Work, Lack, and Longing:
Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” and the Working
Men’s College

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During the summer of 1858, Dante Gabriel Rossetti visited Ford Madox Brown’s studio to see a large modern subject on which Brown had already been working for six years. Work (1852-65), which would in the end take him more than ten years to complete, testifies to Brown’s much-commented-upon capacity for untiring labor. In both form and content, the painting is a meditation on toil and productivity, a highly detailed, painstaking representation of idle rich, shoveling “navvies,” flower-sellers, and “brainworkers” (Brown 152). Rossetti’s response to the exertion that this painting required of Brown indicates much about his own thoughts on representation in relation to labor. In a letter to Lowes Dickinson, he commented that it seemed inappropriate for Brown to devote so much time and energy, so much work, to painting a contemporary scene: “I am beginning to doubt more and more that excessive elaboration is rightly bestowed on the materials of a modern subject—things so familiar to the eye that they can really be rendered thoroughly with much less labor” (Letters 335).

The evocation of times distant, in Rossetti’s thinking, requires vividness, a “concrete definition,” that will allow history to emerge into the present (Pater 231). Labor spent on representing objects an audience might see outside their very own windows is wasted effort. Portraying that which is absent, on the other hand, requires work from the artist, as he strives to bring the audience into contact with an object or a

Abstract: This essay argues that Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s sense of the relationship between lack and artistic labor was strengthened during the time he spent teaching alongside John Ruskin at the Working Men’s College. The influence of the school’s mission and the pedagogy Ruskin and Rossetti developed in their art courses registers in the revisions that “The Blessed Damozel” underwent soon after Rossetti began teaching at the college, suggesting that his consideration of the relationship between artistic production and perpetually unfulfilled desire played an integral role in the development of his aesthetic practices in the late 1850s and early 1860s.

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moment that remains stubbornly distant. And for Rossetti, the blanketing of a subject in mere detail, the “excessive elaboration” to which he refers in this letter, may not most effectively bring that which is absent to life. Rather, the strategic use of color or of surprisingly “fleshly” effects might do more to evoke and concretize that which is necessarily beyond the immediate visual frame. Rossetti disapproved of Brown’s *Work* because it flew in the face of his own aesthetic ideal and the ideas about the relationship between lack and labor upon which that ideal was based.

In order to investigate how the consideration of work, absence, and longing informed Rossetti’s developing aesthetic during this phase of his career, I focus for the most part on a single poem, “The Blessed Damozel” (1850), and its relationship to the courses Rossetti taught alongside John Ruskin at the Working Men’s College. I argue that the analysis of the connection between perpetually unsatisfied desire and aesthetic production is central to both this poem and Rossetti and Ruskin’s pedagogy. Rossetti’s investment in longing or absence as a locus for artistic activity preceded his involvement with the Working Men’s College, but he fine-tuned this idea during the time he spent teaching at a socialist institution. With this in mind, I argue that the revisions “The Blessed Damozel” underwent in 1855, months after Rossetti began teaching at the school, evolved in relationship to the educational philosophy that underwrote Ruskin and Rossetti’s art courses. If we attend to the interplay between the poem and the pedagogy implemented in those art courses, we see the influence Rossetti’s teaching experience had on his evolving aesthetic practice.

Rossetti’s preoccupation with longing that cannot be satisfied, whether for the historical past or for the deceased, plays a crucial role in defining his aesthetic in the 1850s and 1860s. His desire to know the past, for example, inspires an aesthetic of lively color or startling detail. He employs these methods in the hopes of rendering concrete or bringing closer what is always beyond reach. The fleshly moments and bright hues in his medievalist poems and paintings speak to the vain effort that produced them, the desire to know that which is impossible to know. Similarly, in “The Blessed Damozel,” Rossetti focuses on the concrete images generated by a grieving lover in an effort to bring his beloved back to life, a goal that cannot, of course, ever be realized. However, Rossetti often implies that there is something pleasurable and productive about experiencing indefinitely unfulfilled desire for
what Elizabeth Helsinger refers to as “the felt presence of things on the other side of death and time” (27). For Rossetti, the act of longing for the past is a creative one that serves as a template for an aesthetic practice that revels in lack and the perfection of desire while simultaneously eschewing the emphasis on profit and reward in market society.2

If Rossetti’s aesthetic practices subtly contest the appetites and energies of the modern economy, his strategies of production were further politicized in the courses he taught on a volunteer basis at the Working Men’s College in the 1850s and 1860s. His ideas about working, wanting, and the relishing of lack registered in political practice while he taught at the school, and his aesthetic and political ideals mutually reinforced one another during this period as he learned from and contributed to the school’s educational innovations.3 The Working Men’s College was a successful experiment in non-instrumentalized education, and the art classes taught by Ruskin and Rossetti, which shunned the pursuit of practical applications in favor of the development of perception, most perfectly represent the college’s departures from the utilitarian instruction offered at many other nineteenth-century educational institutions for working men. In their efforts to encourage cooperation rather than competition, the founders of the Working Men’s College emphasized what they referred to as the “higher and nobler as distinguished from the lower and selfish ends of mental cultivation,” giving their students “something better and nobler to think about than the everlasting seesaw of profit and loss” (Langley 1). In their art courses, Ruskin and Rossetti taught according to the school’s mission, applying what would later be called aestheticist principles to working-class education, by calling their students to see and represent nature accurately to no other end than to perceive the world around them in a finer manner. They translated the concept of autonomous art into pedagogical practice. Their classes served as a practical criticism of and protest against the goal-oriented art instruction being offered in Government Schools of Art, which, according to Ruskin, gave their pupils “such accurate command of mathematical forms as might afterwards enable them to design rapidly and cheaply for manufacture” (Works XV: xx).

Much as Rossetti’s poetry stressed the value of perpetually unfulfilled desire, Ruskin’s drawing classes emphasized mimetic limitation, the idea that artistic representations always fall short of reproducing the beauty and detail of the natural world. While Ruskin pushed his students to strive for close fidelity, he also encouraged them
to acknowledge the futility of the quest for truly accurate representation. He stressed that every representation, no matter how detailed, would fall “short . . . of the force or quantity of nature” (Drawing 313). Rossetti taught beside Ruskin during his first term at the Working Men’s College, and Ruskin’s approach to art education influenced Rossetti immensely. He in fact reproduced many of Ruskin’s lessons in his own advice to art students. Ruskin’s ideas about mimetic limitation must have resonated with Rossetti, whose earlier works, such as “The Blessed Damozel,” similarly stress the unrealizable. Both Ruskin and Rossetti celebrated futile quests to know and represent that nevertheless generate vivid works of beauty. Rossetti found in Ruskin’s drawing classes an emphasis on the pleasure of continued working and wanting that allowed him to further develop his own nascent ideas about creative labor.

