THE AESTHETICISM OF DANTE
GABRIEL ROSSETTI

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Rossetti is always an interesting figure in Victorian literature, because he seems to be a misfit, not of his own time; despite a personal admiration for their work and various attempts at dramatic monologues, in *A Last Confession* and *Jenny*, he does not harmonize with either of those two pillars of Victorianism, Tennyson or Browning, and he is hardly comparable with Hardy or Meredith, who were responding to the severe criticism of cherished beliefs and ideologies taking place in the century. In general, he is treated as a Romantic, akin to Keats in particular, having a typically Romantic interest in the past, in archaic words and in medieval 'mysteries', and hence is included under such titles as *The Last Romantics*, *The Romantic Imagination*, and *A Victorian Romantic*, Doughty's monumental biography.

But he is also regarded as a forerunner of the Aesthetic, or 'Art for Art's Sake', movement which developed towards the end of the century; he is held up by many as a 'representative aesthete'. And yet he himself regarded the movement with some suspicion, as being only two thirds right, and one third so wrong as to invalidate the whole of it. But why this reserve? One would think that if he was a 'representative aesthete', he would have welcomed this trend in art. And why the 'one third' rejection? What was this 'third' which kept him from embracing the movement? The
critics have not answered this question to my satisfaction, and indeed rarely, if ever, has any of them asked it. And does not his attitude question the claim that he was a 'representative aesthete'? Hence my starting point, the 'germ' of it all, as Henry James would have it. Was Rossetti a 'representative aesthete'?

It soon became apparent that to answer this question Rossetti's own attitude to art, his aestheticism, had to be known, and on this the bulk of criticism is unsatisfactory. Some talk in rather vague terms about an 'aesthetic attitude' to poetry, mentioning perhaps his lack of interest in politics or in the ordinary, every-day happenings of life, but they do not, it seems to me, get right to the core of the matter. It is all there, but is scattered amongst various critics, and there would seem to be a need to draw it all together. For this reason my discussion is often rather a synthesis, than an analysis, of critical opinion; a synthesis which, I hope, does not appear too eclectic. There is, however, one article, Rossetti's Conception of the 'Poetic' in Poetry and Painting, by Oswald Doughty, which comes very close to giving a completely satisfactory outline of Rossetti's aestheticism; it is an excellent and illuminating paper, but I still consider that more needs to be said. Doughty ably reveals Rossetti's essentially 'aesthetic' response to beauty and art.

and Rossetti's Platonism, the intellectual basis of much of his work, but fails to develop his exposition to that further stage which I am attempting to reach: an understanding that it is Rossetti's spiritual aspiration which is the basis of all his art.

Unfortunately for literary criticism, Rossetti has to a great extent been a victim of the 'fashion' for biography current in the nineteen twenties and thirties. The period coincided with the centenary of his birth, 1828, and his life was discovered to be a biographer's paradise. Here at last was a personality open to all kinds of speculation and innuendo. Here was a Romantic, better still an Aesthete and a poet, living in his ivory tower and shunning the materialism of a growing bourgeoisie, that he might allow his soul to search the heights and depths of poetic fancy. The history of Rossettian biography is a history of attack and counter-attack, of siege and defence, and with the publication in 1964 of Rosalyn Glynn Grylls's book, A Portrait of Rossetti, the process is still continuing. Oswald Doughty, with A Victorian Romantic, seemed to have spoken the last word in 1949, but Mrs Grylls contends otherwise. She dissents from Professor Doughty's attitudes:

"He often proffers hostile interpretations of Rossetti's motives which can be disproved by the facts. It seems to me extraordinary for a biographer not to give his 'hero' the benefit of the doubt." 2.

Rossetti's biographers are sometimes illuminating, sometimes exasperating; sometimes they may explain his work, but too often they descend to mere gossip, and in this study I shall be concerned with his life only when it contributes to the understanding of his poetry.

It must be admitted that most of his poetry, especially his non-ballad poetry, is autobiographical in content, and the relations between his poetry and his life have been well exposed by Doughty; but then most poetry of the type that Rossetti is writing has its origin in some personal experience - that is the nature of his art, part of his aestheticism, as will become apparent in the course of the argument. The problem for criticism is whether or not the poetry lives a life of its own, whether it is indeed a 'creation', or whether it remains merely on the level of a well-written diary.

Howard Mumford Jones, writing in 1956, suggested that

"a fresh approach to Rossetti would reveal... that in an age notable for didactic poetry, he is both a subtler moralist and a profounder thinker than many more celebrated bards." 3.

And this has been my experience, especially as far as his profundity of thought is concerned. Some critics, notably R.D. Waller and Graham Hough, have strongly criticised Rossetti for a lack of philosophical structure. It may be agreed that he does not make explicit an ordered - and he would think artificial - philosophy, but his poetry does have

an intellectual basis, despite appearances to the contrary, and where appropriate I have endeavoured to point this out, more particularly in the discussion on love in Chapter Three.

Another problem, related to this one of intellectualism, is that of realism. The question of what, for Rossetti, was 'real' is constantly provoked by his work, and becomes an important factor in critical attitudes towards him. The issue centres on the relationship between internal, psychological experience and external, physical experience, the relationship between the tangible and the intangible. What relationship, if any, did Rossetti see? What was the relative importance of each, and what, in fact, was reality as he saw it? These questions occur at intervals throughout Part I, and I have attempted to draw the threads together and reach some conclusion in the second half of Chapter Four.

The argument falls naturally into two parts. The first explores the nature of Rossetti's Romanticism, which process will reveal his aestheticism. In Chapter One I have included, where appropriate, a discussion of further related questions, viz. in section (i), the influence of Ruskin on Rossetti, and, in section (ii), why the Pre-Raphaelites should have again proposed a 'return to nature'. Chapter Two considers the various manifestations of Rossetti's spiritual life in his poetry. Chapter Three continues this, by dealing with love and his religious sense, and then endeavours to see his
spiritual life, and so his art, as a whole, as spiritual aspiration. Chapter Four concludes Part One with a look at the aspect of Death, which often occurs in Rossetti's poetry—and which many find difficult to reconcile with the rest of his work, in particular with his attitude to love—and at the problem of Realism.

The purpose of Part Two is to relate his aestheticism to that of the Aesthetic Movement. Chapter Five deals with the withdrawal from society, whether it was an escape or a protest, and also with the relationship between Romanticism and Aestheticism, for, if Rossetti is linked with both, there is presumably some relationship to be found. Chapter Six first looks briefly at the influence which Rossetti came to exert on later artists; then at aesthetic theory, in particular that of Walter Pater, and its relationship to Rossetti's work; and finally reaches the answer to the question which originated this thesis—was Rossetti a 'representative aesthete'? Chapter Seven looks, again briefly, at the fall of 'aestheticism', and at reasons for this fall; and the whole concludes with some thoughts on the successes and failures of Rossetti's poetry, and with a suggestion as to why he has not become one of the greatest of England's poets.

In the course of this study, conclusions may sometimes be reached which differ from those of other critics, and when this occurs, it is perhaps valuable to remember Graham Hough's
remark, that criticism is esteemed "for the interest of the journey rather than for the destination reached." 4.

'Aesthetics' has been defined as 'the heterogeneous conglomeration of questions which arise from a thinker's interest in beauty and in art'. With this in mind, I feel justified in bringing into Rossetti's 'aestheticism' all that I do; however, the main implication of the term, as it appears in my title, is a discovery of the artist's attitude to art, of what he is attempting to do in his work. With Rossetti, the task is more difficult than with others, because he so seldom recorded explicit views on the subject. He was an artist, not a philosopher, and it is to his art we must look if we are to discover his 'aestheticism'.

6. Some 20th century critics think it invalid for criticism to look at an author's purpose. See Appendix A.
PART ONE

ROMANTICISM
Chapter One

PRE-RAPHAELOITISM

(1) The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was by birth three-fourths Italian, and even this gives him an association with English Romanticism. Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Coleridge, all visited Italy at some time or other in their lives, and Keats was buried there; Italy held a fascination for all of them, and in fact, there seems to have been quite an Italianate fashion in early nineteenth century England. Gabriel's father was one of many political exiles who reached England from Italy, and who quite probably helped to stimulate the fashion. It is this Italian element in Rossetti which has led F.L. Lucas to suggest that through him Italy gave to the England of Tennyson the same sense of beauty she had given to the England of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and, he may well have added, to the England of Byron and Shelley and the rest. Other observers ponder the relative influences of the three quarters Italian and

1. For a discussion of this fashion see C.P. Brand, Italy and the English Romantics, (Cambridge, 1957).

the one quarter English on his own work and character.

However, blood alone does not explain such titles as *A Victorian Romantic*, and its plural, *The Victorian Romantics*, and so it is the purpose of Part I of this discussion to explore the more substantial evidence of Rossetti's Romanticism, and, in so doing, also explore his aestheticism, for the two are inextricably interwoven. Sir Maurice Bowra has written that the Romantic spirit made a new appearance with the Pre-Raphaelites, and this phenomenon "Pre-Raphaelite" becomes the obvious point of entry for any study of Rossetti.

In 1848 Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt and John Millais were the founders of a group of seven artists who eventually called themselves the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. It was a well-documented affair but, as Graham Hough points out, this material "does not throw as clear a light as could be wished on the real ethos of pre-Raphaelitism." They do not appear to have at any stage clearly defined their aims, and some confusion (although mainly amongst their contemporaries) resulted over what they actually did set out to achieve.

3. For a summary of these opinions up until 1932, see R.D. Waller, *The Rossetti Family*, (Manchester, 1932), p. 181.


However, from the morass of attempts to sort it all out may be extracted the prefix "anti", and Gale Pedrick's pertinent comment in *Life With Rossetti*.

"In the simplest terms, the Seven thought British art was in a rut and wanted to do something about it." 7

Gabriel's brother, William, has recorded their contempt for "the commonplace anecdotal" subjects of most British painting of their time, and their hatred for the "cant about Raphael and the Great Masters" then current amongst academics, that which Mrs Angeli has referred to as "the fossilized academic tyranny of the time." 9 Gabriel and his friends saw the debased state of applied art in England, the academic mechanization of painting resulting from strict adherence to the Raphaellesque rules which were being taught to young artists in the Academy schools, and which were described by Ruskin in 1851, and they reacted strongly against it all.


William Rossetti has outlined four principles about which they appear to have had some sort of tacit understanding.

"I will...take it upon me to say that the bond of union among the Members of the Brotherhood was really and simply this - 1, To have genuine ideas to express; 2, to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; 3, to sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote; and 4, and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues."

The choice of title for their brotherhood was a little unfortunate, as it tended to cause much of the misunderstanding which arose about their aims: that they were anti-"Raphael", and that they imitated the errors of the early Italian painters. These interpretations were not, of course, meant at all. As Hough has pointed out in his excellent account of the P.R.B., the root of their objection to post-Raphael art was "its convention and mannerism in design," and Hunt and Millais at least, while wishing to abandon the affectations of the later schools, were still anxious to include in their doctrine all the accomplishments of those schools. It was not Raphael they disliked, but his uninspired imitators.

12. e.g. see Sharp, op.cit., p. 43.
The second point has been answered by H.C. Marillier, whose book on Rossetti's painting is generally acknowledged as one of the most authoritative.

"What they sought to follow in the old Italian models ... was the honest striving after nature, sincerity of style, decorative simplicity, and, by no means least, the pious selection of worthy subjects." 14

This may well be compared with William's four principles quoted above.

Gabriel Rossetti tended to apprehend an inherent mysticism in those early paintings more than any of the others, an attitude which permeates his own work throughout his life. We find the type of thing in a letter to James Collinson from Bruges in 1849, where he is writing about Memling's triptych in the Hospital of St. John.

"The visions of the third compartment are wonderfully mystic and poetical." 15

His two sonnets on pictures by Memling, also written in 1849, concentrate on Memling's evocation of religious

17. The dates I use for Rossetti's poetry are those given by William in Works, unless otherwise stated.
mysteries, and in three sonnets entitled Old and New Art, Nos. 74-76 in The House of Life, we have both this mystical appreciation of Art and the Pre-Raphaelite criticism of contemporary painting.

In the first of these, St. Luke the Painter, the poet honours Luke Evangelist, a painter, who, according to legend,

"first taught Art to fold her hands and pray."  
Works, p. 99.

Here, with this liturgical image of prayer, Rossetti testifies to a religious view of the function of art. This is not to say that he thought Art was for the propagation of religious dogma; rather that it was the medium whereby man, with the aid of symbolic phenomena, penetrated through the physical world to that ultimate reality beyond - in this case God - which all those with any sort of mystical or spiritual sensibility, no matter how unrefined, aspire to.

"Scarcely at once she dared to rend the mist of devious symbols: but soon having wist
How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day
Are symbols also in some deeper way,
She looked through these to God and was God's priest."

Works, p. 99.

As the priest mediated between man and God, so too did Art. This recognition of "sky-breadth and field-silence and this day" as symbols "in some deeper way" occurs again and again in Rossetti's work, and will often be alluded to in the course of this discussion.
The sestet of *St. Luke the Painter* makes reference to the art of Rossetti's own time, when art's "toil began to irk" and she "turned in vain to soulless self-reflections of man's skill." However, even in this twilight of artistic endeavour, there is still time to kneel and "pray again" before total darkness falls, and with it the total extinction of art.

In the second sonnet, *Not as These*, the poet shrinks from the Philistine world, "where never pencil comes nor pen," and from those poets and painters for whom "rhyme" and "paint" are the only aspects of art which demand "faith"—"I am not as these are." However, he must not rest complacent in his imagined superiority over those around him, because his eyes are not "set backwards", but "see on, and far." He is to look to "the lights of the great Past", who will illuminate "the Future's track." The "lights" were, of course, the early Italian painters, and these sentiments are Pre-Raphaelite.

The third sonnet in this group, *The Husbandman*, is an exhortation to action.

"Stand not ye idle in the market-place." *Works*, p. 100.

After all, referring to the Biblical parable,

"which of ye knoweth he is not that last Who may be first by faith and will?" *Works*, p. 100.
This is similar in thought to the third sonnet in the group, The Choice, which precedes Old and New Art. There, after the ways of pleasure - "Eat thou and drink" - /meditation - "Watch thou and fear" - the third alternative is "Think thou and act." It has not all been done. Climb onto a sand hill and look out to sea, look to the line of the horizon and then reach on beyond that with your mind,

"And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond, - Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea." Works, p.99.

It is an image which recalls Pope's mountain climbing metaphor of "a little learning" fame in his Essay on Criticism.

In 1850, mainly at the urging of Gabriel, the Brotherhood produced a magazine which after much thought and vociferation they called The Germ. It did not gain wide popularity, only four numbers being published, and its literary merits would rest mainly in its publication of some of the early work of Gabriel and his sister, Christina. We would expect to find in it some direct expression of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic values, but unfortunately this is not so, and indeed critics have been rather severe on its value in aesthetic matters. Oswald Doughty comments on No. 1:

"They discussed the propriety of including an article explaining Pre-Raphaelite principles in art, but decided that, as the number contained so many papers on art, this was unnecessary. For themselves it was certainly convenient. They always found some reason for not stating their aesthetic creed." 18.

An acute comment. Actually only one paper on art appeared in *The Germ*, No. 1 (issued in January, 1850), that on *The Subject in Art* by John Tupper. His writing is not exactly lucid, and meanders its way through the distinction between 'High Art' and 'Low Art', the adherence to nature in art (nature is copied in order to achieve the same delight in art that would be got from the original object in nature), a vague protest against critics who have "blundered up" to the 'High Art' left by antiquity and attacked it with callipers and compasses, and a proposal that, if Art is to regard the "general happiness" of man "by exciting the activity of his rational and benevolent powers," then the subject of Art "should be drawn from objects which address and excite the activity of man's rational and benevolent powers...." Tautology, according to the C.O.D., is saying the same thing twice in different words: Tupper says the same thing twice in the same words.

F.G. Stephens, writing as John Seward, fares a little better in his article, *The Purpose and Tendency of Early Italian Art*, published in No. 2. He opens by quoting from the back cover of the pamphlet.

"The object we have proposed to ourselves in writing on Art, has been 'an endeavour to encourage and enforce an

entire adherence to the simplicity of nature; and also to direct attention, as an auxiliary medium, to the comparatively few works which Art has yet produced in this spirit." 20

It is the former thought that he deals with in this paper, and informs us that

"We shall find a greater pleasure in proportion to our closer communion with nature, and by a more exact adherence to all her details... in whatsoever direction her study may conduct." 20

And, in making an interesting comparison with the sciences, he also shows that art is very much a moral concern.

"If... adherence to fact, to experiment and not theory... has added so much to the knowledge of man in science; why may it not greatly assist the moral purposes of the Arts? It cannot be well to degrade a lesson by falsehood. Truth in every particular ought to be the aim of the artist." 21

This becomes rather ironical when we consider the "aestheticism" of the 1890's, which Pre-Raphaelitism eventually led to, and Buchanan's charge of "fleshliness" later brought against Rosetti. However, it is worthwhile to note that at this stage at least, they had this moral view: that of fidelity of purpose, of sincerity in their work. This idea was also the theme of William's sonnet which was printed on the cover of the magazine. Again, no explicit creed is elicited (it is hardly an example of great literature), but

it defended the independence of the artist in the service of truth; the writer was to pursue his own subject honestly and with directness and precision. William says, in his Preface to the 1901 reprint of the magazine, that his sonnet

"...indicated, for writers, much the same principle which the P.R.B. professed for painters, - *individual genuineness in the thought, reproductive genuineness in the presentment." 22

William does not seem to have been aware of it, but there is a subtle difference between the generalised statement by Stephens - "Truth in every particular ought to be the aim of the artist" - and his suggestion of "individual genuineness in the thought" of the artist. William is moving the emphasis towards the artist himself, without reference to others. The artist is to be faithful to his own conceptions and observations, and to express them as truthfully and accurately as he can (to adhere to nature); and this move towards the isolation of the artist, where he is free to create according to his own dictates (for that is what it is), is, in effect, a step towards the path of "aestheticism", towards the "art for art's sake" doctrines of the end of the century.

It is also the doctrine emerging from Gabriel's prose tale, *Hand and Soul*, published in No. 1 of *The Germ*. The story involves the exposition of a particular attitude to art, but it is also a powerfully evocative account of the triumphs and despairs of a young artist, and is by no means a "manifesto of art dogma" as William has suggested (although I hardly think he meant to be derogatory: William was a staunch defender of his brother). It is the most important literary work contained in the magazine, and its intense and concentrated style is in a direct line with Walter Pater and D.H. Lawrence.

The artist in the tale, Chiaro dell' Erma, finds that to work for fame or self-display does not satisfy him, and neither does the preaching of moral values. At the depths of his despair and bewilderment, an image of his soul, a woman, appears before him, and quietly outlines what he ought to do.

"What He hath set in thine heart to do, that do thou; and even though thou do it without thought of Him, it shall be well done.... In all that thou doest, work from thine own heart, simply."

*Works*, p. 554.

She bids him paint her, that he might know her.

"Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more."

*Works*, p. 555.

The artist, then, is to paint his own soul, to paint from his "own heart", his own perceptions and emotions, to be faithful to himself.

Also involved is a reconciliation between those two earlier aims of Chiaro's art which had led him to failure, between personal fame and moral proselytizing, between self and non-self, between man and God. The artist is to serve not one or the other of these, but both equally.

"Give thou to God no more than He asketh of thee; but to man also, that which is man's....Set thine hand and thy soul to serve man with God."

This is an aspect of the tale which critics neglect, and yet what it implies, the combination in art of both the physical and the spiritual, both hand and soul, is at the heart of Rossetti's aesthetic purpose; it is the symbolic representation of "sky-breadth and field-silence" already noted in Old and New Art.

Oswald Doughty has said that the matter of most of the aesthetic articles in The Germ "is clearly taken from Hunt or Rossetti." We are now in a position to notice that there is already a slight difference in this matter, depending on which of the two it was taken from. From Hunt we have 'fidelity to nature', which involved close attention

to external detail (see quote from Stephens above), and from Rossetti 'fidelity to the soul', which, although not explicitly stated, would suggest attention to inner detail. This is a distinction seemingly not noticed by any of the Brotherhood at this time, not by William, and not, as far as I am aware, by any of the critics, but I think it is a valid one, especially as there would seem to be a conflict of interests in being faithful to both external and internal nature. To pay close attention to the soul would appear to suggest concentration on a rather esoteric and introspective world, with only a somewhat tenuous contact with external reality (depending on the character of the personality involved), and this is undoubtedly what many critics have seen in Rossetti. Hence the accusations of escape to his private dream world. This distinction I have made would certainly seem to be the germ of that later parting of ways between Rossetti and Hunt; and Rossetti, I think, does resolve whatever contradictions may occur, although, in order to do so, he treats external nature in a rather particular way. This will be more fully outlined in the section on Nature and in Chapter Four.

