CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

My own belief is that I’m a poet (within the limit of my powers) primarily, and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures (qtd. in Gelpi 106).

I have abandoned poetry (qtd. in Doughty 155).

If any man has any poetry in him he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they [Burne—Jones and Morris], have scarcely begun to paint it. (qtd. in Doughty 209).

I wish one could live by writing poetry. I think I’d see painting damned if I could (qtd. in Doughty 474).

The above statements by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (12 May 1828 to 9 April 1882) at different times during his lifetime do not reveal his capriciousness and uncertainty; rather they serve to affirm the dual status of his career as a poet and a painter. As Houghton and Stange rightly assert:
Dante Gabriel Rossetti presents the interesting case of a man torn between two vocations, for each of which he was splendidly endowed and in each of which he achieved fame and influence. Though he wrote poetry during most of his life, he was trained as a painter, and when in 1870, at the age of forty two he brought out his impressive volume Poems he was already regarded in England as an outstanding European painter [emphasis added] (555).

Rossetti began his career as a painter by joining the Royal Academy on 19 May 1845, the harsh and demanding discipline here forced him to leave and he enrolled himself in another drawing academy on Maddox Street on 11 April 1848. But this did not improve matters, nevertheless he continued to paint in order to sustain himself. For most of his life financial constraints compelled him to paint. His bohemian and extravagant lifestyle frequently landed him in debt and he was obliged to receive hefty advances for paintings commissioned by wealthy tradesmen, who pressurised him to paint hurriedly to meet deadlines. This time and again led to imperfect and uneven results. Intense frustration led him to call poetry his "true mistress" (qtd. in Doughty 481), and express the opinion that poetry is the art "in which I have done no pot-boilling at any rate" (qtd. in Doughty 415).
But poetry was different. As Fleming rightly remarks, "Rossetti wanted to write poems: his first love had always been poetry ... he enjoyed writing verse, which came easily to him" (118). Poetry for Rossetti was a means of diversion and relaxation from the harsh discipline of painting. When he was at the Royal Academy, he wrote two of his most remarkable poems "The Blessed Damozel" and "My Sister's Sleep" in addition to many other poems and English translations of substantial amounts of Italian poetry. However as Doughty affirms in his introduction to Rossetti's Poems "to the end of his life both arts maintained their hold upon Rossetti creating, through their rival demands upon his talents and time, additional tensions" (viii).

Rossetti published five volumes of poetry during his entire lifetime:

The relationship between the last three volumes is quite complex (Waugh 213): Poems, 1881, is largely a new edition of Poems, 1870, while Ballads and Sonnets, 1881 comprises the work written by him between 1870 and 1880. It also contained his significant sonnet sequence The House
of Life which was actually the amplified and reorganised version of all
the sonnets from Sonnets and Songs: Towards a Work to be called "The
House of Life" in the 1870 volume, in addition to many new ones.
However, of these new sonnets, some of them were not new at all, but
were taken from his work before 1870 and not included in that volume.
Poems written after 1870 were inserted in the 1881 volume to take the
place of the House of Life.

William Michael Rossetti, his brother brought out the collected
edition of all his works in 1887. He completely disregarded the 1870
edition, and having thirty one previously unprinted works to include, he
decided upon a new and apt arrangement which has been preserved in
subsequent editions, further The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. 1856,
contains Rossetti's work, sometimes in early versions not repeated later.

It would be impossible to study in isolation Rossetti's painting
or poetry, for as Ray remarks "As collateral means of self expression
Rossetti's poetry and painting supplement and interpret each other, [and
by] rendering poetic moods in colour and visual images in words [they]
shade insensibly into each other" (1-2), and as Knight asserts:

So linked and interwoven are, however, the two
forms of accomplishment in Rossetti that they are
mutually helpful and explanatory. Not easy is it
to divorce one from the other ... With the choice
of two media, in the use of both of which he was equally proficient, Rossetti made naturally frequent experiments as to which was the better adapted to his powers. To this moment the question remains unanswered. Rossetti has been received with enthusiasm in both capacities by both painters and poets [emphasis added] (131).

However, the scope and nature of the present work compels me to concentrate particularly on his poetry, and his achievements in that field.

