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"The Blessed Damozel": A Young Man’s Fantasy

D. M. R. BENTLEY

EARLY IN 1848, Dante Gabriel Rossetti submitted several poems to Leigh Hunt for approval. Evidently the young poet did not find the older man’s comments, though obviously “flattering,” particularly perspicacious. In a letter to his aunt Charlotte Polidori written a short time later he says, “Where Hunt, in his kind letter, speaks of my ‘Dantesque heavens,’ he refers to one or two of the poems the scenes of which are laid in the celestial regions, and which are written in a kind of Gothic manner which I suppose he is pleased to think belongs to the school of Dante” (Letters, 34). There can be little doubt that one of the poems to which Hunt was referring is “The Blessed Damozel” (the other is probably “Mater Pulchrae Delectionis,” an early version of “Ave”). In a sense, Hunt’s informal comments on “The Blessed Damozel” establish the precedent for most of the criticism on the poem published in the first half of this century. Critics have been “pleased to think” that “The Blessed Damozel” is indebted, not just to Dante and the other poets of his circle, but to a small galaxy of Romantic and Victorian writers, including Coleridge, Keats, Goethe, Musset, Blake, Shelley, Tennyson, and the Bailey of Festus. More frequently mentioned than applied is T. Hall Caine’s dubious reminiscence that Rossetti himself gave Poe’s “The Raven” as the direct inspiration and point of departure for his poem (p. 284). There is no need to rehearse here the various literary echoes that have been found singing together in “The Blessed Damozel” since Paull Franklin Baum has already done this in his lengthy introduction to The Blessed Damozel. The Unpublished Manuscript, Text and Collation which, though published over forty years ago, remains the “standard and only really useful edition of the poem”

1The text of Hunt’s letter of March 31, 1848, which is indeed flattering (he hails Rossetti as an “unquestionable poet”) is printed in Memoir, pp. 122-123; DGR’s letter to Hunt is in W. H. Arnold’s Ventures in Book Collecting (New York, 1923), pp. 211-215.

2Caine quotes the now well-known statement, supposedly by Rossetti, that in “The Blessed Damozel” he had “determined to reverse the conditions” of “The Raven”; in his revised edition (1928) Caine omitted the statement (p. 186).
(WEF, 23.32). The point may be made, however, that the inspiration for "The Blessed Damozel" was pictorial as well as literary, and almost certainly includes such favorites of the young Rossetti as Filippo Pistrucci's Iconologia (with its "coloured allegorical designs" [Memoir, p. 85]) of female figures with emblematic adjuncts). Richard Hurst's translation of Gombauld's Endimion, and the Aldine edition of Colonna's Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (both of which contain striking illustrations of scenes where a female lover is depicted in "the celestial regions"). Unquestionably there also lie in the background of the poem the medieval paintings "with two levels, a heavenly and an earthly one" to which Rossetti's later painting of The Blessed Damozel in the form of a diptych makes formal "reference." But a Lowesian journey along the road and across the bridge to "The Blessed Damozel" is not the aim of the present discussion; rather, the aim is to explore the dynamics and meanings of the poem with a view to elucidating the significance of the damozel herself for the male speaker and of the poem itself for the young Rossetti. The initial question in dealing with "The Blessed Damozel" thus comes to the fore: in this "young man's fantasy" (the phrase is John Masefield's) is it possible to differentiate fully and finally between the narrator and the author? This question is complicated by the fact that between the first appearance of the poem in The Germ in 1850 and its publication in Ballads and Sonnets in 1881 Rossetti made a number of changes to it which to a large extent justify Kenneth L. Knickerbocker's argument that though "The Blessed Damozel" "had its inception as a form of poetic exercise" by 1869—which is to say, seven years after the death of Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti—it had "become freighted with biographical details." Although it is doubtful whether all the details added, and in some cases subtracted, in the course of Rossetti's creative career are as biographical as Knickerbocker maintains, it is difficult to doubt that in the years after his wife's death in 1862, "The Blessed Damozel" came to have an increasingly personal meaning for the poet-painter, that—to use Husserl's term as applied by E. D. Hirsh, Jr.—the "horizon" of intention in the poem

3Rossetti was interested in the Iconologia (1821, 1824), a work devoted, in the words of its subtitle, to the "art of representing by allegorical figures the various abstract conceptions of the mind." Hereafter cited as Iconologia.

