# ROBERT BUCHANAN
## 1841–1901

Born in England and educated in Scotland, Robert Buchanan was a prolific poet, novelist, and playwright. (His poem "Dr. B," on Robert Browning, can be found in Appendix B.) But he is best remembered today for a single essay, "The Fleshly School of Poetry," which he published under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland in *The Contemporary Review* in October 1871. A review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Poems* (1870)—which was already in its fifth edition and had garnered a good deal of praise (much of it, as Buchanan notes, from Rossetti's friends, though this practice was far from unusual)—Buchanan's essay acknowledges Rossetti's talent but attacks his poetry at length, together with that of Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Morris, who were members of the same poetic circle. In keeping with his title, Buchanan does object to the sensuality of some of the poems. However, his chief criticisms are not moral but aesthetic, directed at the poems' artificiality and frequent preciousness. The essay was expanded and republished as a pamphlet in 1872. By that time, Rossetti had responded to Buchanan, whose real identity he had discovered, in ⋆"The Stealthy School of Criticism," published in *The Athenaeum* in December 1871; Swinburne, meanwhile, wrote his own pamphlet in response, titled "Under the Microscope" (1872).

Buchanan soon repented the ferocity of his essay and publicly withdrew most of his criticisms; he later dedicated a book to Rossetti and wrote an appreciative tribute after the latter's death. But the review had already had its effect on the hyper-sensitive Rossetti, probably contributing to his mental breakdown in 1872. The essay is worth reading not only for its biographical importance but also because, together with the responses it elicited, it sheds light on many of the most distinctive features of Rossetti's poems and of Pre-Raphaelite poetry more generally.

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### *The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti*

If, on the occasion of any public performance of Shakespeare's great tragedy, the actors who perform the parts of Rosencranz and Guildenstern[1] were, by a preconcerted arrangement and by means of what is technically known as "gagging," to make themselves fully as prominent as the leading character, and to indulge in soliloquies and business strictly belonging to Hamlet himself, the result would be, to say the least of it, astonishing; yet a very

1 *Rosencranz and Guildenstern* Minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

similar effect is produced on the unprejudiced mind when the "walking gentlemen"[1] of the fleshly school of poetry, who bear precisely the same relation to Mr. Tennyson[2] as Rosencranz and Guildenstern do to the Prince of Denmark in the play, obtrude their lesser identities and parade their smaller idiosyncrasies in the front rank of leading performers. In their own place, the gentlemen are interesting and useful. Pursuing still the theatrical analogy, the present drama of poetry might be cast as follows: Mr. Tennyson supporting the part of Hamlet, Mr. Matthew Arnold that of Horatio, Mr. Bailey that of Voltimand, Mr. Buchanan that of Cornelius, Messrs. Swinburne and Morris the parts of Rosencranz and Guildenstern, Mr. Rossetti that of Osric, and Mr. Robert Lytton that of "A Gentleman."[3] It will be seen that we have left no place for Mr. Browning, who may be said, however, to play the leading character in his own peculiar fashion on alternate nights.[4]

This may seem a frivolous and inadequate way of opening our remarks on a school of verse-writers which some people regard as possessing great merits; but in good truth, it is scarcely possible to discuss with any seriousness the pretensions with which foolish friends and small critics have surrounded the fleshly school, which, in spite of its spasmodic ramifications[5] in the erotic direction, is merely one of the many sub-Tennysonian schools expanded to supernatural dimensions, and endeavouring by affectations all its own to overshadow its connection with the great original. In the sweep of one single poem, the weird and doubtful "Vivien," Mr. Tennyson has concentrated all the epicene[6] force which, wearisomely expanded, constitutes the characteristic of the writers at present under consideration; and if in "Vivien" he has indicated for them the bounds of sensualism in art, he has in *Maud*, in the dramatic person of the hero,[7] afforded distinct precedent for the hysteric tone and overloaded style which is now so familiar to readers of Mr. Swinburne. The fleshliness of "Vivien" may indeed be described as the distinct quality held in common by all the members of the last sub-Tennysonian school, and it is a quality which becomes unwholesome when there is no moral or intellectual quality to temper and control it. Fully conscious of this themselves, the fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant[8] to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense; and that the poet, properly to develop his poetic faculty, must be an intellectual hermaphrodite, to whom the very facts of day and night are lost in a whirl of aesthetic terminology. After Mr. Tennyson has probed the depths of modern speculation in a series of commanding moods, all right and interesting in him as the reigning personage, the walking gentlemen, knowing that something of the sort is expected from all leading performers, bare their roseate

1 *"walking gentleman"* Actors with walk-on (minor or non-speaking) roles.

2 *Mr. Tennyson* Alfred Tennyson (1809–92), Poet Laureate since 1850.

3 *Pursuing still … Gentleman* Except for Matthew Arnold (1822–88), who plays the substantial part of Hamlet's friend and confidant, all those named here—including Buchanan himself—fulfill small roles. The poets referred to include Philip Bailey (1816–1902), a "Spasmodic" poet; Buchanan himself (a useful ruse, since the article was published under a pseudonym); Swinburne, Morris, and Rossetti, whom the article goes on to discuss; and Robert Bulwer-Lytton (1831–91), son of the novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who wrote poetry under the pseudonym Owen Meredith.

4 *It will be seen … nights* By 1871 Robert Browning (1812–89) was as revered as Tennyson; he therefore gets to play Hamlet every other night.

5 *ramifications* Branchings; *spasmodic* Fitful and erratic, with a glance at the so-called Spasmodic school of poetry (see Appendix D).

6 *epicene* This word usually means "androgynous" or "effeminate"; here it seems to mean "sensual." "Vivien" (1859), later renamed "Merlin and Vivien," is the most explicitly erotic of the twelve books of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, representing as it does the seduction of the wizard Merlin by the wily Vivien, though it remains very restrained in comparison to the works of Swinburne.