In addition to the dilemma of being involved in writing poetry, and painting at the same time, Rossetti's poetic inspiration was discontinuous. It was frequently interrupted at various times for diverse reasons. The initial burst, for apparently no reason at all, "in his twenty-fifth year ... flickered down into smouldering embers, not to be requickened for many years" (Doughty 55). Nevertheless he persevered, and that too in spite of Leigh Hunt's advice to the contrary: "not a thing for a man to live upon while he is in the flesh" (qtd. in Fleming 29), for Rossetti reasoned that "poetry perhaps ... might offer a shorter and easier way to his goal [success and fame]" (Doughty 62).

After a fairly productive trip to France, his literary endeavours culminated in the publication of The Germ on 18 April 1849. However, not long afterwards, he told his brother William "I have abandoned poetry"
(qtd. in Doughty 153). This was because he had begun to lose interest in Lizzie his love, although to seek relief from the estrangement he wrote poems like "Woodspurge," but more significantly he feared public disapproval: just before the publication of his first volume of original poems he frantically contrived to compel the critics to review it favourably. Another reason was his high esteem for Keats whose poetry he regarded as quintessential, and declared "If any man has any poetry in him he should paint it. The next Keats ought to be a painter" (qtd. in Doughty 209).

However when Fanny replaced Lizzie, poetic inspiration revived causing Doughty to remark "Rossetti's poetic impulse was almost entirely the offspring of passion" (257), and in 1861 his translations were published as The Early Italian Poets. Encouraged by its success, he wished to publish a volume of his original poems, but Lizzie's (whom he had married in 1860) death in 1862 which was suspected to be suicide prevented him from doing so. Rossetti felt that he should have been kinder to her and nursed her during her sickness. In a fit of passion and as a sign of atonement, he placed the manuscript book of his original verses — the only complete copy he possessed— in her coffin, thus forever renouncing his long cherished ambition of poetic fame.

He now turned completely to painting to sustain himself materially and emotionally. Owing to his extravagant lifestyle, he was always in debt. He burnt literally the midnight oil to rehabilitate himself, consequently he nearly went blind in 1868. He became so desperate that he wanted to
commit suicide. His friend Scott came to the rescue and suggested to him "live for your poetry" (qtd. in Doughty 365). Thus in his fortieth year and after an almost unbroken silence of ten years he resumed writing poetry, because of Scott's encouragement. Another reason was he had become conscious of his limitations as a painter, in William Rossetti's words "he [Rossetti] seems more anxious just now to achieve something permanent in poetry than in painting—in which he considers that at any rate two living Englishmen, Millais and Jones, show a higher innate executive power than himself" (qtd. in Doughty 411).

In October 1869, after much mental torture, Rossetti agreed to the exhumation of his wife's body to retrieve the manuscript; because he realised that the poems he was writing now were just not enough in number to make a separate volume. In April 1870 Poems was published which established him "as the greatest of the few contemporaries to practise both arts, that is, as the supreme English painter poet of the day" (Doughty 451). The rave reviews, mostly prearranged, and the consequent fame and success made him remark "I wish one could live by poetry, I think I'd see painting damned if one could" (qtd. in Doughty 474).

However, most characteristically, Rossetti because of his lavish spending and promiscuous lifestyle, soon faced a financial crisis. To avert which he took up painting again. By now, Rossetti was a celebrity and his pictures commanded very high prices, but his "incurable extravagance" (Doughty 506), was his undoing; as he himself lamented, "I make lots of
money (for a poor painter), ... and never have a penny to play with" (qtd. in Doughty 506).

Already Rossetti was painfully aware of the drying up of his poetic inspiration: "As for poetry ... it seems to have fled afar from me, and indeed it has no such nourishing savour about it as painting can boast, but is rather a hungry affair to follow" (qtd. in Doughty 585). All attempts to prevent this from happening proved futile, he became repetitive, and could not free himself from his obsession with the now hackneyed themes of "past happiness, present misery and decay, a tremulous, intermittent hope of love’s final, perfect consummation beyond death" (Doughty 645). As pointed out earlier, the relationship between his last three volumes of poetry is complex. But more significantly they testify to the fact that he wrote very little original poetry towards the end of his life: all the three volumes contained poems which were written during the early part of his career; revisions of earlier poems; and sometimes merely changes in the arrangement of the poems in these volumes.

