

# The Rossettis

*Dante Gabriel and William Michael—  
and Their Friendship With Meredith  
and Swinburne*

By ARTHUR SYMONS

**W**ILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI, who has just died, survived his brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, by thirty-seven years, dying at the age of 89. Not really a man of letters, in the essential sense, his verse, as Gabriel said, "Always going back on the old track", he had a certain talent of his own; for he edited an excellent edition of Blake's Poems, and a creditable edition of Shelley, the first critical edition of his poems.

He was the first Englishman who ever dared to print a Selection from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*,—in 1868; and, in spite of having to exclude such passages as he considered indecent, the whole book was a valuable contribution to our literature.

**T**HERE is no question that Michael was not invaluable to Gabriel; indeed, during the whole of the tragic and wonderful life of that man of supreme genius; not only because he dedicated his *Poems* of 1870 to one "who had given them the first brotherly hearing;" not only because, had not Michael been with him at the British Museum on the ever-memorable and unforgettable date of April 30, 1847, he had never bought the imperishable *MS. Book of Blake*, borrowing for this purchase ten shillings from his brother; but also because when Rossetti, after his wife's death, had his manuscript volume of poems exhumed in October, 1869, he did the right thing, both in his impetuous act in burying them beside his dead wife and in his silence with his brother—who was really aware of the event—so that his own tortured nerves might have some respite.

Still, I have never forgotten how passionately Eleanore Duse said to me, in 1900: "Rossetti's eyes desire some feverish thing, but the mouth and chin hesitate in pursuit. All Rossetti is in that story of his *MS.* buried in his wife's coffin. He could do it, he could repent of it; but he should have gone and taken it back himself: he sent his friends."

In one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's invaluable notes on Poetry, he tells us that to him "the leading point about Coleridge's work is its human love." That Rossetti, whose face indicated voluptuousness brooding thoughtfully over Destiny, was intensely sensitive, is true; and this made him a sort of medium to forces seen and unseen. Yet, I think, he wanted in life more than most men of such genius as he had wanted. For, as Watts-Dunton said: "He was the slave of his imagination—an imagination of a power and dominance such as I have never seen equalled. Of his vividness, no artistic expression of his can give any notion. He had not the smallest command over it." That is one of the reasons why, with all his affection for his brother Michael, the chasm between them was immense—a chasm no dragon-created bridge could ever span; Gabriel had in him, perhaps, too much of "chasm-fire: his genius was too flame-fledged for earth's eternity, to have ever had one wing of it broken by an enemy's shaft.

**N**O modern poet ever had anything like the same grasp upon whatever is essential in poetry that Rossetti had; for all that he wrote or said about Art has in it an absolute right-

ness of judgment; and, with these, as absolutely, an intellectual sanity. Here is one principle of artistic creation stated with instantaneous certainty: "Conception, *fundamental brain work*, that is what makes the difference in all art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that the gold was worth working." But it is, strangely enough, that at the beginning of a review of Hake's *Parables and Tales* he says the final, the inevitable words on creation and on what lies in the artist's mind before the act of creation: "The first and highest is that where the work has been all mentally 'cartooned,' as it were, beforehand by a process intensely conscious, but patient and silent—an occult evolution of life: then follows the glory of wielding words, and we see the hand of Dante, as the hand of Michelangelo—or almost as that quickening hand which Michelangelo has dared to embody—sweep from left to right, fiery and final."

In 1862, Rossetti took possession of his famous house, 10 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, where he lived to the end of his life, and whose joint occupants were, for a certain length of time, George Meredith, Swinburne and William Michael Rossetti, who left the house in 1874, the year in which he married Lucy Madox Brown.

**T**HAT four men of individualities so utterly different, and, in some senses, aggressive, or at least assertive, should have been able to live together in closeness of continuous intimacy, from which there was hardly an escape, was barely conceivable. Yet it was in this house that Swinburne wrote many of his *Poems and Ballads*, part of his book on Blake and his masterpiece, *Atalanta in Calydon*. There Meredith finished his masterpiece in the matter of tragic and passionate verse, *Modern Love*. There is nothing like it in the whole of English poetry, nor did he ever achieve so magnificent a vivisection of the heart in verse as in these pages—in which he created a wonderful style, acid, stinging, bitter-sweet, poignant—where these self-torturing and cruel lovers weave the amazing web of their disillusion as they struggle, open-eyed, against the blindness of passion.

The poem laughs while it cries.

