ROSSETTI ON THE CORNISH COAST

By Arthur Symons

AT Boscastle, as at Tintagel, we are in the world of Old Romance. From the height from which one looks steep down into a ghastly gulley, haunted by few birds, on the right, across a narrow harbor, rises a romantic summit carved by nature into strange shapes. An image sprang into my mind — Coleridge's, in his "Kubla Khan":

But, oh, that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cavern.
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As ever beneath a waking moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover.

Here one's senses are bewildered by certain extravagances of aspects as one sees these two unequal heights, grim guardians of the coast; and, beyond, the unresting sea; in winter storm winged, in autumn savage. In all this splendor there is no luxuriance, no sense of anything but of the change of seasons and of tides; this coast so perilous to sailors. On nights of utter darkness, when the winds howl an unearthly music across the heaving waves and one's ears are dimmed by a great multitude of noises, it seems a Godforsaken kind of land.

From Boscastle to Tintagel one walks along the cliffs — a rough path, that has many twists and turnings. Tintagel, enormous, old as the world, on the iron bound coast of Cornwall, sheer down on the Atlantic, where the sea is never quiet, where the waves roar in the murky caves, where the white foam lashes the cliffs; this monstrous sea scarred, sea swept barrier against eternity is certainly, with Land's End and Inishmore on the Aran Island, a menace and a wonder.

When the fires of the sunset shine on the ruinous walls of Tintagel — sombre, formidable, malevolent, impregnable — these take on aspects of a curious blending of light and shade; every jagged outline is seen distinct, like the jagged curves of the Apennines I have seen, sharp on the sea, at Rimini. Here the colors change, fade; become sinister, ominous as the light wanes, and these uncouth, giant-like shapes remain tenebrous.

But when the terror of the night is upon us and the wind shakes the waves into surging white mouths of foam and cries desolately across these naked heights; when one hears the sea gulls scream —

As if these windy bodies with the sea's
Unfriended heart within them for a voice
Have turned to mock one:

then one's imagination is stirred, stirred to exult with these exultant, destroying, unappeasable elements.

For, does not the wind wander as it asks, in an unknown tongue, infinite unimaginable things? Does not the sea threaten us with some sudden death (beyond that "lawless and uncertain thought" one "imagines howling") out of the deadly air? Do not even sea gulls shake over us their sorrowful laughter?

Tonight, New Year's Eve, I wandered along a lonely and narrow and steep lane, with high hedges and immense trees; I heard the running of pure water, that curious sound of a babbling brook. Suddenly an owl began to hoot, he hooted once; there was silence; then the owls began to hoot at intervals, with their three or four or five notes, then other distinct notes, the varied notes of the owls in the nearer and more distant trees. Then I heard — it struck on me curiously — at long intervals, piercing and inhuman shrieks which reminded me of the raucous voices of the cats at night. Soon, on every side, from wood to wood, some so far off I could hardly distinguish their voices, vibrated, and most magically and most mysteriously, this chorus of the owls; alternate voice after alternate voice, always, to my ear, with varieties in the music of their voices, which, with the wonder of the night — a night with a Tiepolo Venetian sky full of violent contrasts of colors, with under it the enormous and majestic vision of I know not how many trees in one cluster, in one serried and sombre mass — revealed to me the mystery and the magical enchantment of such nights, nights which I have found only in Cornwall and in Spain. The heart of the mystery was in the mysterious hearts of these wise and enigmatical owls, whom one so rarely sees — several this night flew over me from wood to wood — whom I have always imagined to be pagan spirits, reincarnations, perhaps, but none the less divine and inhuman for that.

I climbed up these steep lanes, I crossed many stiles, waiting, instant after instant, so as to catch some of the far off voices of the owls, until I reached the main road. I turned, I saw with my naked eyes, on this New Year's Eve, the naked crescent moon, in her pure golden curve, virginal, sterile, perilous, delicious. The night was ravishing. She was more ravishing than the night. Now and again purple clouds half veiled her; always she emerged. Did not Verlaine write: "Venus emerges and it is the Night"? Still the owls hooted, still the sea thundered, still the moon emerged and vanished.

I imagined Aristophanes on the Acropolis, on such a New Year's Eve as this, gazing at the crescent moon, hearing the owls hoot in the sombre woods, hearing the loud sea thunder on the rocks, seeing the white foam in the act of scaling the heavens: struck all of the sudden by the wonder of it, struck into some lyrical passion of his own, which, like the vision around him and above him, surged into his imagination, ready to burst out of his lyric lips into exultant songs.