During the 1840s, 50s, and early 60s, while Rossetti was writing and revising “The Blessed Damozel” and teaching at the Working Men’s College, he passed as a painter through several phases. His early treatments of biblical subjects, such as The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849), more closely resemble the detailed canvases of his Pre-Raphaelite brethren. However, as Julian Treuherz argues, he was “never comfortable with the detailed naturalism that soon became a hallmark of Pre-Raphaelitism” (23). In his 1850s watercolors of Dante and Arthurian legend, he employed startling colors in an effort to bring the medieval past to life. The “vivid, singing quality” of the color in these works results from Rossetti’s unique method of painting in watercolor, which involved the use of thick pigment, “often minutely stippled, hatched, and scumbled, to give a vibrant surface, sometimes mixing paint with gum to give a richer effect” (32). (These were in fact the very methods that Rossetti passed on to his students in his watercolor course at the Working Men’s College.) As he completed his time at the college, Rossetti’s aesthetic underwent another shift, as he began painting his well-known fleshly, erotic oil paintings of women. During this moment, then, while Rossetti was teaching at the college and revisiting his early poem, “The Blessed Damozel,” he tested out methods for rendering concrete that which is longed for or absent. His vividly colored medievalist watercolors and his sensual representations of women share a preoccupation with questions of perpetual desire and modes of vivid representation that strive to make the desired more immediate. “The Blessed Damozel,” a poem marked, as Walter Pater noted, by “a defi-
niteness of sensible imagery” (230), collapses the preoccupations of these two phases in Rossetti’s painting career—temporal distance and eroticized femininity—and provides insight into the role lack and longing played in the development of his aesthetic practices in the 1850s and early 60s.

I. Labor and the Limits of Mimesis: Rossetti, Ruskin, and the Working Men’s College

A strong bond existed between the Working Men’s College and the Pre-Raphaelite circle during the institution’s early years. Rossetti, Brown, and Edward Burne-Jones all taught art classes there in the 1850s and 60s. They refer to the school frequently in their letters and forged important relationships with some of the college’s founders. The insistent presence of the college in Brown’s Work indicates the extent to which this institution loomed large in the Pre-Raphaelite imagination. F. D. Maurice, the primary founder of the college, stands beside Carlyle on the painting’s right. Together they are the “brain-workers,” the “cause of well-ordained work and happiness in others.” In addition, a poster for the Working Men’s College hangs in the background of the painting. It seems that during the 1850s and 60s, for those associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to think about work meant to think about the Working Men’s College. The questions raised by the educational experiments occurring at the college played important roles in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Brown’s considerations of the concept of labor.

Ruskin was instrumental in establishing ties between the college and the Pre-Raphaelite circle. The school was founded on a set of ideals for which Ruskin would be inclined to feel sympathy. The college’s Christian Socialist founders wished to protest the effects of labor practices on working men, promote cooperation rather than competition, and foster communication between social classes. While Ruskin cannot be properly described as a Christian Socialist, the founders seemingly understood their political ideals to be in agreement with Ruskin’s, and they distributed a special edition of “The Nature of Gothic” at their very first meeting in 1854. When the college requested permission to reprint the chapter from Stones of Venice, Ruskin replied enthusiastically that they might and in addition encouraged them to keep any profits made on the edition. He also volun-
teered to teach a drawing class, and he invited Rossetti to teach beside him.7

The art classes at the Working Men’s College were not for Rossetti a passing fancy or a fleeting interest. He taught at the College from January of 1855 until 1857 and returned to teach and serve on the Council of Teachers from March of 1861 until March of 1862.8 (He was in fact at the college the night that Elizabeth Siddal died.) Rossetti’s commitment to the college might appear out of character, but his vision of aesthetic labor actually harmonizes in many ways with the Christian Socialists’ vision of intellectual labor. This harmony emerges more clearly when we pay attention to the aesthetic pedagogy developed by Ruskin and Rossetti, as their approach to art education enacts many of the college’s ideals in an aesthetic context. Their art classes, much like the college’s socialist educational mission, promoted alternative ways of wanting and working that run contrary to the logic of capitalism. The methods employed in the art classes conform with Rossetti’s vision of ideal aesthetic labor—creative work motivated by perpetually unsatisfied desire—and his ideas about lack and labor gained force during the time he spent teaching at the college.

I do not mean to suggest that Rossetti became a card-carrying Christian Socialist while teaching at the Working Men’s College. Jan Marsh has argued that Rossetti was far from sharing the earnest philosophy of the college and resolute in his refusal to engage in its political programme. He never preached Mauriceism. . . . And if a stranger to snobbery, with a natural egalitarianism stretching from marchionesses to models, he had no particular sympathy toward working men as such. . . . Nevertheless he continued his class at the Working Men’s College longer than many other activities in a demonstration of practical politics that was as personal as it was determinedly apolitical. (137)

It is true that Rossetti never preached “Mauriceism,” and he certainly refused to be subsumed within the college’s political program. However, I argue that Rossetti’s teaching at the college should be understood as a political act and as a significant influence on his own artistic practice as well as on the manner in which he conceived of artistic labor. This period is neither a negligible nor incongruous period in Rossetti’s career but rather a richly indicative moment that tells us much about his aesthetic.
The Working Men’s College operated on a set of principles that accorded with Rossetti’s vision of ideal creative work. Rossetti idealized a mode of production that might be described as “work for work’s sake,” and the college’s educational practices similarly emphasized learning as an end in itself. The founders of the Working Men’s College looked contemptuously on instrumentalized forms of working-class education, and they refused to advertise their institution as an avenue to increased income. The preface to the first issue of the Working Men’s College Magazine speaks disdainfully of the use of cash prizes and wage increases as incentives to learning, referring to the “contemptible imposture” of those who offer raises to the winners of academic prizes (iv). Learning itself would be “the sufficient reward of study” at the Working Men’s College. In an essay entitled “What is the Use of It?” J. N. Langley similarly insists that students of the college should understand their time at the school as an escape from the pervasive utilitarianism of modern existence: “We do not see that our lessons . . . will help you to get higher wages or in any way raise your value in the labor-market. . . . We do not profess to make you a more perfect or useful machine. There is surely something better and nobler for you and for me to think about than the everlasting seesaw of Profit and Loss” (137–38). Students were encouraged then to understand their pursuits at the college as exempt from the principle of competition and external to the capitalist realm of profit and reward.

The college sought to cultivate a sense of infinite lack, an unending desire for culture that would only be aggravated by learning. If education were no longer conceived of as something one acquired and then immediately put to use, as something one finished so as to get on to something else, if it could be disentangled from what Langley termed “the standard of utility,” it might be understood as a process that one did not complete (73). The students at the college were advised to conceive of the pursuit of knowledge as a perpetual quest and an unending exertion, a desire for culture that might be perfected rather than satisfied. As Ruskin stated hopefully in his testimony before the Public Institutions’ Committee in 1860, the working class’s desire for “information and improvement . . . would grow by what it feeds upon” (Works XVI: 478).