The Germ, as noted earlier, was not successful. The ideas were there, but were difficult to sort out and not well expressed - with the exception of Hand and Soul - and

25. See Chapter Five.
the result was that "the rambling aesthetic articles made little or no direct appeal on behalf of Pre-Raphaelitism."

The outcome of this is the suggestion that it was Ruskin who discovered aesthetic principles which justified the term "Pre-Raphaelite".

"The propaganda in The Germ is not impressive... The anonymous announcement at the end of No. 1 concerning the aims of the magazine is very sketchy and strengthens the feeling that the crystallizing of a mood into anything, like a respectable set of principles, was due to Ruskin's polemical defence in the following year." 28

The Brotherhood had met a great deal of criticism in the early 1850's when their work was first exhibited, and especially when the significance of the initials P.R.B. was discovered. Ruskin had by this time established himself as an influential critic, and it was suggested that he be approached and asked for support. Coventry Patmore knew him and made the approach. The result was a letter to The Times on May 13, 1851 and another on May 30.

Ruskin was a reliable and respectable Victorian gentleman, and so with his support, "the fears of insidious moral,

27. See quote from Stephens, p. 17f.
religious and political revolt died away." The importance of these letters, along with the publication of a book entitled Pre-Raphaelitism (it dealt mainly with Turner), for the exposition of the Pre-Raphaelite creed must ever remain unproven one way or the other, although the influence that the movement was able to effect on public taste must certainly owe a great deal to them. Indeed Ruskin's whole insistence upon the importance of the aesthetic, and his application of it to the local scene, to the drabness of Victorian life, his crusade for an awareness of these matters, becomes an important contributing factor to that trend in public taste which later concluded in 'decadence' and 'the nineties'. Of course his artistic standards were social and ethical rather than 'aesthetic'. Great art is produced by a great society, and art is directly related to goodness; it is the regenerative process whereby a sick society might be saved. Art, for him, had an almost utilitarian purpose which might have gladdened the heart of Bentham or Mill, and this led some of the later aesthetes to distrust his principles, even though he had actually prepared the ground for them. Of the P.R.B., the only person whom he could have influenced would have been Hunt, for he was the only member who had, up to 1848 or later, read Ruskin at all.

30. Doughty, op. cit., p. 112.


32. See W.M. Rossetti, Memoir, p. 135. Collinson is named as a possible exception.
Ruskin had paid no attention to their exhibitions in 1849 and 1850, and had to be approached by Patmore in 1851 before he took any serious notice of them. The personal acquaintance between Rossetti and Ruskin did not commence until 1853, and, from a letter Rossetti wrote to William Allingham in 1854, it would seem he was only then reading at least *The Stones of Venice* for the first time.

"I've also read some of the *Stones of Venice* having received all Ruskin's books from him." 33

If he was reading it again, surely he would have mentioned the fact.

Ruskin paid a great deal of attention to Rossetti and bought many of his pictures, and in all probability it was his patronage which allowed Gabriel to be so independent and to devote so much of his time to writing and painting.

"...Mr Ruskin undertook to buy, if he happened to like it, whatever Rossetti produced, at a range of prices such as the latter would have asked from any other purchaser.... I cannot imagine any arrangement more convenient to my brother, who thus secured a safe market for his performances." 34

Such patronage would be valuable to any artist and this arrangement was no doubt a most important feature of their


relationship. As far as his work is concerned, the general view is that Rossetti was too independent in spirit, and too filled with the artist's natural reserve for critics, to have been much influenced by Ruskin. Rossetti himself expresses the latter instinct in *Saint Agnes of Intercession*.

"In a moment the instinctive antagonism wedged itself between the artist and the reviewer, and I avoided his question."

*Works*, p. 559.

Ruskin had strongly held views and would offer his criticism whether it was asked for or not. Wilenski has described him as continually bullying artists into submitting to his ideas, and in Rossetti's case, the classic, oft-quoted example of this is in a letter Ruskin wrote to him in 1857.

"You are a conceited monkey, thinking your pictures right when I tell you positively they are wrong. What do you know about the matter, I should like to know?"

And Welby, writing before Wilenski, said that Ruskin "offered Rossetti that worst of insults, of requiring him under threat to be other than his genius bade him be".

Oswald Doughty appears to be the only critic to suggest that Rossetti worked to please Ruskin: he says it was this

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35. e.g. see Marillier, *op. cit.*, p. 36 et seq.; Angeli, *op. cit.*, p. 82 et seq.; and Grylls, *op. cit.*, p. 47 et seq.
desire that prompted the realistic detail of *Found* - and not Hunt's theory of truth to nature - and similarly, when Rossetti agreed to teach at the London Working Men's Club, Doughty says it was more from wisdom of pleasing Ruskin than from social idealism. But these observations do not necessarily involve Ruskinian influence in Rossetti's work - except in *Found*, and that is not a characteristic work - rather the two incidents show Rossetti making an effort to 'please' a rather demanding friend and benefactor, a gesture to a valuable patron, or even an attempt to gain some sort of respite from continually attempted 'subversion'. I think Rossetti had great respect for Ruskin, but his whole personality was too independent to accept advice from anyone, unless he particularly wanted it, or unless, of course, the advice was congenial to his own ideas.

Eventually the intimacy lapsed. Rossetti, as his own reputation grew, became even less disposed to conform to the likes of anyone else, and Ruskin, as ever, pronounced judgment with his usual exactness. The friendship weakened until, in about 1865 or 1866, they saw the last of each other, "mutually regretful, and perhaps mutually relieved, that it should be the last".

Just as this relationship was severed, so was that between Rossetti and the other members of the P.R.B. Hunt has

said that each member was to be independent - "we were to work
out our several natures" - and that is just what they were. 
Hunt adhered to his "truth to nature" principle, and mainly
interpreted the life and work of Christ; Millais went the aca-
demic way, and painted according to the "point of view of the
healthy, simple-minded Englishman"; and Rossetti "created a
world of his own imagining". Woolner went to Australia, and
Stephens and William were "of no account".

Rossetti himself later spoke of Pre-Raphaelitism in
derogatory terms.

"Pre-Raphaelites! A group of young fellows who
couldn't draw!... Why should we go on talking about the
visionary vanities of half-a-dozen boys? We're all grown
out of them, I hope, by now."

If it was all based on "visionary vanities", then these had
quite an amazing effect on English art. Percy Bate, in 1899,
saw the association of Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais as resulting in

"A wave of freshness and enthusiasm that, like the
ripples caused by the stone flung into the water, spread
and grow, and quivered and quickened, in so many and such
divers ways that none shall say at any one definite point
this was the limit, and here the influence of the Pre-Raphae-
lites ended."

Vol. I, p. 139.
42. J.A. Rythian, The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, (London,
1903), xix.
44. quoted in R. Caine, Recollections of Rossetti, (London,
1928), p. 61.
45. P.H. Bate, The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters, (London,
1899), p. 4.
And Francis Bickley, before quoting this same passage from Bate, says that without the P.R.B.,

"the critics would not have raised their clamour, Ruskin might have remained uninterested, and converts would almost certainly have been longer to seek." 46

The substantiation of such generalities is beyond the scope of this work, but there are two impulses which emerge from these "visionary vanities" that are important for literature, and important for a study of Rossetti; they are the two impulses expressed by Hough: "one a patient naturalism, the other almost in contradiction to it, a flight from actuality into archaic romance". There now follows, in the remaining two sections of this chapter, a discussion of the appearance of these two elements of Pre-Raphaelitism in the work of Rossetti.
"I believe it is no wrong observation that persons of genius, and those who are most capable of art, are always most fond of Nature; as such are chiefly sensible that all art consists in the imitation and study of Nature." 1

Holman Hunt quotes this passage from Pope at the beginning of Chapter Six in Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and, as well as giving authority to his theory, it reminds us that fidelity to nature is no new principle to art or literature. Why, then, did Hunt and the others again propose a "return to nature"? At first sight, this question may appear to involve a somewhat complex answer, but further consideration proves this is not so, and the answer is to be found already well expressed by F.L. Lucas. He wrote of the P.R.B.:

"Their main principle was a return to Nature; most artistic revolutions, are, indeed, returns to Nature. That is itself very natural. A great artist arises; he forms his school and a style; stifles into a formula, /the style a 'soulless self-reflection of man's skill' until at last a new generation blazes into revolt and 'returns to Nature'. These young men wanted to get back from formulae to truth, from vague generalizations to seeing things vividly and minutely. They wanted something less idealized than Raphael; they found it in the simpler sincerity of the Italian painters before him; hence their name. That was all." 2

For most of the P.R.B., in their early stages of development, this tenet implied careful attention to details and scrupulous fidelity to all observed facts, but such a procedure must soon lead to mere photographic reproduction. Hunt was

2. F.L. Lucas, op.cit., p. 103.
aware of this, and made certain to deny that it was part of their aim.

"Despite differences, we both (i.e. he and Rossetti) agree that a man's work must be the reflex of a living image in his own mind, and not the icy double of the facts themselves. It will be seen that we were never realists. I think art would have ceased to have the slightest interest for any of us had the object been only to make a representation, elaborate or unelaborate, of a fact in nature." 3

But it was Rossetti whose work was more apparent as "the reflex of a living image in his own mind". His fidelity to nature was fidelity to his own nature, to his own soul, as we have seen, and the result was something rather more complex than that found in the rest of his fellows.

Sometimes he does pay particular attention to detail, the most celebrated example being in My Sister's Sleep.

"Our mother rose from where she sat:
Her needles as she laid them down,
Met lightly, and her silken gown
Settled: no other noise than that."

Works, p. 165.

This is an early poem and, with this detail, may be said to be Pre-Raphaelite; however, while he does the same thing again later in some of his poetry - for example, each reed's "clinging diamond" in Winter, Works, p. 223 - his object is not merely to list external facts. What concerned him far more than the analysis of individual items, was the total impression of a

scene, and even in My Sister's Sleep the slight sound of the needles is used for the emotional effect it creates, rather than the observation for its own sake. William says this is the Italian element emerging in his brother, since Italians "are not, as a rule, so minute in observation of scenery, so full of 'gush' over hills and trees ... as some English people have become"; they are concerned with the over-all effect of a scene — "whether it is cheerful, gloomy, homely, sublime, or whatnot". William then introduces a very relevant and penetrating comment on his brother:

"To the beauties of Nature he was not insensitive, but he was incurious, and he valued them more as being so much fuel to the fire of the soul than as being objects of separate regard and analysis." 5.

Most critics notice his preoccupation with the emotional crises of men and women (some would say only women, but usually when it is a woman who is specifically involved, there is also a male onlooker who is very much there by implication, whether he be husband or lover, or both), and say, therefore, that he "lacked interest" in nature, or that it was just an "accessory", that it merely formed the "background" for these emotions. William Sharp went so far as to say that he "certainly did not

love it as a poet - neither with the passion of Shelley, the
joy of Keats, the deep understanding of Wordsworth, nor the
enthusiasm of Burns". Nature may not have stirred him in the
same way as it did the Romantics, and yet it cannot be said
to have made no impression on him at all, and to regard it
merely as a "background", or an "accessory", is, in my view,
inadequate.

He valued nature as "fuel to the fire of his soul", to
go back to William's phrase, and the result is that he con-
tinually compares the mood of nature with his own spiritual
state. Very rarely is nature a source of inspiration in itself;
often is it a reflection of some human, inner emotion.

"Very like indeed:
Sea and sky, afar, on high,
Sand and strewn seaweed, -
Very like indeed."

 Works, p. 206.

In The Lovers' Walk (Works, p. 78), there are direct
analogies between scenery and the lovers' emotions, gained
through applying an image first to some aspect in the scene
and then to some aspect of the lovers. Compare: "twining
hedgelowers" with "hand that clings in hand"; "still glades"
with "faces scarcely fann'd"; a "stream that draws the skies
deep to its heart" with "mirrored eyes in eyes"; and "the
Summer land of light and cloud" with "one o'erarching heaven

of smiles and sighs.

In Down Stream (Works, p. 218), dated the same year (1871) as The Lovers' Walk, a similar device is used, when, as Gabriel himself observed in a letter to William Bell Scott, "two epithets are interchanged in each stanza between the landscape and the emotion".

Adieu (Works, p. 226), with its "soul so fain for a flight", addresses in turn the "whispering trees", the "turbulent seas" and the "sumptuous skies"; and The Sea - Limits (Works, p. 191), uses the sea as the basis for philosophical meditation.

The Hill Summit (Works, p. 98) is one sonnet where we almost find description for its own sake, but there are still tinges of emotion, a suggestion of fear of the darkness, of the "sloping shade", into which the traveller must now descend, having reached the summit of some hill; he stops to watch the day fade away before continuing, and there is a sense that his stop is as much an apprehension of what is to come, as from his desire to observe the beauty around him. The octet shows that Rossetti was well aware of nature's effects, with its description of the setting sun glaring through a bush—that evocative line,

"A fiery bush with coruscating hair."

In the sonnet, *A Dark Day*, the writer's gloom is compared with

"...the drops which strike the traveller's brow
Who knows not, darkling, if they bring him now
Fresh storm, or be old rain the covert bears,"

*Works*, p. 97.

and in *Autumn Song*, a lyric marred by seemingly ineffective repetition, the falling of leaves is an occasion for "languid grief".

The sonnets *Winter* and *Spring* are probably the only two works which are purely description, where there is neither evocation of emotion, nor that movement from external to internal experience which is apparent in such poems as *The Card-Dealer* and *Sunset Wings*. The former is not dealing with the "natural" world, but its first four stanzas are evidence of Rossetti's ability at description. A female card-player is dealing her pack, while "around her" a dance "breathes its eager heat"; the cards fall on the board "as 'twere a heart that beat"—and as they do so, the painter's eye for colour makes itself felt.

"Her fingers let them softly through,
Smooth polished silent things;
And each one as it falls reflects
In swift light-shadowings,
Blood-red and purple, green and blue,
The great eyes of her rings."

Then he makes a movement in thought characteristic of his poetry, in this case from the specific to the universal, and now the woman becomes Fate dealing out the cards of Life; we only see each card as it falls, but

"she knows
The card that followeth."  

*Works*, p. 175.

*Sunset Wings* contains a similar movement; this time a scene from nature becomes a mood of the soul. The first three stanzas contain some of Rossetti's finest descriptive verse, and then the fourth stanza marks the change of emphasis: now the whole scene of dying day becomes an image of the last flights of Hope.

"And oh! thou dying day,
Even as thou goest must She too depart,
And sorrow fold such pinions on the heart
As will not fly away?"  

*Works*, p. 220.

Stopford A. Brooke has said of this process:

"Sometimes a transient loveliness of nature, felt as if it were an actual passion of the soul, seems to lose all that is material and become a spiritual thing."  

10

This is what has occurred in *Sunset Wings*, and it happens again in *Silent Noon*. There the scene around the lovers is in complete harmony with their mood, and becomes a kind of silent song of love; the peace and serenity of it all, the sense of suspension as

"the dragon-fly
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky",

is the same effect as is created by Vaughan Williams's Pastoral Symphony (although the scale in Rossetti's sonnet is somewhat more limited). In this poem the emotion of the lovers is not explicit, and, apart from "your eyes smile peace", the only clue to what Rossetti has done is in the last three lines.

"Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
This close-companioned inarticulate hour  
When twofold silence was the song of love."

*Works*, p. 81.

What has happened is that the mood of the surrounding scene has become indicative of the mood of the lovers, which is symbolism, and, again, that function of art expressed in *Saint Luke the Painter*. Megroz describes it thus:

"The forces and scenes of non-human nature, such as winds and waters, sun and moon, forests and meadows, storm and stillness, are made to serve as metaphysical imagery by Rossetti much more than as pictorial description for its own sake. He was a visionary rather than a nature poet, and the natural was for him the necessary symbol of psychic realities." 11

The process occurs also in *The Woodspurge* (*Works*, p. 205), where a weed becomes a symbol of grief; in fact, further than that, it becomes the grief itself. The poet slumped on the grass in some moment of "perfect grief", and came to gaze absently yet fixedly at one particular weed - all he noticed

was that it had "a cup of three". He gazed at it until its image gradually imprinted itself on his mind, where, by all the natural laws of association, it related itself immediately to the predominating emotion of the moment, grief. Rossetti, characteristically, does not seek profound reflection from the experience - and memory itself has forgotten the moment

("From perfect grief there need not be Wisdom or even memory");

but something was learnt at that particular time, and that will never be forgotten, because that tiny, seemingly inane crumb of knowledge - that "the woodspurge has a cup of three" - becomes the very emotion which brought it into existence: in the mind of poet it exists as the emotion itself.

The failure to understand this led E.B. Burgum to condemn Rossetti, along with most other Victorian art, for merely having the "mood to write", "the romantic imperative to be a poet", for failure to "handle an emotional state", for having "no emotional state to handle", and so for seeking consolation in "the three petals of the woodspurge cup". The poetry somewhat belies this view I think.

The question of reality also arises here. What was real for Rossetti - the plant or the emotion? Or the remembered crumb of knowledge? This is a question frequently provoked

by his work and will be more fully dealt with in Chapter Four.

Before leaving this section, we may note the divergence in meaning of the word "Nature" between Rossetti and Hunt. We have already observed the beginning of this divergence, in Rossetti's movement towards the independence of the artist as opposed to Hunt's more moralistic outlook, and Hunt's quotation from Pope gives another clue to their differences, for his view of Nature is more that of the eighteenth-century Augustans and pre-Romantics than Rossetti's, which is that of the early nineteenth-century Romantics of Keats and Shelley. A.O. Lovejoy, in *Nature* as Aesthetic Norm, has listed the various uses of the term "Nature" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and so is of assistance here. Sense One, "Nature as empirical reality", and especially its "implied desiderata" - "literal realism, fidelity of reproduction of objects or events imitated" - applies to Hunt, and is a characteristic eighteenth century sense of "Nature". Sense Fourteen, "freedom from influence of convention", and sense Eighteen, "the familiar and intimate: the 'natural' as that which is most congenial to... each individual", apply to Rossetti, and the latter sense in particular is one of "the essentials of the aesthetic creed of Romanticism".

It is the landscape of the soul that is "congenial" to Rossetti, that which is truly "familiar and intimate"; and it

is the beauty and terrors of that "natural" world which occupy
his poetry - this is not to imply an exclusion of external
nature, but certainly a precedence over it. His descriptions
can be effective, but his practice is to subordinate them to
some emotional or spiritual purpose.
(iii) Medievalism

Having observed Rossetti's subordination of physical imagery to some spiritual or higher purpose, we may consider briefly this process further. In such poems as *The Blessed Damozel*, we find an impression of solidity, that which Walter Pater called a "definiteness of sensible imagery", used in a scene which is certainly emotional, but also spiritual, and, depending on individual reaction to the poem, possibly almost visionary. Pater compares this "definition of outline" with Dante, and so this becomes an aspect of medievalism.

"In *Biographia Literaria*... Coleridge says that his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* were to give supernatural things the appearance of reality. This desirable romantic quality is prominent in medieval ballad and romance, where impossibilities are accepted with a naive literalness mightily thrilling to a person who 'knows better'. In *The Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge seizes upon this quality of the ballad and consciously develops it, so that the poem is perhaps the finest example in English literature of the realizing of the strange.... All good medievalists try to get this effect, from Coleridge to Rossetti, whose *Blessed Damozel* watches the souls going by her 'like thin flames', and whose bosom warms 'the gold bar of heaven'." 3

It is, perhaps, problematical whether this is a romantic quality within Medievalism, or a medieval aspect of Romanticism; however, the medieval world, and in particular that part of it inhabited by Dante, attracted Rossetti a great deal, especially

in the days of the P.R.B., and Hunt even suggested that men who differed from "the cultured" of medieval times "were not poetic in his eyes".

A sympathy for the older forms of literature, and very often their imitation, had formed an integral part of the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and hence Rossetti, and the other Pre-Raphaelites, had numerous models to look to: Percy's Reliques, Chatterton's Rowley poems, Macpherson's Ossian, Coleridge's Christabel and Keats's Eye of St. Mark are some of them. Old ballads and romances fascinated Rossetti also, and, Victor Hugo-like, he spent innumerable hours in the British Museum reading works of chivalry and avidly looking for "stunning" words. The results of these researches are the archaic words, and Old and Middle English verb forms, often found in his work: 'albeit', 'fain', 'aureole', 'wast', 'citherns', and 'citoles' in The Blessed Damozel; 'reft', 'soothly', and 'orison' in Love's Nocturn; 'erst' in The Burden of Nineveh; and, to take two of the sonnets at random, 'hautboys' in Passion and Worship, and 'ruth' in Genius in Beauty - to name but a few. What he was looking for was obviously their emotional savour; they had the overtones of some previous, perhaps more innocent, and so more beautiful, age. Sometimes the success of this usage is doubtful - "where

4. For the stages in the development of Rossetti's medievalism see Doughty, op. cit., p. 321.
erst Pride fixed her sure abode" in The Burden of Minerva (Works, p. 57) - while on other occasions it can be highly successful, as, for example, the use of "ruth" in Genius in Beauty (Works, p. 80). But there are other aspects of medievalism in Rossetti's poetry.