7 *dramatic person of the hero* The unnamed speaker of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855) suffers at times from madness; he swings between extremes of rage, grief, love, and hate.

8 *solemn league and covenant* Here, oath; *The Solemn League and Covenant* (1643) was a document forming an alliance between Scottish and English opponents of the king during the English Civil War.

bosoms and aver that *they* are creedless; the only possible question here being, if any disinterested person cares twopence whether Rosencranz, Guildenstern, and Osric are creedless or not—their self-revelation on that score being so perfectly gratuitous? But having gone so far, it was and is too late to retreat. Rosencranz, Guildenstern, and Osric, finding it impossible to risk an individual bid for the leading business,[1] have arranged all to play leading business together, and mutually to praise, extol, and imitate each other; and although by these measures they have fairly earned for themselves the title of the Mutual Admiration School, they have in a great measure succeeded in their object—to the general stupefaction of a British audience. It is time, therefore, to ascertain whether any of these gentlemen has actually in himself the making of a leading performer. When the *Athenaeum*—once more cautious in such matters—advertised nearly every week some interesting particular about Mr. Swinburne's health, Mr. Morris's holiday-making, or Mr. Rossetti's genealogy, varied with such startling statements as "We are informed that Mr. Swinburne dashed off his noble ode *at a sitting*," or "Mr. Swinburne's songs have already reached a second edition," or "Good poetry seems to be in demand; the first edition of Mr. O'Shaughnessy's poems is exhausted";[2] when the *Academy* informed us that "During the past year or two Mr. Swinburne has written several novels" (!), and that some review or other is to be praised for giving Mr. Rossetti's poems "the attentive study which they demand"—when we read these things we might or might not know pretty well how and where they originated; but to a provincial eye, perhaps, the whole thing really looked like leading business. It would be scarcely worthwhile, however, to inquire into the pretensions of the writers on merely literary grounds, because sooner or later all literature finds its own level, whatever criticism may say or do in the matter; but it unfortunately happens in the present case that the fleshly school of verse-writers are, so to speak, public offenders, because they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read and understood. Their complaint too is catching, and carries off many young persons. What the complaint is, and how it works, may be seen on a very slight examination of the works of Mr. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to whom we shall confine our attention in the present article.

Mr. Rossetti has been known for many years as a painter of exceptional powers, who, for reasons best known to himself, has shrunk from publicly exhibiting his pictures, and from allowing anything like a popular estimate to be formed of their qualities. He belongs, or is said to belong, to the so-called Pre-Raphaelite school, a school which is generally considered to exhibit much genius for colour, and great indifference to perspective.[3] It would be unfair to judge the painter by the glimpses we have had of his works, or by photographs which are sold of the principal paintings. Judged by the photographs, he is an artist who conceives unpleasantly, and draws ill. Like Mr. Simeon Solomon,[4] however, with whom he seems to have many points in common, he is distinctively a colourist, and of his capabilities in colour we cannot speak, though we should guess that they are great; for if there is any good quality by which his poems are specially marked, it is a great sensitiveness to hues and tints as conveyed in poetic epithet. These qualities, which impress the casual spectator of the photographs from his pictures, are to be found abundantly among his verses. There is the same thinness and transparence of design, the same combination of the simple and the grotesque,

1 *business* Stage action; sometimes applied to an individual role.

2 *the first edition … exhausted* Arthur O'Shaughnessy (1844–81) published his first volume of poetry, *Epic of Women*, in 1870. *The Athenaeum* was an important British literary magazine; *The Academy*, mentioned later in the sentence, was in 1871 a new journal, launched two years earlier.

3 *Pre-Raphaelite … perspective* In 1848 Rossetti, along with six other young painters, founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; in their admiration for medieval art, they did sometimes, as Buchanan remarks, imitate the lack of perspectival depth characteristic of European art before the Renaissance. The Pre-Raphaelites were much ridiculed, but they were championed by the art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) and went on to become an important and influential school.

4 *Simeon Solomon* Painter influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites (1840–1905). Although Buchanan could not have foreseen it, Solomon would a few years later be involved in a scandal, when he was arrested and imprisoned for having solicited sex from another man.

the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to all agitating forces and agencies, all tumultuous griefs and sorrows, all the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation. Mr. Morris is often pure, fresh, and wholesome as his own great model; Mr. Swinburne startles us more than once by some fine flash of insight; but the mind of Mr. Rossetti is like a glassy mere,[1] broken only by the dive of some water-bird or the hum of winged insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness, with a light blue sky above it, sultry depths mirrored within it, and a surface so thickly sown with waterlilies that it retains its glassy smoothness even in the strongest wind. Judged relatively to his poetic associates, Mr. Rossetti must be pronounced inferior to either. He cannot tell a pleasant story like Mr. Morris, nor forge alliterative thunderbolts like Mr. Swinburne. It must be conceded, nevertheless, that he is neither so glibly imitative as the one, nor so transcendently superficial as the other.

