DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI
A NEGLECTED NINETEENTH CENTURY POET

The purpose of this paper ¹) is not to give a detailed account of the life, tragic and only partially fulfilled, of Dante Gabriel Rossetti but to concentrate instead, on at least a beginning of a more objective evaluation than has hitherto been attempted of the exceptional qualities of his work as a poet—qualities which I believe entitle him to be considered as belonging among the most important and influential poets of the nineteenth century.

During his lifetime, especially in the last years when his reputation as a painter was well established in accordance with — and to a great extent influencing — the taste of his times, he enjoyed an extraordinary vogue, and his poetry, especially that employing the archaic ballad forms with its pseudo-symbolic paraphernalia of legend and love, was highly esteemed. It must not be understood from this that he was, in the wide sense of the word, a «popular» poet. The great mass of middle-class people who read poetry at all ranged from Martin Tupper at one extreme to Tennyson and, more daringly, Browning, at the other, and we may include among these even Queen Victoria whose taste tended more towards Tupper than Tennyson as we know on good authority. The high esteem in which Rossetti’s poetry was held, was limited to a far smaller world of cultured readers, some distinguished poets and writers themselves, just as good poetry and good art are today and always will be.

The inevitable reaction, which he himself foresaw, was long delayed and only a cataclysm of the proportions of a world war finally swept away the last weak waves of nineteenth century romanticism, but when it did both Rossetti and his great contemporary Tennyson fell into disrepute if not actual oblivion. However in recent years some research and objective criticism has been attempted in order to reassess his position in the great body of lasting poetry. If we discount, as we must do at this stage, the admiring biographies, memoirs and adulatory appraisements of his disciples and friends, we must

¹) Expanded from a lecture delivered at the Ateneo Veneto.

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begin to look for more objective criticism among those of our own generation. It must be said, however, that much of what has been done in recent years has been «misguided» in the first instance and «misbased» in the second.

In the first instance great pains have been taken to unearth every detail of his disorderly and unhappy life, matter which is only remotely related to his work as a poet, and in the second the label «Pre-Raphaelite» has been affixed to everything he wrote and made to fit at all costs, mostly to his disadvantage.

Oswald Doughty’s *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, published in 1960, is undoubtedly one of the most serious studies made since the war while his *Rossetti’s Poems* with its important introduction, first published in 1961, is a valuable instrument for the student. The biographical details in the former are scrupulously documented and critical assessments, almost completely lacking in other and even more recent studies, are in the main fair and objective.

Earle Welby’s *The Victorian Romantics*, originally published as far back as 1929, and recently reprinted, is still an important contribution. This and a brief selected list of works of outstanding importance published within the last ten years, I have added at the end of this paper as a guide to further study.

Other works which I have had occasion to refer to I have not thought it necessary to specify in bibliographical detail.

Earlier biographers and apologists must inevitably be discounted in any attempt at a present day assessment. I am thinking of the useful and diligent but platitudinous William Michael Rossetti, Watts Dunton, that *Perpetua* of poets, and even of later men such as the good Arthur Christopher Benson who recounts the life and personality of Rossetti with almost exasperating decorum while his judgments on the works are permeated with a kind of awed worship that is anything but objective.

Curiously enough the figure of Rossetti has never aroused great interest among Italian critics at any time in spite of his Italian origin and the strong influences of Italian literature on his work. Even his exquisite renderings into English, censured by some for their faithfulness to the spirit rather than to the meaning, of the early Italian poets and *La Vita Nuova*, have been virtually ignored by Italian scholarship.

If irregularity of domestic life could constitute an attraction, as it often seems to do, then Rossetti far outstripped anything that Byron ever dreamt of, except that he accomplished it all in London and not all over Europe. There is enough and to spare for a dozen studies, yet even the Brownings, with their upper middle-class tourist respectability in Florence and Venice, seem to have attracted more attention.