4These were among the "libro sommammente mistico" ("supremely mystical books") in his father's library which, as William Michael recalls (Memoir, p. 62), the young Rossetti "inspected from time to time, with some gusto not unmixed with awe."


8Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel." SP, 29 (1932), 500.

9See Validity in Interpretation (Yale Univ. Press, 1967).
expanded to encompass its author's "fantasy" of joining his own lost love in a heaven of endless unity. To get an idea of how the meaning of "The Blessed Damozel" changed for Rossetti down the years, the evolution of one, particularly telling, stanza may be briefly rehearsed. In The Germ, the first four lines of stanza eight, a description of the pious activities of the new arrivals in Heaven, read as follows:

                      Heard hardly, some of her new friends,  
                      Playing at holy games,                  
                      Spake gentle-mouthed among themselves  
                      Their virginal chaste names.

Apart from the revision of the first line to read "She scarcely heard her sweet new friends" in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, this stanza remained substantially the same in 1856 as it had been in 1850. In the Trial Books of 1869 and in Poems (1870), however, the blessed Damozel's "new friends" are no longer engaged in "Playing at holy games" but are now depicted "Amid their loving games," and by 1881 the four lines have been completely recast to read:

                      Around her, lovers newly met  
                      'Mid deathless love's acclaims,          
                      Spoke evermore among themselves        
                      Their heart-remembered names.

A slight variation of this, the final, version of the stanza is inscribed at the center of Rossetti's 1876 drawing for the background of The Blessed Damozel (S. 244G) which, like the finished painting, depicts several pairs of "lovers, newly met" embracing fervently amidst the lush greenery of Heaven. While they do not tell the whole story, the changes, first from "holy games" to "loving games" in 1869 and then from "virginal chaste names" to "heart-remembered names" in 1881, are, to a degree, symptomatic of how Rossetti's attitude toward "The Blessed Damozel" changed through the years, of how, increasingly, it partook of his urge to secularize his early poems and, moreover, assumed the burden of his wish-fulfillment fantasies.

The fact that Rossetti himself, a man for whom life imitated art, apparently came increasingly to share the sensual fantasies of the speaker of "The Blessed Damozel" provides the post-1870 poem with a context that justifies Jerome J. McGann's reading of it as a transvaluation of the


11Another study (S. 244M) for the painting depicts several figures playing cymbals, in a possible reference to Psalm 130.
“Christian idea of . . . Divine Love” through a replacement of “Love as agape with love as Eros” (48–52). A related, though different (because less personal), context of significance for the latter-day “Blessed Damozel” was provided for the last Romantics by the later habits and consequent myth of Rossetti as an unstable and obsessive visionary, as a figure preoccupied by an ethereal yet sensual ideal of woman, bent on both recapturing the vanished past in all its physical details and on projecting an earthly love into an eternity beyond death. “Yet now, and in this place, / Surely she leaned o’er me—her hair / Fell all about my face . . . / Nothing: the autumn fall of leaves . . . .” These lines, given by Rossetti to the parenthetical speaker in all the published versions of “The Blessed Damozel,” contain a combination of fantasy, sensuality, and longing in the midst of decay which, together with the emphasis on “hair” and, of course, on the glorified lady herself in the poem, draws attention to how easily the poem supports the romantic image of the “Pre-Raphaelite” poet. It is not an image of the implied poet that the relatively ascetic and religious Rossetti of the early Pre-Raphaelite period, of the years just before and after the publication of The Germ (January–May, 1850), would necessarily have countenanced; to accept it as a valid significance for the poem as originally conceived is, therefore, to accede to an inverted historicism which can only obscure the true significance of “The Blessed Damozel” as related to the context provided by its first publication in February, 1850, in the organ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The critical difficulties posed by the biographical and historical accretions that adhere to “The Blessed Damozel” are formidable but at least partly soluble. For while it is a moot and metaphysical point whether once alerted to a textual interpretation, however superadded or projective, a reader can regain his innocence, a choice can be made in the matter of text which holds out the promise of at least a gestural return to a pre-lapsarian state. A decision to focus on The Germ version of “The Blessed Damozel” may not guarantee a pure response to it but, on the most basic bibliographical grounds, it provides the firmest foundation for a discussion of the poem in relation to Rossetti’s program of the Pre-Raphaelite period when, it must be noted, he was as far from being obsessed by his dead wife as not having met her allowed and almost as far distant from the recluse whose behavior fuelled the inferences of the last Romantics. The decision to focus here on The Germ version of “The Blessed Damozel” is not made in ignorance of the fact that in the aesthetics of texts there are both unfortunate and fortunate falls; however, the advantages to be gained for the present discussion by examining “The Blessed Damozel” in the form that can be assumed to reflect Rossetti’s intentions in the days of the P.R.B. seem to outweigh the benefits of considering it in any of the later versions, where the aesthetic improvements are themselves an aspect of the poet’s revisionist view of his own past. Like the Auden of “In Memory of W. B.
Yeats" and, indeed, the Yeats of such a poem as "Leda and the Swan," the Rossetti of "The Blessed Damozel" (as well as of other significantly revised poems such as "My Sister's Sleep") calls into question the axiom that the last authorized text is for all intents and purposes definitive.

