D.G. Rossetti and the poetry of William Bell Scott

by Florence Boos

William Bell Scott's *The Year of the World; A Philosophical Poem on "Redemption from the Fall"* (Edinburgh and London, 1846) has had an uneven history; forgotton soon after publication, it became so obscure within Scott's lifetime that in his *Autobiographical Notes* (New York, 1892) he assumes his readers have not seen a copy.[1] There was one notable exception to this pattern of general indifference: in 1847 the nineteen year old Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote excitedly to the author of *The Year of the World:*

> At the beginning of the present year I fell in with a most inadequate paragraph in the *Art Union Journal* which informed me of the publication of 'The Year of the World'. I was about to bid you imagine my delight, but that would not be easy. I rushed from my friend's house where I had seen the announcement (for the wretched thing was no more), and having got the book, fell upon it like a vulture. You may be pretty certain that you had in me one of those readers who read the volume at a single sitting. A finer, a more dignitous [sic], a more deeply thoughful production, a work that is more truly a *work*—— has seldom, indeed, shed its light upon me. To me I can truly say that it revealed 'some depth unknown some inner life unlived.' (*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* ed. Oswald Doughty and J. R. Wahl, Oxford, 1965, i, 34)

Thus began one of the longest sustained friendships of either man's life. Rossetti wrote some of his most extended and informative letters to Scott at Penkill Castle, Scotland, where Scott spent half of each year. In time Rossetti moderated his youthful admiration, but he still maintained a consistent respect for and interest in Scott's work, and greeted the publication of Scott's 1875 *Poems* with much praise, as well as the

(NB — The footnotes for this article are grouped at the end of it.)

criticism which in turn he scrupulously solicited from his friends.

I have found no recorded expression of enthusiasm for *The Year of the World* since Rossetti's. One of the few modern critics who seems to have read Bell Scott's works, B. Ifor Evans, is almost savage:

> A dull 'cosmic poem,' its scheme and opening books result from the study of Blake, while the last book is due to Scott's absorption of Shelley's combined belief in radicalism and science . . . . The poem has little to commend it philosophically, and less poetically. Blank verse is the main medium, and as Bell Scott could have learnt from Shelley, blank verse leaves no room for mediocrity. The poem is a tomb of its own dead verse; the verse of *Orion,* to which it bears some similarity, is immeasurably superior. (B. Ifor Evans, *English Poetry in the Latter Nineteenth Century,* 2nd ed., London, 1966,130)

Evans then suggests that virtually all that was tolerable in Scott's later poetry was the direct result of Rossetti's influence.

If Evans' withering judgement is at all accurate, what caused this poem to evoke such an effusion from Rossetti? Despite Scott's explanatory preface, careful headnotes to each of the poem's five parts, and a later explication in his *Autobiographical Notes,* it is still difficult to comprehend *The Year.* Its scenes and images, apparently intended to symbolize human progress toward the Athanasian creed, remain thoroughly obscure until Part Four, the advent of Christianity; Parts Four and Five are self-consciously simple and almost pietistic, qualities which may have attracted the young Rossetti. It might seem plausible that Rossetti responded mainly to isolated lines,

> Now the white lily at each gate shall grow,
> And meekness as a handmaid wait within. (83)

or selected images——of Gabriel, Mary, the Annunciation, doves, lilies, a cithera, the pure maiden/soul-mate leading to heaven——which would have pleased the author of 'Songs of the Art Catholic,' but Rossetti's letter indicates the contrary: he considered the poem a successful and ambitious philosophic work. Perhaps the combination of philosophical and