Professor Praz ¹) makes the amusing and provocative suggestion that:

¹) MARIO PRAZ, *Studi e Sogni Inglese*, Firenze, Sansoni, 1937, p. 103.
«Forse nelle condizioni di vita fisica più favorevoli, sotto il cielo d'Italia, questi figli di un emigrato abruzzese e di una istitutrice di origine toscana (Frances Polidori)» – he is discussing Christina as well – «sarebbero stati poeti differenti, o non sarebbero stati poeti affatto».

But who can say what these favourable conditions would have had to have been. Professor Doughty affirms that Rossetti was a born cockney and gloried in it as his comments on continental civilization during his one and only excursion out of England together with Holman Hunt certainly seem to confirm amply.

In the case of Christina, the flame of whose inspiration burned with an intermittent but wholly English brightness, we could well imagine that the religious intensity of her best lyrics and the magical splendiders of Goblin Market might never have been written at all under an Italian sky, with benefit to no-one.

Rossetti himself held, and with good reason, that an artist’s life should be quite private and that what is not made clear in his work should be left so. Indeed we know, even if we tend sometimes to forget it, that suppression – which is a kind of economy – is an important part of the poet’s craft and perhaps Rossetti erred in suppressing too much of his abundant nature in his poetry, employing it almost exclusively, in his later years, as a vehicle to express morbid and often obscure ideas, in what Mario Praz calls an «arte suntuosamente funerea». It is for this that we must look to his youthful works if we are to find his highest and most vigorously healthy poetical expression, and not to the later ones which have until recently been those most studied and made the target of unfavourable, negative judgments on the whole man.

A distinction can also clearly be made between poetry written in youth and poetry written in maturity. With the eternal exception of Shakespeare, the poetic flame has always burned more bright and clear in youth than in later years. We have only to remember the example of Wordsworth – and Rossetti is no exception to this, interesting in their involved and obscure symbolism though his mature poems may be. An artist must be judged by his best work «else who would escape a whipping».

In spite of what we have just said regarding the privacy of an artist’s life we would yet be less than human if we had no curiosity to know something about the man behind the work and our curiosity is justified in so far as it may reveal causes and influences which might otherwise remain unexplained.

I have no intention of going into details about his life as a painter and the farcical confusions of what was known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. These have been dealt with at unnecessary and completely unprofitable length by too many writers already and have little relation to the matter we are here to discuss.
Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born in London in 1828, of Italian parents. His father, Gabriele Rossetti, was from Vasto, a political exile of humble birth, and his mother, Frances Polidori, was Tuscan on her father's side, her mother being English. Dante Gabriel was thus almost completely Italian by race although his whole life was spent, with few interruptions, in the heart of nineteenth century London.

Professor Doughty would have us believe that the father was a bit of a mountebank although he was apparently sufficiently cultured to have merited the appointment of Professor of Italian at King's College, London. Indeed throughout Professor Doughty's book there is the constant implication that the Italian background was in any case slightly amusing — or at least not to be taken too seriously. This is rather irritating and goes against the instinctive feeling that this same background of Italian culture and intellectual ferment must have influenced the young poet profoundly and formed him in quite a different way from his English contemporaries, apart from his inherited temperament which made him at once the most brilliant and compelling personality in whatever company he found himself.

He attended the Royal Academy Art School for a short time and then took some lessons from Ford Madox Brown, then a little esteemed painter but now considered to be one of the most important of his period, yet he was impatient of all academic training and basic method and soon broke way to work out his own forms of expression.

The so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood came into being almost casually in 1848 by the natural discovery on the part of a small group of students that their ideas on the need for a reformation in painting and the basis on which it should be promoted, were more or less the same. Most of its members were undistinguished and mediocre, judged by any standards of excellence, and need not detain us here. The most important personalities were Rossetti himself, of course, Holman Hunt and John Millais. Both the two latter men were to become the most distinguished painters of their age and even if today their ideas and the expression of it may seem to us misguided and fallacious no-one could call in question their high technical accomplishment, something that Rossetti, with all his deeper, more complex and vigorous creative impulse, was never able to achieve. It is not too much to affirm, in addition to this, that some of the earliest works by these two men — Millais's *The Carpenter's Shop* and *Ophelia*, and Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd* for example, still stand as testimonies to splendid and original creative ideas in a period of exceptionally monotonous and academic conventionality.