Ruskin and Rossetti’s art classes, for which about fifty students registered each term, were the most popular at the school, and, according to Ruskin, they were also the most “useless” (“Minutes” 178).
The uselessness of these courses constituted an implicit criticism of vocational or utilitarian systems of art education that sought to endow their pupils with skills that might be employed in designing for manufacturers. There was much conversation and disagreement about the purpose and goals of public art education in the nineteenth century. The School of Design, which opened in London in 1837, announced that its object was “to afford the manufacturers [i.e. industrial workers] an opportunity of acquiring a competent knowledge of the Fine Arts, as far as the same are connected with manufactures” (Bell 73). As Stuart Macdonald notes, “the original purpose of establishing the School of Design was to improve the standard of taste in the country and to raise up a new class of designers” to rival the educated designers of France (119). The national system of art education underwent significant changes in 1852, when Henry Cole became the superintendent of the Department of Practical Art. However, Cole continued to emphasize the development of skills that would improve the students’ capacity for industrial drawing. He expressed the wish that “the Department will continue to be instrumental in raising the character of our manufactures, as well as the intellectual appreciation of those who have to produce and consume them” (qtd. in Minihan 119). The National Course of Instruction, the government curriculum for art instruction introduced in 1852, also stressed the instrumental value of art education and “the acquisition of ‘hand power’ in a purely utilitarian manner” (Haslam, “Looking” 145). This rigid series of exercises involved extensive copying “from the Flat” before moving on to the sketching of solid examples of ornamental casts (Macdonald 388). Students did not have the opportunity to sketch models or actual flowers and foliage until the advanced stages of the National Course of Instruction. As Quentin Bell notes, “The repeated copying of geometrical figures might in the end produce skilled workmen. It might develop accuracy of eye and skill of hand,” but it “turned its back upon nature” (261).

Ruskin revolted against the neglect of nature and insistent utilitarianism in the Schools of Art. J. P. Emslie, who was a student in one of Ruskin’s classes, noted the stark contrast between Ruskin’s courses and those offered at the Government Schools (Davies 39). Rather than going through a long course of copying diagrams and drawing ornamental casts before sketching natural objects, beginning students in Ruskin’s class drew “from nature,” “a spray of dried laurel
leaves, a feather, a bit of spar to show the lines of cleavage" (Sulman 548). Freeing students from the strict course of exercises implemented at the Government Schools, Ruskin also liberated their art education from instrumentalism. In an 1859 memorandum to Lowes Dickinson, Ruskin stated that his classes were “not intended either to fit [the students] for becoming artists, or in any direct manner, to advance their skills in the occupation they at present follow. They are taught drawing, primarily in order to direct their attention . . . to the beauty of God’s . . . universe” (Works XVI: 471). In the preface to The Elements of Drawing (1857), an instructional manual that echoes the method taught in his courses, Ruskin argues that in order for art education to be at all effective, it must purposefully shun the standard of utility: “It is surely inexpedient that any reference to purposes of manufacture should interfere with the education of the artist himself. Try first to manufacture a Raphael; then let Raphael direct your manufacture” (x).11 Too much emphasis on the practical would ensure the cultivation of a pupil’s dexterity rather than his perception, and, according to Ruskin, “the excellence of an artist depends wholly on the refinement of perception” (xi). He carefully distinguished his own course of instruction from classes in practical art that promised to increase the income of students.12 The primary concern of every art student should, according to Ruskin, be the “obtaining of knowledge,” not the use that knowledge might serve or the wealth that might result from using it (Works XVI: 439). In this sense, Ruskin’s drawing classes at the Working Men’s College were in keeping with the founders’ sense of the role education might play in the life of its working-class students.

Above all, Ruskin’s courses emphasized the relationship between artistic labor and perception. By attending to the minute details in, for example, a piece of mossy bark, the pupils would come to see the world in general more clearly. However, in order to attend to these details, they had to work at reproducing them. Only toil, true and extended labor, might open the artist’s eyes to the overwhelming amount of detail in the natural world. Photography could not sufficiently awaken perception, because, according to Ruskin, photography is “nature made easy.”13 Instead, by trying “to copy with the pencil as perfectly as [they] can the shading of the bud,” trying “to get delicacy and character with the pencil,” their eyes would “gain power” (Works XV: 490). The more labor a student devoted to “producing delicate gradations,” the more gradations he would come to see, and, “when
[his] eye [became] keen and true, [he would] see gradations on every-
thing in nature” (Drawing 19).14

Rossetti taught in the same classroom with Ruskin during his first term at the college, and Ruskin clearly influenced Rossetti’s approach to art education. Rossetti’s response to a request for advice from a beginning artist, for example, with its emphasis on hard work and “close fidelity,” could have been drawn directly from the pages of Ruskin’s manual: “What they ought to do would be to take a piece of mossy bark and try to imitate it on its own scale as exactly as possible—this would be a work of time and perhaps require in the first instance that someone should be by to rouse the beginner to a full consciousness of how close a fidelity he ought to aim at and to be able by mere industry to attain” (Letters 348–49). Rossetti eventually began teaching his own courses on figure drawing and watercolor painting, and Ruskin’s influence continued to be evident in these classes. He shared Ruskin’s wish that his students would develop their skills of perception rather than their “hand power,” and he encouraged his students in his figure-drawing course to “get rid of . . . academic fribble” and “draw only what you see” (Sulman 550). Rossetti cooperated with Ruskin in revolting against the tediousness of the National Course of Instruction. He avoided the copying of pictures and casts so typical of the Government schools and had his students “draw directly from nature, one serving as a model to the rest” (qtd. in Marsh 136). He also departed from the initial stages of the National Course of Instruction by emphasizing shade and color, rather than line, in his introductory courses.

However, while Ruskin clearly shaped Rossetti’s approach to art education, their pedagogies were not entirely identical. Whereas Ruskin’s drawing classes stressed intricate detail as the key to close fidelity, Rossetti’s classes focused on the use of “splendid colour” and a highly physical approach to painting as the means for bringing intense vision to life. He taught his students to transform their newly refined perception into concretely sensuous representations. Emslie’s description of Rossetti’s watercolor class highlights the intense physicality of the methods Rossetti modeled for his students:

He would sometimes seat himself and show by example how to paint, throwing the pencil with apparent recklessness about the paper, making a number of lines to represent one form, and producing a sketch which appeared to be neither outline or shadow, but something of a combination of the two. He would then take up a brush, well fill it with violet carmine, and rub it on the margin of the paper until
all the moisture had departed and only dry colour was left in the brush. This dry colour he would drag about the paper until he had produced a very rugged modeling. Over this he would, with a similarly dry brush, rub various colours until he had gained a rough general effect of colour, though, rough as it was, the light and colour were very vivid. Then he would wash all this together, blending and softening it, and somewhat diminishing its force. Working over this, but with a more flowing brush, he would soon complete a work which possessed all that splendid colour which I suppose that only he could attain to produce. (Davies 45)

In order to render their refined perception concrete, to even come close to a fidelity to nature, Rossetti’s students would have to rub, drag, wash, blend, and soften. The emphasis on labor is still there, but the practice encouraged in Rossetti’s classroom departs from the delicate copying with a pencil of Ruskin’s. Rossetti shared Ruskin’s belief in the connection between hard artistic work and refined perception, but Rossetti’s classes emphasized vividness more than accuracy. His students received a unique lesson in “splendid colour” and the fleshly approach to painting.

