# CHAPTER XXXIII

## NOTE UPON ROSSETTI'S PROSE

As we are now studying Rossetti's poetry in other hours, you may be interested in some discussion of the merits of his prose—for this is still, so far as the great public are concerned, almost an unknown topic. The best of the painters of his own school, and the most delicate poet of the Victorian period, Rossetti might also have become one of the greatest prose writers of the century if he had seriously turned to prose. But ill-health and other circumstances prevented him from doing much in this direction. What he did do, however, is so remarkable that it deserves to be very carefully studied. I do not refer to his critical essays. These are not very remarkable. I refer only to his stories; and his stories are great because they happen to have exactly the same kind of merit that distinguishes his poetry. They might be compared with the stories of Poe; and yet they are entirely different, with the difference distinguishing all Latin prose fiction from English fiction. But there is certainly no other story-writer, except Poe, with whose work that of Rossetti can be at all classed. They are ghostly stories—one of them a fragment, the other complete. Only two—and the outline of the third. The fragment is not less worthy of attention because it happens to be a fragment—like the poet's own "Bride's Prelude," or Coleridge's "Christabel," or Poe's "Silence." The trouble with all great fragments, and the proof of their greatness, is that we cannot imagine what the real ending would have been; and this puzzle only lends additional charm to the imaginative effect. Of the two consecutive stories, it is the fragment which has the greater merit.

The first story, called "Hand and Soul," has another interest besides the interest of narrative. It contains the whole æsthetic creed of Rossetti's school of painting, — a little philosophy of art that is well worth studying. That is especially why I want to talk about it. The so-called Pre-Raphaelite school of English painting, whereof Rossetti was the recognized chief, were not altogether disciples of Ruskin. They did not believe that art must have a religious impulse in order to be great art; and they did not exactly support the antagonistic doctrine of "Art for Art's sake." They considered that absolute sincerity in one's own conception of the beautiful, and wide toleration of all æsthetic ideas, were axiomatic truths which it was necessary to accept without reserve. They had no detestation for any school of art; they practically banished prejudice from their little circle. I may add that they were not indifferent to Japanese art, even at a time when it found many enemies in London, and when the great Ruskin himself endeavoured to help the prejudice against it. In that very time Rossetti was making Japanese collections, and Burne-Jones and others were discovering new methods by the help of this Eastern art.

Now the story of "Hand and Soul" is, in a small way, a history of man's experience with Painting. It is supposed to be the story of a real picture. The picture is only the figure of a woman in a grey and green dress, very beautiful. But whoever looks at that picture for a minute or two, suddenly becomes afraid — afraid in exactly the same way that he would be on seeing a ghost. The picture could not have been painted from imagination; that figure must have been seen by somebody; and yet it could not have been a living woman! Then what could have been the real story of that picture? Did the artist see a ghost; or did he see something supernatural?

The answer to these questions is the following story. The artist who painted that picture, four hundred years ago, was a young Italian of immense genius, so passionately devoted to his art that he lived for nothing else. At first

he wished only to be the greatest painter of his time; and that he became without much difficulty. He painted only what he thought beautiful; and he painted beautiful faces that he saw passing by in the street, and beautiful sunsets that he saw from his window, and beautiful fancies that came into his mind. Everybody loved his pictures; and princes made him great gifts of money.

Then a sudden remorse came to this painter, who was at heart a religious man. He said to himself: "Here, God has given me the power to paint beautiful things; and I have been painting only those beautiful things which please the senses of men. Therefore I have been doing wrong. Henceforward I will paint only things which represent eternal truth, the things of Heaven."

After that he began to paint only religious and mystical pictures, and pictures which common people could not understand at all. The people no longer came to admire his work; the princes no longer paid him honour or brought him gifts; and he became as one forgotten in the world.

Moreover, he found himself losing his power as an artist. And then, to crown all his misfortunes, some of his most famous pictures were ruined one day by the extraordinary incident of a church fight; for two great Italian clans between whom a feud existed, happened to meet in the church porch, and a blow was struck and swords were drawn — and there was such killing that the blood of the fighters was splashed upon the paintings on the wall.

