentially sensuous.

"Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen,  
 (O Troy Town!)  
 Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,  
 The sun and moon of the heart's desire;  
 All Love's lordship lay between,  
 (O Troy's down,  
 Tall Troy's on fire.)"

Still it gives no impression of reality. Venus and Cupid, although they have names, are not people but only spirits. Helen is real, but the only other human touch comes in the last verse:

"Paris turned in his bed,  
                    (O Troy Town!)  
Turned upon his bed and said  
Dead at heart with the heart's desire--  
'Oh to clasp her golden head!'  
                    (O Troy's down,  
                    Tall Troy's on fire!)"

1. Benson, A.C., Rossetti, (Macmillan and Company, Limited, London, 1904), pp. 78-79.

While The Portrait, at first a simple description of the beloved and the hours spent with her, takes on, at the end, a mystic tone as the poet speaks of their ultimate union:

"Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears  
The beating heart of Love's own breast,--  
Where round the secret of all spheres  
All angels lay their wings to rest,--  
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,  
When, by the new birth borne abroad  
Throughout the music of the suns,  
It enters in her soul at once  
And knows the silence there for God."

And yet this spirit will have eyes "even than the old gaze tenderer". In The Staff and Scrip too there is an expression of the consciousness of the unseen behind the seen. As the pilgrim knight looks at the Queen

"Right so, he knew that he saw weep  
Each night through every dream  
The Queen's own face, confused in sleep  
With visages supreme  
Not known to him."

In short, Rossetti's is a "Romantic mysticism with faith in the presence of spiritual forces in play at all points upon the human soul."<sup>1</sup>.

Another aspect of this realization of the interplay between the spiritual and the physical is Rossetti's frequent use of the supernatural. For if spiritual powers are present in the world, it is only natural to suppose that they will sometimes manifest themselves in ways inexplicable to our

1. Wood, Esther, Dante Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, (S. Low, Marston and Company, Limited, London, 1894), p. 244.

simple human minds. So in his tale from Scottish history, The King's Tragedy, Rossetti introduces the old woman who thrice warns the king of his approaching death, telling him of her successive visions of him wrapped in a shroud which rose from his feet till at last it covered his eyes and mouth, when she knew he was doomed to die:

"For every man on God's ground, O King,  
His death grows up from his birth  
In a shadow plant continually;  
And thine towers high, a black yew-tree,  
O'er the Charterhouse of Perth."

Sister Helen is based on the old superstition that a man might be made to die if his image were moulded of wax and melted over a fire. The death would be swift or lingering according to the length of time taken to melt the wax. And so, in the poem, as the last of the wax drops from its place, the tolling of the passing bell is heard and Helen's vengeance is complete--"(Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)"

Rose Mary centres on the belief in crystal gazing which is still current. But in this case, the pictures were supposed to be formed by spirits which inhabited the Beryl stone. It could only be read by one who was completely pure and innocent and so, by her secret sin, Rose Mary worked her destruction.

"We whose home is the Beryl,  
Fire spirits of dread desire,  
Who entered in  
By a secret sin  
'Gainst whom all powers that strive with  
ours are sterile,--  
We cry woe to thee, Mother!"

What hast thou taught her, the girl thy daughter,  
That she and none other  
Should this dark morrow to her deadly  
sorrow imperil?"

In the unfinished prose story, St. Agnes of the Intercession, Rossetti employs the fairly wide-spread belief in a former existence; for the hero, in the nineteenth century, finds the faces of himself and his beloved in portraits drawn by a fifteenth century painter. While Hand and Soul, in which an artist makes a picture of his own soul and then dies, is derived from the old superstition of the existence of a phantom, spiritual self which, if seen by the real person, is a sign of death. The same belief is the subject of Rossetti's picture How They Met Themselves, in which two lovers meet their wraiths in a wood; and it seems to be referred to in the third verse of The Portrait--where the poet speaks of a wood wherein you hear "your own footsteps meeting you."

It is noticeable that some of Rossetti's most effective writing is found in passages dealing with such supernatural elements. The whole of Sister Helen is unsurpassed for its feeling of terrible suspense and unholy triumph. It has been termed "the strongest emotional poem as yet in the language."<sup>1</sup> And in The King's Tragedy the verses dealing with the old woman and her prophecy are among the most memorable in the poem. Against a background of wild sea and

1. Dr. Gordon Hake, the poet. Quoted by Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., vol. I, p. 167.

sky, and black rocks dimly silvered with moonlight, stands a figure as uncouth as the scene itself. And a voice boldly declares to the King the swiftness with which his end is approaching.

"Four years it is since first I met,  
Twixt the Duchray and the Dhu,  
A shape whose feet clung close in a shroud,  
And that shape for thine I knew.  
.  
.  
.  
And when I meet thee again, O King,  
That of death hast such sore drouth,--  
Except thou turn again on this shore,--  
The winding sheet shall have moved once more  
And covered thine eyes and mouth."

The mystery of the woman's appearance in such a place and the ghostliness of her solemn warning produce a feeling of dread which overshadows the descriptions of all the festivities that follow. But perhaps the passage which is most perfectly expressive of mystery and desolation, of the memories of days long dead which yet are strangely alive, occurs in The Portrait:

"In painting her I shrined her face  
'Mid mystic trees where light falls in  
Hardly at all; an overt place  
Where you might think to find a din  
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame  
Wandering, and many a shape whose name  
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,  
And your own footsteps meeting you,  
And all things going as they came."

It is all quite visionary and unreal, but Rossetti has surely never created better an impression of nameless dread; while the conception of the things of yesterday "going as they came" seems to give a last touch of strange sadness to the whole

weird picture.

