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Linda FOŘTOVÁ



FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA  
UNIVERZITY KARLOVY  
V PRAZE

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE

FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

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*The Visual Aspect of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Poetry*

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Soňa Nováková, CSc., MA.

Zpracovala: Linda Fořtová  
Studijní obor: Anglistika-amerikanistika

Iowa City, IA, duben 2012

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## Abstrakt

Tato práce se zabývá analýzou tří básní Dante Gabriela Rossettiho. Výchozí myšlenkou práce je teorie “ut pictura poesis”, která zkoumá vztah básně a výtvarného umění. V případě Rossettiho je takováto teorie na místě, neboť Rossetti byl nejen básník, ale především malíř. “The Blessed Damozel”, která je první analyzovanou básní, existuje jako obraz, stejně i jako hudební kompozice složená Claudem Debussym. Druhá báseň v této práci, “The Card Dealer”, byla inspirována skutečným obrazem Theodora Van Holsta, který Rossetti vlastnil, byť v básnickém zpracování se značně odchýlil od originálu. Poslední básní je “My Sister's Sleep”, která vyniká živou dramatickostí jednotlivých scén. Stejně jako dvě předchozí básně, i tato používá “malířské techniky” (rozložení postav na scéně, důraz na detaily, “vykreslení” scény a atmosféry, charakterizace, gesta, barvy, materiály, zpomalený běh času, statický charakter zobrazení, prodlužování tenzního momentu, k němuž celá báseň spěje, symbolika, mystika, atd.), kterými vyvolává snadno představitelný mentální obraz připodobnitelný ke skutečným obrazům, jaké malovali Prerafaelité. Tyto (a mnohé jiné) techniky Rossetti používá ve vícero básních, nicméně v těchto třech jsou dle mého názoru nejvíce prominentní. Cílem práce bylo zanalyzovat malířské prvky v Rossettiho poezii za pomoci zejména *The Pictorialist Poetics* Davida Scotta a *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* Elizabeth Helsingerové, a tím lépe porozumět Prerafaelitskému umění, estetice a vnímání krásy. Prerafaelitské hnutí se zrodilo v 19. století jako odpověď na stav současného umění, načež se na přelomu století zvrátilo v dekadenci, které významně hnulo měřítky vnímání “krásna.” Předložená diplomová práce tudíž měla za úkol přiblížit Prerafaelitské vnímání krásy skrze Rossettiho poezii a tím zpřístupnit jeho složitou poetiku a odhalit určité rysy jeho tvorby, které charakterizují tu méně známou stránku Prerafaelitského umění, totiž poezii. Rossettiho *Sonnets for Pictures* a další “double works of art” jsou analyzovány odděleně v jiné práci, v níž větší důraz se klade na postupné převrácení Prerafaelitské estetiky v následnou dekadenci.

Keywords: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelites, 19th century, poetry, visual arts, ekphrasis, colours, music, aesthetics, “ut pictura poesis”

Klíčová slova: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pre-Rafaelité, 19. století, poezie, výtvarné umění, ekphrasis, barvy, hudba, estetika, “ut pictura poesis”

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"A thing of beauty is a joy forever."  
John Keats

## CHAPTER I: Introduction

*“The author is a painter as well as a poet, and perhaps we owe to the practised eye of the artist, who has embodied his creations in colour and outlined form, some of the exquisite touches which he has now embodied in words [...].”<sup>1</sup>*

*“In fine Mr. Rossetti is a poet, and his gifts in the music, colour, and perfume of verse are extraordinary; but though he gives us a new pleasure, he opens a new path. [...].”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Rossetti has intensity and pictorial beauty – but the strain of dejected sadness pervades all his writings; he is ever depressing; his utter abandonment to his feelings, his affected dictions – the chief characteristics of his poetry – except the direct presence of the sexual side of his sensuousness – are all to be seen in The Woodspurge.”<sup>3</sup>*

These three quotations from 1870 journals and magazines show that even back in his day the critical opinion on Dante Gabriel Rossetti was extremely varied. To this day he remains a somewhat controversial figure in the world of Victorian poetry – on the one hand his poetry is praised as highly original, visually pleasant, exceptionally well-crafted, and influencing the following groups of *fin-de-siècle* and Decadent poets. On the other hand, however, Rossetti has a reputation for being a “decorative” poet whose work is merely ornamental, his medieval imagery is bland in comparison to John Keats, or that his poems are forever rotating three basic themes: Love, Death, and Life. Rossetti's contemporary critics were also exasperated by his use of archaisms which was deemed poetically irrelevant, pretentious, artificial and insincere, if not downright atavistic, and, as Stevenson notes, “no credit was given to their possible connotative or melodic value.”<sup>4</sup> In an era committed to topical relevance in poetry, archaisms often came to be ridiculed as sheer affectation. This might have negatively affected Rossetti's reputation as a poet, as well as the reputation of the whole group of Pre-Raphaelite poets.

It would be unfair to side with either of the general opinions, for it would require a lengthy comparative discussion and extensive research in that vein to solve the dichotomy of opinions surrounding Rossetti's work. It is also true that there is in fact a lack of interpretive criticism regarding Rossetti, as a consequence of this radical division of opinion. I do not dare opposing either; the aim of

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1 *The Broadway* (London), (vol. 1, October 1870 n.s., pp. 286-288). Qtd in S.N. Ghosse, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti & Contemporary Criticism* (Folcroft Library Editions 1970) 141.

2 *The Contemporary Review* (vol. XIV. 1870. pp. 480-1) Qtd. In Ghosse 138.

3 *The Nation, N.Y.* (vol. XI. July 14, 1870 p. 29) Qtd in Ghosse 135.

4 Lionel Stevenson, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1972) 74.

my research is to investigate the less explored aspect of his poetry: the pictorial quality that does not reside in evocative descriptions of images only, but mainly in the world behind his poetic language, behind prosody, and behind the sketchy visual scenes full of hints and suggestions that Rossetti presents in his poems. As Joseph F. Vogel in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Versecraft* points out correctly,

Rossetti's versification, however, may have an even more important, if less demonstrable, connection with his painting. A painting must be more than an idea illustrated; it must be an object of beauty. It can be made so only by a mastery of technique and care in employing it.<sup>5</sup>

For these reasons – despite the decreased demonstrability in this respect – I have chosen to follow this theme through a cross-section of Rossetti's poems. It has always been my interest to pursue the limits of one type of art and finding out where the boundaries of that art are, and what is behind them. In this thesis, it is poetry and its visual aspects, accentuated in this case by Rossetti's being a painter first, and a poet second. The poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is in many respects immensely valuable and therefore deserves much more critical attention than it has received so far, precisely because of the unique effects his poetic works have: the visual vividness, Biblical themes, influence of Dante, the depiction of female ideal and the religious content of this depiction, the music of his poems, as well as sounds, shapes and diction; his ear for rhythm and eye for detail; the lines of poetic structures that contain and condense; evocations of mood and atmosphere as well as of setting and sense of space; and, most importantly, his use of colour, materials, light, and movement within stanzas. In other words, what I aim to carry out in the following body of work, is an interpretative analysis of Rossetti's work with special emphasis on his peculiarly painterly methods which he employs while composing a poem. Lacking a substantial background in art history, I shall not attempt thorough scholarly analyses of the individual paintings; in many cases, however, it would not be even necessary, because not all of the poems I have chosen have a visual accompaniment. In general, the analysis I would undertake on the selected poems would be that of the merger of the visual and the verbal in Rossetti's poetry.

I am going to analyse three poems, taking one by one, in this order: "The Blessed Damozel", "My Sister's Sleep", and "The Card Dealer." The reason I have not chosen Rossetti's famous contributions to *The Germ*, his *Sonnets for Pictures*, is mainly because – like I said – I am going to deal not with descriptions of paintings but with the evocative power of Rossetti's poetry to visualize the poetic images and colours. The poems I have selected for my analysis are chosen on the purpose of presenting a variety. The *Sonnets for Pictures* would probably require a twofold analysis, of the original

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5 Joseph F. Vogel, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Versecraft* (Florida, Gainesville: The Storter Printing Company 1971) 109.

painting and of Rossetti's poem, the former of which I am not fully qualified to execute.

The first poem on my list is an absolute necessity when approaching any work by Rossetti from any angle at all. It is his most famous piece which has been critically well-covered. "The Blessed Damozel" has a counterpart in fine arts as well as in music. "My Sister's Sleep" is a ballad-like poem which has a strong evocative content as far as setting (interiors and exteriors), characters and atmosphere go, though it lacks an actual pictorial accompaniment: yet the language and syntactic configurations that Rossetti uses compensate for the absence of visual counterpart peculiarly well. Finally, "The Card Dealer" has been inspired by a painting by Theodor von Holst in which a gypsy-like female figure deals out cards<sup>6</sup> but the poem has diverged from the source so much that it resembles the original painting only remotely. This poem is interesting not only for its use of colour, imagery and denseness of the setting; it is notable for its prosodic qualities and for the stanzaic structure which the poem shares with "The Blessed Damozel." Each of these three poems deals with the visual impulse in a slightly different way, yet the pictorial content of each cannot be ignored or denied.

In the course of analyzing these poems, I shall briefly recourse to other poems which I have not included in my list, or introduce a comparison with either another poem by Rossetti, or – if necessary to prove a point – with a poem by John Keats, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Lord Alfred Tennyson, etc. Therefore, my analysis does not cover the whole Rossetti oeuvre and will not even attempt to do so; the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate, as clearly as possible, the visual potential of Rossetti's poetry which makes it a unique specimen among the Victorian – or even the Pre-Raphaelite – poets, if among the minor ones. As far as the two widely different opinions on Rossetti introduced early in this chapter, I shall leave that question open: for to some, who do not appreciate the power of words to convey something more than just their grammatical sense, Rossetti may indeed be purely ornamental. Yet for those who are able to perceive the synesthetic qualities of poetic language – not only in Rossetti, but also in Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé – for those Rossetti is an exceptionally gifted poet and artist with great powers of observation.

Before I tackle the poems individually, I shall provide some theoretical background for the history and development of *Ut Pictura Poesis*, a theory of the "sister arts" and the relationship between poetry and visual art (so-called "ekphrasis"), which is going to be the springboard for most of my arguments. Next, I shall also include brief introduction of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite

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6 Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (Paris, The Hague: Mouton 1976) 200.

Brotherhood; I would try to summarize their aesthetic doctrine and aims. These introductions are going to be brief, as their purpose is to merely provide a backdrop for the poetry. This section is going to close off with some general remarks on Rossetti's poetic works that would be useful to bear in mind while studying the poems. Where necessary, I shall refer to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's short story *Hand and Soul* whose mysterious and vague character riddled with metaphors has perplexed readers for years. In the net of its complex metaphors and allusions there are some important points which might turn out to be of use for the poetic analysis. Likewise, Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova* (in Rossetti's translation) is going to be brought in when occasion demands it. Its influence on Rossetti's work is obvious, particularly on his imagery, spirituality, physicality: it would be useful to collate Dante's and Rossetti's use of the concept of "Platonic Love", or love at a distance, if you will. In some respects I consider *La Vita Nuova* to be a key to Rossetti's work, able to elucidate quite a lot of incomprehensible or vague passages of his poems.

To each separate chapter dealing with the individual poems, there will be subchapters – usually attached to a poem in which a certain phenomena can be perceived as most prominent. These subchapters shall be involved with a vast range of concepts such as Rossetti's inventory of the key imagery, colours, binary oppositions, figurative language, movement (or arrested movement), visual stimuli within the poems, recurrent images and patterns, stasis of the images, postures and gestures, nonverbal language of the depicted figures, and his uses of stanzaic forms and meter and, above all, the poetic form. This is, as it has been already mentioned, the crucial aspect of a poem's pictorial quality. It is often helped by other means, yet the form has been likened to a picture frame<sup>7</sup> in that its role is to compress, contain and shape the poetic and visual energy confined within.

All my analyses will be based mainly on my own interpretations of Rossetti's poetry; my approach will be slightly interdisciplinary, relying more on the literary side. Whenever necessary, I shall contrast my opinion with that of relevant sources. As stated, the chief aim of my thesis is to examine Rossetti's poetry and show that his poetry is a unique blend of poetic imagery, pictorial images, and sometimes even synesthesia and music. All of these attributes are lurking behind the lines and images, brought out by carefully selected words and delicately wrought forms. And after all, the point of Rossetti's poetry is really the search for beauty; beauty found in love, in the interior of one's soul.

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Nemerov, "On Poetry and Painting, With a Thought of Music", ed by W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Language of Images* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1980) 9.

## CHAPTER II: History and Development of *Ut Pictura*

### *Poesis*

*"Ut pictura poesis; erit, quae, si propius stes, te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes."*

Horace

*Painting and poetry, flowing from the same fount mutually by vision, constantly comparing Poetic allusions by natural forms in one and applying forms found in nature to the other, meandering into streams by application, which reciprocally improve, reflect, and heighten each other's beauties like ... mirrors.<sup>8</sup>*

J.M.W. Turner

The tradition of *ut pictura poesis* is a long one, reaching far back into antiquity, transforming itself through the ages to return back to its origin in periodic waves. It has been revisited, revised, redefined, reshaped and rehashed multiple times, and never quite fathomed. Whether the theory is applicable or true – or partially true – depends very much on the cultural context of the times. This is extremely important to bear in mind when approaching the diverse theories and their spinoffs that appeared in the course of history. In a culture like ours, in which the visual is slowly taking over from the verbal, the question of the relationship between these two modes of expression is becoming topical again. This trend has been an ongoing process, accelerated by the development of new media, but it is hardly *poetry* and *painting* that is being dealt with, although the principle remains the same: sometimes the visual simply manages to express concepts and ideas out of reach of the words.

A fine history of the development of *ut pictura poesis* is given in James A. W. Heffernan's *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry*,<sup>9</sup> and in *Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor, and the Language of Literature* by Franklin R. Rogers.<sup>10</sup> However, the best source for research on *ut pictura*

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8 Qtd in Jerrold Ziff, "Turner on Poetry and Painting," *Studies in Romanticism* 3, No. 4 (Summer 1964) 193-215: 203. Qtd in George P. Landow, "Ruskin's Version of 'Ut Pictura Poesis'", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Summer, 1968), 521-528: 522.

9 James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashberry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

10 Franklin R. Rogers with the assistance of Mary Ann Rogers, *Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor, and the Language of Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985).

*poesis* is probably *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* by David Scott.<sup>11</sup> This study traces the tradition from its very beginnings to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France. Unlike the essays by Rogers, this source does not reach into the present day which does not, however, lower its value. A good supporting material is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*<sup>12</sup> which is rich in theoretical polemics supported by examples taken from Homer and other Greek literary sources. These the main sources I would refer to in this chapter, and which I am going to use as models *passim*, especially since Scott draws on Lessing and others while developing his more up-to-date arguments.

Lessing, however, presents the theory of *ut pictura poesis* in the state it was in before Romanticism. He stresses mimetic approaches to art, whereas Rossetti, the late Romantic, as he is famously dubbed, should be perceived as an expressive artist, and not a mimetic one. Lessing tends towards keeping the two arts separate, while the Romantics, on the other hand, strove towards unifying them. I have included his theories nonetheless, not for the sake of viewing Rossetti in light of his theories, but mainly in order to trace the development of *ut pictura poesis* and also for the reason of better understanding Scott's approach, for Scott refers to Lessing quite frequently and regards him as one of the most essential theorists in the field. Despite the vast difference between these sources (contextual, conceptual, historical), Lessing offers plenty of interesting points that it would be a pity not to include him. Yet I do not propose using Lessing's approach exclusively as a tool for interpreting Rossetti: the inclusion of his theory is intended to flesh out the background of *ut pictura poesis*.

Even for scholars, it has been difficult to point down the very beginning of *ut pictura poesis*. Some theorists, such as Nemerov, trace it to the early drawings on the cave walls by first primitive societies – these drawings turned into a set of signs which came to be used repeatedly to put across ideas, messages, to communicate.<sup>13</sup> This cave art was, as Howard Nemerov maintains, based on mimesis. Therefore, the developing alphabet acquired something of the painterly: in particular, the shape and form of the letters looked like natural objects: “[we can see] **O** in a hole, **W** or **M** in a distant flying bird, **Y** the branching of a tree, and so on.”<sup>14</sup>

This remark sparks off an idea how valid this actually is. One might be compelled to think of the way children learn to copy and memorize the capital letters of the Latin alphabet. The unfamiliar shapes

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11 David H. T. Scott, *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press 1988).

12 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans., with an introduction and notes by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1962).

13 Ed by W. J. T. Mitchell, *The Language of Images*. Howard Nemerov, “On Poetry and Painting, With a Thought of Music.” (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 11-12.

14 Nemerov 11.

are often made into pictures representing a familiar object that may ease the child's way into the world of literacy. For example, apart from the said **O**, **M**, **W**, and **Y**, there are also **J** which can recall an upside-down cane, **E** a comb, **H** a bed, **F** a key, **S** the shape of a snake (in this case, the sound of an /s/ and the initial letter of the word "snake" are in accord), **I** a column, **B** the profile of a corpulent lady. The same can be made with numbers, e.g. **2** is a swan, **1** is a whip, **4** is a lame chair, and so on. Moreover, the shapes of the individual graphemes and their similarity to everyday objects also gave way to many expressions: an A-shape skirt, a C-moon, a T-shirt, U-turn, V-neck shirt, Y-fronts, the L-shaped move of the knight in chess, etc. Also, there was a belief widely held in the Middle Ages that God had written the word *OMO*<sup>15</sup> on man's face: the two O's being formed by the eyes, and the M by the nose and eye-sockets.<sup>16</sup> These are arguably based on the resemblance of the shapes to the graphemes. To liken an object to an alphabet letter is the easiest way to make the resemblance clear to all who understand and use the same alphabet.

This approach traces the actual beginnings of written language – according to it, all alphabets have been taken from nature, whether the Latin or Greek alphabet, or the Cyrillic script and Asian iconography and calligraphy. Within this strand of development are also various sorts of handwriting styles, scripts, fonts, and styles. In this way, pictures are contained *within* the graphemes, but the resemblance is restricted to form only. It is almost taken for granted that the letters of the alphabet have originated from natural objects and thus are supposed to resemble them, even if we do not immediately realize it. It follows that a certain degree of the pictorial is inherent in the written language. Further speculations could be made as to how the individual graphemes came to symbolize a given sound but that would lead to a large digression. However, this point is indeed useful as it can branch out into a discussion on synesthesia and transposition later on, and also on various poetic devices such as alliteration, consonance, or assonance, and the very composition of words. These will be discussed in due time with regards to each poem.

The other approach, presented by Heffernan (1993), Scott (1988), and Rogers et al. (1985) is far less technical. The beginnings of *ut pictura poesis* are generally limited to the theory of arts only. The earliest records of the idea can be dated back to Plutarch, who attributes the oldest comment about painting and poetry to Simonides of Ceos (ca. 556-467 B.C.). Simonides said that "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture."<sup>17</sup> This frequently quoted observation is considered to be the

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15 "Uomo" means "men, mankind, humanity" in Italian.

16 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by The Rev. Henry F. Cary, *Together with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Translation of The New Life*, ed. with introduction and notes by Oscar Kuhns, Professor in Wesleyan University (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company Publishers, 1897) 275. (*Purgatory*, Canto XXIII, line 28.)

17 Heffernan 49, quoted from Plutarch's *Moralia* (346 f) in Jean Hagstrum (Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of*

point of departure for further polemics on painting and poetry. In my brief account of the development of the theory of the sister arts, I shall – probably quite ostentatiously – neglect sculpture which is often included as a kind of “half sister” to painting (while painting is supposed to be the younger sister of poetry<sup>18</sup>). The reason for that is the different set of signs which sculpture uses, and above all its plasticity and dimensions in space which is something that poetry and painting do not share (although poetry, as Scott suggests in his *Pictorialist Poetics*, may sometimes transcend the boundaries of the spatial and become something like 3-D objects; this was something that Baudelaire and Rimbaud attempted).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, sculpture versus poetry is not pertinent to the subject of my thesis.

Heffernan deals directly with what is called “ekphrasis”, which is “the literary representation of visual art.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is a part of the ongoing battle for dominance between words and images. His arguments are mostly based on Lessing (1766). The most obvious distinction between the two arts is that poetry is temporal, whereas visual art is generally spatial: this is a distinction on which all the sources agree, which justifies the inclusion of Lessing in this account. There are, however, points in history during which this distinction grew increasingly blurred and the boundaries between the two arts almost collapsed; by these I mean again the formal experiments and daring innovations in poetry by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé in 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Since David Scott lists Rossetti among such innovators<sup>21</sup>, I shall comment upon it later on, as it may help to elucidate the visual content of Rossetti’s works in the context of the times.

The main clause of Heffernan’s argument is that “ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual

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*Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958, 10) who also quotes Laurence Binyon as saying that “a precisely identical saying is proverbial among the Chinese (Hagstrum 10n). Also Heffernan 203, n8.

Simonides is also qtd in Scott 5, and in Lessing xii and 4.

18 Lessing 54.

19 “[...] The relationship between the order of syntax in language and the order of perception of phenomena in reality, as expressed in description, is closely bound up.” Scott 32. Therefore, changing the structure or ordering of syntax, the result would be a corresponding shift in perspective in viewing the world. In other words, by adjusting, deforming or dismantling the syntax, one can in fact achieve a certain “fleshing out” of the language that bestows upon it a spatial quality, as can be seen in e.g. Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*. This issue is going to be taken up in Chapter IV.

20 Heffernan 1. In a footnote, Heffernan explains the origin of the concept: “Composed from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce), *ekphrasis* originally meant ‘telling in full.’ [...] First employed as a rhetorical term in the second century A.D to denote simply a vivid description, it was then (in the third century) made to designate the description of visual art.” Shadi Bartsch, *Decoding the Ancient Novel: The Reader and the Role of Description in Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1989) 9, 32n. The meaning, however, remained unstable and “in a recent handbook of rhetorical terms it is called simply “a self-contained description, often on a commonplace subject, which can be inserted at a fitting place in a discourse.” Richard Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986) 39. Heffernan defines *ekphrasis* according to a definition in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: “the rhetorical description of a work of art.” Heffernan, 191, n3.

21 Scott 79.

representation"<sup>22</sup>, a whole literary mode. It is therefore *not* a poem written "about" a painting. The distinction lies in the reading "of the painting as a text, rather than as a static object,"<sup>23</sup> and not in trying to reproduce a work of visual art in words. Nevertheless, it is mainly G.E. Lessing's *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* that offers most basic clues to the relationship between the two arts. It should be perhaps made explicit right at the beginning that Lessing in *Laocoön* actually stands up against the claim of painting to the first place among the arts, which is a deeply rooted tradition.<sup>24</sup>

At the beginning of Lessing's essay, we are met with the following observation:

The first person to compare painting with poetry was a man of fine feeling who observed that both arts produced a similar effect upon him. Both, he felt, represent absent things as being present, and appearance as reality. Both create an illusion, and in both cases the illusion is pleasing.<sup>25</sup>

This seems to sum up the reason why the relationship needs such thorough investigation and analysis: it all comes down to beauty, harmony, and producing a pleasant feeling, and to the ways these channels to human perception work.

Two quotes by Horace from *Ars Poetica* are the backbone of the main argument of Lessing's essay: "Poets and painters have always had an equal license to venture anything at all." (*Ars Poetica*, line 9). This means, basically, that both arts were alike. Another quote is the well-known "Ut Pictura Poesis": "Poetry is like painting: one work seizes your fancy if you stand close to it, another if you stand at a distance." (*Ars Poetica*, lines 316f).<sup>26</sup> Although the quote is fashioned to sound like a Greek maxim, there is a great deal of truth in it and it makes perfect sense. Form-wise, poetry does not work if one is unable to penetrate under the surface and go deep; whereas painting is generally for viewing from a distance: up close, it may appear patchy, full of smudges, and discordant dabs of colour, the surface may be uneven and rough, and on the whole far from the compact entity it appeared to be at a distance.

Horace extends the similarity between visual art and poetry to include everything except the obvious

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22 Heffernan 3.

23 Michael Davidson, "Ekphrasis and the Postmodern Painter Poem." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1983), 69-89. Qtd in Heffernan 3.

24 Translator's preface to Lessing xxi. However, the said translator of *Laocoön*, Edward Allen McCormick I., adds in a conciliatory manner that each of the arts is subject to its own laws – although if one arts seems to be superior to the other, then it is certainly not painting but poetry as it has an infinitely wider domain. Ibid.

25 Lessing 3.

26 Preface to Lessing xii.

fact that one employs colour and lines, and the other words and rhythm.<sup>27</sup> Yet I would argue that there is a certain degree of analogy between colour and lines, and words and rhythm, based on the assumption that words are capable of carrying colour, while lines may in fact substitute “rhythm” in a painting, which contributes significantly to the creation of meaning. After all, how else can one typographically express sense of rhythm than by using lines?