When all these things had happened, the artist despaired. He became weary of life, and thought of destroying himself. And while he was thus thinking, there suddenly entered his room, without any sound, the figure of a woman robed in green and grey; and she stood before him and looked into his eyes. And as she looked into his eyes, an awe came upon him such as he had never before known; and a great feeling of sadness also came with the awe. But he could not speak, any more than a person in a dream, who wants to cry out, and cannot make a sound. But the

woman spoke and said to him, "I am your own soul—that soul to whom you have done so much wrong. And I have been allowed to come to you in this form, only because you have never been of those men who make art merely to win money. To win fame, however, you did not scruple; and that was not altogether good, although it was not altogether bad. What was much worse was the pride which turned you away from me — religious pride. You wanted to do what God did not ask you to do—to work against your own soul, and to cast away your love of beauty. Into me God placed the desire of loveliness and the bliss of the charm of the world. Wherefore then should you strive against His work? And what pride impelled you to imagine that heaven needed the help of your art to teach men what is good? When did God say to you, Friend, let me lean upon you, or I shall fall down? No; it is by teaching men to seek and to love the beautiful things in this beautiful world that you make their hearts better within them — never by preaching to them with allegories that they cannot understand; and because you have done this, you have been punished. Be true to me, your own very soul; then you will do marvellous things. Now paint a picture of me, just as I am, so that you may know that your power of art is given back to you."

So the artist painted a picture of his own soul in the likeness of a woman clad in green and grey; and all who see that picture even to-day feel at once a great fear and a great charm, and find it hard to understand how mortal men could have painted it.

That is the story of "Hand and Soul"; and it teaches a great deal of everlasting truth. Assuredly the road to all artistic greatness is the road of sincerity — truth to one's own emotional sense of what is beautiful. And just to that degree in which the artist or poet allows himself to be made insincere, either by desire of wealth and fame, or by religious scruples, just to that extent he must fail. I have only given a very slight outline of the tale; to give more might be to spoil your pleasure of reading it.

The second story will not seem to you quite so original as the first, though, to English minds, it probably seems stranger. It is a story of pre-existence. Now, a very curious fact is that this idea of pre-existence, expressed by Rossetti in many passages of his verse, as well as in his prose story, did not come to him from Eastern sources at all. He never cared for, and perhaps never read, any Oriental literature. His idea regarding re-birth and the memory of past lives belongs rather to certain strangely imaginative works of mediæval literature, than to anything else. Even to himself they appeared novel — something dangerous to talk about. Unless you understand this, you will not be able to account for the curious thrill of terror that runs through "St. Agnes of Intercession." The writer writes as if he were afraid of his own thought.

The story begins with a little bit of autobiography, Rossetti telling about his thoughts as a child, when he played at his father's knee on winter evenings. Of course these memories did not appear as his own; but as those of the painter supposed to tell the story. As a child this painter was very fond of picture books. In the house there was one picture book containing a picture of a saint — St. Agnes — which pleased him in such a way that he could spend hours in contemplating it with delight. But he did not know why. He grew up, was educated, became a man and became a painter; and still he could not forget the charm of the picture that had pleased him when a child. One day a young English girl, a friend of his sister's, comes to the house on a visit. He is greatly startled on seeing her, because her face is exactly like the face of the saint in the picture book. He falls in love with her, and they are engaged to be married. But before that time he paints her portrait, and as her portrait happens to be the best work of the kind that he ever did, he sends it to the Royal Academy to be put on exhibition. Critics greatly praise the picture, but one of them remarks that at Bologna in Italy there is a painting of St. Agnes that very much

resembles it. Upon this he goes to Italy to find the picture, and does find it after a great deal of trouble. It is said to be the work of a certain Angiolieri, who lived some four hundred years ago. Every detail of the face proves to be exactly like that of the living face which he painted in London. Being greatly startled by this discovery, he examines the catalogue of paintings, which he bought at the door, in order to find out whether there is anything else said in it about the model from whom Angiolieri painted that St. Agnes. He cannot find any information about the model; but he finds out that in another part of the building there is a portrait of Angiolieri, painted by himself. I think you know that many famous artists have painted portraits of themselves. Greatly interested, he hurries to where the picture is hanging, and finds, to his amazement, that the portrait of Angiolieri is exactly like himself—the very image of him. Was it then possible that, four hundred years before, he himself might have been Angiolieri, and had painted that picture of St. Agnes?

