

CHAPTER XXVIII

“THREE SILENCES”

I HAVE said in another lecture that Swinburne and Rossetti had no imitators of any worth to literature. Nevertheless it sometimes happens that a new poet, although not imitating his predecessors, may so represent in his verse a blending of the best qualities of some of them, that we must say, this man's work was developed by the study of such and such singers. We say that Tennyson is the poetical descendant of Keats, but we never could say that Tennyson imitated Keats. You will now understand exactly what I mean when I say that Arthur O'Shaughnessy, the author of the poem entitled “Three Silences,” is the descendant both of Swinburne and of Rossetti. He has united some of the best qualities of both—of Swinburne as to form and as to colour, of Rossetti as to feeling. This poem shows his relation to Swinburne and Rossetti, more especially to Rossetti. The feeling borders upon mystical tenderness, but you will discern in it the melancholy doubt of the nineteenth century. Perhaps this only adds to its sweetness.

We may suppose that the poet is referring to the three great sorrows of human existence. The first great sorrow might be, for example, the death of one's mother—a shock of pain which the child cannot even fully understand as a fact. If he asks the meaning of it, really no one can tell him; and the tender things that are told him in order to console him, do not in the least illuminate for him the awful mystery of the fact.

The next great sorrow might be the death of the woman he loved. As Huxley says, the man who stands with his dead before the abyss of the eternal, has questions to ask.

Some of them he asks his own heart, some of them he asks the dead—but there is no answer. The second shock of death finds him very much wiser and stronger than he was when a child, yet the mystery is not any nearer to solution for him; it is even further away.

Later come other surprises of pain—doubts of humanity, doubts of the worth of life, doubts of everything; and, in the moment of some great sorrow, one turns back to the habit of childhood, to the resource of prayer. And there is no answer.

We can suppose these to be the Three Silences. Nevertheless this is not a philosophical poem but a love poem. It is in a moment of disappointed affection, in the moment of a fourth silence, that the poet remembers the other three periods of pain. This is what gives the poem its extraordinary qualities of melancholy and tenderness.

'Tis a world of silences. I gave a cry
 In the first sorrow my heart could not withstand;
 I saw men pause, and listen, and look sad,
 As though an answer in their hearts they had;
 Some turn'd away, some came and took my hand,
 For all reply.

I stood beside a grave. Years had pass'd by;
 Sick with unanswer'd life I turn'd to death,
 And whisper'd all my question to the grave,
 And watch'd the flowers desolately wave,
 And the grass stir on it with a fitful breath,
 For all reply.

I raised my eyes to heaven; my prayer went high
 Into the luminous mystery of the blue;
 My thought of God was purer than a flame,
 And God it seem'd a little nearer came,
 Then pass'd; and greater still the silence grew,
 For all reply.

—But you! If I can speak before I die,
 I spoke to you with all my soul, and when

I look at you 'tis still my soul you see.
Oh, in your heart was there no word for me?
All would have answer'd had you answer'd then
With even a sigh.

The last line but one is the most beautiful in the whole poem. Love casts out sorrow and fear and doubt in the first moment of its ecstasy; the lover says that had she answered, the grave and the heaven and God himself would have answered at the same time, because in perfect happiness there is no doubt and no fear and no regret. You will observe that this approaches to the tone of Rossetti, and that there is nevertheless within it a something which is not of Rossetti, something sweeter and simpler, and in spite of this simplicity, equally artistic.