Rossetti fell deeply in love with Elizabeth Siddal, a young dressmaker who had posed for one of the other members. We see her likeness in Millais's *Ophelia* and in his own *Beata Beatrix* painted after her death. After a stormy period which, for want of a better word, we may call their engagement, Rossetti married her. The marriage was a complete and tragic failure and
her death, from an overdose of laudanum, was to cast a shadow over the whole of the rest of his life. Whether poor beautiful Lizzie Siddal committed suicide or died by accident will probably never be completely revealed but Rossetti felt himself in some way to be responsible and probably with good reason. Professor Doughty goes so far as to claim that it is be traced throughout all his later poetry as a remorse trauma. Certainly it must have contributed to the almost morbid melancholy that pervades everything he wrote as a mature artist. He even made the theatrical and useless gesture of having all his early poems — just then ready in manuscript form for publication — buried with her in the coffin, against the prayers of all his friends.

He never married again although his household gave hospitality to many pretty ladies — too many to be enumerated here — and he himself became an addict to chloral in an effort to cure his persistent insomnia. It was this that gradually undermined his health, although curiously enough it was laudanum — the same drug that his young wife had died of — which was to be the cause of his death in 1882 at the early age of fifty-four.

In later years he became deeply attracted by William Morris's wife, the beautiful Jane Burden, she too of quite humble origin. She was built on nobler lines than Lizzie Siddal, with abundant black hair, and not in the least frail and consumptive. Professor Doughty asserts that Rossetti was deeply in love with her — a fact which scarcely requires great insight to discover, but she was, fortunately for them both, reasonably happily married and in spite of her great beauty, a very sensible woman, and although she sat for him many times and was reproduced without having to be present many times, she clearly never allowed their relationship to go beyond a certain point of affectionate regard.

Domestic life at Rossetti's house in Cheyne Walk on the Chelsea Embankment, within a few yards of the Carlyles, must have been quite unusual. Fanny Cornforth, who had been one of the causes of the failure of his marriage, was his last, so to speak, permanent mistress; she came and went at will and tried, and sometimes succeeded, in dominating the household in spite of the presence of the detestable Mr. Howells, a cunning and «exploitative» adventurer. Distinguished men from all walks of life, especially writers and poets, came and went. Indeed this was the period when men of such varying ability as Walter Pater, Swinburne, William Morris, Theodore Watts Dunton and, at the very end, the young Hall Caine, were constant visitors. Fabulous dinner parties were given and in the backgarden there was a sort of zoo with an odd collection of animals, a hobby in which Rossetti seems to have been a kind of pioneer. Henry James kept odd pets in Paris as did Gerard de Nerval and the Goncourts at a later period. Among all this, created after all by himself, Rossetti navigated and somehow contrived to execute his many commissions for paintings — he never exhibited again after his first attempt at the Royal Academy — and to write what little
poetry he did produce in those years of varying success and spiritual and physical decline.

It is not too much to say that all the distinguished poets of the last century, after the earlier romantics, have been long out of favour. Tennyson is only now being slowly rediscovered. It required a critic of the calibre and prestige of Eliot to point out that he was a great poet in spite of his bad philosophy. Robert Browning, although much respected, is still little read except in academic places. He has been somewhat unkindly described as the poet of the cultured upper class tourist on the continent, a statement which, although unkind, nevertheless contains some element of truth. Swinburne, acknowledged follower of Rossetti in his earlier poetry, still repels but is increasingly respected as a critic. G.M. Hopkins had a period of favour between the two wars mainly because he was thought to be the father of modern poetry but was then allowed to fall again into comparative obscurity being only appreciated by those connoisseurs who are able to distinguish between vogue and intrinsic worth. Rossetti, as we have said, has recently been the object of some research more for his highly coloured domestic life than for his poetical achievement and when this has been noticed writers have dwelt on the later morbid and obscure utterances rather than on the youthful and vigorous works in order to confirm the negative judgment now in vogue, just as we might do with Wordsworth in a review of his late poems if we were ill-disposed towards him.