A fever seizes upon him, one of those fevers only too common in Italy. While he is still under its influence, he dreams a dream. He is in a picture gallery; and on the wall he sees Angiolieri's painting hanging up; and there is a great crowd looking at it. In that crowd he sees his betrothed, leaning upon the arm of another man. Then he feels angrily jealous, and says to the strange man, tapping him on the shoulder, "Sir, I am engaged to that lady!" Then the man turns round; and as he turns round, his face proves to be the face of Angiolieri, and his dress is the costume of four hundred years ago, and he says, "She is not mine, good friend — but neither is she thine." As he speaks his face falls in, like the face of a dead man, and becomes the face of a skull. From this dream we can guess the conclusion which the author intended.

On returning to England, when the painter attempted to speak of what he had seen and learned, his family believed him insane, and forbade him to speak on the subject

any more. Also he was warned that should he speak of it to his betrothed, the marriage would be broken off. Accordingly, though he obeys, he is placed in a very unhappy position. All about him there is the oppression of a mystery involving two lives; and he cannot even try to solve it—cannot speak about it to the person whom it most directly concerns. . . . And here the fragment breaks.

If this admirable story had been finished, the result could not have been more impressive than is this sudden interruption. We know that Rossetti intended to make the betrothed girl also the victim of a mysterious destiny; but he did not intend, it appears, to elucidate the reason of the thing in detail. That would have indeed destroyed the shadowy charm of the recital. While the causes of things remain vague and mysterious, the pleasurable fear of the unknown remains with the reader. But if you try to account for everything, at once the illusion vanishes, and the art becomes dead. It seems to me that Rossetti has given in this unfinished tale a very fine suggestion of what use the old romances still are. It was by careful study of them, combined with his great knowledge of art, that he was able to produce, both in his poetry and in his prose, the exquisite charm of reality in unreality. Reading either, you have the sensation of actually seeing, touching, feeling, and yet you know that the whole thing is practically impossible. No art of romance can rise higher than this. And speaking of that soul-woman, whose portrait was painted in the former story, reminds me of an incident in Taine's wonderful book "De l'Intelligence," which is *á propos*. It is actually on record that a French artist had the following curious hallucination:

He was ill, from overwork perhaps, and opening his eyes after a feverish sleep, he saw a beautiful lady seated at his bedside, with one hand upon the bed cover, and he said to himself, "This is certainly an illusion caused by my nervous condition. But how beautiful an illusion it is! And how wonderfully luminous and delicate is that hand!

If I dared only put my hand where it is, I wonder what would happen. Probably the whole thing would vanish at once, and I should lose the pleasure of looking at it."

Suddenly, as if answering his thought, a voice as clear as the voice of a bird said to him, "I am not a shadow; and you can take my hand and kiss it if you like." He did lift the lady's hand to his lips and felt it, and then he entered into conversation with her. The conversation continued until interrupted by the entrance of the doctor attending the patient. This is the record of an extraordinary case of double consciousness — the illusion and the reason working together in such harmony that neither in the slightest degree disturbed the other. Rossetti's figures, whether of the Middle Ages or of modern times, seem also like the results of a double consciousness. We can touch them and feel them, although they are ghosts.

As I said before, he might have been one of the greatest of romantic story-tellers had he turned his attention in that direction and kept his health. No better proof of this could be asked for than the printed plans of several stories which he never had time to develop. He collected the material from the study of Old French and Old Italian poets chiefly; but that material, when thrown into the crucible of his imagination, assumed totally novel and strange forms. I may tell you the outline of one story by way of conclusion. It was a beautiful idea; and it is a great regret that it could not have been executed in the author's lifetime:

One day a king and his favourite knight, while hunting in a forest, visited the house of a woodcutter, or something of that kind, to ask for water — both being very thirsty. The water was served to them by a young girl of such extraordinary beauty that both the king and the knight were greatly startled. The knight falls in love with the maid, and afterwards asks the king's leave to woo her. But when he comes to woo, he finds out that the maid has become enamoured of the king, whom she does not know to be the king. She says that, unless she can marry him she will

never become a wife. The king therefore himself goes to her to plead for his friend. "I cannot marry you," he says, "because I am married already. But my friend, who loves you very much, is not married; and if you will wed him I I shall make him a baron and confer upon him the gift of many castles."

The young girl to please the king accepts the knight; a grand wedding takes place at the king's castle; and the knight is made a great noble, and is gifted with many rich estates. Then the king makes this arrangement with the bride: "I will never visit you or allow you to visit me, because we love each other too much. But, once every year, when I go to hunt in the forest with your husband, you shall bring me a cup of water, just as on the first day, when we saw you."