Towards the end of his life he became a recluse, and was estranged from his closest friends and associates. Overwork, the consequent fatigue, insomnia, and the addiction to chloral to relieve his mental anxieties soon took their toll, and he died on Easter Sunday 14 April 1882. His love for poetry was undimmed, however, till the end and even on his deathbed "... his mind still ran on poetry" (Doughty 665).
Critics and biographers have catalogued and studied exhaustively the varied and complex strands of influences which went into the shaping of Rossetti's poetic genius. Chief amongst these was his interest in and love for things medieval. Hopkins writing on 12 January 1881 makes a reference to Rossetti as belonging to the "modern medieval school" (qtd. in Jerome H. Buckley 124). Even as a boy he used to imagine himself to be a medieval knight. However the major influence which shaped and nourished his poetic genius was medieval literature, and overwhelmingly so the works of Dante. As Doughty remarks, "already [by 1851] Dante Gabriel was identifying himself with his medieval namesake, his own love [for Lizzie] with Dante's for Beatrice's. It was the beginning of that almost life-long process of scarcely conscious identification, which led to see his own life as literature, through the eyes of Dante and Malory, and dominating so much of his poetry and painting, gives his work so often a hidden autobiographical significance" (126). But more important Grierson and Smith assert that Rossetti escaped to "the Italy of the Middle Ages ...[to] forget the drab ugliness of industrial England" (443).

Next was the influence of Malory and the Arthurian legend, which was especially operative during the 1857 painting of the murals for the Oxford Union Debating Hall. Rossetti confessed that "these chivalric, Froissartian themes are quite a passion of mine" (qtd. in Hunt 36). Later on Hunt remarks that Froissart was a rich source for his "stunning verbal
gems" (244). Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* provided him with the themes and images for his paintings and illustrations.

But more relevant to my study is the strong influence which the medieval ballad exerted on him throughout his poetic career. It cast on him an irresistible spell which remained unbroken from the early days of his career to the very end of his life: "While still at Sass's [1847] ... in a sudden passion for poetic fame, he had written a tragic ballad "William and Marie," had sent it with an illustrative design to the editor of a magazine" (Doughty 54); and on his deathbed "to Caine be spoke of his love for the old English ballads, adding that when he first read them he told himself: 'there lies your line'" (qtd. in Doughty 665).

Ballad literature was the staple food which nourished his poetic imagination. As Knight remarks, he was a voracious reader of ballads, "ballad ... literature remained, however, if not the chief at least the most easily and advantageously assimilated food" (63). His field of study included also Corsican ballads. Contemporary French novels like Prosper Merimeé's *Colomba* were scrutinised by him and he concluded that the Corsican ballads in them were "exactly in the style of the old English poetry" (Knight, 18).

His wide reading and intensive research of ballads first bore fruit in the form of translations. Three remarkable successes were Burger's "Lenore," Aulié's "Henry the Leper" and Francis Villon's "The Ballad of
Dead Ladies." Although regarded as excellent in many respects, they "suffer" as Hunt perspicaciously points out "from his inability to absorb the emotions and ideas of the original into his own imagination; he has still insufficient knowledge of older literature and his technical skills are not as assured as they were to become" (47).

It was only a small step from translating ballads to writing original literary ballads, and Rossetti achieved it with great panache. "The Staff and Scrip," "Sister Helen," "Rose Mary," "The White Ship," "The King's Tragedy," and "Stratton Water" were the exquisite master pieces he wrote. Oliver Elton includes also "Troy Town" in this list, and it was he who remarked that although "he [Rossetti] published only seven ballads, or ballad lays; along with Morris and Swinburne he is the chief renovator of these forms" (11).

