

knowledge of the heart of man sympathetic almost to clairvoyancy. Byron was wholly concerned with the life of the period, and of that he could only see one aspect, the narrowness of the majority of "respectable" people; and his criticism of life was confined to an exposure, not always in the best possible taste, of their prudery and hypocrisy. The fact that he made himself the principal character in all his poetry, and that he invariably asserted the discontent which formed the burden of his song to be universal and inevitable, whereas it was in truth the reflex of his own unhappy experience, justified Macaulay's taunt that "never was there such variety in monotony as that of Byron," and seriously endangered his claim to be called a great poet. Similarly the circumstances of Rossetti's life, and the fierce concentration of himself into the life of art that made him as Ruskin said "the chief intellectual force in the establishment of the modern romantic school in England," prevented him from attaining that wide comprehension that calm and level attitude of mind, which can alone afford a basis for an adequate criticism of life.

But there is another test of poetic value—the possession or not of that quality of "earnestness" on which Aristotle, and after him Arnold, insists. "Genuine poetry," says Arnold, "is composed in the soul." "Composed in the soul," here at least we have an unmistakable characteristic of the man who wrote

O dearest! while we lived and died
A living death in every day,
Some hours we still were side by side,
When where I was you too might stay
And rest and need not go away.
O nearest, furthest! can there be
At length some hard-earned heart-won home,
Where—exile changed to sanctuary—
Our lot may fill indeed its sum,
And you may wait and I may come?

Here, I say, we have a good assurance for our belief in the genuine character of Rossetti's poetry. But before we consider its import, let us first note those aspects in which he has no claim to excellence. By thus limiting our expectations we shall be in a better position to judge of his real merits.

In the first place, we cannot expect in Rossetti's poetry an interpretation of life such as we find in the "world" poets. No one would think of writing of him as Pope writes of Homer, that "it seemed not enough to have taken in the whole circle of the arts, and the whole compass of nature." Or as Sismondi writes of Dante, "That great genius conceived in his vast imagination the mysteries of the invisible creation, and unveiled them to the eyes of the astonished world." Or as Johnson did of Milton, that "he had considered creation in its whole extent." Or as Dryden of Shakespeare, that he "of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul."

Rossetti is also deficient in what Goethe calls the "architectonics" of poetry. His chief work, "The House of Life," is a mere sonnet-sequence—a series of individually perfect but entirely independent pieces. Not only is he deficient in this faculty of construction, and generally in the sense of proportion so conspicuous in the Greek poets, but that which Aristotle calls the "very soul" of poetic composition, the plot or story, is of necessity absent from his works. Possibly he thought that this function of the poetic art belonged

more especially to fiction in the nineteenth century. It is at least certain that he was not wanting in power to portray actions. Nothing could be more essentially dramatic than the death of William the Atheling in "The White Ship."

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

God only knows where his soul did wake,
But I saw him die for his sister's sake.

While that his eye was no less keen for scenic effect than that of a Greek tragedian is shown by a score of passages in his longer poems; not to mention a whole class that are nothing but pictures rendered into poetry. But the poetic afflatus is too intense ever to last longer than is barely sufficient for a single episode. The flames of the sacrifice burn so fiercely that they consume the very altar upon which they are offered.

Neither is there any decided trace—to turn from the matter of his poetry to his manner—of the "fascinating felicity" of Keats; still less of the supreme genius of Shakespeare, who was "naturally learned"; in whom were present "all the images of nature" which he drew "not laboriously but luckily." Apart from internal evidence, we have Michael Rossetti's account of his brother's poetic method. According to him, Dante Rossetti was a "very fastidious writer." He wrote, indeed, out of a large fund of thought "which would culminate in a clear impulse or (as we say) an inspiration"; but in the execution of his poems "he was heedful and reflective from the first, and he spared no pains in clarifying and perfecting."