Although he has been known for many years as a poet as well as a painter—as a painter and poet idolized by his own family and personal associates—and although he has once or twice appeared in print as a contributor to magazines, Mr. Rossetti did not formally appeal to the public until rather more than a year ago, when he published a copious volume of poems,[2] with the announcement that the book, although it contained pieces composed at intervals during a period of many years, "included nothing which the author believes to be immature." The work was inscribed to his brother, Mr. William Rossetti, who, having written much both in poetry and criticism, will perhaps be known to bibliographers as the editor of the worst edition of Shelley which has yet seen the light.[3] No sooner had the work appeared than the chorus of eulogy began. "The book is satisfactory from end to end," wrote Mr. Morris in the *Academy*; "I think these lyrics, with all their other merits, the most complete of their time; nor do I know what lyrics of any time are to be called *great*, if we are to deny the title to these." On the same subject Mr. Swinburne went into a hysteria of admiration: "golden affluence," "jewel-coloured words," "chastity of form," "harmonious nakedness," "consummate fleshly sculpture," and so on in Mr. Swinburne's well-known manner when reviewing his friends. Other critics, with a singular similarity of phrase, followed suit. Strange to say, moreover, no one accused Mr. Rossetti of naughtiness. What had been heinous in Mr. Swinburne was majestic exquisiteness in Mr. Rossetti. Yet we question if there is anything in the unfortunate *Poems and Ballads*[4] quite so questionable on the score of thorough naughtiness as many pieces in Mr. Rossetti's collection. Mr. Swinburne was wilder, more outrageous, more blasphemous, and his subjects were more atrocious in themselves; yet the hysterical tone slew the animalism, the furiousness of epithet lowered the sensation; and the first feeling of disgust at such themes as "Laus Veneris" and "Anactoria,"[5] faded away into comic amazement. It was only a little mad boy letting off squibs,[6] not a great strong man, who might be really dangerous to society. "I *will* be naughty!" screamed the little boy; but, after all, what did it matter? It is quite different, however, when a grown man, with the self-control and easy audacity of actual experience, comes forward to chronicle his amorous sensations, and, first proclaiming in a loud voice his literary maturity, and

1 *mere* Pond.

2 *a copious volume of poems* Rossetti's *Poems* of 1870, which gathered together more than twenty years' worth of his poetry.

3 *edition of Shelley … light* William Michael Rossetti's *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* was published in 1870.

4 *Poems and Ballads* Swinburne's first volume of poems (1866), which outraged readers and reviewers with its blasphemy and its celebration of various forms of sexuality.

5 *"Laus Veneris" and "Anactoria"* Pieces from *Poems and Ballads* that received fierce criticism, to which Swinburne responded in his 1866 ★*Notes on Poems and Reviews*. ★"Laus Veneris" retells the Tannhäuser legend, in which a medieval knight becomes the paramour of the love-goddess Venus; ★"Anactoria" recreates the voice of the ancient Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos.

6 *squibs* Satires; literally, small firecrackers.

consequent responsibility, shamelessly prints and publishes such a piece of writing as this sonnet on "Nuptial Sleep":[1]

*At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:*
*And as the last slow sudden drops are shed*
*From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,*
*So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.*
*Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start*
*Of married flowers to either side outspread*
*From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,*
*Fawned on each other where they lay apart.*

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.
Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams
Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;
Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.

This, then, is "the golden affluence of words, the firm outline, the justice and chastity of form." Here is a full-grown man, presumably intelligent and cultivated, putting on record for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness. We are no purists in such matters. We hold the sensual part of our nature to be as holy as the spiritual or intellectual part, and we believe that such things must find their equivalent in all; but it is neither poetic, nor manly, nor even human, to obtrude such things as the themes of whole poems. It is simply nasty. Nasty as it is, we are very mistaken if many readers do not think it nice. English society of one kind purchases the Day's Doings.[2] English society of another kind goes into ecstasy over Mr. Solomon's pictures—pretty pieces of morality, such as "Love dying by the breath of Lust." There is not much to choose between the two objects of admiration, except that painters like Mr. Solomon lend actual genius to worthless subjects, and thereby produce veritable monsters—like the lovely devils that danced around St. Anthony.[3] Mr. Rossetti owes his so-called success to the same causes. In poems like "Nuptial Sleep," the man who is too sensitive to exhibit his pictures, and so modest that it takes him years to make up his mind to publish his poems, parades his private sensations before a coarse public, and is gratified by their applause.

It must not be supposed that all Mr. Rossetti's poems are made up of trash like this. Some of them are as noteworthy for delicacy of touch as others are for shamelessness of exposition. They contain some exquisite pictures of nature, occasional passages of real meaning, much beautiful phraseology, lines of peculiar sweetness, and epithets chosen with true literary cunning. But the fleshly feeling is everywhere. Sometimes, as in "The Stream's Secret," it is deliciously modulated, and adds greatly to our emotion of pleasure at perusing a finely-wrought poem; at other times, as in the "Last Confession," it is fiercely held in check by the exigencies of a powerful situation and the strength of a dramatic speaker; but it is generally in the foreground, flushing the whole poem with unhealthy rose-colour, stifling the senses with overpowering sickliness, as of too much civet.[4] Mr. Rossetti is never dramatic, never impersonal—always attitudinizing, posturing, and describing his own exquisite emotions. He is the "Blessed Damozel," leaning over the "gold bar of heaven," and seeing

Time like a pulse shake fierce
Through all the worlds;

he is "heaven-born Helen, Sparta's queen," whose "each

1 *"Nuptial Sleep"* This was the fifth sonnet in Rossetti's ★*The House of Life* as it appeared in 1870; when Rossetti reprinted the expanded sonnet sequence in 1881, he omitted "Nuptial Sleep."

2 *Day's Doings* A short-lived (1870–72) illustrated paper of daily gossip.

3 *lovely devils … Saint Anthony* The temptation of St. Anthony of Egypt (c. 300 CE) in the desert is a common theme in late medieval and Renaissance painting. Some of the devils tempting the saint are beautiful, but most are usually depicted as grotesque (the most terrible temptation being to despair).