But what is more significant is the enduring quality of these ballads. All these ballads have appeared in popular poetry anthologies, and are widely acclaimed by the critics and the lay readers alike as being the best specimens of the genre literary ballad. William Michael Rossetti called them "his very best poetical works" (qtd. in Doughty 611). Graham Hough has said that "Rossetti's best work is in his ballads ..." (71), and Jerome H. Buckley praised him as "the Victorian master of the ballad" (134).
Each of these ballads has a charm of its own and is highly esteemed by one critic or the other. Daiches acclaims "Sister Helen", [as] his most completely successful poem in the ballad style" (1021). Knight, claims that "Rose Mary' is regarded by many as its author's highest poetic achievement" (151). The same opinion was echoed, much later, by Waugh who said "particularly 'Rose Mary' [is] held by most admirers of Rossetti's poetry to be the highest achievement of his genius" (214). Knight also considers "The White Ship" [as] one of the most dramatic of Rossetti's ballads" (106). Swinburne commended "Stratton Water" as "a study after the old manner too close to be no closer" (qtd. in Anne Henry Ehrenpreis 10-11). And Rossetti himself thought highly of 'The King's Tragedy': "I'm sure I've made the ballad a ripper" (qtd. in Doughty 638).

But most importantly these seven literary ballads served as a means of imaginative and literary escape from the drabness of contemporary Victorian society. "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed in 1848" (Wilenski 219), by William Holman Hunt, Rossetti and the others to protest against the petrified methods and principles of the Royal Academy. Rossetti was the genius behind the movement as Fleming rightly points out "without Dante Gabriel Rossetti there would have been no Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood" (1), and its acknowledged leader: "Ruskin's early acclamation of him as the Preraphaelites' "leader" had permanently identified Rossetti with Pre raphaelitism in the mind of the public (Doughty 335). The Pre-Raphaelites were deeply dissatisfied with the prevailing dispiritedness
of contemporary Victorian England, and they sought refuge in the glorious past of the medieval age: "For them [the Pre-Raphaelites] medievalism began as an escape from the constricting drabness of the contemporary world" (Welland 38-39). As Joanna Banham correctly observes "medievalism has often been characterised as a form of anti-modern dissent in the early nineteenth century. The feudal order, monastic institutions, the chivalric code, and the romantic reputation of the Middle Ages offered an escape from or solutions to, its problems of social order, poverty and crises of faith" (17). However as Raymond chapman perspicaciously remarks the escapism "was more eclectic, emphasizing the good and glossing over the awkward bits." (33).

The Oxford Companion to Art emphasises that "the movement had a strong literary flavour from the start" (923). Moreover Faverty quoting Stephen Spender strongly asserts that:

In 'The Pre-Raphaelite Literary Painters,' one of the most perceptive articles on the movement, Spender correctly observes that the 'inspiration of Pre-Raphaelitism was verbal, literary, poetic, rather than of painting.' One may go further and assert that while the movement began as a reform in painting, its greatest impact was made in English letters (254-255).
 Needless to say, Rossetti was the brain and the moving spirit behind the poetic side of the movement. He dominated all the four groups of poets whose purview according to Fredeman "may be described as Pre-Raphaelite: 'The Germ' poets, the poets of the second or Oxford 'Brotherhood,' the poets who came directly under the influence of Rossetti around 1870, when his Poems was published, and a few fringe poets whose work is demonstrably 'Pre-Raphaelque" (308-309).

Rossetti, as Evelyn Waugh affirms "was not merely interested in these ages, as Scott was, as a period of history in which thrilling things happened and fine clothes were worn. It just so happened that the [literary] forms of these periods were the language in which he most easily recorded his emotions" (52). And it was chiefly the ballad form which appealed to him and which he used as a means of literary and imaginative escape from the dreary conditions of contemporary Victorian England.

Critics speak disparagingly of the escapist nature of Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Wilenski remarks disapprovingly that "in one aspect the movement was tainted at the start. It contained within itself the fatal element of 'medievalism'" (219). Even Ruskin their staunchest ally warned them that "if their sympathies with the early artists lead them into medievalism or romanism, they will come to nothing (qtd. in Doughty 164). More particularly John Dixon Hunt expresses his displeasure by saying that Rossetti's medievalism was only "... an excuse for exotic effects and easy atmospheres" (35).
Critics who pass adverse judgements on Rossetti's escapism do not support their arguments with objective evidence. This is because Rossetti's ballads have not been systematically and minutely studied to understand the technical excellence of his means of literary escapism. Even when Rossetti's ballads are praised they are done so grudgingly — Graham Hough remarks:

That Rossetti rarely wrote so wholly successfully elsewhere as in [the] ballads, but for all their good workmanship, they are pastiche: and though pastiche may be the result of a real imaginative experience, it is imaginative experience on a level that is fairly near the surface" (71).