As much as Ruskin and Rossetti encouraged their students to develop and fine-tune their perception, Ruskin also emphasized the necessary inadequacy of their vision. In one of the strangest and most fascinating sections of _The Elements of Drawing_, Ruskin draws a comparison between the primary rule governing the representation of landscapes, “that of mystery; the law, namely, that nothing is ever seen perfectly, but only by fragments, and under various conditions of obscurity,” and the great and unsolvable mysteries of human existence (171). He posits “incomprehensibility” in nature as a “perpetual lesson, in every serrated point and shining vein which escapes or deceives our sight among the forest leaves, how little we may hope to discern clearly, or judge justly, the rents and veins of the human heart” (171). Confronting the incomprehensibility of nature allows the artist insight into “how much of all that is round us, in men’s actions or spirits, which we at first think we understand, a closer and more loving watchfulness would show us to be full of mystery, never to be either fathomed or withdrawn” (171). As much as one strives to perceive every detail in a landscape, certain secrets of the forest leaves will remain outside one’s purview. However, Ruskin celebrates the shortcomings of human perception, seeing in the imprecision of sight a happy lesson in infinite mystery. Additionally, Ruskin asserts that even as one strives to record the details one does manage to see, a representation of nature can...
only gesture toward the wealth of detail in a landscape. As Ruskin states, “Good drawing is, as we have seen, an abstract of natural facts; you cannot represent all that you would but must continually be falling short, whether you will or no, of the force, or the quantity of Nature” (Drawing 313). Ruskin describes the attempt to represent natural detail precisely and truly as an impossible, yet still worthwhile, endeavor.

It is easy to see how Rossetti might have been drawn to Ruskin’s discussion of the limitations of vision and mimesis. Rossetti relished quests for unrealizable ends. He reveled in mysteries never to be fathomed or withdrawn, much as Ruskin delighted in incomprehensibility and celebrated attempts rather than successes. Ruskin encouraged his students to develop their vision while stressing the limitations of mimesis, which only increased their awareness of art’s inability to even approximate the force and quantity of nature. Rossetti reproduced this lesson about art’s limits in his letter to the beginning art student when he spoke of “close” rather than complete fidelity, and he placed a similarly poignant emphasis on the experience of limitations, on processes that will never be complete and work that is never-ending, in poems like “The Blessed Damozel.” His ideas about labor and infinitely deferred satisfaction, first elaborated in such early works, were strengthened by his contact with the arguments advanced in Ruskin’s drawing classes.

Much as the privileging of process and the unrealizable in Ruskin’s drawing classes reinforced the concerns explored in Rossetti’s works, the art classes taught by Ruskin and Rossetti harmoniously extended the foundational principles of the Working Men’s College. The college in general and the art classes in particular stood in opposition to the emphasis on utility and efficiency in nineteenth-century working-class education. Jonathan Crary has suggested that during the first half of the nineteenth century alterations in the conception of vision freed perception from external referents, relocating vision in the human body and foregrounding the subjectivism of perception. However, in response to this new perceptual autonomy, a plurality of means emerged to control and regiment the activity of the eye. Crary links these techniques for the training of vision to the instrumentalism and productivism of nineteenth-century capitalism. He argues that the studies of the eye’s attentiveness, reaction times, thresholds of stimulation, and fatigue conducted during the nineteenth century “were clearly related to the demand for knowledge about the adaptation of a
human subject to productive tasks in which optimum attention was indispensable for the rationalization and making efficient of human labor" (85). These efforts to regiment vision resemble those methods of working-class art education that endeavored to render the working man “more efficient” and able “to do his work more neatly and better” by educating his eye and hand to produce forms that would be useful in manufacture (Macdonald 161, 168). While Ruskin’s “law of mystery” may be linked to the ongoing discussion of the subjectivism of perception in the nineteenth century, the methods employed in Ruskin and Rossetti’s art classes resist the regimentation of vision. The exercises they assigned sought to increase pupils’ attentiveness to the natural world, but without capitulating to the standard of utility.15

The college’s mission should not, of course, be seen as entirely radical or progressive. Ruskin and the Christian Socialist founders of the school were essentially telling working men that they might be compensated for the lack in their everyday existence by receiving an education without use value. It is easy to imagine that some of their listeners might have found this politically suspect. In fact, the Working Men's College and its Christian Socialist founders have at times come under attack for being more reformist than revolutionary. As Edward Norman argues, “There was, indeed, in their educational and moral emphases, much that echoed the traditionalist paternalism of the Tory Church of the first half of the nineteenth century. Their aim of social fellowship, also, was not dissimilar to . . . the old Tory desire to restore the benevolent relationships of the past” (9). However, there is also something appealing about the Christian Socialists’ insistence that working men should bracket all questions of economic need and utility when considering their educational choices and pursue education for education’s sake. The college’s efforts to disentangle its students from instrumentalism and profit-driven motives might have at times been misguided, but these efforts arose from an authentic desire to provide a space in working men’s lives not permeated entirely by the logic of capitalism.

The stress placed on perpetually unfulfilled desire in Rossetti and Ruskin’s art classes could also be understood as a tool for placating the working classes by teaching them to revel in lack rather than actively protest against it. As Marxist critics have taught us, culture can contribute to the “suppression of the discontented masses” by serving as a distraction from economic deprivation (Marcuse 98). However,
what distinguishes Ruskin and Rossetti’s ideas from so-called “affirmative culture” is the central role they assign to the experience of longing and unfulfilled desire (Marcuse 95). For both Ruskin and Rossetti, the goal of both art and education was not to provide distracting forms of pleasure. They encouraged their students to concentrate on limitations, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Rather than creating a false sense of reconciliation and “affirming and concealing the new conditions of social life,” they foregrounded the lack and longing that are so central to modern existence (Marcuse 96).

Rev. Henry Solly recalled that at the closing of one of the terms at the college, Ruskin stated:

Now, remember, gentlemen, that I have not been trying to teach you to draw, only to see. Two men are walking through Clare Market, one of them comes out at the other end not a bit wiser than when he went in; the other notices a bit of parsley hanging over the edge of a butter-woman’s basket, and carries away with him images of beauty which in the course of his daily work he incorporates with it for many a day. I want you to see things like these. (86)

Students would not garner proficiency in design or even in drawing from his courses. They would gain the ability to see the bits of parsley and the mystery of the leaves that surrounded them. The students in Ruskin and Rossetti’s art classes were not being fine-tuned to function effectively within factories. They were not transformed into more perfect or useful machines. Their studies rather attuned them to beauty, the limitations of mimesis, and the productive potential of perpetually unfulfilled desire. Dwelling on lack and longing, they could remake their understanding of the relationship between creative work and profit. The courses encouraged them to rethink labor, to abandon the “standard of utility,” and to work for work’s sake. The Working Men’s College did not solve the problem of working-class education, but its art classes did provide a unique opportunity for Victorian artists, intellectuals, and laborers to cooperate in an aesthetic project with progressive political aspirations.

II. “Definiteness of Sensible Imagery”:
Desire and the Damozel

Rossetti wrote “The Blessed Damozel” before he began teaching his art courses, and my discussion of the poem demonstrates
the extent to which Rossetti’s pedagogical practices extended the “fundamental brainwork” he had been conducting in his poetry prior to working at the college. In what follows, I demonstrate that this poem, which focuses on perpetual longing as the inspiration for vivid aesthetic production, accords with the theoretical underpinnings of the classes taught by Rossetti and Ruskin at the Working Men’s College. Rossetti’s investment in perpetually unfulfilled desire, noted by critics such as Jerome McGann, has significant ties to his politically inflected pedagogy during the 1850s. Reading this poem in light of Rossetti’s pedagogy foregrounds the political valence of his aesthetic theory, and attending to Rossetti’s involvement with the college draws out the political implications of past readings of this poem. I also discuss an alternative version of “The Blessed Damozel,” the Pierpont Morgan manuscript, copied out by Rossetti in September of 1855, nine months after he began teaching at the college, and presented to the Brownings as a gift. Rossetti rethought and remade the poem in light of his experiences in these art courses. The differences between this manuscript and the version of the poem published in the *Germ* in 1850 testify to Rossetti’s efforts to strengthen the preexisting connections between his pedagogy and his aesthetic practices.

