

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.



WOMAN, for some reason which seems to have escaped the philosopher, has never taken a very prominent position in the history of poetry. But she has rarely been absent altogether from any great revival of poetic literature. The example of her total absence which immediately flies to the recollection is the most curious of all. That Shakspeare should have had no female rival, that the age in which music burdened every bough, and in which poets made their appearance in hundreds, should have produced not a solitary authentic poetess, even of the fifth rank, this is curious indeed. But it is as rare as curious, for though women have not often taken a very high position on Parnassus, they have seldom thus wholly absented themselves. Even in the iron age of Rome, where the Muse seemed to bring forth none but male children, we find, bound up with the savage verses of Juvenal and Persius, those seventy lines of pure and noble indignation against the brutality of Domitian which alone survive to testify to the genius of Sulpicia.

If that distinguished lady had come down to us in seventy thousand verses instead of seventy lines, would her fame have been greatly augmented? Probably not. So far as we can observe, the strength of the great poet-women has been in their selection. Not a single poetess whose fame is old enough to base a theory upon has survived in copious and versatile numbers. Men like Dryden and Victor Hugo can strike every chord of the lyre, essay every mode and species of the art, and impress us by their bulk and volume. One very gifted and ambitious Englishwoman of the last generation, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, essayed to do the same. But her success, it must be admitted, grows every day more dubious. Where she strove to be passionate she was too often hysterical; a sort of scream spoils the effect of all her full tirades. She remains readable mainly where she is exquisite, and one small volume would suffice to contain her probable bequest to posterity.

It is no new theory that women, in order to succeed in poetry, must be brief, personal, and concentrated. It was recognized by the Greek critics themselves. Into that delicious garland of the poets which was woven by Meleager to be hung outside the gate of the Gardens of the

Hesperides he admits but two women from all the centuries of Hellenic song. Sappho is there, indeed, because "though her flowers were few, they were all roses," and, almost unseen, a single virginal shoot of the crocus bears the name of Erinna. That was all that womanhood gave of durable poetry to the literature of antiquity. A critic, writing five hundred years after her death, speaks of still hearing the swan-note of Erinna clear above the jangling chatter of the jays, and of still thinking those three hundred hexameter verses sung by a girl of nineteen as lovely as the loveliest of Homer's. Even at the time of the birth of Christ Erinna's writings consisted of what could be printed on a page of this magazine. The whole of her extant work, and of Sappho's too, could now be pressed into a newspaper column. But their fame lives on, and of Sappho, at least, enough survives to prove beyond a shadow of doubt the lofty inspiration of her genius. She is the type of the woman-poet who exists not by reason of the variety or volume of her work, but by virtue of its intensity, its individuality, its artistic perfection.

At no time was it more necessary to insist on this truth than it is to-day. The multiplication of books of verse, the hackneyed character of all obvious notation of life and feeling, should, one would fancy, tend to make our poets more exiguous, more concise, and more trimly girt. There are few men nowadays from whom an immense flood of writing can be endured without fatigue; few who can hold the trumpet to their lips for hours in the market-place without making a desert around them. Yet there never was a time when the pouring out of verse was less restrained within bounds. Everything that occurs to the poet seems, to-day, to be worth writing down and printing. The result is the neglect of really good and charming work, which misses all effect because it is drowned in stuff that is second- or third-rate. The women who write, in particular, pursued by that commercial fervor which is so curious a feature of our new literary life, and which sits so inelegantly on a female figure, are in a ceaseless hurry to work off and hurry away into oblivion those qualities of their style which might, if seriously and coyly guarded, attract a permanent attention.

Among the women who have written verse in the Victorian age there is not one by whom this reproach is less deserved than it is by Miss Rossetti. Severely true to herself, an artist of

conscientiousness as high as her skill is exquisite, she has never swept her fane to sea in a flood of her own outpourings. In the following pages I desire to pay no more than a just tribute of respect to one of the most perfect poets of the age,—not one of the most powerful, of course, nor one of the most epoch-making, but to one of the most perfect,—to a writer toward whom we may not unreasonably expect that students of English literature in the twenty-fourth century may look back as the critics of Alexandria did toward Sappho and toward Erinna.