4 *civet* Strong-smelling glandular secretion of the civet cat, used in perfume.

twin breast is an apple sweet"; he is Lilith the first wife of Adam;[1] he is the rosy Virgin of the poem called "Ave," and the Queen in the "Staff and Scrip"; he is "Sister Helen" melting her waxen man; he is all these, just as surely as he is Mr. Rossetti soliloquizing over Jenny in her London lodging, or the very nuptial person writing erotic sonnets to his wife.[2] In petticoats or pantaloons, in modern times or in the middle ages, he is just Mr. Rossetti, a fleshly person, with nothing particular to tell us or teach us, with extreme self-control, a strong sense of colour, and a careful choice of diction. Amid all his "affluence of jewel-coloured words," he has not given us one rounded and noteworthy piece of art; though his verses are all art, not one poem which is memorable for its own sake, and quite separable from the displeasing identity of the composer. The nearest approach to a perfect whole is the "Blessed Damozel," a peculiar poem, placed first in the book, perhaps by accident, perhaps because it is a key to the poems which follow. This poem appeared in a rough shape many years ago in the Germ, an unwholesome periodical started by the Pre-Raphaelites, and suffered, after gasping through a few feeble numbers, to die the death of all such publications.[3] In spite of its affected title, and of numberless affectations throughout the text, the "Blessed Damozel" has great merits of its own, and a few lines of real genius. We have heard it described as the record of actual grief and love, or, in simple words, the apotheosis of one actually lost by the writer; but, without having any private knowledge of the circumstance of its composition, we feel that such an account of the poem is inadmissible. It does not contain one single note of sorrow. It is a "composition," and a clever one. Read the opening stanzas:—

The blessed damozel leaned out
    From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
    Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
    And the stars in her hair were seven.

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
    No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
    For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
    Was yellow like ripe corn.

This is a careful sketch for a picture, which, worked into actual colour by a master, might have been worth seeing. The steadiness of hand lessens as the poem proceeds, and although there are several passages of considerable power,—such as that where, far down the void,

this earth
    spins like a fretful midge

or that other, describing how

the curled moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf—

the general effect is that of a queer old painting in a missal,[4] very affected and very odd. What moved the British critic to ecstasy in this poem seems to us very sad nonsense indeed, or, if not sad nonsense, very meretricious[5] affectation. Thus, we have seen the following verses quoted with enthusiasm, as italicized—

And still she bowed herself and stooped
    Out of the circling charm;
*Until her bosom must have made*
    *The bar she leaned on warm*,

1 *"Blessed Damozel" … Adam* Referring to ★"The Blessed Damozel" (lines 2, 50–51), "Troy Town" (lines 1, 43), and "Eden Bower."

2 *Jenny … his wife* Referring to ★"Jenny" and ★*The House of Life*, the latter of which was inspired by Rossetti's late wife, Elizabeth Siddal.

3 *the Germ … publications* The Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*, edited by William Michael Rossetti, published only four issues (*numbers*) in 1850 before folding.

4 *missal* A prayerbook for use at mass; medieval missals were often decorated with miniature illustrations.

5 *meretricious* Superficially appealing; literally, having the characteristics of a prostitute.

And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
*Time like a pulse shake fierce*
*Through all the worlds*. Her gaze still strove
Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke as when
The stars sang in their spheres.

It seems to us that all these lines are very bad, with the exception of the two admirable lines ending the first verse, and that the italicized portions are quite without merit, and almost without meaning. On the whole, one feels disheartened and amazed at the poet who, in the nineteenth century, talks about "damozels," "citherns," and "citoles," and addresses the mother of Christ as the "Lady Mary,"—

With her five handmaidens, whose names
Are five sweet symphonies,
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret and Rosalys.

A suspicion is awakened that the writer is laughing at us. We hover uncertainly between picturesqueness and namby-pamby, and the effect, as Artemus Ward[1] would express it, is "weakening to the intellect." The thing would have been almost too much in the shape of a picture, though the workmanship might have made amends. The truth is that literature, and more particularly poetry, is in a very bad way when one art gets hold of another, and imposes upon it its conditions and limitations. In the first few verses of the "Damozel" we have the subject, or part of the subject, of a picture, and the inventor should either have painted it or left it alone altogether; and, had he done the latter, the world would have lost nothing. Poetry is something more than painting; and an idea will not become a poem, because it is too smudgy for a picture.

In a short notice from a well-known pen, giving the best estimate we have seen of Mr. Rossetti's powers as a poet, the *North American Review* offers a certain explanation for affectation such as that of Mr. Rossetti. The writer suggests that "it may probably be the expression of genuine moods of mind in natures too little comprehensive."[2] We would rather believe that Mr. Rossetti lacks comprehension that that he is deficient in sincerity; yet really, to paraphrase the words which Johnson applied to Thomas Sheridan, Mr. Rossetti is affected, naturally affected, but it must have taken him a great deal of trouble to become what we now see him—such an excess of affectation is not in nature.[3] There is very little writing in the volume spontaneous in the sense that some of Swinburne's verses are spontaneous; the poems all look as if they had taken a great deal of trouble. The grotesque mediævalism of "Stratton Water" and "Sister Helen," the mediæval classicism of "Troy Town," the false and shallow mysticism of "Eden Bower," are one and all essentially imitative, and must have cost the writer much pains. It is time, indeed, to point out that Mr. Rossetti is a poet possessing great powers of assimilation and some faculty for concealing the nutriment on which he feeds. Setting aside the *Vita Nuova* and the early Italian poems, which are familiar to many readers by his own excellent translations,[4] Mr. Rossetti may be described as a writer who has yielded to an unusual extent to the complex influences of the literature surrounding him at the present moment. He has the painter's imitative power developed in proportion to his lack of the poet's conceiving imagination. He reproduces to a nicety the manner of an old ballad, a trick in which Mr. Swinburne is also an adept. Cultivated readers, moreover, will recognise in every one of these poems the tone of Mr. Tennyson broken up by the style of Mr. and Mrs. Browning, and disguised here and there by the

1 *Artemus Ward* Pen name of Charles F. Browne (1834–67), American humorist.

2 *a short notice … comprehensive* J.R. Dennett, writing in the *North American Review* (October 1870).

3 *Johnson … nature* Buchanan supplies the relevant quotation from James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), in which Johnson (1709–84) describes the Irish-born educator Thomas Sheridan: "Why, sir, Sherry is dull, *naturally* dull; but it must have taken him a *great deal of trouble* to become what we now see him—such an excess of stupidity is not in nature."

