D. G. Rossetti as Painter and Poet

WENDELL STACY. JOHNSON

I

IN THE MIDDLE of the Victorian period, the idea of the “sister arts” of painting and poetry, an idea associated during the eighteenth century with landscape “painting” in verse, was given by John Ruskin and others a new emphasis.1 It could now be used to justify story-telling pictures largely on the basis of their stories: Ruskin’s conception of the visual arts as constituting a “noble and expressive Language” was literally carried out in the popular taste for painting that either illustrated well-known narratives or told new anecdotes. But this was only one of the senses in which literature and the fine arts were closely related. From the 1840’s to the 1870’s there flourished a surprising number of writers who were also painters, sculptors, draftsmen, or architects: Thackeray, Lear, Butler, Hardy, Hopkins, and the most obvious examples, William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In such an age, it might seem, when parallels between one art and the other were often drawn, there should be ample material for making comparisons of the literary with the visual.

Yet these comparisons are difficult to make in general terms. Even generalizations about a state of culture which is expressed in the several arts have to be undertaken cautiously, as do all large assertions about the most complex and contradictory of ages. Wylie Sypher, observing that “Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry began by being narrative or illustrative and ended by being frankly and consciously ornamental,” wisely declines to become more dogmatic about that so-called school in what he recognizes as “a century without a style.”2 In fact, and perhaps this is saying the same thing, the nineteenth century had almost every possible style—including both the Pre-Raphaelite clarity and simplicity of the very late forties and the lush decoration of the seventies and eighties, which is now generally (if mistakenly) thought of as Pre-Raphaelite.

By looking closely at the work in both arts of painter-poets, especially that of the major figures Morris and Rossetti, we can observe some significant similarities between picture and poem in the choice of

---

1 Earlier expressions of this idea are studied in Jean Hagstrum’s The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray (Chicago, 1958).
2 In Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York, 1960), pp. 198-199.
subject, the use of patterned detail, and a certain dream-like quality of tone. Morris' poetry and design both use medieval subject matter, along with the matter of the northern sagas. In his shorter poems, as in his drawings and flat patterns, he uses repeated details, formal reiteration: the words of the ballad refrain recur insistently in something like the way flower forms recur in a design for paper or fabric, or in the background of a stained-glass window. The coolness of the poet's tone in telling such tales of violence and terror as "The Haystack in the Floods" and "The Defence of Guenevere" may find its counterpart in the flatness with which even intense and heroic figures are treated by the designer's art.

Something of the same can be said about Rossetti, who also takes medieval subjects for both his ballads and pictures, also uses the refrain and the repeated design for pictorial background, also produces an almost hypnotically "flat" tone in his narratives of death and destruction, as in his pictures of the blessed damozel and brooding Lilith. But Rossetti offers a problem in parallels that is both more complicated and more interesting. Morris' is latter-day "Pre-Raphaelitism," and however much he echoes, in the late fifties and afterward, the doctrines of the 1848 brotherhood, he remains consistently a decorative artist. When he expresses moral fervor, as in his socialist writing, it is hardly as an artist at all: he is influenced not by the Ruskin of Modern Painters I and II but by Ruskin of Unto This Last. Rossetti, on the other hand, moves from the pictures of his sister Christina as the Virgin Mary, pictures that were praised in 1850 for an unfleshly "pious feeling," to the later drawings and paintings of his mistresses, pictures quite as "fleshly" as the poems Robert Buchanan attacked in 1871. And Rossetti, in whose art both the flat and fleshly elements are always present or implicit, embodies other contradictory elements: the man who was willing to leave all his unpublished poetry in his wife's grave came later to believe himself primarily a poet, and to argue—along with a good many other Victorians—that a picture should be only "a painted poem." If he seemed to shift from one style to another, he could seem as well to vacillate between one art and another.

II

Still, between the two arts there are specific similarities and consistencies: a complex personality. Rossetti is as an artist a complex

3 The earlier praise of Rossetti's "flat" style is in a review from The New Monthly Magazine, I, XXXIX (1850), 219; Buchanan's "The Fleshly School of Poetry" appeared first in The Contemporary Review, XVIII (1871), 334-350.
4 The point is touched upon repeatedly by Oswald Doughty in A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, (London, 1949).
Wendell Stacy Johnson

whole. Close scrutiny of the subjects and images in poem and picture, of the compositions, and of techniques may help to suggest something of that whole.