Because of his mysticism, it is not surprising to find that Rossetti employed symbolism very extensively. This trait too may be traced to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. In its literature, its art, its ritual, always it insists on the "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Consider, for example, the frequent use of statues in Roman Catholic churches, so often condemned by Protestants as an approach to idolatry--the worship of the man-made, material figure rather than of the spiritual God represented. Though such degeneration may undoubtedly take place, the statues were originally meant simply as visible symbols of an invisible Deity; an interpretation of the Infinite comprehensible to finite minds. Similarly the use of the rosary must have originated in an attempt to reduce to a simple and understandable form something spiritual and intangible which therefore, to our human understanding at least, must always remain a mystery. The only way in which we can gain any understanding whatever of such matters is through their symbolic representation in the forms of things which are familiar to us. So God is pictured as a King in his power, and as a gentle and loving Saviour in his mercy. A bead, in Roman Catholic ritual, is made to stand for a prayer, and a rising cloud of incense for petitions ascending to God, while a graceful, winged figure signifies a pure



spirit. It is all symbolism--an attempt to illustrate and explain at least a part of something which, to our minds, is incomprehensible in its entirety.

With such symbolism, Rossetti, as we have shown, must have been familiar. So when he began to write it is not surprising that he exhibited reflections of it in his poetry. The flowers of the Blessed Damozel, for instance, are a white rose, the flower of the Virgin, and three white lilies for purity--three being the number of the Holy Trinity. Seven was also considered to be a mystic number--in Revelations, St. John tells us that there were seven churches in Asia, that he saw seven gold candlesticks, and that in the hand of the angel were seven stars--and the Damozel has seven stars in her hair. While Lady Lilith, the embodiment of sensuous beauty, has for her flowers roses and poppies signifying love and sleep or death.

"The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where  
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
And soft shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?"<sup>1</sup>.

Similarly the rose represents Mary Magdalene--

"Why wilt thou cast the roses from thine hair?  
Nay, be thou all a rose--wreath, lips, and cheek."<sup>2</sup>.

But for Mary Virgin, in Mary's Girlhood, there are the Tri-point--perfect in two points only, signifying that Christ is

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Body's Beauty", Poetical Works, (P.F. Collier and Son, New York, 1902), p. 219.

2. Rossetti, D.G., "Mary Magdalene at the House of Simon the Pharisee", op. cit., p. 314.

not yet born;--the books whose names are the virtues, guarded by the lily which is innocence; the seven-thorned briar for her great sorrow and the seven-leaved palm for her great triumph. While in The Passover in the Holy Family the bitter herbs she gathers represent her grief; and the entire ritual of the feast stands for the Crucifixion itself, when should "meet together the prefiguring day and day prefigured". Even in the description of the chapel of the Beryl in Rose Mary, Rossetti has made use of symbolism; for here, we are told, were the four symbols of the world's birth--earth, water, fire, and air:

"To the north, a fountain glittered free;  
To the south, there glowed a red fruit-tree;  
To the east, a lamp flamed high and fair;  
To the west, a crystal casket rare  
Held fast a cloud of fields of air."<sup>1</sup>.

But it is in his paintings even more than in his poetry that Rossetti's use of symbolism is so noticeable. Always, we find, he endeavours to symbolize his main subject in the detail and background work of his picture. Says Mr. Hueffer in speaking of Dante Drawing an Angel in Memory of Beatrice: "The desire to fill up every corner with something--symbolic if possible--leads to the introduction of a row of seraphs' heads; a Madonna and Child; a mirror; an hourglass; a pomegranate; many other tools; an architectural landscape seen through a window; a doorway; a corridor and a piece of an

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Rose Mary", Part III, op. cit., p.132.

orchard garden."<sup>1</sup>. In the Beata Beatrix, representing Beatrice in a trance shortly before her end, are a sundial, the figures of Love and of Dante, and a dove bearing a poppy--the symbol of death. The Damsel of the San Grael has behind her head the dove of purity, and around the edge of the picture trail grape leaves. Joan of Arc is represented with the white lily of innocence and kisses the blade of a sword before the crossed feet of a crucifix. And Mary Magdalene, glorious in her halo of bright hair, is placed against a background of briar roses. Fiametta

"A presage and a promise stands; as 'twere  
On Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul."<sup>2</sup>.

The incarnation of Spring, of new life after the death of Winter, she is surrounded by apple-blossoms with a scarlet bird perched above her head. Such examples might be multiplied many times over, but these serve to show the mystic trend of Rossetti's mind, which constantly saw the spiritual and the physical, the abstract thought, and the concrete symbol, so strangely intertwined.

But not only does he symbolize in concrete form an abstract idea. So strongly conscious is he of this invisible idea, of the supernatural or spiritual background of all material expressions of life, that he at times visualizes this

1. Hueffer, F.M., op. cit., p. 56.

2. Rossetti, D.G., "Fiametta", op. cit., p. 360.

element as clearly as he does that which actually meets his eye. The visions of love, life, and death, which we have previously mentioned as being derived from similar visions in Dante, are examples of this phase of mysticism. The Love which sat upon the woodside well with Rossetti in the Willow-wood sonnets is as real to us as the water, the weary wood, and the poet himself. The Blessed Damozel and the Heaven in which she is placed are purely spiritual and imaginative, yet we see them as definitely as we could any material places or people. Certainly the pictures which Rossetti painted so many years later to illustrate his description of the maiden give little idea of an invisible, spiritual being. "She had three lilies in her hand and the stars in her hair were seven," while "Her hair that lay along her back was yellow like ripe corn." both the description and the picture have the details which might be expected from one who had actually seen her. The house of God, moreover, is no shadowy cloud palace but a buttressed castle of the Middle Ages. The Queen of Heaven sits surrounded by her maids

" . . . . . whose names  
Are five sweet symphonies,  
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,  
Margaret and Rosalys."