With all this in mind, it is worth returning to ponder Rossetti's description of "The Blessed Damozel" in his letter to Charlotte Polidori as a poem "written in a kind of Gothic manner," for herein resides a valuable clue to its initial conception and general character. The word "Gothic" points to the medieval dimension of the poem which Rossetti attempted to recreate through several means. There is, first of all, the title, which links the resonantly Catholic adjective "Blessed" with the Anglo-Norman word "Damozel," thus serving notice, like the Gothic script in which the title is printed in The Germ, of the antiquarian nature of what is to follow. Also "Gothic" in character is the stanza form of the poem, an extension of the common ballad quatrains to a sestet (a b c b d b), of which Joseph F. Vogel remarks: "It appears that [Rossetti] thought of the verse of 'The Blessed Damozel' as basically a ballad verse (the stanza itself he probably derived from ballads)"—and, perhaps, intended as a formalistic allusion to the Middle Ages. Further, and more obvious, embodiments of the Gothic mise-en-scène of "The Blessed Damozel" are found in the archaic diction of the poem ("ungirt," "Herseemed," "Circlewise," and so on), in its dramatis personae ("Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, / Margaret, and Rosaly's"), and in its stage furniture ("citherns and citeoles"). To an ungentle reader it might seem that in "The Blessed Damozel" Rossetti has merely pieced together some stunning words from old romants to create a poetry with a vaguely exotic flavor. Yet the "Gothic" manner of the poem, its stylistic idiom and vocal coloring, is the signpost that points to one of its fundamental raisons d'etre: the imaginative recreation of the young Rossetti's conception of a medieval "consciousness" and awareness.

Richard L. Stein's astute observation that for Rossetti "the most important

13 Although J. A. Sanford, "The Morgan Manuscript of Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel," SP, 35 (1938), 471-486 casts doubt on the authenticity of the supposed 1847 manuscript of the poem, it is worth noting that such period words as "Damozel" and "Circle-wise" appear in The Germ when the MS has "damsel" and "circle" since it was late in 1849 that Rossetti spent "several days" at the British Museum "reading up all manner of old romants, to pitch upon stunning words of poetry" (DW 43). One of the works that Rossetti may have encountered at this time is The Old English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum, edited for the Roxborough Club by Sir Frederick Madden, which contains details subsumed into "The Staff and Scrip" as well as a picturesque, Anglo-Norman vocabulary of words such as "demeselle."
belief of the Middle Ages was the identification of flesh and spirit” and, moreover, an important “medieval theme” for him was “love” (pp. 127–128), suggests that the notoriously physical rendition of the spiritual Damozel and, indeed, the central love interest of the poem are key aspects of his attempt in this early “poetic exercise” to give form to his conception of the “nature of Gothic” which, as Stein argues, differs markedly from that of Ruskin.