After Horace, the theory of the sister arts kept on developing. In the Middle Ages, allegory entered both arts, as if it could find a similar opening in both. Thus, it was proved that there indeed was a point of contact between both arts. This went on through the Renaissance, through Spenser, Milton, Pope, to Thomson's *Seasons*.<sup>28</sup> Lessing states that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Luigi Dolce, in *Dialogo della Pittura*, wrote that “a poet is at the same time a painter, and hence a good poet will necessarily be a good painter. Common ground is the element of imitation – the painter imitates by means of lines and colour, the poet by means of words.”<sup>29</sup> This statement is more or less a rehash of what is already well-known: that the painter is limited to what is eyes can see, while the poet is able to represent not only what he sees but also what is revealed to his spirit. Of course, it could be argued that even visual artists paint (or draw) what they do not immediately see, but unless they draw abstract and bizarre visions, they generally take the shapes and contours from their memory, which is a storage pit of what they must have once seen. The same goes for dream-landscapes or dream-like visions: for even dreams are based on what is seen in everyday life, in what is perceived as reality. Lessing was referring strictly to mimetic art. Nevertheless, the mutual dependency of one art on the other is clear. It is also worth considering that painters often get their subject matter from poets and vice versa. The issue of visual arts vis-a-vis poetry has been further elaborated upon by James Harris (1709-1780) who wrote a trilogy of treatises, the first concerning Art, the second concerning Music, Painting and Poetry, and the third concerning Happiness. The second treatise provides some in-depth observations – he writes that painting imitates by means of colours and figures but in representation is limited only to one single moment in time. This is an essential point in which painting differs from poetry. Although it is generally motionless, painting can nevertheless indicate motions and sounds as well as actions which are known, for instance from history. On the other hand, poetry imitates by means of sounds and motion, but since sounds are said to stand for ideas, poetry is able to imitate to the extent that language can express things. Consequently, poetic imitation includes everything that can be ever

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27 Herbert Blümer, *Lessing's Laocoön* (Berlin 1980) 7.

28 Preface to Lessing xiv.

As a matter of fact, Thomson's *Seasons* is listed as one of the influences on Rossetti's poetic art. Boos 160.

The picturesque aspect of Thomson's poetry is discussed in Hagstrum 243-268.

29 Preface to Lessing xv.

expressed in language.<sup>30</sup> Harris concludes that poetry is superior to painting in that it is not restricted to the depiction of short, momentary events but may imitate subjects of any duration at all. In the context of the times, this was a new approach.

The next step was taken by Abbé Jean Baptiste du Bos in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719). Again, the treatise rewrites Horace but attaches special significance to the ability of the two arts to arouse passions.<sup>31</sup> Painting inspires passion through a single instant on an imaginary timeline. All its signs are coexistent, i.e. the spectators take them in all at once. Poetry, on the opposite, produces its effect in a series of moments. Once again we are faced with the fact that poetry is superior to painting on account of its greater potential for arousing more complex passions. Poetry is also given credit for not being dependent on visibility, or on what can be visually revealed.<sup>32</sup>

A further account is given of the development by J.J. Bodmer, J.J. Breitiger, and J.Ch. Gottsched. According to them, poetry is a kind of painting, while the poet is a painter who appeals directly to the imagination and has at his command a greater range of subjects than the painter or sculptor. Later on, M. Mendelssohn and Winckelmann agreed with this in *Schöne Wissenschaften*, adding that the symbols used by the belles lettres – or poetry, to use the traditional, antique term for literature in general, as poetry came much earlier than prose – affect either the sense of hearing or that of sight. Natural symbols appealing to the sense of sight are consecutive and express beauty through motion. This is the case of the art of dancing. But natural symbols that appeal to sight can be also coexistent, expressing beauty through form – and that is the case of those arts which employ figures and lines.<sup>33</sup> And form is the point of contact between poetry and painting. Poetry, moreover, is a matter of both form and motion. The translator of Lessing's treatise evaluates this as "hardly original." Although I agree that the idea is indeed hardly a golden nugget of truth, it has been immensely important for further development of the theory.

J. Winckelmann in *Thoughts On the Limit of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* expands the idea by maintaining that poetry and painting "are merely different ways of expressing the same thing"<sup>34</sup> which emphasizes the idea of the "sister arts." As to their limitations, Winckelmann hints at the inherent similarity among the arts – namely, painting, poetry and music – and states that it ought to be

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30 Lessing xvi-xvii.

31 Ibid xviii.

32 Ibid.

33 Lessing xx.

34 Ibid xx-xxi.

possible for the painter to follow the poet, adding that music is able to do this as well.<sup>35</sup> (I shall attempt to exemplify these ideas during my analysis.) The continuous struggle of the sister arts is, notwithstanding, not brought to any sort of conclusion by any means. As I have already mentioned, it is an ongoing trend that can be easily related to in our increasingly visual culture – and the evaluation of the sister arts very much depends on the entire condition of a culture, as it is reflected from the various points in time as the theory kept on developing: after all, this can be shown on the theories per se.

Probably the most recent source that reflects upon the changes happening in our contemporary culture while yet drawing on Horace and Lessing and *their* sources, is David's Scott's *Pictorial Poetics*. In this study, Scott challenges the concept of *ut pictura poesis* by professing that “if *Ut Pictura Poesis* as a concept was to have any meaning, it was not simply as a reference to poetry's tendency to imitate painting rather than nature, but as *a confirmation of its ability to create a richer synthesis of pictorial, musical and semantic elements* rather than any other art form.”<sup>36</sup>

This statement is the basis of the central argument in Scott's study: maximizing the pictorialist potential of language while yet retaining its full textual dimension.<sup>37</sup> It is poetry's endeavour to adapt the aesthetic and spatial potential of the visual image – by which is meant, as Scott explains, not a “picture” but a “word, or phrase, or a complex of words or phrases which through a combination of what the words themselves signify with what their formal organization suggests, provokes or demands intense *visualization*.”<sup>38</sup> Poetry asserts itself not only as a text but also as a painting, “an artistic arrangement of signifiers”<sup>39</sup> – a structure that is able to promote some of the static, framed, sensual impact of the pictorial image.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Scott does not propose a constant comparative study of poetry and painting, vis-a-vis, but the exploration of the language's full visual potential used in certain kinds of literature. Poetry is obviously the most free, unrestrained, and very changeable literary mode, and it tends to reflect experiments and innovations more successfully than prose. With regards to my subject matter and the emphasis on blending the two arts, I am going to use mainly Scott's approach, although I may recourse to other approaches as well to achieve a sense of well-roundedness.

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35 Ibid.

36 Scott 19. My italics. Here we can see the theory turn away from Lessing's mimesis: in accord with post-Romantic thought, Scott's take on the theory tends towards the unity of the two arts.

37 Scott 2.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

Scott continues that plenty of commentators today tend to ignore the interrelationship between poetry and painting in the Romantic and Symbolist eras; they fail to see the creative links between the two arts as having been initiated so far back in the past – this is another reason I deemed it necessary to elaborate upon the history of *ut pictura poesis*. According to Wendy Steiner (who follows the argument of M.H. Abrams<sup>41</sup>), in the Romantic period, the chief art for comparison with literature was music.<sup>42</sup> Yet painting was, and continued to be, an influence on poetry since antiquity. As Scott's study shows, contrary to the generally held assumptions, the tendency of the two arts to intertwine escalated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in France. The study investigates not only this relationship but also analyzes the tiniest details of it. Scott uses prosodic theory to demonstrate the pictorialist aspirations of poetry as well as its musicality, and he even comes close to defining the spatial structure in avantgarde poems by Rimbaud and Mallarmé. His method of analysis combines structuralist analysis with semiotic approaches. And finally, Scott is also the one who proposes that Dante Gabriel Rossetti provides an example of the “sonneteer/painter *rapprochement*, not only because he wrote poems on his own pictures but also because of the close relationship between the structure of his poems and that of the paintings to which they refer.”<sup>43</sup> This remark immediately makes one think of the structure of *The Blessed Damozel*, both the poem and the painting. As much as the painting is divided into three sections (from top to bottom, the Damozel, the angels, the earthly lover), so is in fact the poem: the world of heaven, the world of earth, and the Damozel's inner world – at this point we ought not to forget that she is half celestial and half earthly.<sup>44</sup> Another division could be the world of the narrator, the world of the Damozel, and the world of the lover. The latter triad are their three voices, each manifesting itself in a different way: the Damozel's speech from the balcony in God's house; the narrator's detached, objective description of the scene; and the lover's commentaries in parentheses that intrude upon either the scene or the Damozel's monologue as if whispered in an aside, or merely thought. This feature is going to be discussed in due time.

Scott also touches upon the subject of Rossetti's sonnets which, according to him, can provide the poet with a tool to actually recreate, in poetic terms, a certain degree of the spatial unity of a painting.<sup>45</sup> For the sonnet, compact and self-contained as it is, with its tight structure and a regular beat, is the best container for a poetic visual image there is. Its structure also suggests a frame for a visual image, or a medallion which is probably the closest thing I can think of to compare a sonnet to. Sonnet can also

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41 M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Norton 1958) 50-51, 88-92.

42 Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1982) 14. Qtd in Scott 2.

43 Scott 79.

44 I shall elaborate more on this issue in Chapter IV.

45 Scott 79.

provide the poem with a sense of space, since it is basically a small, highly concentrated and condensed unit. I am going to deal with Rossetti's sonnets in another work.

While the French distorted and abolished syntax by endless modification, disguise, inversion, ellipsis, anacoluthon, or multiple insertion of parenthetical clauses or phrases, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was still very traditional, if not actually conservative, in the formal aspects of his poetry. There is no dispute about him being no great innovator, much less an experimenter, though avantgarde, at least within the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood group, he certainly was.<sup>46</sup>

Another subject that Scott treats with all seriousness is that of colour in poetry.<sup>47</sup> The French Symbolists in their poetic experiments endeavoured to unite not only pictures and poetry, but also prose syntax and music and colours with poetry, attempting the creation of some sort of a colour symphony. I shall give some attention to the question of colours as well, although I am well aware of the fact that the evocative potential of words, as far as colours as concerned, tends to be very subjective. This also turned out to be the stumbling block for Baudelaire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and enough of a hindrance for him to abandon his theory of colours. Yet in spite of the necessarily subjective views, an analysis of the chromatic phenomenon in this thesis may reveal some principles of how it may work, and then let any reader follow those principles and supply his or her own views on the matter.

To make a few concluding points before encroaching upon the next chapter, one of the most important issues raised in relation to *ut pictura poesis* is as follows: Lessing reformulated Horace's idea of the sister arts by stressing the static nature of the painted image as opposed to the temporal development characteristic of poetry. In this respect, he stresses the difference between the two arts and their autonomous status, as well as their basically mimetic nature. In his view, the objects (or bodies) are the proper subject of painting, whereas actions are the domain of poetry.<sup>48</sup> Although this does seem as though the two arts are divided and contained only within their own realms without pushing in across the boundaries of the other art, here comes the twist:

Bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They persist in time, and in each moment of their duration they may assume a different appearance, or stand in a different combination. Each of these momentary appearances and combinations is the result of a preceding one, and can be the cause of a

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46 Ibid 34.

47 Ibid 26-27.

48 Lessing 78, mentioned in Scott 6.

subsequent one, which means that it can be, as it were, the center of an action. Consequently, painting too can imitate actions, but only by suggestion through bodies. On the other hand, actions cannot exist independently, but must be joined to certain beings or things. Insofar as these beings or things are bodies (or treated as such), poetry also depicts bodies, but only by suggestion through actions.<sup>49</sup>

The key passage continues much in the same vein, bringing up the subject of using a single moment in poetry and painting: while painting can use only a single moment of an action (as everything depicted in a painting is static, frozen and immobilized), poetry can use only one single property of a body. Poetry, unlike the visual art, does not provide the viewer with an opportunity of surveying the whole visual composition at a glance. If the poet wants to put across a full picture, he must invariably resort to listing, and that, according to Lessing, cannot supply the effect of the whole visual image: “[...] it lies beyond the power of human imagination to picture to oneself what the composite effect of this mouth, this nose, and these eyes will be unless we can recall a similar composition of such parts from nature or art.”<sup>50</sup>

It does not follow, in my opinion, that a listing of objects as constituent parts of a picture-like composition fails as a visual spectacle. Consider John Keats' list of goods from “The Eve of St. Agnes” which is, moreover, one of the poems that had had an enormous influence on Rossetti and his Victorian version of the Romantic medievalism:<sup>51</sup>

“[...]  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Savarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.”<sup>52</sup>

This is a list of sweet things prepared by Porphyro for a feast for Madeline, stanza XXX. Even though it could be said that the best effect these sweets might have would be achieved if they were arranged in unity (in a heap, indeed), the listing of the individual ingredients, however, makes it seem as though the eye of a camera moves slowly in detail from one thing to another, emphasizing the

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49 Ibid 78.

50 Ibid 104.

51 Boos 121.

52 Selected and with an Introduction by Philip Levine, *The Essential Keats* (New York: The Ecco Press 1987) 56.

pleasure it gives one to pinch, handle, and taste “the round, smooth, jellied, spiced things.”<sup>53</sup> And as we go on reading, the composition of delicacies is slowly being uncovered – the eye examines the details one by one, just as it would do if it was a painted picture. Even if we saw the accumulation of sweets at once, we would be compelled to look at each separately anyway, so as to be actually able to contemplate the whole effect the heap of goods produces in us. I would argue that if one looks at a cluster of heterogenous details, one cannot see it as a whole unless he examines and considers each detail separately beforehand. Upon seeing a heap of fruit, one must first see what fruit is there, where e.g. the grapes are, in what light, how they are juxtaposed to the other fruit, what the proportion among them is, etc. What happens in reading the poem is essentially what happens in viewing a good painting. Says Benedetto Croce: “[W]e begin by observing particulars, moving from detail to visual detail, and end by seeing the whole. We begin in 'circumvision' and end in vision.”<sup>54</sup>

Even though one must agree with Lessing's claim that “poetry has no business in complete description”<sup>55</sup>, it is inevitable to concede that Keats' eloquent enumeration one by one of the delicacies is a transgression into the field of painters, especially as this argument is supported by Croce's view of the matter. Another example of pictorially conceived poetic scene involving itemization can be found in Hagstrum's *The Sister Arts*: according to him, the scene of Belinda at her toilet in Alexander Pope's “The Rape of the Lock” is richly pictorial, and “rococo.”<sup>56</sup> To wit, the words “unveil'd” and “display'd” (as well as “uncover'd” and so on) are seen as unmistakable hints that the scene is to be regarded as thought it were a work of visual art.<sup>57</sup> Hagstrum even claims that the scene could be annotated by references to actual paintings such as by Titian or Rubens:

And now, unveil'd, the *Toilet* stands display'd  
 Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.  
 First, robed in White, the Nymph intent adores  
 With Head uncover'd, the *Cosmetic* Pow'rs.  
 A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,  
 To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;  
 Th'inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
 Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
 Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here  
 From various Off'rings of the World appear;  
 From each side nicely culls with curious Toil,  
 And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.  
 This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
 And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.  
 The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,

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53 Boos 122.

54 Benedetto Croce, *La letteratura italiana del settecento* (Bari, Italy, 1949) 179. Qtd in Hagstrum 160.

55 Lessing 90.

56 Hagstrum 220-221.

57 Ibid 221.

Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.  
Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.  
Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;  
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,  
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,  
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face.<sup>58</sup>

The dominant manner of proceeding in the poem is not a narrative progress, but we move from scene to scene instead, or from detail to detail, as though we were in a gallery. Hagstrum in particular insists on “The Rape of the Lock” being predominantly a picture gallery with supporting comment and some narrative links.<sup>59</sup> And this cannot be argued against, I believe: the passage quoted above is replete with images and small objects which can be things for beauty's sake themselves – various Oriental boxes, Arabian perfumes, mirrors, gems, glittering and glowing and shiny things, pins, puffs, powders, etc, in some ways recalling Porphyro's feast for Madeline – or a few poems by Christina Rossetti which will be referred to in due time as well, though in a slightly different context.

This is the relation under a magnifying glass, and although it may not seem so at first, all these assumptions concerning the use of details in order to assemble a pictorial scene are indeed applicable to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry. Furthermore, Lessing also makes the following remark which, I think, can be successfully related to “The Blessed Damozel”, notwithstanding the theoretical gulf between Lessing's mimetic approaches and the 19<sup>th</sup> century expressive approaches of the Romantic era: “Painter intrudes into the domain of a poet if he combines in one and the same picture two points necessarily separated in time – like an action and reaction to that action.”<sup>60</sup> In the painting by Rossetti, we may spot several instances of actions separated by time. First, at the top of the painting, above the Damozel's head, the embracing couples are definitely the vision of the future reunion of the two lovers in the world beyond. The Damozel's eyes have a detached stare, meaning she is not “present”, her mind is wandering as if she were immersed in a day-dream, and her eyes are turned to some distant spot on an imaginary timeline, most likely to the future. (In the poem it is plain that both Damozel and her lover experience time differently, but only in terms of the duration of a single moment.<sup>61</sup>) Finally, the earth-bound lover at the bottom of the painting seems to represent the present moment, while his inner monologue in the poem<sup>62</sup> at times hints at remembering how her hair felt when brushing over his face, which is clearly a recourse into the past. Thus, there are two actions at once: the Damozel's

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58 Alexander Pope, “The Rape of the Lock”, Canto I, ii, 121-42. Qtd in Hagstrum 221.

59 Hagstrum 222.

60 Lessing 91.

61 On the subject of the treatment of time in “The Blessed Damozel” see Chapter IV.

62 Here we can see the cooperation of poetry and painting coming in.

reverie in Heaven, and the lover's contemplation in the material world, not to mention the “spatial” levels that already started to cooperate when examining the structure of painting along with the divisions within the poem. The poem, then, acts as a complement to the painting, and vice versa.

The theories of *ut pictura poesis* and their derivatives that I have delineated here will constitute the methodical backbone as well as background to my analysis with almost exclusive preference for Scott's structuralist/semiotic approaches and his challenging views upon the older theories developed by Lessing. My task is to exemplify the key ideas on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry. By doing so, I shall prove that the three selected poems present the point of convergence of the two arts, which not only makes them unique and valuable, but also embody a great deal of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic standpoints.

## CHAPTER III: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

*“The more materialistic science becomes, the more angels I will paint.”*

Edward Burne-Jones.<sup>63</sup>

### Introduction

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry is often characterized and catalogued under the heading of “Pre-Raphaelite poetry.” Many critics claim, though, that there is no such thing as “Pre-Raphaelitism” in

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<sup>63</sup> Qtd in Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (Cambridge, England, New York: Cambridge University Press 1981) 46.

poetry – that it is a term applicable to fine arts only.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite doctrines and stances is reflected so noticeably in Rossetti's poetry that it is necessary to provide a background on the movement in order to understand more fully the balance between his paintings and poetry, and the way both media interacted and overlapped.

### Painting and Influences

Rossetti and his circle (William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, the nuclear trio soon to be joined by other artists) were known in the world of art as the Pre-Raphaelites, or the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The group was established as a protest against the contemporary rules of academic painting which, to the young rebellious artists, seemed very restrictive: it promoted “a deep hostility to aesthetic experience, a disbelief that either the creation or the appreciation of art might involve spontaneity, richness, conviction, or personal vision.”<sup>65</sup> The academy was so particular in these rigid rules that they preferred stock ideas and subjects in painting, and even used conventional colours and prescribed figure arrangements. All these visual conventions and principles in art learned by rote indicated a certain degree of conventionalization of emotional life, which was exactly what the Brotherhood rebelled against.<sup>66</sup> Instead, they emphasized outline, colour, invention, nature and imagination, putting less stress on perspective and realism in drawing. As for the influences they were exposed to, their tastes were quite eclectic: the Pre-Raphaelites were greatly inspired by Venetian art much revered by John Ruskin (who connected colour and human passion in his account of Venetian art in *Modern Painters*)<sup>67</sup>, the German Nazarenes that lent their art “the hardness of outline, the stiffness of attitude [...] and Catholic sentiment,”<sup>68</sup> and provided the device of arranging the figures in a picture to fit an architectural framework, as in an altarpiece or a lunette.<sup>69</sup> The early Flemish painters in oil were another strong influence, from whom the Pre-Raphaelites borrowed their concentrated presentation of minutely observed details of texture and colour, as well as “the densely foliated foregrounds.”<sup>70</sup>

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64 Cecil Y. Lang, ed. *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) xi. Quoted in Trilby Busch Christensen, *Theme and Image: The Structure of D.G. Rossetti's House of Life*. A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate College of Ohio University In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, August 1972 (University Microfilms, A Xerox Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1972) 12.

65 Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts As Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press 1975) 126.

66 Stein 128.

67 J.B. Bullen, *The Pre-Raphaelite Body: Fear and Desire in Painting, Poetry, and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 102.

68 Bullen 28-30. The influence of Nazarenes is also discussed in Ford Madox Hueffer, *Rossetti: A Critical Essay on His Art* (London: Duckworth & Co., New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., year of publication not stated) 20n1. Hueffer regards them as “German Pre-Raphaelites.” Apart from their attempts to return to primitive methods of art and to revive spirituality in art by seeking inspiration in medieval and Renaissance art, the Nazarenes also lived in accordance with their doctrines: in monastic establishments under primitive conditions.

69 Stevenson 13.

70 Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 2008) 62; Nicolette

According to Richard L. Stein, the Pre-Raphaelites regarded the rigid approach of the Academy to art as “a by-product of the familiar domestic realism of most Victorian art,”<sup>71</sup> implying emotional flatness, boredom, and materialism at the expense of spirituality. The spiritual force of primitive art was felt to be able to convey a deeply felt conviction – which was the source of genuine art for the Pre-Raphaelites – and moreover to enable a visionary experience for the viewer.

### Mystery

The above is very important to keep in mind when approaching Rossetti, both his poetry and paintings, because for him, experience was the essential aspect of the interpretation of art. His goal is not any message or “truth”, moral or general or otherwise. Rossetti aims at intensity, an intense experience,<sup>72</sup> and the highest value of art is its abundance of ambiguity, allusiveness and magic that contribute to a sense of mystery.<sup>73</sup> We should never be able to disentangle this mystery. The work of art that cannot be interpreted conventionally and instead casts a spell upon the spectators, therefore generates an intense experience which is, in the words of R.L. Stein, “a condition he seeks throughout his poetry.”<sup>74</sup> It can be assumed, hence, that the way he wrote his poetry was much the same way as that in which he painted: aiming at complex clusters of symbols, meanings, and allusions, in order to create an effect of suggestive mystery. Therefore, the parallel between his paintings and poetry cannot be dismissed as simply accidental – the manner in which he handled both arts is the same.<sup>75</sup> The mysterious nature of many of Rossetti's poems and his use of the supernatural, the ethereal, the remote, the transcendental, and the states beyond the level of normal consciousness also account for the fact that Rossetti has often been regarded as a mystic. In Max Nordau's catalogue of “degenerates”, called *Degeneration*, Rossetti is placed under the heading of Mysticism.<sup>76</sup> Michael Edward Greene in his study of Rossetti's aesthetics generally agrees with Rossetti being a mystic,

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Gray, *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves* (London: Faber and Faber, n.d.) 19.

71 Stein 130.

72 Even for Keats, according to G.H. Ford, intensity was a fundamental quality in art. George H. Ford, *John Keats and the Victorians: A Study of His Influence and Rise to Fame 1821-1895* (New Haven, Yale University Press; London, Milford: Oxford University Press 1944) 119.

73 Stein 132.

74 Ibid.

75 Many of Rossetti's sonnets on pictures, both his or other painters', begin with the capitalized word “Mystery.” R.L. Stein maintains that the word is deliberately mysterious and ambiguous, and therefore stands for the mystery of art per se. Ibid 133.

76 Max Nordau, *Degeneration*. Translated from the Second Edition of the German Work with an Introduction by George L. Mosse (New York: Howard Fertig 1968) 86. Quoted in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel: The Unpublished Manuscript Texts and Collation, with an introduction by Paul Franklin Baum* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1937) 1.

Rossetti as a mystic is also mentioned in Ronnalie Joanne Roper Howard, *The Poetic Development of Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1847-1872*. A Thesis in English Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, June 1968. (University Microfilms, A Xerox Company, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1970) 11.

adding that Rossetti emphasized in particular “the vague mystique inherent in feminine beauty.”<sup>77</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, however, did not originate merely as a reaction against the Royal Academy of Art and Sir Joshua Reynolds, although it is true that their strong opposition against the state of contemporary art touched off the rebellious gesture of creating a Brotherhood. It was also a response to the contemporary taste at large that advocated a certain set of values which privileged “the active, the material, and the reasonable at the expense of the non-material, and the intuitive.”<sup>78</sup>

### Medievalism and archaism

However, several other aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood also deserve to be mentioned. First of all, Stein stresses that the name “Pre-Raphaelite” was not supposed to mean a return to the principles of art before Raphael, but that it was “a revolt against the academic practice of 'borrowing' an elegant style or subject from Raphael or any other officially authorized master.”<sup>79</sup> It may be objected that the medieval masters provided the Pre-Raphaelites with a style as well – on the other hand, the art of the Brotherhood blended so many influences that the resulting style was quite unique and unprecedented. In this regard, the Pre-Raphaelites stopped relying so much on imitation and instead cultivated ways of expression of genuine emotional states; it was in a way a revival of strong feelings as the basis of art. The reason they revered the Middle Ages and often turned to it – both in search of topic, inspiration, or in the case of Rossetti, language and diction – was their admiration for medieval theme of love, its delicacy and intimacy, personal quality and, last but not least, the religious iconography and allusions.<sup>80</sup>

### “Damozele”

An illustrative example of Rossetti's archaism that inevitably brings with it a whole batch of medievalistic associations could be the word from the very first poem I shall analyze: *Damozele*.