Similarly Doughty in his introduction to Rossetti's Poems remarks that "Sister Helen," overpraised like the 'Blessed Damozel' is nevertheless the most original of Rossetti's ballads, though it suffers from Rossetti's tendency towards melodrama and sensationalism in place of the truly dramatic, and also from evident immaturities of organisation and technique. It is, however, a powerful and memorable poem" (xiv). Both Hough and Doughty along with all the other critics, like Hunt for instance who remarks on the "medievalism of ['Sister Helen's'] inspiration" adding that the "authentic ballad notes [of 'Sister Helen'] raise it out of the merely imitative," (51) never bother to substantiate their criticism or vague and half hearted approval with objective evidence, leave alone with any sort of systematic and rigorous analysis.
Herein lies the importance of this dissertation. It proposes the hypothesis that one aspect of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's escapism during the Pre-Raphaelite phase of his poetic career was a positive attempt to breathe new life into an almost fossilized form, the traditional medieval ballad. The hypothesis is proved by a very minute and detailed comparison and contrast of one of his literary ballads namely "Sister Helen" with its traditional medieval original "Edward Edward" by using a modern linguistic and stylistic framework and methodology. The methodology is not used mechanically for its own sake and as an end in itself, but to corroborate precisely the subjective and intuitive critical judgements offered, and most important to prove the hypothesis definitively. The aim of this dissertation is to prove conclusively that there is nothing superficial or gimmicky about Rossetti's effort; on the contrary he has made a serious and emphatic attempt to virtually transcend the medieval original. So much so, "Sister Helen" does not become a mere pastiche or a trivial prosodic exercise written during a flight of escapist fancy, but rather an inspired attempt to create an artistically new and independent work of art with a beauty of its own.

A linguistic and stylistic method of comparing and contrasting the two poems "Edward Edward" and "Sister Helen" has been used for the following reasons:

(i) A.J. Gilbert very rightly remarks "Criticism can be conducted more adequately by using the findings of stylistics" (2).
(ii) As T.S. Eliot remarks "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (297). Stylistics does just this.

(iii) It is a recent and modern system of literary criticism.

(iv) It is the most scientific and statistically precise of all methods available.

(v) It is most useful especially when comparing and contrasting two poems because data can be quantified precisely and compared and contrasted effectively to support and confirm the semantic implications of the ongoing analysis.

(vi) And most important as Leech and Short aver along with the eminent linguist-critic Leo Spitzer "the smallest detail of language can unlock the 'soul' of a literary work" (2). However, the identification, quantification, and classification of the stylo-statistic data do not become an end in themselves. The stylistic analysis is used as a method of 'Practical Criticism' to study the total communicative effect of the two poems, as a means to proving the hypothesis definitively (Leech and Short 4).

The checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories found on pages 75 to 79 of Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose by Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael N. Short is the framework on which this comprehensive and detailed study rests. The semantic implications of the various linguistic categories are explained with the aid of A Grammar
of Contemporary English by Quirk et al. The stylistic categories are thoroughly analysed and explained with reference to Geoffrey N. Leech's A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. Similarly, the stanzaic structure of both the poems has been analysed with the help of Ernst Häublein's The Stanza, and the prosody of both the poems has been minutely studied with the aid of Derek Attridge's The Rhythms of English Poetry and G.S. Fraser's Metre Rhyme and Free Verse. The methods and means of analysis outlined in all the above books have been freely adapted to the particular needs of this dissertation. Anthony Kenny's The Computation of Style: An Introduction to Statistics for Students of Literature and Humanities was useful in interpreting the statistical data.

Throughout this dissertation I have followed the conventions, commonly observed by research students all over India, as described in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research papers, by Gibaldi and Achtert. Brief parenthetical references in the text of this dissertation identify the source and the specific location of the borrowed material. Complete publication information for the source is found in the alphabetically arranged list of Works Cited that follows the text of the dissertation. The books in the Works Consulted list are some of the other books which I had read in the course of writing this dissertation.