

A 'desert in solitude & an Eden in beauty'

Rossetti at Kelmscott¹

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In this article I will discuss the two periods Rossetti spent at Kelmscott Manor, in 1871 and 1872–4, not from the point of view of what they reveal about his relationship with Jane Morris, but for what they show about his attitude to nature, as he experienced living in the country for the first time. I will therefore concentrate on what Rossetti wrote while he was at Kelmscott in relation to the question of his awareness of, and response to, the neighbourhood. Most of the evidence will come from his letters, now available in Volumes 5 and 6 of *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, in the fine edition inaugurated by W.E. Fredeman and handsomely published by D.S. Brewer.²

I

The fifth volume of the correspondence, dealing with the years 1871 and 1872, includes the letters describing Rossetti's first contacts with Kelmscott Manor. Although he visited the Manor on 20 May 1871 and took the joint tenancy, with Morris, in that month, the earliest letter explicitly referring to it is one of 5 July to Barbara Bodichon in which he writes, 'I have taken, jointly with Morris, a most jolly old house in Oxfordshire. The only drawback is that it takes a long while to get there'. At this time, the nearest railway station was at Faringdon, some seven miles (11 km) from Kelmscott. The first letter sent from the Manor, on 14 July, is to Murray Marks, asking him to make urgent arrangements to send a writing table. But on 16 July he tells his friend Ford Madox Brown:

I have been here some days now, & it is simply the loveliest place in the world – I mean the house and garden & immediate belongings, for there is rather a want of variety & interest for walks in the surrounding country. We have got the house well filled with furniture, though still rather

chaotically; but the place is just such a 'haunt of ancient peace' (to quote Tennyson,³ who remains the most quotable of poets about natural beauty) that one can hardly believe one has not always lived here ... This place by the bye is an absolute solitude – as much so as Penkill.

Penkill was the castle in Ayreshire owned by the wealthy Alice Boyd, who had a liaison with William Bell Scott; Rossetti was a frequent visitor to Penkill. In the next few days Rossetti gives similar accounts of Kelmscott to his brother William, to his mother, to William Bell Scott and to Mrs. Cowper-Temple. Perhaps the most attractive is to his mother on 17 July:

I have been here since last Wednesday, and am already greatly benefiting by the change. This house and its surroundings are the loveliest 'haunt of ancient peace' that can well be imagined – the house purely Elizabethan in character though it may probably not be so old as that, but in this dozy neighbourhood that style of building seems to have obtained for long after changes in fashion had occurred elsewhere. It has a quantity of farm buildings of the thatched squatted order, which look settled down into a purring state of comfort, but seem (as Janey said the other day) as if, were you to stroke them, they wd move. Janey is here with her children, & she is benefiting wonderfully, & takes long walks as easily as I do. The children are dear little things ...

Oswald Doughty, in his 1949 biography of Rossetti, remarks that 'Both Janey and Gabriel delighted in Kelmscott', and that 'Gabriel's love of the old place indeed rivalled Morris's'. He adds, 'These few weeks at Kelmscott, passed in a normal tranquil daily round of work and relaxation such as Gabriel had seldom known, were probably the happiest of his life'.⁴ Jane's account, in a letter to Philip Webb, is more prosaic, and perhaps also reflects Rossetti's views:

The country I find is not so beautiful after one gets away from the river, thought it is all delightful and home-like to me, and I love it, still I can well understand others not being much impressed with it, who are not used to it; every field is lovely by itself, and every house, but somehow when one looks far out there is a sameness, a bareness of tree, which makes one begin to want more, but of course I am only speaking of the few miles in the immediate vicinity.⁵

Rossetti tells Scott, also on 17 July, that 'the solitude is as absolute as at Penkill, but not nearly so impressive in its natural features' when away from the Manor. He is planning to stay 'for 2 months at least' and to do some drawing – he wants to draw both Jenny and May (whom he found particularly 'lovely'), and indeed was to do so very finely. Jane was taking walks of five or six miles 'without the

least difficulty' – presumably in his company, as 'her children are the most darling little self-amusing machines that ever existed. The nearest town to this is Lechlade, some 3 miles off, a beautiful old place & not a station' – though it was soon to become one. To Mrs. Cowper-Temple he writes on *ca* 18 July, 'This is a most lovely old place – a desert in solitude & an Eden in beauty – just my idea of a change from hateful London'. A longer letter, to Scott on *ca* 26 July, appends a poem, then called 'The River's Record', of which Rossetti writes with some modesty:

I send you a little ballad or song or something made in a punt on the river – not a very poetic style of locomotion. It's rather out of my usual way – made aiming at the sort of popular view that Tennyson perhaps alone succeeds in taking – not (I hope) that it's at all chargeable with imitation of T. – but I mean that nobody but he tries to get within hail of general readers. But I fear, however much I might like to do so, that it's not my vocation except in such a trifle as this once in a way: and I dare say this wd be voted obscure. I fancy it ought to be suited to music.

The poem is a narrative in five stanzas, its setting implied in the local names of its opening line:

Between Holmscote and Hurstcote
 The river-reaches wind,
 The whispering trees accept the breeze,
 The ripple's cool and kind:
 With love low-whispered 'twixt the shores,
 With rippling laughters gay,
 With white arms bared to ply the oars,
 On last year's first of May.

Between Holmscote and Hurstcote
 The river's brimmed with rain,
 Through close-met banks and parted banks
 Now near, now far again:
 With parting tears caressed to smiles,
 With meeting promised soon,
 With every sweet vow that beguiles
 On last year's first of June.

Between Holmscote and Hurstcote
 The river's flecked with foam,

'Neath shuddering clouds that hang in shrouds
 And lost winds wild for home:
 With infant wailings at the breast,
 With homeless steps astray,
 With wanderings shuddering tow'rds one rest
 On this year's first of May.

Between Holmscote and Hurstcote
 The summer river flows
 With doubled flight of moons by night,
 And lilies' deep repose:
 With lo! beneath the moon's white stare
 A white face not the moon,
 With lilies meshed in tangled hair,
 On this year's first of June.

Between Holmscote and Hurstcote
 A troth was given and riven;
 From heart's trust grew one life to two,
 Two lost lives cry to Heaven:
 With banks spread calm to meet the sky,
 With meadows newly mowed,
 The harvest paths of glad July
 The sweet school-children's road.

There are a number of later references to this poem. On 2 August Rossetti writes to Scott, agreeing that 'your objection to the title ["The River's Record"] is valid', and wondering whether 'May and June' would be any better. He defends his use of 'cool', and the repetition of 'rippling': 'this seems necessary, as you will observe that two epithets are exchanged in each stanza between the landscape & the emotion'. To his mother on 11 August he sends what he describes as 'a few verses suggested by the river here'. He adds in a P.S., 'I doubt not you will note in the above the intention to make the first half of each verse, expressing the landscape, tally with the second expressing the emotion, even to repetition of phrases'. Although the poem is in a ballad-mode seldom practised by Rossetti, it is an effective and affecting narrative, successful particularly in its use of the contrast between the human suffering and the tranquil surroundings.