So much has been written, since the untimely death of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, on the circumstances of his family history, that it is not requisite to enter very fully into that subject in the present sketch of his youngest sister. It is well known that the Italian poet Gabriele Rossetti, after a series of romantic adventures endured in the cause of liberty, settled in London, and married the daughter of another Italian exile, G. Polidori, the brother of Lord Byron's physician. From this stock, three fourths of which was purely Italian, there sprang four children, of whom Dante Gabriel was the eldest, and Christina Georgina, born in December, 1830, the youngest. There was nothing in the training of these children which foreshadowed their various distinction in the future; although the transplanted blood ran quicker, no doubt, in veins that must now be called English, not Italian, even as the winered anemone broke into flower from the earth that was carried to the Campo Santo out of Palestine.

We cannot fathom these mysteries of transplantation. No doubt a thousand Italian families might settle in London, and their children be born as deaf to melody and as blind to nature as their playfellows long native to Hoxton or Clerkenwell. Yet it is not possible to hold it quite an accident that this thousand and first family discovered in London soil the precise chemical qualities that made its Italian fiber break into clusters of blossom. Gabriel Rossetti, both as poet and painter, remained very Italian to the last, but his sister is a thorough Englishwoman. Unless I make a great mistake, she has never even visited Italy, and in her poetry the landscape and the observation of nature are not only English, they are so thoroughly local that I doubt whether there is one touch in them all which proves her to have strayed more than fifty miles from London in any direction. I have no reason for saying so beyond internal evidence, but I should be inclined to suggest that the county of Sussex alone is capable of having supplied all the imagery which Miss Rossetti's poems contain.

Her literary repertory, too, seems purely English; there is hardly a solitary touch in her work which betrays her transalpine parentage.

In a letter to myself, in words which she kindly lets me give to the public, Miss Rossetti has thus summed up some valuable impressions of her earliest bias toward writing:

For me, as well as for Gabriel, whilst our "school" was everything, it was no one definite thing. I, as the least and last of the group, may remind you that besides the clever and cultivated parents who headed us all, I in particular beheld far ahead of myself the clever sister and two clever brothers who were a little (though but a little) my seniors. And as to acquisitions, I lagged out of all proportion behind them, and have never overtaken them to this day.

I interrupt my distinguished friend to remark that, even if we do not take this modest declaration with a grain of salt, it is interesting to find one more example of the fact that the possession of genius by no means presupposes a nature apt for what are called acquisitions. Miss Rossetti proceeds:

If any one thing schooled me in the direction of poetry, it was perhaps the delightful idle liberty to prowl all alone about my grandfather's cottage-grounds some thirty miles from London, entailing in my childhood a long stage-coach journey! This privilege came to an end when I was eight years old, if not earlier. The grounds were quite small, and on the simplest scale—but in those days to me they were vast, varied, worth exploring. After those charming holidays ended I remained pent up in London till I was a great girl of fourteen, when delight reawakened at the sight of primroses in a railway cutting,—a prelude to many lovely country sights.

My impression is that a great deal of judicious neglect was practised in the Rossetti family, and that, like so many people of genius, the two poets, brother and sister, contrived to evade the educational mill. From the lips of Miss Christina herself I have it that all through her early girlhood she lay as a passive weight on the hands of those who invited her to explore those bosky groves called arithmetic, grammar, and the use of the globes. In Mr. R. L. Stevenson's little masterpiece of casuistry called "On Idlers and Idling," he has discussed the temper of mind so sympathetically that I will say no more than this, that Philistia never will comprehend the certain fact that to genius Chapter VI., which is primroses in a railway cutting, is often far more important than Chapter XIII., which happens to be the subjunctive mood. But for these mysteries of education I must refer the ingenious reader to Mr. Stevenson's delightful pages.

From her early childhood Miss Rossetti

seems to have prepared herself for the occupation of her life, the art of poetry. When she was eleven her verses began to be noticed and preserved, and an extremely rare little volume, the very cynosure of Victorian bibliography, permits us to observe the development of her talent. One of the rarest of books—when it occasionally turns up at sales it commands an extravagant price—is “Verses by Christina G. Rossetti,” privately printed in 1847, at the press of her grandfather Mr. G. Polidori, “at No. 15, Park Village East, Regent’s Park, London.” This little volume of sixty-six pages, dedicated to the author’s mother, and preceded by a pretty little preface signed by Mr. Polidori, is a curious revelation of the evolution of the poet’s genius. There is hardly one piece in it which Miss Rossetti would choose to reprint in a collected edition of her works, but there are many which possess the greatest interest to a student of her mature style. The earliest verses—since all are dated—show us merely the child’s desire for expression in verse, for experiment in rhyme and meter. Gradually we see the buddings of an individual manner, and in the latest piece, “The Dead City,” the completion of which seems to have led to the printing of the little collection, we find the poet assuming something of her adult manner. Here are some stanzas from this rarest of booklets, which will be new, in every probability, to all our readers, and in these we detect, unmistakably, the accents of the future author of “Goblin Market.”