And they are engaged in spinning (as the attendants of any medieval lady might be) for it is they who fashion the golden birth robes "for them who are just born, being dead." It is a perfectly realistic picture of a purely imaginative and un-

real scene. In the sonnet Stillborn Love too, there is a clear vizualization of the unseen--the little, lonely, outcast hōur which on the "immortal strand" joyfully greeted the finally wedded souls--

"And leaped to them and in their faces yearned;-  
'I am your child: O parents, ye have come!'"

While in another sonnet,<sup>1</sup> death is

" . . . . . an infant Child  
Which her worn mother Life upon my knee  
Has set to grow my friend and play with me."

Song has hair which "blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;" and art, eyes which "were worlds by God found fair." So real to Rossetti was the unseen which mingles with and transcends our visible world that he endowed it with the physical and material attributes of the world which he saw and loved.

In consequence of his apprehension of the dualism of the world and of man's nature, of the spiritual and physical which, while mingled, are still constantly at war with each other, comes a "conception of retribution and punishment 'not (as Hegel puts it) as something arbitrary, but as the other half of sin.'"<sup>2</sup>. Thus Rose Mary brings about her unhappiness and finally her death through her own secret sin; and though she is finally justified because of her true heart

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Newborn Death", op. cit., p. 230.

2. Wood, Esther, op. cit., p. 233.

of love, she has been obliged to pass through suffering which came upon her by no outside agency, but purely as a result of her own action. Similarly Sister Helen, although she achieves her vengeance, pays with the loss of her own soul for her crime of witchcraft.

"Ah! what white thing at the door has cross'd,  
Sister Helen?  
Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?'  
'A soul that's lost as mine is lost,  
Little brother!'"

The Bride's Prelude, incomplete as it is, is simply a picture of the terrible retribution which came upon Aloyse as the direct result of her wrong doing. The consciousness of her guilt weighed upon her heart till all her life was a nightmare of shame and despair.

"My shame possessed me in the light  
And pageant, till I swooned."

Most cruel was the memory of her lost child.

"The mother leaned along, in thought  
After her child; till tears,  
Bitter, not like a wedded girl's  
Fell down her breast along her curls  
And ran in the close work of pearls."

And as the final phase of her terrible self-wrought suffering, in order to clear the honour of her house, she is to be united to the man who betrayed her and whom she now hates with all her soul. Yet all her punishment consists of the perfectly natural consequences of her surrender to that lower nature which in every man and woman is waging a constant struggle with the higher and nobler urges so strangely mingled with it.

Likewise arising from his consciousness of the dualism of human nature, we find in Rossetti's poetry a realization of the problem of the dual possibilities of womanhood. By an indulgence of the lower side of her nature is produced the purely physical and sensual beauty which is embodied in Rossetti's conception of Lady Lilith and described in his sonnet Body's Beauty:

"And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are in its hold."

If, on the other hand, she develop her higher impulses she may become an expression of

". . . that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
Thy voice and hand shake still,--long known to thee  
By flying hair and fluttering hem,--the beat  
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
How passionately and irretrievably  
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!"<sup>1</sup>.

Or we may contrast his touching description of the depraved but still lovely Jenny, whose lilies are dead and their petals "spread like winter on the garden bed," with his beautiful pictures of the pure young maiden who is herself "an angel watered lily that near God grows and is quiet". Both are women.

"Of the same lump (it has been said)  
For honour and dishonour made,  
Two sister vessels."<sup>2</sup>.

1. Rossetti, D.G., "Soul's Beauty", op. cit., p. 218.

2. Rossetti, D.G., "Jenny", op. cit., p. 93.

And Jenny's features are as lovely as those by which the painters of old represented Mary Virgin. But in the one the physical element has been developed until the spiritual is almost lost; in the other the physical, recognized but controlled, fulfilled, but not abused, is mingled with a very real spiritual life. The difference between them is as wide as that between death and life, between hell and heaven.

It is with the outlook of mysticism too that Rossetti faces the problem of vicarious suffering. With his deep reverence for the person of Christ as a starting point, he grows to see in him the stainless Paschal Lamb who became "(by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world." The suffering of the one atoned for the sin of the many and through the death of an innocent man did "The seed 'o the woman bruise the serpent's head". This belief leads him to "moral collectivism, that principle that 'soul must somehow pay for soul'," <sup>1</sup> the innocent suffer for the guilty. For there is, he sees, in all humanity a spiritual brotherhood, an "at-one-ment", which the Medieval Church recognized in its conception of man as a member of a great spiritual family, the body of Christ. As Rossetti himself expresses it in his poem Soothsay:

1. Wood, Esther, op. cit., p. 309.



"The wild waves cast up by the sea  
Are diverse ever seasonably.  
Even so the soul-tides still may land  
A different drift upon the sand.  
But one the sea is evermore:  
And one be still, twixt shore and shore,  
As the sea's life, thy soul in thee."

Because all souls come from one great spiritual source, all are really merely different manifestations of the same life; therefore, since all are parts of a great whole, there can, in one sense, be no individual sin or virtue, and what appears to be the unjust punishment of an innocent man is "the other half" of that sin which is laid to the account of humanity as a whole as his suffering will be laid. That men should have lost sight of this spiritual "at-one-ment" seems to Rossetti one of the saddest things in his age. He laments in the sonnet On the Refusal of Aid Between Nations:

" . . . . Man is parcelled out in men  
Today; because, for any wrongful blow  
No man not stricken asks, 'I would be told  
Why thou dost thus;' but his heart whispers then,  
'He is he, I am I.' By this we know  
That our earth falls asunder, being old."

