Brief Articles and Notes

THE QUEST OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI IN "THE BLESSED DAMOZEL"

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Although recent analyses of Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel" have done much to revivify interest in Rossetti and to resurrect his work from the shroud of misunderstanding in which it has so long been entombed, one still finds little agreement concerning either Rossetti's aim in "The Blessed Damozel" or the degree to which he achieved that aim. If we examine the construction of the poem, focusing on the nature of the narration, another view emerges which may help clarify Rossetti's poetic aim in the poem.

According to Cecil Y. Lang, "Pre-Raphaelitism strives, impossibly, to accept and reject [romantic supernaturalism] simultaneously: matter and spirit are not quite different and not quite identical, they are 'the same and not the same.' Pre-Raphaelite fantasy affirms the dichotomy, Pre-Raphaelite particularity repudiates it."¹ It is this very dichotomy between realism and fantasy, between naturalism and supernaturalism, which is both asserted and denied in "The Blessed Damozel." In this particular poem, Rossetti seeks to negate the dichotomy by envisioning a reality in which natural and supernatural phenomena fuse. Paul Lauter has pointed out that the key to understanding this poem lies in the nature of the narration,² but whereas Lauter emphasizes the importance of the "I" narrator in the poem, I suggest that of even greater significance is the fact that there are three distinct voices or speakers in the poem.

First there is an omniscient narrator who describes the damozel and who is empowered to observe and relate the actions and feelings of both the lady and her lover. The first two stanzas, for example, portray a still-life within the framework of the poem itself. They reveal a detailed and naturalistic verbal portraiture of a supernatural phenomenon, a blessed lady leaning out of heaven; these stanzas are almost entirely descriptive. The third stanza, although still descriptive, begins to move towards a reflective interpretation of the scene. But the relatively static picture and mood developed in the first three

¹The Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle (Boston, 1968), p. xxvii.

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stanzas is suddenly shattered by the different voice and action implied in the fourth:

(To one, it is ten years of years.

. . . 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.
The whole year sets space.)

A second voice, that of the earth-bound lover, speaks these lines. That they are to be differentiated from the first three stanzas is clearly indicated by Rossetti's use of parentheses. While I do not wholly concur with Lauter's assessment that the parenthetical expression "present the true nucleus of the poem," he is quite right in recognizing that Rossetti's use of parentheses is organically related to the whole poem, as are the two other voices in the poem. The damozel herself is the third voice. Her speeches, narrated in the first person, are to be distinguished from the others by the use of quotation marks.

Although it may be argued that Rossetti has resorted to somewhat mechanical means to differentiate three voices or centers of consciousness in the poem, we ought to view all three as the self-contained, single consciousness of the earthbound lover himself. The supernatural visions of his lady, her speeches, his replies, his supernatural interpretation of natural phenomena—all are but interlocking pieces of the vision of a single consciousness.

"The Blessed Damozel" is a quest poem in which the lover probes multiple levels of his consciousness in an attempt to discover the reality of a spiritual-supernatural existence. He does not (as no one can) envision the lady in the formless state of pure spirit, but in all her physical attributes. The particularity of physical detail throughout the poem becomes a means for him to conceptualize the existence of a non-physical, spiritual sphere. Traditional religious belief in the spiritual world by virtue of faith alone is noticeably absent in the poem despite the abundance of Christian imagery. Jerome J. McGann correctly points out that Rossetti has recast traditional Christian imagery into something quite different and that he has attempted to reinvest it with new meaning.4 But whether Rossetti is relying upon the inherited tradition which lies behind the religious symbolism (which is unlikely), or whether he is attempting to revitalize a tired tradition, the effect of his using the imagery at all seems to remain the same. The religious imagery is invoked by the lover to help him

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4VP (Autumn, 1969), 41-54. Though I do not agree with McGann's final reading of "The Blessed Damozel," his excellent study does provide incisive and refreshing insights into Rossetti's work.
discover or affirm the *possibility* of any kind of reunion with his lady, whether this reunion be spiritual, physical, or both. The lover, uncertain of the real existence of his lady’s “heaven,” uses the religious imagery just as he uses the naturalistic imagery—as an invocation; it is an attempt to discover a reality wherein he can be reunited with his lady. The dominant mood throughout the poem is one of a placid longing for union, but death has denied the possibility of physical union. The lover is asking, however, if death has also denied the possibility of a spiritual union. He is seeking a spiritual reality in which he and his lady may be reunited, but he questions whether elevation to an eternal spiritual existence will be possible solely through the love of a finite being.

