

**DANTE GABRIEL
ROSSETTI,
POET AND PAINTER**

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Poet and Painter by Peter Walker Nicholson

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PETER WALKER NICHOLSON

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The Round Table Series

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VI.

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

POET AND PAINTER

[Michelson, P. W.]

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THE following Essay is the work—the most mature *literary* work—of the late Peter Walker Nicholson, Artist, whose sad and sudden death in the autumn of last year deprived Scottish art of one of its most promising votaries, and cut short a career fraught with sanguine interest to all who watched it. Mr. Nicholson took a warm interest in this Series, as is witnessed by his contribution of the happy and graceful design for the cover, and had promised to revise the present Essay with a view to its appearing therein. This, unfortunately, he had not accomplished, and the Essay came into the editor's possession pretty much as it was originally read before the Dialectic Society of the University of Edinburgh. With the exception, then, of the alterations absolutely necessary when an address to an audience is changed to an essay for readers, the original MS. has not been departed from. It will be only just, then, that the reader should bear in mind that the Essay lacks those finishing touches which the maturer judgment and skill of the author would certainly have bestowed upon it.



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.

FIFTY years ago there was a decided reaction towards mediævalism. In England it affected religion ; on the Continent it affected art. The pale nerveless works which crowd German galleries were mostly the outcome of this renaissance. Cornelius and Overbeck were the chief factors in beginning, as their pictures are very powerful reasons for ending, the German phase of this movement. In England, however, it bore splendid fruit. The Oxford movement in religion, either directly or indirectly, turned men's minds to the stagnant state of affairs generally. The time was ripe for a new departure in art. In poetry the old traditions had been swept away long before by Burns, later by Scott, Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. Tennyson, Browning, and Mrs. Browning, Arnold, and Clough were the voices which one by one broke into song. But art was still imprisoned. Turner, it is true, had done work for all men and for all time. He had painted the labour and sorrow and the passing away of men. But his work was too phenomenal, too individual ever to found a school sufficiently broad to reform art in all its various fields.

His work was too often misunderstood, or too often admired on account of the very qualities in it least worthy of praise. His work was too elemental, too

absolute in its dominant qualities ever to cease being individual. So art still continued bound in spite of Turner's divine subtlety of changing light and wandering shade, of up-soaring splendour of the moon, of calm quiet beauty of noonday, of supreme gleam of crimson and glowing sunlight gold, of fading mists and tremulous sweetness of clouds, of dim mountain distances and far withdrawn glories of tumultuous sun-kissed seas. Ruskin wrote the first and second parts of "Modern Painters," reducing to science the wayward and instinctive works of Turner. But the end was not yet. Art was more hopelessly commonplace than before. The great style of Gainsborough, of Reynolds, had been vulgarised by the successive efforts of Copley, West, and Lawrence, and to a still greater extent by their followers. Based chiefly on the work of Constable and Bonnington, a new art was rising in France. As yet it was not recognised. Millet and Corot, Daubigny and Rousseau, were making a stand against the so-called Heroic School, as in literature, years before, a similar stand, or rather a very decided onslaught, had been made by Victor Hugo and Theophile Gautier against the stilted classicism of the Academy.

In England there duly arose the now famous Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The more I examine their work the more clearly I am of the opinion that the whole movement originated with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, partly because the early work of all these men was very much of a similar nature—a similarity which has ceased as each painter found his individuality, while the characteristics of the early work of Rossetti continued to be present in all his work done afterwards. And this quality which we now recognise as

distinctively his, was in the earlier days of the Brotherhood common to them all. This feeling was so strange, so utterly removed from any other phase of contemporary artistic thought as at once to attract attention. It is scarcely necessary to say that it also attracted ridicule. This ridicule seems requisite for the existence of any new movement. It is what Carlyle would call its "baphometric fire-baptism." This so-called Pre-Raffaelite Brotherhood proved its vitality by surviving this very torrent of baptismal abuse.

Briefly and broadly the aim of this scheme was to return to nature from the pedantic style of the Heroic School, with their lofty ideas as to the unfitness of ordinary truth, with their so-called Raffaelesque grace and Raffaelesque nobility, which required backgrounds of Palladian architecture and trailing drapery before all other things;—who called it needful in the case of one figure being dark against light, that another should be light against dark, that the hands of one should be up and the hands of another down, and various other stringently requisite duties of opposition, with the single exception perhaps that utter inanity of expression in one countenance was not regarded as a sufficient reason for any differing expression in any other. These good people went their way mightily pleased with their improvements, their balancing, their triangular, their circular, their elliptical compositions, with their improved scheme so far in advance of uncomposing, unbalancing nature, who, *tant pis pour elle*, had not invented renaissance architecture, nor renaissance juxtapositions of dark and light, nor renaissance garments in the days of the apostles and prophets and evangelists, whose stately posings and vague grandiose gesticulations these painters dreamed of.

This was the attitude of the later Pre-Raphaelites. This, to paint things as they were, or, in the case of historical work, as they might reasonably be imagined to have happened, not as they might be fancied grandly or nobly to have happened. It was more than a mere technical revolution: it was the infusion into art of a new soul. In the work of Rossetti, with whom I more particularly deal at this time, there was a force of imagination, a present beauty subtle, sweet, benign, a quiet mystical, spiritual loveliness unknown to art since the days of Fra Angelico and Botticelli. The very soul of Mediævalism was in these monks,—that high, pure, intense consciousness of infinite existence, of which this life is but a (momentary manifestation, in a realm filled with angels and the souls of men and women.) In his picture of Mary's girlhood, the angel with long crimson wings, flamelike and radiant, is as real as the Virgin embroidering the lily, as St. Anna with her quiet patient look, as St. Joachim trimming the vines in the dim, sunny garden without. I, for one, feel beyond all question that the painter of this and of the Annunciation saw and felt the presence and reality of the one as clearly as of the others. Further, that this was to him no mere myth, no mere beautiful story, but what was long ago in Galilee. The Annunciation with its utter simplicity: the awakened girl with a faint look of expectation in her eyes, as she gazes at the angel beneath whose feet are flames, bearing a lily, again seems to me to give this feeling of reality. To the Virgin the angel is no strange unknown presence; she has no fear, only a subtle expectation, a half-dazed wonder as one awakened from sleep. It seems to me that this picture is more essentially truthful, more expressive of