The poem was soon to be illustrated, but not by Rossetti himself. Writing to Scott on 25 August, Rossetti mentions that Brown has asked him for a poem to illustrate for the Oxford magazine *Dark Blue*, adding, 'I sent him that "Holmscote" thing now called "Down Stream" which removes your just objection

to title'. A letter to Brown on 31 August concerns the illustration, for which he advises Brown to ask £20; he adds, 'Do you think of seeking a background here? We have a punt of our own where you could study actions'. Brown does not seem to have responded to this suggestion, for on *ca* 2 September Rossetti tells Scott: 'Brown is doing the cut for my verses, & I wanted him to come here (*en garçon*) for his background, but he seems not easy to move.' In a letter to Dr Hake of 2 September Rossetti refers to Brown's illustration for his 'verses about "Hurstcote &c", which I have now called "Down Stream" (as the other title seemed dubious) & which are now to appear in the Dark Blue as an appropriate outcome of Oxfordshire scenery and Oxford morals'. The fact that Rossetti intends the story narrated in the poem, which involves seduction, infanticide and suicide, as a comment on 'Oxford morals' is striking, and reminds one that at this stage Rossetti did not avoid social observation and criticism in his work. His 1870 *Poems* had included the dramatic monologue 'Jenny' which dealt subtly with the subject of prostitution; Jan Marsh rightly praises its verbal vigour and 'topical intervention into the social issues of the day'.⁶ On *ca* 25 September Rossetti is telling Brown of his concern over the future of *Dark Blue* and in his generous way advising Brown to seek payment for his illustration before it is too late, 'as your work must have taken time. Mine gave no trouble so I'll just chance it'. And on 1 October he writes again to Brown:

I expect to see you in a few days, but must write meanwhile & say how very excellent I think your drawing in Dark Blue. It is like a tenderer kind of Hogarth, & seems to me the most successful of your book illustrations, unless perhaps the Traveller⁷ & I think it licks that. The little one is very pretty too. I can't of course judge of the cutting, but I think it looks well on the whole. At any rate an eye new to the design finds nothing out of harmony.

At first sight the 2 people in the boat look both like rustics, but I suppose this may be otherwise when one considers the costume. I *meant* my unheroic hero for an Oxfordswell, though you may say certainly that the internal evidence is rather less perspicuous than Lord Burleigh's shake of the head in the *Critic*.⁸ By the bye you have certainly not minced the demonstrative matter – but would there perhaps be a slight danger of overbalancing? At any rate, whatever may happen to the boat, I should think there was no doubt of the Mag's capsizing (to say nothing of our share in its cargo) when it contains one article on Browning as a Preacher and another on Walt Whitman.

On 2 October, Rossetti writes to Scott that 'Brown's drawing to my verses (Stanza 1) in the Dark Blue is a very fine one I think – 2 indeed there are, & the minor one (Stanza 4) is also very nice'. The illustrations deserve this praise.

Elsewhere in the 26 July letter to Scott, Rossetti writes: 'I have discovered some nice riverside walks, now the floods have subsided, and there is a funny little island midway in one walk, which can be reached by a crazy bridge, & does very well as a half way house to commit sonnets to paper going & coming. It may perhaps lead to further effusions. I got one sonnet out of it today.' However, a little later he remarks, 'I'm afraid I shan't do much poetry here, as my walks are seldom taken alone, *Janey* having developed a most triumphant pedestrian faculty; - licks you hollow I can tell you ... If I were at Penkill I know, as you say, that I should do something decided in poetry – to wit, the "Orchard Pits" poem which I much want to do; but I find it almost impossible to write narrative poetry in a scenery that does not help it, and so have little chance of setting to that here'. Around the same time, on *ca* 26 July, Rossetti writes to Brown about the changing weather at Kelmescott:

Weather has got chillier & more changeable here, and walks are less frequent in consequence, but on the whole I suppose one needs look for no desperate weather ... The fields are no longer flooded, & I have found some nice riverside walks & a little island which makes a good out-door snugger for versifying.

On 31 July he is in a more negative mood to Webb: 'The house and surroundings are delicious, and some of the riverside walks very sweet & pleasant when not flooded, but I must say that, to my own tastes, the country round is about the most uninspiring I ever stayed in. It's so flat that to see anything is not easy, & when you do see it, it isn't worth seeing'. But writing to his aunt on 4 August, Rossetti is a good deal more positive:

You will see by my address that I have left town, having taken, jointly with the Morrises, a share in this very nice old house, – as good and genuine a specimen of old middleclass architecture as could be found anywhere, I suppose. Its aspect is absolutely Elizabethan in every respect, but it is probably a century later, that style of building having lasted in this primitive neighbourhood a long while. The place is quite a little paradise, both as to itself, garden & immediate surroundings, but the country is rather flat & monotonous for views, though the riverside walks (the house is quite close to the river) are charming.

The observation about the date of the Manor is perhaps based on Morris's estimate. Morris was to write to Charles Eliot Norton on 19 October 1871 of the Manor as 'a beautiful and strangely naïf house, Elizabethan in appearance though (not) much later, as in that out of the way corner people built gothic till the beginning or middle of last century'.⁹

The following day, 5 August, Rossetti tells Brown that he is painting 'a little

picture of Janey', and means to 'put the winding river & this house in the background'. There are several allusions in subsequent letters to this painting, which was to become *Water Willow*. Rossetti is also making drawings of the children. He adds: 'I shd get thoroughly in the writing vein too if my walks were taken alone; as it is, I have done a few songs & sonnets – one song an Italian one!' He writes more fully on 7 August to Dr Hake, praising the draft of Hake's poem 'Her Winning Ways' and urging publication. He then goes on to write of his own work:

I have also got to work at a little picture with a river background from the neighbourhood here; and want to write a few things if I may, but this is doubtful, as my walks (my muse's cud-chewing times) are seldom taken alone. I may as well send you one of the few little things I have yet done here. It is a little ballad suggested by the riverside surroundings, which are lovely though rather unvarying, while the country is everywhere so flat that objects are few to the eye. The house itself, with its garden & belongings, are simply perfection – the house a quite unaltered relic of Elizabethan middleclass architecture, though whether actually built in Elizabeth's time or even perhaps a century later in this dozy primitive undeveloping region, may be doubtful. I hope you will come and see it some day ...

The poem, still with the title 'The River's Record', is appended.

On 8 August, Rossetti tells Brown that the 'weather has grown perfect summer here now – indeed almost too hot for walking'. He concludes, 'We read an awful lot of Shakespeare & are very jolly. The place looks now as if it had been in our use for years. I am going to put this house & the river as a background to a little picture of Janey I am about here'. The painting, *Water Willow*, is described by David Rodgers as a 'small and personal picture', painted 'at the height of Rosset's love affair with Jane'; he notes that Rossetti 'retained the picture until 1877 when he was financially straightened and in poor health'.¹⁰ He also argues that the willow which Jane is holding is a symbol of melancholy, and alludes to the willow song in *Othello* – though the willow is a very obvious part of the scenery around Kelmscott, and attracted Morris's attention too, with no suggestions of melancholy. It is certainly one of Rossetti's freshest and most engaging works. Joseph Acheson describes the painting, accurately, as a 'happy portrait of Janey at Kelmscott, in the background of which there is a glimpse of the house and church, a rare reference by him to factual landscape'.¹¹

The young May Morris did not find the landscape factual enough. In her Introduction to Vol. IV of *The Collected Works* she says of the painting:

The Water-Willow picture by Rossetti is a portrait of my mother. It is not so happy a likeness as some of his other studies, the face being rather

pinched and the nose too long. Mr Rossetti brought into the background of the picture Kelmscott Manor, where he was living at the time of painting it, the little old church with its elegant open belfry, and our boat-house with the fishing-punt moored below . . . We girls were fond of the picture when it was finished, but it bothered me to have house and church and boat-house all brought together, when they were in different directions. I confided to my mother my doubts as to the morality of this, and demanded an explanation. But the child's 'That isn't how things really are!' can't be met by explanation.¹²

The painting still retains its direct appeal; the Kelmscott background provides an attractively open effect very different from the claustrophobic atmosphere of some of the larger later paintings. The original is now in the Delaware Art Museum at Wilmington, but a copy made by Fairfax Murray in 1890 may be seen at Kelmscott Manor.