A recognition of the fact that “The Blessed Damozel” was, at the outset, intended (perhaps argumentatively) as the re-creation of a medieval awareness throws into clear relief the relation between Rossetti and his narrator, or, better, between the implied poet and the historical percipient in the poem—an omniscient and speculative figure whose style and assumptions characterize him as the representative of the medieval-Catholic awareness that the reader is invited to enter. The function of the percipient of “The Blessed Damozel” is complex; like the implied poet of Rossetti’s “Sonnets for Pictures” his task is to present a “picture” (in this case the “diptych” composed of the blessed Damozel and her earthbound lover) and to imagine the words and feelings of its personae (again, the damozel and her lover). Through his re-creation of a spatial and emotional relationship that is radically alien to the “modern” mind, the percipient induces the reader-spectator into the medieval-Catholic awareness that he was designed by Rossetti to embody. In effect, he forces the reader-spectator to relinquish the demand for a fixed point of view from which to perceive the external world and asks him to accept (by the willing suspension of disbelief that is the artistic equivalent of an act of faith) a medieval-Catholic awareness in which Heaven and Earth are simultaneously knowable, spirit and flesh are identified, and so on. When William Michael Rossetti claimed that the title Songs of the Art Catholic, under which his brother sent a number of early poems to William Bell Scott in 1847, suggests that “the poems embodied conceptions and a point of view related to pictorial art [and] also that this art was, in sentiment though not necessarily in dogma, Catholic—medieval and unmodern” (Works, p. 661), he might have been thinking in particular of the function of the percipient in “The Blessed Damozel.” And Rossetti’s own later remark, regarding “Avc,” that “the emotional influence . . . employed demands above all an inner standing-point” (Works, p. 661), could well stand as a gloss on the sympathetic response to the percipient’s medieval-Catholic awareness that is demanded of the reader of “The Blessed Damozel.”

Before proceeding to examine the poem itself, the point needs to be made that the role of the percipient in “The Blessed Damozel,” like those of the parenthetical speaker and the damozel herself, is a dramatic and progressive one. Not only does he present and elaborate the scenario of the poem, but he reacts to it, moving from a clear perception, through a
purposeful retention and a sensual apprehension, to a final loss of the bright vision of the heavenly damozel; indeed his reactions to what he envisages constitute both an important means of entering his awareness and an important element—a delicate subplot—in the mental drama of the poem. Neither the implied poet nor the assumed reader can be said or asked wholly to suspend judgment of the, by turns, fantastic and despairing responses of the parenthetical speaker. While the same may hold true for some of the speculative utterances of the percipient, it would be difficult and illegitimate either to claim that Rossetti, with his Pre-Raphaelite and Early Christian aims and ideals, does not endorse the essentials of the awareness that the percipient represents or to argue that “The Blessed Damozel” is other than a celebration of certain things: the ideals represented by and in the materialization of the Damozel herself, the intensity of the parenthetical speaker’s love for her, and the devotion of the one for the other which, like the relationship between Dante and Beatrice, transcends death itself. No large ironies separate the percipient from Rossetti as they frequently do the speaker from the author of, say, a dramatic monologue. The very mention of dramatic monologue calls to mind A Last Confession, the Browningesque poem of the Italian maqui that Rossetti apparently wrote shortly after “The Blessed Damozel,” and might suggest that the depictions of mind(s) in action in the earlier poem are merely the feeble anticipations of the method that is more fully developed under the influence of Browning in the later one. If tenable, the foregoing discussion of the nature and function of the percipient in “The Blessed Damozel” indicates, however, that Rossetti’s primary concern in that poem was not to make his historically distant narrator a fully rounded character as in a Browning monologue but to recreate a mental awareness which he admired to the extent that he felt it worth reexperiencing by his fellow Victorians.