Even if we narrow the comparison and ask what was his comprehension of the life of the age, Rossetti's poetry appears equally inadequate. Of his want of sympathy with its scientific aspect I have already written. As his brother remarks, "he was anti-scientific to the marrow." But this is in itself an insufficient reason for the entire indifference, apparent in his works, to the progress and travail of humanity. It does not excuse the fact that there are in his poetry no lines instinct with the pride of material progress, such as Tennyson's:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward,
forward, let us range.
Let the great world spin for ever, down the
ringing grooves of change.

No cry interpretative of its spiritual unrest such as Browning's "Truth at any cost"; no figure sympathetic to England's life such as Arnold's "Weary Titan." The reason lies solely in the limitations of his own temperament. The exclusive spirit which was shown in his choice of associates and in his manner of life is equally manifested in the choice of his poetic sphere. Just as Rossetti's nature was concentrated into a single phase of the life of art, so his poetic thought is limited to a consideration of that passion which appeared to him to offer most scope for the study of the beautiful in the life of man.

But within this sphere Rossetti's poetry rings true. This limitation once recognized, and there is an end to our disappointment. We feel that by his poetry a door is opened for us into the "soul's sphere of infinite images," and that, of all the poet voices, his voice is most near to that sweet utterance which, in his own unequalled line,

Is like a hand laid softly on the soul.

Dante had striven by his "Vita Nuova" to give an altogether higher and more spiritual conception of the passion of love to his mediæval contemporaries in his great epic; while Virgil acts as his guide, it is Beatrice that inspires and encourages him in his moments of despondency. Rossetti, following in the steps of his master, likewise interprets the passion of love. In so doing he has brought into his considerations the fuller knowledge and the wider spiritual experience of the nineteenth century. Not only has he by his poetry widened the gamut of human passion, but he has introduced half-tones to which the mediæval ear must naturally have been deaf. In particular he has approached a problem of peculiar and special interest at the present time—the endurance of an earthly union under the changed conditions of a future existence. The consideration of this question was deepened by the circumstances of his marriage. His own enjoyment of wedded life had been brief. In such love he recognized the purest and most perfect of human passions—an influence which above all else raised the spirit of men's action. To think that this relationship was only for earth, when it was in truth a foretaste of heaven, revolted his ardent nature, and in his poetry he has endeavoured so to interpret the earthly manifestations of this passion as to demonstrate its fitness for the sphere of heaven. To prove the truth of this belief is the desire of his heart, a desire continually and eloquently poured forth throughout his poetry.

Your heart is never away,
But ever with mine, for ever,
For ever without endeavour.
To-morrow, love, as to-day;
Two blent hearts never astray,
Two souls no power may sever,
Together, O my love for ever!

When such a motive has a chief place in the presentation of the theme, it follows that Rossetti's conception of the passion of love is essentially elevated. The passion which he portrays as existing on earth is, indeed, that of a man keenly alive to all sensuous beauties, but this human passion is dominated by the spiritual element which is the basis on which the doctrine of the continuity of love rests. For him Love's throne was not with "Kindred powers the heart finds fair," Truth, Hope, Fame, Oblivion, Youth, Life, Death,

but far above
All passionate wind of welcome and farewell
He sat in breathless bowers they dream not of.

To portray the manifestations of love in its most perfect form, with the most subtle feeling and the richest imagery, to introduce an element of spiritual interpretation, to assert its continuance in the after-world, is his chosen task. For that task he possessed the fullest equipment. To his passionate Italian nature and his unequalled appreciation of the beautiful he added a spirit of devotion so deep that it led him upon his wife's untimely death to bury in her grave the volume of poems he had ready for publication. He is never tired of asserting the supremacy of Love. Sometimes it is Love's power to discern and reward the true soul on which he dwells. So Rose Mary, after she has passed through scenes of conflict in which the electric atmosphere is lightened ever and anon by flashes of lurid lightning, ultimately triumphs over the Beryl-stone, and hears the voice of Love saying:

Thee, true soul, shall thy Truth prefer
To blessed Mary's rose-bower:
Warmed and lit in thy place afar
With guerdon-fires of the sweet Love-star
Where hearts of steadfast lovers are.