The weather features again in Rossetti's letter of 11 August to his mother: 'The heat here is now excessive – so great indeed that walking even at the close of day is no pleasure, & one is tempted to keep indoors altogether. However I yesterday evening strolled out when the sun was quite gone & found it cool and delightful, so I think I shall time my walks chiefly so at present, only the twilights are very short & there is no moon now, and walking in pitch darkness is not pleasant.' On 13 August, Rossetti writes to Scott about some of Scott's recent journalism, and remarks that 'I send you another little poem (done from nature)' – presumably 'Sunset Wings', though the introductory note by the editors suggests that the poem was not actually enclosed. He certainly sent the poem to his mother on 18 August: 'Having no news in answer to your letter I'll send you another little poem done from nature. I don't know if you ever noticed the habit of starlings referred to which is constant here at sunsets at this season of the year.' He ends – before appending the poem – by referring to 'the beautiful old churches' of the neighbourhood, a 'famous one' at Lechlade, and 'still more interesting to me, one or two simple ones – the Kelmscott church as good as any – of the most primitive order with two bells hanging visibly on the roof at one end – just as one fancies chapels in the Morte d'Arthur, particularly from one side when one sees it above some wild-looking apple-trees. I shall certainly get it into some picture if I keep on coming here'. *Water Willow* was to profit from this affectionate observation. The appended poem is in six stanzas:

Tonight this Sunset spreads two golden wings
 Cleaving the western sky;
 Winged too with wind it is, and winnowings

Of birds; as if the last day's hour in rings
 Of strenuous flight must die.

Sun-steeped in fire, the homeward pinions sway
 Above the dovecote-tops;
 And the clouds of starlings, ere they rest with day,
 Sink, clamorous like mill-waters, at wild play,
 By turns in every copse.

Each tree heart-deep the wrangling rout receives, –
 Save for the whirr within,
 You could not tell the starlings from the leaves;
 Then one great puff of wings, and the swarm heaves
 Away with all its din.

Even thus Hope's hours, in ever-eddying flight,
 To many a refuge tend;
 With the first light she laughed, and the last light
 Glows round her still; who nathless in the night
 At length must make an end.

And now the mustering rooks innumerable
 Together sail and soar,
 While for the day's death, like a tolling knell,
 Unto the heart they seem to cry, Farewell,
 No more, farewell, no more!

Is Hope not plumed, as 'twere a fiery dart?
 Therefore, O dying day,
 Even as thou goest must she too depart,
 And Sorrow fold such pinions on the heart
 As will not fly away.

'Sunset Wings' was not to be published until 1873, when several informative letters refer to it. Thus on 20 May 1873 Rossetti tells his mother that *The Athenaeum* will soon be publishing 'a little piece of mine, which I wrote when I first came here, and embodies the habit of the starlings which quite amounts to a local phenomenon & is most beautiful & interesting daily towards sunset for months together in summer and autumn'. On 9 May, Rossetti had sent the poem to the editor, commenting:

The habit of the starlings referred to in them [the verses] quite amounts to a local phenomenon, & was entirely new to me when I first took this house 2 years ago, at which time the verses were written. It was new to Morris also – a great rural observer – & might perhaps seem strange to some readers, but is very exactly described. The noise is, as said, just like the wheels at a water-mill, or (more prosaically) like a factory in full spin.

Doughty remarks of the poem that ‘the inevitable now obsessive themes of Love and Death’ are here ‘touched ... to an exceptional beauty against a stormy Kelmscott sunset through which homing doves, starlings and rooks sweep down to their nests’.¹³ It is characteristic of Rossetti’s poetry that natural observation should give way to personal emotion, but the transition is here skilfully managed.

During these summer months of 1871 at Kelmscott Rossetti was, as we have seen, both painting and writing. A long letter to Scott on 25 August includes discussion of some sonnets he had sent to Scott, and of his current work: ‘I am painting a little portrait of Janey for a beautiful old frame I have, & am getting into the background the leading features of Kelmscott – the house, the picturesque old church, & the river-banks. I think it will be pretty. I have made chalk drawings too, of the kids and of their mamma’. Meanwhile, in letters to new correspondents Rossetti continues to offer accounts of Kelmscott. His uncle Henry Polidori is told on 27 August:

It is a most lovely old house, purely Elizabethan in character, though perhaps built somewhat later, as in this district architectural style wd change but slowly ... The garden, and meadows leading to the river-brink, are truly delicious – indeed the place is perfect; and the riverside walks are charming in their way, though I must say the flatness of the country renders it monotonous and uninspiring to me. However, it is the very essence of all that is peaceful and retired – the solitude almost absolute. Kelmscott is a hamlet containing, I am told, 117 people, and these even one may be said never to see if one keeps, as I do, [to] the field-paths rather than the highroad.

Rossetti remarks that ‘Morris & I had been for some little time in search of a place to take jointly in the country, when this one was discovered in a house-agent’s catalogue – the last place one would have expected to furnish such an out-of-the-world commodity’. On *ca* 3 September Rossetti writes to Fanny Cornforth about the unfortunate death of a fawn that she had sent to him; he adds, ‘The wild flowers here are wonderfully beautiful and I think in greater variety than I ever saw before. The other day I found a poor lapwing, or peewit, a beautiful bird that I had never seen before, and which is just the sort of bird I ought to have had

to paint in that picture of Beatrice. The poor thing had his beak broken, I fancy by a fish hook, as they go a great deal near the water. He seemed well enough at first, but died in about an hour, and I have had his wings spread out and kept them to paint from’.

In an affectionate letter to James Smetham on 5 September, Rossetti writes of the Manor:

This is a lovely old house – quite a genuine specimen of middleclass Elizabethan building, though perhaps built somewhat later in this dozy neighbourhood. It is really a jewel in its way, garden, meadows & all – built almost *on* the riverbanks (Thames, Oxon) and affording lovely river-walks as you may suppose, though I confess such flat country does not help the sources of inspiration with me. Such a ‘haunt of ancient peace’ as this never was, I think. No railway station at all near it, & only 117 inhabitants in Kelmscott, a hoary sleepy old lump of beehives as ever you saw. From a distance the thatches look like so many pussycats asleep in the sun, and as if when you stroked them they would purr.

On 10 September, Rossetti tells William that he will soon be returning to London and that he has done ‘a little picture of Janey with background of this place & river, made to fit a lovely old Italian frame I have’. This is *Water Willow*, discussed earlier.

On 11 September Rossetti writes to Dr Hake about a new poetic undertaking. He is writing ‘a longish ballad poem about a Beryl or Magic Crystal’; he had intended to ‘intercept the stanzas with a running and very varied burden’, but had found that the poem was ‘too long & intricate for such treatment’. However, he sends Hake two of the ‘burdens’, which he obviously did not wish to discard:

1.

Water-willow and wellaway
With a wind blown night and day.

2.

The willow’s wan and the water white,
With a wind blown day and night.

3.

The willows wave on the waterway,
With a wind blown night and day.

