CHAPTER II

STUDIES IN ROSSETTI

I

We must rank Dante Gabriel Rossetti as not inferior to Tennyson in workmanship—therefore as occupying the very first rank in nineteenth century poetry. He was not inferior to Tennyson either as a thinker, but his thinking was in totally different directions. He had no sympathy with the ideas of his own century; he lived and thought in the Middle Ages; and while one of our very greatest English poets, he takes a place apart, for he does not reflect the century at all. He had the dramatic gift, but it was a gift in his case much more limited than that of Browning. Altogether we can safely give him a place in the first rank as a maker of poetry, but in all other respects we cannot classify him in any way. He remains a unique figure in the Victorian age, a figure such as may not reappear for hundreds of years to come. It was as if a man of the thirteenth century had been reborn into the nineteenth century, and, in spite of modern culture, had continued to think and to feel very much as men felt and thought in the time of the great Italian poet Dante.

One reason for this extraordinary difference between himself and his contemporaries was that Rossetti was not an Englishman but an Italian by blood, religion, and feeling. In his verse we might expect to find something that we cannot find in any other English poet; and I think that we shall find it. The facts of his life—strange and pathetic—need not occupy us now. You need only remember for the present that he was a great painter before becoming a great poet, and that his painting, like his poetry, was the painting

of another century than his own. Also it will be well to bear in mind that he detested modern science and modern philosophy — which fact makes it all the more remarkable that he uttered some great thoughts quite in harmony with the most profound philosophy of the Orient.

In studying the best of his poetry, it will be well for us to consider it by groups, taking a few specimens from each group as examples of the rest; since we shall not have time to read even a quarter of all his production. Taking the very simplest of his work to begin with, I shall make a selection from what I might call the symbolic group, for want of a better name. I mean those poems which are parables, or symbolic illustrations of deep truths — poems which seem childishly simple, but are nevertheless very deep indeed. We may begin with a little piece called "The Mirror."

She knew it not:—most perfect pain
To learn: this too she knew not. Strife
For me, calm hers, as from the first.
'Twas but another bubble burst
Upon the curdling draught of life,—
My silent patience mine again.

As who, of forms that crowd unknown
Within a distant mirror's shade,
Deems such an one himself, and makes
Some sign; but when the image shakes
No whit, he finds his thought betray'd,
And must seek elsewhere for his own.

So far as the English goes, this verse is plain enough; but unless you have met with the same idea in some other English writer, you will find the meaning very obscure. The poet is speaking of a universal, or almost universal, experience of misplaced love. A man becomes passionately attached to a woman, who treats him with cold indifference. Finally the lover finds out his mistake; the woman that he loved proves not to be what he imagined; she is not worthy

of his love. Then what was he in love with? With a shadow out of his brain, with an imagination or ideal very pure and noble, but only an imagination. Supposing that he was worshipping good qualities in a noble woman, he deceived himself; the woman had no such qualities; they existed only in his fancy. Thus he calls her his mirror, the human being that seemed to be a reflection of all that was good in his own heart. She never knows the truth as to why the man loved her and then ceased to love her; he could not tell her, because it would have been to her "most perfect pain to learn."

A less obscure but equally beautiful symbolism, in another metre, is "The Honeysuckle."

I plucked a honeysuckle where
  The hedge on high is quick with thorn,
  And climbing for the prize, was torn,
And fouled my feet in quag-water;
  And by the thorns and by the wind
  The blossom that I took was thinn'd,
And yet I found it sweet and fair.

Thence to a richer growth I came,
  Where, nursed in mellow intercourse,
  The honeysuckle sprang by scores,
Not harried like my single stem,
  All virgin lamps of scent and dew,
  So from my hand that first I threw,
Yet plucked not any more of them.

It often happens that a young man during his first struggle in life, when all the world seems to be against him, meets with some poor girl who loves him. She is not educated as he has been; she is ignorant of many things, and she has suffered herself a great deal of hardship, so that although beautiful naturally and good-hearted, both her beauty and her temper have been a little spoiled by the troubles of life. The young man whom she loves is obliged to mix with a very poor and vulgar class of people in order

to become intimate with her. There are plenty of rough common men who would like to get that girl; and the young man has a good deal of trouble in winning her away from them. With all her small faults she seems for the time very beautiful to her lover, because he cannot get any finer woman while he remains poor. But presently success comes to him, and he is able to enter a much higher class of society, where he finds scores of beautiful girls, much more accomplished than his poor sweetheart; and he becomes ashamed of her and cruelly abandons her. But he does not marry any of the rich and beautiful women. Perhaps he is tired of women; perhaps his heart has been spoiled. The poet does not tell us why. He simply tells a story of human ingratitude which is as old as the world.

One more simple poem before we take up the larger and more complicated pieces of the group.

THE WOODSPURGE

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:
I had walked on at the wind's will,—
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was,—
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three!

The phenomenon here described by the poet is uncon-

sciously familiar to most of us. Any person who has suffered some very great pain, moral pain, is apt to observe during that instant of suffering things which he never observed before, or to notice details never noticed before in common things. One reason is that at such a time sense-impressions are stimulated to a strange degree by the increase of circulation, while the eyes and ears remain automatically active only. Whoever among you can remember the pain of losing a parent or beloved friend, will probably remember with extraordinary vividness all kinds of little things seen or heard at the time, such as the cry of a bird or a cricket, the sound of the dripping of water, the form of a sunbeam upon a wall, the shapes of shadows in a garden. The personage of this poem often before saw the woodspurge, without noticing anything particular about it; but in a moment of great sorrow observing the plant, he learns for the first time the peculiar form of its flower. In a wonderful novel by Henry Kingsley, called "Ravenshoe," there is a very striking example of the same thing. A cavalry-soldier, waiting in the saddle for the order to charge the enemy, observes on the back of the soldier before him a grease-spot which looks exactly like the map of Sweden, and begins to think that if the outline of Norway were beside it, the upper part of the map would go over the shoulder of the man. This fancy comes to him in a moment when he believes himself going to certain death.

Now we will take a longer poem, very celebrated, entitled "The Cloud Confines."

The day is dark and the night
  To him that would search their heart;
  No lips of cloud that will part
Nor morning song in the light:
  Only, gazing alone,
  To him wild shadows are shown,
  Deep under deep unknown,
And height above unknown height.

Still we say as we go,—
"Strange to think by the way,
Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

The Past is over and fled;
Named new, we name it the old;
Thereof some tale hath been told
But no word comes from the dead;
Whether at all they be,
Or whether as bond or free,
Or whether they too were we,
Or by what spell they have sped.
Still we say as we go,—
"Strange to think by the way,
Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

What of the heart of hate
That beats in thy breast, O Time?—
Red strife from the furthest prime,
And anguish of fierce debate;
War that shatters her slain,
And peace that grinds them as grain,
And eyes fixed ever in vain
On the pitiless eye of Fate.
Still we say as we go,—
"Strange to think by the way,
Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

What of the heart of love
That bleeds in thy breast, O Man?—
Thy kisses snatched 'neath the ban
Of fangs that mock them above;
Thy bells prolonged unto knells,
Thy hope that a breath dispels,
Thy bitter forlorn farewells
And the empty echoes thereof?
Still we say as we go,—
"Strange to think by the way,

Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

The sky leans dumb on the sea,
Aweary with all its wings;
And oh! the song the sea sings
Is dark everlastingly.
Our past is clean forgot,
Our present is and is not,
Our future's a sealed seedplot,
And what betwixt them are we?—
We who say as we go—
"Strange to think by the way,
Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

This dark poetry is very different from the optimism of Tennyson; and we uncomfortably feel it to be much more true. In spite of all its wonderful tenderness and caressing hopefulness, we feel that Tennyson's poetry does not illuminate the sombre problems of life. But Rossetti will not be found to be a pessimist. I shall presently show, by examples, the difference between poetical pessimism and Rossetti's thoughtful melancholy. He is simply communing with us about the mystery of the universe — sadly enough, but always truthfully. We may even suspect a slight mockery in the burthen of his poem:

Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day.

Suppose there is nothing to know? "Very well," the poet would answer, "then we shall know nothing." Although by education and by ancestry a Roman Catholic, Rossetti seems to have had just as little faith as any of his great contemporaries; the artistic and emotional side of Catholicism made strong appeal to his nature as an artist, but so far as personal belief is concerned we may judge him by his own lines:

Would God I knew there were a God to thank
When thanks arise in me!

Nevertheless we have here no preacher of negation, but a sincere doubter. We know nothing of the secret of the universe, the meaning of its joy and pain and impermanency; we do not know anything of the dead; we do not know the meaning of time or space or life. But just for that reason there may be marvellous things to know. The dead do not come back, but we do not know whether they could come back, nor even the real meaning of death. Do we even know, he asks, whether the dead were not ourselves? This thought, like the thought in the poem "Sudden Light," is peculiar to Rossetti. You will find nothing of this thought in any other Victorian poet of great rank — except, indeed, in some of the work of O'Shaughnessy, who is now coming into a place of eminence only second to that of the four great masters.

Besides this remarkable line, which I have asked you to put in italics,* you should remember those two very splendid lines in the third stanza:

War that shatters her slain,
And peace that grinds them as grain.

These have become famous. The suggestion is that peace is more cruel than war. In battle a man is dashed to pieces, and his pain is immediately over. In the competition of civil life, the weak and the stupid, no matter how good or moral they may be, are practically crushed by the machinery of Western civilization, as grain might be crushed in a mill.

In the last stanza of the composition you will doubtless have observed the pathetic reference to the meaning of the song of the sea, mysterious and awful beyond all other sounds of nature. Rossetti has not failed to consider this sound, philosophically and emotionally, in one of his most beautiful poems. And now I want to show you, by illus-

* Stanza ii. line 7.

tration, the difference between a really pessimistic treatment of a subject and Rossetti's treatment of it. Perhaps the very finest example of pessimism in Victorian poetry is a sonnet by Lee-Hamilton, on the subject of a sea-shell. You know that if you take a large sea-shell of a particular form, and hold it close to your ear, you will hear a sound like the sound of the surf, as if the ghost of the sea were in the shell. Nearly all English children have the experience of listening to the sound of the sea in a shell; it startles them at first; but nobody tells them what the sound really is, for that would spoil their surprise and delight. You must not tell a child that there are no ghosts or fairies. Well, Rossetti and Lee-Hamilton wrote about this sound of the sea in a shell — but how differently! Here is Lee-Hamilton's composition:

The hollow sea-shell which for years hath stood
  On dusty shelves, when held against the ear
  Proclaims its stormy parent; and we hear
The faint far murmur of the breaking flood.
We hear the sea. The sea? It is the blood
  In our own veins, impetuous and near,
  And pulses keeping pace with hope and fear,
And with our feelings' ever-shifting mood.

Lo! in my heart I hear, as in a shell,
  The murmur of a world beyond the grave,
    Distinct, distinct, though faint and far it be.
Thou fool; this echo is a cheat as well, —
  The hum of earthly instincts; and we crave
    A world unreal as the shell-heard sea.

Of course this is a very fine poem, so far as the poetry is concerned. But it is pessimism absolute. Its author, a brilliant graduate of Oxford University, entered the English diplomatic service as a young man, and in the middle of a promising career was attacked by a disease of the spine which left him a hopeless invalid. We might say that he had some reason to look at the world in a dark light. But

such poetry is not healthy. It is morbid. It means retrogression. It brings a sharp truth to the mind with a painful shock, and leaves an after-impression of gloom unspeakable. As I said before, we must not spoil the happiness of children by telling them that there are no ghosts or fairies. So we must not tell the humanity which believes in happiness after death that there is no heaven. All progress is through faith and hope in something. The measure of a poet is in the largeness of the thought which he can apply to any subject, however trifling. Bearing this in mind, let us now see how the same subject of the sea-shell appeals to the thought of Rossetti. You will then perceive the difference between pessimism and philosophical humanitarianism.

THE SEA-LIMITS

Consider the sea's listless chime:
  Time's self it is, made audible,—
  The murmur of the earth's own shell.
Secret continuance sublime
  Is the sea's end: our sight may pass
  No furlong further. Since time was,
This sound hath told the lapse of time.

No quiet, which is death's,—it hath
  The mournfulness of ancient life,
  Enduring always at dull strife.
As the world's heart of rest and wrath,
  Its painful pulse is in the sands.
  Last utterly, the whole sky stands,
Grey and not known, along its path.

Listen alone beside the sea,
  Listen alone among the woods;
  Those voices of twin solitudes
Shall have one sound alike to thee:
  Hark where the murmurs of thronged men
  Surge and sink back and surge again,—
Still the one voice of wave and tree.

Gather a shell from the strown beach
And listen at its lips: they sigh
The same desire and mystery,
The echo of the whole sea's speech.
And all mankind is thus at heart
Not anything but what thou art:
And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.

In the last beautiful stanza we have a comparison as sublime as any ever made by any poet — of the human heart, the human life, re-echoing the murmur of the infinite Sea of Life. As the same sound of the sea is heard in every shell, so in every human heart is the same ghostly murmur of Universal Being. The sound of the sea, the sound of the forest, the sound of men in cities, not only are the same to the ear, but they tell the same story of pain. The sound of the sea is a sound of perpetual strife, the sound of the woods in the wind is a sound of ceaseless struggle, the tumult of a great city is also a tumult of effort. In this sense all the three sounds are but one, and that one is the sound of life everywhere. Life is pain, and therefore sadness. The world itself is like a great shell full of this sound. But it is a shell on the verge of the Infinite. The millions of suns, the millions of planets and moons, are all of them but shells on the shore of the everlasting sea of death and birth, and each would, if we could hear it, convey to our ears and hearts the one same murmur of pain. This is, to my thinking, a much vaster conception than anything to be found in Tennyson; and such a poem as that of Lee-Hamilton dwindles into nothingness beside it, for we have here all that man can know of our relation to the universe, and the mystery of that universe brought before us by a simile of incomparable sublimity.

Before leaving this important class of poems, let me cite another instance of the comparative nearness of Rossetti at times to Oriental thought. It is the fifteenth of that wonderful set of sonnets entitled "The House of Life."

THE BIRTH-BOND

Have you not noted, in some family
  Where two were born of a first marriage-bed,
  How still they own their gracious bond, though fed
And nursed on the forgotten breast and knee?—
How to their father's children they shall be
  In act and thought of one goodwill; but each
  Shall for the other have, in silence speech,
And in a word complete community?