Rossetti's favorite subjects in both arts are women—and not ordinary women. In this as in several respects he is an artist of opposites. In one group of extraordinary women are the dying sister, the blessed damozel, and Dante's Beatrice, all pure and all directly related to Heaven. In the other group are Sister Helen, Helen of Troy, Lilith, and the less sinister Jenny, all involved in sensuality if not in morbid passions. The archetypal virgin stands at one extreme, the prostitute or siren at the other. These extremes are represented by the Virgin Mary in his first important pictures and by the pagan Venus, who came increasingly to fascinate Rossetti, and who appears in verse and pictures as both "Venus Verticordia" and "Astarte Syriaca." The tension between these two appealing figures can be embodied within a single work, as it is in the later and rather lush versions of the heavenly maiden, especially the damozel, and in the poem Rose Mary. Rose Mary, who must look into a magic stone to detect her lover's danger, proves not to be a maiden at all—she is, in fact, a fleshly and a fallen woman—but at the end of the verse narrative, in Heaven, she can be forgiven and can forget the faithless lover. Rossetti's two ways of seeing women may suggest the two attitudes of Tennyson, in the Idylls as well as in Maud, where feminine figures are viewed with the eyes of desire in the image of the rose, and with the eyes of awe if not of worship in the image of the pure white lily.6 Rose Mary, whose very name combines the idea of woman's sexuality with that of virginity, is at last the rose redeemed.4

Now we are touching on an aspect of the two arts that we might expect to provide the most striking point of comparison between poems

---

6 This very interesting poem is given attention in Clyde K. Hyder's essay subtitled "A Study in the Occult," VP, I (August, 1963), 197-207.

Redemption and damnation, heaven and hell, peaceful repose and terrible violence, pure innocence and guilty passion; these opposing elements are not often perfectly reconciled in Rossetti's work as they are, virtually in Rose Mary; but the opposing qualities are almost always present. A recent criticism suggests that the difficulty with Rossetti's poems is one of distinct religious form unjustified by any substantial belief: heaven is decorative, and only sensual passion and an awareness of death are literally real. (This view is Harold Weatherby's, in "Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," VP, II [Winter, 1964], 11-19.) But the very form used, even if it is reduced to the ornamental or the vaguely sentimental, indicates a longing for some supernatural reality which the poet and painter can represent by his visions of unearthly maidens. His inability to merge form and reality completely, to merge the heavenly ideal with the earthly flesh, can be both a cause of incoherence in his poetry and—in certain poetic moments, as in some early pictures—a source of tension that is formally controlled.
and paintings, the aspect of imagery. Rossetti does repeatedly use the same images in his painting and his verse—not only in the poems inspired by pictures but also in his other lyric pieces. These reveal again and again, as his pictures do, a fascination with flowers, with stars, and with women’s hair. But these and less obviously repeated images are usually dictated by the subject. Some of the poet’s memorable images are wholly literary and do not enter into the backgrounds of his pictures; an important example is the sea, which Rossetti describes and reflects upon, following Carlyle and Swinburne, as “Time’s self” in “The Sea Limits,” but which does not appear in his frequently static and almost timeless paintings. When important images are common to poems and pictures, they are likely to be traditional images which are both visual and literary: the lily, rose, and dove, golden apple and blossom, all are used for the sake of symbolic meanings, religious or mythical. The inspiration for Rossetti’s pictures is not often his own poetry—except for “The Blessed Damozel,” the poems follow the pictures they are linked with—but it is very often literary, deriving from the Bible, Dante, or classical epic and tale. And Mary Magdalene, Beatrice, Cassandra and Pandora carry their own iconographies with them.

Eva Tietz deals with composition and technique, rather than subject and imagery, in the only analytical study of Rossetti’s poetry in relation to his painting, “Das Malerische in Rossettis Dichtung.” Dr. Tietz considers the detailed poetic description of light effects and contrasts in color, as well as the use of vertical and horizontal forms to achieve pictorial and decorative results. She cites examples from the verse of perspective as a painter would see it, and descriptions of objects that grow weak and grey as they recede, “green grass / Whitened by distance” (“Boulogne to Amiens and Paris”). Finally, she suggests that in both Rossetti’s pictures and his poems, with their feminine figures and moonlit landscapes, the figure is the visual center, graphically described and surrounded by minute decorative detail with the landscape as a distant and subordinate background.