4.
 The willows wail in the waning light,
 With a wind blown day and night.

The four sections of the second burden are by contrast attractively summery:

1.
 Honey-flowers to the honey-comb,
 And the honey-bee's from home.

2.
 A honey-comb and a honey-flower,
 And the bee shall have his hour.

3.
 A honeyed heart for the honey-comb,
 And the humming bee flies home.

4.
 A heavy heart in the honey-flower,
 And the bee has had his hour.

Jan Marsh notes that these 'burdens' which Rossetti wrote for *Rose Mary* are 'pure Kelmscott ... Alliterative and assonant, they dwell on its key attributes, the river and garden, water and murmuring sweetness'.¹⁴ They were to be reused in later poems, as we shall see. By now, however, the summer idyll was coming to an end, and the external world was beginning to impose itself again on the ever-sensitive Rossetti. On 2 October, he begins a letter to Scott, 'Here comes my last Kelmscott letter'. And disturbingly, in the light of later events, he mentions having seen advertisements for an anonymous article on 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' in the forthcoming *Contemporary Review*.

Doughty's summary of this period emphasises Rossetti's poetic productivity. In addition to *Rose Mary* he wrote thirty new sonnets for *The House of Life*, the sequence which he had first published in his *Poems* in 1870, when it consisted of fifty sonnets and eleven songs. Doughty also remarks that other sonnets of the year, including 'The Lovers' Walk', 'Youth's Antiphony', 'Beauty's Pageant' and 'Silent Noon', are 'a record of physical passion amidst some such rustic environment as Kelmscott ...'.¹⁵ This is a not inaccurate, if slightly evasive, way of describing these poems, all of which except 'Silent Noon' are part of the sequence identified by J.R. Wahl in 1954 as the 'Kelmscott Love Sonnets'.¹⁶ In these poems

the passion – whether physical or not – has precedence over the setting. Nevertheless the observed details of ‘The Lovers’ Walk’ – ‘Sweet twining hedgeflowers’, ‘An osier-odoured stream that draws the skies/Deep to its heart’ – and the pastoral setting of ‘Silent Noon – the ‘long fresh grass’, the ‘golden kingcup fields with silver edge/ Where the cowparsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge’ – are delicately suggestive of the Kelmscott scene.

Rossetti left Kelmscott on 8 October 1871, not to return for almost a year, after his devastating breakdown. But in the months after he left, he continues to give new correspondents accounts of the Manor and his life there. To Alicia Losh, the aunt of Alicia Boyd of Penkill Castle, he writes on 28 October:

I have been 3 whole months at a beautiful old-fashioned house in Oxfordshire – near the borders of Gloucestershire – at a little hamlet called Kelmscott, the nearest town to which is Lechlade, – that being however but a ‘one-eyed’ town as the Yankees say, & the nearest station being Faringdon, 5 or 7 miles off. So Kelmscott is quite as quiet a place as Penkill, and I only wish I could say it is equally interesting. The country is deadly flat, though of course the river walks – for the house is built almost on the banks of the Thames – are extremely pretty, if somewhat monotonous. However the house itself is and its belongings are simply an ‘Earthly Paradise,’ appropriate you will say to our old friend Top, who was and is my joint tenant in it. The house is absolutely Elizabethan in style and in a perfectly genuine state, though it may probably be really built somewhat later, as styles would change but slowly at Kelmscott, which is about the doziest clump of grey old beehives to look at that you could find anywhere. Its inhabitants number 117.

... By the bye, there is one serious drawback to the charms of that residence, viz: that it gets flooded after rains to such an excess that before I left it I went out in a boat on the fields I used to walk over. Thus for much of the winter I suppose the place must be well-nigh inaccessible. Moreover the roads at the same time got thoroughly swamped, and such walks as I could take had to be got out of stubble-fields & queer byeways which were not very delectable. But if you saw the house you would not wonder that it proved irresistible to us.

By now Rossetti was becoming preoccupied with the attack on him in ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’, but in writing to Frederic Shields on 15 November he reverted to the safer subject of Kelmscott:

I was away in the country 3 months, at a house which I took jointly with Morris on the banks of the Thames at Kelmscott, Oxon. There those verses you write so kindly about were suggested, with other writing of a

more elaborate kind, and I also did some painting there. The house and its immediate belongings are a perfect Paradise and the place peaceful even to excess. It is an Elizabethan house, quite unaltered, and my studio was hung with tapestry which no doubt had always been in it. I wish you could find such a place, within artistic limits.

No doubt the presence of Jane, and perhaps also that of the two little girls, contributed most to Rossetti's sense of well-being at the time, but it can be reasonably argued, on the evidence of these letters and the accompanying poems, and the painting *Water Willow*, that Kelmscott Manor and its surrounding landscape exerted a considerable – and positive – influence on him in 1871, although he was there for only a brief period. Unfortunately, as we know, it would not be enough to save him from breakdown in the following year. Joseph Acheson remarks: 'For Rossetti this most idyllic phase of his life was over.'¹⁷

II

Rossetti was not to return to Kelmscott until after his breakdown and attempted suicide on 8 June 1872 at Dr Hake's house in Roehampton. Fortunately, his earlier sociability had won him a number of stalwart friends, who rallied admirably in support. Brown looked after him at his own home for several days before Rossetti was taken by Brown and George Hake, the doctor's helpful and sympathetic son, to Urrard House in Perthshire, the first of two houses in Scotland made available to him by the generosity of his patron William Graham. On 28 June he moved on to Stobhall, near Stanley in Perthshire, then on 28 July to a rented farmhouse at Trowan, Crieff, in Perthshire, which he liked and where, in September, he was able to begin painting again. He wrote appreciatively about Trowan to his mother on 12 September, describing his daily walks, and to Brown on 22 September: 'The air here is the best I was ever in – infinitely superior to Urrard or Stobhall – the walks far more beautiful & breezy, and the comforts of the place itself, as well as the sense of independence, make it a great improvement on the desolate flunkeyism out-of-use which was the atmosphere of the other places.' But on 11 September he had told Fanny Cornforth, 'I do not expect to be staying very much longer here, but am not inclined to return to London if I can help it. Perhaps I may go for awhile to Kelmscott, where I should be living at much less expense than here'. A long letter of 17 September to his brother William defends his decision not to make 'a sudden & violent move in respect of the Chelsea house', which he planned to keep on until the situation became clearer. He argued that 'I have at Kelmscott quarters already fitted for my work', where he might remain for 'the whole winter'. He was planning to leave Trowan

for Kelmscott the following Monday, remarking that he was now finding that he could work again without difficulty. He then added a sentence which has been often quoted: 'Wherever I can be at peace, there I shall assuredly work; but all, I now find by experience, depends primarily on my not being deprived of the prospect of the society of the one necessary person.' It is evident that he was hoping for the restoration of regular contact with Jane that Kelmscott might supply; his friends had kept them apart in recent months, afraid that Jane would have an unsettling effect on him.

On 24 September Rossetti returned to the Manor, writing on the 25th to Dr Hake in good spirits: Hake's son George was continuing to prove a most sympathetic helper: 'Here we are all right, and wonderfully comfortable. I feel quite myself again, and George punted little May Morris about this morning to her heart's content.' In a business-like mood, Rossetti writes to William the same day, 'you had better at once send me £100 in notes registered. I must pay arrears for my share of the rent and place money in Janey's hands for George's & my expenses'.

The natural surroundings at Kelmscott were beginning to affect him again. Also on 25 September he writes enthusiastically to Brown: 'Here I am, as well as ever I was in my life, which perhaps is a pretty good reason for coming here ... What a heaven seems to surround me here after the hateful jumble of Scotch crags & brakes. However I must do justice to Trowan where I believe the air wd set any body on his legs whose legs had not absolutely tumbled off. I mean to make up for lost time now, as to work & earnings. I have a great repugnance to returning to London ...' In a similar mood, on 26 September he tells William: 'My strength seems completely re-established here today. The floods are not out as yet, so that walking is feasible & the weather splendid. The place is a perfect Paradise. You must really come & see it sooner or later. George says he never knew such a place in his life.'