Even so, when I first saw you, seemed it, love,
  That among souls allied to mine was yet
One nearer kindred than life hinted of.
  O born with me somewhere that men forget,
  And though in years of sight and sound unmet,
Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!

This beautiful little thought of love is almost exactly the same as that suggested in a well-known Japanese proverb about the relations of a previous existence. We have here, in an English poet, who very probably never read anything about Buḍdhism, the very idea of the Buddhist *en*. The whole tendency of the poet's mind was toward larger things than his early training had prepared him for.

Yet it would be a mistake to suppose Rossetti a pure mystic; he was too much of an artist for that. No one felt the sensuous charm of life more keenly, nor the attraction of plastic beauty and grace. By way of an interlude, we may turn for a time to his more sensuous poetry. It is by this that he is best known; for you need not suppose that the general English public understands such poems as those which we have been examining. Keep in mind that there is a good deal of difference between the adjectives "sensuous" and "sensual." The former has no evil meaning; it refers only to sense-impression — to sensations visual, auditory, tactile. The other adjective is more commonly used in a bad sense. At one time an attempt was made to injure Rossetti by applying it to his work; but all good critics

have severely condemned that attempt, and Rossetti must not be regarded as in any sense an immoral poet.

II

To the cultivated the very highest quality of emotional poetry is that given by blending the artistically sensuous with the mystic. This very rare quality colours the greater part of Rossetti's work. Perhaps one may even say that it is never entirely absent. Only, the proportions of the blending vary, like those mixtures of red and blue, crimson and azure, which may give us either purple or violet of different shades according to the wish of the dyer. The quality of mysticism dominates in the symbolic poems; we might call those deep purple. The sensuous element dominates in most of the ballads and narrative poems; we might say that these have rather the tone of bright violet. But even in the ballads there is a very great difference in the proportions of the two qualities. The highest tone is in "The Blessed Damozel," and in the beautiful narrative poem of "The Staff and Scrip"; while the lowest tone is perhaps that of the ballad of "Eden Bower," which describes the two passions of lust and hate at their greatest intensity. But everything is beautifully finished as work, and unapproachably exquisite in feeling. I think the best example of what I have called the violet style is the ballad of "Troy Town."

Heavenborn Helen, Sparta's queen,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Had two breasts of heavenly sheen,
The sun and moon of the heart's desire:
All Love's lordship lay between.
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Helen knelt at Venus' shrine,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Saying, "A little gift is mine,
A little gift for a heart's desire.

Hear me speak and make me a sign!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Look, I bring thee a carven cup;
(*O Troy Town!*)
See it here as I hold it up,—
Shaped it is to the heart's desire,
Fit to fill when the gods would sup.
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"It was moulded like my breast;
(*O Troy Town!*)
He that sees it may not rest,
Rest at all for his heart's desire.
O give ear to my heart's behest!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"See my breast, how like it is;
(*O Troy Town!*)
See it bare for the air to kiss!
Is the cup to thy heart's desire?
O for the breast, O make it his!
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Yea, for my bosom here I sue;
(*O Troy Town!*)
Thou must give it where 'tis due,
Give it there to the heart's desire.
Whom do I give my bosom to?
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Each twin breast is an apple sweet.
(*O Troy Town!*)
Once an apple stirred the beat
Of thy heart with the heart's desire:—
Say, who brought it then to thy feet?
(*O Troy's down!*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"They that claimed it then were three:
(O Troy Town!)
For thy sake two hearts did he
Make forlorn of the heart's desire.
Do for him as he did for thee!
(O Troy's down,
Tall Troy's on fire!)

"Mine are apples grown to the south,
(O Troy Town!)
Grown to taste in the days of drouth,
Taste and waste to the heart's desire:
Mine are apples meet for his mouth."
(O Troy's down,
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Venus looked on Helen's gift,
(O Troy Town!)
Looked and smiled with subtle drift,
Saw the work of her heart's desire:—
"There thou kneel'st for Love to lift!"
(O Troy's down,
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Venus looked in Helen's face,
(O Troy Town!)
Knew far off an hour and place,
And fire lit from the heart's desire;
Laughed and said, "Thy gift hath grace!"
(O Troy's down,
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Cupid looked on Helen's breast,
(O Troy Town!)
Saw the heart within its nest,
Saw the flame of the heart's desire,—
Marked his arrow's burning crest.
(O Troy's down,
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Cupid took another dart,
(O Troy Town!)
Fledged it for another heart,

Winged the shaft with the heart's desire,
Drew the string, and said "Depart!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

Paris turned upon his bed,
(*O Troy Town!*)
Turned upon his bed, and said,
Dead at heart with the heart's desire—
"Oh to clasp her golden head!"
(*O Troy's down,*
Tall Troy's on fire!)

This wonderful ballad, with its single and its double refrains, represents Rossetti's nearest approach to earth, except the ballad of "Eden Bower." Usually he seldom touches the ground, but moves at some distance above it, just as one flies in dreams. But you will observe that the mysticism here has almost vanished. There is just a little ghostliness to remind you that the writer is no common singer, but a poet able to give a thrill. The ghostliness is chiefly in the fact of the supernatural elements involved; Helen with her warm breast we feel to be a real woman, but Venus and love are phantoms, who speak and act as figures in sleep. This is true art under the circumstances. We feel nothing more human until we come to the last stanza; then we hear it in the cry of Paris. But why do I say that this is high art to make the gods as they are made here? The Greeks would have made Venus and Cupid purely human. But Rossetti is not taking the Greek view of the subject at all. He is taking the mediæval one. He is writing of Greek gods and Greek legends as such subjects were felt by Chaucer and by the French poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It would not be easy to explain the mediæval tone of the poem to you; that would require a comparison with the work of very much older poets. I only want now to call your attention to the fact that even in a Greek subject of the sensuous kind Rossetti

always keeps the tone of the Middle Ages; and that tone was mystical.

Having given this beautiful example of the least mystical class of Rossetti's light poems, let us pass at once to the most mystical. These are in all respects, I am not afraid to say, far superior. The poem by which Rossetti became first widely known and admired was "The Blessed Damozel." This and a lovely narrative poem entitled "The Staff and Scrip" form the most exquisite examples of the poet's treatment of mystical love. You should know both of them; but we shall first take "The Blessed Damozel."

This is the story of a woman in heaven, speaking of the man she loved on earth. She is waiting for him. She watches every new soul that comes to heaven, hoping that it may be the soul of her lover. While waiting thus, she talks to herself about what she will do to make her lover happy when he comes, how she will show him all the beautiful things in heaven, and will introduce him to the holy saints and angels. That is all. But it is very wonderful in its sweetness of simple pathos, and in a peculiar, indescribable quaintness which is not of the nineteenth century at all. It is of the Middle Ages, the Italian Middle Ages before the time of Raphael. The heaven painted here is not the heaven of modern Christianity—if modern Christianity can be said to have a heaven; it is the heaven of Dante, a heaven almost as sharply defined as if it were on earth.

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL

The blessed damozel leaned out
  From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
  Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
  And the stars in her hair were seven.

Damozel. This is only a quaint form of the same word which in modern French signifies a young lady—demoiselle.

The suggestion is not simply that it is a maiden that speaks, but a maiden of noble blood. The idea of the poet is exactly that of Dante in speaking of Beatrice. Seven is the mystical number of Christianity.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.

Clasp. The ornamental fastening of the dress at the neck. "From clasp to hem" thus signifies simply "from neck to feet," for the hem of a garment means especially its lower edge. *Wrought flowers* here means embroidered flowers. The dress has no ornament and no girdle; it is a dress of the thirteenth century as to form; but it may interest you to know that usually in religious pictures of angels and heavenly souls (the French religious prints are incomparably the best) there is no girdle, and the robe falls straight from neck to feet. *Service.* The maiden in heaven becomes a servant of the Mother of God. But the mediæval idea was that the daughter of a very noble house, entering heaven, might be honoured by being taken into the service of Mary, just as in this world one might be honoured by being taken into the personal service of a queen or emperor. A white rose is worn as the badge or mark of this distinction, because white is the symbol of chastity, and Mary is especially the patron of chastity. In heaven also —the heaven of Dante— the white rose has many symbolic significations. *Yellow.* Compare "Elle est *blonde comme le blé*" (de Musset.)

Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God's choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of hers;

Albeit, to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.

Herseemed. This word is very unusual, even obsolete. Formerly instead of saying "it seems to me," "it seems to him," "it seems to her," English people used to say "meseems," "himseems," "herseems." The word "meseems" is still used, but only in the present, with rare exceptions. It is becoming obsolete also. *Choristers.* Choir-singers. The daily duty of angels and souls in heaven was supposed to be to sing the praises of God, just as on earth hymns are sung in church. *Albeit.* An ancient form of "although."

(To one, it is ten years of years.
. . . Yet now, and in this place,
Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair
Fell all about my face. . .
Nothing: the autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

Ten years of years. That is, years composed not of three hundred and sixty-five days, but of three hundred and sixty-five years. To the lover on earth, deprived of his beloved by death, the time passes slowly so that a day seems as long as a year. Sometimes he imagines that he feels the dead bending over him — that he feels her hair falling over his face. When he looks, he finds that it is only the leaves of the trees that have been falling upon him; and he knows that the autumn has come, and that the year is slowly dying.

It was the rampart of God's house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth
The which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.

Rampart, you know, means part of a fortification; all the nobility of the Middle Ages lived in castles or fortresses,

and their idea of heaven was necessarily the idea of a splendid castle. In the "Song of Roland" we find the angels and the saints spoken of as knights and ladies, and the language they use is the language of chivalry. *Sheer depth,* straight down, perpendicularly, absolute. God's castle overlooks, not a landscape, but space; the sun and the stars lie far below.

It lies in Heaven, across the flood
  Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
  With flame and darkness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
  Spins like a fretful midge.

Around her, lovers, newly met
  'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
  Their heart-remembered names;
And the souls mounting up to God
  Went by her like thin flames.

Ether. This is not the modern word, the scientific ether, but the Greek and also mediæval ether, the most spiritual form of matter. The house of God, or heaven, rests upon nothing, but stretches out like a bridge over the ether itself. Far below something like enormous waves seem to be soundlessly passing, light and dark. Even in heaven, and throughout the universe, it was supposed in the Middle Ages that there were successions of day and night independent of the sun. These are the "tides" described. *Ridge the void* means, make ridges or wave-like lines in the ether of space. *Midge* is used in English just as the word *kobai** is used in Japanese. *A Fretful midge,* a midge that moves very quickly as if fretted or frightened.

And still she bowed herself and stooped
  Out of the circling charm;
Until her bosom must have made
  The bar she leaned on warm,

* small fly —Editor.

And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

Charm. The circling charm is not merely the gold railing upon which she leans, but the magical limits of heaven itself which holds the souls back. She cannot pass beyond them. Otherwise her wish would take her back to this world to watch by her living lover. But only the angels, who are the messengers of heaven, can go beyond the boundaries.

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove
Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke as when
The stars sang in their spheres.

Shake. Here in the sense of "to beat like a heart or pulse." Heaven about her is motionless, fixed; but looking down upon the universe she sees a luminous motion, regular like a heart-beat; that is Time. *Its path.* Her eyes tried to pierce a way or path for themselves through space; that is, she made a desperate effort to see farther than she could see. She is looking in vain for the coming of her lover. *Their spheres.* This is an allusion to a biblical verse, "when the morning stars sang together." It was said that when the world was created the stars sang for joy.

The sun was gone now; the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sang together.

(Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
Possessed the mid-day air,

Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)

Stair. We must suppose the lover to be in or near a church with a steeple, or lofty bell tower. Outside he hears a bird singing; and in the sweetness of its song he thinks that he hears the voice of the dead girl speaking to him. Then, as the church bells send down to him great sweet waves of sound from the tower, he imagines that he can hear, in the volume of the sound, something like a whispering of robes and faint steps as of a spirit trying to descend to his side.

"I wish that he were come to me,
For he will come," she said.
"Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth,
Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?
Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?

An allusion to a verse in the New Testament — "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them."* She is a little afraid that her lover may not get to heaven after all, but she suddenly remembers this verse, and it gives her encouragement. *Perfect strength* means strength of prayer, the power of the prayer to obtain what is prayed for. As she and he have both been praying for reunion in heaven, and as Christ has promised that whatever two people pray for, shall be granted, she feels consoled.

"When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
And bathe there in God's sight.

The *aureole* is the circle or disk of golden light round the head of a saint. Sometimes it is called a "glory." In

* *Mat.* xviii, 19—Editor.

some respects the aureole of Christian art much resembles that of Buddhist art, with this exception, that some of the Oriental forms are much richer and more elaborate. Three forms in Christian art are especially common — the plain circle; the disk, like a moon or sun, usually made in art by a solid plate of gilded material behind the head; the full "glory," enshrining the whole figure. There is only one curious fact to which I need further refer here; it is that the Holy Ghost in Christian art has a glory of a special kind — the triangle. *White.* This is a reference to the description of heaven in the paradise of St. John's vision, where all the saints are represented in white garments. *Deep wells of light.* Another reference to St. John's vision, Rev. xxii, 1—"And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God." In the heaven of the Middle Ages, as in the Buddhist paradise, we find also lakes and fountains of light, or of liquid jewels.

> "We two will stand beside that shrine,
> Occult, withheld, untrod,
> Whose lamps are stirred continually
> With prayer sent up to God;
> And see our old prayers, granted, melt
> Each like a little cloud.

Shrine. The Holy of Holies, or innermost sanctuary of heaven, imagined by mediæval faith as a sort of reserved chapel. But the origin of the fancy will be explained in the next note. *Lamps.* See again St. John's vision, Rev. iv, 5—"And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God." These mystical flames, representing special virtues and powers, would be agitated according to the special virtues corresponding to them in the ascending prayers of men. But now we come to another and stranger thought. *A little cloud.* See again Rev. v, 8, in which reference is made to "golden vials full of incense, which are the prayers of the

saints." Here we see the evidence of a curious belief that prayers in heaven actually become transformed into the substance of incense. By the Talmudists it was said that they were turned into beautiful flowers. Again, in Rev. viii, 3, we have an allusion to this incense, made of prayer, being burned in heaven — "And there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints." Now the poem can be better understood. The Blessed Damozel thinks that her old prayers, that is to say, the prayers that she made on earth, together with those of her lover, are in heaven in the shape of incense. As long as prayer is not granted, it remains incense; when granted it becomes perfume smoke and vanishes. Therefore she says, "We shall see our old prayers, granted, melt each like a little *cloud*"—that is, a cloud of smoke of incense.