I turn from Aristophanes to Rossetti. "The Cloud Confines" is magnificent, a lyric in verse if not in form, infused with that purely creative genius which won for him the ardent and passionate and affectionate admiration of Swinburne, and in fact Rossetti himself confessed "this *is* my very best thing". In the beat of this imagined rhythm I find the beat, not only of our hearts, but of time the conqueror, but of the past that avoids the mere mention of the future, but of love who is greater and more wonderful than death, but of the sea that is everlasting. The refrain contains our final hope and belief in our immortality:

> We, who say as we go —
> "Strange to think by the way,
> Whatever there is to know,
> That shall we know one day."

The last stanza reveals all that has been ultimate, all that must always be mysterious and unfathomable.

> The sky leans dumb on the sea,
> Aweary with all its wings;
> And oh! the song the sea sings
> Is dark everlastingly.
> Our past is clean forgot,
> Our present is and is not,
> Our future's a sealed seed-plot,
> And what betwixt them are we?

The only question that requires an answer is: if our past is ever forgotten. On the whole, never; to a certain extent, yes. Those of us who are most lonely live for the day only, and only for what that day and what that night which follows might give to us or might take from us. It is our intolerable memory that recalls the past and nothing else. To those who have loved most passionately, the "backward abysm" is some unequal marriage of heaven and hell: from which rise up unforgetable memories of passions and of penalties, of punishments and of pleasures, of unutterable regrets and of unutterable rejoicings. Only, when I imagine Rossetti alone on certain midnights, it is impossible to conjecture what images of good and of evil might have risen before him. In one letter he reveals something of his brooding imagination, in regard to "Hand and Soul", which he wrote one night in December, 1849, beginning about two a. m. and ending about seven. "In such a case a landscape and sky all unsurmised open gradually in the mind — a sort of spiritual Turner, among whose hills are ranges and in whose waters one strikes out at unknown liberty; but I have found this only in nightlong work, which I have seldom attempted, for it leaves one night broken, and this state was mine when I described the like of it at the close of the story, ah! once again, how long ago!" Still, when he wrote this in 1880, he seems to have forgotten those interminable years when — like certain of us who are still alive — he almost literally turned night into day. For as I wrote:

> When I was living alone in the Temple, the desire of roaming in the streets of London — to get out of myself — myself that has always been so absorbing to me — came over me almost every night, and made work, or thought without work, impossible. The nights in Fountain Court were a continual delight to me. I lived then chiefly by night, and when I came in late I used often to sit on the bench under the trees, where no one else ever sat at those hours. Baudelaire's phrase "a bath of multitude" seemed to have been made for me, and I suppose for five years or so — when I was not abroad — all the first part of the time when I was living in the Temple, I never stayed indoors for the whole of one single evening. There were times when I went out as regularly as clockwork every night on the stroke of eleven.

In "The Card-Dealer" Rossetti creates an atmosphere known only to Coleridge and Blake and to Santa Teresa, and to San Juan de la Cruz, whose poetry is metaphysical fire, a sort of white heat in which the abstract, the almost negative, becomes ecstatically realized by the senses. Just as to Rossetti there were four passions that ruled the whole of his existence: poetry, painting, mediæval mysticism, and woman — no one knows how passionate and how deep had been his interest in all these! — so in San Juan's mystical verse which aches (as Rossetti's never ached) with desire and with all the subtlety of desire sanctified to divine uses, they do but swing a more odorous incense, in censers of more elaborately beaten gold, in the service of a perpetual Mass to the Almighty. As in Santa Teresa personal passion molds individual form, so does the same passion surge

in the verses of Rossetti; and as some spontaneous and unknown poet of the people — of *el pueblo Español* — makes up his little stanzas of three or four lines because he has something deep within him which hurts him so much to keep in that he is obliged to say it, so, with Rossetti, in "Penumbra", in "Sister Helen", in "Eden Bower", and in "The Card-Dealer", the same passionate ache of desire in his heart hurts him so poignantly that he has to give utterance to the pent-up violence of his spiritual sensations. In these stanzas on death he subtilizes on words to such an extent that beyond these words the words of other poets might well have fainted by the way.

Can you not drink her gaze like wine?
  Yet though its splendour swoon
Into the silence languidly,
  As a tune into a tune,
Those eyes unravel the coiled night
  And know the stars at noon.

Notice the unerring instinct by which Rossetti gives to death who deals the cards of life and death an absolute inhumanity: he deliberately inhumanizes death, as he reverses the actual sense of vision, seeing that her eyes can seize on the occult significance of the stars only at noon when to all human eyes they are unseen. Again, observe his touch of frozen fire in these lines:

And not more lightly or more true
  Fall there the dancers' feet
Than fall her cards on the bright board
  As 'twere an heart that beat.