The letters in the following months suggest that Rossetti was generally happy at Kelmscott, and enjoyed its natural features. On 28 September he tells Dr Hake:

Today George has gone out fishing with Morris and the two little girls – the elder having returned. She will I dare say soon be as great an ally of George's as her sister is already. He seems to enjoy himself greatly here, and certainly the place is perfection, only a gale of the most furious kind has sprung up these two days, yesterday with rain, today without, but I fear, as soon as it subsides, the rain will fall and the floods rise in good earnest.

This does not seem to have happened immediately. On 1 October Rossetti tells Brown:

George Hake is in raptures of a lasting nature, & punts the kids about & rides them abroad on ponies to an endless extent. The last 3 days however he has spent entirely on the river with Topsy [Morris], fishing to no purpose whatever, as they caught nothing to speak of. What can be the fun of it I cannot conceive. Janey is very delicate, & appallingly unable to walk compared with her condition last year. However, one must hope for improvement. Had I not renewed correspondence and resolved to come here, I should never have got a bit better or been able to take up work again in Scotland.

On 6 October Rossetti writes inviting William to visit the Manor and giving detailed travelling arrangements via Faringdon: 'this place would really take you some time to see ... The weather is changeable now but not very bad yet on the whole, and there seems a fair prospect of some fine spells yet. I have renewed my tenancy & paid up arrears, so I have as good a right to ask you down as anyone else. Jane joins warmly & so would Top if he were here. George yearns also. He seems as happy here as it is possible to be, and gives the children all kinds of treats on the river &c.' On 8 October Rossetti tells Dr Hake that, although there has been no great improvement in the condition of his leg, 'It has been capital walking weather hitherto, and I avail myself of it daily'. On 10 October he writes to his mother that William is now at the Manor, and looking better 'after a good walk'. He goes on:

The weather seems unluckily just today to be breaking up, & the rain at this moment is very heavy. Hitherto we have had on the whole fine weather, and I have walked daily. The worst of this place is that a few days of rain fetch the floods out in no time & the country becomes impassable for pedestrians or indeed for anything but a boat, while even the roads get completely turned to bogs, so badly constructed are they.

He later refers to the 'most comically fat & stolid pony ... which Morris brought back last year from Iceland. He is more like Sancho's donkey than anything equine, and was never seen but twice from the window to do anything but eat in his private field. On two occasions only was he meditating with his back against a tree'.

There are few references to nature in the next few weeks, when many of the letters concern business matters. On 11 November Rossetti writes to Howell that 'John Marshall [his doctor] strongly advises me to continue in country air', but that he has been unable to find a suitable house nearer to London, which he would find more convenient. He is thinking it may be best to stay on at the Manor, but is well aware of likely problems with a Kelmscott winter: 'this house is fearfully likely to be cold in the winter'. Perhaps Howell can find some material

to use to shut out the drafts. On 14 November Rossetti writes to thank Barbara Bodichon for her offer of her house Scalands in Sussex for six months. He is indecisive about his plans, wanting not to return to London but ‘not certain whether this place may not become extremely inconvenient for my daily walks if persistent wet weather sets in, as the Thames then floods the whole neighbourhood’. On the other hand, he has at Kelmscott his ‘artistic “plant” which wd have to be moved with me’. He therefore suggests an agreement that would permit him to make the move, but not commit him to it.

Business matters and Brown’s application for the Slade Professorship at Cambridge form the substance of the following letters, but on 6 December Rossetti writes to Alice Boyd that he is hoping for a visit from Scott: ‘He will soon fill a sketch-book with jottings of the place, even in winter’. Later in the letter, he remarks: ‘The floods are out here, restricting the field for walks a good deal, but the weather is getting frosty & brisk which is a great improvement.’ Writing to Mrs. Cowper-Temple about Brown’s candidature on 11 December, he tells her, ‘I am very well, & steadily at work in this place, beautiful even at the approach of winter’. On the same day, he presses Brown to come to the Manor for Christmas, with his family, Emma, Lucy and Nolly: ‘Do manage coming here. You will be simply enchanted with the place even in winter’ – although there have been severe gales. These he describes more fully to William on the same day:

The floods have been out here now for a long time, but walking is still possible in the higher meadows. The tremendous gale of last Sunday night had some disastrous results, uprooting no less than 6 important trees – 3 in the avenue of Mouse’s [the pony’s] field, & 3 in the island by the boat-house. Three others – very large elms opposite the front gate – are so shaken that they will be sure to fall in the next gale.

On 18 December Rossetti assures George Rae, ‘I am wonderfully well here, have got thoroughly to work, & don’t feel at all inclined at present to go in again for London gloom and suffocation. This is the loveliest of places even in winter, & what between last year and this year, I have gradually established a complete artistic “plant” here’. He spent Christmas with his family in London, but he returned to the Manor on 28 December.

Rossetti’s letters of 1873 and 1874 – in Volume 6 of *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* – continue to show him reacting to Kelmscott in various ways according to his moods, but with nature often playing a significant part. On 2 January 1873 he writes to his mother that he had enjoyed spending Christmas with her and the family, and goes on:

I find the weather here has not been so fine during my absence as it was in London. George [Hake] has brought down an additional dog – a very

intelligent black & tan terrier which he has had from a pup. So now we have 3 dogs, what with the sheep dog I got (named Turvey), the dog sent to George from Scotland, which is a cross between a Scotch deer-hound & a collie, and is named "Bess," – and the new dog who rejoices in the name of Dizzy, after a celebrated politician. [Benjamin Disraeli]

Having been absent on Christmas Day, we were last night serenaded with a Carol by the village-children. The weather here is decidedly colder than it was in London, & today is very dismal. Moreover a dreadful man in the neighbourhood, who has a beetroot-spirit factory, has established a steam-whistle to call his workmen. This goes 7 times a day, beginning at 5 AM, & is the dreariest of super- or subhuman sounds. It is a long way off but still one hears it here much too distinctly to be pleasant.

It is remarkable that this is the only reference in the correspondence of either Rossetti or Morris to the modern farm development being carried on at the time in the nearby village of Buscot.¹⁸

On 1 February Rossetti writes to Brown to encourage a visit, showing unusual awareness of a local farming matter:

I told you if you'd come here you might do a bit of landscape. There is the loveliest thing developed close by here within a day or two, – a breeding-fold – a quadrangle of hurdles thatched & walled with straw, and adjoining a scooped-out haystack in which the shepherd sleeps. It is inhabited by about 30 ewes at the approach of lambing-time which is expected daily. It would make a most charming and most attractive picture. If I were doing it, I should put a Christ walking up & down the centre of it. You could stow your belongings in the haystack.

Writing to Dr Hake on 16 February, Rossetti devotes two paragraphs to the exploits of 'Poor old Dizzy', which clearly give him much pleasure. On 22 February he writes to Hake again, remarking that 'Howell & Dunn are down here – the latter helping me at work at present writing – the former in bed – 3 P M – twelve hours after 3 A M when we went to bed after endless palaver.¹⁹ George is out getting more pike (if he can). His last finds in that line have been wonderfully good'. To his mother on 7 March, Rossetti writes from 'this wilderness':

I take walks regularly. The floods are now gone again, but even while they lasted, there were the higher fields to walk in, which remained free though not over easy walking. Only during the heavy snow, which occurred at two intervals, I was driven to the roads to walk, which are cheerless & monotonous enough. My health continues better than I am habitually in London, but I have lately been getting terribly fat again, which I fear is the healthy

condition with me, but is not desirable. I suppose it is partly attributable to good appetite, as my walk always precedes dinner by an hour or so.