In green emerald baskets were
Sun-red apples, streaked and fair;
Here the nectarine and peach,
And ripe plum lay, and on each
The bloom rested everywhere.

Grapes were hanging overhead,
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;
And in the panniers all around
Yellow melons shone, fresh found,
With the dew upon them spread.

And the apricot and pear,
And the pulpy fig were there,
Cherries and dark mulberries,
Bunchy currants, strawberries,
And the lemon wan and fair.

By far the best and most characteristic of all her girlish verses, however, are those contained in a long piece entitled “Divine and Human Pleading,” dated 1846. It is a pleasure to be the first to publish a passage which the author need not blush to own after nearly fifty years, every stanza of which bears the stamp of her peculiar manner:

A woman stood beside his bed:
Her breath was fragrance all;

Round her the light was very bright,
The air was musical.

Her footsteps shone upon the stars,
Her robe was spotless white;
Her breast was radiant with the Cross,
Her head with living light.

Her eyes beamed with a sacred fire,
And on her shoulders fair,
From underneath her golden crown,
Clustered her golden hair.

Yet on her bosom her white hands
Were folded quietly;
Yet was her glorious head bowed low
In deep humility.

In these extracts from the volume of 1847 we see more than the germ; we see the imperfect development of two qualities which have particularly characterized the poetry of Miss Rossetti—in the first an entirely direct and vivid mode of presenting to us the impression of richly colored physical objects, a feat in which she sometimes rivals Keats and Tennyson; and in the second a brilliant simplicity in the conduct of episodes of a visionary character, and a choice of expression which is exactly in keeping with these, a sort of Tuscan candor, as of a sacred picture in which each saint or angel is robed in a dress of one unbroken color. These two qualities combined, in spite of their apparent incompatibility,—an austere sweetness coupled with a luscious and sensuous brightness,—to form one side of Miss Rossetti’s curious poetic originality.

Three years later, in 1850, she was already a finished poet. That charming and pathetic failure, “The Germ,” a forlorn little periodical which attempted to emanate from the new group of Preraphaelites, as they called themselves, counted her among its original contributors. Her brother Gabriel, indeed, who had already written, in its earliest form, his remarkable poem of “The Blessed Damozel,” was the central force and prime artificer of the movement, which had begun about a year before. It was a moment of transition in English poetry. The old race was dying in its last representative, Wordsworth. Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Browning, Miss Barrett were the main figures of the day, while the conscience of young men and women addicted to verse was troubled with a variety of heresies, the malignity of which is hardly to be realized by us after fifty years. Mr. Bailey’s “Festus” was a real power for evil, strong enough to be a momentary snare to the feet of Tennyson in writing “Maud,” and even of Browning. A host of “Spasmodists,” as they were presently called, succeeded in appalling the taste of the age with their vast and shapeless tragedies, or monodramas. Then, with a

totally different voice, but also far removed from the paths of correct tradition in verse, came Clough, singing in slovenly hexameters of Oxford and the pleasures of radical undergraduates in highland bothies. Clough, with his hold on reality, and his sympathetic modern accent, troubled the Preraphaelites a little; they were less moved by a far more pure and exquisite music, a song as of Simonides himself, which also reached them from Oxford, when Matthew Arnold, in 1849, made his first appearance with his lovely and long neglected "Strayed Reveller." Mr. Coventry Patmore, with his "Poems" of 1844, was a recognized elder brother of their own, and almost everything else which was to be well done in verse for many years was to arise from among themselves, or in emulation of them. So that never was periodical better named than "The Germ," the seed which put forth two cotyledons, and then called itself "Art and Letters"; and put forth two more little leaves, and then seemed to die.

