# CHAPTER XXXII

## NOTE ON CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AND HER RELATION TO VICTORIAN POETRY

IN none of my lectures so far have I attempted a lecture upon any female poet, with the exception of the short study upon Miss Ingelow's famous "High Tide." But the fact is that English poetry has no female poet of the highest class; and, as second class poets, few women are to be found worth lecturing upon. Perhaps the English, with the possible exception of the Italians, are the most poetical race in Europe; yet they have astonishingly few female poets. Even in the wonderful Elizabethan age, when everybody was singing, women had scarcely anything to say. You might reply that women in that age were not well educated; and that the few who were really educated, like Queen Elizabeth herself, and Mary, Queen of Scots,—both of whom attempted verse—showed poetical tendencies. But I do not think that this would explain anything. During the second great literary period in English history—the eighteenth century—woman-poets appeared; yet, with all the advantages of education, leisure, and travel, they accomplished so little in poetry as to leave no mark on their time. And to-day, when women are over-educated — when they have had the professions thrown open to them—when women take high mathematical honours at the universities — when female students act the old Greek plays, and write books about Greek grammar and Greek poetry—the disparity is just as great as ever. And this is not all. France, the most literary of modern countries—France, where feminine culture has been carried to the

highest possible degree — even France has no woman-poets to speak of. She has woman-essayists of a very high class, woman-novelists of the first rank; but she has no female poets. Spain offers us the same phenomenon of feminine silence in the domain of poetry. Italy has a few female poets; but no female poets of the highest rank. The great German poets, Polish poets, Russian poets, Scandinavian poets, are all men. And if we examine the literature of the great Oriental races—of India, of Persia, etc., we find that female poets are very rare. There was a girl born about the middle of this century in India, who had perhaps the greatest poetical faculty ever shown by so young a person in modern times: she could write poetry equally well in French, German, and English; she was also a poet in her own language; but she died at the age of twenty or thereabouts. I mean Toru Dutt. But this was a most extraordinary case of development, which probably cost the life of the girl. The brain burned itself out before it was half formed.

Now when we find the same fact in all literary history throughout modern civilization, East and West, we know that there must be some purely natural reason for the inferiority of female poets. It is no use to quote ancient exceptions, such as Sappho, and the female poets of the Greek anthology. The Greeks were far superior to any race now existing upon the face of the earth; but even the Greeks recognized this fact — *that a woman could only be great in the shorter forms of poetry.* In the history of Japanese literature, I have been told that the same fact is observable; but of this matter I cannot myself judge. However, here we have a great fact declared by all the literary history in the world, — that women cannot equal men as poets. It has been said that a woman cannot obtain the first rank either, in such higher forms of art as sculpture, painting, and music. On this subject we have less evidence to go upon; but it is very probable that this is true.

What is the explanation? It is really a very simple one

—although first explained by nineteenth century science. It is simply that woman has less nervous strength than man—not that she is at all inferior to him in depth of emotion or in delicacy of feeling. Indeed it is questionable whether she cannot feel much more finely than man. But any kind of perfect art means for the artist long sustained effort, and an immense expenditure of nervous energy. The mental work of a poet during three or four hours actually means a nervous waste much greater than that of the strongest man working with his hands at the hardest possible work during the same time. The nervous expenditure involved by mathematical study in a powerful brain represents a loss of force which would be sufficient for an extraordinary amount of heavy physical labour. Therefore, it is natural that a woman cannot do certain things in art, just as it is natural that she cannot attempt certain forms of heavy labour. The mind and the body must not be considered separately when we are treating of these matters. Besides, all the spare strength given to woman is given in the direction of maternity: her reserves of energy are intended for the nourishment of the child: she can afford only so much strength for brain work as will not take away her strength for womanly duty. So, after all it is no wonder that there are very few female poets. What is to be wondered at is that there should be even so many as we have.

During the Victorian period, the number of female poets has been greater than at any previous time in English literary history; and the average of their work rises much higher. Still there is always a tendency to the ephemeral. You will remember at least the name of Mrs. Hemans: she was once immensely popular as a poet; but who reads Mrs. Hemans now? The work was too frail to last. Mrs. Browning was the next remarkable apparition in poetry; and her work was at one time thought to be even better than that of her husband. It is now recognized that she has only left behind her a few pages of poetry that is likely to be remembered. "George Eliot," a greater woman by

far than Mrs. Browning, made a volume of very correct poetry; but nobody now looks at it. Miss Rossetti was certainly the greatest female poet of the time; and her work is likely to live for a long period. But it is not all equally strong; and none of it resembles in solidity and depth of finish the work of the great man-poets of the same time. But this is not wonderful. No woman has the physical strength to labour as Tennyson laboured, or to maintain such constant imaginative activity as was necessary for the creations of Robert Browning. That a woman should be able to do what Tennyson has done, for example, would require her to be doubly as strong as Tennyson; and Tennyson was a giant.