“The Blessed Damozel” serves as a representative example of Rossetti’s preoccupation with lack and longing. In his literary works, Rossetti often concerns himself with the limits placed on knowledge and the representational processes that seek to but cannot breach those limits. His poems and his prose dwell on mysterious women and times distant, investigating the tragic but generative forms of longing inspired by unknowable otherness. “Hand and Soul” (1850), for example, is an exploration of the relationship between aesthetic productivity and perpetually unfulfilled desire for the past. This short story similarly conceptualizes the relationship between absence and labor, thus offering a useful foundation for my subsequent reading of “The Blessed Damozel.”

“Hand and Soul” focuses on creative productivity motivated by curiosity about the past, a curiosity that cannot ever truly be satisfied. As this story indicates, the representation of historical curiosity is particularly useful for thinking about unknowable otherness and perpetually unfulfilled desire. As much as one may long to know the past, the very division that makes another historical moment alluring makes union with that moment fundamentally impossible. “Hand and
Soul” introduces this disconnect between past and present with a discussion of the forgotten Italian painters that preceded Cimabue, who, “if they are even remembered as the shadows of the coming of such an one,” have been neglected by contemporary art history. These painters have “left little, and but little heed is taken of that which men hold to have been surpassed.” Canon formation and the passing of time have ensured that their works are “gone like time is gone,—track of dust and dead leaves that merely led to the fountain” (23). As time passes, the significance of these minor medieval painters threatens to be lost forever. However, the narrator notes thankfully that, “of very late years, some signs of a better understanding have become manifest.” An “eloquent pamphlet” by Dr. Aemmster has “succeeded in attracting the students” to a triptych and two cruciform pictures by Chiaro di Messer Bello dell’ Erma, who also painted an even “more solemn and beautiful work” to which “Hand and Soul” relates (23). The narrator begins his story by drawing attention to the fact that he is dealing in things distant, disregarded, and overlooked, in objects whose history may never be uncovered entirely.

Disregarded objects, artworks shrouded in mystery, serve as useful figures for the elusiveness of the past, and the fanciful storytelling that these artworks engender emerges from the same sort of perpetually unfulfilled desire that inspired the vivid colors in Rossetti’s medievalist watercolors. As John Pfordresher notes, “Hand and Soul” relies upon the “motif of the forgotten picture,” an important part of the Gothic tradition as practiced by Rossetti’s precursors, such as Hawthorne and Poe (106). Within this tradition, a protagonist typically rescues and resuscitates a work suffering unjustly from neglect, piecing together its past and uncovering its historical context. In Rossetti’s works, the past remains impenetrably other, but the work spawned by the enigma of history compensates for the tragedy of the past’s stubborn indecipherability. “Hand and Soul” focuses on the things we make in an effort to know other times, the fantasies we generate and the stories we tell, and implies that these productions are as significant and lovely as the past itself. Referring to the story as “my narrative,” the narrator of “Hand and Soul” foregrounds the fact that his tale is his reconstruction, a reimagined past that has been generated in the present (23). This is not the painting’s story. It is the speaker’s story of the painting.

The conclusion of the tale reinforces this sense of the narrative’s constructed-ness. The narrator recounts that he first saw the
painting in question while visiting the Pitti Gallery in the spring of 1847. At this time, many of the galleries were closed so that the pictures might be examined and repaired. The paintings on display “were profanely huddled together, without respect of dates, schools, or persons,” in the halls and staircases of the museum (32). This chaotic disarray compounds the elusiveness of the past, as each work has been wrested from its proper place where the surrounding paintings might place it in context. Amidst this disorder, the narrator notes a delicate picture of a woman about which the curator is unable to provide much information. As the narrator gazes adoringly at the mysterious picture, students from France and Italy deride his interest in such a minor work, arguing that “quand on ne comprend pas une chose, c’est qu’elle signifie rien” [“When one doesn’t understand something, it’s because that thing doesn’t mean anything”] (33, my translation). However, it is precisely the lack of information about the painting, the fact that it is not understood, that makes it such a fruitful locus of aesthetic production. This work about which so little is known allows the narrator to generate his own tale of the painting’s inspiration. The fantastic explanation the narrator establishes for the picture, a visit Chiaro’s soul paid to him in feminine form, is itself an aesthetic object, the product of the mystery surrounding the picture and the interest it excites in him.

“The Blessed Damozel” similarly allegorizes the connection between perpetual absence and aesthetic production, and also exemplifies the use of startling detail that productive absence so often inspires in Rossetti’s works. According to Robert Buchanan, “the fleshly feeling is everywhere” in Rossetti’s poetry, and the notorious warm bar on which the damozel leans has become representative of Rossetti’s tendency toward the sensual and the concrete (339). The poem’s central situation is one of aesthetic production, in particular the use of evocative detail inspired by perpetually unfulfilled desire, and the “fleshliness” that so offended Buchanan may be linked to Rossetti’s exploration of the relationship between desire and labor.

The poem highlights the fact that its central image, the image of an emparadised woman, was made by someone, because, like “Hand and Soul,” the poem foregrounds the constructed-ness and subjectivism of its narrative. A man envisions his deceased lover pining incessantly for him in heaven. As he longs for her, he imagines that she too longs for him, weeping into her hands and crying out to God. The wishfulness of his thinking, the fact that this scenario was conjured,
becomes apparent in parenthetical passages that aggressively assert that this dream is truth. ("Surely she leaned o’er me" and "I saw her smile" and "I heard her tears" [21, 145, and 150]). Paul Lauter has referred to the narrator’s parenthetical statements as the “true nucleus of the poem”:

Clearly the poem is, as it were, framed by these parentheses; but more than that, the picture of heaven and the Damozel is presented precisely as the bereaved lover we have seen in the parentheses would envision it. The vision can be regarded entirely as the grieving and lonely lover’s projection. . . . The lover transmutes his longing for heaven into the Damozel’s powerful yearning toward earth. (346)

The earthly lover’s anxious insistence about the veracity of his claims renders their fictitiousness all the more clear. His parenthetical intrusions into the vision of the emparadised damozel underscore his role as author or producer.

According to the earthly lover’s vision, he and his damozel are separated both spatially and temporally. The maiden stands on the “terrace of God’s house . . . By God built over the sheer depth / In which Space is begun; / So high, that looking downward thence, / She scarce could see the sun” (25–30). The painting of “The Blessed Damozel,” completed in 1877, foregrounds the physicality of their division, placing the earthly lover in an enclosed predella below the main panel, but the poem also dwells on the strange way in which time separates the two. The earthly lover’s experience of time differs dramatically from that of his beloved: “Her seemed she scarce had been a day / One of God’s choristers; . . . Albeit, to them she left, her day / Had counted as ten years” (13–18). The imagined woman, then, has always just arrived in heaven, while the man below yearns for their union from across an ever-increasing expanse of time. In this sense, the poem collapses two of Rossetti’s most frequently used figures for perpetual desire and unknowable otherness, mysterious femininity and the past. The heavenly damozel, like a hybrid of Jenny and Chiaro, remains stubbornly enigmatic and firmly out of temporal reach.