In the opening stanza of “The Blessed Damozel” the reader is presented by the percipient with a vivid picture of the Damozel which is at once realistic and emblematic in the “Gothic manner”:

The blessed Damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven:
Her blue eyes were deeper much
Than a deep water, even.
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.
Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary’s gift
On the neck mosty worn;
And her hair, lying down her back,
Was yellow like ripe corn.
Thomas H. Brown is quite right in remarking that these two stanzas function as a “still-life within the framework of the poem” (p. 273). The Damozel is initially envisaged for the reader and by the speaker in a static posture and a physical form that is not only insistently pictorial but, in its emphasis on emblematic rather than sensual detail, entirely orthodox within Rossetti's intuitive yet knowledgeable conception of the Catholic Middle Ages. Just as Dante on the first anniversary of the death of Beatrice drew the resemblance of an angel (S. 42), so the percipient, on the tenth anniversary, it transpires, of the death of the Damozel, boldly envisages the dead woman as fit company for the Blessed Virgin. The explicitly and implicitly Marian tenor of the description emphasizes the virtue and purity of the angelic Damozel: her title of “blessed” indicates her saintliness and her affinity with the Virgin; her floral adjuncts, the “three lilies in her hand” and the “white rose of Mary’s gift” are emblematic of her innocence;15 her eyes are blue, a color associated with the Virgin Mary; her unadorned robe, with its “clasps,” is indicative of her purity;16 and even her yellow hair accords with traditional representations of the Blessed Virgin.17 It is little wonder that the Rev. Alfred Gurney, who was for many years the incumbent of the prominent Anglo-Catholic church of St. Barnabas, Pimlico, read “The Blessed Damozel” as “an exposition of the spiritual significance of Mary” and saw the Damozel herself as a representation of that “Beauty [which] is one with Purity [and] one with Charity” (Baum, p. lii). Several details of the description serve to consolidate the reader's awareness that the blessed Damozel is, indeed, in the “celestial regions”: the seven stars in her hair (perhaps those of Amos 5.8 and Revelation 1.16 and 20) recall the starry crown of the Queen of Heaven in Revelation 12.1 (Baum, p. xxxiii); the white rose on her robe suggests the rose of Dante’s Empyrean; and, perhaps, the lilies in her hand remember Pistrucci’s depiction of “Celestial Beauty” as a female figure with lilies for an adjunct.18 As if to diminish the distance between Heaven and earth, as well as to emphasize the physicality of the Damozel, the percipient includes two

15See Works, p. 173 for the lily as emblem of “Innocence.” The “three lilies” in the Damozel's hand bring to mind the "Threefold Plant" (Works, p. 662) of "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Ecce Ancilla Domini!

16The garments of Rossetti's more earthly women—Ophelia, Guenevere, the prostitute in Found and the bride of "The Bride's Prelude"—have ornate dresses while the Virgin in Girlhood and Ecce Ancilla Domini! is plainly attired. The clasp (or cognate "join-belt") appears as an emblem of virginity in "The Bride's Prelude" and Hesterna Rosa.


18Iconologia, No. 35. Pistrucci depicts “Astrology,” No. 27, as a female figure with stars in her hair.
comparisons with things in nature in the poem: the Damozel's eyes, he says, are "deeper . . . / Than deep water . . ." and her hair, he says, is "yellow like ripe corn." Now of course it is both inevitable and conventional that the heavenly be described in terms of the earthly, but in this instance the tropes of the percipient represent clear choices through which the reader understands his awareness to be naturalistic (for Rossetti a medieval characteristic) and, moreover, attuned to the physicality of the Damozel (though not as yet, to the sensual possibilities of that physicality).

Following the opening description of the Blessed Damozel, the percipient proceeds by means of a tension-building contrast between time conceived as an eternal day in Heaven and time on earth, "ten years" of which have passed since the Damozel's death, to an introduction of her emotional, earth-bound lover.