... But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee? (ll. 99-102)

He never explicitly answers his own question. However, one must assume that the lady weeps at the end of the poem because she does not see her lover’s soul among those being escorted to heaven. And when we remember that this entire drama is being enacted within the single consciousness of the earthbound lover, we are led to believe that he finally questions the possibility of an eternal reunion with the dead loved one, the memory of whom has triggered this entire “vision.” It is significant that it is the lover’s own voice that speaks last in the poem, “(I heard her tears),” because the vision has been a mystical and self-revelatory experience for *him*; his vision has suggested that eternal union with his lady is not probable; it is only in transitory visionary moments that he can transcend the realm of the physical existence in which he is rooted.

It would appear that in “The Blessed Damozel,” Rossetti is attempting to recapture poetically the transcendant experience felt in transitory moments of “vision.” It is a vision in which the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, have been harmoniously reintegrated. Thus the ethereal mood evoked by the counterplaying of the three voices within one consciousness and by the juxtaposition of supernatural with naturalistic imagery is of central importance to the poem, for it is essentially in the mood evoked by the poem that we are invited to share the lover’s (or the poet’s) moments of vision. Rossetti is certainly not the only nineteenth-century poet to struggle with the problem of finding the right imagery to capture and hold the moment of poetic vision; it is Rossetti’s technique which sets him apart.
It is interesting to note how Tennyson, for example, so unlike Rossetti in stylistic technique, also attempted to bridge poetically the gulf between the natural and the supernatural. In *In Memoriam* Tennyson, like Rossetti, is enthralled with the fleeting communion which he has established with the dead:

So word by word, and line by line,
   The dead man touch’d me from the past,
And all at once it seem’d at last
   The living soul was flash’d on mine,
And mine in this was wound, and whirl’d
   About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
   The deep pulsations of the world.  (Section 95, ll. 33-40)

But this lyricism terminates when “At length [his] trance / Was cancelled, stricken thro’ with doubt.” Rossetti shares Tennyson’s doubt; it is this doubt that suggests to the lover in “The Blessed Damozel” that eternal union with his lady may not be attained. Both Tennyson and Rossetti conduct an intense search for proof of a spiritual reality, but the stylistic differences between the two poets reflect fundamentally divergent approaches to art and life. Tennyson examines all experience with the painstaking precision of a microbiologist in his attempt to discover the existence of an ideal world, but Rossetti circumvents the realities of politics, science, and individual human experience, employing his art as an invocation to spiritualism, creating (for himself, at any rate) an ideal world where love and beauty and human passion have achieved the perfect union, the harmony which is impossible in the “real” world.

Previous critics have noted Rossetti’s admiration for Keats, and one can not ignore the Keatsian mood which permeates “The Blessed Damozel.” One is struck, for example, by the similarity between Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” and Rossetti’s “Blessed Damozel.” In the former the narrator longs to “fade far away, dissolve,” to fuse his being with the ethereal and timeless existence represented by the nightingale, to transcend the natural for the super-

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4Several critics have pointed to the relationship between Tennyson’s poetry and the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites.


5C. M. Bowra, for example, in *The House of Life,* *Victorian Literature: Essays in Modern Criticism,* ed. Austin Wright (Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 251.
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natural. Furthermore, he hopes to "fly to thee . . . on the viewless wings of Poesy," Rossetti, too, is using "poesy" as a vehicle for transcendence. The damozel seems to serve much the same purpose in Rossetti's poem as does the nightingale in Keats's. She serves as a stimulus for a visionary glimpse of another realm; union with her, and thus participation in that deathless sphere, is which is longed for. In the last stanza of Keats's "Ode" the narrator says:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

In "The Blessed Damozel" Rossetti, too, uses the images of bird and bell; however, Rossetti's narrator questions whether or not he heard "in the bird's song" and those bells's chime the stirring of a supernatural spirit (Stanza 11):

(Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
Possessed the mid-day air,
Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)

Keats's narrator laments that "The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do," and though Rossetti's narrator makes earnest attempts to the contrary, he arrives at the same conclusion. The lover in "The Blessed Damozel" is left with the same mystification of his visionary experience as the narrator in Keats's "Ode" who asks, "Was it a vision or a waking dream? / . . . Do I wake or sleep?"

In "The Blessed Damozel" Rossetti employs poetic art as a vehicle for the pursuit of an ideal world, but it remains an elusive world, and he is not even certain of its existence. His candid uncertainty coupled with his earnest attempts to discover a means for transcendence is what gives the poem its ethereal equanimity. The poem belies an inexorable pursuit of the nature and meaning of both natural and supernatural existence.

At least some of the adverse criticism of "The Blessed Damozel" seems to stem from an uneasiness over its apparent ambiguity. For Rossetti, as for Keats, the act of poeticizing was in itself a legitimate vehicle for the pursuit of truth. That he was unable to answer finally the very questions raised in his quest probably would not have negated for Rossetti the worth of his poetic endeavor. The quest itself was a means of arriving at least nearer the truth about natural and supernatural existence than if the quest had never been made.