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INTRODUCTION

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (christened Gabriel Charles Dante) was born in London in 1828, the son of an exiled Italian patriot. After a period at King's College School he went, in 1846, to the 'antique' school at the Royal Academy, in pursuit of an early ambition (more substantially founded than most childish ambitions) to become an artist. The principles and practices of the Academy at that time represented everything against which he was shortly to rebel so actively, and it is not surprising that the chief things he acquired there were a reputation for waywardness and eccentricity, a mild contempt for his masters, and a few valuable friendships—notably those of Holman Hunt and Millais. It is certain that he never learnt to draw very well.

From this youthful friendship there grew, under the leadership, probably, of Holman Hunt, and by a process that is to this day vague and disputed, the so-called Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; but a full year before its official inception both Hunt and Rossetti had been working and studying along the lines that the Brotherhood's doctrines afterwards prescribed.

It is necessary here merely to mention this movement, since its aims applied to pictorial art rather than to literature. Art, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, had fallen upon evil days, days of imitation and emptiness, and, said the Brotherhood, it could only be rescued by the determination of artists to ignore the precepts of their masters and paint only what they saw, as they saw it. The small band (originally Hunt, Millais and Rossetti—although here again there is much dispute) decided that it was in Italian

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art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that this faithfulness could be seen at its best, and that Raphael was the last of the school of original mediaeval painters. The name Pre-Raphaelite was adopted, therefore, as meaning 'before the imitators of Raphael,' but not before Raphael himself.

The members at first painted mediaeval subjects with a strict attention to detail and to colour. They increased their membership to seven, they signed their pictures with the letters P.R.B., they held monthly meetings and published a magazine (unhappily named *The Germ*) which duly failed. For a time their work was received with some respect by the critics; but in 1850 the meaning of the mystic letters leaked out, and, for reasons which only an intimate knowledge of the social and artistic history of the period can explain, the Brotherhood was attacked mercilessly and scandalously in all the journals, by all the writers. Just as, later on, Rossetti and Swinburne were to be lashed by Buchanan for their poetry, so Hunt, Millais and Rossetti were lashed by *The Times*, by Dickens in *Household Words*, by Macaulay, and by many others less important.

The effect on the Brotherhood was immediate and fatal. Millais subdued the fiercer originalities in his style and was able to discover a parallel line of development which was to prove more popular; Hunt adhered nobly to his principles and triumphed in the end over reaction; Rossetti withdrew almost completely from public exhibition. Two letters to *The Times* by Ruskin rebuked the critics and encouraged the artists. But Hunt went off to the Holy Land to paint Biblical pictures from the life, another member went to the goldfields, a third became a Roman Catholic and gave up painting, and so, as Rossetti remarked, when they saw Hunt off from the station, "the whole Round Table was dissolved."

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However far the P.R.B. fell short of their aims and ideals they had done useful work for English art; for Rossetti, however, the movement in the end meant little. His painting (except for a very few pictures) grew less and less 'mediaeval' and more and more 'Rossetti'; his poetry had been 'mediaeval' from the start.

It has been said that a sort of pageant of the Middle Ages passed through the world of Victorian Literature; Tennyson watched it from his windows and described what he saw; Browning put on fancy dress and joined it; but Rossetti was already of it. Although he could be perfectly at home with English manners and customs when he wished, Rossetti was essentially a foreigner. His earliest recollections must have been of Italians in his father's house in London, plotting rebellion, and quarrelling over their plots. His father himself, dressed as an English sailor and marching in a squad, had been smuggled from Italy in time of rebellion by a friendly English Admiral. The old patriot, moreover, had been a voluminous writer and talker about Dante, whose works the children had known—but scarcely assimilated—from babyhood. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the brightest of them came to write and to paint his imagination turned to the Middle Ages, not with the loving care of the scholar or the pedant, but with the warmth, the sympathy, the *rightness* of one whose mind was already, in many respects, almost mediaeval. It is here, and here only, that the literary and artistic sides of Pre-Raphaelitism coincide; in both there are the interest in mediaeval themes and legends, the bright ingenuous colours of an age that had but newly discovered colour, the stark realities of an age that had not yet forgotten primitive cruelty. To speak strictly, there is no such thing as Pre-Raphaelite Literature, there are only literary Pre-Raphaelites; but if there could be a Pre-Raphaelite

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Literature, these three—mediaevalism, colour and directness—would be its chief characteristics. These three, also, together with a careful love of detail which is also mediaeval, are the qualities which we shall find most insistent in the poetry of Rossetti.

Often in doubt as to which of the arts he would finally pursue, Rossetti turned for a while, after the disaster of the P.R.B., to poetry. He had already written *The Blessed Damozel*, *The Portrait* and other poems; some of his work had appeared in *The Germ*, and there were in manuscript a large number of translations from Dante. The attack on his paintings brought out his indolence, and he would lie on his back for hours composing verses. His father rallied him, and he took up his brushes once more; but meanwhile two important things were happening—his love for Elizabeth Siddal, and his friendship with Ruskin.

