

CHAPTER XXXVII

TWO MYSTICAL ROSE POEMS

NOT only because certain flower poems have great symbolic value in the literature of the past, both religious and profane, but also because at the present time a great deal of this kind of poetry is being produced, I think it will do well to give you one or two examples. The examples are of the highest class: they are also decidedly difficult. But you know that *the rule in mystical poetry is suggestiveness*. The object is to leave the thought or image sufficiently vague to set curiosity and wonder on the path of inquiry. What does it mean?—that is the question to which the author wants the reader to find out an answer for himself.

Now if we can take two different meanings or more out of the poem, so much the better. If we can never be quite sure about the whole, but only about a part, then again the result may be, from a poetical point of view, very good—because the imagination always remains unsatisfied. The latter variety of poems is the best exemplified, I think, by Browning's "Women and Roses." In other cases I usually give the poem first and then the explanation. But in this case I think it is better to give the explanation first—so far as it can be given.

The poet describes a dream; and the whole impossible, but beautiful imagery remains dreamlike, vague, shifting. He dreams of a rose tree, with three beautiful roses upon it. These roses are not in a line upon the tree, but one above another. The lowermost is faded and dead; the next is beautiful, full and fresh. The uppermost is in the bud stage.—Perhaps *this tree means the tree of life*, a kind of Yggdrasil; but one cannot be sure.

Round the tree, round the flowers, swims and hovers a shining circle of beautiful shapes—shapes of women. It is an immense circle, containing numberless shapes—like those great circlings of ghosts that you see in Doré's pictures of Dante's "Inferno."

Looking at these figures, the poet recognizes at least their signification. These shapes of women are the shapes of all the women that ever have been famous for beauty and charm—all the great women of the past;—followed by all the wonderful women of the present;—together with all the women of the future—all beautiful women not yet born. First, by and by the figures of the past; then the present, then the future. And the poet asks himself which shall he prefer.

The poem is divided into three parts—each describing one of the three roses, and the effect produced upon the gazer by the phantoms circling about that particular rose.

The question of the poem is not answered—perhaps it could not be answered. Perhaps that is the very reason why the poem haunts us so much. I imagine that the poem is intended especially to suggest the eternal charm of beauty;—but there are many kinds of beauty described or suggested moral as well as physical. *The reader, of course, has to ask the question whether it is really possible for us to prefer the best things of one age or period, to the best of another.* And the answer must be NO. The best of the past, moral and physical, was the best product that could have existed in the past; *it was suited to that age, not to any other.* So with the present. The moral value with the present as well as the beauty with the present depend upon present relation—upon the adaptability of each to each. Finally, we are never tired of reading and thinking and dreaming about the florid humanity that is to be—the men and women, of millions to come, as Tennyson would say, who are to be so much wiser and fairer than any of those who lived before them. But if such beings existed to-day, by some miracle—if it were possible to behold, in our own time, creatures

represented as perfected humanity, we should find ourselves unable to appreciate them. They would not be adapted to present conditions;—they would not be suited to the world as it now is. Certainly this poem gives us a great many things to think about.

WOMEN AND ROSES

I

I dream of a red-rose tree.
And which of its roses three
Is the dearest rose to me?

II

Round and round, like a dance of snow
In a dazzling drift, as its guardians, go
Floating the women faded for ages,
Sculptured in stone, on the poet's pages.
Then follow women fresh and gay,
Living and loving and loved to-day,
Last, in the rear, flee the multitude of maidens,
Beauties unborn. And all, to one cadence,
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

III

Dear rose, thy term is reached,
Thy leaf hangs loose and bleached:
Bees pass it unimpeached.

IV

Stay then, stoop, since I cannot climb,
You, great shapes of the antique time!
How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you,
Break my heart at your feet to please you?
Oh, to possess and be possessed!
Hearts that beat 'neath each pallid breast!
But once of love, the poesy, the passion,
Drink once and die!—In vain, the same fashion.
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

The first part is very plain, needs no explanation or

commentary. But the last stanzas need interpretation: The difficulty really begins at the fourth and this difficulty is altogether owing to Browning's extraordinary composition of style, in which verbs, prepositions, and nouns are suppressed at will, and in which a single word is often made to convey the meaning of half a dozen.

The three lines describing the rose refer to the beauty of the past, as expressed by that symbol. By "term" means the blossoming term;—and the word "unimpeached" refers to "it" (the flower), not to the bees. Here the word "unimpeached" means unchallenged, therefore unvisited.