artistic fervour appealed to Rossetti at this period; his own early poems reveal a preoccupation with the attempt to fuse moral significance and beauty in art (*e.g.*, see sonnets 74–76 of 'The House of Life', 'Old and New Art', 1849). In his preface Bell Scott had asserted that ' . . . the publication of the poem possesses to the Author something of the interest attaching to the promulgation of a creed, as well as that of a work of art,' and expressed desire for 'the intentions of the poem to be estimated, rather than its execution admired' (vii, viii). Though Scott had been trained in a strict Calvinist piety and immediately disapproved of what he considered Tractarian and Romanist tendencies in Rossetti, there is a pervasive use of religious symbolism for artistic effect in several portions of *The Year*, especially the second, fourth, and fifth parts. Its brightly coloured and religiously conventional qualities may help explain why Rossetti preferred Scott's pulsating female presences, trance-bound lovers, and one-volume microscosms of human possibility to those of other Spasmodics. The very vagueness of the experiences granted Scott's hero, Lyremmos, heightens the phantasmal, dreamlike quality of the poem; Rossetti, who responded acutely to swoon and trance sensations, may not have liked Scott's philosophy the less for its vague evocativeness. There is also nothing anomalous about Rossetti's intense admiration for a work noticed by no one else; throughout his life he proclaimed the merits of many obscure writers——Charles Wells, Ebenezer Jones, William Meinhold. Still, the reader who has nodded reluctantly over Jones and Wells may experience residual puzzlement over Rossetti's attraction to *The Year.*

Evans describes *The Year of the World* as largely derivative from Blake and Shelley. I would characterize it as a very late Romantic work cut with a strenuous work-and-progress ethic, which in certain respects resembles Browning's *Pauline;* it would be unjust to Shelley to equate his private version of 'radicalism and science' with Scott's mid-victorian belief in progress and cyclic progression. *The Year* also contains a couple direct suggestions of Tennyson. Who in 1846 could have forgotton the 1842 'Tithonus'?

Thou shalt live on
Amidst the endless trance of day and night;
The evening star will pass into the morn,
And the sun's chariot verge towards the south
And back due eastward; trees shall shed their leaves,
The birds their feathers, and the prancing deer
His antlers; but no other change shall press
Upon thy peace.

(*The Year*, 33)

There is a briefer echo of 'Ulysses' in 'Much done but more remains' (101), perhaps inevitable in a poem on human aspiration. One of Scott's expressions, 'lidless eyes', also appears in Rossetti's 'The House of Life', Sonnet 63, 'Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell'. Another comparison is with one of the more striking lines of Rossetti's early sonnets: Scott reflects on human separateness, 'all the fear/That made man, men . .' (106). Both *The Year* and Rossetti's early sonnets reflect late-1840's liberal British optimism about continental revolution with their cheerful presentation of holocausts of kings and priests.

Evans remarks that the 1875 *Poems* are chiefly derivative Pre-Raphaelitism, and poem after poem appears to illustrate his thesis. Especially striking examples are the brief sonnet sequences, 'Outside the Temple' and 'Parted Love', which have the imagery, diction, and meter of 'The House of Life' in almost every line, and include such Rossetti titles as 'Hope Deferred', 'Birth', 'Death'. 'Life', and 'the Past'. Any reader of 'The House of Life' will recognize the familiar rewritten in the following:

And in that sunlit past, one day before
All other days is crimson to the core;
That day of days when hand in hand became
Encircling arms, and with an effluent flame
Of terrible surprise, we knew love's lore.

('Parted Love': I, 'The Past')

Incidental sonnets follow a similar pattern, especially those on Rossettian topics, 'Spring Love', 'The Swan', 'The Traveller Lost', and, appropriately, 'To the Artists Called P.R.B.'[2] There

are close analogues in ballad rhythm as well; several contemporary poets were busily reviving the ballad, and Scott's claim to be an antiquary and balladist was as good as any (see 'The Witch's Ballad', Scott's only poem which has been frequently reprinted, whose rhythm is slightly suggestive of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'). 'My Mother', subtitled 'Portobello, Near Edinburgh, 1851', noticeably resembles Rossetti's 1850 'My Sister's Sleep', though Scott's poem is a sonnet and Rossetti's is in iambic tetrameter quatrains (since Scott's mother did die and Rossetti's sister did not, perhaps another and more just tribunal should award the poem's sentiment to Scott). All this would be unremarkable if Scott had not possessed, like Rossetti, much pride in his own originality and a sense that he was the neglected precursor of the works of others. In the preface to his 1875 *Poems*, Scott asserts:

> Originality the writer takes some credit for; he has,moreover, left out some poems whose subjects or motives have been adopted by later poets, and realised in a more poetical or completer manner, considering that the best, not the first, should stand alone.