In the courtly love traditions of medieval poetry, Cupid struck through the eye, and always the eyes were important. This is so in Rossetti too, where the eyes, and the face, often figure prominently.

"... thine eyes
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!"

Works, p. 75.

Further examples may be found in Hand and Soul, The Blessed Damozel, The Card-Dealer, Love's Nocturn, Soul's Beauty, The Dark Glass, Parted Presence, and many others. Eyes are also important in his paintings.

"The sweetness of love, the glamour of mysteries unknown, the brooding aspect of passion, the clear and placid joy of living, are all to be found in the limpid depths of his women's eyes - such wonderful eyes as no other artist has ever painted..."

Myers sees it as a return to the spirit of Leonardo, "to the sense that of all visible objects known to us the human face and form are the most complex and mysterious" - Rossetti's sense of the "mysterious" again.

7. Bate, op. cit., p. 50; and cf. Dr Hake quoted in W.H. Rossetti, Memoir, p. 427.
9. See above, p. 13f.
Hair also was important in descriptions of medieval ladies, especially golden hair, and this too can be found in Rossetti (in The Card-Dealer for example -

"...he were rich who should unwind
That woven golden hair" - Works, p. 174.

and in practically all of his figure paintings).

Rossetti's attitude to women, his approach to them almost as if to a deity, and his use of religious symbols in love poetry, may be seen as akin to medieval courtly love traditions, since these deified the woman and used liturgical symbol and structure in what was essentially a secular hierarchy. How much Gabriel actually knew of courtly principles is difficult to ascertain; however, he painted a watercolour called, Romant of the Rose, and there is a fragment (dated 1850) from the Roman de la Rose included by William amongst other translations in Works (p. 537). It would appear that he was at least acquainted with that work, although William does not mention it in his Memoir as part of Gabriel's reading background.

Lilies have been used as a symbol of purity from as early as the third century, and in the fourteenth century are found in such works as Chaucer's Tales of Sir Thopas and the Second Nun. Rossetti uses this same symbol in both his poetry, in

10. e.g. See Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde, Bk. V, 11.80ff.
The Blessed Damozel, and his painting, in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin. Later the same symbol was employed again by the aesthetes in the nineties.

Arthurian legend was an aspect of the medieval world which appealed to many writers in the mid-nineteenth century, and Tennyson, in particular, published in 1842, Morte D'Arthur and Sir Galahad, and in 1859, Idylls of the King. In 1864, Rossetti painted King Arthur's Tomb, and even though the subject appears little in his poetry, we may note, with Carr, that "while Morris wrote verse on the Arthurian legend he painted pictures of it". In his poetry, the interest is reflected in The Bride's Prelude and The Staff and Scrip, where the spirit of chivalry is to be found.

Many of the Romantics gave to their literature an air of remoteness or detachment, and Rossetti often does the same, thereby enabling Benson to compare Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and Christabel, for, in those poems, "there is the same romantic isolation" that can be found in Rossetti's work.

G.H. Ford notices the same thing; he says that many poems, such as The House of Life and The Stream's Secret, appear to be set in "a realm where historical time is forgotten", and

14. See below, Chapter Seven.
observes that most of the narratives, such as Rose Mary, Sister Helen and The Bride's Prelude, are set in the Middle Ages. He then says that Rossetti was drawn to the past "by its colour and, as he saw it, its romantic mystery".

The medieval world contained a sense of the sacred that became lost in the nineteenth century, when there was, as well as a growing materialism, a growing spirit of enquiry, which, triggered in the first place by the sciences, soon began to permeate religion and philosophy to the extent that the enigma of the universe, which had been a matter of faith for the Middle Ages, became a matter of doubt for the Victorians. However, there were still some who were sensitive to the "mystery" of life, and in the face of scientific enquiry and Carlylian Humanism, they responded again to this aspect of medieval sensibility. Further, historical scholarship and Russian criticism had revealed a clearer picture of medieval civilization: the Renaissance view that the Middle Ages was an age of Gothic barbarism and monkish superstition was no longer tenable, and the merits of medieval art came to be recognized. Thus, Rossetti responded to the mysticism of Heming, and used those medieval symbols outlined above; and critics found a "mystical adoration" in The Girlhood of Mary Virgin.

20. Ford, ibid., p. 130
22. See above, p. 13ff.
23. E.g. Knight, op. cit., p. 55; and Pedrick, op. cit., p. 82.
However, although Rossetti returned to medieval symbols, he did not return to the faith which had given them validity, and their use without that led to charges of sentimentality and vulgarity. It is the problem of realism again, and leads to comments such as those by Ifor Evans - who says that spiritually Rossetti did not exist in "an age of scientific discovery with an emphasis on 'the condition of the people!'", but in his own world "which had the decor of Dante's Italy" - and by A.C. Benson - who says/he "belonged in reality to the medieval school of Italian poetry". The question becomes, whether Rossetti was actually trying to live, at least imaginatively, in an earlier culture, or whether he was using the trappings of that earlier culture to contrast the present one - or was it just that those trappings were the most suitable expression for his particular communication? But, as yet, this must again remain unanswered.

It was said earlier that Dante's part of the medieval world attracted Rossetti in particular. He was well acquainted with Dante and the other Italian poets of that time: his father was a Dante scholar, and in 1861 he published his translations of Dante and his Circle, a most important contribution to the English literary scene. Graham Hough comments:

"The prevailing impression derived from them, in spite of much variety in detail, is an idealisation of love - a

love that was constant, enduring, and hardly conscious of any physical origin." 27

Doughty, in an article in Essays by Divers Hands, makes similar suggestions when he says that Rossetti's medievalism led him to translate these Italian poets, "whose chivalric cult had transformed the religious symbol of the Virgin or idealized motherhood into idealized woman, the Queen of Heaven, claiming the allegiance of the knightly soul." This links up with the aspects of chivalry and courtly love noted above. Megroz, too, has observed Rossetti's apparent worship of an ideal woman, and compares it with Franciscan Maryology. The early poem, Ave, is a good example of this, and although it is addressed to the Biblical Virgin Mary, Rossetti's attitude to her is not that of conventional Roman Catholicism - we may note William's comment that Gabriel was afraid this poem might lead to misconceptions of his ideas about Christian faith and dogma. In Mary was a convenient symbol for a more generalized conception, some higher "mystery", or perhaps just "idealized woman", as Doughty puts it. And this brings us to idealism and Rossetti's spiritual life, the concern of the next two chapters.

29. Megroz, op. cit., p. 171.
CHAPTER TWO

ROSSETTI'S SPIRITUAL LIFE: MANIFESTATION

One does not have to read very far amongst Rossetti's poetry before realizing that he was a man whose sensibilities led him to experience an intense emotional life. His intellect made him susceptible to all those higher mysteries of man's imaginative life that have absorbed poets for centuries, and his solar plexus (as Lawrence would have it) ever reminded him that man was a physical, as well as a mental, being; there is the inevitable struggle to reconcile these two, and his difficulties are by no means unique, but while he may not have been as successful as others in solving them, he still has much to offer us. These next two chapters will be concerned with this struggle, and with Rossetti's spiritual life as a whole. This chapter will explore the various forms in which it appears in his work. The following chapter will continue this, and finally draw all the threads together, in order to show that there is more unity in Rossetti's philosophy than many seem to think.

The discussion on Medievalism ended with mention of idealism, and how Gabriel was probably influenced in this by Dante and other early Italian poets. Acknowledgment of how the *Vita Nuova* taught him to curb passion through idealism can be found in a sonnet written in 1852, *On The Vita Nuova of Dante*. 

"...I long bound within the threefold charm
Of Dante's love sublimed to heavenly mood,
Had marvelled, touching his Beatitude,
How grew such presence from man's shameful swarm."

Works, p. 195.

In Love's Nocturn, written two years later, he presents a lover searching for his ideal love, in the absence of which

"Miserable phantoms sigh;
Quakes the pall,
And the funeral goes by."

Works, p. 71.

Still a young man when he wrote this poem (he was 26), he expresses that fear of death and desire for life common to most men of comparable age; as yet they have not reconciled themselves with death - it is not imminent enough to force such a reconciliation - and so they fear it and where possible avoid it.

"Yet from old time, life, not death,
Master, in thy rule is rife:
Lo! through thee, with mingling breath,
Adam woke beside his wife.
O Love, bring me so, for strife,
Force and faith,
Bring me so not death but life!"

Works, p. 73.

Doughty says that this poem shows Rossetti's "dependence upon an ideal love for salvation", to save him from his own lower nature. But here he wants not so much salvation as "life", and what young man with any measure of character does not have an ideal that he cherishes as his own, and longs for with all his being? Actuality, life within the material, and therefore

1. Doughty, op.cit., p. 149.
The Rossettian ethos is dominated by beauty and love; his adoration of ideal womanhood is his adoration of a universal and all-embracing Beauty, and it is characteristic of him to focus this worship, or love, on a particular woman, to use her as a symbol for his ideal. The process has already been noted in *Ave*, and it may also been seen in *The Stream's Secret*, where, throughout, there is the suggestion of a force or power, Love, beyond, and yet within, the particular beloved. It is this force which will *loosen* the bonds of his spirit; through love, and so through his beloved, he achieves spiritual freedom.

"...from the living spirit of love that stands
Between her lips to soothe and yearn,
Each separate breath shall clasp me round in turn
And loose my spirit's bands."


Rossetti also outlines the implication of his ideal love in this poem. It is the uniting of both the physical -

"Sweet hands, sweet hair, sweet cheeks, sweet eyes,
Each singly wooed and won" -

and the spiritual -

"most with the sweet soul
Shall love's espousals then be knit" -

and through this union is reached that ultimate perfection and beauty when all is one, and mere words are unnecessary, and indeed superfluous.

"Each on the other gazing shall but see
    A self that has no need to speak;
    All things unsought yet nothing more to seek,
    One love in unity."


Because he refused to neglect the physical element in love and beauty, Rossetti suddenly found himself - even after all his careful precautions to ensure favourable reviews for the first publication of his poetry - the victim of that rather notorious attack by Robert Buchanan: Rossetti was one of The Fleshly School of Poetry. He answered Buchanan's rather frail argument in an article in *The Contemporary Review*. There he wrote that

"...all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared...to be as naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times."

*Works*, p. 613.

And he gave the sonnet *Love - Sweetness* as an example. Here the octet enumerates the physical attractions of the beloved, and the sestet adds that which, if lacking, would cause all these attractions to "lose their sweet":

"The confident heart's still fervour: the swift beat And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing."

Works, p. 81.

But Buchanan was not convinced and in 1872 renewed his attack, this time in enlarged and pamphlet form. Most of this publication is merely emotive aggression, with little substance, and is usually treated with the disdain accorded to all such Victorianisms. However, there is one comment which is more worthy of notice than the rest.

"In the poem entitled Love-Lily he (Rossetti) expressly observes that Love cannot tell Lily's 'body from her soul' - they are so inextricably blended. It is precisely this confusion of the two which, filling Mr Rossetti as it eternally does with what he calls 'riotous longing', becomes so intolerable to readers with a less mystic sense of animal function." 3

This accusation of "confusion" of body and soul has been taken up in more sophisticated form in the twentieth century by Graham Hough. He says that Rossetti "mixes the different orders of his experience together...and ends in an emotional and spiritual mist". This may be so, but Rossetti was a Romantic, and dealing with a Romantic imaginative world which can be decidedly misty. He was not concerned with an artificial or arbitrary ordering of experience, but with an exploration of experience, with "the soul's sphere of infinite images"

"He deliberately confuses physical life with psychic life because the most urgent experience he knew of love was that soul and beauty were not strictly to be separated...." 

Hough also suggests that Rossetti was "perpetually tormented by the irreconcilability of the unsensual love he had idealized and the love of the senses". My quarrel is with the suggestion that Rossetti idealized an "unsensual love". On the contrary, Rossetti refuses to forget that all spiritual love is based in its physical aspect - which is what helped to provoke Buchanan's attack. Rossetti revelled in the physical, as can be seen in *Nuptial Sleep* and *Mid-rapture*, and his ideal love consisted, as seen in *The Stream's Secret*, of a union of the physical with the spiritual - "one love in unity"; it is a union of both the sensual and the unsensual, or as Walter Pater has noticed, quoting from *Love-Lily*,

"His chosen type of beauty is one, 'Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought, Nor Love her body from her soul.' Like Dante, he knows no region of spirit which shall not be sensuous, or material." 

Oswald Doughty too has noticed the same ideal.

"In *Love's Lovers* and elsewhere, Rossetti rejoiced in the realization at last of his own love-ideal, a harmony of physical passion crowned, he believed, by intellectual and spiritual affinities with his beloved..." 

And further, consider J.H. Buckley in *The Victorian Temper*:

"The experience of the higher love meant for Rossetti the perfect comprehension of all values material or spiritual."

Thus there was at all times "the concurrence of the soul"; but the soul can only concur if it has something to concur with, and that something was the sensuous side of love, and very much a part of Rossetti's ideal.

Hough, further, finds no unity in Rossetti's conception of love: "there is the Flame-winged and the White-winged, Passion of Love and Love's Worship." There is Soul's Beauty and Body's Beauty and "no real reconciliation between them is ever achieved". But is there no unity given by love itself? All the facets that Hough enumerates - and there are others too, for example the sad contemplation of a parted lover in *The Portrait* and in *Without Her* - are but varying forms of the one emotion, human love. It becomes a variation of the twentieth-century artistic problem of how to represent a disordered society in an ordered art form. In Rossetti's case, the problem was how to present the many and varied experiences of Love as a unified whole. If he merely presented these individual experiences without relating them to some total concept, then Hough's objection would be valid; however, all the examples Hough gives are from *The House of Life*, and

it is apparent from The Stealthy School of Criticism, that
Rossetti himself regarded this sonnet series as one poem,
each sonnet making an individual contribution to the whole.
We may well compare Stravinsky's Symphonies for Wind Instruments,
where the success of the work depends on the relationship
between individual chords, or short litanies, played success-
ively by contrasting groups of homogeneous instruments. Each
chord or litany is a unit in itself, has an excitement of its
own, and so could be isolated, but each is also related to
what comes before and follows after; there is no melody, in
the conventional sense of melody, to give unity, but the whole
is related by skilful use of contrasting consonances and dis-
sonances, movement and pause. In the same way, Rossetti saw
The House of Life as a total conception, with individual
sonnets having a life of their own, as Buchanan had seen in
Nuptial Sleep, but also having a relationship to what comes
before and follows after, a life as part of the whole. This
is not to suggest that there is necessarily any link in theme,
or progression in thought from one sonnet to another. Certain-
ly those which are similar in subject-matter are often grouped
together; but rather it is like a society. Each member of
the society has an individual life and existence of his own;
but collected together they make up and characterize that
somewhat vague, but still very valid term, society. In the
same way as "society" is a "total conception", so is The
House of Life.
The other point arising from Hough's remarks is that there is "no real reconciliation" between Body's Beauty and Soul's Beauty. In the sonnets with these names, which Hough refers to, Rossetti expresses the beauties and attractions associated individually with these aspects of human love, and there is certainly no attempt to reconcile them there. These are two parts, and two important parts, of that whole, The House of Life.

However, I have shown that Rossetti had such a reconciliation as his ideal, that this is what he was searching and striving for; but Hough does not believe he ever really achieved it. Naturally, in reality it is a difficult thing to achieve, especially as most people seem to divide their lives into some sort of medieval split between spiritual, or religious, and physical, or secular, life - when they enter a church they worship God, and when they leave it they worship Mammon. One has only to read Women in Love (most of Lawrence's work probes this problem sooner or later) to see how difficult it is, how both partners have to be so very "ready" for each other. In the light of this, it is no wonder that Rossetti did not achieve his goal easily, or even often; as he says in Michelangelo's Kiss,

"the soul
Touching at length some sorely - chastened goal,
Earns oftenest but a little."

Works, p. 106.
But there is sufficient evidence to suggest that there were at least some moments when his soul earned "a little". Such evidence is in The Stream's Secret, where the poet looks forward to the return of his beloved, to the renewal of that "dear heaven so long unknown", when they together reach this ideal relationship. Doughty has suggested that it was in Jane Morris that Rossetti at last found "the incarnation of his ideal", and maintains that this poem, dated 1869-70, refers to Jane, and not to Elizabeth, Rossetti's dead wife, as had been previously thought.

Hough's attitude may be explained, I think, by his view that Rossetti idealized an unsensuous love, and by his doubts about the validity of meaning in those very lines where, in my view, Rossetti was expressing this reconciliation—those lines, for example, at the end of the octet in Heart's Hope.

"Lady, I fain would tell how evermore
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
Thee from myself, neither our love from God."

Works, p. 76.

What Hough seems to object to is the bringing in of God; he says that Rossetti, in imitation of Dante, but unaware of Dante's "exact analysis and definition", simply turns "his own confused and all too human conception of love into the

highest value, and calls it God". This problem will occur again in the next chapter, but I fail to see, whatever Rossetti's view of God may have been, whatever the relationship he saw between love and God, that it alters the suggestions in these lines that, at this moment of consummation in love, the soul is indistinguishable from the body. In other words, the soul is reconciled with the body, and the woman is reconciled with the man in that "one love in unity", when communication between them has reached beyond the merely verbal - there is "no need to speak" - to that ultimate perfection of understanding where both speech and thought are one, that which is presumably the aim of all communication. I find it all perfectly meaningful.

Idealism such as Rossetti's contains inherent dangers. It could, for example, lead to "self" idealisation; and of this he was aware.

"Seek thine ideal anywhere except in thyself. Once fix it there, and the ways of thy real self will matter nothing to thee, whose eyes can rest on the ideal already perfected."

Works, p. 607.

It could also lead to frustration when reality raised the inevitable obstacles to its fulfillment, and this is found in Rossetti's work, especially as the personal circumstances

of his life, and indeed the circumstances of his age, were far from sympathetic to his particular idealism.

However, the frustration of thwarted love still does not occur as often as some critics would lead us to believe. It is found in *Love's Fatality, Stillborn Love, and Broken Music* in Part One of *The House of Life*, but, in Part Two of the series, there is what Evans has noticed as "a more general approach to life", and the frustration is rather with the recognition of lost opportunities and mistaken purposes, than with failure to realize an ideal. Throughout life, we continually face choices of action and direction, of acceptance and rejection, and when at a later date we look back at these decisions, we can see where they led, whether they were valuable or foolish. This is a theme of *The Landmark*, where the poet realizes that he has missed a sign-post of his life - "Was that the landmark?" - a sign-post rather different from what he had expected.

"I had thought
The stations of my course should rise unsought
As altar-stone or ensigned citadel.

But lo! the path is missed, I must go back."

*Works*, p. 97.

Also the poet is older now, and has become aware of the proximity of death.

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"Alas, the soul! — how soon must she
Accept her primal immortality, —
The flesh resume its dust whence it began?"

Works, p. 96.

And, with the realization of this imminence, he quite naturally is anguished at the thought of those wasted, idle days of his earlier youth:

"Would they be ears of wheat
Sown once for food but trodden into clay?
Or golden coins squandered and still to pay?
Or drops of blood dabbling the guilty feet?
Or such spilt water as in dreams must cheat
The undying throats of Hell, a thirst alway?"

Works, p. 103.

Similarly, in *The Sun's Shame* he looks at life's ironies and realizes why sunrise and sunset blush for the day's shame. In *Known In Vain* he fears that the will to work has awoken too late, and so in *The Heart of the Night* he pleads with the "Lord" for a renewal of vigour, even if it is late.

"O Lord, the awful Lord of will! though late,
Even yet renew this soul with dutious breath."

Works, p. 95.

A superscription expresses a sense of sorrow which would seem open to interpretation as being either for his dead wife or for lost opportunities. Even if we do take the former meaning, this is still one of the few poems in Part Two of *The House of Life* which may be said to refer to frustrated idealism. *Lost on Both Sides* is another, although it too

seems open to interpretation, and the "separate hopes" may refer equally to Rossetti's aspirations in poetry and painting, or to his attempts to fuse physical and spiritual love. The One Hope expresses the desire that after the "vain desire" and "vain regret" of this life he may at last find peace in the next, and that this peace may be completed by a reunion with his beloved. This too may be said to imply a frustration with the complexities of earthly life, but in general the frustration is far more often with his wasted opportunities than with thwarted idealism.