This last point—precise realization of the human figure in the foreground and reduction of the landscape to a distant or shadowy backdrop—is an important comment not only on Rossetti’s but on the other Victorian painters’ frequent composing of pictures. The Pre-Raphaelites were not alone in their inclination to paint either genre or seriously

7 Anglia, LI (1927), 278-306.
8 Like Professor Hagstrum in his study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary pictorialism, Dr. Tietz is interested in visual effects within poetry more than parallels of style between poems and pictures, and so she makes little of the literary influence on painting which seems so striking in the mid-Victorian period.
Wendell Stacy Johnson

illustrative works; in spite of Ruskin's love of landscape, and perhaps in part because of Ruskin's interest in art's having "thought" and telling truths, English artists from the late forties through the seventies very often relegated landscape to a minor role in their canvases, or, at best, used it as a means of commenting symbolically on the people in the picture." Rossetti reveals the extreme form of this tendency in his compositions. The natural settings in his paintings are either (like that he did for "Found") quite separately studied and painted so that they seem like "flats" behind the leading characters in his scenes, or they are slight and sketchy, including some details that reflect the human situation. So Rossetti and his fellow Pre-Raphaelites domesticate (or tame to moral purpose) the landscape which they show instead of expressing the overwhelming power of external natural as Turner had done. Likewise, Rossetti's poems use the natural setting only for selected detail that is relevant to his human characters; his interest as a poet is in the psychology of persons and not in the grandeur of scenery, in the ego and not in the cosmic image.

III

A few familiar "pairs" can best demonstrate the degree of relationship between picture and poem. Rossetti's poem on the Virgin Mary follows and comments on pictures in a style comparable to the paintings' own styles. His longer poem on "The Blessed Damozel" precedes and is illustrated by a picture which may seem richer and more sensuous, in the manner of, say, "The Kiss" or "Nuptial Sleep." But, again, diverse elements are present in the picture of Mary and in the poem of the damozel: the vision of a religious figure on earth contains bright colors and clear decorative elements, as well as a psychologically very human, rather than transcendent, quality; the verbal description of a secular-minded maiden in Heaven carries overtones of the divine Dante as well as the morbid Poe.

"Mary's Girlhood (For a Picture)" actually is a pair of sonnets for a pair of pictures, the 1849 Girlhood of Mary Virgin and the 1850 Annunciation scene. The decorative artificiality of the sonnet scheme appears to be appropriate, for both the paintings, though tense and luminous, have a curiously flat and artificial quality. The repeated

9 The Pre-Raphaelites other than Rossetti were, in fact, very much interested at the beginning of the movement in rediscovering nature, in representing the facts of landscape with close fidelity; but, as John Steegman points out, the three main kinds of English painting from the 1830's until late in the century were genre, illustrative, and historical, all of them in one sense or another literary kinds; both portraits and landscape were of less importance. See Consort of Taste (London, 1950), p. 14.
forms, natural and yet somehow de-natured already suggest the entirely formal design of later Rossetti backgrounds and of Morris paper or fabric. The vine being pruned by St. Joseph in the first picture is like a Jesse tree in a stained-glass window; the two stalks of lilies, one in a vase and the other on a tapestry which the Virgin and St. Anne work at, set up a repeated pattern. The pattern is even more striking in *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (probably the best picture Rossetti ever painted), where the lily in Gabriel's hands, almost an enameled wand, becomes reversed in the lily on the now completed strip of embroidery. This detail, making the flower into a flat decoration so that life is stylized wholly into the form of art, implies the development of latter-day Pre-Raphaelitism—or what might even be called post-Pre-Raphaelitism.

Like these pictures, especially the second, Rossetti’s pair of sonnets give the impression of being strained in austerity: the decoration is clear and clearly symbolic, and the slightly awkward simplicity of syntax—“Gone is a great while, and she / Dwelt young in Nazareth of Galilee”—is related to the nervous rigidity of the figures in both paintings. But in another sense the poetry is hardly pictorial at all. It is filled with abstract nouns and adjectives, compiling—like the titles on three allegorical volumes in Rossetti’s first picture—all the virtues of Mary: “devout respect, / Profound simplicity of intellect, / And supreme patience.” The poet’s only images, taken from his two paintings, are “an angel-watered lily,” “a white bed,” and, to stretch a point, the dawn, the sunshine. Certainly no one of these visual suggestions is at all precisely realized, and the most striking, the lily, in effect explicates and makes metaphorical the actual flower and small angel in the picture. It is as if the poet believed his subject too pure to be expressed in the language of the senses, and had to prove that even the flower in the picture was abstractly justified. There is the same abstract diction in Rossetti’s sonnet for Leonardo’s “Our Lady of the Rocks”; by way of telling contrast, “Venus” and “Lillith”—both poems for later pictures—are filled with the images of eyes, fire, the apple, golden hair, the rose and the poppy.