Only by an apprehension of this universal brotherhood, this strange union of soul with soul, can Rossetti, apparently, account satisfactorily for what appears to be the endless unmerited suffering in the world of men; only by a recognition of the spiritual bond, of the mysterious unseen of which we are all part, can he partially solve the yet unanswered riddle of life.

We see then that the influence of Roman Catholicism

upon the trend of Rossetti's thought was perhaps second in importance only to that of Dante. The two, however, are rather confused and the influence of Dante may, in its religious and mystic aspects, be considered simply as a phase of the influence of Roman Catholicism. But however we think of them, it is certain that the mingling of body and soul, of Heaven and earth, to be discerned in both, is so magnified in Rossetti's poetry as to make it "the embodiment of mystical passion". He was always aware of mysterious spiritual forces at work in the world; and, to him, they found expression through the physical which thus might take on an almost sacred significance. In the words of Mr. Payne: "He was at once the most spiritual and the most material of poets; and the accusation of sensuality from which he was made to suffer could only result from inability to see more than one side of the Druid shield of his poetic personality."<sup>1</sup>.

1. Payne, W.M., "D. G. Rossetti", Warner's Library of the World's Best Literature, (J. A. Hill and Company, New York, 1896), vol. XXI, p. 12415.

## CHAPTER VII

### MEDIEVALISM IN ROSSETTI'S PAINTINGS

The three foregoing sections have shown that the poetry of Dante with its glorification of love and of Beatrice, the gorgeous pageantry of Chivalry, and the mystic faith and quaint legends of the Roman Catholic Church are the chief elements of Rossetti's medievalism as evidenced in his poetry. But Rossetti was a painter as well as a poet, and his drawings demonstrate the medieval qualities of his mind and work quite as clearly as do his poems. Indeed no discussion of his medievalism can be complete without a consideration of his pictures; for painting occupied quite as important a place in his life as did writing, which, in his youth at least, was kept subordinate to it. In 1848, indeed, he submitted some of his poems to Leigh Hunt, who replied that he recognized in them "an unquestionable poet, thoughtful and imaginative and with rare powers of expression,"<sup>b</sup> But guessed that he was altogether "not so musical as pictorial;" adding that if he painted he might become a rich man, which he would never do as a poet, for poetry "is not a thing for a man to live upon while he is in the flesh, however immortal it may render him in spirit."<sup>1</sup> Accepting this advice, Rossetti devoted himself to painting though often in a desultory way which at times aroused

1. Quoted by Cary, E.L., op. cit., p. 117.

the ire of his father, who declared him to be wasting time when he should have been working. About 1853 he is supposed to have decided to adopt painting as a profession, and even before that, in a family letter dated 1852, appears the statement "I have abandoned poetry".<sup>1</sup> It was, apparently a resolution easier to make than to keep, for to these years belong some of his best known poems--The Bride's Prelude, Dante at Verona, A Last Confession, Jenny, The Burden of Ninevah, Stratton Water, Wellington's Funeral, The Staff and Scrip, Sister Helen. Some of them, however, as Jenny and The Bride's Prelude, were not completed as early as the beginning of 1854. Rossetti issued no collection of his poems until seven years after the death of his wife. Then those which had been buried with her were exhumed from the coffin and published with some later compositions in 1869. Until that date his fame rested chiefly upon his paintings.

The close connection between the two forms of his art may be inferred from his habit of frequently writing sonnets to illustrate his pictures. This custom gave rise to Mr. Whistler's famous story. To quote Mr. Cary's account:<sup>2</sup> Whistler on one occasion found him "Quite eager over a projected picture with which, some weeks later, he was progress-

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., p. 168.

2. Cary, E.L., The Rossettis, (G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, 1900), p. 32.

ing 'finely',--the frame having been made for the still blank canvas. Later still, while the canvas was yet pristine, all was reported as going well, the sonnet having been written. Whistler's suggestion at this point was that the sonnet should be put in the frame, and the work considered over." All through his life, because painting and writing were so often going on practically simultaneously, there is noticeable a sort of parallelism between the poems and the pictures.

It is not surprising then, that we can trace in Rossetti's paintings the same elements of Medievalism which we found in his poetry. In the first place, the subjects of many of his pictures, as of his poems, reveal his interest in the Middle Ages. The Dante theme, for example, is very important. There is the pen and ink of Dante drawing an angel from the Memory of Beatrice, which belongs to 1851. It is interesting as being Rossetti's first illustration of the Vita Nuova. Later came the water colour of Beatrice at the wedding feast denying her salutation to Dante. For this picture, Miss Siddal was painted as Beatrice. She is shown, in the words of Mr. Hueffer, as "a haut beauty with half-closed eyes and a pose of forbidding drawing-back."<sup>1</sup> The best known representation of her as Beatrice, however, is in the Beata Beatrix which Rossetti painted in her memory about a year after her death,