One of the most important results of Rossetti's idealism, as far as his aestheticism is concerned, is that in dreaming of his ideal he creates what Doughty refers to as his characteristic "poetic mood", that mood "in which he glimpsed the lotus land of his heart's desire: where sensuous beauty, peace, languor, sadness, pleasure, mingled to form for him a ravishing harmony of flesh and spirit". This mood was usually induced by a beautiful woman, but also on some occasions by natural phenomena and (more often) other works of art. In the latter category are all those sonnets for pictures, such as Our Lady of the Rocks (Leonardo da Vinci), An Allegorical Dance of Women (Andrea Mantegna), Ruggiero and Angelica (Ingres),
The Wine of Circe (Burne-Jones); and in particular A Venetian Pastoral (Giorgione). What he is attempting is not so much a re-creation of the picture, as a reproduction of his reaction to the picture, and this, while not of course purporting to be criticism itself, is characteristic of the sort of criticism employed later by Pater and others: it is an essentially "aesthetic" reaction to works of art.

In his painting, he often shows a similar reaction to his models, tending to idealize; and while the faces still retain a very definite individuality, they have become known collectively as the Rossetti type - so much so that Percy Bate was able to say that "he originated a new ideal loveliness", and D.H. Lawrence was able to describe Hermione Roddice as carrying her face "lifted up, somewhat in the Rossetti fashion".

R.L. Megroz has recorded some interesting comments on Rossetti's idealism. He says that Rossetti trod the road "which leads to an evermore urgent hunger for an unattainable satisfaction". The mind delves into dream, or into the past, and so for a while the memory of his dead wife provided him with a symbol of his aspiration. Then came the new passion for Jane Morris.

"Both the new love and the remembered ideal were shadows of the unremembered ideal which lives in every individual and is a buried memory of the womb; for there is the primordial

prototype of man's earthly paradise as of his heavenly paradise, the 'breathless bowers' that the lovers have forgotten." 26

Recent developments in medicine have suggested that the human foetus does have a considerable degree of consciousness before birth, so that such a "buried memory" may not be at all unreasonable, and there are suggestions of this very thing in Rossetti's poetry. It is, of course, Platonism, since the longing to regain a lost happiness is one of the characteristics of Platonic love in its highest form.

In Sudden Light there is a suggestion of some previous incarnation, of having "been here before", and so of the two lovers' having known each other before.

"You have been mine before, -
How long ago I may not know;
But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turned so,
Some veil did fall, - I knew it all of yore."

Works, p. 200.

The poet then turns on this pre-natal memory, and uses it to express his desire that it should all happen again, in some future realm, after death. If it has happened before, it can happen again.

"Has this been thus before?
And shall not thus time's eddying flight
Still with our lives our love restore
In death's despite,
And day and night yield one delight once more?"

Works, p. 200

In *The Birth-Bond*, written in the same year, 1854, there is again the sense of some past knowledge, dimly recognized, but not consciously understood. It is the recognition by two lovers that each was meant for the other: just as children born of common parentage have an intuitive and unspoken understanding of each other, so the lovers' souls share a secret recognition, a sense of having been born together in some forgotten realm of time.

"Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love, 
That among souls allied to mine was yet
One nearer kindred than life hinted of.
0 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!"

*Works*, p. 79.

At the common level this is love at first sight, but at Rossetti's more exalted spiritual level, it becomes Aristophanes's mystical recognition of the twin soul.

but she was never an end in herself,
Woman was Rossetti's primary inspiration, and he saw
beyond immediate physical beauty to the spiritual beauty beyond.

"To him the forms of human loveliness were in themselves dear and adorable, but they were only, so to speak, the first step in a shining stairway that led among the stars; they were but the alphabet of a passion whose finished scrolls were written by the very finger of God." 30

And this is very close to the Platonic ladder of beauty explained by Diotema to Socrates - which Benson either was not aware of, or did not acknowledge. W. J. Hamilton has summarised the ascent of the Platonic lover as follows:

"The stages of his ascent are from love of particular examples of physical beauty to physical beauty in general; thence to beauty of soul even if unaccompanied by beauty of body... and so to moral beauty in general; and finally to the beauty of knowledge, and through various branches of knowledge to that vision of the Form/Beauty itself which gives complete and unifying knowledge of truth concerning the whole universe." 32

It is also expressed in Castiglione's Book of the Courtier, where Bembo describes the passage of the soul in its search for union with "true angelic beauty". When the soul finally reaches the desired union, she gains the Platonic knowledge of universal truth: she

"understands all things intelligible, and without veil or cloud views the wide sea of pure divine beauty, and receives it unto herself, and enjoys that supreme felicity of which the senses are incapable." 34

Compare Rossetti:

"Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone, 
But as the meaning of all things that are."

Works, p. 83.

The merging of the soul with "true angelic beauty", and Aristophanes's concept of the twin-souls - with the lover's desire to "melt into his beloved", in order that they "should be one being instead of two" - is expressed, in somewhat

31. The Symposium, p. 94.
34. Castiglione, ibid., p. 301.
35. The Symposium, p. 64.
cruder terms, by Tom Brangwen in The Rainbow, and of course is Rossetti's ideal love, where the lovers are united, and body and soul are reconciled - that ideal, expressed in Heart's Hope, which Hough found so obscure. It can also be found in The Portrait (Works, p. 169f.), when the soul of the poet "enters in her soul" and "knows the silence there for God"; in Love's Testament (Works, p. 75), when the eyes of the beloved draw up the poet's "prisoned spirit" to her soul; in No. 2 of True Woman (Works, p. 93), when "they are one"; and in The One Hope (Works, p. 108), where union with the beloved is the "peace" sought for in the next life. In fact, throughout Rossetti's love poetry, is the sense, even when not directly expressed, that the lovers have lost their idiosyncrasies and, in the words of F.W.H. Myers, that "the two streams have mingled to become conscious that they are being drawn together into a boundless sea" - and it is pertinent to note that the sea is often used in his imagery.

Rossetti's conception of ultimate Beauty, the goal of all Platonic Love, is embodied in the sonnet written for his picture, Sibylla Palmifera, or Soul's Beauty, as it came to be called when added to The House of Life. He saw her enthroned "under the arch of life"; and again we find the importance of eyes.

"Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,
The sky and sea bend on thee, - which can draw,
By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath."

*Works*, p. 100.

Those who are looking for an intellectual definition will be somewhat disappointed; Rossetti knew better than to attempt the impossible, and contents himself with conveying an imaginative impression, for, as he later expressed in *Astarte Syriaca*, Beauty is

"Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery."


Heath-Stubbs criticizes the English Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic poets for being less intellectual than the French Symbolists, who, he says, "did not abandon all attempt to fuse intellectual thought with their imaginative vision". Later, he says Meredith's verse represents an attempt to build a metaphysical poetry on aesthetic experience, but that Meredith lacked a sufficiently sensitive imagination to accomplish it. Then he suggests this remedy:

"Platonism, with its idea of absolute beauty, was a philosophic tradition whereby such an aesthetic metaphysic might be constructed. More esoteric doctrines of neo-Platonic affinities, derived ultimately from German Idealism, furnished an intellectual basis for the Symbolist theory of poetry in France."

We ought now to be in a position to see that this is just what Rossetti was attempting. Heath-Stubbs has either not

read enough of Rossetti's poetry, or failed to realize its implications. The elements of Rossetti's Platonism have been well summarised by Doughty, whose statement may serve both to conclude this aspect of the chapter, and to finally repudiate Heath-Stubbs.

"These, then, are the main Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas inspiring the intellectual content of Rossetti's painting and poetry: the pre-existence of the soul, earthly love as the mutual recognition of twin souls, the ecstatic, intuitive apprehension in a region beyond the sense and intellect of an absolute reality which is the soul's reunion with God: a reality, in which absolute Beauty, Truth and Goodness are one." 40

A further aspect of Rossetti's spiritual life is that of the supernatural and the occult. It was only natural that a man with his sensibility and imaginative power should be fascinated by the mysterious world of the occult, by mesmerism and spiritualism; and those episodes in his personal life when he indulged in these interests have been well documented and speculated on by his biographers. In his work he appropriated themes of terror and mystery, which again link him with the Romantic Movement, with Ossian, Percy's Reliques, The Castle of Otranto, Chatterton and the 'Monk' Lewis school. The ominous wraith or "double" - which to behold is to read the death sentence of the beholder - is a very old superstition, and occurs in the picture, How They Met Themselves, in an

41. e.g. see Scott, op.cit., Vol. II, pp. 66 and 113-4; Angeli, op.cit., pp. 305 et seq.; Pedrick, op.cit., pp. 98-101; and Grylls, op.cit., p. 127.
42. Megroz, op.cit., p. 278.
image in the poem, The Portrait; in the prose Michael Scott's Woeing; and we may compare the imaginative confrontation of self in Lost Days and A Supercription. His story, Saint Agnes of Intercession, turns upon the idea of reincarnation, and builds up a gripping atmosphere of fear and illusion. Rossetti is always at his best when his task is to evoke a mood, as can be further seen in A Last Confession, and in Hand and Soul, and the latter again projects the artist's image in a form of self-confrontation. In The King's Tragedy an old woman's power of second sight foreshadows the King's doom, in Sister Helen the common superstition of melting a waxen image in order to secure some designed death is fully exploited, and in Rose Mary the plot hinges on the use of a beryl-stone - an instrument for prophesying the future, but requiring the viewer to be a virgin in order to gain truthful images. The use of the occult in Rose Mary has been well explored by C.K. Hyder in Volume 43 One of Victorian Poetry.

A development from his sympathy for medieval "mystery" is Rossetti's feeling for mysticism. It is an aspect that has so far been recurrent at odd intervals - lack of this sense tended to explain, for example, why Buchanan was so intolerant of Rossetti's portrayal of "animal function" - and there is little more that can be said about it, other than to note it as part of his spiritual life - especially in connection with his religious views. Stopford Brooke has described how

theological conflicts aroused little concern amongst the Pre-Raphaelites. If they cared about any theology at all it was about

"the inner mystic relation between the personal soul and the divine, between the saints, angels and spirits of the universe and their own spirit here on earth. They were in their early career, and especially Rossetti, mystics by nature and grace." 44

Brooke's comment on the nature of mysticism is also worth noting, as it serves to remind us again of the question of realism, and perhaps to explain the attitudes of some people to Rossetti's poetry.

"...Generally speaking it (mysticism) is that temper of mind and feeling which considers the apparent world and all its ways as not real, except relatively to our constitution; and the invisible world of the spirit and of life, outside of our world of sense-perception, the real world. And that is Rossetti's position as a poet. It makes his poetry difficult to that large class of persons who have no mystic tendency, to whom all mysticism appears impossible." 45

In this chapter, then, I have outlined the various forms of Rossetti's spiritual life as they appear in his poetry: Idealism, Platonism, the Occult and Mysticism. It will be the purpose of the next chapter to consider the "religious" nature of his work more closely, and to associate it with the aspects just dealt with, in order to view them all as manifestations of the one phenomenon—the core of Rossetti's aestheticism—spiritual aspiration.

44. Brooke, op. cit., p. 131.
45. Brooke, ibid., p. 149.
The atmosphere of the Rossetti household was such that anyone brought up in it would be used to intellectual and spiritual activity as a normal function in life, and it was always accepted that Gabriel would become some sort of artist. His mother instructed him, as she did the other children, in Protestant Christianity, and her teaching was the primary source of his wide knowledge of religious symbols and mythology. As the children matured, William became a free-thinker - Bickley says "of the standard type of his generation" - and Gabriel lost interest in theological arguments about dogma: the natural scepticism of his intellect led him to reject attempts to rationalize religious beliefs, just as it led him to reject "faith". However, his full spiritual life and ready response to Mystery meant that the emotional and sensuous aspects of religious ceremony always appealed to him. He delighted in the symbol and ritual, if not in the faith, of worship so that, like his father, he was ever divided between his rationalistic mentality and the attraction of religious mysticism.

An expression of this is in the two sonnets, written in 1853, entitled The Church-Porches. In the first he enters a church with his sister, and they

"shall find there
Silence, and sudden dimness, and deep prayer,
And faces of crowned angels all about."

Works, p. 198.

But in the second they must leave:

"We have no more to sing
Or say."

Works, p. 198.

It may be irksome to do so, to re-enter the heat and dust of
the outside world, especially when it is so clear and cool
inside, but

"It is/bidden, sister, let us go."

Works, p. 198.

Holman Hunt has told us that Rossetti treated the gospel
simply as "a storehouse of interesting situations", and R.D.
Waller and Graham Hough have suggested that he used Christian
symbols as "mythological decoration". Waller compares the
procedure of the mystics, who often used "the vocabulary of
human passion to express divine love", and suggests that
Rossetti has reversed this procedure. And yet, the use of
religious imagery in a context of love is no innovation: love
was Cannonised by Donne as long ago as the early seventeenth
century. However, the use of religious terms and images can
certainly be found throughout Rossetti's poetry.

3. Hunt, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 172; and cf. W.M. Rossetti,
Memoir, p. 408.
4. R.D. Waller, The Rossetti Family, (Manchester, 1932),
p. 204f., and Hough, op. cit., p. 78.
In the 1870 edition of Love's Testament the terms of the eucharist are employed: the poem is addressed to the loved one who presents "the body and blood of Love in sacrament", whose breath is "the inmost incense" of Love's "sanctuary", and who, intent upon Love's will, "blent" her life with the poet's,

"And murmured o'er the cup, Remember me!"  

It is interesting to observe how these terms were altered for the 1881 edition: the beloved then presented her "heart" (instead of the "body and blood of Love") as Love's "testament" (not "in sacrament"), and she murmured, "I am thine, thou'rt one with me!" (instead of, "Remember me!"). It becomes another statement of the merging into one of his Platonic ideal and we can only speculate/reasons for the change.

In Lovesight, the face of the beloved is an "altar", where the "spirits" of his eyes worship that "Love" which is made known through her. There is a similar idea in The Portrait when he says,

"In painting her I shrined her face."  

Works, p. 169.

The effect of such imagery is to create in Rossetti's art a sense of reverence and worship which critics, recognizing that it is not directed at the conventional God of Christianity, have been at pains to discover the object of. Some have read

6. These quotes are from the 1870 version; ed. Doughty, Rossetti's Poems, pp. 105-6.
Old and New Art, where Rossetti testifies to a religious view of Art, and see Art as the object. Frances Winwar in Poor Splendid Wings for example.

"Gabriel...seemed to believe in no orthodox God, had no reverence or passion but for the holy spirit of art." 7 Others observed the context of love and put forward Love as the object of his worship. Two of these were Ifor Evans:

"...he possessed towards Love an element of worship, rarefied and complex...." 8

And E.B. Burgum:

"The experience of love became the revelation of a natural religion." 9

Others again have seen it all as a religion of beauty— Doughty for example.

As far as Art is concerned it was not itself the religion, but merely the medium for realizing a religious attitude, for penetrating through the physical world to the spiritual reality beyond. Lord David Cecil, in an essay on Rossetti, links art and love as being the primary sources of his inspiration.

10. See Doughty, op.cit., p. 233.
Undoubtedly he did get "exquisite experiences" from love and art, but he valued love rather more than Cecil hints. Cecil says that he thought Love and Beauty "were the true subjects for the artist; so he wrote about Love and Beauty". Cecil, in saying this, is attempting to link Rossetti directly with the aestheticism of the "Art for Art's Sake" Movement, but Rossetti's aestheticism treats Love and Beauty, particularly Love, in a rather different way; they were more than just "true subjects for the artist". Beauty for him was the great Mystery he expressed in Astarte Syriaca and Soul's Beauty, that which Mary was symbolic of in Ave.

"Thou headstone of humanity,  
Groundstone of the great Mystery,  
 fashionéd like us, yet more than we!"


As a lover he was naturally very concerned with beauty in his beloved, and the beauty of the human face in particular attracted him; but this beauty was never an end in itself, rather it was, as Benson has noted, "a deep-seated thirst for the mystery, whatever it may be, that hides beneath and beyond it". His sympathy for this mystery often brought with it awe and reverence, and a sense of kinship with the immortal

14. See above, p. 167f.
and the eternal, which explains the attitude of those who see his religion as one of beauty. However, of more concern to him, occurring far more frequently in his poetry, is Love.

What relationship he saw between Love and Beauty, whether he saw Love as the pursuit and apprehension of Beauty, or as the mediator between man and Beauty, as in The Symposium, is not made explicit. What I would suggest is that love was his emotional response to a woman and the process whereby he could realize his ideal union with her; but Love was not merely this process, and became the ideal union itself. It was the relationship itself which was the real core of his idealism, and so Love is that core, on it all else depends. This relationship is beautiful and so Beauty can be seen in Love (they are not synonymous), and the individual beauty of a woman is a reflection of universal Beauty. Love, in effect, is the ultimate communication possible for man, and in its wider more universal aspect, which was certainly Rossetti's concern, in its function as a relationship between any man and any woman, or between all men and all women, it becomes a life force, infinite in prospect, and, like Beauty, incomprehensible to man.

"And shall my sense pierce love - the last relay
And ultimate outpost of eternity?"

Works, p. 86.

It is possible to gain the impression from a study of the first sonnets in The House of Life that his conception of Love was gained from his attachment to one woman, but, as Ifor Evans
has noticed, "in sonnet XXXIV it becomes apparent that the loved one is only an instrument through which some mystical abstract quality, Love, becomes momentarily apparent."

"Lo! what am I to Love, the lord of all? One murmuring shall he gather from the sand, - One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand. Yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call And veriest touch of powers primordial That any hour-girt life may understand."

Works, p. 86.

again we note the importance of eyes.

In Life-in-Love it is apparent that Love is revealed through a new woman (and no biography is needed to explain that) and when, in The Love-Moon, Love accuses him of inconstancy, he replies that only through his attachment to this new woman can he respond to Love's "summoning bell", that is worship Love. Just as the Christian looks to union with God after death, so Rossetti here looks to the culmination of his desire after death, when the love-moon will have completed its cycle of "changes" to become a full moon, in which state it will show the way to Love. The end is to justify the means, and the poem may perhaps be read as mere apologia for his changed alliance, but other expressions in his poetry, and the subservient attitude apparent here, make it reasonable to assume that he really does sense some ultimate Love, towards which he aspires. What does emerge here is that Love is to be worshipped, and further, that it can only be worshipped through

a woman: Love, as suggested, is the ideal union with woman, and necessarily requires a woman to achieve that union with. He was engaged in that search for the fulfillment of his soul through woman that was implicit in the Platonic search for the twin-soul, a search seemingly continued into the twentieth century by D.H. Lawrence.

Nicolette Gray, in Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves, has observed this search, and by a comparison with the relationship between the soul and God (i.e. the soul seeks its fulfillment in God), says that it can lead to idolatry, "for does not the lover like every other human soul need God for his fulfillment?" But what if God, for the lover, is synonymous with Love? Miss Gray does, however, recognize that "his beloved was to Rossetti in some sense a symbol, not entirely an end in herself", and adds that in so far as this is so "he avoids the idolatry of Romeo and Juliet, Heathcliff and Cathy..." Just as he used nature to penetrate beyond physical reality, so he uses his beloved (not, of course, forgetting her in the process) to penetrate through the obscurity of the Universe, to reach the infinite and universal understanding beyond, Love.

"Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,  
But as the meaning of all things that are;  
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar  
Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;  
Whose unstirred lips are Musis's visible tone;  
Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,  
Being of its furthest fires oracular;  
The evident heart of all life sown and mown."

18. Gray, ibid., p. 45.
And through his beloved he can be raised from the status of a child to that of a god.

"I was a child beneath her touch, - a man
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she, -
A spirit when her spirit looked through me, -
A god when all our life-breath met to fan
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
Fire within fire, desire in deity."  

Rosalyn Glynn Grylls in her recent book on Rossetti has said that, besides "an emotional regard" for the legends and outward forms of religious observances, he had "a feeling for the necessity of some force to unify and give meaning to the diversity of the universe". But Rossetti had more than "a feeling", he had a definite conception of what that force was.

The concept of mutability occurs at intervals in his poetry and it is apparent that he was very aware of man's transient nature, as in *Pride of Youth*.

"There is a change in every hour's recall,
And the last cowslip in the fields we see
On the same day with the first corn-poppy.
Alas for hourly change!"

In *A Death-Parting*, in his grief for a parted lover, there is another sense of it.

"Leaves and rain and the days of the year,
("Water-willow and wellaway,)
All these fall..."
And similarly in Soothsay, one of the verses directly expresses the diversity and change in the world, but here, despite the transience, there is yet something that is constant, that is "evermore".

"The wild waifs cast up by the sea
Are diverse ever seasonably,
Even so the soul-tides still may land
A different drift upon the sand.
But one the sea is evermore:
And one be still, 'twixt shore and shore,
As the sea's life, thy soul in thee." Works, p. 221.

The soul, then, affords a quality of everlastingness, but alone it is hardly the unifying force of the universe. In Parted Presence two souls are combined in a unity that cannot be severed, that will last for eternity.

"Your heart is never away,
But ever with mine, for ever,
For ever without endeavour,
To-morrow, love, as to-day;
Two bleyt hearts never astray,
Two souls no power may sever,
Together, O my love, for ever! " Works, p. 224.