Among the anonymous contributions to the first number of "The Germ"—that for January, 1850—are two which we know to be Miss Rossetti's. These are, "Where Sunless Rivers Weep," and "Love, Strong as Death, is Dead." In the February number, under the pseudonym of Ellen Alleyn, she printed "A Pause of Thought," the song "Oh, Roses for the Flush of Youth," and "I said of Laughter, It is Vain." To the March number, then styled "Art and Letters," Ellen Alleyn contributed a long piece called "Repining," which does not seem to have been reprinted, and "Sweet Death" ("The Sweetest Blossoms Die"). To the fourth and last number, in which an alien and far more commonplace influence may be traced than in the others, she contributed nothing. Of her seven pieces, however, printed in "The Germ" in 1850, when she was twenty, there are five (if we omit "A Pause of Thought" and "Repining") which rank to this day among her very finest lyrics, and display her style as absolutely formed. Though the youngest poet of the confraternity, she appears indeed in "The Germ" as the most finished, and even, for the moment, the most promising, since her brother Gabriel, if the author of "The Blessed Damsel," was also responsible for those uncouth Flemish studies in verse which he very wisely refused in later years to own or to republish.

Time passed, and the obscure group of boys and girls who called themselves Preraphaelites found themselves a center of influence and curiosity. In poetry, as in painting and sculpture, they conquered, and more readily, perhaps, in their pupils than in themselves. The first independent publications of the school, at least, came from visitors who had been

children in 1850. These books were scarcely noticed by the public; if Mr. Morris's "Defence of Guinevere" attracted a few readers in 1858, Mr. Swinburne's "Queen Mother" fell still-born from the press in 1860. These prepared the way for real and instantaneous successes—for Miss Rossetti's "Goblin Market" in 1862, for Mr. Woolner's "My Beautiful Lady" in 1863, for Mr. Swinburne's dazzling "Atalanta in Calydon" in 1865. At last, in 1870, there tardily appeared, after such expectation and tiptoe curiosity as have preceded no other book in our generation, the "Poems" of Gabriel Rossetti.

It is with these poets that Miss Rossetti takes her historical position, and their vigor and ambition had a various influence upon her style. On this side there can be no doubt that association with men so learned and eager, so daring in experiment, so well equipped in scholarship, gave her an instant and positive advantage. By nature she would seem to be of a cloistered and sequestered temper, and her genius was lifted on this wave of friendship to heights which it would not have dreamed of attempting alone. On the other hand, it is possible that, after the first moment, this association with the strongest male talent of the time has not been favorable to public appreciation of her work. Critics have taken for granted that she was a satellite, and have been puzzled to notice her divergences from the type. Of these divergences the most striking is the religious one. Neither Gabriel Rossetti, nor Mr. Swinburne, nor Morris has shown any sympathy with, or any decided interest in, the tenets of Protestantism. Now Miss Christina Rossetti's poetry is not merely Christian and Protestant, it is Anglican; not her divine works only, but her secular also, bear the stamp of uniformity with the doctrines of the Church of England. What is very interesting in her poetry is the union of this fixed religious faith with a hold upon physical beauty and the richer parts of nature which allies her with her brother and with their younger friends. She does not shrink from strong delineation of the pleasures of life even when she is denouncing them. In one of the most austere of her sacred pieces, she describes the Children of the World in these glowing verses:

Milk-white, wine-flushed, among the vines,
Up and down leaping, to and fro,
Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,
Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
Their golden windy hair afloat,
Love-music warbling in their throat,
Young men and women come and go.

There is no literary hypocrisy here, no pretense that the apple of life is full of ashes, and this

gives a startling beauty, the beauty of artistic contrast, to the poet's studies in morality. Miss Rossetti, indeed, is so didactic in the undercurrent of her mind, so anxious to adorn her tale with a religious moral, that she needs all her art, all her vigorous estimate of physical loveliness, to make her poetry delightful as poetry. That she does make it eminently delightful merely proves her extraordinary native gift. The two long pieces she has written, her two efforts at a long breath, are sustained so well as to make us regret that she has not put out her powers in the creation of a still more complete and elaborated composition. Of these two poems "Goblin Market" is by far the more popular; the other, "The Prince's Progress," which appeared in 1866, has never attracted such attention as it deserves. It is not necessary to describe a poem so well known to every lover of verse as "Goblin Market." It is one of the very few purely fantastic poems of recent times which have really kept up the old tradition of humoresque literature. Its witty and fantastic conception is embrodered with fancies, descriptions, peals of laughing music, which clothe it as a queer Japanese figure may be clothed with brocade, so that the entire effect at last is beautiful and harmonious without ever having ceased to be grotesque. I confess that while I dimly perceive the underlying theme to be a didactic one, and nothing less than the sacrifice of self by a sister to recuperate a sister's virtue, I cannot follow the parable through all its delicious episodes. Like a Japanese work of art, again, one perceives the general intention, and one is satisfied with the beauty of all the detail, without comprehending or wishing to comprehend every part of the execution. For instance, the wonderful scene in which Lizzie sits beleaguered by the goblins, and receives with hard-shut mouth all the syrups that they squeeze against her skin — this from the point of view of poetry is perfect, and needs no apology or commentary; but its place in the parable it would, surely, be extremely hard to find. It is, therefore, astonishing to me that the general public, that strange and unaccountable entity, has chosen to prefer "Goblin Market," which we might conceive to be written for poets alone, to "The Prince's Progress," where the parable and the teaching are as clear as noonday. The prince is a handsome, lazy fellow, who sets out late upon his pilgrimage, loiters in bad company by the way, is decoyed by light loves, and the hope of life, and the desire of wealth, and reaches his destined bride at last, only to find her dead. This is an obvious moral, but it is adorned with verse of the very highest romantic beauty. Every claim which criticism has to make for the singular merit of Miss Rossetti