Later in the letter Rossetti tells his mother: 'The weather here has been brighter & better for the last few days. When settled towards summer, or *in* summer as most feasible, perhaps you might manage a visit here with Christina & Maria too if it might be. George will drive you, boat you, & punt you to any extent.' On 26 March he writes to Charles Eliot Norton, the American critic, who was in London, apologising for a delay in replying to his letter, and commenting: 'I myself have been so much better since carrying out my long-standing project of settling in the country than I ever found myself in London, that I do not feel tempted to leave it as yet, particularly as I find my painting goes on to the full as steadily here as there.' On 6 April Rossetti gives his mother a full account of the doings of Dizzy and two new dogs, Nero – 'a splendid black retriever' – and Jemmy – 'a funny sort of rough terrier ...' Apologetically, and ingeniously, he concludes, 'I fear the above caninities exhaust the Kelmscott budget of news'.

The approach of spring at Kelmscott was evidently good for Rossetti's spirits, as on 14 May he writes to Brown: 'The cold spring, not yet warmed through, has inspired me with a sonnet which I enclose'. The sonnet is called simply 'Spring', and refers to the lambing-fold described in the earlier letter to Brown:

Soft-littered is the new-year's lambing-fold;
 And in the hollowed haystack at its side
 The shepherd lies o' nights now, wakeful-eyed
 At the ewes' travailing call through the dark cold.
 The young rooks cheep, mid the thick caw o' the old:
 And near unpeopled streamsides, on the ground,
 By her spring-cry the moorhen's nest is found,
 Where the drained flood-lands flaunt their marigold.

Chill are the gusts to which the pastures cower,
 And chill the current where the young reeds stand
 As green and close as the young wheat on land:
 Yet here the cuckoo and the cuckoo-flower
 Pledge to the heart Spring's perfect gradual hour
 Whose breath shall soothe you like your dear one's hand.

This is a characteristically accomplished sonnet, in which evocative natural observation gives way only in the last line to the romantic moment. However, Rossetti does not want to acknowledge anything too Wordsworthian in himself, for in the letter to Brown he goes on: 'I shall get used to the country in time I suppose but as yet the cuckoo suggests to me that some one has been to Holborn & bought a

cuckoo-clock. Everything is very jolly here & walks begin to be delightful.'

On 20 May 1873 Rossetti writes to invite his mother to come with his sisters to the Manor:

The apple blossom in our orchard has been in full glory& is still delicious, and everything is most lovely. I shall try if I can pack you a bouquet safely to Euson Square today, including wild flowers – especially the yellow Mary-buds (or marsh marigolds) which are most splendid in the fields wherever the floods have been most persistent.

In the same letter, he tells her that *The Athenaeum* will soon be publishing 'a little piece of mine', 'Sunset Wings', which 'I wrote when I first came here'. It is not clear why so long a delay occurred before the publication on 24 May of this poem, which was discussed earlier. Rossetti ends the letter by enclosing the new sonnet 'Spring', which he also sent to Scott on 22 May.

Rossetti's mother and sisters did visit the Manor in June, and he wrote about their visit to Hake on 27 June: 'My mother and sisters enjoy the place vastly – garden, house, dogs, and all. Unluckily hitherto the weather has been so windy that George has thought it too cold to take them on the water, to which Christina looks forward with great pleasure.' Christina herself writes appreciatively on 30 June to Amelia Heimann:

Did you know that here we are at Gabriel's?

Yes, here are we, ever since last Wednesday, my Mother and I; in a pretty old house, in a charming garden, in a green and flowery world, (a *rainy* world too, this morning), hard by a river ...

I should like you to picture our day to yourself. We breakfast at 10 nominally (please accept all hours as nominal), and dine at 8; between which meals a bit of bread and butter is very acceptable as luncheon, but I don't think Gabriel takes a morsel ... Mr. [George] Hake ... took us out in the boat on Saturday; and a most delightful row we had; my Mother enjoying it greatly. Our river is the Isis ...²⁰

Christina is more specific in writing to her friend Ellen Heaton on 1 July:

What would you say to our quiet life here, after the gaieties of your London season? *Our* greatest gaieties are being rowed in the boat by amiable Mr. Hake, or playing a stakeless rubber at night. But to me the boat is delightful: and I don't think gold & glitter in Guildhall can have been more beautiful, than the gold and enamel of our river flower-banks here. Then water-sounds are so delightful, – and so are bird's notes in native freedom, – and so are all sorts of things in the country.²¹

Subsequently, on 19 July, Rossetti writes affectionately to his mother about

her recent visit – ‘It is a privation not to see your dear old self trotting about the garden’ – and tells her about the arrival of Jane with the girls. He continues, showing an uncharacteristic interest in the garden flowers – he was well aware of his mother’s enthusiasm for them:

The white lily in the garden has grown to a perfect decorative cluster now & is most divinely lovely. Another white lily is developing also, but the others which excited your curiosity remain as yet unexplained. Janey planted them & believes them to be tiger-lilies.

St. Swithin should be called St. Swindler this year, for he has beneficently cheated us. There has not been a drop of rain since his ominous downfall; though at times the sky has threatened again. Today however all seems settled into sunny serenity.

On 19 July Rossetti tells Brown that everything had been reorganised in time for the coming of ‘Janey & the babes’; now ‘The weather has become magnificent, & the view from the window is Paradisiacal’. He remains concerned for the health of the children and their mother, telling George Hake on 20 July that the girls have not been well: ‘Even *I* have been pressed into the propulsion of May’s swing, so much is your absence felt’. On 22 July he tells Dunn, ‘The weather here is divine at last’. On 31 July Rossetti writes to Brown describing the comic exploits of Dizzy, which ‘I assure you made 5 people happy’. In a letter to Scott on 31 August, Rossetti tells him of his mother’s visit: ‘My mummy used to trot about after wild flowers & was as pleased with everything as a baby or an angel, – once or twice took my daily walk with me too! Christina improved inconceivably.’

Similarly, in a long letter to his mother on 13 September, Rossetti recalls her visit and her response to the garden and the flowers:

The amount of enjoyment you get out of the simplest things is indeed a rebuke to the younger ones around you. I never told you that the tall flowers you felt curious about turned out to be tiger-lilies, &, being pretty numerous, made a fine show when in bloom, as a few of them still are. But the garden is fading fast now – the most noticeable things at present being some most curious flowers growing on long stems.

[unusually in Rossetti’s letters a small a drawing appears at this point]

They are a bright red at top and a paler flame colour below, & are here familiarly termed red-hot poker, but I have some reason to believe that their real name is *Ixia*. Do you know them? They are perhaps more like foxes’ tails than anything else. We have a nice garden-seat now in the arbour opposite the front door & porch of the yew-hedge. I often regret that it was not

there during your visit, but will not doubt your sitting in it yet. The river-growths have continued to develop one after another. The arrow-head rush put forth eventually a most lovely staff of blossoms just like a little sceptre.

[another drawing occurs at this point]

The way that the white blossom grows triple round the staff is most lovely,
& the whole might really be copied exactly in gold for a sceptre.