But neither does the unity of merely two souls supply any universal force; rather it is the bond itself which we must look to, in other words, to Love. For Rossetti, it is Love that becomes the unifying power which gives "meaning to/diversity of the universe". His beloved becomes "the meaning of all things that are", but she is given this quality by Love working through her, in the same way that, according to Christian belief, God works through men in order to do His work on earth.
"Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?  
Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart  
All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;  
Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above."

Works, p. 83.

And consider further both passages in The Stream's Secret and Lovesight where he talks of

"the living spirit of love that stands  
Between her lips"  

Works, p. 116

and of

"that Love through thee made known."  

Works, p. 75.

This explains why the very first sonnet in The House of Life enthrones Love above those other mysterious powers, Truth, Hope, Fame, and Youth. Even though Truth may 'foreknow Love's heart' and Hope foretell it, or Fame be "for Love's sake desirable" and Youth be dear to Love and Life sweet to it, despite these relationships, Love's throne is above them.

"He sat in breathless bowers they dream not of."

Works, p. 74.

Doughty, with his usual scepticism, finds all this merely "compensatory fantasy" for a "frustrated passion". He says that, in Love Enthroned,

"...the intensity of frustrated passion sinks to a calmer note while the lover, attempting to sublimate his emotion, exalts love high above the world of sense, as Morris too was doing at that time in Love is Enough, in a similar state of compensatory fantasy."

It is pertinent, I think, to note that Doughty is treating this poem in its chronological order (of writing) and not in its order of appearance in *The House of Life*. Taken in the latter situation the "intensity" of passion cannot sink "to a calmer note" because there is no intensity to sink from: it is the first sonnet in the series, and so, as yet, there is no emotion to sublimate. This, of course, does not necessarily invalidate Doughty's view, because quite possibly Rossetti did have such an emotion at the time of writing, but the positioning of the sonnet in *The House of Life* surely suggests that he regarded it as important, and I believe it points the way to his conception of Love as the major life-force in the universe.

It also explains why his House of Life seems mainly a House of *Love*. The first thing he does is to look at all those "kindred powers" that appeal to the heart - Truth, Hope, Fame, Youth and Life - those powers that collectively would constitute a "House of Life" for most people, but he finds that Love overshadows and dominates all these, that Love is at the heart of all existence, and so in his "House of Life" he is going to deal with Life's very essence, with Love.

The only critics who seem fully sensitive to this feature of Rossetti's philosophy are Walter Pater:

"For Rossetti... the great affections of persons to each other... formed the great undeniable reality in things, the solid resisting substance, in a world where all beside might be but shadow. The fortunes of those affections... is the matter of his verse...." 24

A.C. Benson:

"To him the emotion and the experience of life lay entirely in the intricate and complex development of human passion, the mysterious relations of human spirit." 22

And Esther Wood, writing on the Pre-Raphaelites:

"In humanity itself, with all its possibilities, in its triumphs and in its degradations, its labours and its sufferings, they rediscover 'God' - an 'unknown God', it may be; 'inconceivable', if we will, but evident in the quickened conscience of a growing world, and in the invincible instincts of human pity and love." 23

We may well compare the twentieth century philosophy of Paul Tillich, which is the basis of John Robinson's conception of God in Honest to God. Underlying this view is the Christian doctrine that God is Love, which is to believe "that in love one comes into touch with the most fundamental reality in the universe, that Being itself ultimately has this character". 24

And this is what I have been suggesting Rossetti's attitude to love was, the differences being that he confined the expression of his conception to Romantic love between man and woman - while Tillich and Robinson apply the principle to all relationships between men and women - and that Rossetti's notion is not so much one of God as Love, but of Love as God, or better, of Love as a Divinity (it may be valuable in this respect to compare Lawrence's reversal of the Christian principle that "The Word was made Flesh" into "The Flesh was made Word"). 25

Look again at the third of the Platonic ideas which

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22. Benson, op.cit., p. 78.
Doughty found inspiring the intellectual content of Rossetti's art. It was

"the ecstatic, intuitive apprehension in a region beyond sense and intellect of an absolute reality which is the soul's reunion with God...." 27

Absolute, or "ultimate", reality is precisely Robinson's 28 definition of God. Of course Rossetti did not, as Dante had done, analyse and express his concept in precise terms - he was primarily an artist and concerned with art rather than philosophy - which explains Hough's statement that he turns his "confused and all too human conception of love into the highest value and calls it God". But his conception, while not rigorously reasoned out, is there, expressed in his poetry, and is only "confused" in proportion as the reader is not prepared to be sympathetic with the poet's viewpoint. It may well be a "human" conception, but in that case, so is the conception of Tillich and Robinson, and for that matter all conception of love is human, since the only perception we have of love is human perception. Even if we consider divine love, its "divine" aspect is still based on a human conception of divinity. It is, surely, a necessary condition for all philosophical speculation that it is rooted in the human spectrum.

We are now in a position to understand why Rossetti brought God into those phrases where he is expressing the

26. See above, p. 69.  
28. See Robinson, op.cit., p. 29.  
fulfillment of his ideal, when he does not know Love from God, as in *Heart's Hope*.

"Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor Thee from myself, neither our love from God."

*Works*, p. 76.

He can say this because to him Love is God, a God not in the conventional Christian sense of "up there" or "out there", but in the sense of Robinson's "ultimate reality" and Tillich's "depth within".

And considered thus, it all makes perfect sense, despite the queries of Waller and Hough about those lines in *The Portrait* when the two souls unite and know "the silence there for God". Waller asks if Rossetti could have explained the lines in terms "either of literal belief or or metaphorical imagination". Rossetti (if anyone could ever have got him to do so) could have explained them, I think, in both terms, certainly in the second. Hough asks, "Admitted that this is not Christianity, is it sense?" In the light of the discussion above, yes, I think it is.

There is a feature of Rossetti's imagery which occurs again and again in his poetry, nearly always associated with his state of ideal union, or heaven (for that is what, in Christian terms, it is, as he expressed in *True Woman* -

"blest were he
With youth for evermore, whose heaven should be *True Woman*"),

*Works*, p. 94

30. Waller, *op.cit.*, pp. 204-5.
and which is not generally noticed by critics: that of silence. It seems to perpetually characterize his communication with women, as, for example, in The Portrait, where his beloved stood |\( ^{'} \text{twixt ease of talk and sweet long silences,}^{'} \) Works, p. 170, in Saved Selvcs, where lovers are |\( ^{'} \text{Two separate divided silences, Which, brought together, would find loving voice;}^{'} \) Works, p. 88, and in Silent Noon, where the lovers lie amidst |\( ^{'} \text{visible silence, still as the hour-glass}^{'} \) and |\( ^{'} \text{When twofold silence was the song of love;}^{'} \) Works, p. 81, Also in The Birth-Bond, when each lover has for the other |\( ^{'} \text{in silence speech And in a word complete community}^{'} \) Works, p. 79, and The Stream's Secret, when they at last spoke |\( ^{'} \text{Through that long-lingering silence whose half-sighs Alone the buried secret broke;}^{'} \) and when tender words are found vain they withdraw |\( ^{'} \text{to wonder mute and deep And closed lips in closed arms a silence keep;}^{'} \) Works, p. 115, and of course those beautiful lines in Heart's Compass, when, in an image reminiscent of the Metaphysicals, the beloved becomes |\( ^{'} \text{A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;}^{'} \) Works, p. 83.

Men communicate not only by verbal means but also in other ways, through gesture and facial expression, through looks and glances - through the eyes. The latter are a particularly potent form of communication for lovers, as poets throughout the history of literature, and Rossetti in particular, have
told us; and this moment of profound sympathy, when each looks
deeple into the other's eyes and when a perfect non-verbal under-
standing is reached, was a large part of Rossetti's ideal in
Love. Music is a form of communication which can be expressive
of so much that cannot be adequately put into words, but even
music sometimes fails to express satisfactorily that ultimate
understanding which can be achieved only by man and woman, and
only in silence. And this is the thought behind the brief lyric,
Song and Music.

"Lean nearer, let the music pause:
The soul may better understand
Your music, shadowed in your hand,
Now while the song withdraws."  
Works, p. 192.

In The Portrait, when the two souls merge into one, there is
a "silence" which is known "for God", so that "silence" becomes
the moment of consummation, of ultimate communication, that
supreme union which is Love, and so God.

It is perhaps akin to the state of Nirvana, the culmination
of the Buddhist Eight-fold path. This is not to suggest that
Rossetti had any knowledge of Buddhism - there is no evidence
at all for that - but that the sense of suspended time created
by Rossetti's silences appears to be similar to that state of
non-being, of non-existence (in the existential sense of
"existence") implicit in the term Nirvana; although there are,
of course, many differences. The only critic to draw this
comparison is Megroz, who writes that
"Rossetti's pursuit of love was the old pursuit of 'imperishable peace', that state of Nirvana which Francis Thompson described as 'passionless passion'." 32

Howard Mumford Jones noticed the suspended time element most in Rossetti's poetry, and also that his typical poetry deals with "the intense moment of preparation for action" or "the intense exhaustion that follows upon action". This is valid comment, for, like Greek tragedy, Rossetti hardly ever brings action onto his stage. It is what Walter Raleigh called his "negative capability",

"...the power of resting content in the contemplation of mystery, without any irritable striving after certainty and system." 34

And this explains why Hough was critical of Rossetti's failure to relate "the several orders of his experience" to a consistent structure, and why Heath-Stubbs found that his "vision is blurred, lacking any unifying principle".

But the unifying principle in Rossetti's poetry is his spiritual aspiration, for all those aspects of his spiritual life looked at so far - Idealism, Platonism, Spiritualism, Mysticism, Love - are but manifestations of the one general concept, spiritual aspiration. In his case the particular object of his aspiration was the Love/God of his ideal, that state of peace which some see as "imperishable", but which

35. Hough, op.cit., p. 77.
37. eg. Megroz, see above.
Doughty sees as "unattainable".

Throughout its history, art has recorded such a quest. Man realises the limitations of himself and of his environment, and so aspires to some ideal state of existence where strife and care is meaningless, where all is harmonious; and whether it be a Christian Heaven or a Platonic Beauty, a Buddhist Nirvana or a Rossettian Love that is looked to, it is the product of one common factor: man's spiritual aspiration. Some find their quest so hampered by their physical bodies that they become almost misanthropic in their frustration, and show a marked inability to tolerate their physical selves — Jonathon Swift and Aldous Huxley for example.

Rossetti was not hampered by his body; instead he looked to its aspects of beauty, and allowed its capacity for physical communication to complement the spiritual communication with his loved one. Passion for him was always interrelated with its physical or outward manifestations, which is why he can at the same time be so enraptured with a woman's physical beauty, and so intensely aware of the infinite power, of the Mystery in the universe beyond.

"...just as, under earthly limitations, a philosophical conception cannot exist apart from the words in which it is expressed, so to Rossetti the material expression of beauty was the only key to its mystery, and for the present at least, indissolubly connected with it."

39. Benson, op. cit., p. 79.
Man's spiritual life, at least in this world, cannot be separated from his physical life, and to do so is to stifle or reject half the experience available to him.

It is the misunderstanding of this that led Rosalyn Grylls to find some remarks of Shelley applicable to Rossetti, viz. "the error consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal". But there is not necessarily an error in this because the "eternal" can be seen as an extension of the "mortal image", man's spiritual quest becoming, in effect, only an extension of his inner self. This would seem to be apparent in Hand and Soul when the mystical lady in Chiaro's vision says, "I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee", and a recent interpretation of The Blessed Damozel by P. Lauter, sees the Damozel and her heaven as an extension of the bereaved lover on earth: her grief and her situation is as he would imagine it, and all takes place in his imagination. Lauter's view of the poem would answer those who criticize the appearance of materialisms in a supposedly spiritual heaven - the damozel's bosom warming the bar she leaned on is the most popular example - and the charge by Heath-Stubbs that it is impossible to suppose a soul in heaven "capable of the emotions in which the Blessed Damozel is represented as indulging". This also explains Stopford Brooke's

40. Grylls, op. cit., p. 53.
41. Works, p. 553.
feeling that "the emotions of the earth are intense within the heavenly loneliness", and Waller's comment in 1932.

"The poem is not religious and yet it has spiritual aspiration; it is not a poem of love, but of imagined love...."

Within this view, the poem can show Rossetti's spiritual aspiration and his natural doubt alongside each other. The bereaved lover on earth aspires to be with the lost one in heaven, but doubts his qualifications for heaven, or even its very existence, and so realizes that his imagining must cease, and all ends in terrestrial anguish. Her tears are his tears.

Rossetti's spiritual quest explains his use of religious and medieval symbols, for they belong to the universal knowledge of man, and allow a private and individual spiritual life to be externalized and made communicable to others.

"Archaism does not falsify Rossetti's art as poet or painter because he truly was inspired. That is to say the profound elemental aspirations of the soul which have created the universal symbols and themes of 'romance' found their appropriate shapes in those old visions, and reanimated them."

Finally, his spiritual aspiration is the basis of all his artistic creation.

"For Rossetti, from the first, to paint his soul is to paint woman, his soul's symbol, the focus of his idealism, of his religious feeling, of his passionate temperament which energizes all."

45. Waller, op. cit., p. 203.
46. See Lauter, op. cit., p. 347.
47. Megroz, op. cit., p. 282; and cf. p. 277.
The very core of Rossetti's aestheticism is the endeavour to express his response to feminine beauty, to express his soul, his imaginative life, his search for Love, his spiritual aspiration.
Rossetti's ready response to religious mysticism and to the sensuous appeal of religious ceremony was, as noted at the beginning of Chapter Three, tempered by his rationalistic mentality. Thus in 1879 he wrote to Edmund Bates:

"I myself was never gifted with implicit faith in things not undeniably proved." 1

There is, however, at least one undeniably proven fact in life: that of death. All men must die - there is no escape; and it was Rossetti's intellectual realization of this that caused Death to appear so often in his poetry. It is found more especially in Part Two of The House of Life, but also in other poems - in the ballads for instance, where, as Knight noted, "his heroines were almost always some nimbus of sorrow, of fate, or of death." 2 Very often it is personified, as are also Love and Sleep, and usually with a marked imaginative vividness, as in Death-in-Love and Newborn Death. Most often it is associated with love, which led Megroz to see the pursuit of love as becoming "first an unconscious and then a conscious pursuit of death". 3 One poem which may give a basis for this is Death-in-Love, where an image, seemingly of Love, is pictured closely followed by "a veiled woman" who says,

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1. Quoted in Doughty, op. cit., p. 575 (note 1).
"Behold there is no breath; 
I and this Love are one, and I am Death."

Works, p. 90.

This association must at first appear rather curious, and almost contradictory to the discussion in Chapter Three.

At the end of The Stream's Secret, the poet dreams of Love's final consummation which is to take place after death, and Doughty sees this as a "desire for death as the consummation of love", as a "physical and spiritual vampirism which in its narcissistic urge would absorb, destroy the beloved and indeed the self." But Rossetti would only destroy the beloved and the self in so far as they unite and become one, and this is not necessarily "vampirism". Rather, the unity of the two, the submergence of each identity in the other (and not just the one way absorption that Doughty suggests) produces a new life: it is a creation, not a destruction. In Stillborn Love a man and a woman love, but on earth find no hour of consummation; their love is stillborn. However, in the sestet the poet looks to a time, beyond death again, when a complete union, his ideal, will be achieved, and the sense of the passage is one of healthy joy where the lovers are together, not one of "spiritual vampirism" where one is absorbed by the other.

"But lo! what wedded souls now hand in hand
Together tread at last the immortal strand
With eyes where 'burning' memory lights love home?"

Works, p. 93.

Doughty continues:

"As a contemporary critic has well said: 'A love of love as an absolute, unrelated to human conditions, is a love of death. It is the supreme egoism which desires not liberation but annihilation.' "

But Rossetti seems rather to have wanted "absorption" than "annihilation"; an absorption akin to the Platonic union with Beauty, or perhaps to the Christian heaven, where the soul lives in eternal communion (which some may see as absorption) with God. For Rossetti, the pursued communion is that of lover with beloved, that which is Love, or ultimate reality, God.

In *The Clouds Confine* he muses on the idea - an idea especially fascinating to agnostics - that

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


He had decided in the final version not to attempt to answer the implied question; however, in the first version, which he sent to W.B. Scott on August 13th, 1871, he had proposed an answer, thus:

"Atoms that nought can sever
From one world-circling will,
To throb at its heart for ever,
Yet never to know it still." 8

In another letter to Scott, not dated, but written between August 25th and September 15th of the same year, he replies to some apparent query by Scott about these lines.

"It is meant as the possible answer to the question. I cannot suppose that any particle of life is extinguished, though its permanent individuality may be more than questionable. Absorption is not annihilation, and it is even a real retributive future for the special atom of life to be re-embodied (if so it were) in a world which its own former ideality had helped to fashion for pain or pleasure." 9

This is an idea also to be found in the octet of The Monochord (Works, p. 101). The poem has caused much difficulty, but it would seem valid to sense here some universal force, "Life's Self", which draws the poet into it; he questions whether it is Life or Death, wondering what sea his "separate wave" is a part of, all of which is, surely, suggestive of the absorption (but not the annihilation) of the self into some larger unit. It is not clearly worked out, probably because he is more concerned with posing the questions raised by the enigma of the universe, by the relation of life to natural forces, than with answering them.

If there is sometimes an allusion to annihilation, it is the outcome of his natural doubt about the result of death: he cannot suppose that "life is extinguished", but his reason never allows him to forget that this is a distinct possibility. Thus in Cloud and Wind he asks his beloved whether, if he dies first, death will be a "watchtower" whence he watches her weep, or

"...a bed wherein my sleep
Ne'er notes (as death's dear cup at last you drain),
The hour when you too learn that all is vain
And that Hope sows what Love shall never reap?"

Works, p. 89.

10. See Doughty, op.cit., p. 691f. (note to p. 436).
This almost suggests a fear of death, and Megroz sees The One Hope, at the end of The House of Life, as a sign that the mystery of death was for Rossetti a fear.

But it was a very natural fear. It is man's spiritual aspiration again, the unconscious desire to return to the comfort of the womb. Rossetti's hope was that which is basic to most concepts, religious or philosophical, of the soul's life after death: man aspires to a life beyond, where all conflict is resolved. The denial of such a world is hard to accept, and yet for thinking men the denial must always nag. Any concept of a paradise beyond must of necessity be a non-rational one, and those who, like Rossetti, desire this concept, yet lack a faith in "things not undeniably proved", may quite naturally fear death and the answer it could bring. All they can do is hope. And this is why Death and Love become associated for Rossetti: the realization of his ideal was often thwarted by the circumstances of his earthly existence, and so, like many before and many after him, he looked for this realization after death; but of course this now meant it was dependent on the answer brought by death; continued existence is not a certainty, and hence his fear, in Cloud and Wind, "that Hope sows what Love shall never reap".

In his earlier writing, in Love's Nocturne, for example, he is young enough for death still to be remote, and so can exhort Love to bring him "life", not "death". But as he grows older

14. See above, p. 75.
15. See Works, p. 73, and above p. 50.
death becomes an ever-approaching reality, and at last he must recognize it. This whole process is revealed in *Newborn Death* No. 2, the second to last sonnet in *The House of Life*. He tells us how he wandered with Life "till the haunts of men were pass'd", and "in fair places", and "till only woods and waves might hear our kiss", continually casting "all thought of Death" to the winds. And then comes the recognition.

"Ah, Life! and must I have from thee at last
No smile to greet me and no babe but this?"  

*Works*, p. 108.

Did Love, he asks, and Song, and Art all die "that thou mightst bear me Death?" The only answer is the final sonnet, *The One Hope*, the hope that earthly love and passion hold in them an immortal promise; a promise he expressed thus in *Love's Lovers*:

"There kneels he now, and all-anhungered of
Thine eyes grey-lit in shadowing hair above,
Seals with thy mouth his immortality."

*Works*, p. 77.

Many men might have submerged their doubt in a religious faith, and before the nineteenth century this would almost certainly have happened; but Rossetti could not do this, just as many others in his age could not. He still retained tremendous respect for those who could believe, as is evidenced in *Soothsay* and *World's Worth*, and in *The Bride's Prelude* (where he gives the reason - holy things "were my childhood"), but he could not join them. Megroz sees it as a failure of his mysticism.

"A true mystic in worshipping beauty would overcome fear and remorse at last by the illumination which succeeds the shadow of death. Rossetti could gain no surer foothold on spiritual freedom than *The One Hope* - of re-union, but that was a straw he clung to with the strength of a drowning man." 16

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His mysticism failed, however, not because he feared death itself, but because he feared the answer death might bring, that there might be no "illumination" after death, only "ever-lasting night and nothingness". Love and Death and Hope all become associated because each evokes the other, and all become interdependent, as happens in Through Death to Love, Home Overtaken, Love and Hope and Cloud and Wind. The sense of anguish is his awareness, similar to that of Keats in Ode on Melancholy, of the transience of all earthly pleasure and beauty, and "of the price set by the laws of being upon all aspiration and desire".