Swinburne, who was, I think, on the whole, less susceptible in regard to abusive attacks on his books than Meredith or Rossetti, vindicates himself, and superbly, in the pamphlet I have before me: *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (1866). He has been accused of indecency and immorality and perversity; and is amazed to find that *Anactoria* "has excited, among the chaste and candid critics of the day, or hour, or minute, a more vehement reputation, a more virtuous horror, a more passionate appeal, than any other of my writing. I am evidently not virtuous enough to understand them. I thank Heaven that I am not. *Ma corruption rougit de leur pudeur.*"

**I**N regard to *Laus Veneris*, I turn for a moment to W. M. Rossetti's *Swinburne's Poems and Ballads: A criticism* (1866) which, on the whole, is uncommonly well written, to one of those passages where he betrays a kind of Puritanism in his Italian blood; saying that the opening lines were, apart from any question of sentiment much overdone. "That is a situation (and there are many such in Swinburne's writings) which we would much rather see touched off with the reticence of a Tennyson: he would probably have given one epithet, or, at the utmost, one line, to it, and it would at least equally have haunted the memory." I turn from this to Swinburne on Tennyson, as for instance: "At times, of course, his song was then as sweet as ever it has sounded since; but he could never make sure of singing right for more than a few minutes or stanzas." And

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—what is certainly true—that Vivien's impurity is eclipsed by her incredible and incomparable vulgarity. "She is such a sordid creature as plucks men passing by the sleeve."

Now the actual origin of *Laus Veneris* came about when Swinburne, with Rossetti, bought the first edition of Fitzgerald's wonderful version of *Omar Khayyam*. "We invested," Swinburne writes, "in hardly less than six-penny-worth apiece, and on returning to the stall next day, for more, found that we had sent up the market to the sinfully extravagant price of twopence, an imposition which evoked from Rossetti a fervent and impressive remonstrance." Swinburne went down to stay with Meredith in the country with the priceless book; and, before lunch, they read, alternately, stanza after stanza. The result was that after lunch, Swinburne went to his room and came down to Meredith's study with his invariable blue paper and wrote there and then thirteen stanzas of *Laus Veneris*, that end with the lines:

*"Till when the spool is finished, lo I see  
His web, reeled off, curls and goes out like  
steam."*

His only invention was the certainly cunning one of inserting a rhyme after the second line of each stanza, which is not in the version.

Swinburne's re-creation of the immortal legend of Venus and her Knight, certainly—though certainly unknown to W. M. Rossetti—owes also much of its origin from Swinburne's inordinate admiration of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, by Baudelaire. Its origin, in a certain sense only; that is of the influence of one poet on the other. For, as he says: "It was not till my poem was completed that I received from the hands of its author the admirable pamphlet of Charles Baudelaire on Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. If anyone desires to see, expressed in better words than I can command, the conception of the mediæval Venus which it was my aim to put into verse, let him turn to the magnificent passage in which Baudelaire describes the fallen goddess, grown diabolic among eyes that would not accept her as divine."

**I NEED** not reiterate the extraordinary influence that Baudelaire always had on Swinburne; seen most of all in *Poems and Ballads* and recurring at intervals in later volumes of his verse. Both had in their genius, a certain abnormality, a certain perversity, a certain love of depravity in the highest sense of the word.

Swinburne, who had (*Continued on page 70*) a fashion of over-praising many writers, such as Hugo, so that his prose is often extravagant and the criticism as unbalanced as the praise, dedicated his finest book, "*William Blake*", to W. M. Rossetti, in words whose almost strained sense of humility—a way really in which he often showed the intensity of his pride—makes one wonder how he could have said: "I can but bring you brass for the gold you send me; but between equals and friends there can be no question of barter. Like Diomed, I take what I am given and offer what I have." What Swinburne had—his genius—he never gave away lavishly; here he is much too lavish. "There is a joy in praising" might have been written for him, and he communicates to us, as few writers do, his own sense of joy in beauty. It is quite possible to be annoyed by many of the things he has said, not only about literature, but also about religion, and morals and politics. But he has never said anything on any of these subjects which is not generous, and high-minded, and, at least for the moment, passionately and absolutely sin-

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**I**T is almost cruel to have to test one sentence of the man of talent with one sentence of the man of genius. I chose these from the *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition* they wrote together in 1868, which I have before me, in the form of a printed pamphlet. "If everybody tells me that the picture of A, of which this pamphlet says nothing, merits criticism, or that the picture of B, praised for color, claims praise on the score of drawing also, I shall have no difficulty in admitting the probable correctness of these remarks; but, if he adds that I am blamable for the omissions, I shall feel entitled to reply that A's picture and B's draughtsmanship were not and indeed never were in the bond."