"We two will lie i' the shadow of
That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
Saith His Name audibly.

The heavenly tree of life is described in Rev. xxii, 2, as bearing twelve different kinds of fruit, one for each of the twelve months of the year, while its leaves heal all diseases or troubles of any kind. The Dove is the Holy Ghost, who is commonly represented in Christian art by this bird, when he is not represented by a tongue or flame of fire. Every time that a leaf touches the body of the Dove, we are told that the leaf repeats the name of the Holy Ghost. In what language? Probably in Latin, and the sound of the Latin name would be like the sound of the motion of leaves, stirred by a wind: *Sanctus Spiritus.*

"And I myself will teach to him,
I myself, lying so,

The songs I sing here; which his voice
  Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
And find some knowledge at each pause,
  Or some new thing to know."

(Alas! we two, we two, thou say'st!
  Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
  To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
  Was but its love for thee?)

It is the lover who now speaks, commenting upon the imagined words of the beloved in heaven. *Endless unity* here has a double meaning, signifying at once the mystical union of the soul with God, and the reunion forever of lovers separated by death. The lover doubts whether he can be found worthy to enter heaven, because his only likeness to the beloved was in his love for her; that is to say, his merit was not so much in being good as in loving good in another.

"We two," she said, "will seek the groves
  Where the lady Mary is,
With her fine handmaidens, whose names
  Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
  Margaret, and Rosalys.

Notice the mediæval method of speaking of the mother of God as "the lady Mary"; such would have been the form of address for a princess or queen in those times. So King Arthur's wife, in the old romance, is called the lady Guinevere. *Symphonies* here has only the simplest meaning of a sweet sound, not of a combination of sounds; but the use of the word nevertheless implies to a delicate ear that the five names make harmony with each other. They are names of saints, but also favourite names given to daughters of great families as Christian names. The picture is simply

that of the lady of a great castle, surrounded by her waiting women, engaged in weaving and sewing.

"Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robes for them
Who are just born, being dead.

With bound locks means only with the hair tied up, not flowing loose, as was usual in figures of saints and angels. They are weaving garments for new souls received into heaven, just as mothers might weave cloth for a child soon to be born. The description of the luminous white cloth might be compared with descriptions in Revelation. *Being dead.* Christianity like the Oriental religions, calls death a rebirth; but the doctrinal idea is entirely different. You will remember that the Greeks represented the soul under the form of a butterfly. Christianity approaches the Greek fancy by considering the human body as a sort of caterpillar, which enters the pupa-state at death; the soul is like the butterfly leaving the chrysalis. So far everything is easy to understand; but this rebirth of the soul is only half a rebirth in the Christian sense. The body is also to be born again at a later day. At present there are only souls in heaven; but after the judgment day the same bodies which they used to have during life are to be given back to them. Therefore Rossetti is not referring here to rebirth except in the sense of spiritual rebirth, as Christ used it, in saying "Ye must be born again"—that is, obtain new hearts, new feelings. What in Oriental poetry would represent a fact of belief, here represents only the symbol of a belief, a belief of a totally different kind.

"He shall fear, haply, and be dumb
Then will I lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abashed or weak:

And the dear Mother will approve
My pride, and let me speak.

"Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To Him round whom all souls
Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads
Bowed with their aureoles:
And angels meeting us shall sing
To their citherns and citoles.

"There will I ask of Christ the Lord
Thus much for him and me:—
Only to live as once on earth
With Love,—only to be,
As then awhile, for ever now
Together, I and he."

The Damozel's idea is that her lover will be ashamed and afraid to speak to the mother of God when he is introduced to her; but she will not be afraid to say how much she loves her lover, and she will cause the lady Mary to bring them both into the presence of God himself, identified here rather with the Son than with the Father. *Citherns and citoles.* Both words are derived from the Latin *cithara,* a harp, and both refer to long obsolete kinds of stringed instruments used during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.

She gazed and listened and then said,
Less sad of speech than mild,—
"All this is when he comes." She ceased.
The light thrilled towards her, fill'd
With angels in strong level flight.
Her eyes prayed, and she smil'd.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
Was vague in distant spheres:
And then she cast her arms along
The golden barriers,
And laid her face between her hands,
And wept. (I heard her tears.)

In these beautiful lines we are reminded of the special duty of angels, from which they take their name, "messenger" — the duty of communicating between earth and heaven and bringing the souls of the dead to paradise. The Damozel, waiting and watching for her lover, imagines, whenever she sees the angels coming from the direction of the human world, that her lover may be coming with them. At last she sees a band of angels flying straight towards her through the luminous ether, which shivers and flashes before their coming. "Her eyes prayed," that is, expressed the prayerful desire that it might be her beloved; and she feels almost sure that it is. Then comes her disappointment, for the angels pass out of sight in another direction, and she cries—even in heaven. At least her lover imagines that he saw and heard her weeping.

The use of the word Damozel needs a little more explanation, that you may understand the great art with which the poem was arranged. The Old French *damoisel* (later *damoiseau*) signified a young lad of noble birth or knightly parentage, employed in a noble house as page or squire. Originally there was no feminine form; but afterwards the form *damoiselle* came into use, signifying a young lady in the corresponding capacity. Thus Rossetti in choosing the old English form *damozel* selected perhaps the only possible word which could exactly express the position of the Damozel in heaven, as well as the mediæval conception of that heaven. Our English word "damsel," so common in the Bible, is a much later form than damozel. There was, however, a Middle English form spelled almost like the form used by Rossetti, except that there was an "s" instead of a "z."

Now you will better see the meaning of Rossetti's mysticism. When you make religion love, without ceasing to be religious, and make love religion, without ceasing to be human and sensuous, in the good sense of the word, then you have made a form of mysticism. The blending in Rossetti is very remarkable, and has made this particular

poem the most famous thing which he wrote. We have here a picture of heaven, with all its mysteries and splendours, suspended over an ocean of ether, through which souls are passing like an upward showering of fire; and all this is spiritual enough. But the Damozel, with her yellow hair, and her bosom making warm what she leans upon, is very human; and her thoughts are not of the immaterial kind. The suggestions about bathing together, about embracing, cheek against cheek, and about being able to love in heaven as on earth, have all the delightful innocence of the Middle Ages, when the soul was thought of only as another body of finer substance. Now it is altogether the human warmth of the poem that makes its intense attraction. Rarely to-day can any Western poet write satisfactorily about heavenly things, because we have lost the artless feeling of the Middle Ages, and we cannot think of the old heaven as a reality. In order to write such things, we should have to get back the heart of our fathers; and Rossetti happened to be born with just such a heart. He had probably little or no real faith in religion; but he was able to understand exactly how religious people felt hundreds of years ago.

Let us now turn to a more earthly phase of the same tone of love which appears in "The Blessed Damozel." Now it is the lover himself on earth who is speaking, while contemplating the portrait of the dead woman whom he loved. We shall only make extracts, on account of the extremely elaborate and difficult structure of the poem.

THE PORTRAIT

This is her picture as she was:
  It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
  Should tarry when myself am gone.
I gaze until she seems to stir,—
Until mine eyes almost aver

That now, even now, the sweet lips part
To breathe the words of the sweet heart:—
And yet the earth is over her.
. . . . . .
Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears
The beating heart of Love's own breast,—
Where round the secret of all spheres
All angels lay their wings to rest,—
How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,
When, by the new birth borne abroad
Throughout the music of the suns,
It enters in her soul at once
And knows the silence there for God!

Here is the very highest form of mystical love; for love is identified with God, and the reunion in heaven is a blending, not with a mere fellow soul, but with the Supreme Being. By "silence" here you must understand rest, heavenly peace. The closing stanza of the poem contains one of the most beautiful images of comparison ever made in any language.

Here with her face doth memory sit
Meanwhile, and wait the day's decline,
Till other eyes shall look from it,
Eyes of the spirit's Palestine,
Even than the old gaze tenderer:
While hopes and aims long lost with her
Stand round her image side by side,
Like tombs of pilgrims that have died
About the Holy Sepulchre.

What the poet means is this: "Now I sit, remembering the past, and look at her face in the picture, as long as the light of day remains. Presently, with twilight the stars will shine out like eyes in heaven — heaven which is my Holy Land, because she is there. Those stars will then seem to me even as her eyes, but more beautiful, more loving than the living eyes. The hopes and the projects which I used to entertain for her sake, and which died when she died—

they come back to mind, but like the graves ranged around the grave of Christ at Jerusalem." The reference is of course to the great pilgrimages of the Middle Ages made to Jerusalem.

More than the artist speaks here; and if there be not strong faith, there is at least beautiful hope. A more tender feeling could not be combined with a greater pathos; but Rossetti often reaches the very same supreme quality of sentiment, even in poems of a character closely allied to romance. We can take "The Staff and Scrip" as an example of mediæval story of the highest emotional quality.

"Who rules these lands?" the Pilgrim said.
"Stranger, Queen Blanchelys."
"And who has thus harried them?" he said.
"It was Duke Luke did this;
God's ban be his!"

The Pilgrim said, "Where is your house?
I'll rest there, with your will."
"You've but to climb these blackened boughs
And you'll see it over the hill,
For it burns still."

"Which road, to seek your Queen?" said he.
"Nay, nay, but with some wound
You'll fly back hither, it may be,
And by your blood i' the ground
My place be found."

"Friend, stay in peace. God keep your head,
And mine, where I will go;
For He is here and there," he said.
He passed the hill-side, slow,
And stood below.

So far the poem is so simple that no one could expect anything very beautiful in the sequence. We only have a conversation between a pilgrim from the Holy Land, returned to his native country (probably mediæval France), and a

peasant or yeoman belonging to the estate of a certain Queen. We may suspect, however, from the conversation, that the pilgrim is a knight or noble, and probably has been a crusader. He sees that the country has been ravaged by some merciless enemy; and the peasant tells him that it was Duke Luke. The peasant's house is burning; he himself is hiding in terror of his life. But the pilgrim is not afraid, and goes to see the Queen in spite of all warning. One can imagine very well that the purpose of the Duke in thus making war upon a woman was to force a marriage as well as to acquire territory. Now it was the duty of a true knight to help any woman unjustly oppressed or attacked; therefore the pilgrim's wish to see the Queen is prompted by this sense of duty. Hereafter the poem has an entirely different tone.

The Queen sat idle by her loom;
  She heard the arras stir,
And looked up sadly: through the room
  The sweetness sickened her
      Of musk and myrrh.

Her women, standing two and two,
  In silence combed the fleece.
The Pilgrim said, "Peace be with you,
  Lady;" and bent his knees.
      She answered, "Peace."

Her eyes were like the wave within;
  Like water-reeds the poise
Of her soft body, dainty thin;
  And like the water's noise
      Her plaintive voice.

The naked walls of rooms during the Middle Ages were covered with drapery or tapestry, on which figures were embroidered or woven. *Arras* was the name given to a kind of tapestry made at the town of Arras in France.

For him, the stream had never well'd
In desert tracts malign
So sweet; nor had he ever felt
So faint in the sunshine
Of Palestine.

Right so, he knew that he saw weep
Each night through every dream
The Queen's own face, confused in sleep
With visages supreme
Not known to him.

At this point the poem suddenly becomes mystical. It is not chance nor will that has brought these two together, but some divine destiny. As he sees the Queen's face for the first time with his eyes, he remembers having seen the same face many times before in his dreams. And when he saw it in dreams, it was also the face of a woman weeping; and there were also other faces in the dream, not human but "supreme"—probably angels or other heavenly beings.

"Lady," he said, "your lands lie burnt
And waste: to meet your foe
All fear: this I have seen and learnt.
Say that it shall be so,
And I will go."

She gazed at him. "Your cause is just,
For I have heard the same,"
He said: "God's strength shall be my trust.
Fall it to good or grame,
'Tis in His name."

"Sir, you are thanked. My cause is dead.
Why should you toil to break
A grave, and fall therein?" she said.
He did not pause but spake:
"For my vow's sake."

"Can such vows be, Sir—to God's ear,
Not to God's will?" "My vow

Remains: God heard me there as here,"
He said with reverent brow,
"Both then and now."

They gazed together, he and she,
The minute while he spoke;
And when he ceased, she suddenly
Looked round upon her folk
As though she woke.

"Fight, Sir," she said; "my prayers in pain
Shall be your fellowship."
He whispered one among her train,—
"To-morrow bid her keep
This staff and scrip."

The scrip was a kind of wallet or bag carried by pilgrims. Now we have a few sensuous touches, of the kind in which Rossetti excels all other poets, because they always are kept within the extreme limits of artistic taste.

She sent him a sharp sword, whose belt
About his body there
As sweet as her own arms he felt.
He kissed its blade, all bare,
Instead of her.

She sent him a green banner wrought
With one white lily stem,
To bind his lance with when he fought.
He writ upon the same
And kissed her name.

"Wrought" here signifies embroidered with the design of the white lily. Remember that the Queen's name is white lily (Blanchelys), and the flower is her crest. It was the custom for every knight to have fastened to his lance a small flag or pennon—also called sometimes "pennant."

She sent him a white shield, whereon
She bade that he should trace

His will. He blent fair hues that shone,
And in a golden space
He kissed her face.

Being appointed by the Queen her knight, it would have been more customary that she should tell him what design he should put upon his shield — heraldic privileges coming from the sovereign only. But she tells him generously that he may choose any design that he pleases. He returns the courtesy very beautifully by painting the Queen's face on the shield upon a background of gold, and kissing the image. By "space" here must be understood a quarter, or compartment, of the shield, according to the rules of heraldry.

Born of the day that died, that eve
Now dying sank to rest;
As he, in likewise taking leave,
Once with a heaving breast
Looked to the west.

And there the sunset skies unseal'd,
Like lands he never knew,
Beyond to-morrow's battle-field
Lay open out of view
To ride into.