It has been noted during the discussion in preceding chapters that Rossetti did not strive after any rigid philosophical system, and that some critics have expressed grave dissatisfaction with the situation. R.D. Waller compares his fate with that of the Lady of Shalott.

"He lived in a world of shadows and reflections, and happily wove them into his web, until maturity took him down to Camelot and broke the web forever. But still the shadows haunted him, and mocked his attempts to come to terms with life." 19

Graham Hough, in The Last Romantics, criticizes Rossetti for evolving no coherent scheme of philosophy, and contrasts him with Dante.

"...Dante knew where his ideal love and his lechery fitted into the total scheme of things: Rossetti had no scheme of things into which they could fit.... Rossetti had not the spiritual energy to relate the several orders of his experience to any consistent structure." 21

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20. Waller, ibid., p. 198, has also done this with less effect.
And further:

"The concept of a love which can never be satisfied by its simple bodily object is not absorbed by Rossetti as it was by Dante into any total scheme of life...." 22

But Rossetti's age was a rather different one from Dante's. As Hough has himself told us, "the split between ideal love and the exigencies of day-to-day life" caused no profound disturbance in the medieval mind, and "behind it all was the vast Catholic structure in which love of another order was the central fact and in which all contradictions could be reconciled." To the medieval world "the silence of the natural world towards man's eagerest questionings of the Power behind it was...only the holy reticence of an all-wise and all-sufficient God."

But there was no "vast Catholic structure" behind the nineteenth century world, and the "all-sufficient God" was rapidly losing followers.

"...the rise of science, and of a materialist philosophy which laid claims to a total explanation of the universe, produced profound internal conflicts, and a disintegration of long-accepted religious ideas. Much of the poetry of the Victorians...is a poetry of doubt and questioning." 25

Rossetti, then, may be seen as characteristic of the nineteenth century dilemma of how to reconcile a rational scepticism about religious faith with a strong sense of the spiritual and mystical. Some accepted a faith ignoring its irrationality, others accepted a rational philosophy ignoring the spiritual life. Rossetti, as we have seen, retains elements of both. I do not wish to suggest

22. Hough, ibid., p. 82.
23. Hough, ibid., p. 76.
25. Heath-Stubbs, op. cit., xii; and see above p. 46.
that he ever did achieve an adequate reconciliation of the two, and in this respect Hough is correct, but I think he did have an attitude to life, which, while not being satisfactory to some people, was at least an honest one, and one which, after an age of Freudian Psychology and Existentialism, we are in no position to criticise.

He does, of course, continually examine the riddles of life, as is very evident in The House of Life, and in doing this, is part of the Victorian poetry of "doubt and questioning". The Trees of the Garden contains a characteristic query.

"is it all a show, -
A wisp that laughs upon the wall - decree
Of some inexorable supremacy
Which ever, as man strains his blind surmise
From depth to ominous depth, looks past his eyes,
Sphinx-faced with unabashed augury?"

Works, p. 104.

And The Dark Glass, The Love-Moon, Sleanless Dreams, Through Death to Love, Cloud and Wind, The Heart of the Night, The Monochord, Michelangelo's Kiss, He and I, and Newborn Death all contain questions about some mystery or other of life. Examples may also be found outside The House of Life, and one of the best is The Cloud Confines, which, in its mere contemplation of the various enigmas of the universe, without an attempt to explain them (the answer which the first version attempted to propose was eventually abandoned as unsuccessful), and in its musing on the fact that one day we shall know the answers, is probably characteristic of his attitude.

26. See above, p. 96.
However, it is in another poem, Soothsay, that he gives the most explicit expression of his philosophy, or, for those who find it not rigorous enough to be a philosophy, attitude to life. It is, in effect, a form of humanism. Friendship is important.

"Let thy soul strive that still the same
Be early friendship's second flame....

"In the life-drama's stern cue-call,
A friend's a part well-prized by all." — Works, p. 221.

In verse eight, he says you ought to give freely when others are in need, and accept freely when you are in need; and, in verse nine, you ought always to work equally well, lest you come to hate, as a form of self-rebuke, that which you did best. In verses ten and eleven, he gives the fruit of his own bitter experience: to some men thought itself may be action, but never yield to idleness lest time overtakes all. Verse twelve summarizes his religious attitude: let theology be to you what it can, but be sure to realize that it is not for you to measure God — a just recognition of the worth of human definitions of Divinity.

"...the Power that fashions man
Measured not out thy little span
For thee to take the meting-rod
In turn, and so approve on God
Thy science of Theometry." — Works, p. 222.

In verse thirteen, man is to be always grateful for what is good, and cherish grace as the child of his soul. The final verse gives his conclusion thus:
"Gaze onward without claim to hope, 
Nor, gazing backward, court regret."  

This is an acceptance of the present similar to twentieth century existentialism, which is also concerned with what is, and not with what was, or what might be. We may note that he did not adhere to the sentiment of this last verse; he often made claims to hope, as already seen in The House of Life.

However, this poem does demonstrate his agnosticism, and his sense of a humanistic "grace" is perhaps suggestive of a religion without revelation, which in turn suggests Julian Huxley's book of that very name, Religion Without Revelation. Indeed, it may well be said that he has made of Love a kind of religious substitute. Faced with the necessity for satisfying an innate religiosity without the aid of revealed religion, he was in a similar position to many artists in our own century. He turned to Love, to Platonism and to the vision of Beauty through women; in the twentieth century D.H. Lawrence also looked through women to the "mystery" beyond; Isherwood and Aldous Huxley turned to mysticism; Greene and Waugh accepted the Roman Catholic faith; and the deep need of the soul to recognize, in no matter how primitive a form, some power beyond itself, is expressed in telling manner as "the beastie" in Golding's Lord of the Flies (compare the suggestion made by Megroz, in connection with Rossetti and the early Italian poets, that "the adoration of an ideal woman is the expression of

27. See above, p. 74f.
a deep need of the soul). As F.R. Leavis has noted, "the old rhythms and habits" have been destroyed and "nothing adequate has taken their place". The problem on a more universal scale is man's struggle for balance, "for self-adjustment to the forces around him, and to the greater forces within", which "recurs in every age of the world's life, but under conditions ever new".

That Rossetti was concerned with the "forces within" is evidenced by his whole concern with painting his soul, and this concern is again prophetic of the twentieth century where, with the aid of psychology, man has become extremely self-analytical, as almost any twentieth-century novel will exemplify. The focus is on the individual, again as in existentialism. However, Rossetti does not merely penetrate within and stop there, he is constantly concerned with linking himself with some universal force, and this distinguishes him from much twentieth-century study and thought.

It must also be fairly evident by now that reality to him was an inner experience: that creed of fidelity to the soul which emerged from Hand and Soul; that reflex of the living image in an artist's mind which Hunt agreed with, but which still led him to produce very different results from Rossetti.

32. See Hunt, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 150; and see above, p. 31.
It is a reality that many have seen as a "dream-world", \( ^{33} \) Love's Nocturn becoming "the triumph of fantasy over the world of fact". \( ^{34} \) Pater saw Rossetti's primary aim as the creation in form and expression of the exact equivalents of "those data within", and said he had a gift of "transparency in language", a style which obediently shaped itself to "mental motion", and which proved itself in his translations of the early Italian poets.

It may be seen as a complete indulgence in imaginative experience, the true realm of literature; and such an indulgence immediately creates a choice for the reader. He must either accept the reality of the world of the poet's imagination and join the poet therein, or treat it merely as a dream-world, as fantasy, to be enjoyed as such, indulged in, and then left, in order to return to the "real" world outside. Those who, with Aldous Huxley, agree that "the only facts of which we have direct psychological knowledge are psychological facts" \( ^{36} \) will choose the former alternative and join the poet in his imaginative world. Scott tells us how Rossetti had no appreciation of the effect of geological and other discoveries, and that he was not even sure that the earth really moved round the sun.

"Our senses did not tell us so, at any rate, and what then did it matter whether it did move or not?" \( ^{37} \)

This is very similar to Huxley's account of a discussion with

\[ \text{References:} \]

33. E.g. Doughty, Rossetti's 'Poetic', p. 98.
34. Evans, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 18.
D.H. Lawrence, when he urged Lawrence to look at the evidence for evolution.

"His answer was characteristic," Huxley writes. "But I don't care about evidence. Evidence doesn't mean anything to me. I don't feel it here." And he pressed his two hands on his solar plexus." 38

Such a concern with the senses and the imagination sometimes leads the artist into difficulties of expression, for the mind may apprehend some imaginative image or vision which becomes extremely difficult to express in verbal, or even visual, or oral, terms. This is what Brooke has noticed when he says the atmosphere of Rossetti's art was often above and beyond both Nature and "the intellectual explanation men give to symbolism"; it was drawn from his incursions into "the realm some call the sub-liminal consciousness", from a spiritual, "often a preternatural", world. Samuel C. Chew further illuminates this point when he says that Rossetti's dream-world

"was for him no mere piece of poetic decoration derived from old literary traditions; in his mind the barriers between the conscious and the sub-conscious are thin." 40

Such introspection and penetration of the sub-conscious, however, is not contained in all his poetry. The ballads contain a rather different, and certainly more easily comprehended, style, although in so far as they are concerned with evoking an atmosphere, a mood, and with an appeal to the senses, to the reader's emotions, they too are concerned with the life of the soul. The Staff and

Scrib, Sister Helen, Eden Bower, The White Ship and The King's Tragedy, all contain a more direct and objective style than, for example, the sonnets in The House of Life; and yet there is still the "concentrated thought and constricted energy" that is characteristic of all his writing.

There is, however, a feature of his writing which may cause some difficulty in defining his realism. This is his tendency, noted in the section on Nature, to use concrete imagery in a spiritual context — the Blessed Damozel warming her bosom on the bar again. I hope by now I have shown that Rossetti refused to neglect the physical element in Love, and that his spiritual aspiration was always rooted in the actual (i.e. the external, physical actuality of everyday life). One of the reasons he preferred Keats to Shelley was, as William tells us, his resentment of

"Those elements in Shelley's poetry where the abstract tends to lose sight of the concrete, or where revolutionary philanthropy, rather than the world of men and women is the dominant note." 42

Gabriel's own concern not to lose sight of the concrete has caused difficulty for some critics. E.L. Cary says that in some instances in his poetry the feeling is

"Overpowered and distorted by the weight of the intense materialisation...where the poet probably intends to intimate divine exalted influences alive in the forms of things, the forms themselves are so definitely realized as to clog the reader's imagination instead of helping it." 43

41. See Chew, ibid., p. 1426.
42. Works, p. 671.
This is akin to Huxley's awareness, in Chapter XIII of *Antic Hay* and Chapter II of *Point Counter Point*, of the grotesqueness of musicians who produce such beautiful music, and of the origins of the violin string that produces such a beautiful sound. But the music is there for those who can hear it, even if, of necessity, it must be performed by humans, and often by human oddities. Again the onlooker, the reader or listener, is faced with a choice: either he becomes so preoccupied with the ugliness of the physical origin of the art that any beauty is ruined for him, like Swift and Huxley (and, I suspect, Cary), or he can accept the ugliness and, by way of contrast, enjoy even more the beauty produced by it, which is what Rossetti did. Afterall, without ugliness there can be no beauty: it is all relative, as Einstein has shown. Thus, while Rossetti is concerned with the expression of his spiritual life, he is also fully aware of its origins in his own very tangible bodily existence.

The external world becomes a reflection of the internal world, and it is the poet's concern to penetrate this external world in order to realize the "reality" within. It is Blake's habit of seeing the deeper meanings in outward appearances; in the Christian sense, it is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; to Rossetti it is simply Hand and Soul.

"There is a kind of double consciousness, akin to mysticism, about the true artist. He is vividly aware of the two simultaneous worlds of reality and appearance, God and man, knowing both are one. He sees things temporal with their equivalent in things

eternal, like surfaces implying depth beneath, time and space being equally symbolic rather than real." 45

And especially is this so of the Romantic artist, of Blake, of Coleridge, Keats and Shelly, and of Rossetti. They are concerned with what Nicolette Gray calls the "romantic vision":

"Instead of seeing things around us according to our ordinary mode of knowing partially, dully, only half conscious, to see some particular thing as it is, as God sees it, in the glory of its reality." 46

We may compare Hopkins's "inscape", Joyce's "epiphanies", and Pater's "focus of forces". And consider also Fairchild's definition of Romanticism:

"Romanticism is the endeavour, in the face of growing factual obstacles, to achieve, to retain, or to justify that illusioned view of the universe and of human life which is produced by an imaginative fusion of the familiar and the strange, the known and the unknown, the real and the ideal, the finite and the infinite, the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural." 47

Rossetti was certainly concerned with the "known and the unknown", and with the "ideal", the "spiritual", and the "supernatural" - all these have occurred in the course of this discussion, all were manifestations of his spiritual life - and since, as Fairchild went on to state, emphasis on the second members of the pairs constituted the transcendental element of Romanticism, Rossetti may be seen to continue the line of transcendental Romantics.

45. Preston, ibid., p. 60.
49. See Benson, op. cit., p. 136; and cf. Ford, op. cit., p. 142, who says Rossetti's Romanticism is primarily Keatsian.
He is, then, a Romantic; and his realism is the realism of the imaginative world of transcendental Romanticism, always rooted in its physical origins, and yet always aspiring beyond them in that "double consciousness" outlined by Preston. Rossetti's aestheticism, in the wide sense of the term, embraces all we have discussed so far, but its most vital features are this consciousness, the seeing of "things temporal with their equivalent in things eternal" which links him more with the Romantics than with the Aesthetes — and the spiritual aspiration which, as suggested, is fundamental to his work. (The two are, of course, closely associated: it was his spiritual aspiration which promoted his double consciousness.)

But his aestheticism also contains elements of 'art for art's sake'. He saw no utilitarian purpose in art. He was neither teacher nor preacher, neither moralist nor philosopher, but an artist, occupied purely with re-creating his own physical and mental experiences for the enjoyment of others.

"To have brought true birth of Song to be
And to have won hearts to Poesy,
Or anywhere in the sun or rain
To have loved and been beloved again,
Is loftiest reach of Hope's bright wings."

(Boothsaw) Works, p. 221.

Looking back we can see how these features of his aestheticism — his transcendentalism, aspiration and autonomy in art — emerged from the Pre-Raphaelitism, the "visionary vanities",

50. See above, p. 7.
51. See above, p. 28.
of his youth. And it is interesting to note that, in the final analysis, the early sonnets entitled *Old and New Art* contained the essentials of his whole aesthetic. His emotional state may have altered, but not his attitude to art. We are now, with this appreciation of his aestheticism, in a position to discover to what extent he was part of, or representative of, the Aesthetic movement; and this is the subject of Part Two.

52. See above, p. 14, et.seq.
PART TWO

AESTHETICISM
CHAPTER FIVE

AESTHETIC WITHDRAWAL

One of the concepts implicit in the Platonic theory of Beauty is that Beauty itself has an independent existence, and this appears to be the earliest manifestation of aesthetic theory. Plato's idea was modified slightly by Aristotle and Longinus, and then later, in the eighteenth century, German philosophers made numerous enquiries into the nature of the "aesthetic". Alexander Baumgarten, who published a work entitled Aestheticca in 1750, was the first to apply the term "aesthetic" to the criticism of taste considered as a science or philosophy. The term is derived from the Greek aesthesis, signifying things perceptible by the senses, and Kant comes closer to this with his definition of it as "the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception".  

From a dispute in Germany as to whether an object is beautiful in itself, or merely appears so to certain persons with sensitive faculties, came the origin of the Aesthetic Movement in nineteenth-century art. The "aesthetes" were those who prided themselves on "having found out what is the really beautiful in nature and art", and their faculties and tastes were developed "to the point necessary for the full appreciation of such qualities"; those who could not see the true and the

beautiful were outsiders, Philistines.

The phrase "art for art's sake" has been explained by William Gaunt:

"...What the phrase meant was what Gautier had expressed in Maupin and what Baudelaire had learnt from Poe: that moral purpose, deep thought, sage and prudent reflections, all the worn and respectable trappings of the creative spirit were irrelevant to its free exercise; positively hampered it, in fact."

Verse in the generation of Tennyson and Browning made conscious attempts to deliver a "message", but in the second half of the century the tendency was to abandon any attempt to deal with the external world, or to express any philosophy. The poets withdrew from society to contemplate the purity of beauty, and to live in a private world of sensitivity and response to the "intense" moments of life. The central feature of it all was the non-influence on art of the thoughts and emotions of the outside world.

With Rossetti, as seen in Part One, the world of his imagination replaced the world of scientific method and higher criticism:

"In vain might the geologists clink their hammers at the earth's skeleton, striking with every blow at the foundation stones/Genesis; in vain Darwin trace the origin of species; as futilely the philosophers build solider worlds on cobweb thought: they were all on other planets and did not touch him."

And for this attitude Keats served as an example. Rossetti was familiar with the story of Keats proposing a toast to Newton's damnation, and, as G.H. Ford has told us, Keats "provided a realm of poetry in which science and the discussion of the conflict between science and faith do not exist". Ford adds that Rossetti was not only indifferent to politics and science, but also "not interested in anything in the nature of exhortation and argument"; or, as William writes in Works:

"In all poetic literature, anything of a didactic, hortatory, or expressly ethical quality was alien from my brother's liking. That it should be more or less implied was right, but that it should be propounded and preached was wrong; such was his view."

Which is what we observed in Part One - any philosophy is implied, not stated.

As far as politics is concerned, some few references are to be found in his poetry, as in A Last Confession, After the French Liberation of Italy, After the German Subjugation of France, Czar Alexander the Second, and On Refusal of Aid Between Nations. Odd incidents in English history also interested him, and thus there is Wellington's Funeral, On the Field of Waterloo, The Last Three from Trafalgar, and Raleigh's Cell in the Tower. However, his general attitude is to be found in a letter to Hall Gaine.

10. Works, p. 671.
"I do think seriously on consideration that not only my
own sluggishness, but vital fact itself, must set to a great
extent a veto against the absolute participation of artists in
politics. When has it ever been effected? True, Cellini was
a brave, and David a good deal like a murderer; and in these
qualities they were not without their political use in very
turbulent times." 11

He may also have observed that when a poet is involved in
political writing his work tends to become dated, and often in
need of close editing, if it is to be fully enjoyed - Dryden's
Absalom and Achitophel and Mac Flecknoe, and Pope's Dunciad, for
example. Occasionally there is a work, such as Milton's
Areopagitica, which is still very relevant in our own time,
but this would be the exception rather than the rule.

Rossetti appears to have been something of an "outsider"
at heart. He was little interested in London society, and pre-
ferred his own intimate circle and solitary wanderings.
Doughty suggests that the origins of this aloofness were to be
found in the environment of his childhood, that he was driven
to create in imagination "the beauty he craved but which the
external world denied". And yet despite his aloofness, he
was part of a general trend in artistic taste.

"It (about 1870) was a time, said Sir Sidney Colvin, long
afterwards, when lovers of poetry, weary of mid-Victorian decorum
in letters, disappointed by the mildness of the Idylls of the
King... specially hungered after poetic passion and romance." 14

13. Doughty, Rossetti's Poetic, p. 98; and cf. A Victorian
Romantic pp. 121-2; and Wood, op. cit., pp. 20-1.
And G.H. Ford informs us that the Aesthetic Movement "carried to its extreme conclusion a tendency which was part of the general direction of taste after 1850". Whether or not Rossetti recognized himself as part of public taste is difficult to determine, but his withdrawal of *Nuptial Sleep* from *The House of Life* (after Buchanan's attack) suggests at least a rather fine sensitivity to his public reputation, and perhaps almost a subservience to the conventional standards of the time.

He did not exhibit his paintings publicly after 1850, and when his poems were published he made every endeavour to ensure that they would receive favourable reviews. He almost appears to have been cringing from public criticism, and when Buchanan's attack finally came, he was so affected by it that he became ill. Why he should have this somewhat morbid sensibility is, no doubt, owing to a number of reasons - the taking of chloral and a persecution mania are the favourite ones for his biographers. I think, however, there are two further points worth considering.

The first involves a paradox of the artistic temperament which is by no means peculiar to Rossetti. Most artists, at some stage or other, feel, quite naturally, despondent about their work, especially when it is still incomplete, and, if they

are ambitious or of delicate sensibility, this despondency may only too well respond to any outside sign of discouragement. Who can blame an artist for avoiding such a possibility? He may well be morbidly sensitive, but he need not necessarily be weak or faltering.

The second involves the artist's ambition. In *Saint Agnes of Intercession*, Rossetti writes that society, "where the average strength and the average mind are equal, as in this world, becomes to each life another name for destiny." The concept of immortality whereby man perpetuates himself through his offspring, whether children or creative art, is a very acceptable one for agnostics, such as Rossetti, who cannot be certain of eternal life after death. It does, of course, imply that the artist is dependent upon society's accepting his work, or in other words, that in society is the artist's destiny, which is, surely, what Rossetti is getting at. And he was well aware of that curious, and often frustrating, feature of life:

"When a man, having endured labour, gives its fruits into the hands of other men, that they may do their work between him and mankind: confiding it to them, unknown, without seeking knowledge of them; to them, who have probably done in likewise before him, without appeal to the sympathy of kindred experience."