1. Hueffer, F.M., Rossetti, (Duckworth and Company, London, E.P.Dutton, New York, 1902), p. 43.

as Dante had drawn his angel. In a trance just before her end, she is seated on a balcony with upturned face bathed in the light of the setting sun. Behind her on the street can be seen the figures of Dante and of Love, who bears in his hand a flaming heart. On the ledge beside her a sundial marks the passing of time; and a dove bears in its beak a scarlet poppy which it is about to lay in her hands. On several occasions did Rossetti attempt the subject of The Salutation of Beatrice; at one time, in a water colour representing the meeting as occurring in the portico of a church; again, in a diptych, showing, in one compartment, Beatrice saluting Dante in a street in Florence, in the other, their meeting in the fields of Paradise; and, in a third design, portraying her alone in the streets of Florence but within sight of Dante. There is also the picture entitled The Boat of Love, having its origin in one of Dante's sonnets addressed to Guido Cavalcanti. The poet wishes that he, Guido and Lapo Gianni might take a voyage with their ladies--"O'er seas to move and not to talk of anything but love."--Rossetti represents the three pairs of lovers embarking in a boat which has for its steersman an angel. Still another famous painting inspired by Dante is the Dante's Dream, illustrating the poet's vision of the death of his lady. On a couch lies Beatrice clad in white robes, while her maidens spread over her a purple pall filled with May blossoms. Through an opening in the roof is seen a flight of angels

bearing away her soul in the shape of a white cloud. And Love, holding Dante by the hand, bends and kisses Beatrice thus making himself the reconciler between life and death. Of the incidents recorded by Dante after the death of Beatrice, Rossetti has illustrated, besides the passage concerning the anniversary of her death, Dante's description of the pitiful lady of the window who "became pale and of a piteous countenance as though it had been with love" whenever she saw him. Rossetti's picture is an unfinished study entitled Our Lady of Pity and represents a beautiful, dark woman with true Rossetti hands, and in her face, as Mrs. Wood expresses it "all the depth, all the tenderness, all the heroic strength of a divine sorrow that sees the end of sorrow."<sup>1</sup>.

But the influence of Dante in the poetry of Rossetti did not cease with the treatment of themes inspired directly by the medieval poet. It permeated his whole thought and affected especially his conception of love which for him took on a spiritual quality much like that of Dante's for Beatrice. Woman too was idealized and regarded as an embodiment of the mystery and beauty of all life. It is in the sonnets of the House of Life that we observe most clearly this Dantesque influence. With their glorification of love, their idealization of the beloved, they seem an echo of Dante's voice in a modern world. Paralleling these sonnets

1. Wood, Esther, op. cit., p. 257.

with their medieval outlook are Rossetti's numerous portraits of women. Such pictures as Lady Lilith, Pandora, Proserpine, Fiametta are more than mere portraits; they are expressions of life itself. Lady Lilith, surrounded by her roses and combing her beautiful golden hair with which she ensnares the hearts of men, represents sensual beauty and illicit love. Pandora, mourning over her opened box from which all the spirits are escaping, seems to stand for the grief of mankind over its infirmities. Proserpine, having eaten the forbidden fruit of lower knowledge, longs in vain for the pure upper world which she can now inhabit only for limited seasons. She is the sullied soul grieving for her lost innocence. While Fiametta, bowered in apple blossoms, with the joy of new life in her lovely eyes, is the embodiment of eternal youth and spring--"a presage and a promise . . . as 'twere on Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul." In these pictures the subjects are more than merely beautiful women; they are expressions of truths of life. Not, of course, that Rossetti always glorified his models thus. Often, as in Le Joli Coeur, Lady with the Fan, and The Loving Cup, he merely paints their portraits, but when, as in the pictures discussed, he expresses through them an interpretation of life, we feel the shadow of Dante's idealization of his Beatrice and therefore of the thought of the Middle Ages.

Rossetti's poems of chivalry, particularly such



visionary compositions as The Staff and Scrip also have certain pictures which seem to correspond with them in their general theme and feeling. The sensation of the unreality of the whole, the vividness of imagination in certain respects, the rich wealth of medieval detail, all of which are so noticeable in the poems, are repeated in the paintings. The water colour, The Wedding of St. George, for example, represents an episode unrecorded in the legend of the knight--his marriage to the Princess Salera whom he has rescued from the dragon. The whole atmosphere is as unreal as the event; the knight is an idealized Italian-medieval figure in gold armour; golden angels strike a row of little bells. Yet in strange contrast, the princess is a real woman; and from the corner of a box protrudes a deliberately humorous dragon's head; while the entire picture is decorated with numberless medieval details and objects, most of them quite unnecessary. The Christmas Carol represents a girl playing an ancient instrument resembling a harmonium, while a figure on one side of her combs her hair and another on the other side takes down something from a shelf. The costumes are done with a good deal of minuteness, the hands of the player are surprisingly real and the figure behind really reaches up, but the whole, like the former picture, is only a beautiful dream. Equally charming and unreal are the Tune of Seven Towers and The Blue Closet for which Rossetti's friend, William Morris, wrote a poem by the

same title. Arthur's Tomb, probably inspired by Rossetti's reading of Tennyson's Mort d'Arthur, likewise represents an episode not recorded by legend--the appearance of Launcelot's ghost to Guinevere at the tomb of Arthur. Also dealing with the Arthurian legend are Launcelot in Guinevere's Chamber, showing the meeting where the lovers were discovered together and Launcelot's hand wounded in a struggle; and Sir Tristram and La Belle Yesult, which portrays the two unfortunate lovers drinking the fatal potion. Many of these pictures represent events which are not known to have taken place, but all might have occurred in those legendary days of romance and adventure. And all, with their quaint costumes, their strange jewel-like colouring breath most truly the spirit of the Middle Ages.

There are, too, several pictures, as there are several poems, dealing with religious subjects. Such are Rossetti's two earliest paintings. The first of these, already referred to several times, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, shows the maiden working with her mother, St. Anna, at an embroidery frame. Outside the window St. Joachim trains a vine which takes the shape of a cross. On the floor beside the two seated figures are six large books; on top of them stands a tall, white lily guarded by a quaint little child angel. In Ecce Ancilla Domini, or The Annunciation, Mary has grown a little older. Just awakened from sleep, she faces a white clad angel with an expression of wonder in her eyes.

