

SOME REMINISCENCES OF WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

XIX

MY LITERARY WORK, 1858 TO 1867

IN 1858 the editor and founder of *The Spectator*, Mr. Rintoul, was getting advanced in years, and was declining in health. He sold the property to a new editor, a Mr. Scott, and retired from the concern. I continued under Mr. Scott to be the art-critic of the paper, and got on very well with him, though I had felt more drawn to Mr. Rintoul. The only persons that I remember meeting through the agency of Mr. Scott were Mr. Andrew McCallum, the landscape-painter, and his first wife. Mrs. McCallum was a beautiful woman, having some fortune in her own right. She was not of the stately order of beauty, but had a face both fine and charming, and large eyes of surprising lustre. She was one of the not quite innumerable persons who, perusing Dante Rossetti's old prose-tale *Hand and Soul* (in *The Germ*) had supposed it to be a narrative of actual facts, and had made research in the Pitti Gallery for the picture, *Manus animam pinxit*, by Chiaro dell' Erma. She had to retire baffled, and I conjecture that she may have left behind her the name

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of “*la bella inglese*” who asked some unintelligible questions.

Mr. Scott retired from *The Spectator* at the close of 1858, and another editor succeeded. For a reason which I need not here detail (not anything in the nature of a personal dispute) I was somewhat reluctant to act under the new editor, and I of my own accord relinquished my position, and have never since been a contributor to *The Spectator*. I had done my work there with some resoluteness, and between November 1850 and December 1858 I had lived to see the virulent invectives against the Præraphaelite painters and their movement change into very general (though certainly not universal) recognition, and in many quarters energetic eulogy. Possibly the eulogy was every now and then not much more intelligent than the preceding abuse. This change was of course due to the merits of the artists themselves; for my own small part, I will only claim to have “stuck to my guns.” I did so without—so far as I observed—exciting any animosity among hostile artists or hostile critics. It is curious how long a tradition can persist in matters of this kind. At intervals since I left *The Spectator*—and one of the instances may have been some twenty years beyond that date—I have heard fine-art articles in this paper attributed to my hand, owing not to any conformity in the opinions expressed, but simply to the fact that I had at one time been known to be the art-critic, and the persons concerned had not happened to learn that I had ceased to be so. This experience has always rendered me rather chary in ascribing particular unsigned articles to particular writers. There may be a reasonable presumption, but not a certainty which one can securely

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act upon. I have known another rather salient instance of the like kind. In 1873 Oliver Madox Brown published his first novel, *Gabriel Denver*. It was reviewed in *The Athenæum* with some degree of asperity. Oliver Brown and his family were led to think that Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson was the reviewer; they were more than sufficiently ready to believe that such and such persons were "enemies," and for some years Mr. Jeaffreson passed with them as an enemy. And yet the assumption was totally mistaken; Jeaffreson had nothing whatever to do with the review.

In the last year of my *Spectator* work, 1858, I was the art-critic of *The Saturday Review* likewise. This connexion lasted only one season, for the proprietor of *The Saturday*, Mr. Beresford Hope, was decidedly adverse to Præraphaëlitism, while I had been championing its cause. The founder of *The Saturday Review*, Mr. Douglas Cook, continued to be its editor in 1858; a tall man of middle age, with a very red smooth face, not of the literary type.

Between 1861 and 1864, under the editorship of Mr. Froude, I wrote various articles in *Fraser's Magazine* upon aspects of fine art, in immediate relation to the annual exhibitions; and towards 1862 I was the art-critic of *The London Review*, a paper, edited by Mr. Patrick Comyn, upon much the same plan as *The Saturday*. I found Mr. Froude personally very agreeable, but my acquaintance with him was slight. About 1864 Mr. Benjamin B. Woodward, the Queen's Librarian at Windsor Castle, founded *The Fine Arts Quarterly Review*, and he got me to write a quarterly summary of fine arts news, and one or two articles of a more individual kind. This review had some support in high

