

## OUR BIOGRAPHICAL BUREAU.

## Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

As the sketches and selections we have hitherto presented in "Our Biographical Bureau," have been critical as well as biographical, our readers will, we trust, not be disappointed if in this number we dispense with the application of the title, and present an excellent review extracted from the *Cornhill Magazine*, on "Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty."

THE students of Rossetti's poems—taking their tone from Mr. Swinburne's magnificent eulogy—have for the most part rather set forth their artistic excellence than endeavored to explain their contents, or to indicate the relation of the poet's habit of thought and feeling to the ideas which Englishmen are accustomed to trust or admire. And consequently many critics, whose ethical point of view demands respect, continue to find in Rossetti's works an enigma not worth the pains of solution, and to decry them as obscure, fantastic, or even as grossly immoral in tendency.

It will be the object of this essay—written from a point of view of by no means exclusive sympathy with the movement which Rossetti led—to show, in the first place, the great practical importance of that movement for good or evil; and, further, to trace such relations between this Religion of Art, this Worship of Beauty, and the older and more accredited manifestations of the Higher Life, as may indicate to the moralist on what points he should concentrate his efforts if, hopeless of withstanding the rising stream, he seeks at least to retain some power of deepening or modifying its channel.

From the æsthetic side such an attempt will be regarded with indifference, and from the ethical side with little hope. Even so bold a peacemaker as the author of "Natural Religion" has shrunk from this task; for the art which he admits as an element in his Church of Civilization is an art very different from Rossetti's. It is an art manifestly untainted by sensuousness, manifestly akin to virtue; an art which, like Wordsworth's, finds its revelation in sea and sky and mountain rather than in "eyes which the sun-gate of the soul unbar," or in

Such fire as Love's soul-winning hands distill,  
Even from his inmost ark of light and dew.

YET, however slight the points of contact between the ethical and the æsthetic theories of life may be, it is important that they should be noted and dwelt upon. For assuredly the "æsthetic movement" is not a mere fashion of the day—the modish pastime of nincompoops and charlatans. The imitators who surround its leaders, and whose jargon almost disgusts us with the very mysteries of art, the very vocabulary of emotion—these men are but the straws that mark the current, the inevitable parasites of the rapidly rising cause. We have, indeed, only to look around us to perceive that—whether or not the conditions of the modern world are favorable to artistic excellence—all the main forces of civilization are tending towards artistic activity. The increase of wealth, the diffusion of education, the gradual decline of the military, the hieratic, the aristocratic ideals—each of these causes removes some obstacle from the artist's path or offers some fresh prize to his endeavors. Art has outlived both the Puritans and the Inquisition; she is no longer denuded by the spirit of self-mortification, nor enslaved by a jealous orthodoxy. The increased wealth of the world makes the artist's life stable and secure, while it sets free a surplus income so large that an increasing share of it must almost necessarily be devoted to some form of æsthetic expenditure.

And more than this. It is evident, especially in new countries, that a need is felt of some kind of social distinction—some new aristocracy—based on differences other than those of birth and wealth. Not, indeed, that rank and family are likely to cease to be held in honor; but, as power is gradually dissociated from them, they lose their exclusive

predominance, and take their place on the same footing as other graces and dignities of life. Still less need we assume any slackening in the pursuit of riches; the fact being rather that this pursuit is so widely successful that in civilized capitals even immense opulence can now scarcely confer on its possessor all the distinction which he desires. In America, accordingly, where modern instincts find their freest field, we have before our eyes the process of the gradual distribution of the old prerogatives of birth amongst wealth, culture, and the proletariat. In Europe a class privileged by birth used to supply at once the rulers and the ideals of other men. In America the rule has passed to the multitude; largely swayed in subordinate matters by organized wealth, but in the last resort supreme. The ideal of the new community at first was Wealth; but, as its best literature and its best society plainly show, that ideal is shifting in the direction of Culture. In the younger cities, the coarser classes, still bow down undisguisedly to the god Dollar; but when this Philistine deity is rejected as shaming his worshippers, æsthetic Culture seems somehow the only Power ready to install itself in the vacant shrine.

And all over the world the spread of Science, the diffusion of Morality, tend in this same direction. For the net result of Science and Morality for the mass of men is simply to give them comfort and leisure, to leave them cheerful, peaceful, and anxious for occupation. Nay, even the sexual instinct, as men become less vehement and unbridled, merges in larger and larger measure into the mere æsthetic enjoyment of beauty; till Stesichorus might now maintain with more truth than of old that our modern Helen is not herself fought for by two continents, but rather her image is blamelessly diffused over the albums of two hemispheres.

Since the primal impulses, will remain to mankind, since Love's pathway will be retrodden by many a generation, and all of faith or knowledge to which that pathway leads will endure, it is no small part of the poet's function to show in how great a measure Love does actually presuppose and consist of this exaltation of the mystic element in man; and how the sense of unearthly destinies may give dignity to Love's invasion, and steadfastness to his continuance, and surround his vanishing with the mingled ecstasy of anguish and of hope. Let us trace, with Rossetti, some stages of his onward way.

The inexplicable suddenness with which Love will sometimes possess himself of two several hearts—finding a secret kinship which, like a common aroma, permeates the whole being of each—has often suggested the thought that such companionship is not in reality now first begun; that it is founded in a pre-natal affection, and is the unconscious prolongation of the emotions of an ideal world—

Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love,

That among souls allied to mine was yet

One nearer kindred than life hinted of.

O born with me somewhere that men forget,

And though in years of sight and sound unmet,

Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!

It is thus that Rossetti traces backward the kindling of the earthly flame. And he feels also that if love be so pervading, so fateful a thing, the man who takes it upon him has much to fear. He moves among great risks; "the moon-track of the journeying face of Fate" is subject for him to strange perturbations, to terrible eclipse. What if his love be a mistake?—if he feels against his will a disenchantment stealing over the enchanted garden, and his now self walking, a ghastly intruder among scenes vainly consecrated by an illusive past?

Whence came his feet into my field, and why?

How is it that he finds it all so drear?

How do I see his seeing, and how hear

The name his bitter silence knows it by?

Or what of him for whom some unforgotten hour has marred his life's best felicity, "et inquinavit æro tempus aureum"? What of the recollection that chills his freest moments with an inward and icy breath?

Look in my face, my name is Might-have-been;

I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell.

There is no need to invite attention to the lines which thus begin. They will summon their own auditors: they