The lover’s intense desire for the embowered beloved, his need to bring her back to life and back to him, inspires the use of “fleshly” details. The bar warm from her bosom and the lilies that have lilted along the side of her arm are symptoms of his longing to make this vision flesh. The beloved’s absence motivates the lover’s perpetual reimagining of her highly embodied presence above him in “ever more
detailed (and, therefore, reassuring and convincing) descriptions of the Damozel’s Heaven” (Bentley, “Damozel” 39). The persistent separation of the two lovers motivates labor that produces beautiful things, visions of loveliness that are alive with detail. This poem is not, however, marked by the “excessive elaboration” that Rossetti deplored in Brown’s Work. Strategic details that are startling in their specificity threaten to thrust the reader into immediate contact with the lady’s warm flesh. These details are markers of longing that almost, but cannot quite, resurrect the perpetually absent damozel, making her material again and almost capable of being grasped.  

Jerome McGann’s reading of the poem, however, reminds us of the “eternal separation” of the two lovers, of the fact that the lady is forever beyond the grasp of the lover. McGann’s emphasis on the pleasure of deferred satisfaction indicates the centrality of absence to Rossetti’s idea of pleasurable labor. As McGann argues, though the lovers long for union, “human sexual love is . . . an eternal barrier to any complete identity of the lovers’ personalities. But of course they would not have their glorious relationship without that separation” (“Details” 50). McGann notes that Eros is often perfected rather than satisfied in Rossetti’s poetry. The satisfaction of the desire for union would terminate the desire itself, and in Rossetti’s works, desire for desire’s sake emerges as poignantly and productively pleasurable. The earthly lover eternally trapped in the predella, eternally envisioning the warm bar and the wilted lilies, perfects his sense of yearning for the damozel and, in the process, revels in the pleasure of generating these beautiful and vivid images.

The teaching Rossetti did at the college may be seen then as a logical extension of the “brainwork” conducted in “The Blessed Damozel.” Attending to Rossetti’s participation in the Working Men’s College casts new light on the political implications of his aesthetic practices, and focusing on the ideas about work and desire that underwrote these practices illuminates the emphasis on labor, refined perception, and the limitations of mimesis in Ruskin and Rossetti’s art classes. While the first published version of the poem is in keeping with the theoretical foundations of Ruskin and Rossetti’s pedagogical practices, an 1855 manuscript of “The Blessed Damozel,” entitled “The Blessed Damsel,” written months after he began teaching at the college, exhibits an even stronger accord with the theories of labor and longing central to their pedagogy. Rossetti’s 1855 revision of the poem could be understood as
an effort to strengthen the preexisting connections between the theoretical apparatus developed in this work and the mode of production encouraged by Ruskin and Rossetti in their art classes.

While the Pierpont Morgan manuscript clearly dates from 1855, there has been some critical disagreement as to whether the manuscript might be a fair copy of the original version of the poem. No other copy of the original text of the poem, which was first written in 1847, has survived, so this theory is impossible to disprove, and Rossetti did sign the manuscript “D. G. R. 1847” (Rossetti, *Family* 293). Carl Peterson has, however, argued convincingly that the manuscript is a revision of the 1850 version published in the *Germ*. I rely on Peterson’s assertions in my reading of the manuscript. However, if this manuscript does represent a “memorial reconstruction” of the original text, the fact that Rossetti decided to revisit this version of the poem so soon after beginning his work at the college would indicate that he perceived an agreement between the vision of artistic labor developed in the art courses and in this particular version of the poem.19

The changes made to the parenthetical passages in the 1855 manuscript further underline the poem’s emphasis on artistic production. In “The Blessed Damozel,” the parenthetical statements—the “nucleus” of the poem—indicate that the vision of the emparadised beloved is the fruit of the lover’s aesthetic labor. However, in the 1850 version of the poem, the longest parenthetical passage does little to reinforce the sense that we are watching the lover manufacture a vision. It rather concerns itself with the new knowledge the damozel has acquired in heaven and the possibility of reunion between lover and beloved:

(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!
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 ?) (91-102)
In 1855, Rossetti replaced this passage with a parenthetical passage that clarifies that the lover is generating images born of his own longing:

(Alas! just now, in that bird’s song,
   Strove not her accents there
Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
   Possessed the midday air,
Was she not stepping to my side
   Upon a silver stair?) (79–84)

The lover, so longing for his vision to be truth, hears the damsel’s voice in the cry of birds. In the ring of a bell, he hears the sound of her foot upon a silver stair. The intensity of his desire has allowed him to rewrite sensory information, to use this information as raw material for the manufacture of a more vivid vision of his beloved. Rossetti preserves this passage, which, of all the parenthetical statements in the poem, does the most to indicate that this is a work about working, an artwork about making art, in all future versions of the poem.

It is not, however, only the earthly lover who is hard at work. In both the 1850 and the 1855 versions of the poem, the lover manufactures visions of an emparadised woman who in turn generates images of her own, fantasies of a man praying for her on the earth below, dreams of a moment in the future when she might “take his hand and go with him / To the deep wells of light” (“Damsel” 57-58). The lover’s labor results in a vision of a lady laboring, an embowered author whose work mimics and echoes the very work that produced her. Her body seems to be bent and distorted by her labor. As she leans over the bar, “her gaze [striving] / Within that gulf to pierce / The swarm,” she “[bows]” and “[stoops],” contorting her form in her effort to see her perpetually absent lover (“Damsel” 45-47, 37). Unlike the reclining and sleeping ladies that populate aestheticist paintings and poems, the damsel, with her striving gaze and her stooped posture, possesses an active and distressed body. It is in fact all of this bowing and stooping that has heated the bar and wilted the lilies:

And still she bowed herself & 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. (37–42)
The damsel’s work, her effort to produce a vision of a man who remains stubbornly absent, has generated quite a bit of heat, enough to warm metals and kill plants. The poem’s most well-known stanza then is one in which the lady’s work is most visibly and sensually foregrounded.

In the 1855 version of the poem, however, Rossetti further stresses the fact that the damsel and the lover are twinned in their labor. He strengthens the sense that this is a poem about work through the use of a vocabulary of service and rest to describe the lady in heaven. The damsel in this later draft possesses eyes that know of “rest and shade” (3) rather than eyes “deeper . . . than deep water” (3–4). She wears a white robe in Mary’s “service” (10) rather than a white rose “meetly” (10). And in the 1855 manuscript, repetition, a spondee, and an awkward enjambment flag the moment when the lady expresses exasperation at the amount of effort both she and her lover have invested in their imaginative labor. “Have I not prayed in solemn heaven? / On earth, has he not prayed?” (63–64) becomes “Have I not prayed in Heaven?—on earth, / Lord, Lord, has he not prayed?” (51–52). In addition, the final stanza of the revised draft sees the woman wearily “[laying]” (117), rather than “[casting]” (147), her arms along the barriers and weeping. The later lady is not simply frustrated. She is also tired. Her fruitless, unending toil has exhausted her. The 1855 poem places greater emphasis, then, on the idea that this is a poem about an author imagining another author hard at work.