But the hard part begins, in the third line of number four. The poet cries out to the shapes of the beautiful women of dead Greece and Rome, the women of the ancient poets. "How can I *fix* you, *fire* you, *freeze* you?" What does he mean? He is simply making use of a sculptor's technical language. "To fix" in the artistic sense means to embody by means of a statue or engraving or other work of art. The verb "to fire" refers to the firing of a figure in clay. The *clay* must be fired to make it hard;—the bronze or gold must be melted by fire to make the statue. "Freeze" is a term of which poets are very fond—using it in such expressions as, to freeze in stone, as water takes shape only when turned into ice, so the ideal of the artist takes shape only when it is, poetically speaking, congealed or frozen into stone of the substance of the statue. So the line simply means "O that I had power to represent you through the medium of art!" But he wishes for more than that in the next line. It is the wish of force for element—the longing of the artist for a miracle that would give you back the beauty that vanished thousands of years ago. The fifth line is very much compressed: the thought is "Oh were it possible for human hearts to beat within those beautiful bosoms of stone!" And that is the wish of Pygmalion, the old Greek sculptor who made the statue of a woman so beautiful, that he himself fell in love with it, and prayed the gods to make it alive, which the gods did. There was always something unhappy, however, as a consequence of

these miracles: suppose, then, that the poet could have his wish—would it not mean misfortune or death? What matter? he cries, such love would be cheap at the cost of life. However, he speaks to the past in vain: the ghost does not come back;—the spirits circling around the tree will not visit him. And he turns to the rose of the present:

V

Dear rose, thy joy 's undimmed;
Thy cup is ruby-rimmed,
Thy cup's heart nectar-brimmed.

VI

Deep as drops from a statue's plinth
The bee sucked in by the hyacinth,
So will I bury me while burning,
Quench like him at a plunge my yearning,
Eyes in your eyes, lips on your lips!

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Girdle me once! But no—in their old measure
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

The rose of the present is fair. If the past is out of reach, shall we not prefer the present? Can not one plunge to love, real love, as a bee plunges into a flower? Will not it be possible, through union with the living woman to satiate the longing for the ideal woman—can not the illusion of the impossible be broken? No,—beauty is something that charms beyond all that is possible: the ideal in itself is divine,—is something above all passion,—is something above all self. The shapes of the present pay no more attention to the prayers of the dream than did the ghost of the past. Neither does he know which to admire most.

And he turns to the rose of the future:

VII

Dear rose without a thorn,
Thy bud 's the babe unborn:
First streak of a new morn.

VIII

Wings, lend wings for the cold, the clear!
 What 's far conquers what is near.
 Roses will bloom nor want beholders,
 Sprung from the dust where our own flesh moulders
 What shall arrive with the cycle's change?
 A novel grace and a beauty strange.
 I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her,
 Shaped her to his mind!—Alas! in like manner
 They circle their rose on my rose tree.

Here the language is not difficult. But the thought is. When we think of the beauty that is to be there is nothing to appeal to our senses—nothing that belongs to our experience. We can imagine only a moral beauty—cold and clear. When the poet says “Lend me wings for the cold and clear” he is using the very old simile for the zone of intellectual and moral beauty. As we mount higher in the moral and intellectual atmosphere the colder it becomes—i.e., there is less and less of the sensuous in our nature: just as when ascending a mountain or rising in a balloon the air becomes clearer and colder. *So the suggestion is that the ideal of the future is higher than anything in the present or the past. But after all the future is just as unattainable as is the past.* The spirits of the future pay no heed to the poet—and continue their fairy dance.

You must try to remember that the three little pictures above given only represent three ideals in the poet's mind—first, the ideal charm of the past, the romance of the artist;—secondly, the ideal of the present, the ideal woman whom every young man wishes for but never finds—the woman never to be known, as the French poet Baudelaire called her;—thirdly the unattainable ideal of future perfection—what we can only dream about but never really conceive. All ideals are unattainable, because they represent the impossible. And it is by wishing for impossible things that we really climb to higher things. It is a very hard poem; but it makes us think a good deal; and there is the value of it.

Now for something much simpler, though deep enough in another way. It is called—"The Rose of the World."

THE ROSE OF THE WORLD

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
For these red lips with all their mournful pride,
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
And Usna's children died.

We and the laboring world are passing by:—
Amid men's souls that day by day gives place,
More fleeting than the sea's foam-fickle face,
Under the passing star, foam of the sky,
Lives on this lonely face.

Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
Before ye were or any hearts to beat,
Weary and kind, one stood beside His seat;
He made the world, to be a grassy road
Before her wandering feet.

W. Yeats

The allusions in the first stanza are to Helen of Troy and to a famous heroine of Celtic legend Deirdre; but these allusions only refer to the power exerted by the ideal of beauty in human history. *The Rose of the World simply means Ideal Beauty.* Think how many changes have occurred, the poet says, since the time of Helen of Troy—yet in the imaginations of all men the shadow of that face remains. In the last stanza we are told that highest beauty existed even before the universe existed. Ideal Beauty was really made by God and the world was created only for beauty's sake. This poem has also the value of suggestiveness.