The outstanding impression given by this picture is its whiteness, which the relieving colours--the red of the embroidery, the gold of the girl's halo,--serve only to emphasize. So long was it in selling that it was termed by the painter "the white eyesore" and "The blessed white daub". "Its most real value as a work of art", says Mr. Hueffer, "lies in its catching, not of the religious, but of the human emotions of the Virgin--of a young girl confronted by one of the great moments of life. It exists, and will probably continue to exist, on that account rather than on any other--as a piece of typical life observed and rendered rather than an illustration of a literary incident."<sup>1</sup>. These two pictures, be it noted, express the same reverential attitude toward the Virgin which has been seen in various of the religious poems. After these compositions, Rossetti practically abandoned the religious field, and only two or three other drawings can be included in this group. The Passover in the Holy Family and Mary Magdalene at the door of Simon the Pharisee have already been discussed in connection with the sonnets written for them. An early picture, Bethlehem Gate shows the Holy Family in flight from the Massacre of the Innocents; The Crucifixion represents John leading the Madonna from Calvary; and Mary in the House of John portrays the new home where they waited together for the fulfilment of Christ's promise, "Surely I came quickly".

1. Hueffer, F.M., op. cit., p. 36.

John has been writing and Mary lights a lamp which hangs at the intersection of the window bars so that the light shines from the centre of the cross where the head of Christ should be--a delicate emblem of glory through sacrifice, of the light which lightens the darkness of sorrow.

The treatment of these pictures is characterized by the same tendencies which have been noticed in Rossetti's poetry. Very outstanding in their mystic quality--the abiding consciousness of that unseen and spiritual world which is so strangely mingled with the physical;--witness the frequency with which he combines supernatural elements with human and realistic features. Such are the child angel in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, Gabriel in Ecce Ancilla Domini, the golden angels in The Wedding of St. George, the spirits of the man and woman in How They Met Themselves, the figure of love in Beata Beatrix. The reality of such beings in the mind of the artist is evidenced by their vivid representation. There is no difference, in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, and Ecce Ancilla Domini, between the drawing of the angels and that of the human figures; all are equally substantial; in How They Met Themselves the wraiths of the man and woman are scarcely more shadowy than the figures of the lovers themselves; and Love, in the Beata Beatrix, is no less clearly seen than Dante. In his paintings, then, as in his poems, Rossetti insists on that mingling of the spiritual and the physical

which is so characteristic of his mode of thought.

That phase of mysticism known as symbolism is, as we have already pointed out, even more important on the pictorial side of Rossetti's work than on the poetic. His idealization of women into symbols of various phases of life has already been discussed. But also the bent of his mind, which constantly interpreted things unseen in the terms of things seen, delighted in reaffirming in the details of a picture the thought already expressed in the subject as a whole. In addition to the symbols already pointed out, we may notice that the character of Venus Astarte is shown in the roses and honeysuckle by which she is surrounded; and that Beatrice in Dante's Dream is being covered with May blossoms to signify that the end came in the springtime of her life. In Mary Magdalene at the door of Simon the Pharisee, the vine on the wall of the house takes the form of a cross, symbolic of the day that is to come, when shall "the seed o'the woman bruise the serpent's head". While in Bethlehem Gate, representing the Holy Family escaping from the wrath of Herod, an angel beside the Madonna bears a palm branch, emblem of deliverance and reward. Thus constantly did Rossetti translate things unseen into visible expressions of his thought.

The moral tone observable in his poetry is likewise repeated in his pictures. The inevitable punishment which must follow sin as its "other half" is finely suggested in

King Arthur's Tomb. Here Queen Guinevere, now an aged and honoured abbess, visiting the tomb of her husband, is confronted by the terrible ghost of Launcelot; while, as Mrs. Wood points out, the converse side of the picture is seen in the design for the Oxford Debating Union, Sir Launcelot before the Shrine of the Holy Grail. "He seems," she says, "to have almost attained the goal of his pilgrimage, the Holy Grail is just within his grasp; but in the hour that might have brought victory, the old sin brings mockery and defeat; the face that looks out at him from the place of his hope is the sad, reproachful face of Guinevere."<sup>1</sup> The same truth is suggested in the Paola and Francesca da Rimini. The picture shows the first embrace of the lovers, but already, under a curtain, is seen the foot of the approaching husband, bringing with him inevitable retribution. While Found is simply a portrayal of the punishment which "as the night the day" must follow sin:

"Ah! gave not these two hearts their mutual pledge,  
Under one mantle, sheltered 'neath the hedge  
In gloaming courtship? And O God! today  
He only knows he holds her;--but what part  
Can life now take? She cries in her locked heart,--  
'Leave me--I do not know you--go away!'"<sup>2</sup>

A realization of the dual potentiality of woman is also to be found in Rossetti's paintings. As in the poems,

1. Wood, Esther, op. cit., pp. 233-34.

2. Rossetti, D.G., "Found", op. cit., p. 360.

there are represented both types,--the spiritual and the physical, beauty of soul and beauty of body. On the one hand are such intellectually and spiritually lovely faces as those of Beatrice, Monna Vanna, Sibylla Palmifera, Fiametta, Joan of Arc, and Mary Virgin. They are all representations of that nobility of womanhood which may "make brutes men and men divine". But also he shows us the shameful actuality which is too often found. Such is the tragic woman in Found, the sensuous appeal of Lady Lilith, and the yet shamed figure of Yesterday's Rose. So did he interpret and express the mysterious dualism of woman and man, in whom evil constantly wars with good in a struggle which has at stake the development or destruction of a human soul. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life."