It is only natural, in the light of this, that the artist should be somewhat diffident about submitting his work for scrutiny, before he thought it was absolutely ready. And if

this was Rossetti's view, then it would explain his withdrawal of *Nuptial Sleep*: he would have thought that the removal of this poem ought to render the rest acceptable; and far better to sacrifice one poem, if it was to be a stumbling block, than to jeopardize the chances of the whole achieving the desired immortality. This desire (a desire which, I suspect, is never really absent from the motivating forces of any man, artists and public figures apart) would also explain why Rossetti exhumed the poems he buried with his wife, an explanation supported by William's comment when, referring to Gabriel's decision to recover the poems, he says,

"His object manifestly was the desire of poetic fame, and reluctance that his light should be permanently hid under a bushel...." 22

Rossetti did not at any stage openly protest or revolt against his age, as, for instance, Carlyle and Arnold protested - the nearest he came to doing so was in *Old and New Art*, and that was hardly a protest - and hence there has been some difference of opinion as to whether his withdrawal was an escape or a revolt. Those who see it as an escape include B.B. Burgum 23 and A.C. Benson, and Graham Hough, who suggests Rossetti could hardly have turned away from anything, since he was "so indifferent to science and sociology...that he hardly realized there was anything to turn away from". However, Rossetti had enough

contact with people like William Bell Scott to at least have been aware of what was happening, even if it meant nothing to him - and Hough has talked earlier in his book of "Rossetti's turning away from science, sociology and progress into the analysis of his own soul". Those who say it was a protest include Esther Wood, William Sharp, D.S.R. Welland, Gale Pedrick and J. Heath-Stubbs. Doughty supports both sides:

when discussing Idle Blessedness he says the mood was one into which Rossetti "increasingly withdrew in neurotic flight from reality", and he draws from Love's Nocturn the conclusion that "from the dilemma of unpropitious circumstance and deepening disillusion Rossetti was escaping... into the warmth and light of his own, inner dream-world"; but then he later talks of the hatred of the Oxford Pre-Raphaelites for middle-class, mid-Victorian England as being "encouraged by Rossetti", and of Rossetti's "revolt against mid-Victorian Philistinism".

However, the two views are not really incompatible, since an escape can quite well imply a protest, although it is usually a somewhat passive form of protest. What is more certain is the comment by Ifor Evans that Rossetti "disentangled his poetry

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27. Hough, op.cit., p. 82.
31. Pedrick, op.cit., p. 34.
32. Heath-Stubbs, op.cit., p. 204.
33. Doughty, op.cit., p. 121.
34. Doughty, ibid., p. 150.
35. Doughty, ibid., p. 235.
from its prescribed Victorian duties of expounding the ideas of the time", which is not so much an escape or a protest as just a withdrawal; perhaps, as Bowra has suggested, he admitted defeat from the start; or is Hough closer to the mark, when he says the "hushed stillness" of Rossetti's dream world is due to an "extremely efficient sound-proofing system"? As Helen Rossetti has written,

"He belonged to that race of men who leave cab men to settle topographic difficulties, sermons to parsons, and painting to artists. He lived in an atmosphere of his own; belonged to himself and his art." 40

This is a withdrawal from society which those who see poetry as having a sociological function cannot countenance - David Cecil for example.

"A poet, like anybody else, is not a completely self-dependent individual; he is also a member of a society. And like any member of a society, he must partake of its general life if he is fully to develop his talents, must draw nourishment and stimulus from its common interests and enthusiasms if he is to maintain the vitality needed to make him create." 41

On the other hand, Heath-Stubbs says it would have been impossible for most of the poets of this period to have evolved a style of verse capable of dealing with the social problems of the day. The changes taking place in the social structure were too rapid, the answers offered by science were uncertain and conflicting,

and traditional religious faiths seemed "irreparably shaken". 42

"In these circumstances the only course for the artist who sought to retain his integrity was a withdrawal from the confused and unintelligible reality which lay without. The subjectively apprehended reality of aesthetic experience could at least not be explained away by science." 43

And this withdrawal, in so far as it was a protest against scientific method and a growing materialism, is reminiscent of the revolt by the Romantic Movement against eighteenth-century rationalism and empiricism. This enmity between poetry and science in fact was, as Heath-Stubbs has said, "a peculiar and a late development of Romantic sentiment". It was a Romantic withdrawal into "the inner strongholds of the imagination in the face of an uncompromising materialism", and so Rossetti saw in the lives of Blake, Keats, Chatterton, Coleridge and Shelley a counterpart of his own experience - "the decay of early ideals, of a romantic faith, a physical and moral decline, the vain questioning of inevitable death."

But, if this was a Romantic withdrawal, in what way was it Aesthetic? What, in fact, was the relationship between Romanticism and "Art for Art’s Sake"? The answer is, I think, suggested by K.E. Gilbert and H. Kuhn in their book, A History of Esthetics, where they see the Aesthetic Movement as disillusioned Romanticism. A group of artists took a firm stand against the

adulteration of art by the, then, modern world, and set out to defend art's aloofness and purity; they "carried on the romantic vision of beauty in the face of an avowedly hostile world. They were disillusioned Romantics." They turned their back on "the loathsome spectacle" of the industrialization of the civilized world, and kindled "in the privacy of their studies and esoteric circles an impassioned worship of beauty".

The process can be traced in a direct line from Keats, who was recognized by Oscar Wilde as containing the beginnings of the Pre-Raphaelite school, and so of the Aesthetic Movement. Keats was most apathetic to science, and time and again created "a vision of unsurpassable beauty", although his "art for art's sake" was more a creative impulse than a doctrine. The attitude developed through Rossetti, and so into the decadence of the nineties; but in its final form it differed from Keats, and Rossetti, and this explained why the Romanticism of the beginning became the Decadence of the end. The nature of this difference is hinted at already in the suggestion that Keats's "aesthetic" attitude to art was an impulse rather than a doctrine; but this is to anticipate the next chapter.

49. Gilbert and Kuhn, ibid., p. 485.
51. A. Guerard, Art for Art's Sake, (New York, 1936), qu. in Ford, ibid., p. 63.
52. Guerard, ibid., (Ford, p. 63).
CH. A. IPTER SIX
ROSETTI AS REPRESENTATIVE AESTHETE

(1) His influence

Ifor Evans has said that in poetry the Pre-Raphaelite movement was little more than the emergence of Rossetti, "an inconvenient synonym for Rossetti's personal influence on English poetry", and this must to a large extent be true, especially, as Evans indicates, in poetry - in painting a little more is involved. It is beyond the scope of this work to explore Rossetti's influence in depth, and for our purposes it will be sufficient merely to sketch in the area covered by it.

Max Beerbohm wrote that "Holman Hunt, Millais, Swinburne, Morris, were among those whose early work bore his stamp." I think it doubtful that he had much influence on Hunt: they may have shared similar attitudes in the early days of the P.R.B., but basically their purposes were different, as discussed in Chapter One. Similarly, it is difficult to see much influence on Millais; but then Francis Bickley says that few men remained "altogether unaffected" by Rossetti, and so "it may well be that Millais, protest as he might...was not so entirely immune from his influence as in after years he believed." On Morris, and on Burne-Jones, Rossetti had more definite influence, as Doughty has outlined.

1. Evans, op. cit., p. 5, and see also Ford, op. cit., p. 108.
"For Jones and Morris, Gabriel was not only a fascinating human friend, but also an inspiration, a god." 4

Swinburne greatly admired Rossetti's work and shows elements of influence, as in his early poem, *Lilac*, and in some passages of his letters, where the prose style of *Hand and Soul* appears—a style later to be developed by Walter Pater. Rossetti helped the young Hall Caine, suggesting the theme of *The Deemster*.

Doughty has said that the influence of Rossetti on Wilde's verses is "real enough", and Samuel Chew, referring to Wilde's tendency to "borrow" rather widely, wrote that his poems "are imitations of Rossetti and Swinburne discordantly juxtaposed to borrowings from Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Arnold." 9 In particular, he borrowed the lilies from *The Blessed Damozel* for use as a symbol, and in the *Ballade de Marguerite* imitated Rossetti's (and Morris's) form and style. But compare J.H. Buckley, who says that Wilde "identified himself too readily with the Pre-Raphaelite group, from whom he actually derived little more than a taste for the archaic". 11

Max Beerbohm also said that Rossetti influenced Whistler, and this view was supported by Percy Bate; Bate also added Linton, Maris, du Maurier, Steer and Wonter to the list of

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7. See Grylls, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
those coming, at least in some degree, under Rossetti's spell.  
Samuel Chew adds Dobson, Gosse, Lang, Calverley and Stephen.

Graham Hough says that Rossetti's work provided the starting point for the work of Yeats, Yeats having grown up "in the Pre-Raphaelite afternoon"; and finally, Rossetti, along with Swinburne and Morris, appears to have influenced the early work of Ezra Pound. Also, as well as his own work, he introduced the work of others to English readers - Omar Khayyam and Walt Whitman for instance - and paved the way for collections of such things as old oak furniture and blue china, both very fashionable occupations for the Aesthetes.

From this it is possible to assert that his influence was far reaching, especially in the last thirty years of the century, and it would appear that a new generation of poets arose, ten years after the first edition of Poems, in 1870, who recognized the source of their own aestheticism in his, and so hailed him as a leader.

"Thus it was that to Rossetti, these young poets and writers, Pater, Wilde, Richard Garnett, O'Shaughnessy, Marzials, Gosse, John Payne, P.B. Marston and the rest paid ready homage."  

They found in him the same inspiration and example as he had found in Keats.

12. Bate, op.cit., pp. 48-9, and see also p. 119f.
14. Hough, op.cit., p. 82.
15. Hough, ibid., p. 216.
17. See Evans, op.cit., p. 17.  18. See Grylls, op.cit., p. 80
19. See Grylls, op.cit., p. 84.  20. See Marillier, op.cit., p. 80
(11) Aesthetic theory

During the discussion of Ruskin in Chapter One it was suggested that he had prepared the ground for the Aesthetes, but that the definite moral basis for his aesthetic prevented him from becoming the major theorist for them. The real philosopher of the Aesthetic Movement then was Walter Pater, for whom moral considerations disappeared, and the moment of aesthetic experience became "the sole significant reality". Consider the following from the conclusion to *The Renaissance*.

"Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, - for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated dramatic life.... How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

"To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.... While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment.... With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.... art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake." 3

This is aesthetic theory, and we can begin to recognize the applicability of it to Rossetti. He did not "make theories about the things we see and touch", and he was vitally concerned

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with setting the spirit "free"; but more especially was he concerned with expressing those exquisite moments which Pater is so concerned with. And he found an admirable medium for such expression in the sonnet.

"A sonnet is a moment's monument, -
Memorial from the Soul's eternity
To one dead deathless hour."  

Works, p. 74.

This goes a long way towards explaining why he used the sonnet form so often; as Bowra writes, "he can best express himself in this special kind of poetry which concentrates on some distilled thought or passion and pours all its strength into a narrow vessel." 4 And, in general, each sonnet emerges from some personally experienced moment of crisis, as Rossetti testifies in a letter to William Allingham, in 1854.

"I've referred to my notebook... And therein are various sonnets and beginnings of sonnets written at crises (?!) of happy inspiration." 5

And Pater has himself recognized this quality in Rossetti's work.

"With him indeed, as in some revival of the old mythopoeic age, common things - dawn, noon, night - are full of human or personal expression, full of sentiment....to him life is a crisis at every moment." 6

Which is to say he burnt with a "hard, gemlike flame", and attempted to be present at the focus "of vital forces". The

result was a marked concentration and intensity of thought. It was an intensity Rossetti found exemplified in Keats, for, as G.H. Ford has told us, such poems as La Belle Dame Sans Merci and The Eve of Saint Agnes "fulfilled the two things which Rossetti especially sought: intensity and highly-finished pictorial power". David Larg, in Trial by Virgins, suggests that the early Italian poets also afforded examples of condensed writing; English poets, by comparison, "needed an abundance of words to say anything at all". The English language does often allow wordy circumlocutions, and perhaps Rossetti's condensed language is part of his Italian nature - on the other hand, the very nature of poetry demands conciseness of expression, and the degree of conciseness becomes a matter for personal style. It is interesting in this respect to reflect on the way so much twentieth-century music has become more and more condensed, so much so that in extreme cases it is virtually non-existent - in Webern, Stockhausen, and Cage. This is probably just a renewed attempt to achieve "intensity", although it is of rather a different nature from that which led Liszt, Rubinstein and Wagner to be admired by the nineteenth-century Aesthetes as "consummately intense".

The true Aesthete admired only what was known in his language as "intense", the adjective becoming a virtual cliche.

11. Hamilton, ibid., p. 31.
and "Are you intense?" becoming a catch-phrase eventually satirized by du Maurier in a cartoon in *Punch*. And Rossetti, by writing in an "intense" manner, is fulfilling the requirements of the Aesthetes.

His attitude to criticism is also aesthetic. We have seen above that sometimes in his poetry he expressed his reactions to other works of art, concerning himself with his own impressions, realizing the true "nature" of the work – which he did with most external objects. And these are the duties of aesthetic criticism.

"To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step toward seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly." 16

Also, Rossetti did not let the author's private life interfere with judgment of his work.

"...if Byron f....d his sister, he f....d her and there's and end, - an absolute end, in my opinion, as far as the vital interest of his poetry goes, which is all we have to do with." 17

And, of course, he wanted the same approach taken to his own poetry.

Another of Pater's theories was that "all art constantly aspires toward the condition of music." In all arts other than

15. See above, p. 109f.
17. Qu. in Grylls, *op.cit.*, p. 145.
music it is possible to distinguish between matter and form, and yet, art is constantly striving to obliterate this distinction.

"That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely, its given incidents or situation...should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees." 20

It then follows that the ideal types of poetry are those in which this distinction is reduced to a minimum, in lyrical poetry.

"And the very perfection of such poetry often seems to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that the meaning reached us through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding, as in some of the most imaginative compositions of William Blake, and often in Shakespeare's songs, as pre-eminently in that song of Mariana's page in Measure for Measure, in which the kindling force and poetry of the whole play seems to pass for a moment into an actual strain of music." 21

Rossetti testifies to a similar notion in this comment on Blake:

"The truth is that as regards such a poem as My Spectre I do not understand it a bit better than anybody else, only I know better than some may know, that it has claims as poetry apart from the question of understanding it, and is therefore worth printing." 22

And in Rossetti's own work it is often difficult to reach an exact verbal understanding, but there is always a total impression to be gained and comprehended, as in music. The Monochord 23

20. Pater, ibid., p. 95.
22. Qu. in Doughty, op. cit., p. 307.
23. See above, p. 97.
is one example, and Knight finds Love's Nocturn another, where "the remote significations of scenes are sought rather than their obvious meanings"; on the other hand, I do not find Love's Nocturn as obscure as some of his other works. The main difficulty is probably condensed thought, and the intellectual structure behind that thought, which seems not to have been comprehended by many critics.

Benson points to another relevant aspect: the way that in much of the later poetry "there is a certain slight shifting of the usual meaning of words...some slight nuance added to them which is not found in ordinary speech." He gives as examples the use of "commemorative" in A Superscription, and "regenerate" in The Monochord. This must to a large extent be true, as Rossetti was obviously particularly sensitive to the emotional overtones of words, although of course all poetry, and particularly lyrical poetry, is concerned with this. Part of it for Rossetti was his search for "stunning" words in old ballads; and Benson continues, to give the total result.

"Rossetti had a mood, to which he gave way but sparingly, of making words into a kind of vague music...there are poems which are like a sweet modulation, where the effect is produced not by the adaptation of the words to the central thought, but by a species of murmuring melody, in which the thoughts seem blurred upon the edge of a gentle slumber." 27

Others to comment are Brooke, who says his music "does not

26. See above, p. 42.
27. Benson, op.cit., p. 90.
seem to be the result of laborious art, but of a native genius for sweet sound", and Raleigh, who remarks on his power of "evoking emotions of wonder and pathos and mystery from the subtle music of words". And, of course, this mode of communication was well suited to his subject-matter: love and beauty are, after all, hardly capable of precise, scientific definition.

I also find it interesting to note that Rossetti had no sympathy for actual music, being rather of the opinion of Dr Johnson that music was perhaps of all noises the most bearable, which rather suggests that he was not actually, and consciously, striving towards "the condition of music"; however, it is legitimate, I think, to say that there is a definite tendency to communicate in the manner of music, and that at times he fulfills Pater's arguments on this matter. In this, again, he is Aesthetic

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30. See W.M. Rossetti, Memoir, p. 412; and G. Pedrick, op.cit., p. 56.
(iii) His own attitude

As I intimated in the Introduction, critics, such as Walter Hamilton, David Cecil, and Graham Hough, have often regarded Rossetti as a "representative aesthete", but he himself had grave doubts about the Aesthetic Movement, as recorded by William Sharp.

"I once asked him how he would reply to the asseveration that he was the head of the 'Art for Art's sake' school, and his response was to the effect that the principle of the phrase was two-thirds absolutely right and one-third so essentially wrong that it negatived the whole as an aphorism." 2

He certainly had wide influence on the Movement, as seen in section one of this Chapter, but there were differences between his aesthetic and the aesthetic of those who followed him, such that any leadership was entirely unconscious, as Doughty has suggested.

"...It was Rossetti who unconsciously led art from the simple, moral Pre-Raphaelite precepts of Hunt, to the obvious aestheticism of the later Pre-Raphaelites, and thus, ultimately, to those faerie or satanic regions inhabited later by the more ecstatic devotees of 'Art for Art's sake'." 3

Doughty later suggests that part of the reason for Rossetti's dislike of the Aesthetic Movement was that he was, from youth, Francophile, and so "disliked the French influences largely inspiring English aestheticism". And yet Rossetti translated France's medieval poet, Villon, thus helping to stimulate the

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4. Doughty, ibid., p. 615.
vogue for French poetic forms: the rondeau, the triollet, the ballade, the rondeau, the villanelle and the chant royal. The attraction Villon had for him was probably no more than the attraction all medieval art, with its purity and sincerity, had for him; and his interest was not so much with the form, as with the sentiment, the form being only the appropriate expression of that sentiment. And this brings us to the differences between Rossetti and the Aesthetes, to why, in fact, they were one-third "wrong".

Rossetti, in my view, was not purely concerned with form, or merely concerned with creating a beautiful object, whether it be poem or painting. There is so much sense in his poetry of going beyond the work itself, of his spiritual aspiration searching ever onwards and upwards, beyond, but through, the poem—which is why I place so much emphasis on his spiritual quest in Part One. He painted a picture in order to record the beauty of the subject, that which was a reflection of universal Beauty, and when contemplating the product, he still recognized the beauty which it represented; that is, it was not the work of art itself which concerned him, but what it communicated. Art was a medium, not an end in itself, which, as we saw, was the thought in *Old and New Art*.

The Aesthetes, on the other hand, became concerned only with the art object itself. The actual painting or poem was what was

beautiful, and what was responded to, which is why "Art for Art's sake" principles led to Decadence. The artists, and especially the pseudo-imitators of artists, the accompanying coterie of would-be artists, indulged in sensation for its own sake: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." But for Rossetti "experience itself" was not the end, and this is one remark of Pater's which is not applicable. Rossetti was exploring and re-creating experience, yes, just as Lawrence was exploring and re-creating experience; but in neither case was it the "end". This is why he cared little for descriptive poetry, because, as William has pointed out, it

"exhibits and extols objects instead of turning them into a 'medium of exchange' between the material world and the soul."

And Gabriel's comment on Keats further illuminates the point.

"Keats did not die so much too early if there was any danger of his taking to the modern habit eventually of treating material as product...." 9

It was not just Hand that concerned him, but Hand and Soul.

William Knight, in The Philosophy of the Beautiful, quotes a passage by J.A. Symonds which may be applied to Rossetti.

"The mind, reflecting upon Nature...becomes aware of an Infinity which it can only grasp through thought and feeling, which shall never be fully revealed upon this earth, but which poetry and art bring nearer to our sensuous perceptions...." 10

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7. See above, p. 128.
The heart of the matter is the bringing of "Infinity" nearer to
the "sensuous perceptions", for it involves that association of
flesh and spirit which has led to so much criticism of him by
those who see this association as a defect, as, in fact, destroy-
ing any sense of the spirit and only leaving the flesh. Oswald
Doughty's introduction to his edition of Rossetti's poetry con-
tains such a criticism.