The lover’s conflicted and contradictory representation of the lady in the 1855 draft draws further attention to the lady’s labor. Though she bows and stoops and grows hot as she exerts herself, the lover seems compelled at moments to imagine an embowered lady more in keeping with a scopophilic tradition. He allows that her gaze is striving and her back is bent, but he also insists that her eyes know “more of rest and shade / Than a deep water, even—” (3–4) and that her look is “still” (16). Similarly, in the second to last stanza of the poem, right before the damsel lays down her arms to weep, the lover describes her as smiling and “mild” (110–14). The lover oscillates in his representation of the damsel between more conventional images of a relaxed, reclining beloved and stranger, more startling visions of a weary and agitated woman. However, more than wilted lilies and a warm bar belie the lover’s fantasies of a lazy, languid lady. Jangling, imperfect rhymes cast into question the veracity of the stanzas describing the lady’s rest. The first stanza, which refers to the damsel’s
eyes and their knowledge of rest and shade, links “Heaven,” “even,” and “seven” in a slant rhyme. In the stanza in which the lady’s striving eyes are described as “still,” Rossetti unsuccessfully attempts to rhyme “choristers” and “hers” with “years.” The smiling and mild woman (who is at the same time moments away from crying) appears in a stanza that seeks to match “mild” and “smiled” with “filled.” The off rhymes give the lie to the lover’s contradictory fantasies, undermining his moves to represent her in conventionally lovely terms. At each moment that he endeavors to erase her labor, labor that he himself has written into existence, the poem sounds a harsh note to signal that something is wrong. The perpetual longing and imaginative endeavors in which both the lady and her earthbound lover are engaged must, according to the poem, be acknowledged as a form of work.

“The Blessed Damozel” theorizes a mode of production inspired by perpetual longing, by infinitely unfulfilled desire. The 1850 version, however, threatens to deviate from this theme in a stanza devoted to envisioning the moment when the two lovers finally unite:

Yea, verily; when he is come  
We will do thus and thus:  
Till this my vigil seem quite strange  
And almost fabulous;  
We two will live at once, one life;  
And peace shall be with us. (133–38)

While the preceding stanza similarly alludes to this possibility, it does so within the framework of an entreaty to Christ: “There I will ask of Christ the Lord . . . to be / As then we were” (127–31). The stanza that follows rests on the assumption that this wish will be granted, that the lover and beloved will be granted peace, that their desire to be united will be gratified and their hard work will finally come to an end. What is undone here is the sense of eternal tension, of infinitely unfulfilled longing, that is so central to the poem’s vision of labor and desire. Rossetti removes this stanza in the Pierpont Morgan manuscript, and it never appears again in any published version of the poem. The revisions that the poem underwent after Rossetti began teaching at the Working Men’s College brought the poem much closer to the version with which most readers are familiar, the version of the poem that most clearly articulates a vision of a mode of production inspired by unfulfilled desire.
One of the most pronounced differences between the 1850 version of “The Blessed Damozel” and the 1855 manuscript, a change Rossetti did not preserve in future versions of the poem, is the exchange of a silver bar for the famous golden bar upon which the lady leans in every published version of the poem. John Albert Sanford links this change to two other “striking” and “unique” variations in the text, the mention of a “silver stair” in line 66 and the replacement of a “golden barrier” with a “shining barrier” in line 142 (486). With these changes, most of the gold has been elided from the text, and silver has become the primary metal of the poem. While Carl Peterson has traced out a convincing account of the order in which Rossetti made these changes, arguing that with the addition in 1855 of the silver stair in a new parenthetical passage, the bar was altered to match, I would like to explore another potential rationale for the elision of gold from the poem (415).

The Rossettis often link gold to troublesome or suspect exchanges. The narrator of “Jenny” (1870) tosses gold coins disrespectfully into a prostitute’s hair, and Laura’s downfall in “Goblin Market” (1862) begins with the exchange of a golden curl for goblin fruit. Christina Rossetti links silver, on the other hand, to redemption, as Lizzie brings a silver penny to the goblins when she goes to rescue her sister. Jill Rappoport has explored the significance of the silver penny, arguing that it should be understood in the context of the silver coins minted for distribution as “Maundy money” in nineteenth-century England. While “Goblin Market” was not written until 1859, Rappoport’s argument does indicate that, for the Victorians, silver had come to be associated with charity, and the metal did signify in this fashion for the Rossettis. During this period when Dante acquired a heightened sense of economic injustice and participated actively in a charitable organization, he temporarily eliminated from the poem a metal linked in the Rossetti lexicon to more problematic forms of economic exchange and replaced it with a metal associated with generosity.

When the poem was published again in 1870, the bar and the barrier became golden once more. While Rossetti did not preserve the variants having to do with metal in future versions of the poem, he strengthened the poem’s thematic preoccupation with perpetual longing and artistic labor in the Pierpont Morgan manuscript. The poem seems to have become more itself through contact with the principles that underwrote the particular form of art instruction offered by Ruskin and Rossetti in their drawing classes at the Working Men’s College.
In January of 1859, Thomas Dixon, the “Working Man” to whom Ruskin addressed the letters in *Time and Tide* (1867), wrote to Rossetti to thank him for sending along a copy of the *Germ*. The cork-cutter from Sunderland found that the *Germ*’s medievalism produced in him a yearning comparable to the backward-looking interest excited by Chiaro’s paintings or the emparadised damozel. He asked, “Why is it for these pictures and essays, &c., being so realistic, yet produce on the mind such a vague and dreamy sensation, approaching as it were the Mystic Land of a Bygone Age? . . . There is [in] them the life which I long for, and which to me never seems realizable in this life” (Papers 221). Dixon noted the “realism” of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, the liveliness and precision of their representations of the past, and he noted as well that the *Germ* activated in him a longing for something “unrealizable.” These works reproduced in this reader the same form of desire that inspired their production: desire perfected rather than desire satisfied.

The note must have been particularly welcome at this moment, when Rossetti was so preoccupied with the aesthetics of desire. Strikingly, Dixon’s response to the *Germ* insists that Pre-Raphaelite “realism” aggravates rather than satisfies his longing for the medieval past. During this phase in his career, Rossetti experimented with multiple methods for concretizing or bringing to life that which is perpetually absent. The startling moments of sensuous detail in “The Blessed Damozel,” the vivid color in his medievalist watercolors, and the warm flesh of his later ladies represent disparate strategies that emerge from a similar locus of inspiration and work toward a similar goal. In the late 1850s, while Rossetti taught at the Working Men’s College and retooled one of his most important poems, he tested out different types of color and detail as methods for bringing the perpetually absent to life. However, he also reveled in the persistent failure of that project, in the impossibility of truly concretizing the immaterial, traveling through time, or resurrecting the dead. His time spent at the college, engaging with Ruskin’s ideas about the limitations of mimesis as well as the school’s own vision of perpetually unfinished education, strengthened and extended his earlier thinking on the question of what motivates labor. The perfection, rather than the satisfaction, of desire emerges in all of these projects as a means to acknowledge the limitations of the present while engaging in pleasurable work with beautiful results.