Here we have the suggestion of emotions known to us all, when looking into a beautiful sunset sky in which there appeared to be landscapes of gold and purple and other wonderful colours, like some glimpse of a heavenly world. Notice the double suggestion of this verse. The knight, having bidden the Queen good-bye, is riding home, looking, as he rides, into the sunset and over the same plain where he must fight to-morrow. Looking, he sees such landscapes —strangely beautiful, more beautiful than anything in the real world. Then he thinks that heaven might be like that. At the same time he has a premonition that he is going to

be killed the next day, and this thought comes to him: "Perhaps I shall ride into that heaven to-morrow."

Next day till dark the women pray'd:
  Nor any might know there
How the fight went: the Queen has bade
  That there do come to her
    No messenger.

The Queen is pale, her maidens ail;
  And to the organ-tones
They sing but faintly, who sang well
  The matin-orisons,
    The lauds and nones.

Orison means a prayer; *matin* has the same meaning as the French word, spelled in the same way, for morning. Matin-orisons are morning prayers, but special prayers belonging to the ancient church services are intended; these prayers are still called matins. *Lauds* is also the name of special prayers of the Roman morning service; the word properly means "praises." *Nones* is the name of a third special kind of prayers, intended to be repeated or sung at the ninth hour of the morning—hence nones.

Lo, Father, is thine ear inclin'd,
  And hath thine angel pass'd?
For these thy watchers now are blind
  With vigil, and at last
    Dizzy with fast.

Weak now to them the voice o' the priest
  As any trance affords;
And when each anthem failed and ceas'd,
  It seemed that the last chords
    Still sang the words.

By *Father* is here meant God—probably in the person of Christ. To incline the ear means to listen. When this expression is used of God it always means listening to

prayer. In the second line angel has the double signification of spirit and messenger, but especially the latter. Why is the expression "at last" used here? It was the custom when making special prayer both to remain without sleep, which was called "keeping vigil" or watch, and to remain without food, or "to fast." The evening has come and the women have not eaten anything all day. At first they were too anxious to feel hungry, but *at last* as the night advances, they become too weak.

"Oh what is the light that shines so red?
'Tis long since the sun set;"
Quoth the youngest to the eldest maid:
" 'Twas dim but now, and yet
The light is great."

Quoth the other: " 'Tis our sight is dazed
That we see flame i' the air."
But the Queen held her brows and gazed,
And said, "It is the glare
Of torches there."

Held her brows—that is, put her hand above her eyes so as to see better by keeping off the light in the room. There is a very nice suggestion here; the Queen hears and sees better than the young girls, not simply because she has finer senses, or because she has more to fear by the loss of her kingdom. It is the intensification of the senses caused by love that makes her see and hear so well.

"Oh what are the sounds that rise and spread?
All day it was so still;"
Quoth the youngest to the eldest maid:
"Unto the furthest hill
The air they fill."

Quoth the other: " 'Tis our sense is blurr'd
With all the chants gone by."
But the Queen held her breath and heard,
And said, "It is the cry
Of Victory."

The first of all the rout was sound,
The next were dust and flame,
And then the horses shook the ground:
And in the thick of them
A still band came.

I think that no poet in the world ever performed a greater feat than this stanza, in which, and in three lines only, the whole effect of the spectacle and sound of an army returning at night has been given. We must suppose that the women have gone out to wait for the army. It comes; but the night is dark, and they hear at first only the sound of the coming, the tramp of black masses of men passing. Probably these would be the light troops, archers and foot-men. The lights are still behind, with the cavalry. Then the first appearance is made in the light of torches — foot soldiers still, covered with dust and carrying lights with them. Then they feel the ground shake under the weight of the feudal cavalry—the knights come. But where is the chief? No chief is visible; but, surrounded by the mounted knights, there is a silent company of men on foot carrying something. The Queen wants to know what it is. It is covered with leaves and branches so that she cannot see it.

"Oh what do ye bring out of the fight,
Thus hid beneath these boughs?"
"Thy conquering guest returns to-night,
And yet shall not carouse,
Queen, in thy house."

After a victory there was always in those days a great feast of wine-drinking, or carousal. *To carouse* means to take part in such noisy festivity. When the Queen puts her question, she is kindly but grimly answered, so that she knows the dead body of her knight must be under the branches. But being a true woman and lover, her love conquers her fear and pain; she must see him again, no matter how horribly his body may have been wounded.

"Uncover ye his face," she said.
"O changed in little space!"
She cried, "O pale that was so red!
O God, O God of grace!
Cover his face."

His sword was broken in his hand
Where he had kissed the blade.
"O soft steel that could not withstand!
O my hard heart unstayed,
That prayed and prayed!"

Why does she call her heart hard? Because she naturally reproaches herself with his death. *Unstayed* means uncomforted, unsupported. There is a suggestion that she prayed and prayed in vain because her heart had suffered her to send that man to battle.

His bloodied banner crossed his mouth
Where he had kissed her name.
"O east, and west, and north, and south,
Fair flew my web, for shame,
To guide Death's aim!"

The tints were shredded from his shield
Where he had kissed her face.
"Oh, of all gifts that I could yield,
Death only keeps its place,
My gift and grace!"

The expression "*my* web" implies that the Queen had herself woven the material of the flag. The word "web" is not now often used in modern prose in this sense—we say texture, stuff, material instead. *A shred* especially means a small *torn* piece. "To shred from" would therefore mean to remove in small torn pieces—or, more simply expressed, to scratch off, or rend away. Of course the rich thick painting upon the shield is referred to. Repeated blows upon the surface would remove the painting in small shreds. This is very pathetic when rightly studied. She sees that

all the presents she made to him, banner, sword, shield, have been destroyed in the battle; and with bitter irony, the irony of grief, she exclaims, "The only present I made him that could not be taken back or broken was death. Death was my grace, my one kindness!"

Then stepped a damsel to her side,
And spoke, and needs must weep;
"For his sake, lady, if he died,
He prayed of thee to keep
This staff and scrip."

That night they hung above her bed,
Till morning wet with tears.
Year after year above her head
Her bed his token wears,
Five years, ten years.

That night the passion of her grief
Shook them as there they hung.
Each year the wind that shed the leaf
Shook them and in its tongue
A message flung.

We must suppose the Queen's bed to have been one of the great beds used in the Middle Ages and long afterwards, with four great pillars supporting a kind of little roof or ceiling above it, and also supporting curtains, which would be drawn around the bed at night. The staff and scrip and the token would have been hung to the ceiling, or as the French call it *ciel,* of the bed; and therefore they might be shaken by a passion of grief — because a woman sobbing in the bed would shake the bed, and therefore anything hung to the awning above it.

And once she woke with a clear mind
That letters writ to calm
Her soul lay in the scrip; to find
Only a torpid balm
And dust of palm.

Sometimes when we are very unhappy, we dream that what we really wish for has happened, and that the sorrow is taken away. And in such dreams we are very sure that what we were dreaming is true. Then we wake up to find the misery come back again. The Queen has been greatly sorrowing for this man, and wishing she could have some news from his spirit, some message from him. One night she dreams that somebody tells her, "If you will open that scrip, you will find in it the message which you want." Then she wakes up and finds only some palm-dust, and some balm so old that it no longer has any perfume — but no letter.

They shook far off with palace sport
  When joust and dance were rife;
And the hunt shook them from the court;
  For hers, in peace or strife,
    Was a Queen's life.

A Queen's death now: as now they shake
  To gusts in chapel dim,—
Hung where she sleeps, not seen to wake
  (Carved lovely white and slim),
    With them by him.

It would be for her, as for any one in great sorrow, a consolation to be alone with her grief. But this she cannot be, nor can she show her grief to any one, because she is a Queen. Only when in her chamber, at certain moments, can she think of the dead knight, and see the staff and scrip shaking in their place, as the castle itself shakes to the sound of the tournaments, dances, and the gathering of the great hunting parties in the court below.

In that age it was the custom when a knight died to carve an image of him, lying asleep in his armour, and this image was laid upon his long tomb. When his wife died, or the lady to whom he had been pledged, she was represented as lying beside him, with her hands joined, as if

in prayer. You will see plenty of these figures upon old tombs in England. Usually a nobleman was not buried in the main body of a large church, but in a chapel — which is a kind of little side-church, opening into the great church. Such is the case in many cathedrals; and some cathedrals, like Westminster, have many chapels used as places of burial and places of worship. On the altar in these little chapels special services are performed for the souls of the dead buried in the chapel. It is not uncommon to see, in such a chapel, some relics of the dead suspended to the wall, such as a shield or a flag. In this poem, by the Queen's own wish, the staff and scrip of the dead knight are hung on the wall above her tomb, where they are sometimes shaken by the wind.

Stand up to-day, still armed, with her,
  Good knight, before His brow
Who then as now was here and there,
  Who had in mind thy vow
    Then even as now.

The lists are set in Heaven to-day,
  The bright pavilions shine;
Fair hangs thy shield, and none gainsay;
  The trumpets sound in sign
    That she is thine.

Not tithed with days' and years' decease
  He pays thy wage He owed,
But with imperishable peace
  Here in His own abode,
    Thy jealous God.

Still armed refers to the representation of the dead knight in full armour. Mediæval faith imagined the warrior armed in the spiritual world as he was in this life; and the ghosts of dead knights used to appear in armour. The general meaning of these stanzas is, "God now gives you the reward which he owed to you; and unlike rewards given

to men in this world, your heavenly reward is not diminished by the certainty that you cannot enjoy it except for a certain number of days or years. God does not keep anything back out of his servants' wages — no tithe or tenth. You will be with her for ever." The adjective "jealous" applied to God is a Hebrew use of the term; but it has here a slightly different meaning. The idea is this, that Heaven is jealous of human love when human love alone is a motive of duty. Therefore the reward of duty need not be expected in this world but only in Heaven.

Outside of the sonnets, which we must consider separately, I do not know any more beautiful example of the mystical feeling of love in Rossetti than this. It will not be necessary to search any further for examples in this special direction; I think you will now perfectly understand one of the peculiar qualities distinguishing Rossetti from all the other Victorian poets — the mingling of religious with amatory emotion in the highest form of which the language is capable.

III

While we are discussing the ballads and shorter narrative poems, let us now consider Rossetti simply as a story-teller, and see how wonderful he is in some of those lighter productions in which he brought the art of the refrain to a perfection which nobody else, except perhaps Swinburne, has equalled. Among the ballads there is but one, "Stratton Water," conceived altogether after the old English fashion; and this has no refrain. I do not know that any higher praise can be given to it than the simple statement that it is a perfect imitation of the old ballad — at least so far as perfect imitation is possible in the nineteenth century. Should there be any criticism allowable, it could be only this, that the tenderness and pathos are somewhat deeper, and somewhat less rough in utterance, than we expect in a ballad of the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Yet there is no stanza in it for which some parallel might

not be found in ballads of the old time. It is nothing more than the story of a country girl seduced by a nobleman, who nevertheless has no intention of being cruel or unfaithful. Just as she is about to drown herself, or rather to let herself be drowned, he rescues her from the danger, marries her in haste to save appearances, and makes her his wife. There is nothing more of narrative, and no narrative could be more simple. But as the great pains and great joys of life are really in simple things, the simplest is capable of almost infinite expansion when handled by a true artist. Certainly in English poetry there is no ballad more beautiful than this; nor can we imagine it possible to do anything more with so slight a theme. It contains nothing, however, calling for elaborate explanation or comment; I need only recommend you to read it and to feel it.

It is otherwise in the case of such ballads as "Sister Helen" and "The White Ship." "The White Ship" is a little too long for full reproduction in the lecture; but we can point out its special beauties. "Sister Helen," although rather long also, we must study the whole of, partly because it has become so very famous, and partly because it deals with emotions and facts of the Middle Ages requiring careful interpretation. Perhaps it is the best example of story-telling in the shorter pieces of Rossetti — not because its pictures are more objectively vivid than the themes of "The White Ship," but because it is more subjectively vivid, dealing with the extremes of human passion, hate, love, revenge, and religious despair. All these are passions peculiarly coloured by the age in which the story is supposed to happen, the age of belief in magic, in ghosts, and in hell-fire.

I think that in nearly all civilized countries, East and West, from very old times there has been some belief in the kind of magic which this poem describes. I have seen references to similar magic in translations of Chinese books, and I imagine that it may have been known in Japan. In India it is still practised. At one time or other it was

practised in every country of Europe. Indeed, it was only the development of exact science that rendered such beliefs impossible. During the Middle Ages they caused the misery of many thousands of lives, and the fear born of them weighed upon men's minds like a nightmare.

This superstition in its simplest form was that if you wished to kill a hated person, it was only necessary to make a small statue or image of that person in wax, or some other soft material, and to place the image before a fire, after having repeated certain formulas. As the wax began to melt before the fire, the person represented by the image would become sick and grow weaker and weaker, until with the complete melting of the image, he would die. Sometimes when the image was made of material other than wax, it was differently treated. Also it was a custom to stick needles into such images, for the purpose of injuring rather than of killing. By putting the needles into the place of the eyes, for example, the person would be made blind; or by putting them into the place of the ears, he might be rendered deaf. A needle stuck into the place of the heart would cause death, slow or quick according to the slowness with which the needle was forced in.

But there were many penalties attaching to the exercise of such magic. People convicted of having practised it were burned alive by law. However, burning alive was not the worst consequence of the practice, according to general belief; for the church taught that such a crime was unpardonable, and that all guilty of it must go to hell for all eternity. You might destroy your enemy by magic, but only at the cost of your own soul. A soul for a life. And you must know that the persons who did such things believed the magic was real, believed they were killing, and believed they were condemned to lose their souls in consequence. Can we conceive of hatred strong enough to satisfy itself at this price? Certainly, there have been many examples in the history of those courts in which trials for witchcraft were formally held.

Now we have the general idea behind this awful ballad. The speakers in the story are only two, a young woman and her brother, a little boy. We may suppose the girl to be twenty and the boy about five years old or even younger. The girl is apparently of good family, for she appears to be living in a castle of her own—at least a fortified dwelling of some sort. We must also suppose her to be an orphan, for she avenges herself — as one having no male relative to fight for her. She has been seduced under promise of marriage; but before the marriage day, her faithless lover marries another woman. Then she determines to destroy his life by magic. While her man of wax is melting before the fire, the parents, relatives, and newly-wedded bride of her victim come on horseback to beg that she will forgive. But forgive she will not, and he dies, and at the last his ghost actually enters the room. This is the story.