(To one it is ten years of years:
. . . . . . Yet now, here in this place
Surely she leaned o'er me,—her hair
Fell all about my face . . . . . .
Nothing: the Autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

The parentheses enclosing this stanza serve two purposes: they isolate the earth-bound lover in a typographical equivalent of a predella and, within that paratactic frame, they present the thoughts of the troubled and fantastic mind of the lover as separate from yet accessible to the percipient, as part of the awareness into which the reader enters. The painful intensity of the lover's devotion to the Damozel and his evident desire to renew contact with her, besides being a central node of feeling in the poem, serve a rhetorical function in that they provide the causal referents for the percipient's ensuing assertions that the damozel does indeed exist in a physical heaven ("It was the terrace of God's house / That she was standing on . . .") and that she, too, shares the desire to be united with her lover, albeit, necessarily, after this death. Such assertions, which take the form of the percipient's ever more detailed (and, therefore, reassuring and convincing) descriptions of the Damozel's Heaven, are the means by which the reader-spectator comes to share in the medieval-Catholic's vision, not only of Heaven (its location and components), but also of the soul's journey there (in the likeness of "thin flames").

In the several stanzas following the intrusion of the parenthetical speaker, the percipient gives what, in essence, is the verbal equivalent of a

19In the painting of The Blessed Damozel (1875-1878) three angelic figures clothed in flames carry palm branches—Rossetti's emblem for the soul's victory over death and triumph in Heaven.
"Gothic" painting of Heaven. Of these stanzas, the cumulative effect of which is to locate and, as it were, flesh out, a Heaven that is, at once, inconceivably distant and readily envisaged, quietistically spiritual and tangibly physical (indeed, palatial), the most controversial is the one containing the percipient's second description of the blessed Damozel:

And still she bowed herself, and stooped
Into the vast waste calm;
Till her bosom's pressure must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

The last four lines of this delightful stanza are sometimes adduced to prove the depiction of Heaven in "The Blessed Damozel" to be excessively physical and sensual. It is crucial to realize that, as in the earlier, naturalistic comparison of the Damozel's hair with "ripe corn," the charmingly sensual and tenderly maternal components of the passage are the speculative and fanciful additions of the percipient: "her bosom's pressure must have made / The bar she leaned on warm..."; "the lilies lay as if asleep / Along her bended arm." The shift from the relative detachment of the opening stanzas to the sensitive empathy of the later description is interesting. It reveals a shift in the putative psychology of the percipient who, after prolonged exposure to the vision of the damozel and, perhaps also, in sympathy with the parenthetical speaker whose thoughts are a part of his own consciousness, is now preparing to enter more fully into the intense emotional life, the transcendent love, of the damozel and her lover. Needless to say, the percipient's ability to assume the damozel's point of view, and the resultant account of her speech that occupies the greater part of the remainder of the poem, provide a further means by which the reader-spectator enters into the awareness of a medieval-Catholic.

The Damozel's speech, in which she looks forward longingly to her lover's arrival in Heaven, demands that the reader-spectator adopt a point of view related to pictorial art and envisage the stages of the lover's initiation—his purification and purgation, the approach of the pair to "the dear Mother," and the intercession of the Mediatrix with Christ on behalf of their love—as a series of medieval paintings or panels. As in the opening stanzas of the poem, it is the stanza form itself which in the Damozel's speech exhibits a paratactic quality, framing within its regular contours the episodes of the solemnly imagined events:

When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand, and go with him
To the deep wells of light,
And we will step down as to a stream
And bathe there in God's sight.
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Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To Him round whom all souls
Kneel—the unnumbered solemn heads
Bowed with their aureoles:
And angels, meeting us, shall sing
To their citherns and citoles.

In highly pictorial lines such as these the spirit of Early Christian art is captured. But while their technique is carefully pictorial, these and other lines in the Damozel's speech draw for imagery and resonance on literary sources, particularly the *Divine Comedy* and the Book of Revelation—the "deep wells of light" that are likened to "a stream," for instance, recalling both the "lume in forma di riviera" in the *Paradiso*, XXX and the "pure river of water of life" in Revelation 22.1.

At almost the exact center of the Damozel's orderly and stylized speech are two parenthetical stanzas given over to the earthly lover's doubts about his own worthiness to enter Heaven. It is easy to miss the fact that the first of these is a reflexive comment on the mentality of the Damozel and, by extension, on the awareness of the percipient:

(Alas! to her wise simple mind
These things were all but known
Before: they trembled on her sense.—
Her voice had caught their tone.
Alas for lonely Heaven! Alas
For life wrung out alone!