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quarters ; but it did not seem to take any root with the public, and its life was short. The same was the case with *The Chronicle*, a paper which, beginning in March 1867, lasted barely a year. The editor was Mr. Wetherall, a very courteous and high-minded gentleman, a Roman Catholic ; the paper, a weekly, was not exclusively or directly a religious organ, but it was planned with a view to giving expression to the opinions, on all sorts of subjects, of the more liberal and advanced section of Catholics. Lord Acton is stated to have been the proprietor. I, it was well understood, was not a Catholic ; but I was left free to say what I liked, short of coming into absolute collision with Catholic tenets. In *The Chronicle* I for the first time expressed my critical opinion concerning Walt Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*. This article of mine had a sequel, of which anon.

When in 1867 I published, under the title, *Fine Art, chiefly Contemporary*, a volume reproducing several of my papers collected out of various periodicals, I drew not only upon sources heretofore mentioned, but also upon *The Edinburgh Weekly Review*, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Liverpool Post*, and *Weldon's Register*. I need not however burden the reader's attention with any details regarding my connexion with these four serials. That phrase in my title, "chiefly contemporary," indicates one of the too numerous deficiencies in my writings on fine art. I have very generally been concerned with the works of living artists, and even these more as displayed from year to year in exhibitions than as representing the sum of their performance. To write on a tolerably adequate scale respecting the great art of the past, or even respecting the entire career of important

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masters of our own time, has been my lot hardly if at all.

There was another publication in which I, and also Christina, wrote a good number of articles more or less short—perhaps a full hundred in all. It was entitled *The Imperial Dictionary of Biography*, brought out by subscription in Glasgow from 1857 to 1863, and edited by Dr. Waller. My concern with this publication may have been towards 1859–60. My articles were on Italian personages of various kinds—literary, artistic, political, etc. Another production of mine—about the only one in which I have dealt at some little length with a subject unrelated to literature or art—was an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, towards 1865, on *English Opinion on the American War* (the war of Secession). It affirmed my strong sympathy with the cause of the Northern States, and analysed the marked bias which had been evinced by English society in the opposite direction. This article, as I was pleased to learn, was well received in America.

In all this sequence of years—beginning may-be in 1855—I did a large amount of work for the Philological Society, which had started the project of a new English Dictionary on a more extensive and systematic plan than anything as yet extant. This project ultimately developed into the monumental work which is now coming out through the Clarendon Press, under the editorship of Dr. J. A. H. Murray. The Philological Society invited various persons to undertake the reading of books of all dates, and of very diverse degrees of literary importance, and to make extracts therefrom, suitable to be used as quotations in the projected dictionary. I came into relation with Mr. Herbert Coleridge, who was

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acting as editor for this preliminary work, and with Dr. Furnivall, Secretary of the Society. I read a great number of books, making—or sometimes only marking—extracts for quotation; I dare say the books may have exceeded a hundred, and some of them big affairs, such as all the dramas of Massinger. I also did some sub-editing work, which probably, in the long run, counted for next to nothing. My busiest time with the dictionary business may have lasted up to 1865 or thereabouts; it has occasionally been renewed since then, and something of it was going on as late as 1900.

It has befallen me to do a good deal with William Blake at one time or another, and in one or other form. I could not define when I first heard about this potent inventor in art and poetry, whose death, 1827, preceded my birth by only two years. My first informant concerning him must, as in so many other cases, have been my brother, at some such date as 1846. He may or may not have known a few of Blake's poems and designs before reading the graphic and diverting account of him given by Allan Cunningham—a writer many of whose lyrics and legendary tales (besides *Sir Hugh the Heron*, versified by Dante Gabriel in boyhood) were favourites with us at a very early age. Anyhow, after reading Cunningham's memoir, our attention was fixed upon Blake, and we began looking out for his work whenever we could. In April 1847 a notebook full of Blake's verse and prose, published and unpublished, and of his designs mostly unengraved, was offered to my brother at the British Museum by an attendant named Palmer (some relative of Samuel Palmer, the water-colour landscape-painter, friend of Blake in his latest years); the price

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*To his sister Christina
from The Author*

SIR HUGH THE HERON.