The word “*damozele*” from the eponymous poem was chosen deliberately for sounding medieval. As Paul Franklin Baum notes, “*damozele*” occurs in Spenser and in the King James Bible, and it was a quite common word in the 16th and 17th century. Rossetti used the word several times in his translations from the Early Italian Poets as a deliberate archaism.<sup>81</sup>

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77 Michael Edward Greene, *A Study of D. G. Rossetti's Poetry and Aesthetic*. Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English, Indiana University, December 1969 (University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1970) 52-53 n46.

78 Bullen 192.

79 Stein 130.

80 Ibid 128.

81 Baum xiv, Lafcadio Hearn, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets: lectures by Lafcadio Hearn*, Selected and Edited with an Introduction

Hearn, in turn, offers an etymological background for the word which is not absolutely relevant for the present purposes but, as he says, to understand it means we may understand the “great art with which the poem was arranged.”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, it reinforces the reading of the poem in terms of a medieval castle: The Heaven being an actual castle is indicated by God's rampart, with the Queen being naturally the Virgin Mary and the King being Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup> The five handmaidens' names fit into this framework as particularly favourite names commonly given to daughters of respectable families. Instead of a landscape with royal gardens, this castle is surrounded by the very universe, its ethers and incenses. And finally, the Damozel herself can be read a servant of the Mother of God wearing a badge of distinction in the form of the white rose, etc.<sup>84</sup> Hearn's exquisite interpretation clicks with the medieval mood of the poem. This particular mood is conveyed not only through imagery but also through various references: the robe of the Damozel, “ungirt from clasp to hem” and completely free of any embellishments, is a dress of the thirteenth century. Hearn particularly notes that in French religious pictures, angels and heavenly souls are depicted as dressed in a robe that falls straight from neck to feet: this is exactly the kind of robe the Damozel is wearing. Some of the medieval mood is also contained in the archaic language (e.g. “herseemed” or “albeit” which in Hearn's opinion is obsolete<sup>85</sup>) as well as in the notion of “tides of day and night” as successions independent of the sun. The references to the citherns and citoles add to the medieval castle setting – they are instruments from the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.<sup>86</sup> What Hearn says about the word “Damozel”, however, is no less interesting. The word “Damozel” is the quaint equivalent of modern French “demoiselle” which signifies a young lady.<sup>87</sup> According to him,

the Old French *damoiseil* (later *damoiseau*) signified a young lad of noble birth or knightly parentage, employed in a noble house as page of squire. Originally there was no feminine form; but afterwards the form *damoselle* came into use, signifying a young lady in the corresponding capacity. Thus Rossetti in choosing the old English form *damozel* selected perhaps the only

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by John Erskine, Professor of English, Columbia University (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company 1922) 34. Also noticed by J.N. Hobbs as resonating with archaic quaintness and diffusing the air of medieval romance. John Nelson Hobbs, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 1967 (University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan) 38.

82 Hearn 33.

83 In the “Song of Roland”, the angels and the saints are spoken of as knights and ladies, while the language they use is that of chivalry. Ibid 23.

84 Ibid 21ff.

85 Ibid 22.

86 Hearn adds that “cithern” and “citole” are words derived from the Latin *cithara* which is a harp. Hearn 32. The two ancient instruments are not exactly anywhere near “a harp” but they are stringed and definitely obsolete.

Moreover, a cithara is also a Biblical instrument: King David is often depicted with a cithara with which he relieved Saul of an evil spirit. C.M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006) 81.

87 Hearn 21.

possible word which could exactly express the position of the Damozel in heaven, as well as the medieval conception of heaven.<sup>88</sup>

By virtue of the word's impregnation with medieval meanings, Rossetti places his Damozel square into the middle of a balladic, vaguely medieval setting. (Historical time is obliterated in the poem, so it is impossible to pin down the approximate century.) The word also identifies her as an enchanted figure, spiritual and remote. He could have used "maiden", though, but it is plain to see the reason of preferring "Damozel" - it connotes elegance, nobility, the sublime, exaltation, and therefore it makes her a proper object for worship from down below, just like one would worship the Virgin Mary. As it will be shown later on, the partial identification of an exalted figure of an empyrean, Beatrice-like lady with a Marian figure is an essential feature of Rossetti's poetry in general.

The word "Damozel" was also chosen for other reasons – associative ones to which even the less educated can respond. In particular, the word is said to awaken in the consciousness of an English reader the idea of "slim, noble ladies in the tapestries of old castles, of haughty Norman knights in mail, of something remote, ancient, half forgotten; 'damozel' carries back the contemporary beloved into the mysterious depths of the Middle Ages and spiritualizes her into the enchanted figure of a ballad."<sup>89</sup> The word also suggests noble blood and noble origin – perhaps even aristocracy, or any elevated rank.<sup>90</sup>

### Ruskin and Pater

So much for Rossetti's deliberate archaisms. It has been said that the Pre-Raphaelites gave their art a distinctly medieval colouring. Nevertheless, they also carried out in their art the principles of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters I and II*. These volumes, to which William Holman Hunt introduced Rossetti, are dedicated "to the landscape artist of England" and, apart from promoting naturalism and truth in painting, they praise "purism" of the Italian painters of the Middle Ages.<sup>91</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites responded in their desire for art to express moral and philosophic responsibility, to give the finest moments in history a fresh form, to embody spiritual truths, and – what Ruskin saw Turner as achieving – to fuse different kinds of reality, distinct levels of perception, and various modes of artistic

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88 Ibid 33-34.

89 Baum lii.

90 Rossetti's archaisms and at times extraordinarily obscure diction are examined in a greater detail in R.M. Cooper's *Lost on Both Sides*. Cooper calls these unusual words "stunners" and claims that there is at least one "stunner" in every poem – these expressions are said to bestow upon the poetry a particular Rossetti flavour. Examples that Cooper has collected, range from *southron, furze, sea-wold, writhen, osier-odored, galiot, auroral, guerdoning, malisons, gonfalon* to Latinisms such as *refluent, confluence, philtred euphrasy, choral consonancy* or "the jaw breaking" *multiform circumfluence manifold*. R.M. Cooper, *Lost on Both Sides: Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Critic and Poet* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1970) 216-217.

91 Stein 121.

style within one picture. This blend of various aesthetic impulses and expressive modes is the essence of Rossetti's painting and poetry, and must be taken into consideration when approaching his poetic works. Walter Pater in his essay on Rossetti in *Appreciations* refers to the "grotesque" quality of Rossetti's combinations of natural and supernatural effects in his poetry. According to Pater, Rossetti's poetry was unique for his "gift of transparency in language – the control of a style which did but obediently shift and shape itself to the mental motion, as a well-trained hand can follow on the tracing paper the outline of an original drawing below it."<sup>92</sup> The "transparency of language" is what I consider to be one of the prominent features of Rossetti's poems.

### Poetic Influences: Keats and Blake

A crucial aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism in poetry are the influences that shaped the movement. Except for Ruskin, the dominant influence was John Keats and his picturesque, medieval poetry. The Pre-Raphaelites began by borrowing Keatsian subjects and themes in painting – especially his decorative quality, sensuality, love of detail and reverence for the past: later on, Keats crawled into their poetry as well. Rossetti's early poems are, to an experienced reader, definitely saturated with something of Keats' poetic mannerisms, his medievalism, magic and religiosity. This matter has been investigated by several critics, especially by George H. Ford in *Keats and the Victorians*, but the influence of Keats is also discussed in direct relation to the Pre-Raphaelite fine arts in John Nicoll's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*.<sup>93</sup> Keats has been paired with the Pre-Raphaelites since 1848 as though they were a closed corporation, though the Pre-Raphaelites used Keats mainly as their basic point of departure after which their individual ways inevitably split.<sup>94</sup>

It is not necessary to go into details about Keats' influence on Pre-Raphaelites but certain points ought to be mentioned since they might be of use in the analysis of Rossetti's poems. As Florence Saunders Boos notes in *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study*, Rossetti admired Keats particularly for his "high coloration, the woman-in-trance motif, medievalism, intensity, use of dramatic ballad [...]."<sup>95</sup> In his poetry, Rossetti used abundantly all of these, as will be shown presently. Apart from these "Keatsian" colours, the affinity of Rossetti's poetry with his paintings has been also

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92 Qtd in Stein 125.

93 See George H. Ford, *John Keats and The Victorians: A Study of His Influence and Rise to Fame 1821-1895* (New Haven, Yale University Press; London, Milford: Oxford University Press 1944); and John Nicoll, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975) 45-48.

94 Ford 108.

95 Boos 5. The above listed traits are also said to be characteristic of Coleridge whose influence on Rossetti has been often neglected or undermined. Coleridge does not use as many descriptive adjectives in his ballad as Keats in his narratives; however, both were equally influential on Rossetti, which Boos shows by standing side by side lines 277-81 from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and stanza 4 of Rossetti's "The Card Dealer." Ibid.

The influences of John Keats are also briefly discussed in Greene 38.

compared to that of Blake's: "The quality of Rossetti's work, like Blake's, derives from the inseparability of his talents: in many ways, his pictures tend to be poems in paint, and his poems (because of their intense pictorial details) tend to be pictures."<sup>96</sup> This statement is yet another rehash of the well-known; yet the comparison with Blake is fundamental and certainly to the point. The points of contact between Blake and Rossetti are indeed manifold: they stressed outline, colour and invention in their fine arts, admired Raphael, Dante and earlier artists; they embraced a pious, yet unorthodox and comparatively unconventional sort of religion; they were fascinated by the Bible's examples and visions, and emphasized imagination.<sup>97</sup> This is not to suggest that theirs were parallel, if not identical, approaches to art; but the comparison is appropriate, especially as Rossetti was drawing heavily from Romanticism. Florence Boos maps out a full scope of Rossetti's influences, ranging from his namesake Dante Alighieri, through Poe, Blake, Coleridge, Tennyson, Meredith, to Leigh Hunt and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and, last but not least, the French Symbolists and Wilde whom Rossetti influenced,<sup>98</sup> to name but a few.<sup>99</sup>

### Tennyson

A particularly intriguing – and decidedly underestimated – streak of influence is that of coming from Tennyson, especially from his rendition of the Arthurian legend in *The Idylls of the King* from the 1850s on. This epic poem originated in the renewed interest in the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. During the Romantic period, the national revival did not leave Britain untouched; the British empire was linked with the legendary Camelot which was an empire as well, and people were looking back, looking for a national legend deep in the vague annals of Saxon history – a legend they could relate to and claim as their own. That was the reason why Malory was rediscovered and the tale was later on retold by the Poet Laureate. Tennyson's version of the Arthurian legend became in fact legendary itself; he took great pains to portray Arthur as a perfect being, especially since "Arthur" was the given name of his friend Arthur Hallam. In Tennyson, therefore, the Pre-Raphaelites acquired what later on surfaced in their own art: mystery, visions, romance of chivalry, sorcery, love, wizardry, magical rituals, celestial bodies, the New Jerusalem, beautiful women, divinity, religious allusions, knights, heroic battles, dreams, visions, deaths, colour symbolism (the red glow of the Holy Grail<sup>100</sup>). Besides, King Arthur is something of a Christ figure – he comes and goes, and since the

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96 Robert M. Seller, ed. *The Book of Beautiful: Walter Pater and the House of Macmillan* (London & New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press 1999) 18.

97 Boos 267.

98 I included the French Symbolists and Aesthetics among Rossetti's influences, mainly because back-reading sheds a new light on Rossetti's work. Besides, Nordau in *Degeneration* clearly delineates the succession of these movements by stating that "Pre-Raphaelitism in England degenerated into 'aestheticism' and in France into 'symbolism.'" Nordau 99. If we take his view on the matter for granted, we may consider the Pre-Raphaelites as the forefathers of both movements.

99 Boos 259-286; Blake is discussed on pages 266-269.

100 Red colour has been used in the Middle Ages to symbolize light. John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from*

circumstances of his death are unclear, he might as well come again some day. His origin is given as mythical in Tennyson – he arrived on a ship from the sea and will return to the sea. (Here the ship symbolism in Tennyson comes in.) Arthur's vocation as a warrior for a noble cause was certainly appealing as well. At any rate, the Pre-Raphaelites were enchanted by the legend, its medieval setting and Christian mysticism that it is small wonder that some of Tennyson's *Idylls* seeped into the Pre-Raphaelite (especially visual<sup>101</sup>) art, though it may be somewhat difficult to trace Tennyson in Rossetti's poetry.<sup>102</sup> But neither can we with any certainty trace other poets, as a matter of fact, perhaps with the exception of the aforesaid John Keats.

### “The Last Romantic”

Rossetti was known for making a point of his own originality and was forever carefully disguising any possible influences of other poets so as not to be perceived as derivative.<sup>103</sup> Yet, to say that the coloration of Rossetti's early poetry is most likely Keatsian or Tennysonian is not wide off the mark.<sup>104</sup> This is probably one of the good reasons why Rossetti is frequently called “the Last Romantic.”<sup>105</sup> He is either described as a “Victorian Romantic”, “one of the Last Romantics”, or a “failed Romantic”, precisely for his having carried on the Romantic tradition of his predecessors.<sup>106</sup> The medieval world, a consistently Romantic theme, as created by the Pre-Raphaelites, is after all only the Victorian version of the Middle Ages,<sup>107</sup> not genuine or true, but permeated by their own times, the temporal context and also by the works other poets that explored this terrain before them. As Joan Reeds points out in *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression*, the Middle Ages provided the artists with an opportunity to fill in for what the Pre-Raphaelites missed in their own increasingly commercial and mechanized world that would eventually end up in the degeneration and decadence of the *fin-de-siecle* culture: “through colours they could provide the richness that industrial landscapes were destroying, through the use of closely observed detail they could sharpen their senses and sensibilities [...]”<sup>108</sup>

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*Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993) 26, 52-3, 56, 58-61. Qtd in Woolgar 167.

101 See for instance J.A Grimshaw's, J.W. Waterhouse's, W. H. Hunt's, A. Hughes', and Rossetti's “The Lady of Shallot”, Rossetti's “The Heart of the Night”, “Mariana in the South”, “Sir Galahad”; J.E. Millais' “Locksley Hall”, “St. Agnes Eve”, “The Beggar Maid”, “Mariana”; A. Hughes' “Sir Galahad” and “Lady Godiva.”

Ed.by Jim Cheshire with Essays by Julia Thomas, Colin Ford, Leonee Ormond, Ben Stoker and John Lord, *Tennyson Transformed: Alfred Lord Tennyson and Visual Culture* (Surrey: Lund Humphries, 2009).

102 Though keeping in mind the Arthurian legend whilst reading “The Blessed Damozel”, the interpretation of the poem may greatly benefit from it. See Chapter IV.

103 Boos 259, Baum xxxv.

104 “The Blessed Damozel” and “My Sister's Sleep” are included in Ford's list of Rossetti's “Keatsian” poems; I am going to deal with both in Chapter IV and VI. Ford 122-123. Qtd in Boos 5.

105 David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983) 112.

Christensen 13.

106 Riede 112.

107 Friedman 306.

108 Rees 12. Also mentioned in Roper 10.

Yet, Riede concedes that even Keats' medieval romances are often described as escapist poetry, such as “Isabella”, “Lamia”,

And medieval taste in particular favoured vivid, bright colours.<sup>109</sup> By depicting medieval scenes, settings and imagery, Rossetti showed his disregard for the contemporary scene. The world of his poetry seems to be far removed from the images of industrialized, urban societies that were presented in the works of Hardy, Eliot, Dickens or Thackeray,<sup>110</sup> but in his case, I dare say, it was not so much an escapist gesture than his eternal pursuit of beauty in an increasingly decaying and declining world. Though artistically “living” in the Middle Ages, Rossetti sure did not entirely lose touch with the contemporary times: a great deal of his later poetry reflects contemporary concerns, if in a disguise – prostitution in “Jenny”, the emerging aestheticism, the re-evaluation of the gender distinction, etc. Some of his latest pieces, very little known, even betray the decay and darkness of the age in their imagery. Most importantly, his medieval poetry is to be read on the backdrop of the Victorian period, so as to be fully understood and appreciated. The quote by Burne-Jones, one of the most faithful followers of Rossetti and his immediate successor<sup>111</sup>, that introduces this chapter is therefore most fitting.

## CHAPTER IV: “The Blessed Damozel”: The Coloured

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and most importantly for the Pre-Raphaelites as it was their particular favourite, “The Eve of St. Agnes.” 121. Also briefly discussed in Christensen 52 in connection to Sonnet VI, “The Kiss”, from *The House of Life*.

109 Woolgar 159. Bright, clear, and plain colours, moreover, were associated with truth and righteousness in the Middle Ages. Ibid 163.

110 Christensen 17.

111 Gray 49.

# World of the Pre-Raphaelite Poetry.

*“Que frole une harpe par l’Ange  
Formee avec son vol du soir  
Pour la delicate phalange”<sup>112</sup>*

## Introduction

A considerable bulk of critical material has been written about “The Blessed Damozel” but a surprisingly small number of the studies deal directly with the relationship of the painting of the poem and the poem itself from the point of view of their symbiotic interrelation. It is true that the poem is interesting in many respects, though to me, the pictorial aspect of the poem is the most striking one. In the following analysis I am going to examine various facets of the poem: its prosody, scansion, colours, atmosphere and mood, the characters, and also the picture itself to prove that both media – the poem and the picture – necessarily cooperate in generating a full interpretation and understanding of the poem.

The poem has been described as “one of the most pictorial of his early poems [...] it reads very much as if it were a longer, dramatic narrative poem on a painting by one of the early Renaissance painters – Northern, or perhaps Italian – whom [Rossetti] and other members of the PRB so admired.”<sup>113</sup> “The Blessed Damozel” is a poem laced with music, colours, and details of pious atmosphere in such a manner that it makes it a truly exquisite poem. In Stedman's words,

yielding to [the poem's] melody and illumination, we are bathed in the rich colours of an abbey-window and listen to the music of choristers, chanting from some skyey, hidden loft.<sup>114</sup> [...] He knows exactly what effect he desires, and produces it by a firm stroke of colour, a beam of light, a single musical tone.<sup>115</sup>

The goal of this chapter is, therefore, to examine just that, discussing and analyzing the poem's sensual potentials in a very detailed way, with a particular focus on the visual component.

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112 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, translated, and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 43.

113 Helsinger 45.

114 Edmund Clarence Stedman, *Victorian Poets (Revised, and Extended, by a Supplementary Chapter, to the Fiftieth Year of the Period Under Review)* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893) 362.

115 Stedman 361.

## Stanza

“The Blessed Damozel” uses an extended ballad stanza with an A-B-C-B-D-B rhyme scheme.<sup>116</sup> The stresses are distributed in an iambic tetrameter, alternating between four- and three-beat lines, as it is the custom in such quatrains. The ballad stanza, albeit extended, may appear at first sight to have been an odd choice for the poem, since ballads, especially the traditional folk ballads, are generally known for certain properties that indeed make them “ballads” in the full sense of the word.

In the ballad, a great emphasis is on speech, as well as on deeds rather than words, which drives the plot onward. The diction is usually quite simple, without any unnecessary ornamentation: merely the bare bones of the plot. If there happens to be a “colourful” world among these strictly functional words, it stands out quite remarkably and its meaning and associative powers are thus strongly emphasized. In this respect, the ballad tends to aspire towards the dramatic genre.<sup>117</sup> The ballad also produces stereotypes, resembling in their description crimes reported in the newspaper – in fact, characters in the ballad are more like actors than spectators; their inner world is obliterated, there is no place for being subjective or personal, and action is the main purpose of the ballad; and everything else that appears in the ballad supports the action. But on the other hand, ballads are also said to function like “templates”, or formulas, for common life situations,<sup>118</sup> but removed from the constraints of everyday life and relocated into a romantically distant realm – and whatever little plot goes on in “The Blessed Damozel,” is really located in such a realm, though the realm is distinctly medieval: sometime in the time before Raphael, somewhere in the heaven of Dante.<sup>119</sup>

In connection to Rossetti's interest in ballad subjects and Christian subjects, in *A Study of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Poetry and Aesthetics*, Greene makes a mention of stained glass. Though I shall elaborate on the subject of stained glass and its aesthetics later on, Greene's observation is worth considering at this point, for old ballads and Christianity with its associations are closely intertwined. Rossetti is said to have associated the Bible in general with the Middle Ages, or – more precisely - with the image of the Middle Ages as he created it for himself. Greene states he linked the Scriptures “with medieval saints, with the bright colours and rectangularities of stained-glass windows, and with the innocence of faith.”<sup>120</sup> The appeal of the religious and the innocent is frequently present in old ballads: they typically feature simplicity in meter, subject, situation, dialogue, narrative method, emotion, and

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116 The same meter is used in “The Card Dealer.”

117 Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961) 36.

118 Friedman 19, 50-51, 60.

119 Hearn 21.

120 Greene 63.

diction. They are atemporal, non-historical, and based on stereotypes. Yet their overall effect is strikingly strong – because of this simplicity, the balladic form aspires towards the dramatic genre.<sup>121</sup> And, most importantly, old ballads are frequently closely tied with Christianity. They act out Christian morality and justice, principles and traditions. Sometimes they may even act out New Testament parables to showcase the omnipotent and omnipresent Divine Justice. After all, the purpose of the traditional ballad is to present a story of human folly in conflict with moral rules. In “The Blessed Damozel”, however, the Christian association overrules the other implications suggested by the ballad genre. Rossetti’s fondness of the old ballad is also discussed in Hobbs.<sup>122</sup>

Moreover, it appears to me that the extended ballad stanza fits the poem in some sense. The A-B-C-B-D-B structure, as compared to the traditional ballad stanza, produces an effect of progression (or action – which in a ballad stanza is generated by words), of a movement within a static structure. The stasis is represented by the B-rhymes. These frame the progression from A to C to D. “The Blessed Damozel” can be regarded as a rather static poem, though there are marks of movement within it, both in rhyme scheme, as I have just showed, and in the meaning. All that happens in it is mainly the soliloquy of the damozel concerning her imaginative future and her yearning lover left behind in the world of the living. According to Hagstrum, “the pictorial in a verbal medium necessarily involves the reduction of motion to stasis or something suggesting such a reduction. It need not eliminate motion entirely, but the motion allowed to remain must be viewed against the basic motionlessness of the arrangement.”<sup>123</sup>

Therefore, I believe the poem may indeed qualify as a picture in words. There is no change in the scene, everything happens in one moment and within one scene. Yet it is very important to know that the details of the scenery move (moon sinking, hair falling, the damozel leaning forward and changing her posture occasionally, angels flying, lilies nodding) but they never leave their proper location, as if they were *painted* upon the scene. These movements are tiny, imperceptible – compared to normal motion, these movements are what tinkling is to normal sound, or glittering to normal light. It is almost like a picture come alive for a moment (the moment could be the temporal length of the poem), with all the painted details and decorations set in their momentary motion – the painted moon is allowed to sink, the hair falls, the lilies nod. All these minimal motions take place within the fixed setting. The structural potentialities of the ballad stanza therefore fit this aspect of the poem: the B-rhymes (stasis) correspond to the unchangeable scene, or backdrop, that frames the action, while the

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121 Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press 1932) 6.

122 Hobbs 85-88.

123 Hagstrum, “Introduction”, xxii.

progression of A-C-D rhymes (tiny motions) correspond to the living details that flutter and dance without virtually leaving the scene.

### The Painting and the Poem

M.E. Greene in his study of Rossetti's poetry connects the static quality of Rossetti's paintings and poetry with the artistic goal of suggesting a very intense, yet completely static, emotion – an emotion that deserves to be called “tension”, that is at its climax and needs to be fixed, summarized and contained forever.<sup>124</sup> “The Blessed Damozel” is precisely a case in point. Even its pictorial counterpart expresses a very tense moment – the liminal figure of the damozel, depicted in the upper part of the tri-partite picture, is leaning against the golden bar with an almost ballet-like deliberateness,<sup>125</sup> with an absent expression and dreamy eyes with half-closed eyelids, her mouth slightly open as if in a deep thought that makes her forget herself completely; while her lover in the picture's predella is painted in a tense posture, staring upwards with a serious expression. By the same token, the poem's emotional charge seems to culminate in the final stanza with the damozel weeping – this is a very jarring moment and seems to last very long, probably on account of the lover's comment about having heard her tears. The act of her weeping, then, is not restricted merely to constitute a dramatic gesture, but it is also present in the perception of the lover. In fact, both characters are engaged in this last scene, she weeping above, him listening down below – we can only imagine the sound of her tears coming down to the Earth, the way her voice did in a previous stanza, “like the voice of the stars / Had when they sang together.” This contrasts strongly with the implied joy of the singing stars.<sup>126</sup> Ergo, by employing both the damozel and her lover and uniting them in a scene with the vast space between them – just like the painting with its predella – the picture is completed. We may now stand back and contemplate the overall effect.