4 *Vita Nuova … translations* Rossetti's *The Early Italian Poets* (1861) introduced English readers to many medieval poems not previously translated into English; it includes a complete translation of Dante's autobiographical *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life).

eccentricities of the Pre-Raphaelites. The "Burden of Nineveh" is a philosophical edition of "Recollections of the Arabian Nights"; "A Last Confession" and "Dante at Verona" are, in the minutest trick and form of thought, suggestive of Mr. Browning; and that the sonnets have been largely moulded and inspired by Mrs. Browning can be ascertained by any critic who will compare them with the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*.[1] Much remains, nevertheless, that is Mr. Rossetti's own. We at once recognise as his own property such passages as this:—

> I looked up
> And saw where a brown-shouldered harlot leaned
> Half through a tavern window thick with vine.
> Some man had come behind her in the room
> And caught her by her arms, and she had turned
> With that coarse empty laugh on him, as now
> *He munched her neck with kisses, while the vine*
> *Crawled in her back*.

Or this:–

> As I stooped, her own lips rising there
> *Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth*

Or this:—

> Have seen your lifted silken skirt
> Advertise dainties through the dirt!

Or this:—

> What more prize than love to impel thee,
> *Grip* and *lip* my limbs as I tell thee.[2]

Passages like these are the common stock of the walking gentlemen of the fleshly school. We cannot forbear expressing our wonder, by the way, at the kind of women whom it seems the unhappy lot of these gentlemen to encounter. We have lived as long in the world as they have, but never yet came across persons of the other sex who conduct themselves in the manner described. Females who bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and in a general way slaver over their lovers, must surely possess some extraordinary qualities to counteract their otherwise most offensive mode of conducting themselves. It appears, however, on examination, that their poet-lovers conduct themselves in a similar manner. They, too, bite, scratch, scream, bubble, munch, sweat, writhe, twist, wriggle, foam, and slaver, in a style frightful to hear of. Let us hope that it is only their fun, and that they don't mean half they say. At times, in reading such books as this, one cannot help wishing that things had remained forever in the asexual state described in Mr. Darwin's great chapter on Palingenesis.[3] We get very weary of this protracted hankering after a person of the other sex; it seems meat, drink, thought, sinew, religion for the fleshly school. There is no limit to the fleshliness, and Mr. Rossetti finds in it its own religious justification much in the same way as Holy Willie:—

> Maybe thou let'st this fleshly thorn
> Perplex thy servant night and morn,
> 'Cause he's so gifted.
> If so, thy hand must e'en be borne,
> Until thou lift it.[4]

Whether he is writing of the holy Damozel, or of the Virgin herself, or of Lilith, or Helen, or of Dante, or of

1 *the sonnets … Portuguese* Elizabeth Barrett Browning's autobiographical ★*Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), the first amatory sonnet sequence in English published since the Renaissance, set the example for later Victorian sonnet sequences, including Rossetti's *The House of Life*. "Recollections of the Arabian Nights" is an early poem by Tennyson (1830).

2 *I looked up … tell thee* Quoting respectively from Rossetti's "A Last Confession," ★"Willowwood 1" (sonnet 24 of *The House of Life*), ★"Jenny," and "Eden Bower."

3 *Palingenesis* The theory that a developing organism passes through the forms of its evolutionary ancestors. This theory was widespread at the time, and parts of Charles Darwin's recently published *The Descent of Man* (1871) are related to it (such as Part 1, chapter 6), although Darwin does not use the term.

4 *Maybe … lift it* A slightly misquoted version of stanza 10 of Robert Burns's great satire on religious self-righteousness, "Holy Willie's Prayer" (1789).

Jenny the street-walker, he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes; never a true lover merging his identity into that of the beloved one; never spiritual, never tender; always self-conscious and aesthetic. "Nothing," says a modern writer, "in human life is so utterly remorseless—not love, not hate, not ambition, not vanity—as the artistic or aesthetic instinct morbidly developed to the suppression of conscience and feeling"; and at no time do we feel more fully impressed with this truth than after the perusal of "Jenny," in some respects the finest poem in the volume, and in all respects the poem best indicative of the true quality of the writer's humanity. It is a production which bears signs of having been suggested by Mr. Buchanan's quasi-lyrical poems, which it copies in the style of title, and particularly by "Artist and Model";[1] but certainly Mr. Rossetti cannot be accused, as the Scottish writer has been accused, of maudlin sentiment and affected tenderness. The two first lines are perfect:—

> Lazy laughing languid Jenny,
> Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea;

And the poem is a soliloquy of the poet—who has been spending the evening in dancing at a casino—over his partner, whom he has accompanied home to the usual style of lodging occupied by such ladies, and who has fallen asleep with her head upon his knee, while he wonders, in a wretched pun—

> Whose person or whose purse may be
> The lodestar of your reverie?

The soliloquy is long, and in some parts beautiful, despite a very constant suspicion that we are listening to an emasculated Mr. Browning, whose whole tone and gesture, so to speak, is occasionally introduced with startling fidelity; and there are here and there glimpses of actual thought and insight, over and above the picturesque touches which belong to the writer's true profession, such as that where, at daybreak—

> lights creep in
> Past the gauze curtains half drawn to,
> And *the Lamp's doubled shade grows blue*.