It is not that Rossetti always set himself deliberately to express a moral truth in his paintings. Sometimes, to be sure, he did so, but such pictures are seldom his best. As Mr. Hueffer expresses it: "When he was content, being in a certain mood, to observe and record, he was up to the limit of his powers successful; when he attempted to point his moral, to illustrate his mood, he was most liable to fail and to fail by exaggerating. It was a question of getting hold of one end or other of the stick . . . . Rossetti at his best was a painter in, not of, moods. He was most successful when, having recorded a type of feminine beauty--or even

repulsiveness--he afterwards found a name for it; stood back in fact from his canvas and only then discovered the moral of what he had been painting."<sup>1</sup>.

Even technically Rossetti has at least one characteristic which might be termed "medieval". This is his use of clear, brilliant colour. The most popular painters of his day shuddered at the thought of such crudeness as the painting of grass in its actual green. To their minds, such a colour should be toned down into a soft brown such as that found in the work of the Old Masters. In order to achieve this effect of age they deliberately covered over their pictures with varnish and used asphaltum in their paint. (Mr. Madox Brown tells us that Rossetti loved to quote from the diary of B. R. Haydon: "Locked my door and dashed at my picture with a brush dripping with asphaltum.") Rossetti, however, insisted that the old masters themselves had originally used bright colours and that he too would represent objects as they really appeared to the eye. Hence his pictures are characterized by the pure, bright tone of colour which distinguishes him from so many of his contemporaries. The jewel-like effect of such a picture as The Beloved; the rich brilliance of Beata Beatrix, The Blue Closet, or La Ghirlandata constitutes one of their greatest charms and is as important to their effect as in the use of picturesque and colourful words in poetry. This

1. Hueffer, F.M., op. cit., pp. 142-44.



practice in colouring sets him apart from the great body of painters of his time and links him with the painters of a day when art still looked to nature rather than to Raphael and his followers for its inspiration.

And here, perhaps, should be said something concerning the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, its aims, and Rossetti's connection with it. At a time when art was governed entirely by the precepts of Sir Joshua Reynolds, a few men realized that some change from the formal and lifeless style of painting then in vogue was absolutely imperative. The popular artists of the day simply followed the advice of Sir Joshua when he told them to copy the old Masters; always to obey the rules of Raphael as to proportions, colouring, etc., so that nature, which is not always beautiful, may be made so by means of his corrections; then, when the student could paint about as well as the Master could and in the same style, to add something original of his own; thus would he become an artist. Such a method naturally produced painters who were little better than copyists; their technique was frequently unexceptionable; but there was no vitality, no life, frequently even no thought in their work. They simply copied and attempted to improve on what had been done hundreds of times before.

A little group of young men,--Rossetti, Holman Hunt and Millais were the originals, with Madox Brown as friend and adviser,--realized that true art, in England, was at the point

of death. They felt that a painter's inspiration should come primarily from the object to be reproduced, not from another man's interpretation of it; that the message conveyed by the work was as important as its technique; and that life, not other pictures, should furnish subjects. This, of course, was simply a movement parallel to the Romantic Movement in literature after the Neo-Classical Period of the eighteenth century, when literature had become almost as imitative and formal as was art now. In looking back over history these men thought that they should see in the very early Renaissance art of Italy a spirit similar to their own. In those days, it seemed to them, painting, which for many years had been lifeless and stereotyped, employed almost entirely for religious purposes and limited by many conventions, began to take on a new vigour. The influence of long forgotten classic literature, of humanism, began to make itself felt in this sphere as well as in others. Painting, they thought, began to express life, to reproduce real people rather than conventional figures. Whether it actually did so or not has little bearing on the question. The young men had small knowledge of early Italian art, but they believed that it had such vigour and freedom as they desired to infuse into their own. Therefore they took the name of Pre-Raphaelites.

The group, as such, lasted only a short time. It was, according to Mr. Holman Hunt, directly inspired by a book

found one night at the home of Millais--Lasinio's engravings of the Campo Santo in Pisa. That was in 1848. By 1851 the brotherhood was dissolved. But during that time they had issued several numbers of their paper infelicitously named The Germ, in the first of which were stated their aims, and had produced a number of works which take their place among the treasures of English art. Their purpose, according to W. M. Rossetti was simply: "1. To have genuine ideas to express; 2, to study nature attentively so as to know how to express them; 3, to sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; and 4, and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues."<sup>1</sup>.

Such an organization, it is apparent, brought no new elements of medievalism into Rossetti's life. It was rather a crystalization of his own previous ideas; instead of its influencing him, it was he who influenced it, to such an extent that he is frequently regarded as its leader. His pictures produced during its existence--The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Ecce Ancilla Domini--do, by their quaint medieval accessories and their choice of subject, recall the Old Masters. But this is a result of Rossetti's study of the Italian Middle Ages rather than of early Italian art, of

1. Rossetti, W.M., op. cit., p. 135.

which he had actually little first-hand knowledge. He was in revolt against the accepted canons of the Academy and because he was Italian and had studied the Middle Ages with great interest his paintings have a quaintness and a mysticism which strongly recall the early Italian art. But the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, rather than being regarded as one of the influences toward medievalism in his life, may better be considered as another expression of his medievalism.

So although the Brotherhood itself soon passed, the medieval quality of Rossetti's art did not. As I have attempted to show, it was as strongly ingrained in his painting as in his poetry. The ideas and dreams of a bygone day were always so strongly present in his mind that at times he seems almost like a medieval figure lost in a Victorian world. The mystic and yet human quality of his pictures is as foreign to the average art of his day as would be Dante's Divine Comedy to the literature of the eighteenth century. For to him many things of the colourful and romantic past were far more real and admirable than those of his very practical and prosaic present. This feeling in relation to his painting, he expresses in one of his sonnets on Old and New Art--Not as These:

"'I am not as these are', the poet saith  
In youth's pride, and the painter, among men  
At bay, where never pencil comes nor pen,  
And shut about with his own frozen breath.  
To others, for whom only rhyme wins faith

As poets,--only paint as painters,--then  
He turns in the cold silence; and again  
Shrinking, 'I am not as these are', he saith.