You will observe that the whole conversation is only between the girl and this baby-brother. She talks to the child in child language, but with a terrible meaning behind each simple word. She herself will not answer the prayers of the relatives of the dying man; she makes the little brother act as messenger. So all that is said in the poem is said between the girl and the little boy. Even in the opening of the ballad there is a terrible pathos in the presence of this little baby brother. What does he know of horrible beliefs, hatred, lust, evil passion of any sort? He only sees that his sister has made a kind of wax-doll, and he thinks that it is a pretty doll, and would like to play with it. But his sister, instead of giving him the doll, begins to melt it before the fire, and he cannot understand why.

One more preliminary observation. What is the meaning of the refrain? This refrain, in italics, always represents the secret thought of the girl, what she cannot say to the little brother, but what she thinks and suffers. The references to Mary refer to the Virgin Mary of course, but with the special mediæval sense. God would not forgive certain

sins; but, during the Middle Ages at least, the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, was a refuge even for the despairing magician or witch. We could not expect one practising witchcraft to call upon the name of Christ. But the same person, in moments of intense pain, might very naturally ejaculate the name of Mary. And now we can begin the poem.

SISTER HELEN

"Why did you melt your waxen man,
Sister Helen?
To-day is the third since you began."
"The time was long, yet the time ran,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Three days to-day, between Hell and Heaven!)

"But if you have done your work aright,
Sister Helen,
You'll let me play, for you said I might."
"Be very still in your play to-night,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Third night, to-night, between Hell and Heaven!)

"You said it must melt ere vesper-bell,
Sister Helen;
If now it be molten, all is well."
"Even so,—nay, peace! you cannot tell,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
O what is this, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Oh the waxen knave was plump to-day,
Sister Helen;
How like dead folk he has dropped away!"
"Nay now, of the dead what can you say,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother!*
What of the dead, between Hell and Heaven?)

"See, see, the sunken pile of wood,
Sister Helen,
Shines through the thinned wax red as blood!"
"Nay now, when looked you yet on blood,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
How pale she is, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Now close your eyes, for they're sick and sore,
Sister Helen,
And I'll play without the gallery door."
"Aye, let me rest,—I'll lie on the floor,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What rest to-night, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Here high up in the balcony,
Sister Helen,
The moon flies face to face with me."
"Aye, look and say whatever you see,
Little brother,"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What sight to-night, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Outside it's merry in the wind's wake,
Sister Helen;
In the shaken trees the chill stars shake."
"Hush, heard you a horse-tread as you spake,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What sound to-night, between Hell and Heaven?)

"I hear a horse-tread, and I see,
Sister Helen,
Three horsemen that ride terribly."
"Little brother, whence come the three,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Whence should they come, between Hell and Heaven?)

In this last stanza the repetition of the words "little

brother" indicates intense eagerness. The girl has been expecting that the result of her enchantments would force the relatives of her victim to come and beg for mercy. The child's words therefore bring to her a shock of excitement.

"They come by the hill-verge from Boyne Bar,
Sister Helen,
And one draws nigh, but two are afar."
"Look, look, do you know them who they are,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Who should they be, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Oh, it's Keith of Eastholm rides so fast,
Sister Helen,
For I know the white mane on the blast."
"The hour has come, has come at last,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Her hour at last, between Hell and Heaven!)

Those who come are knights, and the child can know them only by the crest or by the horses; as they are very far he can distinguish only the horses, but he knows the horse of Keith of Eastholm, because of its white mane, floating in the wind. From this point the poem becomes very terrible, because it shows us a play of terrible passion —passion all the more terrible because it is that of a woman.

"He has made a sign and called Halloo!
Sister Helen,
And he says that he would speak with you."
"Oh tell him I fear the frozen dew,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Why laughs she thus, between Hell and Heaven?)

"The wind is loud, but I hear him cry,
Sister Helen,
That Keith of Ewern's like to die."

"And he and thou, and thou and I,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
And they and we, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Three days ago, on his marriage-morn,
Sister Helen,
He sickened, and lies since then forlorn."
"For bridegroom's side is the bride a thorn,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Cold bridal cheer, between Hell and Heaven!)

We now can surmise the story from the girl's own lips. There are wrongs that a woman cannot forgive, unless she is of very weak character indeed. But this woman is no weakling; she can kill, and laugh while killing, because she is a daughter of warriors, and has been cruelly injured. Notice the bitter mockery of every word she utters, especially the exulting reference to the unhappy bride. We imagine that she might be sorry for killing a man whom she once loved; but we may be perfectly sure that she will feel no pity for the woman that he married.

"Three days and nights he has lain abed,
Sister Helen,
And he prays in torment to be dead."
"The thing may chance, if he have prayed,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
If he have prayed, between Hell and Heaven!)

"But he has not ceased to cry to-day,
Sister Helen,
That you should take your curse away."
"*My* prayer was heard,—he need but pray,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Shall God not hear, between Hell and Heaven?)

"But he says, till you take back your ban,
Sister Helen,
His soul would pass, yet never can."
"Nay then, shall I slay a living man,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
A living soul, between Hell and Heaven!)

"But he calls for ever on your name,
Sister Helen,
And says that he melts before a flame."
"My heart for his pleasure fared the same,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother!*
Fire at the heart, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Here's Keith of Westholm riding fast,
Sister Helen,
For I know the white plume on the blast."
"The hour, the sweet hour I forecast,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Is the hour sweet, between Hell and Heaven?)

"He stops to speak, and he stills his horse,
Sister Helen,
But his words are drowned in the wind's course."
"Nay hear, nay hear, you must hear, perforce,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother!*
What word now heard, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Oh he says that Keith of Ewern's cry,
Sister Helen,
Is ever to see you ere he die."
"In all that his soul sees, there am I,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
The soul's one sight, between Hell and Heaven!)

"He sends a ring and a broken coin,
Sister Helen,
And bids you mind the banks of Boyne."

"What else he broke will he ever join,"
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
No, never joined, between Hell and Heaven!)

It was a custom, and in some parts of England still is a custom, for lovers not only to give each other rings, but also to divide something between them—such as a coin or a ring, for pledge and remembrance. Sometimes a ring would be cut in two, and each person would keep one-half. Sometimes a thin coin, gold or silver money, was broken into halves and each of the lovers would wear one-half round the neck fastened to a string. Such pledges would be always recognized, and were only to be sent back in time of terrible danger—in a matter of life and death. There are many references to this custom in the old ballads.

"He yields you these, and craves full fain,
Sister Helen,
You pardon him in his mortal pain."
"What else he took will he give again,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Not twice to give, between Hell and Heaven!)

"He calls your name in an agony,
Sister Helen,
That even dead Love must weep to see."
"Hate, born of Love, is blind as he,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Love turned to hate, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh it's Keith of Keith now that rides fast,
Sister Helen,
For I know the white hair on the blast."
"The short, short hour will soon be past,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Will soon be past, between Hell and Heaven!)

"He looks at me and he tries to speak,
Sister Helen,
But oh! his voice is sad and weak!"
"What here should the mighty Baron seek,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Is this the end, between Hell and Heaven?)

"Oh his son still cries, if you forgive,
Sister Helen,
The body dies but the soul shall live."
"Fire shall forgive me as I forgive,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
As she forgives, between Hell and Heaven!)

This needs some explanation in reference to religious belief. The witch, you will observe, has the power to destroy the soul as well as the body, but on the condition of suffering the same loss herself. Yet how can this be? It could happen thus: if the dying man could make a confession before he dies, and sincerely repent of his sin before a priest, his soul might be saved; but while he remains in the agony of suffering caused by the enchantment, he cannot repent. Not to repent means to go to Hell for ever and ever. If the woman would forgive him, withdrawing the curse and pain for one instant, all might be well. But she answers, "Fire shall forgive me as I forgive" — she means, "The fire of Hell shall sooner forgive me when I go to Hell, than I shall forgive him in this world." There will be other references to this horrible belief later on. It was very common in the Middle Ages.

"Oh he prays you, as his heart would rive,
Sister Helen,
To save his dear son's soul alive."
"Fire cannot slay it, it shall thrive,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Alas, alas, between Hell and Heaven!)

Rive is seldom used now in prose, though we have "riven" very often. To rive is to tear. The last line of this stanza is savage, for it refers to the belief that the black fire of Hell preserves the body of the damned person instead of consuming it.

"He cries to you, kneeling in the road,
Sister Helen,
To go with him for the love of God!"
"The way is long to his son's abode,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
The way is long, between Hell and Heaven!)

"A lady's here, by a dark steed brought,
Sister Helen,
So darkly clad, I saw her not."
"See her now or never see aught,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What more to see, between Hell and Heaven?)

As the horse was black and the lady was all dressed in black, the child could not at first notice either in the shadows of the road. On announcing that he had seen her at last, the excitement of the sister reaches its highest and wickedest; she says to him, "Nay, you will never be able to see anything in this world, unless you can see that woman's face and tell me about it." For it is the other woman, who has made forgiveness impossible; it is the other woman, the object of her deepest hate.

"Her hood falls back, and the moon shines fair,
Sister Helen,
On the Lady of Ewern's golden hair."
"Blest hour of my power and her despair,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Hour blessed and bann'd, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Pale, pale her cheeks, that in pride did glow,
Sister Helen,
'Neath the bridal-wreath three days ago."
"One morn for pride, and three days for woe,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Three days, three nights, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Her clasped hands stretch from her bending head,
Sister Helen;
With the loud wind's wail her sobs are wed."
"What wedding-strains hath her bridal-bed,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What strain but death's, between Hell and Heaven?)

You must remember that the word "strains" is nearly always used in the sense of musical tones, and that "wedding-strains" means the joyful music played at a wedding. Thus the ferocity of Helen's mockery becomes apparent, for it was upon the bridal night that the bridegroom was first bewitched; and from the moment of his marriage, therefore, he has been screaming in agony.

The climax of hatred is in the next stanza. After that the tone begins to reverse, and gradually passes away in the melancholy of eternal despair.

"She may not speak, she sinks in a swoon,
Sister Helen,—
She lifts her lips and gasps on the moon."
"Oh! might I but hear her soul's blithe tune,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Her woe's dumb cry, between Hell and Heaven!)

To "gasp" means to open the mouth in the effort to get breath, as one does in a fit of hysterics, or in time of great agony. "Gasps on the moon" means that she gasps with her face turned up toward the moon. In the last line we

have the words "blithe tune" used in the same tone of terrible irony as that with which the words "wedding strain" was used in the preceding stanza. "Blithe" means "merry." Helen is angry because the other woman has fainted; having fainted, she has become for the moment physically incapable of suffering. But Helen thinks that her soul must be conscious and suffering as much as ever; therefore she wishes that she could hear the suffering of the soul, since she cannot longer hear the outcries of the body.

"They've caught her to Westholm's saddle-bow,
Sister Helen,
And her moonlit hair gleams white in its flow."
"Let it turn whiter than winter-snow,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Woe-withered gold, between Hell and Heaven.)

The allusion is to the physiological fact that intense moral pain, or terrible fear, sometimes turns the hair of a young person suddenly white.

"O Sister Helen, you heard the bell,
Sister Helen!
More loud than the vesper-chime it fell."
"No vesper-chime, but a dying knell,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
His dying knell, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Alas! but I fear the heavy sound,
Sister Helen;
Is it in the sky or in the ground?"
"Say, have they turned their horses round,
Little brother?"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
What would she more, between Hell and Heaven?)

"They have raised the old man from his knee,
Sister Helen,
And they ride in silence hastily."

"More fast the naked soul doth flee,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
The naked soul, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Flank to flank are the three steeds gone,
Sister Helen,
But the lady's dark steed goes alone."
"And lonely her bridegroom's soul hath flown,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
The lonely ghost, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Oh the wind is sad in the iron chill,
Sister Helen,
And weary sad they look by the hill."
"But he and I are sadder still,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Most sad of all, between Hell and Heaven!)

"See, see, the wax has dropped from its place,
Sister Helen,
And the flames are winning up apace!"
"Yet here they burn but for a space,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Here for a space, between Hell and Heaven!)

"Ah! what white thing at the door has cross'd?
Sister Helen?
Ah! what is this that sighs in the frost?"
"A soul that's lost as mine is lost,
Little brother!"
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)

Notice how the action naturally dies off into despair. From the beginning until very nearly the close, we had an uninterrupted crescendo, as we should say in music — that is, a gradual intensification of the passion expressed. With

the stroke of the death-bell the passion subsides. The revenge is satisfied, the irreparable wrong is done to avenge a wrong, and with the entrance of the ghost the whole consequence of the act begins to appear within the soul of the actor. I know of nothing more terrible in literature than this poem, as expressing certain phases of human feeling, and nothing more intensely true. The probability or improbability of the incidents is of no more consequence than is the unreality of the witch-belief. It is enough that such beliefs once existed to make us know that the rest is not only possible but certain. For a time we are really subjected to the spell of a mediæval nightmare.

As we have seen, the above poem is mainly a subjective study. As an objective study, "The White Ship" shows us an equal degree of power, appealing to the visual faculty. We cannot read it all, nor is this necessary. A few examples will be sufficient. This ballad is in distichs, and has a striking refrain. The story is founded upon historical fact. The son and heir of the English king Henry I, together with his sister and many knights and ladies, was drowned on a voyage from France to England, and it is said that the king was never again seen to smile after he had heard the news. Rossetti imagines the story told by a survivor — a butcher employed on the ship, the lowest menial on board. Such a man would naturally feel very differently toward the prince from others of the train, and would criticize him honestly from the standpoint of simple morality.

> Eighteen years till then he had seen,
> And the devil's dues in him were eighteen.

The peasant thus estimates the ruler who breaks the common laws of God and man. Nevertheless he is just in his own way, and can appreciate unselfishness even in a man whom he hates.

He was a Prince of lust and pride;
He showed no grace till the hour he died.
. . . . . .
God only knows where his soul did wake,
But I saw him die for his sister's sake.

It is a simple mind of this sort that can best tell a tragical story; and the butcher's story is about the most perfect thing imaginable of its kind. Here also we have one admirable bit of subjective work, the narration of the butcher's experience in the moment of drowning. I suppose you all know that when one is just about to die, or in danger of sudden death, the memory becomes extraordinarily vivid, and things long forgotten flash into the mind as if painted by lightning, together with voices of the past.