What we object to in this poem is not the subject, which any writer may be fairly left to choose for himself; nor anything particularly vicious in the poetic treatment of it; nor any bad blood bursting through in special passages. But the whole tone, without being more than usually coarse, seems heartless. There is not a drop of piteousness in Mr. Rossetti. He is just to the outcast, even generous; severe to the seducer; sad even at the spectacle of lust in dimity[2] and fine ribbons. Notwithstanding all this, and a certain delicacy and refinement of treatment unusual with this poet, the poem repels and revolts us, and we like Mr. Rossetti least after its perusal. We are angry with the fleshly person at last. The "Blessed Damozel" puzzled us, the "Song of the Bower" amused us, the love-sonnet depressed and sickened us, but "Jenny," though distinguished by less special viciousness of thought and style than any of these, fairly makes us lose patience. We detect its fleshliness at a glance; we perceive that the scene was fascinating less through its human tenderness than because it, like all the others, possessed an inherent quality of animalism. "The whole work" ("Jenny"), writes Mr. Swinburne, "is worthy to fill its place for ever as one of the most perfect poems of an age or generation. There is just the same life-blood and breadth of poetic interest in this episode of a London street and lodging as in the song of 'Troy Town' and the song of 'Eden Bower'; just as much, and no jot more"—to which last statement we cordially assent; for there is bad blood in all, and breadth of poetic interest in none. "Vengeance of Jenny's case,"[3] indeed!—when such a poet as this comes fawning over her, with tender compassion in one eye and æsthetic enjoyment in the other!

It is time that we permitted Mr. Rossetti to speak for himself, which we will do by quoting a fairly representative poem entire:—

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1 *Mr. Buchanan … Model* Buchanan here again refers to himself, and to his "Artist and Model: A Love Poem" (1866).

2 *dimity* Sheer cotton fabric used in women's clothing.

3 *"Vengeance of Jenny's case"* Line from Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that Rossetti used as an epigraph to ★"Jenny."

LOVE-LILY

Between the hands, between the brows,
  Between the lips of Love-Lily,
*A spirit is born whose birth endows*
  *My blood with fire to burn through me;*
Who breathes upon my gazing eyes,
  Who laughs and murmurs in mine ear,
At whose least touch my colour flies,
  And whom my life grows faint to hear.

Within the voice, within the heart,
  Within the mind of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born who lifts apart
  His tremulous wings and looks at me;
Who on my mouth his finger lays,
  And shows, while whispering lutes confer,
That Eden of Love's watered ways
  Whose winds and spirits worship her.

Brows, hands, and lips, heart, mind, and voice,
  Kisses and words of Love-Lily—
Oh! bid me with your joy rejoice
  *Till riotous longing rest in me!*
Ah! let not hope be still distraught,
  But find in her its gracious goal,
Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought
  Nor Love her body from her soul.

With the exception of the usual "riotous longing," which seems to make Mr. Rossetti a burden to himself, there is nothing to find fault with in the extreme fleshliness of these verses, and to many people who live in the country they may even appear beautiful. Without pausing to criticise a thing so trifling—as well might we dissect a cobweb or anatomize a medusa[1]—let us ask the reader's attention to a peculiarity to which all the students of the fleshly school must sooner or later give their attention—we mean the habit of accenting the last syllable in words which in ordinary speech are accentuated on the penultimate:

Between the hands, between the brows,
  Between the lips of Love-Lil*ee*!

which may be said to give to the speaker's voice a sort of cooing tenderness just bordering on a loving whistle. Still better as an illustration are the lines:

Saturday night is market night
Everywhere, be it dry or wet,
And market night in the Haymar-*ket*!

which the reader may advantageously compare with Mr. Morris's

then said the king
Thanked be thou; *neither for nothing*
Shalt thou this good deed do to me;

or Mr. Swinburne's

In either of the twain
Red roses full of rain;
She hath all bond*women*
  All kinds of flowers.[2]

It is unnecessary to multiply examples of an affectation which disfigures all these writers—Guildenstern, Rosencranz, and Osric; who, in the same spirit which prompts the ambitious nobodies that rent London theatres in the "empty" season to make up for their dullness by fearfully original "new readings," distinguish their attempt at leading business by affecting the construction of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and the accentuation of the poets of the court of James I.[3] It is in all respects a sign of remarkable genius, from this point of view, to rhyme "was" with "grass," "death" with "lièth," "love" with "of," "once" with "suns," and so on ad nauseam. We are far from disputing the value of bad rhymes used occasionally to break up the monotony of verse, but the case is hard when such blunders become the rule and not the exception, when writers deliberately lay themselves out

1 *medusa* Jellyfish.

2 *Saturday night … flowers* Quoting Rossetti's ★"Jenny," lines 140–42, Morris's "The Man Born to be King" in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70), lines 237–39, and Swinburne's "Madonna Mia" (1866), lines 5–8.

3 *James I* King of England from 1603 to 1625.

to be as archaic and affected as possible. Poetry is perfect human speech, and these archaisms are the mere fiddle-dedeeing of empty heads and hollow hearts. Bad as they are, they are the true indication of falser tricks and affectations which lie far deeper. They are trifles, light as air, showing how the wind blows. The soul's speech and the heart's speech are clear, simple, natural, and beautiful, and reject the meretricious tricks to which we have drawn attention.