might be substantiated from this little-known romance, from which I must resist the pleasure of quoting more than a couple of stanzas descriptive of daybreak:

At the death of night and the birth of day,
When the owl left off his sober play,
And the bat hung himself out of the way,
Woke the song of mavis and merle,
And heaven put off its hoddin grey
For mother-o'-pearl.

Peeped up daisies here and there,
Here, there, and everywhere;
Rose a hopeful lark in the air,
Spreading out towards the sun his breast;
While the moon set solemn and fair
Away in the West.

With the apparent exceptions of "Goblin Market" and "The Prince's Progress," both of which indeed are of a lyrical nature, Miss Rossetti has written only lyrics. All poets are unequal, except the bad ones, who are uniformly bad. Miss Rossetti indulges in the privilege which Wordsworth, Burns, and so many great masters have enjoyed, of writing extremely flat and dull poems at certain moments, and of not perceiving that they are dull or flat. She does not err in being mediocre; her lyrics are bad or good, and the ensuing remarks deal with that portion only of her poems with which criticism is occupied in surveying work so admirably original as hers, namely, that which is worthy of her reputation. Her lyrics, then, are eminent for their glow of coloring, their vivid and novel diction, and for a certain penetrating accent, whether in joy or pain, which rivets the attention. Her habitual tone is one of melancholy reverie, the pathos of which is strangely intensified by her appreciation of beauty and pleasure. There is not a chord of the minor key in "A Birthday," and yet the impression which its cumulative ecstasy leaves upon the nerves is almost pathetic:

My heart is like a singing-bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow-shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

It is very rarely, indeed, that the poet strikes so jubilant a note as this. Her customary music is sad, often poignantly sad. Her lyrics have that *desiderium*, that obstinate longing for something lost out of life, which Shelley's have, although her Christian faith gives her regret a more resigned and sedate character than his possesses. In the extremely rare gift of song-writing Miss Rossetti has been singularly successful. Of the poets of our time she stands next to Lord Tennyson in this branch of the art, in the spontaneous and complete quality of her *lieder*, and in their propriety for the purpose of being sung. At various times this art has flourished in our race; eighty years ago most of the poets could write songs, but it is almost a lost art in our generation. The songs of our living poets are apt to be over-polished or under-polished, so simple as to be bald, or else so elaborate as to be wholly unsuitable for singing. But such a song as this is not unworthy to be classed with the melodies of Shakspeare, of Burns, of Shelley :

Oh, roses for the flush of youth,
And laurel for the perfect prime;
But pluck an ivy-branch for me
Grown old before my time.

Oh, violets for the grave of youth,
And bay for those dead in their prime;
Give me the withered leaves I chose
Before in the old time.

Her music is very delicate, and it is no small praise to her that she it is who, of living verse-writers, has left the strongest mark on the metrical nature of that miraculous artificer of verse, Mr. Swinburne. In his "Poems and Ballads," as other critics have long ago pointed out, as was shown when that volume first appeared, several of Miss Rossetti's discoveries were transferred to his more scientific and elaborate system of harmonies, and adapted to more brilliant effects. The reader of Mr. Swinburne would judge that of all his immediate contemporaries Miss Rossetti and the late Mr. Fitzgerald, the translator of Omar Khayyám, had been those who had influenced his style the most. Miss Rossetti, however, makes no pretense to elaborate metrical effects; she is even sometimes a little naïve, a little careless, in her rough, rhymeless endings, and metrically her work was better in her youth than it has been since.