The picture also offers multiple perspectives due to its three parts – the damozel, the surrounding saints representing the wide, unbridgeable gulf between her and her lover, thus enhancing the sense of separation and longing, and finally the narrator/lover down below. So does the poem, however. The damozel's speech and thoughts are clearly distinguished from the rest of the poem by their being enclosed in quotation marks, whereas the lover's comments upon the damozel's speech are within parentheses. The rest of the poem is a straight narrative.<sup>127</sup> The narrator omnisciently looks upon the

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124 Greene 60-61.

125 Hobbs 38.

126 Hearn links this allusion to a Biblical verse, “when the morning stars sang together.” Hearn 25. Though he does not refer to the location of the verse in the Bible, I suppose it must be a verse from Job 38:7-8: “while the morning stars sang together, and all the angels shouted for joy?” NIV, the “morning stars” and “angels” meaning the “sons of God.” The morning stars sang for joy when God laid the foundations of the earth.

127 The narrator, according to Helsinger, might be either the lover, or the lover and the narrator are identical, and the comments

whole situation and matter-of-factly describes what he “sees” - and his is the power of surveying the whole scene and narrate it from the position of a beholder.<sup>128</sup> Rossetti uses these three levels of narration as framing devices that contribute a great deal to the division of the poem into its three distinctive parts – which are, though, still contained within one compact picture. (Consider the Holy Trinity, the Three in One; this may serve as a helpful image in comprehending “The Blessed Damozel.”) The three parts of the poem correspond with the three parts of the picture in these clear divisions; but that is definitely not the only link that relates the two media.

### Time

Another link is that between the fundamentally static quality of the painting and the given temporal properties of the poem. Time is experienced differently in Heaven and on Earth. No wonder; the main action of the poem takes place in Heaven which is depicted as a far-off place that is half mysterious, half fantastical and supernatural. From the allusions to Mother Mary, God, and Jesus Christ, as well as the angels and Mary's saintly handmaidens,<sup>129</sup> we can deem it a Christian – more specifically, Catholic – heaven, although the poem is by no means a religious one, especially if compared to other poems I am going to analyze, for instance “My Sister's Sleep.” The state of “blessedness” is what precedes becoming a saint; thus the assumption that the heaven is a Catholic one is quite correct. Nevertheless, the third and fourth stanzas make it quite clear what time feels like in such a place. What is one day on Earth is ten years to the damozel: a hardly imaginable configuration.

This fact sparked off plenty of half-mocking criticism on Rossetti's treatment of time in the poem. The argument is that if the damozel's day was ten years on Earth, then she would not have to wait very long for her lover to join her in Heaven. Therefore, there is no real reason for her to mourn her living lover, if it would take but a few days (in her temporal settings in which her day would amount to twenty to thirty years on Earth) for him to die. On the other hand, though, the temporal perception of the deprived lover on earth is touchingly expressive of the time passing very slowly for him so that a day seems to last as long as a whole year: “Ten years of years”, Hearn points out, “are years composed not of three hundred and sixty-five days, but of three hundred and sixty-five *years*.”<sup>130</sup>

This aspect of the poem has been also criticized by Max Nordau in *Degeneration*.<sup>131</sup> Nordau's

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in parentheses are distinguished from the “straight” narration as dramatic “asides”, emotional outbreaks of the narrator that interrupts (though in *sotto-voce*, as it were) the otherwise emotionless and unconcerned narrative. Helsing 47.

128 More or less the same has been pointed out by Helsing 46.

129 I am going to treat the subject of the handmaidens separately later on.

130 Hearn 23. Italics mine.

131 Nordau 88-89. Qtd also in Baum lii.

*Degeneration* has been in turn criticised as detestable for its “nasty-minded positivistic puritanism and its pseudoscientific pretentiousness”<sup>132</sup>: in any case, the validity of this work of criticism is entirely dependent on the cultural context of the end of the century and should be understood as such. Nordau, however, condemns Rossetti's “ten years of years” as a thoroughly mystical computation<sup>133</sup> pointing to Rossetti's deranged imagination in which there exists a sort of higher order of year: one which is composed of 365 years.<sup>134</sup> The greatest mistake that Nordau makes, I am afraid, is that he takes these numbers literally: in my view, they were doubtlessly incorporated into the poem not for the sake of their numerical value, but as a hyperbolic, exaggerated expression of the soreness of the earthly lover's longing. George Y. Trail, for a change, regards the Damozel's treatment of time as an indication of still not being a part of Heaven yet, precisely because she is still thinking in terms of calendar time.<sup>135</sup>

### Space

At the same time, even the perception of space is accordingly distorted - “By God built over the sheer depth / The which is Space begun; / So high, that looking downward thence / She scarce could see the sun.” The whole impression of these scarcely imaginable spatial and temporal settings is that of general stasis. It seems as though nothing ever moves up in Heaven, that everything takes place in slow motion as if under water: in quiet, outside of earthly time and space, in an unimaginably immense space in which time runs at a pace not sustainable for mortals. This, to me, seems like a painterly technique – and a thorough analysis of the individual details in their succession may actually prove that Rossetti does indeed employ such a technique. This excludes the “normal” earthly time of the predella, though. Given the binary opposition of the poem and the painting, the actual opposition of the painting and its predella, and the physical distance between the Damozel and the lover, it may seem as though the “poem” really takes place in the scene of the predella where the lover and the narrator can be located, and its task is to describe what happens above. This is, of course, quite wrong: the narrator cannot be restricted to the predella only; if this were so, then he would be unable to “see” what is going on in Heaven, nor what it is like up there.

As far as spatial concerns of the poem go, we could say that all the composite parts of it coexist within

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132 Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Professor Emeritus Hunter College of the City of New York, *Religious Trends in English Poetry, Volume V: 1880-1920: Gods of A Changing Poetry* (New York and London: Columbia University Press 1962) 161.

133 Nordau 88.

134 Ibid 89.

135 George Y. Trail, “Time in ‘The Blessed Damozel’”, from *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 2, Vol 1 (May 1981), Ed and with an introduction by Harol Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities Yale University, *Modern Critical Views: Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (New Haven, New York, Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers 1986) 46.

the poem. They never disappear from the places assigned to them, nor are they modified in any particularly noticeable way. Lessing in *Laocoön* points out that “succession in time is the province of the poet, coexistence in space that of the artist.”<sup>136</sup> Although in “The Blessed Damozel” there definitely *is* temporal succession – the progress of the damozel's inner monologue, interlaced with the thoughts of her lover down below – there is also a high degree of coexistence. Whatever is described in the poem never leaves it. It is contained in it just like in a painting. Moreover, David Scott's comment (possibly inspired by Lessing) that “objects were the proper subject of painting, actions the subject of poetry; painting imitates actions only through forms and images, poetry describes objects but only indirectly through actions,”<sup>137</sup> is none the less relevant for “The Blessed Damozel.” For the poem considerably lacks direct action; everything that happens takes place mainly on the mental level. The picture, I dare say, may stimulate the viewer to imagine action even slightly more than the poem. There is a sense that hangs over the picture of things about to start happening any minute – the tension is literally visible. But whatever action has been happening or is about to start, is arrested in mid-motion. Likewise, the text – with its rhyme scheme – is in the state of dynamic stasis. The main difference, however, is that all the action that does take place is reduced to a few small movements, as I have remarked at the opening of this chapter – the angels flying, lilies nodding, moon sinking. The poem essentially furnishes the picture with the sense of motion it appears to need in order to relieve the tension that surrounds it, while the poem creates other tensions on its own – especially as there is very little happening physically, and the expectation of something about to happen that radiates from the painting is generally not fulfilled. It is not a failed expectation, quite the opposite: by withholding any action from happening, the poem only enhances the picture's tension and doubles the emotional response from the viewer and reader. The picture and the poem are therefore in a symbiotic, harmonic relationship. They cooperate, complement, and intensify one another.

### Symbiosis

The poem provides no clue whatsoever to the painting, and vice versa – they keep opening up new mysteries, and intensifying the tension of the moment when they cooperate. We are given an insight into the damozel's soul by means of the poem, and this is what the painting is unable to do for us – for we cannot penetrate the painted vacant expression of the damozel to see what is behind those languid eyes. But we can with the aid of the poem. On the other hand, we are unable to really visualize the immense spaces of the Heaven and Earth at the same time, the way they are presented in the poem – which we can, to an extent, when “reading the picture.” The vast difference between those two poetic

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136 Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E. Frothingham (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Low & Searle, 1874) 109. Qtd in Scott 6.

137 Scott 6.

realms is rather striking – the figure of the damozel, or the torso that we can see, appears almost colossal as compared to the earthly form of her lover. She is painted as an otherworldly, saintly being. A great emphasis is given on her shining, alabaster complexion, probably reflecting the heavenly light – contrasting sharply with the shaded, prostrate figure of her lover down in the predella. The imposing, radiant figure of the damozel immediately draws attention upon encountering the picture for the first time, or indeed at any time at random. It is probably no accident that the poem begins with the uppermost image – the damozel at the gold bar of Heaven – and as the eye scans the picture downwards from this dominant image, our eyes invariably end resting on the predella. This is also what the poem closes with: the earthly lover listening to the weeping of the damozel. Much in the same way, we are unconsciously directed to read both the painting and the poem vertically from top to bottom, allowing the poem to unfold its various aspects and details before the reader as though they would before the viewer,<sup>138</sup> sometimes focusing in on a single detail as in a close-up (or on a series of details), dwelling on it for a while and scanning it up and down – just as a human eye would when examining a particular item in the picture that captured his attention. Greene links this aesthetic experience of “unfolding” with Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” which, as he maintains in his study, moves along the same lines, gradually revealing the whole picture detail by detail, yet always moving “back to the repose of the whole pictorial composition; the overall result is of static contemplation, and of carefully controlled craftsmanship.”<sup>139</sup> What Greene here describes is precisely the effect of “The Blessed Damozel”: the eye and the mind are cooperating in the process, producing a vivid visualization of the painting.

The fact that all the lover’s comments embedded in the text are in parentheses may signal that these comments and thoughts do not really belong there – they are out of place, dislocated somehow, and therefore they are enclosed in parentheses. In the painting, the image of the horizontal lover is located in the third part of the canvas, on the predella – and predellas are attached to paintings as an addition to the main image: and Rossetti in fact added the predella to the picture several years after he finished it. What the lover says in the poem is also, in a way, “in addition.” His comments are indispensable, though, since they contribute to the creation of the tension, and furthermore they unlock for us the world of the longing mortal who yearns for his deceased beloved. By the same token, the painting, too, would not be complete without its third part either. This proves that poetry and painting are in this case indeed “two sisters, nature’s daughters, [...] analogous but different products of imagination that combined them in its search for unity.”<sup>140</sup> Unity, as we have seen, is a necessary element of the work of

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138 Greene 69.

139 Ibid 69-70. Hobbs also greatly stresses the poem’s centrality of the vertical dimension. Hobbs 38.

140 Elizabeth F. Abel, “The Married Arts: Poetry and Painting in Blake and Baudelaire”, unpublished Ph.D.dissertation

art: it is through our imaginative faculties that the poem merges with the painting. Unity, too, manifests itself in synesthetic connections.

### Synesthesia

Apart from the painterly treatment of the spatial dimension of the poem, there are other aspects that tell us that the hand which wrote it belonged to a painter. First and foremost, there is a lot of colour in the poem. Words of poetry have been considered as an equivalent to colour in painting. As Cicely Davis explains, until the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, colour was generally dismissed as a mere appendage to the linear design. Likewise, words were regarded as only extrinsic beauty. This is said to be “the traditional Renaissance conception of the value of words.”<sup>141</sup> All this has changed in the Romantic period, however. The era that emphasized emotions and sensual perceptions made for the connection between colours and words that finally flourished in the Aesthetic and Symbolist movements at the end of the nineteenth century. Words and colours may be united either on the basis of their symbolic function, or by means of synesthesia. Synesthesia is a neurological phenomenon in which the perception of colours is interconnected with the perception of frequently encountered shapes, as of numerals and graphic form of letters – or tones of music and sounds of musical instruments – by involuntary association, probably inborn or acquired early in life.

Max Nordau briefly discusses synesthesia in *Degeneration*, calling it “colour hearing” and treating it, typically, as a symptom of degeneration: his treatise is, after all, a product of the times. In his opinion, it is a part of “colour mysticism” which is an unmistakable symptom of mental decay.<sup>142</sup> Despite the fact that research on synesthesia continues to the present day, some of his observations match those of the most up-to-date studies: it is either acquired in early childhood by means of subconscious associations of ideas, and therefore established as a stable component of the mental process; or it is an inborn neurological abnormality. Synesthesia is also correctly claimed to be different from one individual to another.<sup>143</sup> As an exemplary case of enervation resulting in synesthetic perceptions, Nordau mentions Huysmans' antihero Des Esseintes and his series of little liquid barrels the drops of which he mixes so as to achieve an experience of “taste symphonies,”<sup>144</sup> as well as his collection of perfume flasks he uses to sniff the “colour of perfumes.”<sup>145</sup> In any case, Nordau condemns these perceptions as atavistic, hysterical, and neurotic.<sup>146</sup> His views necessitate a disagreement from the

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(Princeton University, 1973) 33. Qtd in Scott 11.

141 Cicely Davis, “Ut Pictura Poesis”, *Modern Language Review*, 30 (1935) 162-163. Qtd in Scott 6.

142 Nordau 142.

143 Ibid 140-141.

144 Ibid 304.

145 Ibid 305.

146 Ibid 139-143, 304-305.

present standpoint, mainly because scientific research has proved that synesthesia has nothing whatsoever to do with degeneration – it is, shall we say, an ability of heightened sensory perception in persons whose natural sensitivity is innately augmented; a fully recognized psychological trait.

### Colour

Colour, according to Baudelaire's essay on colour in the *Salon de 1848*, can articulate feeling, mood, or tone, since "colour is, in itself, a kind of language, a way of thinking."<sup>147</sup> An analysis of the language of colours in "The Blessed Damozel" may elucidate even more Rossetti's painterly methods of composition. The role of colour is said to be "surprisingly understudied"<sup>148</sup>, yet the same source claims that coloration is undeniably a rich, powerful source for achieving high poetic intensity. A shining example could be Keats or Tennyson, both of whom we may justly regard as the great forefathers of Pre-Raphaelitism in poetry. I am aware of the danger of falling into a subjective and/or intuitive mode while approaching the emblematic associations of colours with moods and tones;<sup>149</sup> however, I am going to try to be as much objective as the poem allows.

Colour was regarded by Rossetti as having mystical significance. Riede in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* suggests that Rossetti apparently "links the 'mystery' of color with the expression – and impression – of soul. Clearly Rossetti's decorative coloring, in both arts, is not that of the mere aesthete."<sup>150</sup> Riede concludes the discussion of Rossetti's use and mastery of colour (as well as his fondness of surfaces and their illumination, and the way he handles effects of light in both painting and poetry, with the painterly habit "of seeing the world in terms of light and shade"<sup>151</sup>) by claiming that to Rossetti, colours "symbolized confrontation with life." That means strong visual content, since life is perceived for the great part visually, e.g. in colours (and in shapes, dimensions, sizes and lines, too), and it is quite understandable that the more colourful a surface is, whether of a painting or a poem, the more it tries to rival the colorfulness of life. In the words of Elizabeth Helsinger in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*,

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147 Scott 27.

148 Helsinger 55.

149 Nevertheless, the power of associations should not be underestimated, for R.L. Stein observes that a network of associations can greatly contribute to the governing emotional effect. Stein 21.

150 Riede, *Vision* 163.

151 Ibid 162. This argument is developed by Eva Tietz in "Das Malerische in Rossettis Dichtung" (*Anglia: Zeitschrift für Englische Philologie*, II, 1927), adding that Rossetti in his poetry imposes a special care upon plotting his sources of light and the variety of effects he achieves with colours, proving that light and colour are treated the same way in both his poems and his paintings. Tietz also discusses Rossetti's poetic scenes which, though taken from the real world, are represented in an almost decorative manner, rather than in an unselectively realistic one, which is decidedly the trace of a painter's hand. A further proof of his poetic paintings or painterly poems is the way Rossetti deals with symbols and the central character of a given poem/painting. Tietz 278-306 in Ronnalie Joanne Roper Howard 16 n4.

Color can't be tied down. Color makes the lived moment seem intensely present, or “real”, yet as a property of things it is an illusion. A sense of color's elusiveness as well as its illusiveness – its impermanence (subject to fading through light or air or moisture) but also its resistance to efforts to fix it adequately in any language, verbal or mathematical – is always with us. No other sense can confirm it (as visual shape, for example, can be corroborated or altered through touch). Yet color belongs perhaps all the more strongly, given this ontological, epistemological, and perceptual elusiveness, to the life and motions of the mind. [...] Without necessary shape or determinate boundaries of its own, it combines easily with shape and form [...] [a]nd it combines easily with feeling, memory, events in mental life, marks on the mind's surface, learned neurological connections, and the relationships among those symbols we call words.<sup>152</sup>

This account, albeit lengthier, very much sums up the way I perceive colours myself – and the way colour ought to be understood in order to comprehend Rossetti's painterly technique in poetry. Colour is a resource for both painters and poets, and is used mainly for the purpose of making vivid the worlds that are being evoked verbally. They are not only pleasing and “aesthetic”; they have a function in their own right – and that is to generate a feeling of vivid atmosphere, to bring the depicted world closer to us so that it would eventually envelop us and contain us, thus provoking to come out all the associations, emotions and feelings connected to that given colour (or colour combination), so that the work of art would succeed in producing the highest emotion in the reader/viewer.

For instance, I suggest that the bright gold, red and blue colours in their most basic shades used plentifully in the Pre-Raphaelite representations of medieval scenes and art-romance may signify the purity, truth, simplicity and pleasantly “primitive” archaism of the Middle Ages as the Pre-Raphaelites viewed it (with their reverence and admiration). The clue in this case is the basic shades of these colours, the opposition of blue and red on the chromatic scale, the fact that blue and red (and yellow) are both primary colours from which all other colours of the spectrum can be mixed. The emotion that is supposed to be felt by the viewer is that of reverence and admiration for the pleasing simplicity: feeling of purity and of the most basic, uncomplicated sensations. Similar observations, though mostly focused on William Morris' poetry in relation to Pre-Raphaelite art, are discussed in Helsingers' *Poetry and Pre-Raphaelite Art*; other, yet equally weighty, ideas concerning the use of colour of Pre-Raphaelite painting are also fleshed out in this excellent study.

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152 Helsingers 84.

Likewise, Ruskin believed colour to be the embodiment of feeling; he is said to have written of “playing on a colour violin... and inventing your tune as you play it”<sup>153</sup>. This comes very close to synesthesia. Furthermore, he also mentions the painter's mastery of colours as being comparable in subtlety to the musician's mastery of sound. Intense colours (yet, of course, in moderation and in accord with divine nature) were considered by Ruskin as a suitable means for the conveyance of the emotional expression of a scene – much more than the explicit depiction of faces or violent scenes expressive of strong passions.<sup>154</sup> For Ruskin, the beauty of coloration is embodied in bright, clear, intense hues – “in the reds and golds of medieval painting, in the palette of the Pre-Raphaelites, and [...] in the scarlets, blues, and yellows of Turner.”<sup>155</sup>

The language of colour has been said to be the means by which objects are enabled to “speak” their “native language” of the soul. This can be exemplified by Baudelaire's explorations of the potential of colour (as well as sound and scent) as an emotional instrument in poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* such as “Harmonie du Soir” or “Correspondances.”<sup>156</sup> At the same time we can easily assert that colours are used for precisely the same reason in Rossetti. After all, the goal to which all Pre-Raphaelite poets were aspiring was the production of the highest tone of emotion, a very intense feeling that transcends, transforms, and takes us away from the material world into the worlds beyond the senses and the everyday. They aimed at producing aesthetic satisfaction by using colour patterns and colour harmony “in a manner that Keats, Ruskin, Baudelaire, Pater, and Rossetti would have understood as ‘melodic’ or ‘lyric.’”<sup>157</sup> Having just mentioned musical associations, “The Blessed Damozel” does indeed display a certain degree of musicality to which I shall turn later on in this chapter. Though obviously unrelated to the main topic of visual quality in Rossetti's poetry, the musical properties of the poem nonetheless enrich our understanding of it. Moreover, Baudelaire's assumption that “harmony is the basis of the theory of colour” justifies the treatment of music in Rossetti, for the art of coloration and music ought to be viewed as analogous and symbiotic, one giving substance to another, or one extending the other – just as it is in the case of the verbal art of poetry and painting.

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153 George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1971)

144, quotes from Ruskin's *Modern Painters* 15:416.

154 Ibid 144, 74n18.

155 Ibid 144.

156 Helsinger 108.

157 Ibid 109.

The same source also maintains that as a painter, Rossetti was ranked extremely high as a colorist by John Ruskin – even to that extent he perceived Rossetti as equally fine a colorist as Turner. During his lectures on landscapes at Oxford, Ruskin allegedly expressed his appreciation of the Pre-Raphaelite pursuit of “the skill of exquisite delineation and laying of colour”, adding that Rossetti's colour sense was especially strong. Helsinger 94-95. Therefore, if Rossetti used his painterly techniques when writing his poetry – which he undeniably did, as many sources confirm and as the poems themselves prove – he must have used, whether consciously or not, his highly developed sense of coloration.

The associative links between colour and sound, or the texture of a graphic form of a word, are quite admittedly always in the peril of becoming idiosyncratic and hardly applicable to a universal scale. Nevertheless, Helsinger supports her argument that “as language, color terms have their own sound and look and feel – in the ear, on the page, and in the mouth”<sup>158</sup> as she examines Rimbaud's sonnet “Voyelles” (“The Vowels”) in which the unfolding genealogy of each vowel of the alphabet draws on an associative complex of sound, smell, texture, objects, and shapes:<sup>159</sup>

A Black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,

I shall tell, one day, of your mysterious origins:

A, black velvety jacket of brilliant flies

Which buzz around cruel smells,

Gulfs of shadow; E, whiteness of vapours and of tents,

Lances of proud glaciers, white kings, shivers of cow-parsley;

I, purples, spat blood, smile of beautiful lips

In anger or in the raptures of penitence;

U, waves, divine shudderings of viridian seas,

The peace of pastures dotted with animals, the peace of the furrows

Which alchemy prints on broad studious foreheads;

O, sublime Trumpet full of strange piercing sounds,

Silences crossed by Worlds and by Angels:

O the Omega, the violet ray of Her Eyes!<sup>160</sup>

The individual vowels are treated with enormous sensitivity. Even though the list of associations may be subjective, the principle of linking colours with vowels emerges as quite clear: one needs to sharpen his perceptions and become acutely attentive to symbolic – or even completely individual – associations of colours, in order to reveal the energy, the emotions and sensations, the aesthetic and lyric intensity, and the hidden power of language. What Rimbaud does in “The Vowels” is precisely what synesthetes feel when confronted with words of a text. Despite its being a rather controversial topic for research (synesthesia is an interdisciplinary subject, falling roughly somewhere between

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158 Helsinger 58.

159 Ibid 59.

160 Arthur Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, translated by Oliver Bernard (Penguin Books, 1986) 171.

neuropsychiatry, neurology, linguistics and the analysis of the colours' chromatic properties), synesthesia is charged with a huge potential for the expansion of perceptions, resulting in a greater enjoyment of art, since it may span over several kinds of art (e.g. music and painting, poetry and colour, colour and music, sounds and text, but also poetry and pictures and colours) and merge them together in a highly unique, original unity. In this way, by thinking through colour, and thus intensifying one's perception of the arts through sensual perceptions, one can apprehend the arts as an exalted, intense, sensual expression of emotion which in turn arouses a corresponding emotion in the reader/viewer.<sup>161</sup> Having introduced synesthesia in this way, I suggest viewing Rossetti's poem in the light of these theories.