Professor Robson, in The Pelican Guide to English Literature, lumps the two Rossettis, William Morris and a number of others all together in the same chapter under the curious and misleading title of «Pre-Raphaelite Poetry». He subjects them all to a test based on Mathew Arnold's formula: «Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life», a test from which they all emerge as sorry figures as well they might. We are left asking ourselves who among the great poets of the past would be saved in Professor Robson's esteem if this formula were to be applied too rigorously.

It is important, I think, to make clear the distinction between the ideas and artistic convictions of a small body of young men convinced of the necessity for a revival and renewal in the world of painting, and the further development of the romantic spirit which many sensitive creative men felt themselves to be a part of at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite manifesto as reported by Holman Hunt in his book Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1905), surely a trustworthy source. This does not appear to include or to foresee any of the works discussed by Professor Robson or for that matter by many other critics who use the term «Pre-Raphaelitism» to embrace a whole half century of poetry and prose of a great variety of kinds. The term itself is convenient for lack of another but is, after all, by itself quite explicit in its intentions. That these young men employed antique subject matter for their works only demonstrated that they too felt the escapist
longings of their times but it was not basically a part of their program. Some — Arthur Hughes for example and the more distinguished Ford Madox Brown who sympathized but was never actually associated with the group — painted almost exclusively contemporary subjects, including scenes of everyday life and industry. Are we to classify them under the all-embracing term which is considered by so many critics as being equivalent to late nineteenth century decadence? Tennyson was never connected in any way with the group although he knew of it and at least once met Rossetti at the house of a friend. Such early poems as The Lady of Shalott and Marianna could have been written at that time under the influences of Coleridge and Keats even if the Brotherhood had never existed.

William Morris with his curious mixture of practical craftsman, socialist, and romantic escapist, and Swinburne, were late-comers and felt the influence of Rossetti’s magnetic personality alone, but already with Swinburne we come into a wider, more international consciousness of which even Rossetti knew little or nothing, and which had been in no way foreseen by the Brotherhood. Rossetti himself had no high opinion of the ideas of men like Swinburne and Pater thinking them effeminate and decadent.

Thus, with the dispersal of the group, the gradual « fall from grace » of so brilliant a member as Millais, and the defection of Holman Hunt who, however, thought himself to be the only true continuer of the Pre-Raphaelite ideals (and he was probably right), it was Rossetti alone who continued to be a focal point and source of dynamic inspiration in the development of late romanticism, long after the group had ceased to exist. The Brotherhood, formed in 1848, had dispersed almost completely by 1852. Christina Rossetti’s humorous verse beginning « The P.R.B. is in its decadence » was its only epitaph.

As with many other poets, not everything that Rossetti wrote succeeded or can be called great poetry, but among the small body of work he left there are some poems of the highest quality. It is exactly these that require our careful attention. As we have said inspiration seems to be a youthful quality and in this Rossetti is no exception; almost all his best poetry belongs to his youth in its first inspiration, but unlike the work of other poets most of it — certainly the early works — underwent the unusual process of being interred, dug up again and subjected to rigorous revision ten years after the first impulse which had given it form had died out or had at least lost its youthful freshness.

The lyrical and moving, My Sister’s Sleep, written in what was to be the In Memoriam stanza, and the first version of The Blessed Damozel, appeared in The Germ, the ill-starred journal of the Brotherhood that survived only four numbers, although, significantly, the poems themselves had been composed long before it was ever contemplated, while The Burden of Nineveh and
the second version of *The Blessed Damozel*, were published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856.