"The Blessed Damozel in heaven is no spirit; as substantial,
as fleshly as those baroque angels who, on the roofs of Italian
churches, so daringly and glaringly defy the laws of gravitation,
she unwittingly, in her too evident corporeality - which 'made
the bar she leaned on warm' - counteracts the spiritual inten-
tion of the poem. This is a frequent defect in Rossetti's love-
poetry... Body's Beauty is often more evident in his imagery
than Soul's Beauty: to borrow the titles of two of his sonnets."

But this is part of Rossetti's realism and, indeed, philosophy.
Man's existence does not consist of isolated units of mental and
physical experiences, but is integrated, and Rossetti, therefore,
refused to separate the parts: the spirit is to be reached
through the flesh, not despite it.

Megroz's book on Rossetti contains a passage similar to
Doughty's.

"He had dragged his heaven down to earth, environed himself
with the fleshly paradise, and before he could gain his freedom
it vanished like that paradisal feast which the oriental ruler
gave to the youths before drugging them: when they awoke they
believed that they had been in heaven; but they had gone no
further than the palace of pleasure." 13

12. See above, p. 108f.
Megroz is suggesting that Rossetti was merely an epicurean or hedonist, as the Aesthetes of the nineties became, and naturally he wanted pleasure, just like anybody else; but, as I have been pointing out again and again, there is too much sense of the recognition of the Infinity beyond sensual pleasure for Rossetti to have been merely a hedonist. As Samuel Chew says, "a sense is imparted of intellectual control over the exuberant sensuousness", and Buckley's comment on the Pre-Raphaelites is also applicable.

"...their reverence for accurate reproduction was from the first qualified by a desire that each detail fully realized might stand as a symbol of some spiritual force above sense perception."

Certainly, Rossetti was a devotee of beauty, but he saw in beauty the secret of the universe, and thus, in Benson's words, "the soul...in pursuit of this secret, must be alive to any hint that comes to it from the beauty of outward form". And this is why he was concerned with those moments of crisis; it was then that the dark glass cleared and became light.

Rossetti was in numerous ways a "representative aesthete" — in his concern for beauty, and with re-creating the "focus of vital forces", his non-didactic purpose for art, and his withdrawal from contemporary society (and consequent narrowing of subject-matter)— but his imaginative experience was more akin to the

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14. Chew, _op. cit._, p. 1424; and cf. Wood, _op. cit._, p. 270; Helen M.M. Rossetti, _op. cit._, p. 25; and Grylls, _op. cit._.
15. Buckley, _op. cit._, p. 164.
16. Benson, _op. cit._, p. 80; and see also Bate, _op. cit._, p. 49.
Romantic transcendentalists than to the Aesthetes. He came in a direct line between Keats and the Aesthetic Movement; but what was for Keats a creative impulse became for the Aesthetes a doctrine, and I would suggest that Rossetti lies closer to Keats on this line, and for him also "art for art's sake" was an impulse rather than a doctrine.

The result, finally, is that, just as the Aesthetic Movement was for him only two-thirds correct, he was only two-thirds an Aesthete. He would have agreed with Pater that art gives "nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass", but would not have continued to complete Pater's sentence: art was not "simply for those moments' sake".

17. See above, p. 124.
18. See above, p. 128.
CHAPTER SEVEN

AESTHETIC FAILURE

In *A History of Esthetics*, Katherine Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn distinguish three closely interrelated systems of thought resulting from the conception of beauty as a supreme and absolute value. In the first, "practical estheticism", the supremacy of beauty is adopted in an unrestricted sense.

"Life has to be beautiful, and all its other values, goodness, truth, honesty, and wisdom, are either comprised in the esthetic consummation or subordinated to it." 1

None of the writers of the Aesthetic Movement fully developed this idea or embodied it in his life, although most of them contemplated it as a possibility, like Walter Pater with his nineteenth-century Epicureanism - "a world formed by the interaction of atoms culminates in the most refined and vivid experience, the sensation of beauty." 2

However, this theory proved impracticable, and in the second system, "artistic estheticism", beauty became a supreme and absolute value in art, as distinct from life.

"Life is no longer subjected to beauty, but within life an autonomous dominion is claimed for art. Art, with its specific value, exists for its own sake. It fulfills its purpose by being beautiful." 3

This is the concept most usually associated with "art for art's sake" and, but for the last sentence, is Rossetti's position.

The difficulty of this doctrine is that it leads to a double life for the artist, because, while art may be divorced from life, it does not cease to be part of life.

"The visualizer of a beauty hitherto unknown, rapturously lifted above the needs of this frail body and feeding upon glowing visions, drags on, at the same time, the drab, monotonous, laborious, respectable life of the much despised bourgeois." 4

And this leads to the third system, which involves the artist's life, where there is a revival of the Platonic and Christian idea of the contemplative life. (We may note the difference of this aesthetic from that of Matthew Arnold, who, while much attracted to the contemplative life, preferred to remain involved in active existence.) The contemplation of the Platonic philosopher was generally fruitful, since, returning from his visionary experience, he was able "to trace the divine vestiges in imperfect matter"; and in this respect Rossetti is also fruitful (he, of course, had also made the opposite choice to Matthew Arnold). But the contemplation of the Aesthetes was a flight from the burden of existence, from the materialism and ugliness of their age, in that disillusioned Romanticism already mentioned, and the result of their experience was "nothingness, forgetfulness".

"Thus the movement of art for art's sake ends in a blank and radical negation of life, not because of the whims of its disciples but because of a logical development of its philosophy. In this context the much praised contemplation is not a beatific vision, a source of life, but a strong narcotic, a draught of Lethe." 7

5. Gilbert and Kuhn, ibid., p. 499.
6. See above, p. 123.
And the "draught of Lethe" had no lasting effect; further doses were continually required, which life could not supply and which few could keep up anyway, as David Cecil has well pointed out.

"Nobody has got a vital enough sensibility to be unceasingly susceptible to aesthetic impressions all the time, even if he has the time or the health or the money. This its proponents found. Their lives were all disappointing to them because they could not maintain themselves in the ecstasy which in their view was the only right condition in which man should live." 8

In their endeavour to maintain the ecstasy the last drop of intensity was wrung from life's sensations; they developed the knack of sucking their lollipop "so as to extract out of it the best possible flavour", as Buchanan aptly described it, and the result was artificial "posturing", and insincerity. At one party white rats were carried on arms and shoulders; at another a lily was held and intensely contemplated throughout the evening. Max Beerbohm describes the scene in an essay entitled Eighteen-Eighty.

"...Dodos arose upon every wall, sunflowers and the feathers of peacocks curved in every corner, tea grew cold while the guests were praising the Willow Pattern of its cup. A few fashionable women even dressed themselves in sinuous draperies and unheard of greens." 10

(The sunflower, peacock's feather and lily were symbols of constancy, beauty and purity, widely used by the Aesthetes.)

The artificiality did not go unnoticed, and the whole business was satirized, by du Maurier in *Punch* and by Gilbert and Sullivan in their comic opera, *Patience*. In the latter, Bunthorne, a poet, presents himself as an "aesthetic sham".

"Let me confess!
A languid love for lilies does *not* blight me!
Lank limbs and haggard cheeks do *not* delight me!
I do *not* care for dirty greens
By any means.
I do *not* long for all one sees
That's Japanese.
I am *not* fond of uttering platitudes
In stained-glass attitudes.
In short, my medievalism's affectation.
Born of a morbid love of admiration!"

And Bunthorne then outlines what every young Aesthete should know.

"If you're anxious for to shine in the high aesthetic line
As a man of culture rare,
You must get up all the germs of transcendental terms,
And plant them everywhere.
You must lie upon the daisies and discourse in novel phrase
Of your complicated state of mind,
The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter
Of a transcendental kind."

This opera did not necessarily bring the Movement to shame, although it certainly exposed it to laughter, and, as Amy Cruse says, "It certainly helped to kill aestheticism, but at the same time raised an enduring monument to its memory."

So the craze declined, helped by the ridicule of *Patience* and *Punch*, but also through the way "its very extravagance was wearing it out". And this failure of Aestheticism has had

unfortunate consequences for Rossetti, because, through being associated with the movement, he has become associated with its decline. Thus, Benson could write that he became a figure, standing alone, "rather over-shadowed by the doom of art than crowned with its laurels". But even Burgum, whose main aim in his essay on Rossetti seems to be to rebuke "Victorianism", admits that when Rossetti succeeds he "has" a richness forbidden the Decadents", and his poetry fails for different reasons from those which caused Aestheticism to fail.

Throughout this discussion I have in general been sympathetic towards Rossetti's work; however, it must be acknowledged that he cannot rank with the greatest of English poets, that his poetry, in fact, is marred by limitations. The limitations most often observed are those outlined by Ifor Evans: "his imperfect rhymes, prosodic licences, tortured vocabulary, the absence of natural landscape or normal human interest, the rejection of faith, and of all ethical or social preoccupations." I cannot accept the rejection of faith and of ethical preoccupations as necessarily defects—not in the twentieth century; but the absence of social interest must perhaps count against him. The feature of his narrowing of subject-matter is that which was noted throughout Part One, his turning inwards in order to

15. Burgum, op. cit., p. 446.
explore the depths of his own soul. As E.L. Cary has noted, the
treasure of his intellect "was rich but not various, deep but
not broad". We do not find in his work the epic vision of
Milton or Dante, but the thorough exploration of a single con-
sciousness, that which has already been noted as becoming a
twentieth-century preoccupation. In limiting his subject-matter
in the main to love, he dealt with what to him was the basic
fact of our existence; and as all men become concerned with
love in greater or lesser degree, his work is thereby given
contact with the universal. His poetry has to do with man's
imaginative experience, at once a personal, and therefore limiting,
aspect of poetry, but, in fact, the true realm of most literature.

However, Rossetti was also dealing with experiences very
difficult to define; we get, in the words of Benson, "that
strange sense of haunting desire which is, as it were, so in-
communicable in essence that it can only be expressed in types
and hints and far-off dreams". This desire is, as Benson later
expresses, "an inner force", or, in other words, his spiritual
aspiration. Myers also suggests that Rossetti's art "spends
itself in the effort to communicate the incommunicable", in
which notion lies, I think, the reason for his comparative
failure. Rossetti lacks that final facility of communication

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18. See above, p. 105.
21. F.W.H. Myers, Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty, in
demanded of an artist who deals with such difficult and non-
communicable subject-matter. G.H. Ford says that he developed
"some features of Keats's highly-wrought style", but developed
them "to a point where often they simply obstruct communication
between poem and reader". And the fault, or lack of facility
of expression, is one which he himself recognized.

"Rossetti was... never entirely satisfied with his work;
his aim was always higher than his hand could reach. In 1877,
when declining to join the new group of the Grosvenor Gallery,
he wrote: 'What holds me back is simply the lifelong feeling
of dissatisfaction which I have experienced from the disparity
of aim and attainment in which I have all my life produced as
best I could.' " 23

He was continually altering his poems, trying new words, adding
or rephrasing passages; and this in itself suggests he was never
satisfied (which, of course, can be an excellent trait in an
artist). But unfortunately the result was often as Megroz saw
it.

"Rossetti brooded over poems and designs for years, in some
cases for half his lifetime, and although his poetic alterations
are usually marvels of tactful recovery of an original inspira-
tion, the habit showed that he never properly extended his mind." 24

Some may object to this criticism of communication, and want
evidence that the artist was in fact concerned with communicating
to his public, especially from an artist such as Rossetti, who
appeared to have withdrawn into indifference towards
such a task. 25

But his desire for immortality demanded successful communication

25. See above, p. 119.
with others, and William Sharp quotes some remarks of his which give direct evidence that he was well aware of this duty.

"Above all ideal personalities with which the poet must learn to identify himself, there is one supremely real which is the most imperative of all; namely, that of his reader. And the practical watchfulness needed for such assimilation is as much a gift and instinct as is the creative grasp of alien character. It is a spiritual contact hardly conscious yet ever renewed, and which must be a part of the very act of production." 26

And, as William Rossetti testifies, he took great pains to keep his work free from ambiguity or difficulty.

"My brother... has not the least wish to be obscure. To himself, his thoughts... were always clear and compacted; and he took a large amount of pains to keep the diction free from huddle or ambiguity." 27

I must also point out that, despite this criticism of his communication, I still believe his poetry to be far more intelligible than some critics would suggest, which I endeavoured to show in Part One. He insisted on the need for "fundamental brainwork" in painting and in poetry, and usually it is there; but unfortunately there is too often a lack of any real sense of that Infinity which can be found in the earlier Romantics, in Shelley, for instance. On the other hand, in some poems he transcends this inadequacy and ranks then with the best of lyrical poets.

Part of the reason for this unevenness in his work probably lies in his inability to discipline himself, particularly in his

youth. He could not remain at the painting schools he attended - Sass's and the Royal Academy's Antique School - for any length of time, being too impatient with the need for detail and the rigours of developing a technique, and desiring instead "freedom to express the hauntings of ideal love and beauty" which "flashed upon him". Another part of the answer is in the conflict between the two arts, poetry and painting, which occurred in him. Both demanded much time and effort, and in trying to excel in both, he could well have fallen between the two stools. The recognition of this possibility is in a letter to William Allingham in 1854.

"I believe my poetry and painting prevented each other from doing much good for a long while, and now I think I could do better in either, but can't write, for then I shan't paint." 29

And the frustrations caused by the divided allegiance can be seen in Known in Vain and Lost on Both Sides.

A further reason for the lack of any sense of breadth of vision is his inability to handle large poems. The longer ballads and the monologues (A Last Confession is perhaps the best of these) do not seem as successfully handled as his sonnets; and the nature of the sonnet, its conciseness and intensity of expression, appears to have best suited his type of creativity. Again this probably results from lack of that perseverance over long periods of time which is demanded by the creation of large

works, and from lack of time to devote to poetry. Painting had to take first place, because it was his only source of income.

Finally, it may be considered whether poetry such as Rossetti's is still relevant in the twentieth century. I think it is, if only because, as Stopford Brooke noted as early in the century as 1908, it provides "a counterpoise to the tyrannies of the scientific intellect", it helps to maintain "the balance of power in human life". His movement away from society is relevant, since he was one of the first to become a virtual outsider, so foreshadowing those twentieth-century artists who merely profess to be "onlookers", and those others who profess interest in no artistic judgment other than their own. But the real value of his work lies in its exploration of his personal imaginative experience: all those interested in the workings of the human mind will find much to attract them here.

Rossetti was not a dominant figure in Victorian literature, but a fascinating one, whose achievement, if viewed in the light I have attempted to bring to bear on his work in Part One, may rank at least with the best of the secondary poets, with Morris, Meredith, Swinburne, Hardy, and his sister, Christina. The nature of his achievement was different from theirs; but that is what makes him so interesting.

APPENDIX A

THE RELEVANCE TO CRITICISM OF THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION

In studying Rossetti's aestheticism, I am, in effect, looking at his intention in art, and this is a process which many critics think not valid for criticism. The question has caused much controversy in recent years and practically every book on aesthetics deals with it somewhere; and for every essay against the notion there is usually another for it. In literature, one of the most famous debates related to this issue was that between C.S. Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard over *Paradise Lost*.

Monroe C. Beardsley, Professor of Philosophy at Swarthmore College, discusses the problem in his book, *Aesthetics*. When studying a work of art, he distinguishes between internal and external evidence for the nature of the object observed; that is, the evidence supplied by the object itself, and that supplied from outside the object, usually from the author. When the two sources agree there is no problem, difficulty occurs only when they conflict. Beardsley would say that the work itself must always be the final criterion for judgment, and points out the danger of the artist's persuading his audience that there is a quality present in his work which is not there at all. Certainly, this is something to be wary of, especially since, as Beardsley points out, anyone can make anything mean or symbolize anything.

merely by saying it does. However, in Rossetti's case this problem does not arise, since he made few, if any, pronouncements on his intentions, and so cannot mislead our judgment.

Beardsley later summarizes the argument against the use of the author's intention in judging the value of his work.

"Essentially...the argument is this: (1) We can seldom know the intention with sufficient exactness, independently of the work itself, to compare the work with it and measure its success or failure. (2) Even when we can do so, the resulting judgment is not a judgment of the work, but only of the worker, which is quite a different thing." 4

These are somewhat conclusive points. However, there would still appear to be occasions when ignoring altogether the author's intention can lead to faulty judgment of his work. Consider this passage on Rossetti by R.D. Waller:

"His poetry fails as 'a criticism of life', whenever it deals with the stuff of which life is made, because he never had any critical standards of his own to apply." 5

But Rossetti never intended his poetry to be 'a criticism of life', rather it was an 'exploration' of life, and so why should his work be criticized for failing as 'a criticism of life'?

Naturally, the critic should look closely at the work to see that it bears out what the author claims, but, as H.M. Jones has pointed out, "it is arrogant for the critic to claim to know better than the artist what his work means". And, as

Jones further points out,

"Where there is obscurity or the kind of ambiguity which raises questions of alternative interpretations the reference to other evidence such as an artist's statement of intention is required for an optimum presentation of the work. Such reference is not merely relevant but necessary to validate the reading of the work by the critic." 7

I tend to feel that in a subject as subjective as this, there is nothing so convenient as an honest Anglo-Saxon compromise, especially as both sides of the argument can lead to faulty judgment and mistaken conclusions, when taken to extremes. I have endeavoured to concentrate primarily on the works themselves, and in Rossetti's case I have attempted to establish his aestheticism more from a study of his poetry than from his private life; but, where necessary, perhaps for the explanation of some obscure allusion or unusual attitude, I have looked at the author's private circumstances, or at his intentions, if they can be known.

My conclusion, then, is that of Jones:

"...in some cases where an artist has stated that his work was intended to mean one thing rather than another, and where this statement is a possible solution to what would otherwise be an undecided or obscure question, then this statement is relevant and the critic is bound by it. He is free to reject it only if he can show that it is not a possible solution, that it is not congruent with the given facts in the particular case. He is not free to reject it simply on the grounds that he can interpret those facts in another way which would provide results which in his view are aesthetically more satisfactory." 8

Further references on this issue are:

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APPENDIX B

ART AS COMMUNICATION

In the last chapter of this thesis I criticize Rossetti for a failure of communication, and I do this because I regard art as primarily a communicative activity. I.A. Richards, in Principles of Literary Criticism, writes that,

"A large part of the distinctive features of the mind are due to its being an instrument for communication. An experience has to be formed, no doubt, before it is communicated, but it takes the form it does largely because it may have to be communicated." 1

Later he adds that "the arts are the supreme form of the communicative activity". A work of art, a poem, novel, painting, sculpture or symphony, may "exist" when merely lying idle, but does not "live" until someone reads it, looks at it, or plays it. The greatest novel in the world cannot be distinguished from the poorest until it is actually read, so that for the work to become "art" it must actually communicate with the reader.

Of course, the artist seldom looks on himself as a communicator, and is far more likely to be concerned with making something which is beautiful in itself, or satisfying to him personally. Richards recognizes this, and admits that the artist has enough problems with the precise embodiment of particular experiences without being concerned with how others are going to react to that embodiment. But this neglect of communication,

whether conscious or unconscious, does not diminish the importance of the communicative aspect.

"...the very process of getting the work 'right' has itself, so far as the artist is normal, immense communicative consequences...it will, when 'right', have much greater communicative power than it would have had if 'wrong'. The degree to which it accords with the relevant experience of the artist is a measure of the degree to which it will arouse similar experiences in others." 3

Rossetti both acknowledged his duty as a communicator, and was concerned with making his work 'right'; that he kept altering his work throughout his life suggests that it was not 'right' for him, and hence that he lacked that absolute facility of poetic expression possessed by the greatest poets.

It may, of course, be asserted that the failure is not with the poet but with the reader. Eric Newton, in a lecture delivered to the British Society of Aesthetics in 1960, says that

"...before a communication becomes possible a kind of unwritten agreement must exist between artist and spectator. There must be a certain fund of experience common to both." 4

He adds that usually the artist contributes something to the spectator's knowledge and the sum total of the addition is what is communicated. However, I do not see that the spectator need necessarily have his knowledge increased by the artist, since all that may be achieved is a re-creation of some previous experience, or that knowledge already gained is seen from some

3. Richards, ibid., p. 27.
new, exciting or illuminating viewpoint; I would suggest that it is the spectator's experience which is increased rather than his knowledge. However, the main point for concern is the "fund of experience" which should be common to both spectator and artist.

Newton points out that this is "usually an extremely elementary affair", but it can become more complicated, as in the classical allusions of Milton. This immediately suggests that on some occasions it may be necessary to explore the artist's personal experience in order to understand his art, so that we, as the onlookers, may obtain the required common "fund of experience".

If this common ground is lacking, then it is quite likely that there will be a failure in communication between the artist and his reader, and the fault belongs to neither. However, if this common experience does exist, and if the reader, or onlooker, is approaching the art object without prejudice and with alert faculties, then any lack of communication may quite fairly be seen as the fault of the artist, and especially if, as in Rossetti's case, the artist himself appears to be dissatisfied.
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