Rossetti's knowledge of flowers was not perhaps extensive; the botanical name for the red-hot poker is not *Ixia* but *Kniphofia*. His response to the arrow-head rush, *Sagittaria sagifolia*, shows the way his imagination sought to transform nature into art. Letters like these show the justice of Doughty's observation that 'The effect of his county environment as well as the other gracious influences of this summer at Kelmscott revealed itself even more clearly in his letters than in his verse'.²²

There are few references to Kelmscott in the next few months, though on 4 December Rossetti thanks William Davies for sending him his recent volume of poetry, *The Shepherd's Garden*, and appends a copy of 'Spring' with the comment that: 'Instead of tearing off the blank leaf, I'll fill it with a sonnet resulting from these Kelmscott ruralities. But indeed I have done nothing but my daily painting all my time here.' He spent Christmas in London before returning to Kelmscott at the end of December. Jane and the girls came in early January 1874; but Jane was back in London by the 17th. On 21 January Rossetti tells Hake that his son Cecil, and Brown, have recently visited, but 'Otherwise George & I have all along been monarchs of all we survey – which is at present chiefly water, the floods having come at last. The weather is extremely mild'. On 19 February Rossetti tells Dunn that he has 'painted the 3 heads straight off from little May successfully' for the *Triple Rose*. On 23 February he writes to his mother about her summer visit, hoping she will come again. He continues:

Today the little Morris girls collected all the flowers we could find in the garden – no very choice gleanings – and they were sent on to you – so perhaps you have them ere this reaches you. I know they will be better than nothing to your flower loving heart. This extremely mild winter causes many things to be very forward already. The children were quite sorry afterwards that they had omitted to send you some branches of the palm-willow with its furry buds not yet as yellow as they will be. The gum-cistus you planted thrives but of course is very gradual in growth.

Later in the letter he tells her, 'I'll enclose a Winter sonnet written lately'. He doesn't seem to have done so, but the sonnet had been written:

'Winter'

How large that thrush looks on the bare thorn-tree!
 A swarm of such, three little months ago
 Had hidden in the leaves and let none know
 Save by the outburst of their minstrelsy.
 A white flake here and there – a snow-lily
 Of last night's frost – our naked flower-beds hold;
 And for the rose-flower on the darkening mould
 The hungry redbreast gleams. No bloom, no bee.

The current shudders to its ice-bound sedge;
 Nipped in their bath, the stark reeds one by one
 Flash each its clinging diamond in the sun:
 'Neath winds which for this Winter's sovereign pledge
 Shall curb great king-masts to the ocean's edge
 And leave memorial forest-kings o'erthrown

This is clearly a companion piece to 'Spring', in that observation of nature continues to play a central part. The simplicity of the first line and the rest of the powerful opening section succeed in evoking the bleak atmosphere, culminating in the figure of the 'hungry redbreast' and the succinct 'No bloom, no bee'. The octave begins with similar force, but perhaps the conclusion fades into over-familiar imagery.

At this time Rossetti's social activities seem to have been taking their toll. On 10 March Howell is told: 'Everyone in the house is playing at hide & seek which they are likely to keep up till one in the morning! All day they have been snow-balling in the garden! I begin to feel very old indeed.' However, Rossetti's spirits recovered, and on 4 April 1873 he writes genially to the young Oliver Madox Brown, telling him that his friend Francis Hueffer may be coming to the Manor for the weekend. He continues in friendly fashion:

Would you accompany him next Saturday to stay a week with us here? And do you think you could get your father to come with you? Perhaps really it might be good for him. There are no floods at present, & though everything is looking bleakish just now, I dare say a week may bring improvement.

The two younger men did make the visit, Hueffer insisting on walking much of the way. But there was no visit from the elder Brown.

It is on 9 April that Rossetti writes an important letter to the house agent which shows that he was still enjoying his time at Kelmscott and intended to

remain there:

I beg to enclose the quarter's rent due at Lady Day last.

I should be glad to take a lease of this house for 7 or 14 years, conditionally on my obtaining whenever needed the use of the outbuilding before in question. For this I should be willing to pay a small additional rent if required. My use for it would be as a studio, & in such case I should spend a considerable sum in adapting it to the purpose, which would add materially to the value of the property.

In a similarly positive mood, he tells his mother on 16 April: 'The country is getting genial & pleasant. Many flowers are coming out, – abundant daffodils in the garden, marybuds all over the fields near the river, and the island by the boathouse is rich in wild periwinkles – a large beautiful blue purple flower. I must try and send you some gleanings.' But on the same date, Morris was writing to Rossetti, enclosing his share of the quarterly rent, in a distinctly unfriendly tone:

I send herewith the £17.10 to you, not knowing where else to send it since Kinch is dead. As to the future I will ask you to look upon me as off my share, & not look upon me as shabby for that, since you have fairly taken to living at Kelmscott, which I suppose neither of us thought the other would do when we first began joint possession of the house; for the rest I am both too poor, & by compulsion of poverty, too busy to use it much in any case, and am very glad if you find it useful & pleasant to you.²³

No reply from Rossetti has survived, but the letter must have made it difficult for him to further his plan for continuing to live at Kelmscott.

On 23 April, Rossetti asks his mother, who had decided to go to Eastbourne, 'Why, WHY, Why did you not come to Kelmscott if you had to leave town? The weather is divine here & everything lovely. Unless indeed sea-air was thought needful – or unless Maggie is not allowed to go so far afield as to a brother's roof'. Perhaps we can feel in the tone of the last remark a hint of the suspicion of other people's motives that was increasingly to inform Rossetti's behaviour in the coming months. But the tone of the letters generally remains steady. On 17 May he tells his mother:

The weather here wd be genial now as to sunshine if it were not for the persistent east winds. However the improvement is very decided & I trust will soon merge into complete Summer.

The Winter sonnet you liked & the one on Spring I have sent to the Athenaeum where they will appear Saturday after next.

The two sonnets appeared in *The Athenaeum* on 30 May 1874 entitled, accurately if unromantically, 'Thames Valley Sonnets'

To Brown on 18 May Rossetti comments: 'The weather hangs back here, & things as yet are not thoroughly genial. We had about 10 days of *perfect* weather just after Nolly [Brown] left here, but since then various degrees of discomfort. I suppose it must have been pretty much the same everywhere'. On 23 May he writes to his brother's bride, Lucy, about a possible visit:

Yesterday I went for a walk rather earlier than usual, & was astounded to find everything changed for warmer & brighter – wind south-west, & swarms of dragonflies round one's head – to such an extent that to walk under the sun in one's usual clothes was quite a labour. Today all has receded to gloom with addition of rain.

On 29 May Rossetti tells his mother: 'Things are very lovely here, but not quite so redundant as this time last year, owing I judge to the absence of fertilizing floods during the past winter.' However, his state of mind was becoming increasingly disturbed, and in a postscript to a letter of 31 May he tells Brown: 'I am in a state of great despondency and low spirits. I can hardly make myself work ...' He did, however, arrange to receive a series of visitors soon after this. On 9 July he tells Dunn: 'Besides Leyland and the Howells, I expect Watts & Brown – or if Brown does not come, Sandys is likely to be here: so that all space wd be occupied.' But matters seem to have changed rapidly; and for the worse. Doughty records the crisis:

the auditory hallucinations and persecution mania of paranoia had returned. Strolling one day by the river with George Hake, Rossetti passed a party of three or four anglers when, fancying that they had called out some insult to him in passing, he suddenly turned and attacked them with reproaches and abuse for the supposed outrage. Hake ran up and parted the disputants, apologizing and explaining as well as he could, to the astonished anglers. Rumours of this outbreak quickly spread about the neighbourhood, and finding Kelmscott impossible Rossetti, before the month was over, returned to Cheyne Walk.²⁴

Suddenly, on 15 July, we find Rossetti writing to Howell: 'I am obliged to put off Sandys after all – being unexpectedly called to London. I shall try to see both him & you if I stay at all. Don't tell people I am coming, as I don't want to be besieged.' He was never to return to Kelmscott, and seldom to refer to it again.

III

The strongest evidence for Rossetti's feeling for nature, stimulated by his time at Kelmscott, is, as we have seen, to be found in his frequently eloquent letters.