Almost everything else was collected in *Poems*, published in 1870, together with fifty sonnets and « songs » for the sequence known as *The House of Life*. A revised edition of *Poems* and *Ballads and Poems* were both published in 1881, only a year before his death; the latter contained several of those works in ballad form which aroused so much admiration among his contemporaries and which have little appeal for us today.

If we exclude the unique and exquisite translations from the early Italian poets, *La Vita Nuova*, a small group of songs from the French of Villon — all of which would require a special study — and one brief and remarkable prose work entitled *Hand and Soul*, written expressly for *The Germ*, the whole body of his work is very small indeed.

My purpose here is not to attempt to cover the whole range of Rossetti’s poetic expression, which would obviously be impossible except at a very superficial level, but rather to focus attention very selectively on one or two of those poems which seem to me to be of importance in proving his claim to high regard.

Like most genuine poets Rossetti wrote what he felt impelled to write first and then found a reason for it afterwards. He believed that the most direct but uncommon expression possible was to be used in saying what he had say. We know too that he was a conscientious and scrupulous craftsman with an exquisite — sometime even too much so — ear for the music of words like his contemporary Tennyson. In spite of Matthew Arnold’s formula this has always been an important and sometimes decisive element in the creation of poetry although today it has gone conspicuously out of fashion perhaps in deference to the above-mentioned formula, for sociological reason which have nothing to do with poetry.

For some reason or other *The Blessed Damozel*, one of Rossetti’s earliest known poems, is always chosen to represent him in the anthologies and has perhaps as a consequence been singled out for analysis and criticism, usually adverse, as though it were the « test piece », on which his reputation must stand or fall. Although very unequal in quality and even with lapses into bathos where he intended lofty images, it contains passages of great beauty, and if we remember that it was composed by a youth of nineteen — his brother thinks twenty-two — it is all the more remarkable for the technical perfection of its prosodic structure and the richness and originality of its diction that a lesser man could never have achieved.

The translations from the early Italian poets occupied him with interruptions for a number of years from this time on although they were only published, together with *La Vita Nuova*, in 1861, and traces of their influence are to be found everywhere in the poems of this period. The first inspiration, developed, quite naturally, with a more « worldly » conception, for *The
Blessed Damozel is to be found in La deificazione di Laura and the sonnets that follow it. This, with other abundant elements, leads to the conclusion that a closer study of Petrarch would help greatly in the better understanding of Rossetti's poetry especially the sonnets. With the exception of John Dixon Hunt, no critic in recent years has taken the trouble to do this perhaps from lack of real knowledge of the Italian of Petrarch.

The Burden of Nineveh, is again an early work, rarely mentioned by critics except in passing, chiefly, we suspect, because it does not fit with their established conception of Pre-Raphaelitism, yet it is a work of rich beauty. The brilliantly sustained verse structure with its complex rhyme scheme, is a masterpiece of prosodic skill while the theme is evolved with dense and varied meditation that owes little to the commonly accepted bagaglio of Pre-Raphaelite imagery and symbolism. We are reminded of Shelley's Ozymandias—«I met a traveller from an antique land» which may well have been its first inspiration.

One curious point of purely surface interest is the poet's mistake in supposing that the great winged Bull—actually there are two of them—was worshipped as a god, or that it was modelled in clay; in the third verse he tells us that:

The print of its first rush wrapping,
wound ere it dried, still ribbed the thing

but later corrects himself with:

Ah! in what quarries lay the stones

These superficial discrepancies, together with some verses not entirely in key such as the eighth with its humorous and somewhat ironical mention of:

...school foundations in the act,
of holiday, three files compact,

suggest more than one rewriting, but they do not, in any way, constitute serious blemishes in what is a remarkable and impressive work of poetic utterance.