The person of whom we are going to consider the work was a weak, quiet, little woman, who succeeded in doing some remarkable things largely by patience and force of will, as well as by talent of a very high order. The poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti had two sisters, Maria Francesca and Christina Georgina. The elder, Maria, did not attempt much in poetry or in literature of any kind, although she had great abilities: she will chiefly be remembered by her excellent treatise on the Divina Commedia, entitled "The Shadow of Dante." She was an extremely religious person —too religious, perhaps, to find much pleasure in literature for its own sake. Christina, who was born in 1830 and died in 1894, grew up under the rather severe training of the elder sister, and became before her death almost equally religious. As the sisters did not marry, their religious tendencies naturally became of the more sobre kind as the years went by. The natural affections, when deprived of their natural rights, are apt to turn towards celestial ideals: the love of heaven taking the place of the love of children and family. Perhaps this was unfortunate in the case of the younger sister. She might have become a greater poet, one would say, had her mind been freed from the restraint of certain rather conventional forms of religious belief. At all events she would have given more time to secular poetry

and less time to devotional poetry. Her secular poetry is all that she has done of real importance. Her religious poetry has its own admirers; but none of it is likely to take a place in permanent English literature. Besides secular poetry and religious poetry, she has also wandered occasionally into half-way dusky regions of thought — touching upon subjects either mystical or gloomy; and some of these efforts are very striking. I should say that a poem like the following—which reminds us of an Anglo-Saxon composition once quoted to you, is not likely to perish.

UP-HILL

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore or weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yes, beds for all who come.

Now this extremely plain verse gives no idea of Miss Rossetti's power in the use of colour and music; but it does give an idea of her strength. I suppose you see the gloomy parable at once. The road is the road of life. Man asks, "Is it always up-hill? — will there always be labour and pain?" And the answer is, "Yes, to the very end of the road—that is to the very end of life." I need not attempt

to explain all the similes: they are easily read. But notice the dark irony of the piece — "You cannot miss that inn," — because all men reach their grave without having looked for it. *They will not keep you standing at the door*— nobody is refused an entrance into the place of death. There is but one purely religious allusion — the line, "Of labour you shall find the sum." That is that according to what you have done in this world, so shall you be paid. That the how and where of the payment is not mentioned, adds considerably to the darkness of the suggestion.

Here is another bit on the same subject: it is not new; —it is an old thing repeated with great effectiveness.

THE BOURNE

Underneath the growing grass,
Underneath the living flowers,
Deeper than the sound of showers:
There we shall not count the hours
By the shadows as they pass.

Youth and health will be but vain,
Beauty reckoned of no worth:
There a very little girth
Can hold round what once the earth
Seemed too narrow to contain.

It is not really in an elaborate work that the force of a poet can best be seen: it is in the simplest naked verse, without ornament of any kind. There is a terrible power in those two little stanzas, as well as perfect poetry. Perhaps at first reading you will not think the composition at all remarkable; but it will grow upon you every time that you read it again, and there were very few persons living in the time of Miss Rossetti who could have set the same thing in an equally powerful way.

Now, fine as this meditative poetry is, it is neither in meditative nor in devotional pieces that the particular value of Miss Rossetti appears: it is almost entirely in narrative

poetry. Five or six narrative pieces which she has written will always rank among the best of their kind. And, curiously enough, her narrative poetry is at its best unlike anything else done during the period. It is a kind of fairy-tale work in exquisite verse, but fairy-tale work with a peculiar mediæval quality of grotesqueness. Last year, you will remember that I told you the grotesque is a mixture of the humorous with the terrible. Sometimes in Miss Rossetti's work, the darker element dominates; sometimes the lighter. There is a great variety of tones in her: she has scarcely given us the same tone in any two narrative poems. And it is especially by her introduction of the grotesque spirit into narrative poetry of a very delicate kind that she belongs to the great movement of her time. Her brother gave us the tragic and mystical emotion of the middle ages; Swinburne gave us the passionate extravagance of Renaissance feeling: Morris gave us the mediævalism of the far North in its heroic aspect. But nobody, except Miss Rossetti, attempted the light fairy-tale, with a hidden moral behind it, and a peculiar quaint grotesqueness flavouring the whole.

Before we take up the most remarkable examples of her grotesqueness, let us look at a narrative poem which is not grotesque, but which has qualities of a totally unique kind. The central idea is very old—the fancy of a husband brought back from the dead by the power of his wife's grief. I think that you have read a great many old poems on this subject: perhaps you remember one by Longfellow in which the dead complains that the tears of the living sinking into the grave disturb his rest like drops of fire. In Miss Rossetti's imagining of the same subject, there is nothing of this horrible kind: the charm of the thing is that the living wife and phantom husband remain, throughout the incident, so absolutely natural that their naturalness becomes touching. The little poem is called "The Ghost's Petition."

Two sisters are talking together—maid and wife. The husband has promised to return after a brief absence upon a certain day; but he has not come. Therefore there is

grief in the house; the sisters watching till late into the night. The wife says then—

"But he promised that he would come:
  To-night, to-morrow, in joy or sorrow,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

"For he promised that he would come:
  His word was given; from earth to heaven,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

"Go to sleep, my sweet sister Jane;
  You can slumber, who need not number
Hour after hour, in doubt and pain.