On her fingers are green rings; no man, nor woman either, knows the game she plays; we know certain of her cards: the heart, the diamond, the club, the spade; we know that these feed on our lives as vampires that suck their victims' blood; all that remains for us to know — if such knowledge be ever given to us — is this:

But 'tis a game she plays with all
  Beneath the sway o' the sun.

In "Penumbra" is unveiled the mysterious disguise of Isis, the pagan goddess of vain desires and of vainer mysteries; and, besides this, the intolerable heat and intense suspense of noontide "when fevers are"; besides this, the fever of love's unrest; besides this, a still more aching sense of what is almost despair — made more wonderful by the intricacy of the metre Rossetti invents — an intricacy like that of intricate music.

So shall the tongues of the sea's foam
(Though many voices therewith come
From drowned hope's home to cry to me,)
Bewail one hour the more, when sea
And wind are one with memory.

"The Woodspurge" is one of his naked confessions, as naked as the elemental air we breathe, as naked as woman's divine nakedness; only with this, another not so intense sense of suspense when he wanders at the wind's will to satiate his vision on some ten weeds. Again grief comes with a waft of his primitive imagination from his heart to his lips.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

All great poets have sung sad songs, some from memory, some from pain, some from ecstasy: only, in every sad song, there must be some tragic element; if not, the song does not satisfy one's senses. Of all the saddest songs a poet ever wrote "Even to" is the saddest and the most tragical, made out of so trivial a thing as this image:

But the sea stands spread
As one wall with the flat skies,
Where the lean black craft like flies
  Seem well-nigh stagnated,
  Soon to drop off dead,

which is in fact so trivial as to be fundamental; the stanzas follow one another with a beat that is neither the heart's beat nor the sea's beat — it is something incommunicable. The emotion that rose to his eyes when he wrote this stanza is so contagious that no one can hear it read without being penetrated with the same emotion: again an emotion derived from what may seem trivial, but which tears at one's fibres like some bars in Wagner's "Tristan and Iseult".

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

"A Death-Parting" has a quality utterly different from Rossetti's other lyrics; yet in its passion there is the same lament, the wind's or the sea's lamentation; only, that bitter and savorless sense, as bitter on one's tongue as wormwood, that the past, the atrocious and passionate past, shall never return. In "Sister Helen" this line

A soul that's lost as mine is lost!

has the same sense of tragedy I find in this stanza:

Mists are heaved and cover the sky;
(The willows wail in the waning light)
O loose your lips, leave space for a sigh,—
They seal my soul, I cannot die.
(With a wind blown day and night.)

When Sister Helen asks of her brother:

Nay now, of the dead what can they say?

so, in the same sense, Marlowe's Faustus, in his death agony, as he feels hell's breath thick as hell's spume upon him, cries on the name of Christ: if only Christ could save him!

See: where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!

His lips have been sealed forever by the kisses of Helen of Troy.

III

I have known what it was in Paris for violent days to pass into violet nights. Here, in Cornwall, there are no violet nights; only, in this seclusion, day merges into night and night into day. Here, as in Spain, I can become spellbound. Rossetti was certainly spellbound and by some unearthly spell when he wrote his miraculous "Love's Nocturn". Haunted and obsessed and possessed by I know not what unimaginable visions, he creates a world no poet ever before created. The heated atmosphere swarms with ghostly shapes and secret images. Stanza follows on stanza, as it were, breathless as it were deathless. Indeed, there is no breathing place between these stanzas. The air is perfumed with oriental spices and with the heavy scent of smoking incense. It is addressed to that "Lord of terrible aspect" who saluted Dante as he bore in his naked hand a burning heart. It is addressed to Eros, who watches over sleepless lovers. In a word, it is a scented whirlwind where one's senses are bewildered: a whirlwind that dances as it sings.

Poets' fancies all are there:
There the elf-girls flood with wings
Valleys full of plaintive air;
There breathe perfumes; there in rings
Whirl the foam-bewildered springs;
Siren there
Winds her dizzy hair and sings.

Half formed visions lead us to death's wicket; his body's fantom — like Blake's in one of his finest poems — wavers in the wind; he, like Dante, bids his master give to his shadow speech and song; another fantom beckons to him from some fragrant

bed of flowers; the spellbound air becomes more perfumed; his image passes like a shaken flame, his soul shudders at the touch of its breath on the glass. Then, sleep having utterly vanished, he cries for relief:

Ah! might I, by thy good grace
Groping in the windy stair,
(Darkness and the breath of space
Like loud waters everywhere,)
Meeting mine own image there
Face to face
Send it from that place to her!