### Colours in "The Blessed Damozel": Gold

The two dominant colours of "The Blessed Damozel" is gold and white:<sup>162</sup> colours commonly associated with emblems of saintliness, Christianity, Heaven and religion in general, most likely due to the early Christian art and the association of gold with glory, holiness, kingdoms, riches, nobility, elegance, power. White, in turn, the "zero" colour, traditionally represents purity, saintliness, cleanness, and innocence. Already the first stanza of the poem features gold in the form of the "gold bar of Heaven" (reappearing again in stanza VIII) and the seven stars in the damozel's hair (there are, however, only six stars to be seen in the painting, but since they are arranged in circle around her head, we may assume that the seventh star is hidden behind her head). In stanza V, the gold colour recurs in the form of the sun. The sun and the stars are revisited again in stanza IX and X, respectively, and then gold reappears in the golden thread that Mary's handmaidens weave in stanza XIX. Lastly, in stanza XXIV, we find ourselves back at the gold bar where we started, with the damozel leaning her arms against it in a dramatic gesture of despair. Gold is, however, contained not only in these objects – gold recurs, by association, also in the images of fire and flames the poem abounds in: in stanza VI and VII. As Florence Boos points out, precious metal is not merely pictorially descriptive; it also serves an emblematic function. Gold appears very frequently in Rossetti's poetry, Boos continues – from his early poems such as "The Blessed Damozel" through the *House of Life* sequence, to his late, difficult poems – be it coins, hair, goblets, sky, threads, flames, or fire.<sup>163</sup> Thus, the golden objects of Rossetti's

161 Helsinger 56. Helsinger moreover adds that the use of colour in poetry and arts has a long and rhizomatically rich tradition. Coloration has been used "from Keats to Baudelaire, Morris, and Rossetti" (56). It has been promoted by "commentators like Hazlitt, Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater [...]" (Ibid), used in paint and in language by "Bonington, Turner, Delacroix, Keats, and (less directly) Scott and Byron" (Ibid), and has been also the sign of the intensity that marks lyric art distinctively modern "for Ruskin, Baudelaire, and Pater, [...], Gautier, Huysmans, and Wilde [...], Keats [...], Morris or Arthur Rimbaud, [...], Delacroix and Turner [...], the English Pre-Raphaelites and Gustave Moreau." (Ibid). Coloration in poetry, however, has been used already in the eighteenth-century, despite its reputation of poetic austerity and ornamental barrenness, namely in Pope, Dryden, Gray, or Thompson, as Jean H. Hagstrum proves in *The Sister Arts*.

162 Though I refer to the poem, McGann notices the dominance of white and gold in the painting of "Monna Vanna," in which they are, however, freed from any sort of spiritual value. McGann 124.

163 Boos 67.

imagery not only enhance the elegance, perfection, and glory of the texture of the given poem. They also serve as emblems for these concepts, while carrying with them a certain symbolic signification, high colour, and a distinctive shine that almost makes the surrounding words glitter. The phenomenon of bright glimmering objects is going to be examined more closely later on.

#### Colours in "The Blessed Damozel": White

The white colour, in turn, is contained in the image of the three lilies in stanza I and VIII, in Mary's white rose in stanza II, in the curled feather-like moon in stanza X, and in the white clothes in stanza XIII and IXX – but also, again by association, in the Dove, if we take it literally as a bird hidden in a mystic tree, though the capitalization and the clearly Christian context points rather in the direction of the Christian interpretation of "Dove" as the Holy Ghost or Noe's harbinger of Hope. (The image of the Dove nevertheless remains ambiguous despite all possible interpretations: the image of the mystic tree may open to us the supernatural dreamy landscape that often figures in Rossetti's poems, and even "The Blessed Damozel" takes place in such a realm; or it may be interpreted in a strictly religious sense as the Tree of Life.)

#### Colours in "The Blessed Damozel": Other

Another colour that is assigned a certain role in the poem is yellow which is the colour of the Damozel's hair, likened to "ripe corn"<sup>164</sup>, thus mixing earthly features into her saintly appearance. With the strong emphasis on white colour that is threading through the whole poem, the images of Heaven – by means of a common association with the sky – may be given the colour blue in the reader's vision of the poem. Consequently, the poem's dominant colours would be gold/yellow, white, and blue. And the last two colours, white and blue, are said to be the colours of the Virgin Mary<sup>165</sup>, which again foregrounds the notion of the Catholic Heaven and bestows a special significance to the liminal, elusive presence of the Virgin Mary in "The Blessed Damozel." Of course, the colour blue enters the chromatic spectrum of the poem only by a conventional connotative link between the Heaven (which nobody knows how it looks like but the common conception of it is that it is located above, in the sky, which to a mortal is associated with the blue expanses of a clear day), but it is nevertheless there and the connection is, for a reader sensitive to coloring, in some ways inevitable.

In the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin asserts the "sacredness of colour"<sup>166</sup>, arguing that

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164 Cf: De Musset's "Elle est blonde comme le blé." Hearn 22.

165 Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press 1989) 89.

166 Ruskin 6.68. Qtd in Landow, *Ruskin* 144.

“God appointed *blue*, purple, scarlet, *white*, and *gold* for the tabernacle, and that He has made colour to accompany 'all that is purest, most innocent, and most precious.'”<sup>167</sup> Thus, blue and white and gold, the dominant colours of “The Blessed Damozel”, are in this respect closely tied to the notion of holiness and divinity, purity and innocence. More so, because they are used in the depiction of Heaven in the poem. Lionel Stevenson in *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* also regards the implicit blue colour as perceptible, though only by sheer association, as he comments upon the poem's engrossing dominance of “clear primary Pre-Raphaelite colours.” Namely, he is intrigued by “the gold balustrade, the white robe, the yellow hair, with the implication of pellucid heavenly blue encompassing the figure”<sup>168</sup> - exactly the colours that stand out, define the poem's atmosphere, and elevate it to the status of an actual Pre-Raphaelite painting.

### Atmosphere

By using evocations of colour in the lyrical descriptions, Rossetti intermittently encourages the reader to visualize. The visual imagination is stirred and stimulated by coloured objects – perhaps even so much that we may automatically begin to assign colours to other objects of the poem as well, regardless of what the painting looks like with its generally darksome, twilight tones, cloudy texture and its subdued light. The visual potential of the poem is maximized by the enhancement of the general atmosphere that governs its imagery: that is, we see a place that is still and quiet (“stilled waters at even” as reflected in the damozel's eyes; “the still weather”), vapoury and filled with soft incense-like mist that envelops the whole place, giving it a feeling of secrecy and mystery (“flood of ether”, “little feather”, “like a little cloud”), with water somewhere in it (“We will step down as to a stream, / And bathe there in God's sight”), full of strange and elusive lights (“to the deep wells of light”, “The light thrilled towards her, fill'd / With angels in strong level flight”), and celestial music (“Her voice was like the voice the stars / Had when they sang together”, “five sweet symphonies,” angels singing “To their citherns and citoles,” and the entire stanza XI with its songs, accents, bells and echoes).

Hearn adds that in the heaven of the Middle Ages we can find lakes and fountains of light, or of liquid jewels.<sup>169</sup> Although the stream in “The Blessed Damozel” is without doubt filled with holy water, the medieval implication of liquid jewels hints at the Pre-Raphaelite (and medieval, too) enthusiasm for gems and jewels, which shall be discussed presently. In this respect, the visual images of “The Blessed Damozel” fall right into the canon of the usual imagery Rossetti uses quite generously in his poetry,

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167 Ibid. My italics.

168 Stevenson 26.

169 Hearn 27.

and these are mostly “wings, air, light, breath, incense, ashes, words, murmuring, glances, floods, waves, seas, streams, flowers, clouds, snow, glass, moon, sunsets – and doubtless more.”<sup>170</sup> A whole inventory of Rossetti's typical imagery can be culled from the sonnets of *The House of Life*, which has been attempted by Christensen in *Theme and Image: The Structure of D.G. Rossetti's House of Life*.

### Appeal to Senses

The references to music and sounds also employ the sense of hearing, though only on the level of imagination. Other senses are called into cooperation as well – for instance the sense of touch is being provoked by referring to “the fine cloth white like flame” or even the Dove in its “secret growth.” The cleanliness and finesse of the cloths is almost tangible: “fine, like flame” imitatively evokes the rustle and swish of cloth against cloth. And if we interpret the Dove as a physical creature, then the lines 86-89 – “That living mystic tree / Within whose secret growth the Dove / Is sometimes felt to be” – may in fact stimulate the tactile sense as well. We can almost feel the soft, compact shape of the bird that fits into a cupped palm while the bird's shape is warm and velvety, snug in its secret growth where it stays hidden, only sometimes giving away its presence. Or else, we can “hear” its presence by imagining it cooing. According to Hobbs, objects in Rossetti's poetic world are generally “more felt than seen, they are sensuously perceived without being concrete.”<sup>171</sup> The Dove hidden in the growth, then, can be identified intuitively<sup>172</sup> either by imagining what it feels like to hold physically a dove-like object (soft, warm, feathery, restless, shivering, smooth), or how its cooing sounds like – or perhaps one may even employ both senses to heighten the vividness of the image. In both cases, other senses than that of sight are engaged.<sup>173</sup> Of course, it is by far much more likely that the Dove stands for the Holy Ghost, but the charm of the reference is in its ambiguity. The sense of touch is also invoked by the mention of the damozel's hair falling about her lover's face in his earthly vision in stanza IV, and by the fact that the damozel's bosom actually warms the bar she leans on in stanza VIII, suggesting that she is still alive, corporeal, physical, with her blood still circulating: not a part of Heaven yet, waiting for her sainthood in the state of blessedness.

As for the “living mystic tree”, Hearn claims that this particular image was sourced from Revelation 27:2 where the heavenly tree of life is described as “bearing twelve different kinds of fruit, one of each

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170 Boos 71.

171 Hobbs 281.

172 I dare say that “intuition” is a key concept in interpreting Rossetti and a great aid in grasping his dream imagery. Hobbs hints at the same as well, adding moreover that the typical poetic personality of his poetry is “introverted, passive, erotic, and intuitive.” Hobbs 283.

173 In this respect, the poem comes very close to Dante, who “[...] gives us the shape, the size, the colour, the sound, the smell, the taste; he counts the numbers; he measures the sizes.” *Edinburgh Review*, XLIV, August 1825, 316. Qtd in Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 2009) 25.

On the employment of visual, auditory, and tactile senses also see Hearn 15.

of the twelve months of the year, while its leaves heal all diseases or troubles of any kind.”<sup>174</sup> Whenever a leaf touches the Dove's plumes, that particular leaf pronounces His name. In his meticulous commentaries to nearly every single line of the poem, Hearn presents a truly amazing interpretation of this image – he meditates upon what language the leaf may use: “Probably Latin, and the sound of the Latin name would be like the sound of the motion of leaves, stirred by a wind: *Sanctus Spiritus*.”<sup>175</sup> I dare say that this may very well be accurate. Not only is *Sanctus Spiritus* highly consonant and can easily be imagined as being whispered by a leaf, but the Latin words also impart to the section a sense of pious gravity, awe, and reverence of medieval Christianity. Together with the vividness of the sibilant sound and the multiplicity of religious allusions, what we get is a snatch of the melody of a prayer whispered by a leaf among shadows, mystic trees, and secret growth. Though not explicitly called into action, the auditory sense can be activated and integrated in the process of reading the poem by means of creative imagination. Besides, if we were to imagine several leaves touching the Dove's body and each time uttering “*Sanctus Spiritus*” (with the appropriate Latinate distribution of stresses: /'spi:.ri.tus 'sank.tus/<sup>176</sup>) at overlapping intervals, as if in a canon in music (each leaf's “voice” varying in pitch according to its size), the result would be an amazing musical shower full of whispery s's.

The appeal to senses is a typical feature of Rossetti's poetry. But not only of his, for we may also think again of John Keats and his employment of senses in his poetry by using colour,<sup>177</sup> and his belief in the centrality of colour to aesthetic perception.<sup>178</sup> Helsingers paraphrases Arthur Hallam's (Tennyson's friend) theory that

lyric intensity [...] recovers the full range of human sensory experience, including those sensations that eighteenth-century reason held to be unreliable and unquantifiable as accounts of objective reality: taste, smell, sound, touch, but above all, color.<sup>179</sup>

This idea falls in finely with Scott's arguments in *Pictorial Poetics* I have introduced earlier: that words were considered as mere extrinsic beauties in the eighteenth century by poets like Dryden (though Hagstrum in *The Sister Arts* is apparently of a different opinion) – while in the fine arts, colour was

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174 Hearn 29.

175 Ibid.

176 I am thankful to Jana Fridrichovská for her help with determining the Latin stresses.

177 The influence of John Keats and his “colorism” and “pictorialism”, much appreciated by Rossetti, is discussed in Boos 1, 4, 5.

178 Helsingers 87.

179 Ibid 75.

usually dismissed as merely decorative and ornamental and therefore unnecessary.<sup>180</sup>

The Romantics transformed these rigid assumptions surrounding colour and words, thus giving poetry all the possible tools and means for expressing and generating emotions – that is, enough stimuli for all the five senses. An exemplary poet could be again John Keats. Rossetti is said to have felt that everything in poetry had been done, especially by Keats, and is credited as saying to his young disciples that “if any man had any poetry in him, he should paint it. The next Keats ought to be a painter.”<sup>181</sup> As a particular example of Keats' painter-like approach to his imagery, it may be useful to recall again stanza XXX of “St. Agnes Eve” with the extremely sensual portrayal of the preparation of the feast for Madeline, which I have mentioned in Chapter I, based on an observation of Florence Boos.<sup>182</sup> The stanza is a literal feast for both eyes and taste; tickling our imagination even more by the exotic names of Fez, Samarcand and Lebanon.<sup>183</sup> Or we may be lead to think of Christina Rossetti's “Goblin Market” in which the reader is compelled to imagine, due to their constant recurrence, the grapes, pomegranates, dantes and bullaces, pears and greengages, damsons (plums) and bilberries, currants and gooseberries, barberries, figs, citrons, melons, peaches, sugar, apples, cherries, plums and other small, colourful, tasty and juicy fruit with which the eponymous goblins tempt maids.<sup>184</sup> Tennyson, too, uses plenty of colour and senses in his poetry almost to the point of being quite Pre-Raphaelite in it. As a matter of fact, as M.A Lourie argues in a commentary on “The Lady of Shallot”, “between 1830 and 1833 Tennyson had essentially invented Pre-Raphaelism.”<sup>185</sup> Although this appears to be a rather daring statement, revisiting Tennyson in the midst of studying Pre-Raphaelite poetry does give substance to the claim, and the traces of Tennyson in the Pre-Raphaelite arts stand out – particularly his visual appeal and pictorial quality, as well as theme, as I have shown already.

Having just mentioned “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “The Lady of Shallot”, these two poems have been compared to “The Blessed Damozel” in Joseph F. Vogel's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Versecraft*, mainly as far as the colourful poetic imagery is concerned. What the three poems have in common, Vogel states, is that they are very colourful, and the main scene on which the entire poems are based is a paintable one. In Rossetti's case, such a static scene even constitutes the backbone, basis, and core of the whole

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180 Scott 6.

181 Oswald Doughty, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Victorian Romantic* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press 1949) 209. Qtd in Rees 21.

182 Boos 121-122.

183 Fez, Samarcand, and Lebanon are all far away places of colourful names and rich associations. See subchapter on Capitalization in this chapter.

184 I am indebted to Professor Florence S. Boos for pointing this out to me.

185 M.A. Lourie, “Tennyson's 'New Kind of Romanticism'”, *Studies in Romanticism* xviii, 1979, 19-21, 27. Qtd in Christopher Ricks, ed., *Tennyson: A Selected Edition, Incorporating the Trinity College Manuscripts* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 1989) 20.

poem – in poems such as “The Blessed Damozel”, the pictorial scene is both the ends and means. Vogel furthermore maintains that the lyric colours of Rossetti’s poems reveal the painter who wrote the verse.<sup>186</sup> The key to the relationship between poetry and painting in Rossetti’s case are also their respective structural properties. I am going to deal with structures later on, using Vogel’s arguments as the basis of my own.

### Spatial Dimension

The next aspect of the poem that needs to be discussed for the purposes of further demonstration of Rossetti’s painterly techniques, is related to both colour and versecraft. Joseph F. Vogel argues that Rossetti’s experience in painting

influenced him to regard poetry similarly as an art in which good craftsmanship is invaluable, and to perceive that, like subtle nuances of color, line, and composition, subtle nuances of sound, rhythm, and structure may greatly enhance emotion.<sup>187</sup>

This argument ties well with Scott’s analysis of Rimbaud’s poetry in *Pictorial Poetics* where Scott discusses the sheer spatial dimension of poetry. Though the analysis is concerned with Rimbaud’s avantgarde treatment of syntactical and stanzaic spacing, some of the points he makes can be very well applicable to Rossetti’s poetry; “The Blessed Damozel” in particular, though Rossetti’s sonnets come close as well. (I am going to deal with his sonnets in another critical work.) Scott’s examination of the visual side of Rimbaud’s poems may extend Vogel’s point about the technical side of poetry. Scott maintains that “the poet, like the painter, [is] a maker of marks on the white page, and many of the semiotic processes operative in painting could be activated by poetry [...]”<sup>188</sup> In addition, Scott regards the perception of the page itself as “being the formal arena of the poem’s performance [...]”<sup>189</sup> in which the visual hierarchization of linguistic elements is realized on the basis of the tension between text and its background (page). More importantly, though, Scott continues that “the foregrounding of the linguistic signifier (through the inclusion in the text of spacing, syntactical or stanzaic placing, the use of capitals, italics, numerals, etc.) could become in this way the poetic equivalents of the plastic qualities of paint.”<sup>190</sup>

Elizabeth Helsinger moreover adds that as far as the French Symbolic poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are

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186 Vogel 109.

187 Ibid 109-110.

188 Scott 37.

189 Ibid.

190 Scott 37.

concerned, Rossetti may be linked not only with Rimbaud (with whom he may be paired through their use of colour and poetic embellishments and ornamentation in the form of capitalization, spacing, italics, poetic compression or expansion of a given moment that is being depicted), but also with Mallarmé, for their shared endeavour is to “re-embodiment the poem or picture itself: to explore its capacities to affect readers as a concrete sensuous artifact – ‘literally seen’ – that speaks powerfully to the mind and imagination that recognize themselves there.”<sup>191</sup> In the following analysis Helsinger undertakes, “The Blessed Damozel” is placed side by side with Mallarmé’s “Sainte” (1865) as an example of a poem which is constructed around a visual image informed by the paintings of an earlier age.<sup>192</sup>

It is true that in comparison to Rimbaud’s flamboyant poetic extravaganza, Rossetti comes across as rather tame in experimenting with form, yet there are certain points that need to be made about “The Blessed Damozel” and its artistic arrangement of words, specifically about the “foregrounded linguistic signifiers”, as Scott puts it. Thus, before I undertake the analysis of Rossetti’s poems from the point of view of prosody, it is essential to take a closer look at Rossetti’s capitalization, spacing, the architecture of the poem, and, last but not least, his use of parentheses, dialogues, and words that receive special emphasis.

These are very prominent features of “The Blessed Damozel.” In connection with the spatial demarcation of both the poem and the painting, I have already provided a brief commentary upon Rossetti’s use of quotation marks to distinguish the damozel’s speech, and the parentheses to divide the rest of the narrative from the inner thoughts and comments of the earth-bound lover. These features ought to be analyzed from the perspective of spatialization as well, since what they lend to the poem is a peculiar sense of three-dimensionality. Although Rossetti’s poetic imagery was deemed as lacking dimensional depth and being virtually “flat”<sup>193</sup> because he looks upon the landscapes and images two-dimensionally (and the painting “The Blessed Damozel” is decidedly two-dimensional and lacks the sense of the vastness of the universe). Greene states that his words often pause “in search of particular visual or aural effect.”<sup>194</sup> I would argue that it is precisely these “effects” that give his poetry other dimensions.

The poem, therefore, displays a sense of three directions from which the three voices speak. One is the

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191 Helsinger 52.

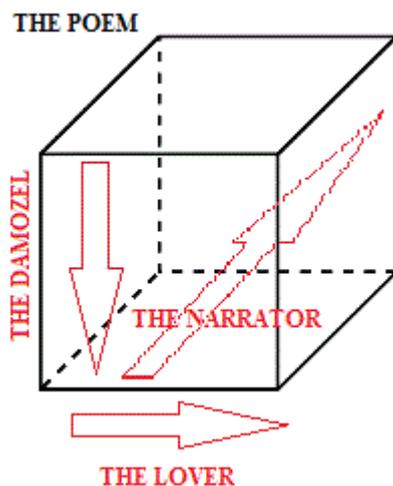
192 Ibid 52.54. For “Sainte”, see the motto to this chapter.

193 Greene 68. The painter’s eye flattens the landscape out, puts it into a frame – stops it, in effect. [...] His images tend to have a ‘flat’ quality; his time tends to be slowed down. The result is not leisureliness, but tension.” Ibid.

194 Greene 69.

damozel's solo voice sounding from above; its particular location is marked by quotation marks. The second are the lover's parenthetical responses to the emotional turmoil the scene produces in him. And the third is the detached voice of the narrator whose eye is allowed to scan the whole scene from top to bottom, as his position is that of a passive participant. We may locate him somewhere in the middle, or, more precisely, above the whole picture in the position of a god-like person who is omniscient and omnipresent in the picture. (He is not "outside" of it, and yet he is distanced from both characters. He is like a voice speaking from the universe.) Even the voices of the damozel and her lover are not entirely separated from his – they are an integral, embedded part of the whole narration. Ergo, they must still be perceived as narrated by the narrator's voice that spans over the entire scene. Thus, with the damozel located above, the lover below, and the narrator's voice hovering over them, the poem does indeed manifest a sense of three-dimensionality: the poem can be viewed lengthwise from top or from the bottom, depending on whether it is the damozel or the lover speaking at the

moment, but also depthwise – that is when the narrator takes over again:



The painting slightly complicates the situation because it poses the inevitable question which is, what moment from the poem does it actually depict? This line of inquiry may seem to be rather irrelevant, if we understand the picture as the summing up of the most intense moment from the poem, but it is equally difficult to judge which moment from the poem should be regarded as the most intense one. An answer to that question is hard to find; yet we may partially answer it by the idea of the painting representing the

compressed poem in its entirety, with all the hints of "things about to happen" as I have suggested above, and with the sense of time arrested in mid-motion at the very height of the emotional climax, containing all that happens and has happened in the poem: the moment before the damozel begins to weep, the glittering flight of the angels, the visions of their ultimate union depicted in the mysteriously illuminated, twilight pairs of embracing lovers all around and above the damozel's head. Moreover, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the poem exhibits a very low level of action. It is amazingly static and its settings remain fixed throughout. In this respect, it is not difficult to justify the supposition that the picture contains the poem in its wholeness, only immobilized and static, with its visible tension encouraging the viewer to imagine the component parts engaged in their small actions.

### Foregrounded Signifiers: Names

"The Blessed Damozel", then, deserves fully to be labeled as "multidimensional." It also can justly be called "multimedial," for it employs words not only for their lexical meanings which are of course indispensable for the successful conveyance of the descriptions and actions, but words are also employed here for the clearly perceptible quality of their sounds. The next direction I want to pursue takes us in the rarely mapped region of an almost neglected part of the poem – the names of the saintly handmaidens who attend to Lady Mary in Heaven. The poem makes it explicit that their names are "five sweet symphonies", reminding us again of the allusions to celestial music that can be "heard" throughout the poem along with the foliage sighing out "Spiritus Sanctus". Nordau adds that in the case of these five names, "word ceases to be the symbol of a distinct presentation or concept, and sinks into a meaningless vocal sound, intended only to awaken divers agreeable emotions through association of ideas."<sup>195</sup> If the string of names should awake such emotions, I would argue, then they are not completely devoid of meaning: their sonic properties create a meaning per se. Helsinger deems the names – Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret and Rosalys respectively – were apparently chosen "for their musicality and evocativeness of past saints."<sup>196</sup> It would be a pity to dismiss the names as merely accidental or just being chosen at random – there is literally much more than meets the eye.

The names themselves, having been allegedly selected with special care and purpose, have a meaning, and although it is hardly relevant for the present study, it may be interesting to explicate them. Cecily is most obviously the patroness saint of music and musicians. The second name, Gertrude, means "spear of strength" and the most prominent bearer of the name was Saint Gertrude the Great, a 13<sup>th</sup> century nun and mystic writer.<sup>197</sup> Magdalen instantly brings to mind Mary Magdalene (derived from Magdala, meaning "tower" in Hebrew,<sup>198</sup> a village on the Sea of Galilee, therefore her name was actually Mary from Magdala) who was a popular saint in the Middle Ages. So was Margaret who is moreover said to be a martyr and a patron saint of expecting mothers<sup>199</sup> (which ties logically with the reason why she is in attendance of the Virgin Mary). Lastly, Rosalys, a variant of Rosaline or Rosalind, was originally composed of the Germanic elements *hros*, meaning "horse", and *linde*, "soft, tender", but later on fell under the influence of the Latin phrase *rosa linda*, meaning "beautiful rose." The lexicon of the etymological origins of names claims the name Rosalind was popularized by Edmund

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195 Nordau 90.

196 Helsinger 49.

197 <http://www.behindthename.com/name/gertrude> <Retrieved March 4 2012>

198 <http://www.behindthename.com/name/magdalene> <Retrieved March 4 2012>

199 <http://www.behindthename.com/name/margaret> <Retrieved March 4 2012>

Spenser who used it e.g. in "The Shepheardes Calender."<sup>200</sup> The link between the five names and the Middle Ages is therefore quite apparent: they ornament the already "medieval" poem with further associations that are carried with them.