Miss Siddal, discovered in a milliner's shop by one of Rossetti's friends, became, by reason of her undisputed beauty, first his model, then his pupil, and finally, after ten years, his wife. The engagement was protracted by her ill-health and his inability to save money. Her beauty was of the type that Rossetti has made familiar—bright, copper-coloured hair, long, stately neck, languid eyes, full lips. She had undeniable gifts, combined with wretched health and little education, and it would seem that in view of Gabriel's careless habits, his impatience, and his superior mental and social training, the marriage must have been foredoomed. For nearly two years, however, they lived together on reasonably happy terms. Then she died from an overdose of laudanum, and Rossetti in his grief buried the manuscript of his poems with her.

The connection with Ruskin was never properly a friendship at all. The whole cast of mind and habit of life of the two were so different as to render a friendship

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between them impossible. Ruskin admired the other's work, although he criticised it freely, and—more important for the artist—he bought it. Also he was the soul of kindness to Miss Siddal, offering to pay her £150 a year for her drawings, whether she finished any or not. It is probable that at some time he was genuinely fond of Rossetti, but the latter's point of view seems most eloquently summed up in his expression of joy after Ruskin's first visit: "He seems in a mood to make my fortune!"

To oblige Ruskin, Rossetti conducted art-classes at the Working Men's College, and there he came into contact with Morris and Burne-Jones. They immediately fell under his sway, as people did all through his life. "I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can," wrote Morris, one of the most strong-minded and self-opinionated of men; and Burne-Jones was even more humble. In 1857 they were all engaged in painting frescoes, for love, on the walls of the Union Society's Debating Hall at Oxford. Their knowledge of mural painting was inadequate, and their work did not last; but it was finely conceived and (Rossetti's share at least) finely executed, and it brought Rossetti into touch with an admiring circle of friends and critics at Oxford—among them Swinburne.

All the while the poet was steadily writing. He contributed to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (conducted by Morris and his friends) and by 1862 had collected enough verse for a volume. It was written in a neat little book given to him for the purpose by his wife—a trifling circumstance that may have helped the impulse to bury the book with her. In burying it, also, he was not untouched by remorse; the poems, he said, represented hours of enjoyment and of work that he might well have devoted to her in her suffering, and it was fitting that they should go with her. The noble action had a less noble sequel.

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From 1862 to 1867 have been called his 'good years.' He painted some of his loveliest pictures—notably *Beata Beatrix* and *The Beloved*—and became famous and wealthy, living in a large house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, together with (at various times) Swinburne, George Meredith and his brother William—one of the fairest and most conscientious of biographers. There was a large garden where he kept queer animals as pets—a kangaroo, a deer, a racoon, a wombat (which once ate some valuable cigars), a bull, an armadillo and others, not all at the same time, of course. He collected bric-a-brac and blue china, he entertained his few friends lavishly, and on the whole, after his grief had softened, spent some of the happiest years of his life. But about 1867 he began to suffer from insomnia and to have fears for his sight. In 1868 he went to Scotland, where he recovered sufficiently to return to poetry, and where some of his finest poems were written in a cave by the side of a stream—the scene of *The Stream's Secret*. At the same time he was trying painfully to remember the poems lying in his wife's coffin. On his return to London he was persuaded to consent to their recovery. Permission was obtained from the Home Secretary, a fire was kindled by the graveside, and while Rossetti sat in anguish in a friend's house, the volume was recovered, soiled but not illegible.

By 1870 the poems were published. (The Translations from the Italian had appeared in 1862.) There was a chorus of praise from all sides; but then, as now, it was possible, if you were sufficiently influential, to arrange for your books to be reviewed by your friends, and the glowing tributes came from the pens of William Rossetti, Swinburne and Morris. They were none the less sincere and capable for that. A year later Robert Buchanan published, under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland, an article in the *Contemporary Review* called *The Fleshly School of Poetry*.

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Rossetti, and to some extent Swinburne and Morris, were accused of coarseness and immorality, of considering the body as more important than the soul, and, most absurd of all, of being inartistic and second-rate poets. Actually, Rossetti's errors, like Swinburne's, had been of taste rather than of feeling. He had very little 'English reserve' in love matters (at least when it came to writing about them), and, as he himself pleaded, it was in emphasising the subservience of the corporal to the spiritual that he had written so frankly in certain sonnets. Nothing daunted, Buchanan reprinted the article in pamphlet form under his own name a year later. He was well known and popular, and his attack had supporters. Rossetti the sensitive, who had staked his reputation and his vanity on the volume, was wounded, and with the same instability that he had shown in 1850, he gave way before the onslaught.

Briefly, he collapsed. His insomnia grew worse, and drove him to chloral, a drug then believed to be harmless. From small doses he passed to incredibly large ones, and he very soon became completely dependent upon it. Here again it is necessary to be cautious in judging him. The drug almost certainly saved his reason in the first place; later it secured him just enough sleep by night to enable him to work by day. It is necessary to read an account of his life between 1867 and 1870 to realise what insomnia was doing for him. Chloral may have made his last years a tragedy; but it enabled him to give to the world paintings and poems as important as *Proserpine*, and *The King's Tragedy*.