The painter and poet of the Virgin may feel something of that deep uneasiness about the flowers and fruits of this world (to say nothing of maidens in bed), which gives such tension to the poetry of his maiden model, his sister Christina—especially in her “Goblin Market,” where lush forbidden fruits are deliciously pictured in virtually sexual language, and are ascetically rejected. But the same painter-poet can combine the elements of earth and Heaven, flesh and soul, image and abstraction, in his picture and poem on “The Blessed Damozel.”

The familiar version of this work which appeared in the 1870
Poems is somewhat altered from the two earlier printed texts; but it is not so altered that it cannot still represent the spirit which produced the Pre-Raphaelite magazine of 1850, The Germ, as well as that vaguely, dreamily erotic quality which caused Rossetti to be attacked in 1871 for “fleshly” preoccupations. One oil painting of the subject was apparently done in 1874, and the other begun in 1873 but finished in 1879. But, as F. G. Stephens remarked in 1894, the pictures illustrate the poem in close and faithful detail; if there are contrasts between painting and lyric, they are not contrasts of definite imagery. The fact that in this important instance the literal images follow from the literary, the pictures having been painted after the poem was written, even makes the relationship closer: “The Blessed Damozel” is actually what Rossetti declared every picture should be, a “painted poem.”

This painted version, which emphasizes the rich and sensual feeling of the poem more than its rigid form (not surprisingly, as the painting is later), nevertheless contains both qualities. If the lines in the main part of the picture are all flowing curves, the figure of the lover in the lower part (of the Leyland version), has, with his crossed legs and arms bent at right angles, the stiffness we find in early Holman Hunt figures and in Rossetti’s two pictures of Mary. The painting of the damozel can, in fact, be seen as a later illustration not only of the poem’s explicit subject but also of its implicit themes, style, and tone: and the themes are double, the style mixed, the tone complex. For the picture and the poem are both partly successful attempts to relate, to balance, opposites: earthly man in time and blessed woman in eternity, or the temporal and the ideal.

Certain traditional dualities introduced by the very subject of a lover on earth and a beloved in heaven become merged in the styles and imageries of picture and poem. There is no dramatized distinction of body and soul, for the heavenly is concretely embodied. The lush coloring of the picture and the definiteness of its images are counterparts for the emotional language of the poem and its definiteness of imagery: Rossetti’s damozel is chaste, with her white rose and her three lilies, but she is also quite physical, with her yellow hair and her warm bosom. As for the possible sexual contrast between man and

---

10 On successive versions of the poem, see Paull F. Baum’s edition (Chapel Hill, 1937).

11 Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Portfolio monograph, London, 1894), pp. 84 ff. Stephens explains that the 1874 picture was painted for William Graham and the 1873-79 version was for another patron, F. R. Leyland. The one described here is the Leyland painting, now in the Lady Lever Collection, Port Sunlight, Cheshire. The other version is in the Fogg Museum at Harvard University, and it differs only in detail—notably in the inclusion of some dozen pairs of embracing lovers behind the figure of the damozel.
woman, Rossetti's tendency, accentuated in later pictures and seen also in Morris and sometimes in Burne-Jones, is to picture heroic women who have remarkably masculine jaws and shoulders, and delicate men who have remarkable feminine lips and eyes, so that the sexes seem virtually interchangeable and in that sense virtually sexless. This clear tendency in the painting of the damozel, where it is impossible for instance to tell if the angels are male or female, may reflect an element in the verse. Most of the men in Rossetti's poetry are awed or otherwise dominated by their women, and in the poem of the damozel the role of speaker, wooer, and teacher is hers. If body and soul, and male and female, are not strikingly distinguished, the distinct ideas of time and eternity are both clearly implied in the picture and given in the poem, ideas that cannot seemingly be so easily merged. And yet even these ideas tend to coincide with each other, or to co-exist, rather than to be contrasted.

The painting reveals an element of time in its vision of heaven if only because the blooming flowers, the gracefully waving wind-blown garments, and the flowing hair of the maiden all show movement instead of stillness. These are not the tranquil forms that are likely to surround a madonna or saint; and certainly the lyric lines of arm and neck, the rich living glow of the damozel's skin, seem as unlike any Byzantine or Gothic "eternalizing" of form as they can be. In the bottom panel of the Leyland picture, however, the tense earthly figure appears paradoxically to be like a statue, more still than the heavenly maiden. If, on the other hand, some element of, say, limited time is in the main part of Rossetti's picture, it is communicated by the limited space, the lack of depth in the scene. The flattening of images, a virtual denial of distance in heaven, may well work because of our association of time with space to flatten and to deny the absolute relevance of historical depth and movement to a central figure, for all its own movement. Again, by way of contrast, the rigid lover's figure in the lower part of this picture is set against a vista of leaves and a winding river, two familiar images for seasonal change and the constant flowing of time. The damozel strikes us as warm, as breathing and moving, in a flat setting with little dimension of time and space; the lover appears almost like a carved figure seen against a landscape that provides both distance and images of time and change.