A Last Confession and Jenny inevitably go together — experiments in the Browning dramatic monologue method of communication and, clearly, not adapted to Rossetti's particular mode of expression. It must be conceded that the first of these is not very successful. It is melodramatic in the best mid-Victorian taste, and consciously «worked up» with local colour that evokes more a contemporary steel engraving in a keepsake volume than the real Italy of the times, an Italy that Rossetti only knew at second-hand and was unable to infuse with reality.
Jenny is something very different, at once vital and more bitter, in spite of a certain «romantic» diction that he could scarcely escape. Yet it is implicitly and unsentimentally tragic and far «nearer the bone», than Browning could ever have achieved if for no other reason than that it is undoubted drawn from the poet's own experience—a fact which he takes no trouble at all to disguise and which Browning probably never knew in his comfortable upper middle class vacuum and — even if he had — would never have dared risk in poetic composition. His «naughty ladies» are all represented far away in their Renaissance or Medieval setting safely distant from all possibility of an interpretation of indecorous personal experiences.

In some cases we have the impression that Rossetti has carried his theme on too long and got lost in the convolutions of «over wrought» ideas and symbols only hazily focused by him himself. I have in mind The Portrait with its touchingly elegiac opening verse, charged with an emotion that gives it clarity but which is then gradually dispersed in what seem thinly disguised autobiographical details:

This is her picture as she was;
It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
Should tarry when myself am gone.
I gaze until she seems to stir, —
Until mine eyes almost aver
That now, even now, the sweet lips part
To breathe the words of the sweet heart:
And yet the earth is over her.

In the second verse there is the remarkable image:

The drip of water night and day
Giving a tongue to solitude,

but everywhere, even in the least successful works, we many find moments of arresting and memorable beauty.

The Card Player is sonorously sensual and reminds us that the young Swinburne was inspired by its music:

Could you not drink her gaze like wine?

We are carried forward on the sustained pitch of the rhythm with the image of the mysterious blond card dealer—is she not perhaps the model for Madam Sesostris, «the wisest woman in Europe» mith her «wicked pack of cards»? Yet in Rossetti's figure there is no irony:

Around her where she sits, the dance
Now breathes its eager heat.
The fifth and sixth verses are weak and would be better omitted, but the seventh regains the tension and is dramatically effective.

There is now the accusation of what someone has called his « religiosity » to be briefly discussed. This can be justified in regard to some of his later works, where symbols of a religious nature appear to be employed with uncertain symbolical significance quite unknown in his youthful period, and, I believe, closely linked with his physical decay.

In spite of what must have been an almost oppressively religious atmosphere in the family life of the young Rossetti’s, Dante Gabriel grew up a free thinker like his father although it is very probable that he never gave the matter as much specific thought as his father had perforce to do in order to free himself from orthodox beliefs taught him in childhood in Italy. Dante Gabriel’s mother was Anglican as was also his sister Francesca, the oldest of the family, who quite early in life took the veil in an Anglican Sisterhood. Christina, the youngest, was also deeply religious and ascetic, so much so that poor young Collinson, one of the very minor brothers of the Brotherhood, was rejected as a suitor because he was a Roman Catholic, and not, as one Italian critic wrote a few years ago, for the contrary reasons. None of them were Roman Catholic in spite of their Italian origin.

It is clear that all this intense religious atmosphere – round the dinner table as it were and not just on Sundays – had a purely negative effect on Dante Gabriel, nevertheless daily life was filled and enriched with the art and literature of Italy. It was, therefore, inevitable that he should be drawn by the emotional and decorative appeal of the ritual and pageantry of the Roman Church.

As Professor Doughty says «... his racial tendency was strengthened by his readings of medieval literature especially Dante ». Thus the Madonna, confused, or rather fused, in his imagination with Dante’s Beatrice and Malory’s Guenevere, appears in his paintings, progressively more and more with the physical likeness of the many women he had known, blended into one ideal type. She is to be traced too, specifically or by allusion, in many of the later and « ill » poems, especially in The House of Life sonnets:

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, ...