But for a time there was no question of work. His brother, calling on him at Chelsea, found him, to his distress and amazement, 'past question not entirely sane.' He attempted suicide, he imagined the world against him in an organised conspiracy, he fancied he detected insults

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from the best of his friends. Eventually he was got to Scotland where, under careful guidance, he gradually recovered and began spasmodically to work again.

But the end was not far. For two years he lived with the Morrises at Kelmscott, a home of peace and culture among beautiful scenery which he scarcely ever noticed. There he painted *Dante's Dream*, one of his most popular pictures, and wrote some fine sonnets. He left Kelmscott, characteristically because he thought some anglers had intentionally insulted him, and returned to Chelsea. The whole spirit of the house was changed; there were no more parties, most of his friends having been alienated by his suspicions and accusations; the famous blue china was sold; there were no more animals. For two years he lived in comparative seclusion, attended devotedly by Watts-Dunton, visited regularly by his brother, painting occasional replicas of his most famous pictures for immediate sale. Another breakdown was followed by a new spasm of work, and about 1879 he made the acquaintance of Mr (later Sir) Hall Caine. In 1881 the latter came to live in his house and tended him to the end with great patience and kindness. The same year a new volume of poems was published and favourably received. But Rossetti was too far gone in his depression and melancholia to care for appreciation. He was seized with a fit while staying at Birchington-on-Sea, and died there on Easter Day, 1882.

His character represents a confusing array of contradictions. Benson (*Rossetti*: *English Men of Letters* Series) summed it up thus: "Such then was Rossetti: mystical, full of passion, haunted by the sense of beauty, with an intense need of loving and being loved; dominant, fiery, genial, robust; with a narrow outlook, and yet with a keen intellectual power; capable, generous, lavish, humorous; a natural leader of men, self-centred, unbalanced; with

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no touch of tranquillity about him, but eager, ardent, impatient." This would seem to say everything, and yet there are a few aspects that are somehow excluded.

He stays with a friend of W. B. Scott's, a kind old lady, not wealthy, in Scotland; she offers to lend him money, but he refuses, and tells Scott that he has refused; and yet at her death it is found that he has received at least £100 from her. Again, when the Morris decorating firm is being re-organised, and the original share-holders are being asked to renounce their interests, Rossetti affects complete indifference to his share of the capital; but he accepts it, to put it away for the ultimate benefit of one of the Morris family—and after his death it is discovered that he had made considerable inroads upon it! Or again, he is painting a calf at Finchley and cannot, or will not, afford the daily 'bus-fare; so he billets himself upon Madox Brown, who is poor, sleeps in the parlour until noon every day, wears Brown's great-coat incessantly whether Brown wants it or not, and, when delicately asked to go because Mrs Brown is ill, flatly refuses. He engages an assistant, Treffry Dunn, to mix his colours and prepare his canvases, and to this day it is not certain how much of the 'replica work' attributed to him is by the master, and how much by the servant. He is, at the best, inconsiderate to his wife who, feeble already, is (even Benson admits) wounded by his unfeeling conduct. In a tea-shop he loosens the hair of a country-girl, a stranger, because he wants to see what it looks like hanging down....

And yet he was loved, as well as admired, by everyone who knew him. Madox Brown wrote, when Rossetti had been trying to sell a picture for him, "never did fellow, I think, so bestir himself for a rival before; it is very good and very great to act so." Later in life, when Rossetti was in frequent ill-health, his friends' devotion was amazing.

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They would meet and make plans for him, dividing the days and nights into periods for watching by him, giving up time and money and work to nurse him or to conduct him down to the country, knowing all the while that their reward would be groans and suspicions. No man inspires such devotion who has not more in him of good than of evil. In his youth he had possessed a large wholesome sense of fun, and even in his darker days it sometimes shone through. His talk was pointed and terse, seldom malicious. Always he was thoughtful and sympathetic for his friends, almost at the same time as he was imposing on them—just as he would borrow from one to lend to another, or draw upon a fund set aside for jewellery for his wife in order to help a widow and her children. It is easy, but unjust, to say briefly a "cad." Perhaps the best decision that can be based on the accounts of him which we possess is that he was morally unstable, full of good impulses that soon wore themselves out, easily discouraged, seeking too often the line of least resistance.

We shall look in vain among his works for 'nature' poems on the Wordsworth or Tennyson model, for classical excursions like Swinburne's *Atalanta*, for spontaneous personal lyrics like Shelley's. We shall find everywhere a keen sense of detail—not apparently relevant, and yet helping to build up an impression, just as little pieces of bric-a-brac appear time and again in his paintings. We shall find, too, a love of colour, of bright words and luminous pictures; a sense, also, of futility, of waste and despondency in all things, beauty squandered. Occasionally we shall meet that sudden enlightening phrase, or line, or inspiration that catches us up and brings us to a standstill before the thought, 'this is genius!' There is one such in *Jenny*:

> You know not what a book you seem,
> Half-read by lightning in a dream;

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