"I shall sit here awhile, and watch;
  Listening, hoping, for one hand groping
In deep shadow to find the latch."

After the dark, and before the light,
  One lay sleeping; and one sat weeping,
Who had watched and wept the weary night.

After the night, and before the day,
  One lay sleeping, and one sat weeping,—
Watching, weeping for one away.

There came a footstep climbing the stair;
  Some one standing out on the landing
Shook the door like a puff of air,—

Shook the door, and in he passed.
  Did he enter? In the room centre
Stood her husband: the door shut fast.

She is not afraid; she does not know; she does not understand that he came in without opening the door—because her senses are so fatigued by the long watch that her mind is not quite clear. All she knows is that her husband is standing there before her; and that now it is her duty to try to look pleasant — not let him know that she has been crying about him. So she addresses him as

if nothing had happened—even tries to joke with him about looking so cold :—

"O Robin, but you are cold,—
  Chilled with the night-dew; so lily-white you
Look like a stray lamb from our fold.

"O Robin, but you are late:
  Come and sit near me,—sit here and cheer me,"—
(Blue the flame burnt in the grate,)

because when the dead enter a room the lights are believed to change colour — to burn blue. Still she does not know. He sits beside her. She wants to lean her head on his breast. He says to her :—

"Lay not down your head on my breast:
  I cannot hold you, kind wife, nor fold you
In the shelter that you love best.

"Feel not after my clasping hand:
  I am but a shadow, come from the meadow
Where many lie, but no tree can stand.

"We are trees which have shed their leaves:
  Our heads lie low there, but no tears flow there;
Only I grieve for my wife who grieves.

"I could rest if you would not moan
  Hour after hour; I have no power
To shut my ears where I lie alone.

"I could rest if you would not cry;
  But there's no sleeping while you sit weeping,—
Watching, weeping so bitterly."—

But still she is not afraid: her love is too strong for that: she is only terribly unhappy — so unhappy that, like "very woman of very woman," she even reproaches him in her pain for coming to her only as a ghost.

"Woe's me! woe's me! for this I have heard.
O, night of sorrow!—O, black to-morrow!
*Is it thus that you keep your word?*

But presently she recovers herself a little—recovers herself enough to question him about the place in which he now is:

"O my husband of flesh and blood,
For whom my mother I left, and brother,
And all I had, accounting it good,

"What do you do there, underground,
In the dark hollow? I'm fain to follow.
What do you do there?—what have you found?"—

He answers her gently but mysteriously with comforting words.

"What I do there I must not tell;
But I have plenty. Kind wife, content ye:
It is well with us,—it is well.

"Tender hand hath made our nest;
Our fear is ended; our hope is blended
With present pleasure, and we have rest."—

Grief, the sense of duty, the wish for death, the fear of her own loneliness, all mingle together in her answer — as well as the womanly tone of reproach, that she cannot hope, and the sense of resentment caused by pain: it is the extreme naturalness of this which gives the poem a particular place of its own.

"O, but Robin, I'm fain to come,
If your present days are so pleasant;
For my days are so wearisome.

"Yet I'll dry my tears for your sake:
Why should I tease you, *who cannot please you*
*Any more with the pains I take?*"

Now we shall turn to a poem about goblins, — the famous "Goblin Marked," which is the most grotesque

thing Miss Rossetti ever wrote, and which resembles nothing of the kind in English literature. There is, as Prof. Gosse said, one difficulty about this strange poem — the difficulty of following out the hidden moral. There certainly is a moral in it; but it is not at all easy to say what it is: you feel the thing without being able to define it. The principal fact is the saving of a younger sister by the self-sacrifice of an elder sister. Further than that it is not at all easy to go. But the story is plain enough, and, as a fairy-tale, is delightful enough to deserve a very high place for all time. And in this case, I may remind you that we must not expect too much from imaginative poetry in the way of ethical teaching. There was a famous and terrible old woman, the very moral Miss Hannah More, who said to Coleridge that his "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" had no moral; and the world still laughs at her for having said it, because with so perfect a poem before us, it cannot make the least difference whether the thing has a moral or not.

Well, "Goblin Market" is the story about goblins that sell fairy fruit in lonesome places to beautiful young girls. The fruit is cheap, and wonderfully beautiful and wonderfully sweet; but whoever eats it once wants to eat it again, and if this want is not satisfied old age and death result. You can imagine that this means anything you please; but we need not concern ourselves at present with more than the facts of the fairy-tale, which opens with a list of all kinds of delicious fruit.

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
"Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,

Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegrana es full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy."

The girls of the story every evening hears the goblin-fruit-seller crying their wares, and the younger sister always feels a strange desire to buy some of the fruit — although she knows that it would be wrong. The elder sister has told her so; has told her that it is wrong even to look at goblin men. At first the two sisters shut their eyes and stop their ears when the goblins come; but one evening the younger sister, finding herself alone, ventures to look. She sees a number of little men carrying baskets of fruit, and these little men have not the faces of men, but the faces of rats and cats and weasels and other strange animals. They were not pretty, these goblins; but their fruit was very beautiful; and when they came and spoke to her, their voices were very soft and gentle, like the voices of doves.