I Berold was down in the sea;
And passing strange though the thing may be,
Of dreams then known I remember me.

Not dreams in the sense of visions of sleep, but images of memory.

Blithe is the shout on Harfleur's strand
When morning lights the sails to land:

And blithe is Honfleur's echoing gloam
When mothers call the children home:

And high do the bells of Rouen beat
When the Body of Christ goes down the street.

These things and the like were heard and shown
In a moment's trance 'neath the sea alone;

And when I rose, 'twas the sea did seem,
And not these things, to be all a dream.

In the moment after the sinking of the ship, under the water, the man remembers what he most loved at home—

mornings in a fishing village, seeing the ships return; evenings in a like village, and the sound of his own mother's voice calling him home, as when he was a little child at play; then the old Norman city that he knew well, and the church processions of Corpus Christi (Body of Christ), the great event of the year for the poorer classes. Why he remembered such things at such a time he cannot say; it seemed to him a very ghostly experience, but not more ghostly than the sight of the sea and the moon when he rose again.

> The ship was gone and the crowd was gone,
> And the deep shuddered and the moon shone,
>
> And in a strait grasp my arms did span
> The mainyard rent from the mast where it ran;
> And on it with me was another man.
>
> Where lands were none 'neath the dim sea-sky,
> We told our names, that man and I.
>
> "O I am Godefroy de l'Aigle hight,
> And son I am to a belted knight."
>
> "And I am Berold the butcher's son,
> Who slays the beasts in Rouen town."

The touch here, fine as it is, is perfectly natural. The common butcher finds himself not only for the moment in company with a nobleman, but able to talk to him as a friend. There is no rank or wealth between sky and sea—or, as a Japanese proverb says, "There is no king on the road of death." The refrain of the ballad utters the same truth:

> *Lands are swayed by a king on a throne,*
> *The sea hath no King but God alone.*

Both in its realism and in its emotion this ballad is a great masterpiece. It is much superior to "The King's Tragedy," also founded upon history. "The King's Tragedy"

seems to us a little strained; perhaps the poet attempted too much. I shall not quote from it, but will only recommend a reading of it to students of English literature because of its relation to a very beautiful story—the story of the courtship of James I of Scotland, and of how he came to write his poem called "The King's Quhair."

Another ballad demands some attention and explanation, though it is not suitable for reading in the classroom. It is an expression of passion — but not passion merely human; rather superhuman and evil. For she who speaks in this poem is not a woman like "Sister Helen"; she is a demon.

> Not a drop of her blood was human,
> But she was made like a soft sweet woman.

Perhaps the poet desired to show us here the extremest imaginative force of hate and cruelty—not in a mortal being, because that would repel us, but in an immortal being, in whom such emotion can only inspire fear. Emotionally, the poet's conception is of the Middle Ages, but the tradition is incomparably older; we can trace it back to ancient Assyrian beliefs. Coming to us through Hebrew literature, this strange story has inspired numberless European poets and painters, besides the author of "Eden Bower." You should know the story, because you will find a great many references to it in the different literatures of Europe.

Briefly, Lilith is the name of an evil spirit believed by the ancient Jews and by other Oriental nations to cause nightmare. But she did other things much more evil, and there were curious legends about her. The Jews said that before the first woman, Eve, was created, Adam had a demon wife by whom he became the father of many evil spirits. When Eve was created and given to him in marriage, Lilith was necessarily jealous, and resolved to avenge herself upon the whole human race. It is even to-day the custom among Jews to make a charm against Lilith on their marriage night; for Lilith is especially the enemy of brides.

But the particular story about Lilith that mostly figures in poetry and painting is this: If any young man sees Lilith, he must at once fall in love with her, because she is much more beautiful than any human being; and if he falls in love with her, he dies. After his death, if his body is opened by the doctors, it will be found that a long golden hair, one strand of woman's hair, is fastened round his heart. The particular evil in which Lilith delights is the destruction of youth.

In Rossetti's poem Lilith is represented only as declaring to her demon lover, the Serpent, how she will avenge herself upon Adam and upon Eve. The ideas are in one way extremely interesting; they represent the most tragical and terrible form of jealousy — that jealousy written of in the Bible as being like the very fires of Hell. We might say that in Victorian verse this is the unique poem of jealousy, in a female personification. For the male personification we must go to Robert Browning.

But there is a masterly phase of jealousy described in one of Rossetti's modern poems, "A Last Confession." Here, however, the jealousy is of the kind with which we can humanly sympathize; there is nothing monstrous or distorted about it. The man has reason to suspect unchastity, and he kills the woman on the instant. I should, therefore, consider this poem rather as a simple and natural tragedy than as a study of jealousy. It is to be remarked here that Rossetti did not confine himself to mediæval or supernatural subjects. Three of his very best poems are purely modern, belonging to the nineteenth century. This "Last Confession," appropriately placed in Italy, is not the most remarkable of the three, but it is very fine. I do not know anything in even French literature to be compared with the pathos of the murder scene, unless it be the terrible closing chapter of Prosper Mérimée's "Carmen." The story of "Carmen" is also a confession; but there is a great difference in the history of the tragedies. Carmen's lover does not kill in a moment of passion. He kills only after

having done everything that a man could do in order to avoid killing. He argues, prays, goes on his knees in supplication—all in vain. And then we know that he must kill, that any man in the same terrible situation must kill. He stabs her; then the two continue to look at each other—she keeping her large black eyes fixed on the face of her murderer, till suddenly they close, and she falls. No simpler fact could occur in the history of an assassination; yet how marvellous the power of that simple fact as the artist tells it. We always see those eyes. In the case of Rossetti's murderer, the incidents of the tragedy differ somewhat, because he is blind with passion at the moment that he strikes, and does not see. When his vision clears again, he sees the girl fall, and

> —her stiff bodice scooped the sand
> Into her bosom.

As long as he lived, he always saw that—the low stiff front of the girl's dress with the sand and blood. In its way this description is quite as terrible as the last chapter of "Carmen"; and it would be difficult to say which victim of passion most excites our sympathies. The other two poems of modern life to which I have referred are "The Card-Dealer" and "Jenny." "The Card-Dealer" represents a singular faculty on the poet's part of seeing ordinary facts in their largest relations. In many European gambling houses of celebrity, the cards used are dealt—that is, given to the players—by a beautiful woman, usually a woman not of the virtuous kind. The poet, entering such a place, watches the game for a time in silence, and utters his artistic admiration of the beauty of the card-dealer, merely as he would admire a costly picture or a statue of gold. Then suddenly comes to him the thought that this woman, and the silent players, and the game, are but symbols of eternal fact. The game is no longer to his eyes a mere game of cards; it is the terrible game of Life, the struggle for wealth and vain pleasures. The woman is no longer a

woman, but Fate; she plays the game of Death against Life, and those who play with her must lose. However, the allusions in this poem would require for easy understanding considerable familiarity with the terms of card-play and the names of the cards. If you know these, I think you will find this poem a very solemn and beautiful composition.

Much more modern is "Jenny," a poem which greatly startled the public when it was first published. People were inclined for the moment to be shocked; then they studied and admired; finally they praised unlimitedly, and the poem deserved all praise. But the subject was a very daring one to put before a public so prudish as the English. For Jenny is a prostitute. Nevertheless the prudish public gladly accepted this wonderful psychological study, which no other poet of the nineteenth century, except perhaps Browning, could have attempted.

The plan of the poem is as follows: A young man, perhaps the poet himself, finds at some public place of pleasure a woman of the town who pleases him, and he accompanies her to her residence. Although the young man is perhaps imprudent in seeking the company of such a person, he is only doing what tens of thousands of young men are apt to do without thinking. He represents, we might say, youth in general. But there is a difference between him and the average youth in one respect—he thinks. On reaching the girl's room, he is already in a thoughtful mood; and when she falls asleep upon his knees, tired with the dancing and banqueting of the evening, he does not think of awakening her. He begins to meditate. He looks about the room and notices the various objects in it, simple enough in themselves, but strangely significant by their relation to such a time and place — a vase of flowers, a little clock ticking, a bird in a cage. The flowers make him think of the symbolism of flowers — lilies they are, but faded. Lilies, the symbol of purity, in Jenny's room! But once she herself was a lily — now also morally faded. Then the clock, ticking out its minutes, hours—what strange hours it

has ticked out! He looks at the sleeping girl again, but with infinite pity. She dreams; what is she dreaming of? To wake her would be cruel, for in the interval of sleep she forgets all the sorrows of the world. He thinks:

> For sometimes, were the truth confess'd,
> You're thankful for a little rest,—
> Glad from the crush to rest within,
> From the heart-sickness and the din
> Where envy's voice at virtue's pitch
> Mocks you because your gown is rich;
> And from the pale girl's dumb rebuke,
> Whose ill-clad grace and toil-worn look
> Proclaims the strength that keeps her weak.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Is rest not sometimes sweet to you?—
> But most from the hatefulness of man,
> Who spares not to end what he began,
> Whose acts are ill and his speech ill,
> Who, having used you at his will,
> Thrusts you aside, as when I dine
> I serve the dishes and the wine.

Then he begins to think of the terrible life of the prostitute, what it means, the hideous and cruel part of it, and the end of it. Here let me say that the condition of such a woman in England is infinitely worse than it is in many other countries; in no place is she treated with such merciless cruelty by society. He asks himself why this should be so —how can men find pleasure in cruelty to so beautiful and simple-hearted a creature? Then, suddenly looking at her asleep, he is struck by a terrible resemblance which she bears to the sweetest woman that he knows, the girl perhaps that he would marry. Seen asleep, the two girls look exactly the same. Each is young, graceful, and beautiful; yet one is a girl adored by society for all that makes a woman lovable, and the other is—what? These lines best explain the thought:

Just as another woman sleeps!
Enough to throw one's thoughts in heaps
Of doubt and horror,—what to say
Or think,—this awful secret sway,
The potter's power over the clay!
Of the same lump (it has been said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

My cousin Nell is fond of fun,
And fond of dress, and change, and praise,
So mere a woman in her ways:
And if her sweet eyes rich in youth
Are like her lips that tell the truth,
My cousin Nell is fond of love.
And she's the girl I'm proudest of.
Who does not prize her, guard her well?
The love of change, in cousin Nell,
Shall find the best and hold it dear:
The unconquered mirth turn quieter
Not through her own, through others' woe:
The conscious pride of beauty glow
Beside another's pride in her.

. . . . . .

Of the same lump (as it is said)
For honour and dishonour made,
Two sister vessels. Here is one.

It makes a goblin of the sun.

For, judging by the two faces, the two characters were originally the same. Yet how terrible the difference now! This woman likes what all women like; his cousin, the girl he most loves in the world, has the very same love of nice dresses, pleasures, plays. There is nothing wrong in liking these things. But in the case of the prostitute all pleasure must turn for her to ashes and bitterness. The pure girl will have in this world all the pretty dresses, and pleasures, and love that she can wish for; and will never have reason to feel unhappy except when she hears of the unhappiness

of somebody else. And it seems a monstrous thing under heaven that such a different destiny should be portioned out to beings at first so much alike as those two women. Even to think of his cousin looking like her, gives him a shudder of pain — not because he cruelly despises the sleeping girl, but because he thinks of what might have happened to his own dearest, under other chances of life.

Yet again, who knows what may be in the future, any more than what has been in the past? All this world is change. The fortunate of to-day may be unfortunate in their descendants; the fortunate of long ago were perhaps the ancestors of the miserable of to-day. And everything may in the eternal order of change have to rise and sink alternately. Cousin Nell is to-day a fortunate woman; he, the dreamer at the bed-side of the nameless girl, is a fortunate man. But what might happen to their children? He thinks again of the strange resemblance of the two women, and murmurs:

> So pure,—so fall'n! How dare to think
> Of the first common kindred link?
> Yet, Jenny, till the world shall burn
> It seems that all things take their turn;
> And who shall say but this fair tree
> May need, in changes that may be,
> Your children's children's charity?
> Scorned then, no doubt, as you are scorn'd!
> Shall no man hold his pride forewarn'd
> Till in the end, the Day of Days,
> At Judgment, one of his own race,
> As frail and lost as you, shall rise,—
> His daughter, with his mother's eyes?

Then he begins to think more deeply on the great wrongs of this world, the great misery caused by vice, the cruelty of lust in itself. The ruined life of this girl represents but one fact of innumerable facts of a like kind. Millions of beautiful and affectionate women have been, and are being, and will be through all time to come, sacrificed

in this way to lust—selfish and foolish and cruel lust, that destroys mind and body together. The mystery of the dark side of life comes to him in a new way. He cannot explain it — who can explain the original meaning of pain in this world? But he begins to get at least a new gleam of truth —this great truth, that every one who seeks pleasure in the way that he at first intended to seek it that night, adds a little to the great sum of human misery. For vice exists only at the cost of misery. The question is not, "Is it right for me or wrong for me to take what is forbidden if I pay for it?" The real question is, "Is it right for me or wrong for me to help in any way to support that condition of society which sacrifices lives, body and soul, to cruelty and selfishness?" We all of us in youth think chiefly about right and wrong in their immediate relations to ourselves and our friends. Only later in life, after we have seen a great deal of the red of human pain, do we begin to think of the consequences of an act in relation to the happiness or unhappiness of humanity.

Suddenly the morning comes as he is thinking thus. At once he ceases to be the philosopher, and becomes again the gentleman of the world. The girl's head is still upon his knees; he looks at the sleeping face, and wonders whether any painter could have painted a face more beautiful. But the beauty does not appeal to his senses in any passional way; it only fills him with unspeakable compassion. He does not awake her, but lifts her into a more comfortable position for sleeping, and leaves beside her pillow a present of gold coins, and then steals away without bidding her good-bye. The night has not given him pleasure, but pain only—yet a pain that has made his heart more kindly and his thoughts more wise than they had been before.

IV

Our last lecture dealt with the shorter narrative poems of Rossetti, including the ballads. There remain to be con-

sidered two other narrative poems of a much more extended kind. They are quite unique in English literature; and both of them deal with mediæval subjects. One, again, is chiefly objective in its treatment; and the other chiefly subjective—that is to say, psychological. One is a fragment, but the most wonderful fragment of its kind in existence; more wonderful, I think, than even the fragments of Coleridge, both as to volume and finish. The other is complete, a story of magic and passion entitled "Rose Mary." We may first deal with "Rose Mary," giving the general plan of the poem, rather than extracts of any length; for this narration cannot very well be illustrated by examples. We shall make some quotations only in illustration of the finish and the beauty of the work.