A LEGENDARY TALE,

IN FOUR PARTS.

BY GABRIEL ROSSETTI, JUNIOR.

SIR HUGH THE HERON BOLD,
BARON OF TWISELL AND OF FORD,
AND CAPTAIN OF THE HOLD.
Scott's Marmion, Canto 1.

LONDON: MDCCCXLIII.
G. POLDORI'S Private Press,
15, Park Village East, Regent's Park.

(For Private Circulation only.)

THE FIRST BOOK ISSUED BY GABRIEL ROSSETTI AGED 15.

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was ten shillings. I have given some details of this matter in my *Memoir of Dante Rossetti*, and shall abridge them here. Dante Gabriel did not possess (and in those days he seldom did possess) the ten shillings; but I luckily did, and I produced it. And so this exceedingly choice relic became ours. At my brother's death in 1882 its commercial value was very different from what it had been in 1847: the volume sold for £110. 5s., and even so it was, I apprehend, a cheap lot to its purchaser Mr. F. S. Ellis, who, after a rather long interval, re-sold it to Mr. W. A. White, of Brooklyn, United States. This purchase by Mr. Ellis took place at the sale of my brother's effects in July 1882, not very long before the buyer retired from the bookselling and (in a limited degree) the publishing business. He had been my brother's publisher, and they were warm personal friends as well, and I take this opportunity of saying that a more likeable, straightforward, and liberal man than Mr. Ellis has hardly come within my cognizance. He had besides a very good literary turn of his own, as sufficiently attested by his verse-translations of *Reynard the Fox* and *The Romaunt of the Rose*. I truly regretted the death of this estimable man in 1901.

Another Blake acquisition of my brother's—at a rather later date, when he had in his own pocket the small sum needed as purchase-money—was the rare pamphlet bearing the following long title: *A Treatise on Zodiacal Physiognomy, illustrated by Engravings of Heads and Features, and accompanied by Tables of the Time of rising of the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac, and containing also new and Astrological Explanations of some remarkable Portions of Ancient Mythological History: by John Varley. Longman and Co., 1828.* This contains several curious engravings

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with which Blake had to do, especially his “Ghost of a Flea.” In connexion with this pamphlet I became the butt of some good-humoured but pointed raillery from my brother, and also from Alexander Gilchrist ; for it was my ill fortune (the pamphlet, like all other books in those days, being counted as the joint property of Dante and myself) to put it up with some other brochures etc. to be bound ; and the ruthless binder, contrary to any anticipation of mine, cut horribly into the margins, and interfered with the engravings themselves to some minor extent. For some years I felt a little sheepish, and probably looked so, when *Varley’s Zodiacal Physiognomy* was mentioned by Dante Gabriel or in his presence.

I gather that the active interest which Alexander Gilchrist took in Blake’s works and career, and his preparations for becoming his biographer, began towards 1856 ; his work as a press-reviewer of fine art, in *The Literary Gazette* and *The Critic*, towards 1858. His *Life of Etty* had come out in 1855, and I had then reviewed it in *The Spectator*. What may have been the precise beginning of our personal knowledge of Gilchrist I no longer remember. It seems likely that some one—as for instance Bell Scott—told him that my brother possessed that MS. book of Blake’s, and that Gilchrist thereupon, in or about 1859, sought out Dante Rossetti, applying for leave to inspect the volume. At any rate, my brother lent him that book, and got me to produce the *Zodiacal Physiognomy* for the like purpose. Dante took a more than usual fancy to Gilchrist, thinking very well of him as an art-critic, sympathizing with his enthusiasm for Blake, and enjoying his company and conversation. I myself may have met Gilchrist some