It is on the score that these tricks and affectations have procured the professors a number of imitators, that the fleshly school deliver their formula that great poets are always to be known because their manner is immediately reproduced by small poets, and that a poet who finds few imitators is probably of inferior rank—by which they mean to infer that they themselves are very great poets indeed. It is quite true that they are imitated. On the stage, twenty provincial "stars" copy Charles Kean, while not one copies his father; there are dozens of actors who reproduce Mr. Charles Dillon, and not one who attempts to reproduce Macready.[1] When we take up the poems of Mr. O'Shaughnessy, we are face to face with a second-hand Mr. Swinburne; when we read Mr. Payne's queer allegories, we remember Mr. Morris's early stage; and every poem of Mr. Marston's reminds us of Mr. Rossetti.[2] But what is really most droll and puzzling in the matter is, that these imitators seem to have no difficulty whatever in writing nearly, if not quite, as well as their masters. It is not bad imitations they offer us, but poems which read just like the originals; the fact being that it is easy to reproduce sound when it has no strict connection with sense, and simple enough to cull phraseology not hopelessly interwoven with thought and spirit. The fact that these gentlemen are so easily imitated is the most damning proof of their inferiority. What merits they have lie with their faults on the surface, and can by caught by any young gentleman as easily as the measles, only they are rather more difficult to get rid of. All young gentlemen have animal faculties,[3] though few have brains; and if animal faculties without brains will make poems, nothing is easier in the world. A great and good poet, however, is great and good irrespective of manner, and often in spite of manner; he is great because he brings great ideas and new light, because his thought is a revelation; and, although it is true that a great manner generally accompanies great matter, the manner of the great matter is almost inimitable. The great poet is not Cowley, imitated and idolized and reproduced by every scribbler of his time; nor Pope, whose trick of style was so easily copied that to this day we cannot trace his own hand with any certainty in the *Iliad*; nor Donne, nor Sylvester, nor the Della Cruscans.[4] Shakespeare's blank verse is the most difficult and Jonson's the most easy to imitate, of all the Elizabethan stock, and Shakespeare's verse is the best verse, because it combines the great qualities of all contemporary verse, with no individual affectations; and so perfectly does this verse, with all its splendour, intersect with the style of contemporaries *at their best*, that we would undertake to select passage after passage which would puzzle a good judge to tell which of the Elizabethans was the author—Marlowe, Beaumont, Dekker, Marston, Webster, or Shakespeare himself.[5] The great poet is Dante, full of the thunder of a great Idea; and Milton, unapproachable in the serene white light of thought and sumptuous wealth of style; and Shakespeare, all poets by turns, and all men in succession; and Goethe, always innovating and ever indifferent to innovation for its own sake; and Wordsworth, clear as crystal and deep as the sea;

1 *On the stage … Macready* The actor Charles Kean (1811–68) was not considered nearly as talented as his father Edmund Kean (1787–1833), nor was Charles Dillon (1819–81) nearly as well regarded as the great Shakespearean actor William Macready (1793–1873).

2 *When we take up … Mr. Rossetti* The imitators are Arthur O'Shaughnessy (mentioned above, near the start of the essay), John Payne (1842–1916), and Philip Bourke Marston (1850–87). Marston's ★"To James Thomson" can be found in Appendix B.

3 *animal faculties* Physical abilities or functions.

4 *The great poet … Della Cruscans* The distinctively complex odes of Abraham Cowley (1618–67) were much admired in the seventeenth century; the heroic couplets used by Alexander Pope (1688–1744) in his translation of Homer's *Iliad* were widely adopted throughout the eighteenth century; John Donne (1572–1631), the translator Joshua Sylvester (1563–1618), and the group of late-eighteenth-century sentimental poets who referred to themselves as the Della Cruscans all had very distinctive poetic styles.

5 *Jonson's … himself* The English Renaissance dramatists mentioned here, whose lives all overlapped with that of Shakespeare (1564–1616), are Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Francis Beaumont, Thomas Dekker, John Marston, and John Webster.

and Tennyson, with his vivid range, far-piercing sight, and perfect speech; and Browning, great, not by virtue of his eccentricities, but because of his close intellectual grasp. Tell *Paradise Lost*, the *Divine Comedy*, in naked prose; do the same by *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*; read Mr. Hayward's translation of *Faust*; take up the *Excursion*, a great poem, though its speech is nearly prose already; turn the "Guinevere" into a mere story; reproduce Pompilia's last dying speech without a line of rhythm.[1] Reduced to bald English, all these poems, and all great poems, lose much; but how much do they not retain? They are poems to the very roots and depths of being, poems born and delivered from the soul, and treat them as cruelly as you may, poems they will remain. So it is with all good and thorough creations, however low in their rank; so it is with the "Ballot in a Wedding" and "Clever Tom Clinch," just as much as with the "Epistle of Karsheesh," or Goethe's torso of "Prometheus"; with Shelley's "Sky-lark," or Alfred de Musset's "A la Lune," as well as Racine's "Athalie," Victor Hugo's "Parricide," or Hood's "Last Man."[2] A poem is a poem, first as to the soul, next as to the form. The fleshly persons who wish to create form for its own sake are merely pronouncing their own doom. But *such* form! If the Pre-Raphaelite fervour gains ground, we shall soon have popular songs like this:—

When winds do roar, and rains do pour,
Hard is the life of the sail*or;*
He scarcely as he reels can tell
The side-lights from the binna*cle;*
He looketh on the wild wat*er*, etc.,

and so on, till the English speech seems the speech of a raving madmen. Of a piece with other affectations is the device of a burden,[3] of which the fleshly persons are very fond for its own sake, quite apart from its relevancy. Thus Mr. Rossetti sings:—

"Why did you melt your waxen man
Sister Helen?
Today is the third since you began."
"The time was long, yet the time ran,
Little brother."
(*O Mother, Mary Mother,*
*Three days today, between Heaven and Hell!)*[4]

This burden is repeated, with little or no alteration, through thirty-four verses, and might with as much music, and far more point, run as follows:—

"Why did you melt your waxen man
Sister Helen?
Today is the third since you began."
"The time was long, yet the time ran,
Little brother."
(*O Mr. Dante Rossetti,*
*What stuff is this about Heaven and Hell!)*

About as much to the point is a burden of Mr. Swinburne's, something to the following effect:—

We were three maidens in the green corn,
*Hey chickaleerie, the red cock and gray,*

1 *Tell … rhythm* Works by the poets named in the previous sentence: John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1667); Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1321); Shakespeare's three greatest tragedies; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's poetic drama *Faust* (1808, 1832), which was translated into English by Abraham Hayward (1833); William Wordsworth's philosophical blank-verse poem *The Excursion* (1814); Tennyson's "Guinevere" (1859), part of his *Idylls of the King*; and Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69), Book 7 of which is spoken by the dying heroine Pompilia.