Additionally, the concept of the "beautiful rose" again recalls the Virgin Mary whose gift of the white rose adorns the damozel's robe as the only ornament – and it ought not to be forgotten that the rose is a commonly used Christian symbol of the Virgin Mary herself. White colour is also the symbol of chastity – and Virgin Mary is especially the patron of chastity.<sup>201</sup> Additionally, the emblem of the rose is charged with a plethora of symbolic meanings that have been attached to it the course of time through its various visual representations in art; for the present purposes, suffice it to say that the emblem of the rose appears frequently in medieval art, where it represents the Virgin Mary.<sup>202</sup> according to Saint Ambrose, roses were thornless in the Garden of Eden and acquired thorns only after the Fall of Man. Since Mary was conceived without "the stain of original sin" (Immaculate Conception), she is called the "rose without thorns" which is also a reference to the "Rose of Sharon" from The Song of Solomon 2:1: "I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys."<sup>203</sup> (A lily is a Marian emblem as well, symbolizing purity.) The Virgin Mary is compared to either the white rose (her virginity) or the red rose (for her charity).<sup>204</sup> Significantly, the rose is also used by Dante in the *Divine Comedy* as a symbol for God's love and the Virgin Mary herself, and the thirteenth-century allegorical *Roman de la rose* is thematically centered around a lover's quest for the symbolic rose.<sup>205</sup>

Together with the white rose, David Riede regards the three lilies and the seven stars as symbols belonging to the iconographic tradition of the Blessed Virgin, though he claims that their symbolic value in the poem is diminished as they rub shoulders with quite "earthly" decorative adjuncts such as the damozel's blue eyes and yellow hair.<sup>206</sup> I would only point out that these Christian symbols adorn an actually living, warm, fleshy person which furthermore takes some of the heavy Christian implications off of these ornaments, while yet reminding one of the partial identification of the damozel with Rossetti's Marian archetype, making her at once desirable and unreachable. The combination of the spiritual and the physical (which, simplified, can be in my opinion analogous to poetry and painting respectively, since one is abstract and the other is material) is a large theme in the poem.

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200 <http://www.behindthename.com/name/rosalind> <Retrieved March 4 2012>

201 Hearn 22.

202 Leslie Ross, *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary* (Westport: Greenwood Press 1996) 90.

203 Song of Songs 2:1. NIV.

204 Ross 90.

205 Ibid.

206 David Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992) 30.

To sum up, the five maidens surrounding Lady Mary in the groves of Heaven, are a patron saint of music, a medieval nun and mystic, Mary Magdalene, a patron saint of expecting mothers, and “a beautiful rose.” In the Christian context of “The Blessed Damozel”, we do not have to go too far to guess that these names may have been chosen *both* for their implicit religious meanings relatable to the Virgin Mary *and* for their prosodic properties. The latter feature is going to be clarified presently.

These five names have been said to “arouse gliding shadowy ideas of beautiful young maidens, 'Rosalys' those of roses and lilies as well; and the two verses together diffuse a glamour of faerie, as if one were roaming at ease in a garden of flowers, where between lilies and roses slender white and rosy maidens pace to and fro.”<sup>207</sup> This is a rather pleasant image that is very much in accord with the Pre-Raphaelite representations of ladies, and is easy to visualize down to a detail – five maidens enclosed in their Pre-Raphaelite tapestry-like flowery bowers, surrounded by roses and lilies which are Christian symbols, their soft complexions painted in gentle shades of rosy and white. Precisely this image, Vogel argues, is created by the names alone,

without any need for a description of the maidens themselves – and the names [create the image] only partly by romantic connotations (e.g. roses and lilies in 'Rosalys') but very largely by the sound and meter Rossetti created when he chose and arranged them.<sup>208</sup>

Vogel continues that the likely purpose for choosing these names was the fact that four of them are dactylic – the only name that is stressed differently is Gertrude which is, to the best of my knowledge, an amphibrach. (That is, we read the name as “Ger-'tru-deh.” I would argue that the additional third syllable should be pronounced, both for the sake of keeping the catalogue of names trisyllabic and, by means of modifying the regular modern pronunciation (“Ger 'tru:d”), of sounding archaic, outlandish, and “authentically” medieval.) The entire stanza, as a matter of fact, employs a few more dactylic words in the preceding lines: “handmaidens” and “symphonies” are clearly dactylic. These metrical changes are said to “smooth the way for those names by introducing dactylic terms gradually.”<sup>209</sup> Before I came across Vogel's study, I have already made the following detailed dissection and analysis of the five names: there indeed seemed something fishy about them, about their arrangement, and even about the very composition of them.

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207 Nordau 90. Qtd in Baum lii. Also qtd partially in Vogel 106.

208 Vogel 106.

209 Ibid 107.

C	E	C	I	L	Y	
G	ER	TR	U	D	E	
M	AG	D	A	L	E	N
M	AR	G	A	R	E	T
R	O	S	A	L	Y	S

Although this diagram may not appear to be very logical at a first glance, there are certain attributes that need to be addressed. First and foremost, the structural compositions of the names are in some way similar to one another, and they even seem to intertwine in the way they are arranged in succession.

C	<i>E</i>	C	I	<u>L</u>	Y	
G	<i>ER</i>	TR	U	D	<i>E</i>	
M	AG	D	A	<u>L</u>	<i>E</i>	N
M	AR	G	A	R	<i>E</i>	T
R	O	S	A	<u>L</u>	Y	S

Or, to simplify the progression of the vowels:

<u>E</u>	I	Y
<u>E</u>	U	<u>E</u>
A	<u>A</u>	<u>E</u>
A	<u>A</u>	<u>E</u>
O	<u>A</u>	Y

As it appears, there is a snake-like motion threading through the structures of the individual names in their succession. "Cecily" and "Gertrude" connect at the point of their "E", whereas "Gertrude" provides a link with the final "E" for "MagdalEn" and "MargarEt." These two in turn, connect to "Rosalys" by means of the medial "A" of their names which is located about in the middle of "Rosalys" as well. In addition, "Margaret" seems to echo "Magdalen" as the composition of both names is strikingly similar, but they cannot be swapped, nor can they replace one another for specific reasons delineated below.

At this point it may be appropriate to deal with the names in analogy with music: both as an aid to

orientate among the five structures, and as a means of paying special attention to the sonic effects and harmony of the passage. As far as the alliance of poetry, painting, and music is concerned, Ruskin in *Modern Painters* often discusses music to draw analogies between her sister arts (i.e. poetry and painting) so as to stress “the irrational, hidden nature of imaginative creation.”<sup>210</sup> Moreover – and this is essential for the present concern with the sound play of the names – Ruskin was of the opinion that “as long as critics considered poetry a mimetic art, its natural analogue was painting; but once it became an art whose central operation and purpose were expressive, poetry’s natural analogue became music.”<sup>211</sup>

This makes perfect sense – in other words, when poetry is regarded as “static” (imitative), painting is its best analogy. Whereas once we analyze poetry’s ability to move and generate emotion (“express”), it may easily approach the state of music and be justly compared to it. Poetry as painting could be said to represent Ruskin’s conception of “Typical Beauty” which is concerned primarily with visual beauty. The other kind of beauty, “Vital Beauty”, is concerned with emotional states and the expression of these states. Then, poetry as painting is “Typical Beauty” - and poetry as music is therefore “Vital Beauty.”<sup>212</sup> Since “The Blessed Damozel” is both static and dynamic, we might infer that these two types of Beauty merge in the poem – and the more beautiful the final effect.



Therefore, to use musical analogy, if the five names

were the notes of, say, a C pentatonic scale, “Magdalen” and “Rosalys” respectively would be C, E and G – and these three notes are a Third distant from each other on a C pentascale. (See above.) This interval is generally perceived as more harmonious than the interval of a Second.<sup>213</sup> A Third gives a feeling of peaceful resolution while Seconds are routinely employed for the purpose of setting up a tension which demands the soothing resolution of a Third. If the names were to strike a C chord, then the chord would be composed of “Cecily”, “Magdalen,” and “Rosalys”. A C-Major Chord is composed

210 Landow, *Ruskin* 74 n18.

211 Ibid 74.

212 Ibid 86.

213 Seconds are the notes which are in immediate succession on a scale – that is, the C-pentascle progression C-D-E-F-G is composed of Seconds, if all the five of them are played from C through G. Thirds are only every other notes, skipping D and F; therefore, Thirds from a C-pentascle are C-E-G. On a musical staff, the interval of a Second is always from the line to the next space, or from the space to the next line. Whereas the interval of a Third is always from space to space, or from line to line. By featuring only five notes, the pentatonic scale differs from a “normal”, that is, an eight-note scale, also known as Major Scale.

of the root note or tonic (C), a major third (E) and a perfect fifth or dominant (G), and is perceived as producing a feeling of completion and unity. In Ruskinian terms, unity of variety is indispensable in the evaluation of an object as beautiful:<sup>214</sup> and the names featured in my suggestion of the C-Major chord *do* contain all of the sounds the five names share bar /t/ which is, however, softened by the surrounding sounds in “Gertrude”, or by its unstressed position in “Margaret”, and therefore /t/ does not play a prominent role in the names' sound spectrum. The names are varied (that is, not identical nor similar at first sight) and yet, due to their internal structure, they are unified. In addition, “Cecily” (1), “Magdalen” (3), and “Rosalys” (5) feature an “L” opening the last syllable, which connects them into a triad, and also locks the whole string of five names into a fluent cycle. The harmonious effect they produce can be therefore equated to the C-Major chord. On the other hand, a Csus4 chord (which is supposed to give the combination of notes a suspended feeling, restlessness, incompleteness, and thus a sense of aesthetic dissatisfaction as far as unity is concerned) would be “Cecily”, “Margaret” and “Rosalys” - in which case the triad of names *would* sound – and look – somewhat discordant, perhaps because of the recurrence of *rs* in the two latter names.

Though there is a great similarity between “Magdalen” and “Margaret”, when each is in a particular constellation with some of the other names and the sense of harmony is examined, the “r” and “d” and “l” do make a difference: in the first triad Cecily-Margaret-Rosalys (the Csus4 chord one), the points of contact do not thread through all three names. “Rosalys” lacks an “e”, Margaret lacks an “l”, and Cecily lacks an “r.” Conversely, the other triad – the C-Major chord one – Cecily-Magdalen-Rosalys – weaves several internal patterns. Not only do all of them share an “l” on the last unstressed syllable, as stated already, but “Cecily” and “Rosalys” (each of whom is at one end of the imaginary pentascale) are also structured on a similar pattern: Ceci / Rosa / Ly(s). (Due to their similarity, a fine analogy is the two-note chord of the pentatonic scale: C and G. See page 52.)

But that is not the end of my analysis. Taking the names from another perspective and inspecting other sounds apart from the vowels, there emerges a pattern of recurrent letters from which the names are composed (among others, of course):

	Initial	Other				
<b>CECILY</b>	<b>C</b> <sup>215</sup>	<b>E</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>Y</b>		
<b>GERTRUDE</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>D</b>

<sup>214</sup> Landow, *Ruskin* 122-123.

<sup>215</sup> I have separated their initials from the “other sounds” as the C of “Cecily” does not appear anywhere in the other four names.

MAGDALEN	M	M	A	G	D	L	E
ROSALYS	R	R	A	L	Y		
MARGARET	M	M	A	R	G	E	T

As we can see, the underlying structure of the names discloses the fact that each name contains a consonant – or a vowel, for that matter - which recurs in another name; yet there is no consonant or vowel whatsoever that all five would share. To make the diagram more comprehensible, let us swap positions, telescope the sounds, and attach the appropriate names to them:

Recurring letters/sounds	Names that contain the given letter/sound
M	Magdalen, Margaret
A	Magdalen, Rosalys, Margaret
R	Gertrude, Rosalys, Margaret
G	Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret
E	Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret
T	Gertrude, Margaret
L	Cecily, Magdalen, Rosalys
D	Gertrude, Magdalen
Y	Cecily, Rosalys

The letter which comes close to resonating in every name is “E”, but then again, “Rosalys” is missing from the list. The connective letters, though not shared by all but in a somewhat complementary relationship, could be “Y” and “G”, since “Y” pairs “Cecily” and “Rosalys” - two names that do not contain a “G” - whereas the sound “G” unites “Gertrude”, “Magdalen” and “Margaret” into a triad – these, in turn, do not contain an “Y.” Overall, the list of names displays a variety of pairings, trios and one quartet, so that it almost resembles a logical riddle. It may be made easier if the names were replaced by numbers for the sake of a clearer arrangement, from Cecily (1) to Margaret (5)

M	3	4		
A	3	4	5	
R	2	4	5	
G	2	3	4	
E	1	2	3	4
T	2	4		

L	1	3	5
D	2	3	
Y	1	5	

What can we read in this peculiar diagram of patterns is that each name contains at least two letters of the other four names in the catalogue of saints – yet none of the particular groups gathered under the heading of a given letter reappears under the heading of another letter. In other words, no pattern is repeated twice. This may be a tell-tale sign of their individual unique compositions which has attracted the attention of both Vogel and Helsinger, though not to the extent of delving under their structure and cutting them up into tiny segments. The names are similar, yet different in the sense of being complementary. Each name shares something of its neighbor, yet simultaneously adds its own element that is carried by other names which in turn add something of their own composition and let it circulate. We should not forget that in the poem the maids are depicted as sitting “circlewise”, thus creating a small tableau within the picture. As a matter of fact, Greene points out as well that

the way in which Rossetti arranges the handmaidens suggests that his basic concern is with creating a “composition”, in the sense in which we use the word in speaking of a painting. The “composition” in these lines is of beautiful shapes and is intended to evoke a pleasing but vague miasma of gold and white, clouds and exotic features.<sup>216</sup>

This remark also echoes what I have suggested before: the recurrence of colours gold and white as emblems of Heaven. Greene's impression of the passage moreover recalls Nordau's about the pleasant vision of gliding, shadowy figures of young maidens that the five names arouse in the reader. The manner in which Rossetti “paints” his handmaidens leaves us with a visual impression of a cloudy harmony of gold, light, and celestial whiteness. Later on in the poem, the same atmosphere of gold-white vapoury beauty is revoked once again in the flight of angels in Stanza XXIII, this time accentuated by “wings and flight, [and] tears falling in the stillness left by the disappearing angels.”<sup>217</sup> This is, however, merely the impact of the poem's incessant appeal to the senses – in what way the names are able to conjure up a vision of such heavenly splendour, order, and harmony, that is another matter altogether, and ought to be thoroughly investigated.

As far as structure and form are concerned, what these five names form (not the maidens themselves) – in their seemingly innocent arrangement in “The Blessed Damozel” - is an intricate net of

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<sup>216</sup> Greene 97.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

complicated, almost mathematical, relations between the sounds within the names. As I indicated before, the proper C-Major chord occurs in the triad under “L” - “Cecily”, “Magdalen”, “Rosalys.” These echoes have been remarked upon in passing by Vogel,<sup>218</sup> though not expanded in such a painstaking analysis as mine (though he does compose statistical charts as well, mostly spanning over Rossetti’s entire *oeuvre*, consisting of statistics on Rossetti’s use of pyrrhics, spondees, or stressed syllables and strong words, or on the various octave and sestet arrangements of the sonnets from *The House of Life*). What Vogel notices about the names in particular are

the sibilants in Cecily and Rosalys that soften the beginning and end of the series and the approximate rhyme in the weak syllables of those two names (*Cecily:Rosalys*), and the repetitions of *m*, *r*, and *l*. [...] And Rossetti’s three uses of *g* constitute a fine touch; they introduce subtly just enough hardness to prevent any possible lushness.<sup>219</sup>

Vogel also remarks elsewhere that the use of a concentration of rhymes which employ the same vowel, or indeed any closely similar vowels, is called rhyme “colouring.”<sup>220</sup> The task of such rhymes is not only to heighten the intensity of rhyme-echoing, but also to bestow upon it a special emotional quality. He illustrates his point on the example of Milton’s “use of eleven rhyme words having the long *o* (*bones*, *cold*, etc.) to lend an ominous mournful tone to his sonnet [18] ‘On the Late Massacre in Piedmont.’”<sup>221</sup> As another example of rhyme colouring, Vogel briefly comments upon Love’s song in

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218 Vogel 107.

219 Ibid 107-108. I would stress especially the “l” sounds as they give the names liquid fluency, occurring in the same position in the first, third, and fifth name.

220 Ibid 86.

221 Ibid.

To illustrate Vogel’s point on Milton’s sonnet and its rhyme-coloring in full:

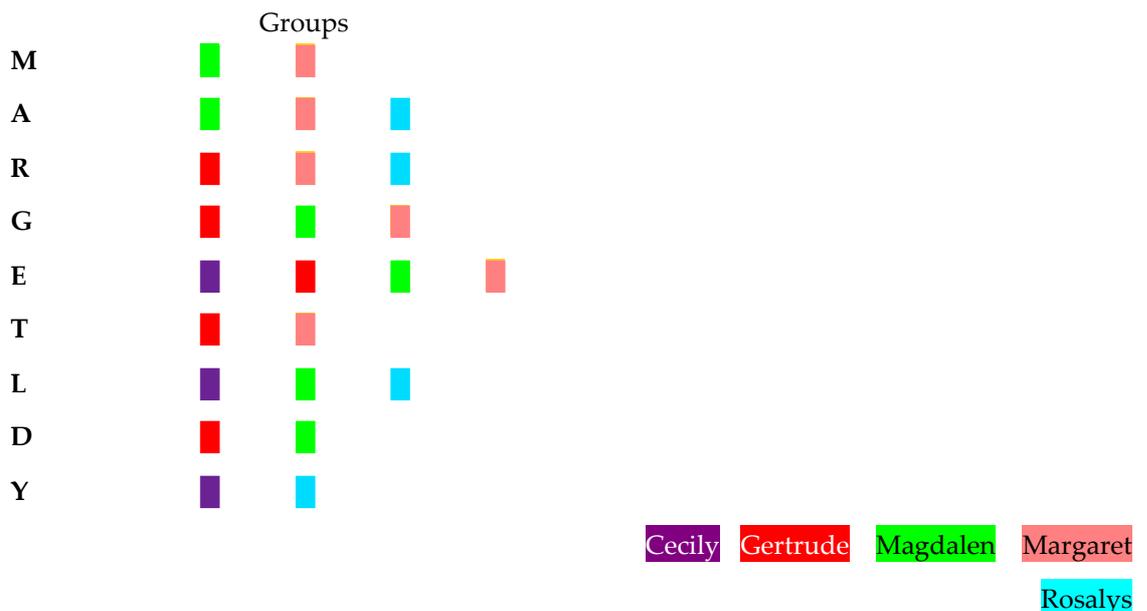
*“Avenge O Lord thy slaughter’d Saints, whose bones  
Lie scatter’d on the Alpine mountains cold,  
Ev’n them who kept thy truth so pure of old  
When all our Fathers worship’t Stocks and Stones,  
Forget not: in thy book record their groanes  
Who were thy Sheep and in their antient Fold  
Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that roll’d  
Mother with Infant down the Rocks. Their moans  
The Vales redoubl’d to the Hills, and they  
To Heav’n. Their martyr’d blood and ashes sow  
O’re all th’ Italian fields where still doth sway  
The triple Tyrant: that from these may grow  
A hunder’d-fold, who having learnt thy way  
Early may fly the Babylonian wo.*

There is, indeed, an ominously rolling, echoing sound contained in the recurrence of “o” in words that carry the primary stress. The most prominently reverberating ones are placed at the end of the lines for obvious reasons: just like in a folk ballad, the reader can hang on to the last syllable as long as he wishes to, in order to emphasize the vowel’s quality or merely play with its sound, stretching it forever. These recurring sounds arguably endow the poem with a tragic tone telling

the *House of Life* sonnet *Willowwood* and the poem's use of the long, stressed /u:/ throughout the whole song which lends it "[a] soft, brooding tone"<sup>222</sup> – see my analysis of Rossetti's sonnets in another piece of critical work.

Nevertheless, Vogel concedes that rhymes are not the only prosodic feature that can be involved in colouring – even words liberated from the rigours of rhyme would do; any words. If we couple the rhyme coloration with Rimbaud's – or Baudelaire's – synesthetic practice of attaching colours to individual sounds (not only vowels, but also consonants), what may emerge from the catalogue of the saints' names would be five coloured patterns, each composed of five colours, yet completely original, unique and different from all the others.

To see what such an assemblage of tricolors, two-colours and four-colours would look like, we may alter the diagram that uses numbers, and use colour patterns instead. The colours I used are selected at random; the point is to demonstrate the principle:



In order to highlight the resulting harmonious effect of the sequence, we can assign different colours to each of the nine recurrent sounds, then put them into the names wherever these sounds occur, and imagine these colour patterns in a circle, for that is the way the maidens sit around the Virgin Mary in "The Blessed Damozel." The choice of colours does not matter and the chromatic harmonies should be

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of the drama, mourning, and disaster of the massacre. Its wild music echoes through the entire sonnet, making it an almost poetic/musical masterpiece which, with the aid of vowels – something immediately available to the writer and always at his disposal – manages to re-create something of the emotion connected with the massacre.

<sup>222</sup> Vogel 86.

disregarded now; what is important is the interweaving structure of repeated letters. Here the shared sounds may now clearly stand out as they stitch through the neighboring names in the circle.

CECILY      ROSALYS  
 GERTRUDE      MARGARET  
 MAGDALEN

Scott in *Pictorial Poetics* claims that when relating poetry and paintings, sound patterns – phonetic ones in particular – operate “as an aural equivalent to the colour harmonies that unify discrete or disparate features in Romantic painting.”<sup>223</sup> He further discusses the actual shape of certain phonemes, especially if foregrounded by repetition, such as the “sinuous, bending and curving” /s/ sound and the S-objects of a painting on which an actual poem is based, or the evocative power of /u/ sound.<sup>224</sup> The use of these poetic devices, he says, are “in a manner analogous to that of the artist in his use of paint and pictorial form.” We can see quite clearly how Scott's ideas relate to the same phenomena in Rossetti's poetry – and besides, it is now much easier to visualize Rossetti's five names as five colour patterns due to their interwoven phonemic structures.

It is worth considering Vogel's brief comparison of Rossetti's list of names with that of Swinburne's from his 1865 poem “Dedication.”<sup>225</sup> On the basis of this succinct comparison, Vogel demonstrates the pleasant musical effect of Rossetti's use of the female names, again taking into account the sensual appeal of “The Blessed Damozel” and its reaching out into the domain of music and word-painting. In the sixth stanza of his poem, Swinburne uses an evocation of six names in a manner similar to Rossetti's:

That life is not wearied of yet,  
 Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores,  
 Félise and Yolande and Juliette,  
 Shall I find you not still, shall I miss you,  
 When sleep, that is true or that seems, [...]

What we have before us now are two lists of female names: Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret, and Rosalys as opposed to Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores, Félise, Yolande, and Juliette. The majority of the

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223 Scott 96.

224 Ibid.

225 Swinburne was very strongly influenced by Rossetti, even to the point of nearly idolizing him. Riede, *Vision* 230.

last six names are characters from Swinburne's poems. The name "Faustine" creates a hypnotizing effect in the eponymous poem<sup>226</sup>, while "Fragoletta" is not named in its poem; "Dolores" is better known as "Our Lady of Pain", the invocation of which in the last short line (an amphibrach followed by an iamb) is occasionally substituted with another phrase; "Félice" rhymes perfectly with words containing the long /i:/ and its strategic placements in the poem put special stress upon the name, thus enabling the reader to relish the final sibilant.<sup>227</sup> "Juliette" is addressed in the eight stanza of "Rococo": "Men's days and dreams, Juliette; For love may not remember [...]."<sup>228</sup> To the best of my knowledge "Yolande" does not seem to appear in any poem by Swinburne. Be that as it may, these two sets of names are contrasted in Vogel's study purely on the basis of their musicality, and his comparison underlines his argument concerning the harmonious and melodious effect of Rossetti's names.

On a closer examination of Swinburne's string of names, it appears that – just like Rossetti's names – they are very carefully constructed as well, but their overall effect – unlike that of Rossetti's – is far from pleasing. In fact, they "clamor", as Vogel points out.<sup>229</sup> He also claims elsewhere that Rossetti always tried to avoid cacophony, believing that subject matters demanding harsh sound were not appropriate for poetry.<sup>230</sup> This fact complements well Rossetti's general pursuit of beauty and recalls Walter Pater's shutting off all but aesthetic sensations. As Christensen points out, "to perceive the whole physical world with its Crystal Palaces, blind pit ponies, and wretched street urchins, as Dickens did, is, according to Pater, a mistake." According to Christensen, Rossetti shares Ruskin's

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226 Again, to illustrate in order to press a point:

"Lean back, and get some minutes' peace;  
 Let your head lean  
 Back to the shoulder with its fleece  
 Of locks, Faustine.

The shapely silver shoulder stoops,  
 Weighed over clean  
 With state of splendid hair that droops  
 Each side, Faustine."