In his imagination the confusion of the image seems almost complete here, yet I find it difficult to tax him with the religiosity, even where Christian « mythology » is used more explicitly to his own ends, that sat so ill on later men like Swinburne and Wilde. Christian « mythology », together with pagan mythology, permeated and were integrated with his ima-
ginative thinking and were not, as with these other men, merely part of the «stock in trade» vocabulary in vogue later on among the professional poets.

It is important then that we should not waste time looking for non-existent keys to the complex, confused and highly mutable symbolism in these later poems. Our chief concern must be the appreciation of the emotional impact — today a very unfashionable quality — of his poetry on our minds and on those elements which are the cause of it rather than to attempt an analysis of what is unanalysable.

The importance of a study of the influence of Petrarch on Rossetti has already been mentioned. This is all the more important if we are to appreciate the full measure of his achievement. His studies of the early Italian poets influenced him deeply in his whole conception of poetic expression and more particularly in the sonnet both as a vehicle of intimate personal expression and as a highly formalized type of verse. It is sometimes forgotten that Rossetti is the last great writer of sonnets in the history of English literature, that he wrote more sonnets of a high level of expression than any other poet since Shakespeare, and that he used the form with unrivalled skill and — if I may be forgiven the use of so old-fashioned a word — elegance.

Although his subject matter and sentiments were derived, as how could they not have been, from the great romantic poets of the previous generation and in particular from Keats, his form, and to a great extent his mode of expression, were derived from the original source of the sonnet and not from handed-down tradition as was the case with all the sonnet writers before him excepting, of course, Sir Thomas Wyatt and perhaps Milton. He knew and could appreciate to the full the sonnets of Petrarch for unique and known reasons.

The form itself exacts the utmost from the poet, both as a creative artist and as a craftsman, in putting «memorable speech» into what is probably the most inflexible kind of verse yet devised. Even such copious poets as Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats wrote comparatively few sonnets and achieved poetical expression of a high quality only in one or two rare cases.

On the contrary for Rossetti it seems to have been the form he preferred to any other and while respecting almost completely the petrarchan structure he experimented with it freely even in his youthful sonnets, in order to obtain a greater variety of «textures» than had hitherto seemed possible or even been attempted. He deviates slightly from the classical Petrarchan form only in the divisions between the groups of lines. Petrarch separates the whole stanza into four distinct groups while Rossetti makes only one break — always a very appreciable one internally quite apart from the visible one — between the second quatrains and the next group which he makes an unbroken sestet, maintaining, however, the Petrarchan rhyme pattern, unlike
Wordsworth and Keats who used a variety of patterns that varied from one sonnet to another.

I quote here in full the sonnet entitled Our Lady of the Rocks, written under the deep impression made by the celebrated painting by Leonardo da Vinci, when he visited the Louvre during his one and only excursion to the Continent in company with Holman Hunt at the time of their youthful Pre-Raphaelite ardours:

Mother, is this the darkness of the end,
    The Shadow of Death? and is that outer sea
    Infinite imminent Eternity?
And does the death-pang by man’s seed sustain’d
In Time’s each instant cause thy face to bend
    Its silent prayer upon the Son, while he
Blesses the dead with his hand silently
To his long day which hours no more offend?

Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,
    Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls
Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.
Thy name, O Lord, each spirit’s voice extols,
    Whose peace abides in the dark avenue
Amid the bitterness of things occult.

Although undoubtedly a knowledge of the picture does intensify the evocative atmosphere, we are almost surprised to realize that there is not a single word of description in the whole sonnet and the two other figures present – the infant John the Baptist and the angel – are not even referred to. The music is solemn but not «funereal» and words and sequences of words – «infinite imminent Eternity» – contribute to intensify it. The end is stragely and almost unexpectedly abrupt with the sharp sound of «occult», which has, however, its premonition in «difficult», and «keen as these rocks». We know that it was worked on a great deal as all his poems were but it has a completeness and sustained intensity that place it among the great sonnets in our literature. We may also opportunely add, that it contains no elements that could be remotely identified as being «Pre-Raphaelite», all the more remarkable as it was written when the Brotherhood was in its first enthusiasm.