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NOTES

I would like to thank William Smith, Diana Maltz, Kathy Psomiades, and the readers and editors at Victorian Studies for their invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

1Tim Barringer associates the “obsessively detailed finish” of early Pre-Raphaelite works with a desire on the part of the Pre-Raphaelites to be “seen as hardworking members of the middle class rather than wayward geniuses or bohemian outcasts” (101).

2Richard Kaye makes a similar case for the potentially subversive implications of indefinitely unfulfilled desire. He argues that “in an era that placed exceptionally high value on the accelerated production and consumption of goods, as well as on linking individual worth to rapidly disseminated effects, flirting—the libidinal form of loitering without intent—fostered insurrectionary energies.” He notes that “in a male-dominated order, in which marriage was prized as a satisfying resolution, flirting represents a reckless adventurism that violates—and sometimes succeeds in undermining—the smooth functioning of middle-class interests and aspirations” (4).

3In the caption to the frontispiece to Rossetti and His Circle (1922), Max Beerbohm famously referred to Rossetti as “precociously manifesting” a “queer indifference to politics which marked him in his prime and in his decline,” and it is this vision of Rossetti that has persisted into the present. This is not to say that this characterization has never been contested. In 1979, for example, D. M. R. Bentley countered Beerbohm’s assertions by examining Rossetti’s early political sonnets and by foregrounding the political content of “The Burden of Nineveh.” Here, I return to the question of Rossetti’s politics and look for evidence of the political in his most seemingly aestheticist works, such as “The Blessed Damozel.”

This essay cooperates with recent attempts to reconsider the politics of aestheticism in England. During the past few decades, aestheticism’s reputation has been radically revised by scholarship that calls into question the casting of the movement as the apolitical precursor to the avant-garde. See, for example, Freedman; Helsinger; Lesjak; and Maltz. This revision of our understanding of aestheticism has allowed us to see how frequently authors and artists linked to aestheticism expressed earnest attachments to political ideals. As Elizabeth Prettejohn has recently suggested, the motto “art for art’s sake” should be understood “not as the name of an art theory, but rather as the statement of [a] problem” (2).

4While Brown never became a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, he was closely involved with the group through his friendship with Rossetti, and his works exhibit many Pre-Raphaelite characteristics.

5This comes from Brown’s own description of the painting in the catalog that accompanied the exhibition of the work in 1865.

6Edward Norman notes that, though Ruskin has been referred to as a Christian Socialist, “the title does not rest easily upon him” (121). Ruskin “shared with the Christian Socialists... a belief that social disaster could only be averted if social righteousness became the object of public policy” (125), but Maurice “was hardly an influence at all upon Ruskin” (131). Ruskin spoke of his love for Maurice, but he also referred to him as “wrong-headed” (131). He did not align himself with the Christian Socialists, but he did
seem to appreciate the opportunity for contact with working men that teaching at the school provided.

For further discussion of Ruskin’s involvement with the Working Men’s College, see Haslam.

As Jan Marsh notes, “His evident enjoyment of the Working Men’s College is underlined by the fact that, as Ruskin noted, unlike other artists, he was happy to teach without payment. He kept up his regular evening there well into 1857, when the College moved to Great Ormond Street, and returned in 1861” (137). According to the Rossetti Archive, which dates the end of Rossetti’s first association with the Working Men’s College May 15, 1857, he returned to teach there again in March 1861 and resigned from the Council of Teachers in March 1862. The “programme of classes” for the third term (March 11–May 18) printed in the March 1, 1861, issue of the Working Men’s College Magazine does not list Rossetti as an instructor (42). However, he is listed as a member of the Council of Teachers in the May 1, 1861, issue (74). He is listed as an instructor in the program of courses for the fourth (June 3–June 27) and first (August 5–August 31) terms of 1861 (89, 121). When Elizabeth Siddal died in February of 1862, Rossetti was still teaching a class at the Working Men’s College. He seems to have dissolved his association with the school soon after she passed away.

As Quentin Bell notes, “It may be doubted whether we have ever decided just what it is that our art schools ought to do. Certainly, at the time of their inception, their purpose was very ill-defined. . . . But it was, in one way or the other, to serve industry” (67).

See Macdonald 388–91 for the twenty-three stages of the National Course of Instruction.

William Bell Scott, while master at the Government School of Design at Newcastle, found Ruskin’s disregard for the standard of utility infuriating and, in a review of Tyrwhitt’s Our Sketching Club: Letters and Studies on Landscape Art (1874), launched an attack on Ruskin, arguing that he “took to teaching without being a practical artist, with a disastrous result” (21). Ruskin had, according to Scott, “never made one good draftsman, and never will” (22). Ruskin, however, argued that art education should aim to transform men not into tools but into artists.

During an address to the St. Martin’s School of Art, for example, Ruskin argued that, while “it was perfectly right that students should look to their art as a means of support,” the pursuit of economic gain “must be a secondary point with them while they were at work in the art” (Works XVI: 439).


Ruskin acknowledged that many of his assignments could seem “tedious” or “irksome,” but he asked his students to “consider whether the acquirement of so great a power as that of pictorial expression of thought be not worth some toil” (Drawing 4). Those who wished to “obtain quicker perceptions of the beauty of the natural world, and to preserve something like a true image of beautiful things that pass away . . . must understand first of all, that these powers, which indeed are noble and desirable, cannot be got without work” (1–2).
In her discussion of the Pre-Raphaelites’ interest in the forms of attentiveness associated with aesthetic consciousness, Helsinger argues that “the attention fostered by aesthetic work contrasts with the tightly focused and goal-oriented concentration demanded, in much Victorian prescriptive writing, of modern workers and of middle-class men and women alike as the means for social, educational, and economic success” (4).

Helsinger notes,

In his own practice, as in the work of others, he was attracted to pictures where listening or gazing or touching seems to be directed toward the barely perceptible or even what is absent: figures in the paintings strain to hear in silence, look fixedly into apparent emptiness, or appear lost in thought, shutting out ambient noise to focus on their awareness of one small sensory signal and the world it seems to open to them. (28)

Unless noted, line numbers refer to the 1850 version of the poem, published in the second issue of the Germ. The fact that the vision of the damozel is conjured by the lover seems to have been obscured for some time by T. Hall Caine’s account of Rossetti’s description of the poem’s origin. According to Caine, Rossetti described the poem as inspired by a desire to “reverse the conditions” of Poe’s “The Raven” and “give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven” (Rossetti, Dante I: 107).

Helsinger argues that the warm bar “is often read as evidence of Rossetti’s own ‘fleshly’ imagination, or of the damozel’s incomplete translation from earthly to heavenly lover. However, it would be more accurate to say that it is Rossetti’s way of characterizing the narration as that of someone imagining the lady in heaven in a way that marks his location within a modern world of the senses—that is the location from which art and poetry must now do their work” (48).

The collection introduction to “The Blessed Damozel” on the Rossetti Archive website acknowledges that the poem may be a “memorial reconstruction of the original 1846–7 text.”

WORKS CITED