The subject of "Rose Mary" was peculiarly adapted to Rossetti's genius. In the Middle Ages there was a great belief in the virtue of jewels and crystals of a precious kind. Belief in the magical power of rubies, diamonds, emeralds, and opals was not confined either to Europe or to modern civilization; it had existed from great antiquity in the Orient, and had been accepted by the Greeks and Romans. This belief was perhaps forgotten after the destruction of the Roman Empire, for a time at least, in Europe; but the Crusades revived it. Talismanic stones were brought back from Palestine by many pilgrim-knights; and as some of these were marked with Arabic characters, then supposed by the ignorant to be characters of magic, supernatural legends were invented to account for the history of not a few. Also there was a certain magical use to which precious stones were put during the Middle Ages, and to which they are still sometimes put in Oriental countries. This is called crystallomancy. Crystallomancy is the art of seeing the future in crystals, or glass, or transparent substances of jewels. The same art can be practised even with ink—a drop of ink, held in the hand, offering to the eye the same reflecting surface that a black jewel would do. In Egypt, Arabia, Persia, and India divination is still practised

with ink. This is the same thing as crystallomancy. Usually in those countries a young boy or a young girl is used by the diviner. He mesmerizes the boy or the girl, and bids him or her look into the crystal or the ink-drop, as the case may be, and say what he or she sees there. In this way, the future is supposed to be told. Modern investigation has taught us how the whole thing is done, though science has not been able yet to explain all that goes on in the mind of the "subject." But in the Middle Ages, when the whole process was absolutely mysterious, it was thought to be the work of spirits inside the stone, or crystal, or ink-drop. And this is the superstition to which Rossetti refers in his poem "Rose Mary."

Now there is one more fact which must be explained in connection with crystallomancy. It has always been thought that the "subject" — that is, the boy or girl who looks into the stone, crystal, or ink-drop—must be absolutely innocent. The "subject" must be virtuous. In the Catholic Middle Ages the same idea took form especially in relation to the chastity of the "subject." Chastity was, in those centuries, considered a magical virtue. A maiden, it was thought, could play with lions or tigers, and not be hurt by them. A maiden—and the word was then used for both sexes, as it is sometimes used by Tennyson in his "Idylls"—could see ghosts or spirits, and could be made use of for purposes of crystallomancy even by a very wicked person. But should the subject have been secretly guilty of any fault, then the power to see would be impaired. The tragedy of Rossetti's poem turns upon this fact.

In the poem a precious stone, of the description called beryl, is the instrument of divination. This beryl is round, like a terrestrial globe, and is supposed to be of the shape of the world. It is half transparent, but there are cloudings inside of it. Hidden among these cloudings are a number of evil spirits, who were enclosed in the jewel by magic. These spirits make the future appear visible to any virtuous person who looks into the stone; but they have power to

deceive and to injure any one coming to consult them who is not perfectly chaste. The stone came from the East, and it was obtained only at the sacrifice of the soul of the person who obtained it. Having been brought to England, it became the property of a knightly family. This family consists only of a widow and her daughter Rose Mary. The daughter is in a state of great anxiety. She was to be married to a certain knight, who has not kept his affectionate promises. The daughter and the mother both fear that the knight may have been killed by some of his enemies. So they resolve to consult the beryl-stone. The mother does not know that her daughter has been too intimate with the absent knight. Believing that Rose Mary is all purity, the mother makes her the subject of an experiment in crystallomancy; and she looks into the beryl.

First she sees an old man with a broom, sweeping away dust and cobwebs; that is always the first thing seen. Then the inside of the beryl becomes perfectly clear, and the girl can see the open country, and the road along which her lover is expected to travel. And she sees him too. But there are perhaps enemies waiting for him. The mother tells her to look for those enemies. She looks; she sees the points of lances, in a hiding place by a roadside, and there is the evidence of what the lover has to fear in that direction. "Now look in the other direction," says the mother. The girl does so, and sees the whole road clearly, except in one place, in a valley. There she says that there is a mist; and she cannot see under the mist. This surprises the mother, and she takes away the beryl. The presence of the mist indicates that Rose Mary has committed some sin.

As a consequence the daughter confesses to the mother all that has occurred. She is not severely blamed; she is only gently rebuked, and forgiven with great love and tenderness. But it is probable that the sin must be expiated. Both are afraid. Then the expiation comes. The lover is killed by his enemies, and killed exactly on that part of the road where the mist was in the image seen in

the beryl-stone. The mother goes to the dead knight's home, and examines the body. Evidently the man had died fighting bravely. The woman at first is all pity for him, as well as for her daughter. Suddenly she notices something in the dead man's breast. She takes it out, and finds that it is a package containing a love-letter, and a lock of hair. The hair is bright gold — while the hair of Rose Mary is black. This makes the mother suspicious, and she reads the letter. Then she no longer pities but abhors the dead man; for the letter proves him to have had another sweetheart, and that he had intended to betray Rose Mary.

When the daughter learns of her lover's death, she suffers terribly; but she makes sincere repentance for her fault, and then in her mother's absence she determines to destroy the beryl-stone, as a devilish thing. This is another way of committing suicide, because whoever breaks the stone is certain to be killed by the enraged spirits cast out of it. By one blow of a sword the stone is broken, and Rose Mary atones for all her faults by death. This is the whole of the story.

The extraordinary charm of the story is in its vividness —a vividness perhaps without equal even in the best work of Tennyson (certainly much finer than similar work in Coleridge), and in the attractive characterization of mother and daughter. There is this great difference between the mediæval poems of Coleridge or Scott, and those of Rossetti, that when you are reading "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" or the wonderful "Christabel," you feel that you are reading a fairy-tale, but when you read Rossetti you are looking at life and feeling human passion. It is a great puzzle to critics how any man could make the Middle Ages live as Rossetti did. One reason, I think, is that Rossetti was a great painter as well as a great poet, and he studied the life of the past in documents and in museums until it became to him as real as the present. But we must also suppose that he inherited a great deal of his peculiar power. This power never wearies. Although the romance of Rose

Mary is not very short, you do not get tired of wondering at its beauty until you reach the end. It is divided into three parts, which is a good thing for the student, as he can see the structure of the composition at once. It is written in stanzas of five lines, thus arranged—*a*, *a*, *b*, *b*, *b*. You would think this measure monotonous, but it is not. I give two examples. The first is the description of the magic jewel.

> The lady unbound her jewelled zone
> And drew from her robe the Beryl-stone.
> Shaped it was to a shadowy sphere,—
> World of our world, the sun's compeer,
> That bears and buries the toiling year.
>
> With shuddering light 'twas stirred and strewn
> Like the cloud-nest of the wading moon:
> Freaked it was as the bubble's ball,
> Rainbow-hued through a misty pall,
> Like the middle light of the waterfall.
>
> Shadows dwelt in its teeming girth
> Of the known and unknown things of earth;
> The cloud above and the wave around,—
> The central fire at the sphere's heart bound,
> Like doomsday prisoned underground.

I feel quite sure that even Tennyson could not have done this. Only a great painter, as well as a great observer, could have done it; and the choice of words is astonishing in its exquisiteness. Most of them have more than one meaning, and both meanings are equally implied by their use. Take, for example, the word "shadowy"; it means cloudy and it also means ghostly. Thus it is peculiarly appropriate to picture the magic stone as full of moving shadows, themselves of ghostly character. Or take the word "shuddering"; it means trembling with cold or fear, and it means also a quick trembling, never a slow motion. Just such a word might be used to describe the strange

vibration of air-bubbles enclosed in a volcanic crystal. But we have also the suggestion here of a ghostly motion, a motion that gives a shiver of fear to the person who sees it. Or take the word "freaked." "Freak" is commonly used to signify a mischievous bit of play, a wild fancy. "Fancifully marked" would be the exact meaning of "freaked" in the ordinary sense; but here it is likewise appropriate as a description of the streams and streaks of colour playing over the surface of a bubble without any apparent law, as if they were made by some whimsical spirit. Now every verse of the whole long poem is equally worthy of study for its astonishing finish. I shall give a few more verses merely to show the application of the same power to a description of pain. The girl has just been told of her lover's murder; and the whole immediate consequence is told in five lines.

> Once she sprang as the heifer springs
> With the wolf's teeth at its red heart-strings.
> First 'twas fire in her breast and brain,
> And then scarce hers but the whole world's pain,
> As she gave one shriek and sank again.

The first two lines might give you an undignified image unless you understood the position of the girl when she received the news. She was kneeling at her mother's feet, with her mother's arms around her. On being told the terrible thing, she tries to spring up, because of the shock of the pain — just as a young heifer would leap when the wolf had seized it from underneath. A wolf snaps at the belly of the animal, close to the heart. Therefore the comparison is admirable. As for the rest of the verse, any physician can confirm its accuracy. The up-rush of blood at the instant of a great shock of pain feels like a great sudden heat, burning up toward the head. And in such a time one realizes that certain forms of pain, moral pain, are larger than oneself—too great to be borne. Psychologically, great moral pain depends upon nervous development;

and this nervous susceptibility to pain is greater than would seem fitted to the compass of one life. Moral pain can kill. It is said that in such times we feel not only our own pain, but the pain of all those among our ancestors who suffered in like manner. Thus, by inheritance, individual pain is more than individual. At all events the fourth line of the stanza I have quoted will appear astonishingly true to anybody who knows the greater forms of mental suffering.

Leaving this poem, which could not be too highly praised, we may turn to "The Bride's Prelude," the greatest of the longer compositions, therefore the greatest thing that Rossetti did. Unfortunately, perhaps, it is unfinished. It is only a fragment; death overtook the writer before he was able to complete it. Like "Rose Mary," it leads us back to the Middle Ages. But here there is no magic, nothing ghostly, nothing impossible; there is only truth, atrocious, terrible truth—a tale of cruelty, treachery, and pain related by the victim. The victim is a bride. She is just going to be married. But before her marriage, she has a story to tell her sister — a story so sad and so frightful that it requires strong nerves to read the thing without pain.

We may suppose that the incident occurred in old France, or — though I doubt it — in Norman England. The scenery and the names remind us rather of Southern France. All the facts belong to the life of the feudal aristocracy. We are among princes and princesses; great lords of territory and great lords of battle are introduced to us, with their secret sorrows and shames. Great ladies, too, open their hearts to us, and prove so intensely human that it is very hard to believe the whole story is a dream. It rather seems as if we had known all these people, and that our lives had at some time been mingled with theirs. The eldest daughter of one great house, very beautiful, and very innocent, is taken advantage of by a retainer in the castle. She is foolish and unable to imagine that any gentleman could intend to do her a wrong. The retainer, on the other hand, is a very cunning villain. His real purpose is to bring

shame upon the daughter of the house. Why? Because, as he is only a poor knight, he could not hope to marry into a princely family. But if he can seduce one of the girls, then perhaps the family will be only too glad to have him marry his victim, because that will hide their shame. Evidently he has plotted for this. But his plans, and everybody's plans, are affected by unexpected results of civil war. His masters, being defeated in a great battle, have to retreat to the mountains for a time; and then he deserts them in the basest manner. Meantime the unhappy girl is found to be with child. Death was the rule in those days for such a case — burning alive. Her brothers wish to kill her. But her father interferes and saves her. It is decided only that the child shall be taken from her — to be killed, probably. Everybody is forbidden to speak of the matter. Some retainers who did speak of it are hanged for an example. Presently, by another battle, the family return into their old possessions, and enormously increase their ancient power. When this happens the scoundrel that seduced the daughter of the house and then deserted the family returns. Why does he return? Now is the time to fulfil his purpose. He has become a great soldier and a nobleman in his own right. Now he can ask for that young lady in marriage, and they dare not refuse. If they refuse, he can revenge himself by telling the story of her disgrace. If they accept him as a son-in-law, they will also be obliged to make him very powerful; and he will know how to take every advantage. The girl is not consulted at all. Her business is to obey. She thinks that it would be better to die than to marry the wicked man that had wronged her; but she must obey and she is ordered to marry him. He cares nothing about her; she is only the tool by which he wishes to win his way into power. But, cunning as he is, the brothers of the girl are even more cunning. They wish for the marriage only for the purpose of getting the man into their hands, just for one moment. He shall marry her, but immediately afterwards he shall disappear for ever from the

sight of men. The bride does not know the purpose of her terrible brothers; she thinks they are cruel to her when she tells her story, but they only wish to avenge her, and they are much too prudent to tell her what they are going to do. The poem does not go any further than the moment before the marriage. The first part is quite finished; but the second part was never written.

The whole of this great composition is in verses of five lines, curiously arranged. Rossetti adopts a different form of verse for almost every one of his narrations. This is quite as unique a measure in its way—that is, in nineteenth century poetry — as was the measure of Tennyson's "In Memoriam" in elegiac poetry. Now we shall try to illustrate the style of the poem.

Against the haloed lattice-panes
  The bridesmaid sunned her breast;
Then to the glass turned tall and free,
And braced and shifted daintily
Her loin-belt through her côte-hardie.

The belt was silver, and the clasp
  Of lozenged arm-bearings;
A world of mirrored tints minute
The rippling sunshine wrought into 't,
That flushed her hand and warmed her foot.

At least an hour had Aloÿse—
  Her jewels in her hair—
Her white gown, as became a bride,
Quartered in silver at each side—
Sat thus aloof, as if to hide.

Over her bosom, that lay still,
  The vest was rich in grain,
With close pearls wholly overset:
Around her throat the fastenings met
Of chevesayle and mantelet.