The effect of "Faustine" concluding each final line which is composed of a trochee and a spondee, is paired with the second line of the same meter, and is compressed between lines of iambic tetrameter, is quite clearly hypnotic and spell-binding. Swinburne 49.

227 For instance:

"The gods, the gods are stronger; time  
 Falls down before them, all men's *knees*  
 Bow, all men's prayers and sorrows climb  
 Like incense towards them; yea, for *these*  
 Are gods, *Félice*."

Swinburne 79. My italics.

228 Swinburne 52.

229 Vogel 107.

230 Ibid 71.

concern with the perception of the visible world, as well as Pater's pursuit of beauty through these perceptions: for Rossetti, though, this search for beauty is embodied in a woman.<sup>231</sup> We may as well say that beauty is embodied even in the *names* of women, such as in his catalogue of saints.

In order to examine the “clamour” of Swinburne's names, may be useful to set up a similar diagram that I have used for the purpose of analyzing Rossetti's maidens:

Recurring sound	Names that contain the given sound
<b>F</b>	<b>Faustine, Fragoletta</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Faustine, Fragoletta, Yolande</b>
<b>U</b>	<b>Faustine, Juliette</b>
<b>S</b>	<b>Faustine, Dolores, Félice</b>
<b>T</b>	<b>Faustine, Fragoletta, Juliette</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>Faustine, Félice, Juliette</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>Faustine, Yolande</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>Faustine, Fragoletta, Dolores, Félice, Yolande, Juliette</b>
<b>R</b>	<b>Fragoletta, Dolores</b>
<b>O</b>	<b>Fragoletta, Dolores, Yolande</b>
<b>L</b>	<b>Fragoletta, Dolores, Félice, Yolande, Juliette</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>Dolores, Yolande</b>
<b>Y/J</b>	<b>Yolande, Juliette</b>

The list of the names' points of contact is much longer than those in the case of Rossetti's names. However, that does not mean that their sound quality produces a better effect. Quite the opposite: instead of letting the names hum and murmur ethereally, Swinburne lets them clang – or indeed clamour, as Vogel puts it.<sup>232</sup> All of the sounds that comprise the name “Faustine”, as it is clear from the list, are featured in the other names in various proportions, while every one of them share the letter “e.” Otherwise the principle of linking the names is virtually the same; each borrows something from its neighbor while lending another letter to the next neighbor. Yet the choice of the sounds is heavy, “especially the alliteration of *f* (probably the least melodious sound in English), the too prominent rhyming on stressed syllables in *Fragoletta:Juliette*, and the clang of [the sequence of] *and Yolande and.*”<sup>233</sup> In comparison, Rossetti's avoidance of these hard and brutal sounds is what makes the music

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231 Christensen 6.

232 Vogel 71.

233 Ibid.

of his string of names much more pleasing to the ear: the repetitions of *m*, *l*, *r* and *g* (as Vogel states) but also of the subdued sounds of *t* and *d*, greatly contribute to the resulting softness of the sounds. Whereas Swinburne uses *f*, *s*, lots of clearly sounding *t*; and also, keeping in mind Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont", the ominous sound of *o*. If I were to translate the sound patterns into colours again, the result would be most likely far less pleasing than that of the names Rossetti uses – especially as there are simply too many sounds to handle: Swinburne uses twelve as opposed to Rossetti's nine.

Vogel furthermore argues that still more difference between the two catalogues is due to meter:

While it makes Rossetti's maidens glide and sway, it makes Swinburne's canter. Inherently, the anapestic meter tends to produce that effect, and instead of mitigating it Swinburne compounded it by making four of his names end with a stressed syllable that coincides with the metrical stress, thus augmenting the beat so that it pounds: [FausTIne / Fragolet/ta, Dolores, FeLlise / and YoLAnde / and JuliEtte].<sup>234</sup>

Rossetti, on the other hand, may be given credit for choosing names that all have falling rhythm, which contributes a great deal to the softening of the iambic beat. His names, save for "Gertrude," are stressed on the first syllable, thus allowing the rest of the names enter into decrescendo. Or, in Vogel's words, "[the names] being on a position of metrical stress and by continuing beyond that position they allow the impact of stress to die away, as it were, in the succeeding weaker syllables."<sup>235</sup> The terminal pyrrhics in both lines – and in the line that precedes them, too – makes the rhythm even softer. Due to these pyrrhics, along with the initial trochee and dactyl and merely three iambs, the meter is, according to Vogel, "daringly irregular."<sup>236</sup> And yet it does not disturb the iambic flow of the poem in the least. Baum points out that the music of a stanza can never be completely dissociated from its matter: "The metrical pattern remains; the tune changes."<sup>237</sup> Thus, the ease with which the temporary irregularity of meter blends fluently into the rest of the poem may be regarded as a mere "change in the tune." Consequently, it is barely noticeable that the meter of the segment with the names has been altered:

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234 Vogel 108.

235 Ibid.

236 Ibid.

Stevenson adds that although Rossetti's use of extra unaccented syllables does not go as far as to produce syncopated effects like those of Swinburne's, they are said to "form a link between the younger poet's singing melodies and the liberating metrical innovations of Coleridge." Stevenson 75.

237 Baum xxviii.

“We **two**, she **said**, will **seek** the **groves**  
Where the **lady Mary is**,  
With her **five** **handmaidens**, whose **names**  
Are **five** **sweet symphonies**,  
**Cecily**, **Gertrude**, **Magdalen**,  
**Margaret** and **Rosalys**.

**Circlewise sit** they, with **bound locks**  
And **foreheads garlanded**;  
Into the **fine cloth white** like **flame**  
**Weaving the golden thread**,  
To **fashion the birth-rob**es for **them**  
Who are just **born, being dead**.”

And finally to provide a comparison with Swinburne:

That **life** is not **wearied** of **yet**,  
**Faustine**, **Fragoletta**, **Dolores**,  
**Félice** and **Yolande** and **Juliette**,  
Shall I **find** you not **still**, shall I **miss** you,  
When **sleep**, that is **true** or that **seems**, [...].

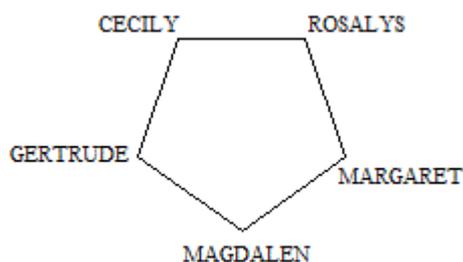
The difference is quite obvious, and confirms Vogel's point – Rossetti's names, with their careful stress on the first syllable (bar one), come out as gentle, soft and emanating harmonious music as the stressed syllable is left enough time to peter out on the pyrrhics. The result is that of fragile beauty. Conversely, Swinburne tends to stress his names either in the middle, or on the final syllable (again, bar one), thus making his words tumble heavily on the line, one after another, letting the loudest sound to come last, which, as it has been demonstrated, gives it an unpleasant dissonance and the impression of pounding.

Moreover, were I to use my favourite juxtaposition of sounds and their nuances to music, Swinburne's six names do not fit the example of the pentascale. As I have indicated in the case of Rossetti's five names, a pentatonic scale represents a complete, harmonious unity with a clearly defined beginning, middle and end in each of its five segments, thus enabling the sequence to rise, poise, and fall,

satisfying one's inherent need for completing things so as to comprehend them in their fullness. Swinburne's names do not fit this template, simply because there are six of them. Odd numbers, such as five, for some reason, seem to convey a somewhat more proportionate and harmonious impression. It may have very likely something to do with the aesthetics of the Golden Ratio which produces the effect of proportion that is perceived as pleasant; or with the sequence of Fibonacci numbers; however, this is extremely difficult to determine.

A clue to the numerical mystery may be perhaps found in Ruskin's theory, again, that beauty is composed of symmetry and variety (theory prevalent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) which is exactly the case of forms found in nature, for instance in leaves of trees. Leaves are nature-made, and though imperfect to the human eye, perfect on the scale of things in the natural world. It is also nature that demands of art to be imperfect at times, just like various natural objects are created imperfect. Gerard M. Hopkins later on built on this idea by adding that proportion (in Ruskin's terms, proportion was a dynamic property, while symmetry was static, both nevertheless concerned with order and arrangement of parts) is what beauty is made of, but this proportion ought to be compounded of regularity and irregularity.<sup>238</sup> Here I am again recalling the previous mention of Hopkins' chestnut leaf. To apply this to Rossetti and Swinburne, respectively, Rossetti's five names are in a regular arrangement, yet their count (5) is a number that is irregular, if we imagine the number 5 in a spatial dimension. On the other hand, Swinburne's names are regular both as regards their arrangement and count – thus, the element of irregularity is missing and the names, unlike Rossetti's, cannot be truly perceived as producing a sense of beauty.

On the other hand, Rossetti's five names in their succession create a “circlewise” symmetry ideally of the shape of a pentagon, though the circle in the poem is merely suggested. (See the pentagon scheme as follows.)



Due to their acoustic properties and rhythmical structure, they roll off the tongue like lozenges, producing a pleasant, reeling, undulating effect as the words' accents fade away on the pyrrhics. The vowels in the stressed syllables can be elongated<sup>239</sup> to enhance

<sup>238</sup> Landow, *Ruskin* 119-121.

<sup>239</sup> Rossetti's open and elongated vowels are noted in Boos 53 as well. Other poets, the source continues, developed the alliterative and assonant tricks to perfection, with “architectonically piled cadences and echoes. Rossetti's 'lifted shifted steps' will become Swinburne's 'bright like blood' [...], and Hopkins' 'daylight's dauphin, dapple dawn-drawn Falcon.” Boos 53. I set this down particularly because I find the link with Hopkins very intriguing, as “The Windhover” is, in my

the colour of their tone (“Gertrude”, “Margaret”, “Rosalys”; these names also vibrate slightly due to their *r*'s), or they may be used as a bridge between two acoustically colourful consonants (sibilants in “Cecily”, murmuring “m” and the touch of “g” in “Magdalen”). Rossetti's keenness on poetic musicality has been best recorded by Sir Sidney Colvin, who heard him reading his poetry aloud. According to Sir Colvin, Rossetti was

the greatest magician of them all. . . . A kind of sustained musical drone or hum, rich and mellow and velvety, with which he used to dwell to and stress and prolong the rhyme words and sound echoes, had a profound effect in stirring the senses and souls of his hearers.<sup>240</sup>

Another witness who may attest to Rossetti's emphasis on melody, is his brother William, who has been quoted as saying: “His voice was deep and harmonious [...] in the reading of poetry, remarkably rich, with rolling swell and musical cadence.”<sup>241</sup> Though Rossetti was a painter, and not a musician, his usual word for a poet was allegedly “singer”, and for a poem, “song.” Likewise, the poetic process was a *Song-Throe*.<sup>242</sup> It is likely that he appreciated the well-shaped fullness and completeness of music that in many ways resembled exceptionally rounded poetic forms such as sonnets – or it may be also that he thought himself a medieval troubador of sorts. To “sing” “songs” in the Middle Ages meant basically being a poet: a minnesänger, a troubador. In any case, Rossetti was well aware of musicality innate in language.

The accounts pertaining to Rossetti's performance may prove that his skilful manipulations with words in his poetry to produce musical effects was to a great extent intended to enhance the emotional impact of his poetry, especially if read aloud like he did. And indeed, if we recite the five names one after another, in a manner similar to that of Colvin's description above, the soft, harmonious musical effects of “Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret, Rosalys” clearly stand out with the careful structure that spaces their soft beats.

To accentuate the distinction between the two sets of names, musical analogy might again come in useful in order to illustrate the major difference in meter, rhythm, melody, harmony, and the general

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view, one of the most fascinating poems metrically, rhythmically, acoustically, visually, and content-wise.

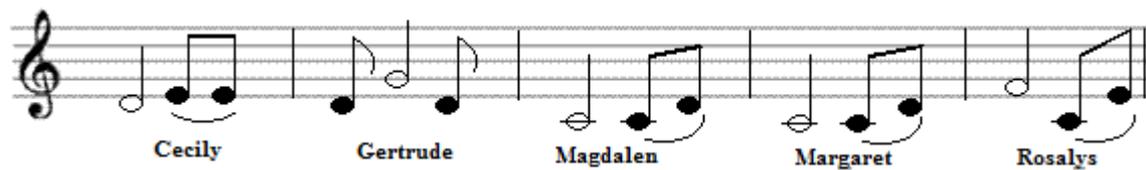
240 Sir Sidney Colvin, “Famous Voices I Have Heard”, as quoted in Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic*, 231-232. Hall Caine describes Rossetti's reading similarly in *Recollections of Rossetti* (London, 1928) 217. Qtd in Vogel 71.

241 Qtd in Cooper 203. The source quotes yet another witness, T. Hall Caine, who listened to Rossetti recite his poem “The White Ship”: “I never heard anything at all matchable with Rossetti's elocution; his rich deep voice lent an added music to the music of the verse: it rose and fell in the passages descriptive of the wreck with something of the surge and sibilation of the sea itself; in the tenderer passages it was soft as a woman's, and in the pathetic stanzas with which the ballad closes it was profoundly moving.” T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Boston, 1898) 217. Qtd in Cooper 203-204.

242 Ibid 203.

pattern of each list of names. In this case, musical syntax seems to prevail over grammatical syntax. Let us imagine the vowels as musical notes, assuming the following pairs, regardless of any possible ties between the tonality of the vowels in their proper placement on the phonetic map: /a/ as C, /e/ as D, /i/ as E, /o/ as F, and /u/ as G. The stressed syllables are signaled by a half-note, unstressed syllables by a quarter-note. Each catalogue of names contains the spectrum of the five vowels, which enables us to draw analogy with the five notes of a C-pentascala.

### ROSSETTI



### SWINBURNE



The structural disproportionality of Swinburne's names becomes quite apparent in this illustration. There is absolutely no pattern that would hold the names in a regular form so that the names could echo one another. The structures are heterogenous and generally do not correspond to each other in any way. Conversely, Rossetti's set of names is visibly symmetrical, even melodious, and the individual sounds are arranged in a clearly discernible pattern, with stressed and unstressed syllables evenly distributed – and, save for “Gertrude”, with the heavy stress on the first syllable, according to my and Vogel's reading. They are, indeed, “five sweet symphonies.”

Thanks to these metrical merits of the names, their structure ( / - - ) may help us to visualize the saintly ladies: with the first accented syllable, we can see their heads with “bound locks”; whereas with the pyrrhics that put the name into a fade-out, the rest of their bodies is formed accordingly: they, too, “fade out” into indistinctness of the celestial clouds of incense among which they sit. Since “circlewise” does not mean “a full circle”, their figures are arranged in an arc around the Lady Mary,

with Rosalys echoing Cecily and closing the half-circle.

The importance of musical effects in Rossetti's poetry has been best formulated by Hobbs:

[...] the sensations of light and sound are drawn metaphorically toward the condition of fluidity. Words melt into music, and music often strives toward a verbal precision. Instead of being compartmentalized, perceptions are received synesthetically by the intercommunicating senses.<sup>243</sup>

Though Hobbs refers to his poetry in general, we may as well relate this observation to "The Blessed Damozel." In this poem, synesthetic perceptions are undeniably utilized in the blending of words into music, of words into pictures, and of sounds into emotions, and further breaking down into colours. It requires a synesthetic reading, attentive to subtleties of sound and colour, in order to be able to appreciate these effects. Nevertheless, the overall complexity and mystery of the poem easily guides the reader towards such reading, even though he or she may not fully realize it, as these aesthetic perceptions usually lay just beyond the threshold of normal perception level.

The analysis of the names shows that there indeed *is* more than meets the eye. It is especially the sound quality of the individual words, and something that may come close to be actually labeled as "word-painting." Their sound patterns – the recurrence of the individual vowels and consonants – constitute a melody of their own. Since this melody has been described as a murmuring, humming, soft kind of music, we may perceive it as Rossetti's attempt to put across an impression of celestial music.<sup>244</sup> Which he, I dare say, accomplishes successfully, for each name seems to be composed of the same material that music is made of. The repetition of sounds in poetry can be said to be analogous to that of tones in music which I have tried to present as an empirical fact. And just like in music, this repetition may end up producing a variety of effects, either harmonious or dissonant. Examples of both can be seen on the respective strings of names of Rossetti's and Swinburne's, and their distribution of stresses, their use of word-colour and rhyme-colouring, their positions in an imaginary space, and their emphasized use of particular sounds. In the case of Rossetti's names, the liminal melodious effects justly belong to their assigned place in the bejewelled, painted scene of "The Blessed

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243 Hobbs 84.

244 The matter of the musicality of Rossetti's poetry can be best summed up by Walter Pater's famous quote: "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." Walter Pater, *Renaissance*.

Also, it might be worthwhile to examine the musicality of Rossetti's and Swinburne's names with regards to Lord Alfred Tennyson's series of early poems on female names: "Claribel", "Madeline", "Isabel", "Lilian", "Adeline", "Margaret", "Rosalind", "Eleanore", and "Kate" which are highly assonant, *very* musical, and interesting both formally and prosodically. Again, I thank Prof. Florence Boos for this suggestion.

Damozel”, where leaves sigh out “Sanctus Spiritus”, the lady's voice is like the morning stars “when they sang together”, and angels sing hymns to their medieval stringed instruments whose names – citherns and citoles<sup>245</sup> – have a pleasant sound in themselves. And Vogel stresses that, after all, Rossetti's aim was always to create a pleasing sound.<sup>246</sup> The names are not mere poetic ornaments with an accidental aura of the Middle Ages about them. They definitely have a value – as Nordau demonstrates in his comment from *Degeneration* that I have quoted before – and they also possess a certain function in the text which they successfully carry out, as it becomes clear from an attentive treatment of their underlying aspects.

#### Foregrounded Signifiers: Numbers & Mysticism

The next case of Scott's “foregrounded linguistic signifiers” would be that of magical numbers, followed by the use of capitalization, which appear in Rossetti's poem. Both phenomena are immensely interesting. In the context of the poem's “pictoriality”, along with the use of three voices, three locations, and demonstrable musical effects, they impart to the poem yet other dimensions by which it may transcend the boundary of ordinary poetry and be rightfully considered a picture-poem.

The pictorial counterpart of “The Blessed Damozel” is a vertical diptych, consisting of the upper picture presenting the damozel on a celestial backdrop, and the predella, depicting the earthly “reality.” According to Stein, the use of the diptych is an obvious reference to medieval painting and has a clearly dramatic function, since the picture gives symbolic form to the dialectic of the painting: it draws the dividing line between the male speaker and his dead mistress, who “almost seems encased in a cartoonist's 'thought balloon' above his head.”<sup>247</sup> Nevertheless, despite the explicit division of the canvas into the said diptych, still we may think of the painting as divided into *three* parts, the upper with the damozel, the middle one with the three faces of angels, and the low one with the lover. Just as we read the picture from top to bottom, the poem is read in a likewise manner. At the same time, the poem features three voices and three locations: the Heaven, the earth, and the future realm which is located largely in the damozel's mind. Indeed, it may seem as though the poem is full of such obscure trinities which, however, are always one: there are three voices distinct from one another yet contained within one poem in the frame of the narrator's voice, three places but all of them located within one picture, the painting has three parts,<sup>248</sup> there are three angels in the painting, and the damozel is both depicted and described as holding three lilies that are erect or nod, depending on what she is thinking

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245 Possibly echoing Genesis 31:27 and the “singing to the music of timbrels and harps.” NIV.

246 Vogel 74.

247 Stein 153.

248 Formally, the painting has two parts, like I said: the painting and its predella. The picture on the painting is split up into three sections, though.

of.

The nodding lilies in Stanza VIII are said to be nodding because, as traditional symbols of purity and modesty, they react to the damozel's pangs of painful desire to be united with her lover, by which she overcomes her virginal purity, showing that she has a yearning in her heart.<sup>249</sup> The lilies nod in the passage in which a significant emphasis is put on her "fleshliness" and the sheer physicality of her warm bosom – this slightly erotic implication may be another clue to the lilies giving up on their emblematic value of purity.

Hobbs also proposes that the lilies suggest "children in her maternal arms, a simile that may express her own desire [...]."<sup>250</sup> The damozel's thus implied maternity in turn suggests her identification with the Virgin Mary. As Hobbs suggests elsewhere, the Marian archetype was Rossetti's (and Dante's, whose Beatrice, in her exalted state, is allegedly modelled exactly on this spiritual archetype) the feminine ideal, containing both the virgin and the mother<sup>251</sup> as well as the lover,<sup>252</sup> and being at the same time maternal, divine, and sensuous.<sup>253</sup> The same source also indicates that the three-fold potential of the Virgin Mary (lover, mother, virgin) is symptomatic of Rossetti's "regressive desire for a maternal security as well as the possessiveness of love."<sup>254</sup> Nevertheless, his damozel expresses certain desires of her own which raises the question as to what extent she is a true Marian figure with innocent virginal feelings. For a full discussion of Rossetti's conception of two aspects of woman – a virginal maiden that is both a Marian figure and a real woman (a woman to be loved in an innocent Dantean way), versus the snake woman/a siren (a woman to be feared *and* loved in a self-destructive way), see Greene's *A Study of D. G. Rossetti's Poetry and Aesthetic*.<sup>255</sup> Greene moreover adds that Rossetti achieved the blending of the Marian worship with love for a female by the linking together of the language of religion and love as a poetic tool, and not by an expression of doctrine.<sup>256</sup> If anything, Rossetti was more of a poet of love than of religious dogma. Yet, however, he esteemed the medieval piety which in the Middle Ages was the guiding principle and the leading aesthetic influence of everyday lives, and the adored Dante; thus the inclusion of holy numbers (e.g. three) in "The Blessed Damozel" therefore help us view the damozel as one of the said Marian figures: half the Virgin Mary, half Beatrice; a queen, a saint, an angel – a woman "not as she is, but as she fills his dream."<sup>257</sup>

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249 Hobbs 40.

250 Ibid.

251 Ibid 10-11, 76, 83.

252 Ibid 31.

253 Ibid 28.

254 Ibid 48.

255 Greene 126-129.

256 Ibid 96.

257 McGann 96.

The general impression that strikes us is that the numbers apparently play a certain role in the picture and in the poem, whether they are employed merely for the sake of their mystical connotations (three lilies and the seven stars in her hair in Stanza I, the five handmaidens in Stanza XVIII), or as an indication of measure (her day counting as ten years in Stanza III, or the lover's impression of the elapsed time as having been "ten years of years" in the stanza following). Though the presence of numbers in the poem does not directly enhance the poem's pictorial effect, the numbers in some way enrich and thicken the poetic texture. Just as I will be showing presently on Rossetti's use of capitalization, the numerals in the poem endow its content with depth and density – another dimension that is strongly connoted with the fine arts.

### Mysticism

Max Nordau in *Degeneration*, in accord with his disdain for the Aesthetes, "finds the use of the mystical numbers three and seven without significance"<sup>258</sup>, although he still insists that Rossetti is basically a mystic<sup>259</sup> and that the numbers "three and seven" were not accidental, precisely because they are mystical.<sup>260</sup> As far as Rossetti's mysticism is concerned, this may be the right place to discuss it. Greene connects Rossetti's interest in "mesmerism, hypnotism, and spiritualism"<sup>261</sup> with a superstitious streak in his character which prompted him to constantly search for some sort of assurance from beyond.<sup>262</sup> Cooper, however, ascribes his experiments with spiritualism to the loss of his wife with whom he tried to communicate at seances,<sup>263</sup> but she died in the early 1860s, whereas the first draft of "The Blessed Damozel" was composed in the late 1840s. Finally, according to Hobbs, his mysticism is said to be reflected in his employment of conventional symbols of spirituality: that is, the lilies (the flower of the Virgin Mary), the stars (the crown of the Queen of Heaven in Revelation 12:1),<sup>264</sup> and the rose (the symbol of the Virgin Mary). Since these items hold an indisputable symbolic value, the numbers could be expected to display similar significance as well.

The Revelation of St. John was also said to be Rossetti's favourite part of the Bible, one that he studied forever and never ceased to be fascinated by it. Baum even goes as far as to attempt to trace the influence of the Book of Revelation in "The Blessed Damozel", taking into account the white clothes,

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258 Nordau 87-88. Baum li.