The sonnets present points of noticeable interest. They are few, but they are of singular excellence. They have this peculiarity, that many of them are objective. Now the great bulk of good sonnets is purely subjective—occupied with reverie, with regret, with moral or religious enthusiasm. Even the celebrated sonnets of Gabriel Rossetti will be found to

be mainly subjective. On the question of the relative merit of the sonnets of the brother and the sister, I hold a view in which I believe that few will at present coincide; I am certain Miss Rossetti herself will not. If she honors me by reading these pages, she may possibly recollect a conversation, far more important to me of course than to her, which we held in 1870, soon after I had first the privilege of becoming known to her. I was venturing to praise her sonnets, when she said, with the sincerity of evident conviction, that they "could only be admired before Gabriel, by printing his in the 'Fortnightly Review,' showed the source of their inspiration." I was sure then, and I am certain now, that she was wrong. The sonnets are not the product of, they do not even bear any relation to those of, her brother.

Well do I recollect the publication of these sonnets of Gabriel Rossetti, in 1869, when, at a moment when curiosity regarding the mysterious painter-poet was at its height, they suddenly blossomed forth in a certain number of the "Fortnightly Review," in whose solemn pages we were wont to see nothing lighter or more literary than esoteric politics and the prose mysteries of positivism. We were dazzled by their Italian splendor of phraseology, amazed that such sonorous anapests, that such a burst of sound, should be caged within the sober limits of the sonnet, fascinated by the tenderness of the long-drawn amorous rhetoric; but there were some of us who soon recovered an equilibrium of taste, in which it seemed that the tradition of the English sonnet, its elegance of phrase, its decorum of movement, were too rudely displaced by this brilliant Italian intruder, and that underneath the melody and the glowing diction, the actual thought, the valuable and intelligible residue of poetry, was too often much more thin than Rossetti allowed it to be in the best of his other poems. As to Gabriel Rossetti's sonnets being his own best work, as has been asserted, I for one must entirely and finally disagree. I believe that of all his poetry they form the section which will be the first to tarnish. Quite otherwise is it with Miss Christina Rossetti. It is in certain of her objective sonnets that her touch is most firm and picturesque, her intelligence most weighty, and her style most completely characteristic. The reader need but turn to "After Death," "On the Wing," "Venus's Looking-Glass" (in the volume of 1875), and the marvelous "A Triad"¹ to concede the truth of this; while in the more obvious subjective manner of sonnet-writing she is one of the most successful poets of our

¹ Why has Miss Rossetti allowed this piece, one of the gems of the volume of 1862, to drop out of her collected poems?



ENGRAVED BY WALTER TURNER, AFTER A CHALK DRAWING BY D. G. ROSSETTI MADE IN 1866.

Christina G. Rossetti.

time. In "The World," where she may be held to come closest to her brother as a sonneteer, she seems to me to surpass him.

From the first a large section of Miss Rossetti's work has been occupied with sacred and devotional themes. Through this most rare and difficult department of the art, which so few essay without breaking on the Scylla of doctrine on the one hand, or being whirled in the Charybdis of commonplace dullness on the other, she has steered with extraordinary success. Her sacred poems are truly sacred, and yet not unpoetical. As a religious poet of our time she has no rival but Cardinal Newman, and it could only be schismatic prejudice or absence of critical faculty which should deny her a place, as a poet, higher than that of our exquisite master of prose. To find her exact parallel it is at once her strength and her snare that we must go back to the middle of the

seventeenth century. She is the sister of George Herbert; she is of the family of Crashaw, of Vaughan, of Wither. The metrical address of Herbert has been perilously attractive to her; the broken stanzas of "Consider" or of "Long Barren" remind us of the age when pious aspirations took the form of wings, or hour-glasses, or lamps of the temple. The most thrilling and spirited of her sacred poems have been free from these Marini-like subtleties. There is only what is best in the quaint and fervent school of Herbert visible in such pieces as "The Three Enemies," "A Rose Plant in Jericho," "Passing Away, saith the World," and "Up-Hill." Still more completely satisfactory, perhaps, is "Amor Mundi," first included in the "Poems" of 1875, which takes rank as one of the most solemn, imaginative, and powerful lyrics on a purely religious subject ever printed in England.

Edmund Gosse.