And say that this is so, what follows it?  
For were thine eyes set backward in thine head,  
Such words were well, but they see on, and far.  
Unto the lights of the great Past, new-lit  
Fair for the Future's track, look thou instead,  
Say thou instead, 'I am not as these are.'"

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

The medievalism of Rossetti is, as <sup>I</sup>~~we~~ have demonstrated, divisible into three main elements--those of Dante, of Chivalry, and of Roman Catholicism. Of these the first is by far the most pervasive. Not only is it reflected in the subjects of several of Rossetti's poems, but his whole treatment of the love theme is coloured by Dante's worshipful adoration of Beatrice, and his glorification of the ethics of Courtly Love. Even Rossetti's mode of expression is so affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the phrases and imagery of his great namesake, that while reading the poetry of the modern Dante we seem constantly to be hearing echoes of the medieval. Often it is only a word or a turn of thought not definite enough to be traced to any particular passage as a source, but sufficient to make us exclaim mentally, "Dante". The Roman Catholic element, second in importance to the Dantesque, also affected Rossetti's thought in addition to inspiring various poems. It was not, however, the dogma of the Church which interested the poet, but its beautiful legends and mystic faith. These are responsible for the poet's emphasis on the dualism of a world in which the spiritual and the physical are so strangely mingled. The supernatural, to him, was a very real force in the universe. These two elements of Rossetti's medievalism--the ideas of

Dante and of Roman Catholicism--are, at times, almost impossible to separate, for the mysticism of Dante in his Divine Comedy is based on the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church; and so when Rossetti writes of a life after death, he is frequently combining ideas derived indistinguishably from the two sources. The Chivalric element is, rather surprisingly, the least influential of the three. It appealed to Rossetti mainly from a picturesque point of view, affecting his thought only in respect of the Courtly Love regulations, which, after all, belong properly to the sphere of Dante whose poetry is the apotheosis of Courtly Love.

These influences, be it noted, are all literary. They were the result of the poet's early reading of knightly adventure, supernatural tales, and, later, the poetry of Dante and the early Italian soneteers. Of the actual life of the Middle Ages he had little definite knowledge. Therefore it is not surprising that the medieval world of his creating is a beautiful dream land and that much of his art gives an impression of unreality. If we for a moment compare the actual medievalism of such a writer as Chaucer, who admits into his poetry, all sorts of people, high and low, picturesque and grotesque, fearlessly and uncompromisingly representing them as they appeared to him in daily life, with Rossetti's decorative and highly selective art, his enchanted regions of romance, we realize at once the difference between the realist

and the idealist. Chaucer reproduced what he saw; Rossetti, what he would like to have seen.

So we find that his characters are frequently merely graceful figures rather than real people. Rose Mary, Queen Blanchelys, Sir James of Heronhaye--what do we really know of them? We watch them play their parts with interest but without ever identifying ourselves with them as we do with, say, Dickens' characters. Nor do we feel that we should immediately recognize them if we happened to meet them. And in all the glittering group there is not one who stands out with the complete reality and vividness of such a personage as Chaucer's Wife of Bath. Equally vague and nebulous are the backgrounds of Rossetti's poems. While reading The Bride's Prelude and Rose Mary we are conscious of being in feudal castles, but just what they look like or where they are situated we cannot tell. We leave them with the feeling of one waking from a dream who, remembering that he has been wandering in a beautiful country, is unable to recall or describe it distinctly. The supernatural elements so frequently introduced do not at all help to create an impression of actual life. Such things as the magic beryl stone and Sister Helen's witchcraft, being removed from the common experience of the average reader, serve rather to strengthen the feeling of unreality. While such a poem as Love's Nocturn is the essence of dreamy beauty.



This effect is, of course, produced by Rossetti's very careful selection of the elements admitted into his work. The ugly and the brutal aspects of medieval life are simply disregarded. There are, with one or two exceptions, no peasants or poor folk in his poems; only gallant knights and beautiful ladies, are portrayed, with a few angels and other blessed spirits. Art has, of course, a perfect right to be selective. Indeed, by its very nature it must be so; for it is by means of selection that it creates an interpretation of life which is frequently truer than actuality. And Rossetti's insistence on the beauty and mystery of the Middle Ages no doubt results in a picture of the period which is truer to his conception of the spirit of that age than its actual life would have been. But it is not a complete representation of the life of the times such as Chaucer gives us. It is instead a highly idealized portrayal of the most picturesque aspects of medieval life--the portrayal of a dreamer who saw in the past all the loveliness which he found so seldom in the present. Many of his paintings show this even more clearly than do his poems. The Wedding of Saint George, The Christmas Carol, The Blue Closet, Dante's Dream--all are artistic but chiefly imaginative portrayals of a charmed medieval age, glowing with "the light that never was on land or sea".

In conclusion, I cannot do better than to quote a paragraph by James Smetham. It was written in reference to

The Wedding of Saint George and captures perfectly all the dreamy beauty, the mysticism and unreality of Rossetti's medievalism.

"One of the grandest things, like a golden dim dream. Love credulous all gold; gold armour; a sense of enclosure in 'palace chambers far apart'; but quaint chambers in quaint palaces, where angels creep in through sliding-panel doors and stand behind rows of flowers drumming on golden bells with wings crimson and green."<sup>1</sup>.

1. Quoted by Hueffer, F.M., op. cit., p. 73.

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