Scott seems oblivious to whatever he may have borrowed for the remaining poems, though his dedicatory sonnet to Rossetti, Morris, and Swinburne and his sonnet to the PRB suggest some conscious debt. As his *Autobiographical Notes* show at length, Bell Scott was capable of both sentiments, gratitude and offended pride, especially on behalf of his poetic ewe lamb. Rossetti, usually very touchy about borrowings, seemed to like Scott's sonnets and ballads best among his poems, and commended their comparative discipline of form. He seemed sincerely moved by the very Rossettian sonnet in praise of himself, Morris, and Swinburne, ' . . . as good a title to goodwill assuredly, as my poor memory will have to show . . . ' (*Autobiographical Notes,* vol. ii, 211). Rossetti was still preoccupied by the Buchanan attacks and believed Scott's dedicatory sonnet ran him 'the pretty certain risk of some responsive bespatterings from the scavengers of the *press*—gang.' (*Autobiographical Notes,* ii, 212). In such a mood he clearly felt anyone willing to side with him publically in artistic matters as a welcome ally.

Something should be said in turn for the probable influence of two of Scott's very early poems on the young Rossetti. When Rossetti wrote to Scott in 1847 concerning *The Year of the World,* he mentioned that a few years earlier he had discovered Scott's poems 'Rosabell' and 'A Dream of Love' in an obscure periodical.

> So beautiful, so original did they appear to me,
> that I assure you I could think of little else
> for several days . . . . (*Letters,* i, 33)

'Rosabell' was later retitled 'Maryanne,' revised, and reprinted in Scott's *Autobiographical Notes* (135-52), and it seems likely from its blank verse rhythm and manner that the 1875 *Poems's* 'Love' is a retitled version of 'A Dream of Love'. Each poem is a companion piece to one of Rossetti's poems begun in 1847 or 1848. 'Rosabell' and 'Jenny' both trace the life of a prostitute through analogous stages of decline.[3] In 'Love' an idealized and symbolic woman appears to a young man walking in the grass outside the city; she then disappears, and the lover prays devoutly to her departed spirit. This is a Shelleyan vision in form and sentiment, but with some of the vague, melting sensousness of Leigh Hunt, and a surprising emphasis on exactly elaborated concrete details:

> A butterfly with purple-velvet wings,
> Invested with two lines of dusky gold
> And spotted with red spots . . . . (11. 37–39)

The sense of ideal perfection is heightened rather than diminished by these careful details, exactly the sort of 'Pre-Raphaelitic' effect which characterizes several of Rossitti's earliest poems. The situation of 'Love' is very similar to Rossetti's 1847 'On Mary's Portrait' (an early version of 'The Portrait,' to be found only in Paul Baum's *Dante Gabriel Rossitti: An Analytical List of the Manuscripts,* Durham, North Carolina, 1931), except that Rossetti's maiden is a real person who accompanies her lover to the meadow, and does not dissappear but dies. The use of small details to heighten a sensous fantasy is also present in Rossetti's poem. It would be difficult to speculate at length on the relationship of Scott's and Rossetti's

poetry, however, because although Scott reprints in his *Autobiographical Notes* virtually every praiseful remark made about his poems, he does not date them or discuss their actual composition in detail. If this vagueness is intentional, it of course detracts from claims of priority. Incidentally, Scott designed illustrations of 'The King's Quair' for Penkill Castle, with the text of the poem painted underneath; these probably suggested to Rossetti his effective use of 'The King's Quair' in 'The King's Tragedy'.