The sonnet A Venetian Pastoral on the equally celebrated painting by Giorgione in the Louvre, with its so unPre-Raphaelite chiaroscuro, and lack of insistence on detail, might have been supposed to lack any element likely to stir the imagination of the young poet. Instead we have one of the loveliest and most evocative sonnets of all. The exquisite effect produced by:

And hark how at its verge the wave sighs in
Reluctant ...

of water flowing into the glass jug as the young girl dips it in the pool.
Again very lovely and unusual in the spontaneous freshness of the emotional atmosphere is the sonnet on one of his own drawings *Mary Magdalen at the door of Simon the Pharisee*. We see her mounting the steps distraught with this new, sudden passion, her lover meanwhile trying to detain her, and through a little side window we can see the beloved profile of Christ looking gravely on, an ingenuously charming device often employed by Rossetti in order to reveal other planes, as it were, of the scene. The final sestet of the sonnet is sweet yet moving:

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!

Rossetti often delighted to set himself unusual rhyme schemes which he used with brilliant ease. A typical example is the exacting a a a a b, c c c c b of *The Burden of Nineveh*.

It was a curious coincidence that he composed *My Sister’s Sleep* in the same scheme and form — of extreme simplicity yet never before used — that Tennyson was using in *In Memoriam* and with which he is always credited as having virtually invented.

In this brief examination of the personality and poetry of Rossetti I have tried to put into a more just focus some of those works which entitle him to be considered one of the major poets of the nineteenth century, leaving aside the details of his private life and the influence, undoubtedly powerful, he had on a later and, be it said, far less vigorous generation of poets.

It is obvious that the events and emotional crises of a creative artist’s life are bound to have their influence on his work but how these actually do act on the creative spirit itself is beyond our power to know. We know only, in the case of Rossetti, that his was of unusual disorderliness yet by modern standards it was in no way exceptional. What is exceptional is that he left us a body of poetry small in quantity but exceptional in its variety and inspiration.

If he had left us nothing else his translations from the early Italian poets, again the work of his youth, would assure him a place among distinguished poets for they are something a great deal more than mere pedestrian translations, a fact which some critics are unable to forgive. They are, instead, recreations by a highly sensitive artist who had the unique advantage of also knowing perfectly the language he was translating from. It is indeed strange that Italian scholars should have give them so little attention.

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LATEST BIBLIOGRAPHY

OSWALD DOUTHBY, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London, reprinted 1960. Undoubtedly one of the most serious studies made since the war. The biographical matter is scrupulously documented and critical assessments, almost completely lacking in other and even more recent studies, are in the main fair and objective.

WILLIAM GAUNT, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy*, London, Cape, paperback edition 1965. This may serve as a sort of *eademecum* of the lives and vicissitudes of the major personalities who made up what is known as the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. A great deal of useful information is, however, so inextricably interwoven with purely fictional if probable detail, and brilliant but sly irony, that the student in search of the truth may find it difficult to know the difference. Critical assessment of the poetry and painting of the various writers and artists whose lives are recorded is almost completely lacking.

JOHN DIXON HUNT, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968. A serious and sympathetic attempt at analysing the aspirations and spiritual crises of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. In the chapter entitled «The Narrow Chamber of the Individual Mind» the author makes a study of some aspects of Rossetti's poetry more particularly the influence of the *dolce stil novo*, and his own personal symbolism in *The House of Life* sequence. The approach is somewhat confused and the reader would be glad of a final synthesis to the various aspects of the subject but this is not forthcoming.

EARLE WELBY, *The Victorian Romantics*, London, Cass. reprinted 1966. Professor Welby takes the whole romantic movement across the century, for his field of study and reveals an astonishingly intimate knowledge and understanding of the artistic as well as the literary world of the age. His aesthetic judgements of the major and minor figures are those of a sensitive and unprejudiced mind.