After this the king saw her three times;—that is to say, in three successive years she greeted him with the cup of water when he went hunting. In the fourth year she died, leaving behind her a little daughter.

The sorrowing husband carefully brought up the little girl—or, at least caused her to be carefully brought up; but he never presented her to the king, or spoke of her, because the death of the mother was a subject too painful for either of them to talk about.

But when the girl was sixteen years old, she looked so exactly like her mother, that the father was startled by the resemblance. And he thought, "To-morrow I shall present her to the king." And to his daughter he said, "To-morrow I am going to hunt with the king. When we are on our way home, we shall stop at a little cottage in the wood—the little cottage in which your mother used to live. Do you then wait in the cottage, and when the king comes, bring him a cup of water, just as your mother did."

So next day the king and his baron approached the cottage after their hunt; and the king was greatly astonished and moved by the apparition of a youg girl offering him a cup of water—so strangely did she resemble the girl

whom he had seen in the same place nearly twenty years before. And as he took the cup from her hand, his heart went out toward her, and he asked his companion, "Is this indeed the ghost of her? — or another dear vision?" But before the companion could make any answer—lo! another shadow stood between the king and the girl; and none could have said which was which, so exactly each beautiful face resembled the other — only the second apparition wore peasant's clothes. And she that wore the clothes of a peasant girl kissed the king as he sat upon his horse, and disappeared. And the king immediately, on receiving that kiss and returning it, fell forward and died.

This is a vague, charming romance indeed, for some one to take up and develop. Of course the figure in peasant's clothes is the spirit of the mother of the girl. There are many pretty stories somewhat resembling this in the old Japanese story-books, but none quite the same; and I venture to recommend anybody who understands the literary value of such things to attempt a modified version of Rossetti's outline in Japanese. Some things would, of course, have to be changed; but no small changes would in the least affect the charm of the story as a whole.

In conclusion, I may observe that the object of this little lecture has not been merely to interest you in the prose of Rossetti, but also to quicken your interest in the subject of romance in general. Remember that no matter how learned or how scientific the world may become, romance can never die. No greater mistake could be made by the Japanese student than that of despising the romantic element in the literature of his own country. Recently I have been thinking very often that a great deal might be done toward the development of later literature by remodelling and reanimating the romance of the older centuries. I believe that many young writers think chiefly about the possibility of writing something entirely new. This is a great literary misfortune; for the writing of something entirely new is scarcely possible for any human being. The greatest Western writers have

not become great by trying to write what is new, but by writing over again in a much better way, that which is old. Rossetti and Tennyson and scores of others made the world richer simply by going back to the literature of a thousand years ago, and giving it re-birth. Like everything else, even a good story must die and be reborn hundreds of times before it shows the highest possibilities of beauty. All literary history is a story of re-birth—periods of death and restful forgetfulness alternating with periods of resurrection and activity. In the domain of pure literature nobody need ever be troubled for want of a subject. He has only to look for something which has been dead for a very long time, and to give that body a new soul. In romance it would be absurd to think about despising a subject, because it is unscientific. Science has nothing to do with pure romance or poetry, though it may enrich both. These are emotional flowers; and what we can do for them is only to transplant and cultivate them, much as roses or chrysanthemums are cultivated. The original wild flower is very simple; but the clever gardener can develop the simple blossom into a marvellous compound apparition, displaying ten petals where the original could show but one. Now the same horticultural process can be carried out with any good story or poem or drama in Japan, just as readily as in any other country. The romantic has nothing to gain from the new learning except in the direction of pure art; the new learning, by enriching the language and enlarging the imagination, makes it possible to express the ancient beauty in a new and much more beautiful way. Tennyson might be quoted in illustration. What is the difference between his two or three hundred lines of wondrous poetry entitled "The Passing of Arthur," and the earliest thirteenth or fourteenth century idea of the same mythical event? The facts in either case are the same. But the language and the imagery are a thousand times more forcible and more vivid in the Victorian poet. Indeed, progress in belles-lettres is almost altogether brought about by making old things con-

form to the imagination of succeeding generations; and poesy, like the human race, of which it represents the emotional spirit, must change its dress and the colour of its dress as the world also changes.