Absolutely real as this seems, we know that the details must have been carefully studied in museums. Elsewhere,

except perhaps in very old pictures, these things no longer exist. There are no more loin-belts of silver, no côte-hardies, no chevesayle or mantelet. I cannot explain to you what they are without pictures — further than to say that they were parts of the attire of a lady of rank about the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Brides do not now have their white robes "quartered in silver"—that is, figured with the family crest or arms. Why silver instead of gold? Simply because of the rule that brides should be all in white; therefore even the crest was worked in white metal instead of gold. By the word vest, you must also understand an ancient garment for women; the modern word signifies a garment worn only by men. "Grain" is an old term for texture. The description of the light playing on the belt-clasp of the bridesmaid, in the second stanza, is a marvellous bit of work, the effect being given especially by three words—"lozenged," "rippling," for the sunshine, and "minute," for the separate flushes or sparklings thrown off from the surface. But all is wonderful; this is painting with words exactly as a painter paints with colours. Sounds are treated with the same wonderful vividness:

> Although the lattice had dropped loose,
> There was no wind; the heat
> Being so at rest that Amelotte
> Heard far beneath the plunge and float
> Of a hound swimming in the moat.
>
> Some minutes since, two rooks had toiled
> Home to the nests that crowned
> Ancestral ash-trees. Through the glare
> Beating again, they seemed to tear
> With that thick caw the woof o' the air.

One must have been in the tower of a castle to feel the full force of the first stanza. The two girls are in a room perhaps one hundred and fifty or two hundred feet above the water of the moat, so that except in a time of extraordinary stillness they would not hear ordinary sounds from

so far below. And notice that the poet does not tell us that this was because the air did not move; he says that the heat was at rest. Very expressive — in great summer heat, without wind, the air itself seems to our senses not air but fluid heat. And the same impression of summer is given by the description of the two crows flying to their nest and back again, and screaming as they fly. The poet does not say that they flew; he says they toiled home—because flying in that thick warm air is difficult for them. When they return he uses another word, still more impressive; he says they beat again through the glare. This makes you hear the heavy motion of the wings. And he describes the crow as seeming to tear the air, because that air is so heavy that it seems like a thing woven.

Here is a strangely powerful stanza describing the difficulty of speaking about a painful subject that for many years one has tried to forget:

> Her thought, long stagnant, stirred by speech,
> Gave her a sick recoil;
> As, dip thy fingers through the green
> That masks a pool,—where they have been
> The naked depth is black between.

Any of you who as boys have played about a castle moat, and stirred the green water-weeds covering the still water, must have remarked that the water looks black as ink underneath. Of course it is not black in itself; but the weeds keep out the sun, so that it seems black because of the shadow. The poet's comparison has a terrible exactness here. The mind is compared to stagnant water covered with water-weeds. Weeds grow upon water in this way only when there has been no wind for a long time, and no current. The condition of a mind that does not think, that dares not think, is like stagnant water in this way. Memory becomes covered up with other things, matters not relating to the past.

Now we can take four stanzas from the scene of the secret family meeting, after the shame has been confessed and is known. They are very powerful.

"Time crept. Upon a day at length
My kinsfolk sat with me:
That which they asked was bare and plain:
I answered: the whole bitter strain
Was again said, and heard again.

"Fierce Raoul snatched his sword, and turned
The point against my breast.
I bared it, smiling: 'To the heart
Strike home,' I said; 'another dart
Wreaks hourly there a deadlier smart.'

" 'Twas then my sire struck down the sword,
And said, with shaken lips:
'She from whom all of you receive
Your life, so smiled; and I forgive.'
Thus, for my mother's sake, I live.

"But I, a mother even as she,
Turned shuddering to the wall:
For I said: 'Great God! and what would I do,
When to the sword, with the thing I knew,
I offered not one life, but two!' "

This is now the most terrible part of the story; and it has a humanity about it that almost makes us doubt. Fancy the situation. The daughter of a prince unchaste with a common retainer. Now in princely families chastity was of as much importance as physical strength and will; it meant everything — honour, purity of race, the possibility of alliance. And a great house is thus disgraced. We can sympathize with the horrible mental suffering of the girl, but it is impossible not to sympathize also even with the terrible brother that wishes to kill her. He is right, she deserves death; but he is young, and cruel because young. The father sorrows, and seeing the girl smiling, thinks of

the dead mother, and forgives. This is the only point at which we feel inclined to lay down the book and ask questions. Would a father in such a position have done this in those cruel ages? Would he have allowed himself to pity? —or rather, could he have allowed himself to pity? Tender-hearted men did not rule in those days. We have records of husbands burning their wives, of fathers killing their sons. All we can say is that an exception might have existed, just as Rossetti imagines. Human nature was of course not different then from what it is now, but it is quite certain that the gentle side of human nature seldom displayed itself in the families of the feudal princes; a man who was gentle could not rule. In Italy sons who did not show the ruling character were apt to be killed or poisoned. One must understand that feudal life was not much more moral than other life.

I think we can here turn to another department of Rossetti's verse. I only hope that the examples given from "The Bride's Prelude" will interest you sufficiently to make you at a later day turn to this wonderful poem for a careful study of its beauty and power.

V

When we come to the study of the lives of the Victorian poets, we shall find that Rossetti's whole existence was governed by his passion for one woman, whom he loved in a strange mystical way, with a love that was half art (art in the good sense) and half idolatry. To him she was much more than a woman; she was a divinity, an angel, a model for all things beautiful. You know that he was a great painter, and in a multitude of beautiful pictures he painted the face of this woman. He composed his poems also in order to please her. He lost her within a little more than a year after winning her, and this nearly killed him. I may say that throughout all his poems, speaking in a general way, there are references to this great love of his life; but

there is one portion of his work that we must consider as especially illustrating it, and that is "The House of Life," a collection of more than one hundred sonnets upon the subject of love and its kindred emotions. But the love of which Rossetti sings is not the love of a young man for a girl—not the love of youth and maid. It is married love carried to the utmost degree of worship. You will think this a strange subject; and I confess that it is. Very few men could be praised for touching such a subject. Coventry Patmore, you know, was an exception. He made the subject of his own courtship, wedding, and married life the subject of his poetry, and he did it so nicely and so tenderly that his book had a great success. But Rossetti did his work in an entirely different way, which I must try to explain.

Unlike Patmore, Rossetti did not openly declare that he took any personal experience for the subject of his study; we only perceive, through knowledge of his life, and through suggestions obtained from other parts of his work, that personal love and personal loss were his great inspiration. As a matter of fact, any man who sings about love must draw upon his own personal experience of the passion. Every lover thinks of love in his own way. But the value of a love poem is not the personal part of it; the value of a love poem is according to the degree in which it represents universal experience, or experience of a very large kind. It must represent to some degree a general philosophy of life. Even the commonest little love-song, such as a peasant might sing in the streets of Tokyo, as he comes in from the country walking beside his horse, will represent something of the philosophy of life if it is a good and true composition, no matter how vulgar may be the idiom of it. When we come to think about it, we shall find that all great poetry is in this sense also philosophical poetry.

Rossetti, as I have already shown you, was a true philosopher in certain directions; and he applied his philosophical powers, as well as his artistic powers, to his own

experiences, so as to adapt them to the uses of great poetry. He is never narrowly impersonal. And his sonnets are really very wonderful compositions—not reflecting universal experience so as to be universally understood, but reflecting universal experience so as to be understood by cultivated minds only. These productions are altogether above the range of the common mind; they are extremely subtle and elaborate, both as to thought and as to form. But their subject is not at all special. Rossetti had the idea that every phase of happiness and sorrow belonging to married life, from the hour of the wedding night to the hour of death, was worthy of poetical treatment, because married life is related to the deepest human emotions. And in the space of one hundred sonnets he treats every phase. This series of sonnets is divided into two groups. The first contains poems relating to the early conditions of love in marriage; the second group treats especially of the more sorrowful aspects of a married life—the trials of death, the pains of memory, and the hopes and fears of reuniting after death. The second part does not, however, contain all the sad pieces; there are very sad ones in the first group of fifty-nine. We have already studied one of the first group, the piece called "The Birth-bond." There is another piece in this group, the first of four sonnets, which is exquisite as a bit of fancy. It is entitled "Willowwood."

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
  Leaning across the water, I and he;
  Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible
The certain secret thing he had to tell:
  Only our mirrored eyes met silently
  In the low wave; and that sound came to be
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.

And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers
  He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.

Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

This is a dream of the dead woman loved. The lover finds himself seated with the god of love, the little naked boy with wings, as the ancients represented him, at the edge of a spring near the forest. He does not look at the god of love, neither does the god look at him; they were friends long ago, but now—what is the use? She is dead. By the reflection in the water only he knows that Love is looking down, and he does not wish to speak to him. But Love will not leave him alone. He hears the tone of a musical instrument, and that music makes him suddenly very sad, for it seems like the voice of the dead for whom he mourns. It makes his tears fall into the water; and immediately, magically, the reflection of the eyes of Love in the water become like the eyes of the woman he loved. Then while he looks in wonder, the little god stirs the surface of the water with wings and feet, and the ripples become like the hair of the dead woman, and as the lover bends down, her lips rise up through the water to kiss him. You may ask, what does all this mean? Well, it means as much as any dream means; it is all impossible, no doubt, but the impossible in dreams often makes us very sad indeed—especially if the dead appear to come back in them.

Another example of regret, very beautiful, is the sonnet numbered ninety-one in this collection. It is called "Lost on Both Sides."

As when two men have loved a woman well,
Each hating each, through Love's and Death's deceit;
Since not for either this stark marriage-sheet
And the long pauses of this wedding-bell;
Yet o'er her grave the night and day dispel
At last their feud forlorn, with cold and heat;
Nor other than dear friends to death may fleet
The two lives left that most of her can tell:—

So separate hopes, which in a soul had wooed
The one same Peace, strove with each other long,
And Peace before their faces perished since:
So through that soul, in restless brotherhood,
They roam together now, and wind among
Its bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns.

The comparison is of the hopes and aims of the artist to a couple of men in love with the same woman — bitter enemies while she lives, because of their natural rivalry, but loving each other after her death, simply because each can understand better than anybody else in the world the pain of the other. Afterward the men, once rivals, passed all their time together, wandering about at night in search of some quiet place, where they can sit down and drink and talk together. In Rossetti's time such quiet places were not to be found in the main streets, but in the little side streets called bye-streets. After this explanation, the comparison should not be obscure. The artist who loves does all his work with the thought of the woman that he loves before him; his hope to win fame is that he may make her proud of him; his aims are in all cases to please her. After he has lost her, these hopes and aims, which might have been antagonists to each other in former days, are now reconciled within him; her memory alone is now the inspiration and the theme. I hope you will notice the curious and exquisite value of certain words here. "Stark," meaning stiff, nearly always refers to the rigidness of death; it is especially used of the appearance and attitude of corpses, and its application in this poem to the cover of the marriage bed is quite enough to convey the sense of death without any more definite observation. Again the expression "long pauses," referring to the sound of the church bells, makes us understand that the bells are really ringing a funeral knell; for the ringing of wedding bells ought to be quick and joyous. It might seem a strange contradiction, this simile, but the poet has in his mind an old expression about the death of a maiden: "She became the bride of

Death." Thus the effect is greatly intensified by the sombre irony of the simile itself.

We might extract a great many beauties from this wonderful collection of sonnets; but time is precious, and we shall have room for only another quotation or two. The following is one to which I should like especially to invite your attention—not only because of its strange charm, but also because of the curious legend which it recalls — a legend which we have already studied:

BODY'S BEAUTY

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

The reference to the rose and the poppy may need some explanation. The rose has been for many centuries in Western countries a symbol of love; and the poppy has been a symbol of death and sleep from the time of the Greeks. It is from the seeds of the poppy that opium is extracted. The Greeks did not know the use of opium; but they knew that the seeds of the flower produced sleep, and might, in certain quantities, produce death. We have the expression "poppied sleep" to express the sleep of death.

A final word must be said about Rossetti's genius as a translator. He has given us, in one large volume, the most

precious anthology of the Italian poets of the Middle Ages that ever has been made — the poets of the time of Dante, under the title of "Dante and his Circle." This magnificent work would alone be sufficient to establish his supreme excellence as a translator of poetry; but the material is mostly of a sort that can appeal to scholars only. Rossetti is better known as a translator through a very few short pieces translated from French poets, chiefly. Such is the wonderful rendering of Villon's "Ballad of Dead Ladies," beginning

> Tell me now in what hidden way is
> Lady Flora the lovely Roman?
> Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thais,
> Neither of them the fairer woman?
> Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
> Only heard on river and mere,—
> She whose beauty was more than human? . . .
> But where are the snows of yester-year?

Even Swinburne, when making his splendid translations from Villon, refrained from attempting to translate this ballad, saying that no man could surpass, even if he could equal, Rossetti's version. The burthen is said to be especially successful as a rendering of the difficult French refrain:

Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

You will find this matchless translation almost anywhere, so we need not occupy the time further with it; but I doubt whether you have noticed as yet other wonderful translations made by this master from the French. Such is the song from Victor Hugo's drama "Les Burgraves"; you will not forget Rossetti's translation after having once read it.

> Through the long winter the rough wind tears;
> With their white garments the hills look wan.
> Love on: who cares?
> Who cares? Love on.

My mother is dead; God's patience wears;
It seems my chaplain will not have done.
Love on: who cares?
Who cares? Love on.
The Devil, hobbling up the stairs,
Comes for me with his ugly throng.
Love on: who cares?
Who cares? Love on.

Another remarkable translation from the same drama is that of the song beginning:

In the time of the civil broils
Our swords are stubborn things.
A fig for all the cities!
A fig for all the kings!

and ending:

Right well we hold our own
With the brand and the iron rod.
A fig for Satan, Burgraves!
Burgraves, a fig for God!

But even more wonderful Rossetti seems when we go back to the old French, as in the translation which has been called "My Father's Close."

Inside my father's close,
(*Fly away O my heart away!*)
Sweet apple-blossom blows
So sweet.

Three kings' daughters fair,
(*Fly away O my heart away!*)
They lie below it there
So sweet!

Now the Old French of the first stanza will show you the astonishing faithfulness of the rendering:

Au jardin de mon père,
(*Vole, mon coeur, vole!*)
Il y a un pommier doux,
Tout doux.

Besides the small exquisite things, there are long translations from mediæval writers, French and Italian, of wonderful beauty. Compare, for example, the celebrated episode of Francesca da Rimini in Dante (which Carlyle so beautifully called "a lily in the mouth of Hell"), as translated by Byron, and as translated by Rossetti, and observe the immeasurable superiority of the latter. It would be very pleasant, if we had time, to examine Rossetti's translations more in detail; but the year advances and we must turn to an even greater master of verse—Swinburne.