As far as artistic results are concerned, the list is quite meagre: four poems and some alliterative ‘burdens’, and one painting, *Water Willow*. To these it might be possible to add the painting *The Bower Maiden*, painted and sold to William Graham in 1874, for which Rossetti used the local girl Annie Cumley as model, although it does not take the viewer outside the Manor; and *The Bower Meadow*, ‘a fine, richly atmospheric work in subtle greens and pinks’, of which Jan Marsh has remarked that, although originating at Sevenoaks in 1850, in its revised form it is surely ‘inspired by Kelmscott’.²⁵

The case will be considerably strengthened if we add to the evidence the two poems which Rossetti developed from the unused ‘burdens’ to his *Rose Mary*, referred to earlier, in particular ‘The Water Willow’. Jerome McGann follows J.R. Wahl in arguing that the manuscript of these poems was given to Jane by Rossetti ‘in the summer of 1874, when he was leaving Kelmscott for what turned out to be the last time’. He adds the suggestive comment: ‘Perhaps both of them understood that it would be the last time’.²⁶ Very small changes seem to have been made to the poem in 1876, and the title changed to the more sombre ‘A Death Parting’; it was published under this title in *Poems and Ballads* in 1881:

Leaves and rain and the days of the year,
 (*Water-willow and wellaway*,)
 All these fall, and my soul gives ear,
 And she is hence who once was here.
 (*With a wind blown night and day*.)

Ah! but now, for a secret sign,
 (*Willow’s wan and the water’s white*,)
 In the held breath of the day’s decline
 Her very lips seem pressed to mine
 (*With a wind blown day and night*.)

O love, of my death my life is fain;
 (*The willows wave on the water-way*)
 Your cheek and mine are cold in the rain,
 But warm they’ll be when we meet again.
 (*With a wind blown night and day*.)

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

Leaves and rain and the days of the year,
 (*Water-willow and wellaway,*)
 All still fall, and I still give ear,
 And she is hence, and I am here.
 (*With a wind blown night and day.*)

This one of Rossetti's most poignant poems. The 'burdens' work powerfully to relate the human situation to the natural setting, while the repetition creates a deepening sense of tragic inevitability

The more summery of the 1871 'burdens' adapted later by Rossetti produced a less powerful emotional effect, in the slight but accomplished alliterative poem created as 'Chimes' in 1878, and published in 1881. Of the seven sections of the new poem, the first two derive from Kelmscott. The first, in four couplets, is unchanged from 1871 and was quoted earlier; the second, in a further four, is new:

II

A honey-cell's in the honeysuckle,
 And the honey-bee knows it well.

The honey-comb has a heart of honey,
 And the humming bee's so bonny.

A honey-flower's the honeysuckle,
 And the bee's in the honey-bell.

The honeysuckle is sucked of honey,
 And the bee is heavy and bonny.

The poem then moves on, in five further section of increasing despondency. William Michael Rossetti called 'Chimes' 'clearly an exercise in alliterative verse ... It represents, rather than aught else, a number of thoughts and images passing through the writer's mind in dreary dimness, when he was already too prone to gloomy impressions'.²⁷ But the Kelmscott section with the honey-bee, 'bonny' and full of nectar, seems both clearer and more optimistic than the later part of the poem. Kelmscott had helped Rossetti, but it could not save him.

It would be pleasant to invent a Wordsworthian later life for Rossetti, with nature leading him to salvation via the Church of England. But he remained largely shut within his own concerns, and these increasingly narrowed on him as his life moved towards its premature and unhappy end in 1882. As Doughty puts it, dramatically but not inaccurately:

During these Kelmscott years, Rossetti's introvert, introspective tendencies were being counteracted, extraverted as never before. All around him were new interests – human, animal, scenic – floral, all the many sights, sounds, relationships of country life, creating in the life-long townsman a new awareness that was evidently a new source of strength and joy. In leaving Kelmscott Rossetti lost all this wide variety of life he was learning to love. From these bright influences of earth and human companionship he now returned to the gloomy, silent house in Cheyne Walk, with its coarse, grasping mistress, to deliver himself up once more to the dark internal gods ...²⁸

The letters show that in his periods at Kelmscott Rossetti was sensitive to his surroundings and could write about them with vividness and an eye for detail. In a small number of poems and paintings this attentiveness to nature produces positive results, but he was no Manley Hopkins to create new poetic forms to convey his awareness of nature as a force beyond the self. The works 'done from nature' are certainly not those most characteristic of Rossetti's art, and his move back to London allowed him to revert to his more usual style. Jan Marsh has written well of his 'ornate sonnets in which intricate conceits are used to convey abstract ideas'.²⁹ These qualities would be evident again in the poetry written after Kelmscott, leading us to see his periods there as giving rise to work suggestive of unfulfilled possibilities in his art.

NOTES

1. This article is based on a lecture given at Kelmscott House on 29 March 2008. I am grateful to Peter Preston and Tony Pinkney in particular for their contributions to the discussion that followed the lecture.
2. In the course of the text, quotations from Rossetti's letters are taken from W.E. Fredeman *et al.*, eds, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, Vol. 5, 2005 & Vol. 6, 2006. This edition is fuller and more accurate than its predecessor, Oswald Doughty and J.R. Wahl, eds, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Vol. III, 1871–1876. Oxford: The

- Clarendon Press, 1967. As full dates are provided for each entry, no page numbers are given in these Notes.
3. The phrase is from Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art', line 88.
 4. Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. London: Frederick Muller, 1949, pp. 470, 471. (Subsequently Doughty)
 5. Jane Morris, quoted in John Brandon-Jones, 'The Importance of Philip Webb' in *William Morris and Kelmscott*. London: The Design Council, 1981, p. 92. (Subsequently *Kelmscott*).
 6. Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Painter and Poet*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999, p. 530. (Subsequently Marsh).
 7. An illustration by Brown in *Once a Week*, 27 Feb. 1869, p.144.
 8. Lord Burleigh is a character in Sheridan's play *The Critic*; the implication is that the evidence provided is unclear.
 9. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Vol. I, 1984, 153. (Subsequently Kelvin).
 10. David Rodgers, *Rossetti*. London: Phaidon Press, 1996, p.106.
 11. Joseph Acheson in *Kelmscott*, p. 33.
 12. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., Vol. IV, 1910, Introduction, pp. xix–xx.
 13. Doughty, p. 479.
 14. Marsh, p. 426.
 15. Doughty, p. 533.
 16. J.R. Wahl, *The Kelmscott Love Sonnets of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Cape Town: Balkema, 1954.
 17. Acheson in *Kelmscott*, p. 34.
 18. The development at Buscot is fully described in *The Faringdon Collection. Buscot Park*. London: The National Trust, 1990, pp. 60–63, 'An industrialised farm estate in Berkshire'.
 19. Rossetti's behaviour at the Manor, including his fondness for late hours, has attracted a good deal of criticism. In a well-known letter of 25 November 1872 Morris had complained to Aglaia Coronio that 'he [Rossetti] has all sorts of ways so unsympathetic with the sweet simple old place, that I feel his presence there as a kind of slur on it'; Kelvin, I, p. 172.
 20. Antony H. Harrison, ed, *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, Vol. I, 1843–1873, 1997, p. 431. Subsequently referred to as *CR Letters*.
 21. *CR Letters*, I, p. 432.
 22. Doughty, p.558.
 23. Kelvin, I, p. 222.

24. Doughty, p. 567.
25. Marsh, p. 430.
26. Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must be Lost*.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 73.
27. William Michael Rossetti, ed, *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London:
Ellis, 1911, p.670.
28. Doughty, p. 568.
29. Marsh, p. 530.