**H**OW honestly that is written and how prosaically, "Pale as from poison, with the blood drawn back from her very lips, agonized in face and limbs with the labor and the fierce contention of old love with new, of a daughter's love with a bride's, the fatal figure of Medea pauses a little on the funereal verge of the wood of death, in act to pour a blood-like liquid into the soft opal-coloured hollow of a shell." How princely that praise of Sandys rings in one's ears, lyrical prose that quickens the blood! But the greater marvel to me is that Swinburne in his *Miscellanies*, of 1866, should have quoted two sentences of Rossetti on Shakespeare's Sonnets and ended by saying: "These words themselves deserve to put on immortality: there are none truer or nobler, wiser or more memorable in the whole historic range of highest criticism." I can only imagine it as that of an arrow in flight: only, it loses the mark.

**I**T was when Christina Rossetti was living at 30 Torrington Square that I spent several entrancing hours with her. She had still traces of her Italian beauty; but all the loveliness had gone out of her, so subtly and so delicately painted by Gabriel when she was young. The moment she entered, dressed simply and severely, she bowed, almost curtsied, with that old-fashioned charm that since her time has gone mostly out of the world. Her face lit up when she spoke of Gabriel: for between them was always love and admiration. His genius, to her, both as a poet and a painter, invariably received her elaborate and unstinted praise.

She told me that Gabriel had said to her: "*The Convent Threshold* is a very splendid piece of feminine ascetic passion; and, to me, one of your greatest poems is that on France after the Siege — *To-Day for me*." And that Swinburne specially loved *Passing away, saith the world, passing away*. It always seems to me that as she had read Leopardi and Baudelaire, the thought of death had for her the same fascination; only it is not the fascination of attraction, as with the one, nor repulsion, as with the other, but of interest, sad but scarcely unquiet interest in what the dead are doing underground, in their memories, if memory they have, of the world they have left.

Yet this fact is of curious interest, knowing the purity of her imagination, that when Swinburne sent her his *At-*



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*alanta in Calydon* she crossed out in ink one line:

*"The supreme evil, God."*

Swinburne himself told me of his amazement and amusement when he happened to turn to this page while he was looking through the copy he had sent her.

**I**T was one of Gabriel Rossetti's glories to paint luxurious women, surrounded by every form of luxury. And some of them are set to pose in Eastern garments, with caskets in their hands and flames about them, looking out with unsearchable eyes. His colors, before they began to have, like his forms, an exaggeration, a blurred vision which gave him the need of repainting, of depriving his figures of life, were as if charmed into their own places; they took on at times some strange and stealthy and startling ardors of paint, with a subtle fury.

By his fiery imagination, his restless energy, he created a world: curious, astonishing, at first sight; strange, morbid, and subtly beautiful. Everything he made was chiefly for his own pleasure; he had a contempt for the outside world, and his life was so given up to beauty, in search for it and in finding of it, that one can but say not only that his life was passion consumed by passion, as his nerves became more and more his tyrants (tyrants, indeed, these were, more formidable and more alluring and more tempting than even the nerves confess), but also that, to put it in the words of Dégas Pater: "To him life is a crisis at every moment."

**T**HERE was in him, as in many artists, the lust of the eyes. And as others feasted their lust on elemental things, as in Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, as in Whistler's *Valparaiso*, as in the *Olympia* of Manet, as in a *Decors de Ballet* of Dégas, so did Rossetti upon other regions than theirs. He had neither the evasive and instinctive genius of Whistler, nor Turner's tremendous sweep of vision, nor the creative and fiercely imaginative genius of Manet. But he had his own way of feasting on forms and visions more sensuous, more nervously passionate, more occult, perhaps, than theirs.

Yet, as his intentions overpower him, as he becomes the slave and no longer the master of his dreams, his pictures become no longer symbolic. They become idols. Venus, growing more and more Asiatic as the moon's crescent begins to glitter above her head, and her name changes from Aphrodite into Astarte, loses all the freshness of the waves from which she was born, and her own sorcery hardens into a wooden image painted to be the object of savage worship.

Dreams are no longer content to be turned into waking realities, taking the color of the daylight, that they may be visible to our eyes, but they remain lunar, spectral, a dark and unintelligible menace.