Something of this paradoxical treatment of fixedness and movement, of flatness and depth, of eternal form and flowing time, has

---

12 The dominating female figure is not, however, more ubiquitous in Rossetti than in Swinburne, and she appears as well in Tennyson.
already been given by the poem. The curious sense of temporal passion in heaven and of a timeless trance on earth is reinforced by the rhetorical structure of Rossetti's verse. "The Blessed Damozel" consists largely of a narrative voice using the conventional narrative past tense. But there are two other voices: the damozel's, set off by quotation marks, and the earthly lover's, contained in parentheses. And the damozel's speech is almost entirely in the future tense, anticipating her lover's arrival in eternity, while his interpolated speech is almost entirely in the present tense, which might ordinarily seem more appropriate to the eternal present than to the world of time in which he exists. Apparently the bereft lover can have only a dim impression, a partial vision and hearing, of the lady in heaven whom we see and hear; yet his mind is fixed on that impression so intently as to take him out of time. As for the maiden, she is so intent upon his moving toward the future that she is concerned only with the movement and the promise of time, not with her own eternity:

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw  
Time like a pulse shake fierce  
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove  
Within the gulf to pierce  
Its path.  

(ll. 49-53)

This poem touches upon the idea of time repeatedly and in various ways: ten years seem like a day in eternity, it declares, and can seem like a hundred years on earth. It repeats, in the damozel's words, the last theme of "My Sister's Sleep," that to die is to be born into new life—to leave, as it were, the trance-like present and enter into an eternity conceived of not as timeless being but as intensified time. Although the very end of the poem, which represents weeping in heaven, may appear to be the most clearly unorthodox thing about it, the paradoxical and unorthodox view is evident throughout; and it is evident most of all in the use of tense and in the treatment of past, present, and future. In contrast with other visions of the blessed in eternity—such visions as Dante's and the Pearl poet's—this one has a narrative describing not a visionary's growing comprehension of heaven but rather the actuality of heaven. It allows the heavenly maiden to speak not of integrity and not of the present, but of longing and of the future. The man on earth, in his fleeting glimpses of the vision, is absorbed in the present, using the words "now" and "even now." So time and eternity, in the poetic tenses as well as in the pictorial images, are blurred, are redefined, are even in part reversed.

The picture and the poem, then, both bring together and tend to merge opposing elements, in several ways; in their compositions,
their images, their uses of color and line, and of diction and tense, they produce parallel effects.

IV

John Ruskin's doctrine in the early volumes of *Modern Painters*, along with the principles of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood which were largely inspired by Ruskin's words, are calculated to encourage visual art that is at once literally representational in its method and either elevated or otherwise edifying in its subject matter. Pictures, that is, should tell high truths in scrupulous detail; and art should truly be, in Ruskin's famous phrase, "nothing but a noble and expressive language" —the language of the botanist or of the moralist, or both. But the tendency of much of Victorian painting is away from representing landscape nature as it reveals a divine message, toward representing both art itself (the later Rossetti's and Morris' pictures are filled with elaborately patterned tapestries, clothes, and other decorated surfaces) and human nature for its own sake.

As painter and as poet, Dante Rossetti represents something of the old Pre-Raphaelite strain and more, perhaps, of the later tendency. At his most characteristic, he combines the two interests, one in religious or moral subjects realistically portrayed, and one in earthy, even voluptuous, images artfully realized. *The House of Life* includes a sonnet on "St. Luke the Painter," whose art "looked through [symbols] to God" instead of achieving, as later painters' did, only the "soulless self-reflection of man's skill"—and this sentiment is pure Ruskin. And, of course, *The House of Life* also includes such earthly, fleshly lyrics as "Silent Noon."

Finally, if Rossetti's pictures often have extremely literary purposes, either illustrating or telling stories, his poems often have extremely visual qualities which are purely pictorial; we are probably less likely to "read" his simple physical images as psychologically or morally or philosophically symbolic than we are the images of any other important Victorian poet. The parallels observed here may support Rossetti's own inclination to think of himself as a poet who painted. Certainly he is a literary artist. But the accent hovers between the two words in that ambiguous phrase when we consider his work as a whole.

*Hunter College*

*The City University of New York*