The function of these lines, and of the following stanza, is not just to provide an explicit gloss on the "wise simple mind" of the believing medieval-Catholic that is being presented and celebrated in "The Blessed Damozel" but also, through the interjected sorrows, anxieties, and questions of the earthly lover, to explore the form that doubt might take in a sceptical mind of the Middle Ages and, by so doing, to provide the passive or unbelieving reader of the Victorian period with a mimesis of his own mental processes:

Alas, and though the end were reached ........
Was thy part understood
Or borne in trust? And for her sake
Shall this too be found good?—
May the close lips that knew not prayer
Praise ever, though they would?)

Although, ostensibly, this is a dialogue of one within the mind of the earthly lover, it also functions in a dialogic manner within the "inner standing-point" of the poem as a whole, posing rhetorical questions of the reader-spectator and forcing him to recognize whatever gap exists between his own mentality and the "wise simple" awareness embodied in the damozel and the percipient. If tenable, this possibility suggests that the earthly lover, no less than the damozel and the percipient, is a rhetorical device employed by the implied poet of "The Blessed Damozel" to argue
the reader-spectator towards an appreciation and acceptance of the “Catholic—medieval and unmodern” “conceptions and . . . point of view” which the poem embodies.

The final lines of “The Blessed Damozel,” where the Damozel has “mildly” concluded her speech and is hopefully awaiting the arrival of her lover in Heaven, also serve a distinctly rhetorical purpose:

She ceased;
   The light thrilled past her, filled
With Angels, in strong level lapse,
   Her eyes prayed, and she smiled.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their flight
   Was vague 'mid the poised spheres,
And then she cast her arms along
      The golden barriers.
And laid her face between her hands,
   And wept. (I heard her tears.)

The “barriers” of this final stanza achieve special force when compared with the “golden bar” across which the Damozel leans at the beginning and middle of the poem. That “th. . . . bar” has now become “Th. . . . barriers” indicates the percipient’s recognition (which is also the damozel’s) that between the quick and the dead there can only be visionary communication. Thus the Damozel’s sorrow that her lover’s soul is not amongst those being carried to Heaven by the Angels (whose flight does mediate between earth and Heaven) is bracketed by the simple affirmations of the parenthetical speaker who is, literally, given the last words in the poem. If the way the poem ends bequeath a final validity on the transcendent love of the earthbound speaker, it does not at all negate those aspects of “The Blessed Damozel” which make the poem an unmistakable celebration, not merely of intense emotion, but of the Damozel herself, her meticulously pictorial Heaven, and, above all, of the wise, simple, and visionary consciousness of the percipient through whose eyes, ears, sympathies, and speculations the reader-spectator comes to participate in an awareness of the Catholic Middle Ages.

It should now be clear that, whatever significance “The Blessed Damozel” came to have for the later Rossetti or for later generations, the poem, at the time of its publication in The Germ, partook of the Pre-Raphaelite program to recover a mode of awareness that they associated with the Catholic Middle Ages and to make it accessible to their Victorian contemporaries. If the poem offers a Kantian answer to such conventional, empirical questions as “who is speaking?” and “what is real?” it does so as part of its strategy of demanding that the reader adopt an “inner standing-point” in order to reexperience its emotional influence. But if the percipient of “The Blessed Damozel” was designed by Rossetti as a window into
Gothic consciousness, he also offers glimpses of the implied poet and the real poet-painter of the Pre-Raphaelite period. So celebratory is the poem of a medieval-Catholic awareness that, when read beside The Germ version of "My Sister's Sleep" for instance, it justifies Swinburne's conception of the implied poet of the Pre-Raphaelite period as a "Christian" (Lang, II, 105). Yet the articulation, through the meditations of the earthbound lover, of deep self-questionings and all-questioning points to a Rossetti of the Pre-Raphaelite period who knew about religious doubt as well as medieval faith, about personal misgiving as well as idealistic vision, about despair as well as hope. A hundred years after his death the mercurial amalgam that can be sensed behind "The Blessed Damozel" continues to intrigue.