Scott's poems have at the least a historical interest, and their nearly total neglect may in large part result from the posthumous publication of his *Autobiographical Notes* in 1892. These eschew the Victorian practice of whitewashing the great and respectable, but their claims to rugged truth-telling ('My work has not been Art for Art's sake, but truth for truth's sake', 318) is undercut by the humourless self-praise and lingering tone of asperity which recurs in his recollections of his friends. They seem presented in the worst possible light by someone who proclaims his great affection and loyalty to them. The *Notes* do present a more accurate version of Rossetti's paranoia and breakdown of 1872 than the official version had done.[4] Scott's bitterness towards Rossetti, at least, was openly that of an aggrieved friend:

> For myself, Rossetti had been the last of a succession of men I had loved and tried to make love me; for each of them I would have given all but life, and I was again defeated by destiny. (*Autobiographical Notes,* 181)

Since Scott is now chiefly read because of his association with the Rossetti family, his *Notes* are more familiar than anything else he wrote, and its bilious and equivocal qualities may have biased readers against his poetry. Yet portions of Scott's works remain creditable if minor examples of Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and reflect shifts in poetic taste between the 1840s and the 1870s and '80s.

Likewise the apparent interaction between the work of Scott and Rossetti merits notice, since it may not have been as wholly one-sided as has been assumed. In particular, *The Year*

of the World among Scott's early works is an eccentric if minor precursor Pre-Raphaelitism, and an exemplar for some of Rossetti's idiosyncratic early preferences and enthusiasms.

FOOTNOTES

[1] I recently discovered in the University of Iowa Library a presentation copy of *The Year of the World,* which contains minute and careful corrections on three pages in an ink which matches that of the autograph. It is inscribed 'W. M. Rossetti/from the Author 1867', and the corrections are:

p. 10, l. 15, 'as' excised
p. 11, Pt. III, l. 4, 'I' altered to 'me' to remove a grammatical error
p. 63, ll. 15–17, changed from:

'I've taken from the Cista's sacred verge
Things arcane: into the Calanthus formed
For terrene fruits I've flung them. Hence again
. . . .

to:

'I've taken from the Cista's sacred verge
Things arcane: and into the Calanthus
Formed for earth fruits I've flung them.
Hence again . . . .

It is a little sad to see delicately penned corrections in a text whose accuracy has probably been of little interest to anyone but the author since its issue.

[2] Of these, only 'To the Artists Called P. R. B.' appeared as early as the 1854 *Poems* (where the date 1851 was placed under the title). It was revised for the 1875 edition; most changes were merely stylistic, but a first-stanza addition, underlined below, suggests a favorite Rossettian image of earth blending into sky:

1854 version: For ye have shown with youth's brave confidence,
The honesty of true speech, that intense
Reality uniting soul and sense.
1875 version: For you have shown, with youth's brave confidence,
The honesty of true speech and sense
Uniting life with 'nature', *earth with sky.*

For example, see 'The House of Life', no. 10, 'The Portrait,' whose octave concludes:

That he who seeks her beauty's further goal,
. . . may know
The very sky and sea-line of her soul . . . .

or the sestet of the third sonnet of 'The Choice', no. 73 of 'The House of Life':

> Nay, come up hither. From this wave-washed mound
> Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me; . . .
> Miles and miles distant though the grey line be . . . .

[3] For more detailed comment, please see the appendix on 'Rosabell' and 'Jenny' in my *The Poetry of Dante G: Rossetti: A Critical and Scource Study,* Mouton, 1976, 277–78.

[4] For a full account using, among other sources, Scott's letters at the time, see William Fredeman's 'Prelude to the Last Decade: Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the summer of 1872', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,* vol. 53 (1970–71), 75–121, 272–328.