2 *Ballot … Last Man* The poems alluded to are "Ballad upon a Wedding" (Buchanan corrected "Ballot" in later editions) by Sir John Suckling (1609–41); "Clever Tom Clinch" by Jonathan Swift (1667–1745); Browning's "An Epistle of Karshish" (1855); Goethe's early poem "Prometheus" (1789), a *torso* perhaps in the sense that it was intended as part of a larger poem; "To a Sky-lark" by Percy Shelley (1792–1822); "Ballade à la Lune" by the French poet Alfred de Musset (1810–57); the tragedy *Athalie* by the French playwright Jean Racine (1639–99); "Le Parricide," part of the epic poetry cycle *La Légende des Siècles* (*The Legend of Ages*) by the French novelist and poet Victor Hugo (1802–85); and "The Last Man," a grimly comic poem by Thomas Hood (1799–1845).

3 *burden* Refrain.

4 *Why … Hell* The opening stanza of Rossetti's ★"Sister Helen," but reversing the order of "Heaven" and "Hell."

Fairer maidens were never born,
*One o'clock, two o'clock, off and away*.[1]

We are not quite certain of the words, as we quote from memory, but we are sure our version fairly represents the original, and is quite as expressive. Productions of this sort are "silly sooth"[2] in good earnest, though they delight some newspaper critics of the day, and are copied by young gentlemen with animal faculties morbidly developed by too much tobacco and too little exercise. Such indulgence, however, would ruin the strongest poetical constitution; and it unfortunately happens that neither masters nor pupils were naturally very healthy. In such a poem as "Eden Bower" there is not one scrap of imagination, properly so-called. It is a clever grotesque in the worst manner of Callot,[3] unredeemed by a gleam of true poetry or humour. No good poet would have wrought into a poem the absurd tradition about Lilith; Goethe was content to glance at it merely, with a grim smile, in the great scene in the Brocken.[4] We may remark here that poems of this unnatural and morbid kind are only tolerable when they embody a profound meaning, as do Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and "Cristabel."[5] Not that we would insult the memory of Coleridge by comparing his exquisitely conscientious work with this affected rubbish about "Eden Bower" and "Sister Helen," though his influence in their composition is unmistakable. Still more unmistakable is the influence of that most unwholesome poet, Beddoes, who, with all his great powers, treated his subjects in a thoroughly insincere manner, and is now justly forgotten.[6]

The great strong current of English poetry rolls on, ever mirroring in its bosom new prospects of fair and wholesome thought. Morbid deviations are endless and inevitable; there must be marsh and stagnant mere as well as mountain and wood. Glancing backward into the shady places of the obscure, we see the once prosperous nonsense-writers each now consigned to his own little limbo—Skelton and Gower still playing fantastic tricks with the mother-tongue; Gascoigne outlasting the applause of all, and living to see his own works buried before him; Sylvester doomed to oblivion by his own fame as a translator; Carew the idol of the courts, and Donne the beloved of the schoolmen, both buried in the same oblivion; the fantastic Fletchers winning the wonder of collegians, and fading out through sheer poetic impotence; Cowley shaking all England with his pindarics, and perishing with them; Waller, the famous, saved from oblivion by the natural note of one single song[7]—and so on, through league after league of a flat and desolate country which once was prosperous, till we come again to these fantastic figures of the fleshly school, with their droll medieval garments, their funny archaic speech, and the fatal marks of literary consumption in every pale and

1 *We were … away* The real opening lines of Swinburne's "The King's Daughter" run thus: "We were ten maidens in the green corn, / Small red leaves in the mill-water; / Fairer maidens never were born, / Apples of gold for the king's daughter."

2 *"silly sooth"* See Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, speaking of a song: "It is silly sooth, / And dallies with the innocence of love" (2.4.46–47). In Shakespeare the phrase means "simple truth," but Buchanan seems to intend it as "silly indeed."

3 *Callot* Jacques Callot (1592–1635), French engraver, including of grotesque figures.

4 *Goethe … Brocken* Goethe's *Faust* Part 1, scene 21 ("Walpurgis Night") takes place on the summit of the Brocken, the highest peak in the Harz mountains; in this scene the devil Mephistopheles mentions Lilith, who according to legend was the first wife of Adam.

5 *Coleridge's … Cristabel* "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) and "Christabel" (1816) are the two major supernatural poetic narratives by the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).

6 *Beddoes … forgotten* It is not quite fair to say that Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803–49), whose great macabre work *Death's Jest-Book* was published posthumously (1850), was ever forgotten; he was never a popular poet but has always had his admirers, including such Victorians as Robert Browning.

7 *Skelton … song* Referring to the late-medieval English poets John Skelton and John Gower, the Elizabethan poet and dramatist George Gascoigne, the poet and translator Joshua Sylvester (see p. 11, note 4 above), the Cavalier poet Thomas Carew, the Metaphysical poet John Donne (who at the time was considered a minor writer), the brothers Giles and Phineas Fletcher (imitators of Edmund Spenser), Abraham Cowley (who wrote odes imitating the style of the ancient Greek poet Pindar), and Edmund Waller, chiefly remembered for his poem "Go, lovely Rose."

delicate visage. Our judgment on Mr. Rossetti, to whom we in the meantime confine our judgment, is substantially that of the *North American Reviewer*, who believes that "we have in him another poetical man, and a man markedly poetical, and of a kind apparently, though not radically, different from any of our secondary writers of poetry, but that we have not in him a new poet of any weight," and that he is "so affected, sentimental, and painfully self-conscious, that the best to be done in his case is to hope that this book of his, having unpacked his bosom of so much that is unhealthy, may have done him more good than it has given others pleasure." Such, we say, is our opinion, which might very well be wrong, and have to undergo modification, if Mr. Rossetti was younger and less self-possessed. His "maturity" is fatal.

—1871