259 Nordau 88. Baum l.

260 Nordau 87.

261 Greene 116.

262 In today's terms, this reliance on superstitions and magic may be dismissed as a neurotic trait or even as a symptom of an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

263 Cooper 193.

264 Hobbs 39. The same is suggested in Baum xxxviii.

the ablutionary act of bathing, the image of prayers as little clouds (as incense), the living mystic tree, the deep wells, etc, and linking them with the appropriate verse of the Biblical work.<sup>265</sup> Rossetti's fondness of the Apocalypse as his favourite portion of the New Testament on account of its richness of symbols and signs and its dense mystery, is also referred to in Boos.<sup>266</sup>

As for the image of prayers as little clouds, Hearn's research leads to Revelation 5:8: "And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people."<sup>267</sup> Hearn adds that this is an evidence of a medieval belief that prayers in heaven become transformed into the substance of incense – the Talmudists said that prayers were turned into beautiful vapoury flowers. At any rate, the damozel thinks that all the prayers she had said while back on earth, as well as those of her lover, float freely in heaven in the form of incense. "As long as prayer is not granted," Hearn says, "it remains incense; when granted it becomes perfume smoke and vanishes. Therefore she says 'We shall see our old prayers, granted, melt each like a little cloud.'"<sup>268</sup>

My take on Rossetti's mysticism is that his Catholic background provided him with a particular mindset from which he drew his imagery, inspiration, and which coloured his poetic language. Since he did not aim to be a religious or metaphysical poet (or at least he cannot be justly classed as such) but still used religious symbolism and metaphor, his poetry became a hybrid between love and religion. His mysticism stems from the blending of religion with love without losing the significance of either:<sup>269</sup> this is best exemplified on his treatment of the female figures. The spiritual in his poetry can be read into the amorous and the other way round; hence, probably, the label "mystic." Also, the mysticism of the Middle Ages ought not to be dismissed either. The medieval period, or its idealized form,<sup>270</sup> was a rich repository of inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelites, together with all its sensuality, piety, and mystery surrounding everything for which there was no science yet. And if there was, science was repudiated as witchcraft: the overruling power is exclusively that of God, and it was God that was the ends and means of all. It is a small wonder, then, that Rossetti's poetry is riddled with medieval (or Biblical) allusions with enigmatic significance whose chief attraction is their linkage to

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265 Baum xxxvii-xxxix. As a principal source Baum uses a study by F. Holthausen, "D.G. Rossetti und die Bibel" from *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, XIII (1925) and XIV (1926).

266 Boos 203.

267 The Book of Revelation 5:8, NIV.

268 Hearn 28-29.

269 Hearn has the same opinion. *Ibid* 34.

270 Nicolette Gray in *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves* very much doubts whether to the contemporary reader the medieval stories were as romantic as they seem to us, "because the background which seems to us often so marvellous and mysterious – the unknown – was to them an allusion, an analogy, a sophisticated ramification out of the idea of an intelligible (though not yet known) world order which was taken for granted by everyone." Gray 47.

the World Beyond; the classic binary of life and death in particular can be explored in such terms. If we add Dante and his *Divine Comedy*, as well as *La Vita Nuova*, into this melting pot, we may understand Rossetti's mysticism better. In some ways, yes, Rossetti *is* a mystic, but a necessary appendage must be added to that epithet: a mystic of love.

In her discussion of the strong influence of old ballads on Rossetti's poetics, Hobbs comes up with a suggestion of his frequent usage of the heritage of these ballads in his poetry at large. This particular heritage, according to Hobbs, consists of the major literary principles of the old ballads, namely the repetition of descriptive phrases, omens, symbols, symmetrical patterns, magical numbers - "especially three, seven, and nine"<sup>271</sup> - which are used to stylize the quantity and passage of time; to utilize the *in medias res* temporal setting-off of the poem, to obliterate the clock time. Numbers and symbols connote folk Christianity, magical rites, curses, symbolic acts, the Bible, and doubtless many more. Although "The Blessed Damozel" cannot rank with the traditional ballad, since it features introspection (the heritage of Dante)<sup>272</sup> and lacks a solid action that would drive the plot through the stages of the typical Aristotelian dramatic structure, it certainly displays a multitude of balladic features at least as far as the balladic accessories go. Setting it side by side with bona fide ballads that are often coupled with "The Blessed Damozel", such as "The Lady of Shallot", "Christabel", "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", Rossetti's poem admittedly possess a lot of balladic traits:

In the first place, the poem makes use of the balladic stanza, albeit extended, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. There is also an implicit medievalism in his use of the ballad: Stedman in particular is of the opinion that "his ballads recall the Troubador period."<sup>273</sup> And the troubadors, as it is well-known, are emblematic of the Middle Ages, and so are their songs of chivalry and courtly love - this, in turn, may provide a link with the Arthurian legend, and the fact that Rossetti's poetry is innately very musical. Taken altogether, this only reinforces Hearn's understanding of the poem's location as being a medieval castle, only clothed in Dante's heaven. (See page 21.)

And secondly, the poem displays a simplicity of style, timelessness, Christian implications, and, significantly, a sense of delicate magic. The impression of esoteric mysticism is conveyed by the use of numbers that are deemed as magical in the common understanding of the folk ballad. Furthermore, I believe that these numbers impart to the poem some of the atmospheric mystery that shrouds the

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271 Hobbs 89. Precisely three and seven are used in "The Blessed Damozel."

272 Hobbs 91.

273 Stedman 359.

painting. The picture is heavy in visual symbols but so is the poem. However, a number is not a visual symbol, it is an intellectual symbol, and as such demands the engagement of the intellect. The same could be said about the “feel” of the painting as a whole, the certain *je ne sais quoi* that refuses to be pinned down just by observance – though all its parts are visible, plenty remains hidden. A viewer standing before the painting may ask: “What does it mean? How should I understand this? What is behind it all? What is it about the picture that radiates this kind of mystery that I am unable to comprehend?” - similar questions can be raised by the reader upon encountering the magical numbers. For their symbolic meaning is just as impenetrable as the mystery emanating from the painting and its hidden content. To me, numbers (and capitalized words, too – see page 73) are something like hyperlinked words – one click and a whole maze opens of possible interpretations and meanings.

Though Max Nordau did not ascribe any deeper significance to the numbers (dismissing the “ten years of years” as being “thoroughly mystical. It means, that is, absolutely nothing.”<sup>274</sup>), he admitted that they were indeed “mysterious and holy” and of “deep meaning, which the intuitive reader may try to understand.”<sup>275</sup> Elsewhere Nordau claims that this “cabbala” may impress only the wholly “degenerate and hysterical reader” who believes in mystical numbers and can appreciate allusions to something unknown, mysterious, and holy with a vague Christian implication (which leads to further mystery).<sup>276</sup> This is, I believe, one of the reasons why Nordau places the Pre-Raphaelites among the Mystics in *Degeneration*.

Attempts may be made to disentangle the numbers' mystery from an esoteric point of view, from an astrological point of view, from the rich material of folklore, or even drawing on primitive pagan religions, mythology, or metaphysics; and still their elusive meaning would forever remain concealed in the variety of directions that such an interpretative act may take. What ought to be kept in mind when approaching Rossetti's mysterious nuances, however, is his strong predilection for the occult and the magical, as well as his strong religious background that surfaces abundantly throughout all his *oeuvre*. And numbers in the Bible are not to be comprehended thoroughly either.

## Numbers

It is remarkable that all the poem's numbers are odd (except “ten”); it is as though even numbers were not quite eligible for the embodiment of the mysterious, the supernatural, the sense of the occult. As

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274 Nordau 88.

275 Qtd in Baum li.

276 Nordau 87-88.

for the “mystical” numbers three, seven and five, we may perhaps turn to the Bible to find out what these numbers may symbolize – at this point, the poem's religious connotations need to be foregrounded. It is necessary to be selective in suggesting their meanings, for behind them lies an infinite vista of possible interpretations; and nowhere is it written what a given number must always stand for as a symbol. But with regards to the Christian Heaven and the Christian allusions that pervade the whole poem (the image of the Dove, the white rose of Mary, the mystic tree, bathing in God's sight as an act of ablution, prayers, saints, angels, etc) the numbers' religious connotations may be the appropriate direction. The five Mary's handmaidens instantly establish a link with the five wise virgins who trimmed their lamps – originating in Matthew:25:1-13 in the parable of ten virgins who took their lamps and went out “to meet the bridegroom.” Five were foolish and were shut out; the other five were wise and were saved, because they provided enough oil for themselves to be able to relight their lamps on the way.<sup>277</sup> This interpretation may be fortified and, to an extent, confirmed by the poem's reference to the image of lamps in Stanza XIV: “Occult, withheld, untrod, / Whose lamps are stirred continually / With prayer sent up to God.”

Hearn, however, views the image of lamps differently: according to him, these mystical flames represent special virtues and powers and can be agitated in accord with special virtues that correspond to them contained in ascending prayers of men. As for the Scriptural reference, Hearn supposes that the lamps were inspired by Revelation 4:5 - “And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.”<sup>278</sup> This messes up the interpretation a little: number five figured in mine, number seven figures in Hearn's. Though nowhere in the poem is it indicated how many lamps are there, I do tend to incline towards the “five virgins” version especially as there are explicitly five virginal maidens depicted in a later stanza. At any rate, both interpretations include either five or seven, proving the Christian significance of these two numbers. Said Hearn: “Seven is the mystical number of Christianity”<sup>279</sup> although he does not explain why – very likely because the number seven recurs in the Bible multiple times in various instances, especially in the Book of Revelation. Also, the number seven carries a whole powerhouse of mystical or esoteric associations, ranging from the Seven Deadly Sins and the Seven Virtues, the Seven Stars of the Great Bear that guide mariners to port, Seven gifts of the Spirit that lead men to Heaven<sup>280</sup>, the Seven liberal arts forming the quadrivium and the trivium, Seven gates of Hell in Dante,<sup>281</sup> Seven archangels (Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Remiel, Saraquael), God rested on the seventh day after the

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<sup>277</sup> Matthew 25:1-13, New International Version. The oil, lamps, and bridegroom are, of course, not to be taken literally.

<sup>278</sup> Hearn 28.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid 21.

<sup>280</sup> Alighieri, *Purgatory*, Canto XXX, lines 1-7. Alighieri 303.

<sup>281</sup> Alighieri, *Hell*, Canto CIV, line 104. Alighieri 59.

Creation, Seven colours of the Rainbow, Seven tones of the pentatonic scale, Seven pillars of the House of Wisdom, Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys of the Virgin Mary, Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man, etc. Seven is also a prime number.

The three lilies in the damozel's hand (apart from suggesting her maternity), in turn, suggest the Holy Trinity. Three is a holy number as well, denoting all manner of triads, apart from the said Trinity: the three Holy Virtues,<sup>282</sup> the Third day in the Bible, the Three Wise Men, Heaven and Hell and Purgatory in Dante, three notes in a musical chord, three primary colours, etc. Because Three has a beginning, middle, and end, it was favoured as the perfect number by Pythagoras. The list of possible connections could go on and on. The number seven – as in the seven stars in the damozel's hair – has been already partially resolved by Hobbs as standing for the crown of the Queen of Heaven.<sup>283</sup> Nevertheless, what the number seven – as well as five and three – *really* stand for, must always remain a guesswork for the reader.<sup>284</sup> I have offered my interpretation of the numbers to show that there is a whole range of available meanings – in this regard, the numbers deserve to be called mysterious. Their magical quality intrigues the reader to ask, to wonder, to search for an answer, and yet never be absolutely sure of ever finding one that could satisfy one's curiosity. Quite in the same way, the painting may provoke a similar reaction. Therefore, to read the poem becomes just as difficult as trying to “read” the painting, on account of the unsolvable mystery that surrounds both.

### Foregrounded Signifiers: Capitalization

Having mentioned “hyperlinkedness” of the numbers, it is now vital to turn the attention to capitalization. This section is intended to emphasize even further that it is possible to understand the relationship between poetry and picture not only from the viewpoint of the verbal power of evocation, but that it also can be done by considering it from the perspective of the typographic layout of the poem on the page. As “The Blessed Damozel” has been shown to be verbally evocative of a painting – by which I mean not only *the* painting of “The Blessed Damozel”, painted by the poet himself, but I also have in mind any kind of visual image that can be generated in the mind's eye of the reader by an intellectual process – I would argue that the architecture of the poem may enhance even more the final aesthetic experience of intense visualization.

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282 Faith, Hope, and Love. I Corinthians 13:13. NIV. Also in Dante's *Purgatory*, Canto VIII, line 89. Alighieri 214.

283 Hobbs 39. Baum xxxviii.

284 However, Ellen Conroy in *The Symbolism of Color* offers a very plausible interpretation of the number seven as far as its mystical connotations are concerned: according to her, seven represents completion “in both body and spirit, for it contains the basic four (which is the number of man, who has to perfect his fourfold nature – body, mind, soul, and spirit), and also it contains the there, which is the perfection of the Trinity, for every great religion has contained a Trinity.” Ellen Conroy, *The Symbolism of Color* (North Hollywood, California: Newcastle Publishing Co., Inc. 1996) 23.

I wish to draw attention to Scott's analysis of Rimbaud's poetry that I have quoted earlier. Essentially, the principle of his approach is modelled on placing a special attention to the formal properties of a poem on the page, and the graphic hierarchization of the poem's linguistic elements and punctuation. Rimbaud and especially Mallarmé were great innovators in this respect, stripping poetry down to its bare essentials, promoting the idea that "[p]oetry [...] is made not with ideas, but with words."<sup>285</sup> Though Rossetti is not a French Symbolist and cannot be regarded as such, the link between him and the poets of the French avantgarde has been many times proven valid,<sup>286</sup> and that was not only because the Pre-Raphaelites had an enormous influence on the *fin-de-siècle* and Decadent culture (most prominently manifest in the figure of Edward Burne-Jones, Rossetti's disciple, who was said to have inherited and developed Rossetti's perversities<sup>287</sup>). Christensen in *Theme and Image: The Structure of D.G. Rossetti's House of Life* sees the connection between Rossetti and the Symbolists as very accurate and logical. For one thing, like the Symbolists (and like the Romantics, too), Rossetti is concerned with the "synthesized, interior world of mental images." And secondly, what matters in his poetry is the impression of his symbols, not their external significance, in which sense Rossetti is a symbolist.<sup>288</sup>

Rossetti, like Baudelaire or Rimbaud, employs synesthesia and high coloration in his poems, strives towards the full engagement of senses, and, most importantly, tries to approximate his poetry to the condition of painting (and music). Painting was valued highly by the Symbolist and Romantic poets alike; what they esteemed most was the power of the fine arts to suggest ideas and provoke reverie.<sup>289</sup> Some of the French symbolists "painted" their verbal pictures by using the words on the page, thus creating a kind of a typographical image, the mention of which instantly recalls Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* or the experiments of Christian Morgenstern. These two examples verge on Surrealism, though; and Rossetti does not go as far as that by any means. Yet his painterly hand and his craftsmanship may have been attempting – consciously or not – to create the same impression on the page. However that may be, even Rossetti's typography may disclose something about the painterly content of his poems, or about the condition of poetry as being a blood-relation to painting

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<sup>285</sup> Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, Ltd., 1949) 210.

<sup>286</sup> John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination, 1848-1900*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 1. Langham Smith, 95, 109. Christensen 16. Boos 285, 253. Boos gives credit to Rossetti for preparing the ground for the Decadents and Symbolists with his technique and thematic focus, being in a sense an early Symbolist himself (253) and a precedent for the *fin de siècle* characteristics of English poetry and, like Swinburne, constituting a small intermediary link between Coleridge and Wilde, the resemblance between whom has been often noticed. (193)

In fact, Stanley Holberg's thesis, "Image and Symbol in the Poetry and Prose of Dante Gabriel Rossetti", unpublished dissertation, University of Maryland, 1958, often quoted in Christensen, is entirely constructed around the premise that Rossetti was a symbolist poet., though his arguments are not quite sound and his definition of symbolism is so loose as to include all poems concerning dream states. Boos 98n19.

<sup>287</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (Yale University Press 1990) 493.

<sup>288</sup> Christensen 16, Stanley M. Holberg, "Image and Symbol in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti" Diss. Maryland, 1959, 174. Qtd in Christensen 16.

<sup>289</sup> Scott 36.

in more ways than one.

In the aforementioned case of Rimbaud's experiments with typography, to which I am going to turn in my subsequent analysis of the same in Rossetti, we may discern another approach of the French Symbolists which opens a much more accessible gateway to Rossetti. Rimbaud went against the conventional poetic syntax, destroying it in order to achieve the sense of "spatialization" of poetry on the page, viz his dense and complex work *Illuminations* in which he endeavoured to bring poetry as close to the visual arts as possible.<sup>290</sup> But more importantly, among the means by which Rimbaud attempted the conveyance of these poetic visual effects, is an effort to thicken the texture of the poem by systematic repetition of capital letters, thus typographically erecting a verbal structure.<sup>291</sup> And this is exactly what I wish to examine in Rossetti. In addition, I would also briefly address the poem's punctuation and alliteration which play an immensely important role in the overall architecture of the poem. In the third part of the typographical analysis, I shall refer to Vogel's analytical observations in that respect.

This section is going to be closely related to that in which I concentrated on the five names. My analysis is going to deal with them as well, though from a different angle. I am aware that I am putting the following analysis at the risk of overt generalizations about the usage of capitalization in poetry; however, I shall stick as close to the imaginary wall of Rossetti's poetry as possible (metaphorically speaking), in order to avoid straying onto the path of half-baked theories. My aim is not to present capitalization in poetry as a verifiable fact or as an empirically demonstrable phenomenon, but rather as one possible way of reading the poem along with the picture itself and with the evocative/connotative power of its verbalized images. Such reading may contribute to the vast range of the poem's interpretations. Throughout the analysis, we must not forget that a poem is, technically, a visual arrangement of words on a page which may influence the verbal content to a considerable degree, as it has been shown on the examples of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, or Apollinaire: the core issue is manner versus matter. My treatment of capitalization in "The Blessed Damsel" will be in some ways similar to that of the numbers; that is, my focus will be chiefly on the vast referential range of proper names or place names, and the effect they have when employed as a poetic device.

A pictorial effect of a poem can be asserted on the level of signifiers (the meanings) as well as

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290 For the complete method and analysis of *Illuminations* and its elevation to the status of a "poetic image" made of scraps of story, descriptions, prints, vignettes, shop signs, theatre, décors, hallucinatory visions, overtures, palimpsest-like images, verbal illustrations, titles, phrases, and punctuation, see Scott 131-133.

291 Scott 136. To extend the understanding of capitalization, one may also consider the abundant and extremely dense capitalization in Blake and the effect *that* has on the reader.

signifieds (the forms).<sup>292</sup> The way Rimbaud does it in *Illuminations* has been described by Scott as follows:

[...] in citing a plethora of proper nouns, all names of places – whether towns (Carthage, Venice, Scarborough, Brooklyn), countries of geographical regions (Epirus, the Peloponnese, Japan, Arabia, America, Asia), buildings (the 'Royal', the 'Grand', the 'Palais-Promontoire'), etc. – Rimbaud erects a verbal structure in which capital letters [...] thicken the texture of the poem, projecting the signifier sharply into the foreground, creating thus a textual surface or *facade* which dazzles and fascinates the reader as much as the imaginary vision signified behind the words.<sup>293</sup>

It cannot be denied that Rossetti does not go into such extremes, yet the evocation of proper names can be said to create a very similar effect in “The Blessed Damozel.” Proper names in general have a wide scope of reference, meaning that the concepts they represent display a huge range of possible ways in which they conjure up a concrete mental image in the mind of the reader – this is what I mean by “hyperlinkedness.” A single signification of a proper name can branch out in an enormous variety of directions, while each direction can branch out in itself, creating a rhizomatic structure full of feasible references of that proper name. For instance, the word “Asia” evokes a whole continent of images: to some, the word may call to mind a particular landscape, or a colour, or a combination of smells, or sounds, a particular culture, a concrete visual image of a symbol commonly perceived as typically Asian; to others, “Asia” may represent India, China, Japan, Russia, or Turkey. The number of possibilities is endless. Capitalized words are almost, as it were, pieces of poetry in their own right, when employed as a poetic auxiliary (cf. Samarcand and Lebanon of the oft-quoted stanza of Keats’ “The Eve of St. Agnes” or Coleridge’s Xanadu). A good linguistic example of the evocative power of a capitalized name could be provided by the juxtaposition of an innocently looking question, “are mermaids real?” and of “Are Mermaids Real?” which is the name of a nail polish colour.<sup>294</sup> As a normal question it is utterly commonplace. As a nail-polish name, however, it receives a new dimension of meaning: one is compelled to ask how the title relates to the particular shade of colour of the nail varnish. Does the colour evoke mermaids somehow? And if it does, does it mean that when using it, you could rank among mysterious and fantastical creatures such as mermaids (whose mythical and fairy-tale nature, as well as their great superhuman beauty, renders them rather

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292 Scott 136.

293 Ibid.

294 A similar example could be made of contrasting other phrases and their use in the names of products such as the above-mentioned nail polish: “magic carpet ride” contra “Magic Carpet Ride”; “I’m baroque” contra “I’m Baroque”; “black mamba” and “Black Mamba”, “shuffle the deck” and “Shuffle the Deck”, “pick your poison” and “Pick Your Poison”, “plastic flamingo” and “Plastic Flamingo”, “distant memory” and “Distant Memory”, “good karma” and “Good Karma”, or “violet femmes” and “Violet Femmes” - the list could go on and on. (Thus named shades of nail varnish really exist.)

desirable for women), or that you would begin to believe in mermaids and ponder their existence, something you have no time for in your daily life – or, perhaps, something you used to do in childhood and have not done it since; and who in the adult world does not for a moment wish for a return to an idealized and simplified version of one's childhood? Therefore, “are mermaids real?” is a bland question; “Are Mermaids Real?” is, on the other hand, a grand name which shelters a plethora of secondary meanings, often elevated, and almost bordering on poetic meaning as a consequence of their evocative power. Capitalized words are very often titles, and a title, in general, suggests that there would be a lot to follow – a title is something of a summary of the whole, a concentration of the whole, whether it refers directly to the meaning or not. And as far as place-names are concerned, Jeremy McGann in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must be Lost* claims that Rossetti's poetry often locate regions of spiritual energy, even if he does not name them flat out: “Palestine in the Judaeo-Christian mythology, Glastonbury in Arthurian lore, Greece, Dante's Firenze, the London of Blake [...]”<sup>295</sup> Place-names of this sort are evoked in his poetry by suggestion of Holy Sepulchres, memorials, or various geographical tropes; these place are, according to McGann, “savage, holy, and enchanted.”<sup>296</sup> The power of their presence in Rossetti's poetry lies predominantly in their emblematic function. Though they may not be verbally represented and therefore do not supply the foregrounded signifiers that would thicken the poetic texture, McGann argues that we can still feel their presence by means of the hints Rossetti drops here and there. Nevertheless, McGann's argument reinforces my assumption that capitalized place-names (as well as other names) are extremely evocative, particularly if they denote something holy, enchanted, far-away and often unexplored and riddled with romantic preconceptions of one who has never been there.

In “The Blessed Damozel”, capitalization occurs multiple times, though not in extreme abundance. If we disregard the obligatory – or, more precisely, customary – capitalization of the first word of each line, there are many other words whose initial letter is a capital one. Here follows a list:

<i>Stanza</i>	<i>The capitalized word</i>
I	Heaven
II	Mary
III	God
V	God, God, Space
VI	Heaven
VII	God

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295 Jeremy McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) 97.

296 Ibid.

IX	Heaven
XII	Heaven, Lord, Lord
XIV	God
XV	Dove, His, His Name
XVII	God
XVIII	Mary, Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen, Margaret, Rosalys
XX	Mother
XXI	Him
XXII	Christ the Lord, Love

From the list I have made, all the capitalized concepts refer to a large cluster of associations connected with that concept. The capitalized words are those that can have a different meaning for different readers; “Space” cannot be defined as “the universe” in the poem, because the Christian tone of the poem would be disrupted, if something scientific and concrete entered it. Thus, “Space” is capitalized in order to heighten the mystery of what it really is. “Space” with a capital “S” is a concept that is both elusive and strangely specific – it denotes an unexplored, mysterious region surrounding the even more mystifying concept of “Heaven.” It is not the “space” as we know it from our earthly perspective: galaxies, planets, meteors, gases. In spite of the presence of stars in it, the “Space” of the poem does not resemble the astronomic “Space” at all. All this enhances the impression of the unreachable, the removed, the unknown, the hardly imaginable for a mortal being: “By God built over the sheer depth / The which is Space begun;<sup>297</sup> So high, that looking downward thence / She scarce could see the sun.” The distance from the sun is a very fine example of my point: it is extremely difficult to imagine such a distance, let alone to admit that it is physically possible for something to be that far away from the sun. (It is noteworthy that “sun” is not capitalized in the poem, in comparison with “Space”, proving that Rossetti was not aiming at the representation of cosmic things.) The expanse of the gulf between the damozel and her earth-bound lover is therefore accentuated to the extreme, so that the pangs of longing seem very intensified in this respect. The mysteriousness of the heavenly place is perfectly in accord with the basic conception of Rossetti’s poetic geography in which a dream landscape that has no roots in reality is the most frequent image, see “Love’s Nocturne.”

In much the same way, “Heaven” eludes definition when out of a proper Christian context, and so does “God” (plus the capitalized pronouns related to God), or “Lord”, “Christ the Lord,” though it must be conceded that these are in fact capitalized by convention and not for the sake of semantic richness. Nevertheless, these concepts conceal an immense mass of possible referents: their

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<sup>297</sup> The “Space” in the poem – much unlike our “Space” – has a beginning at a particular point.

capitalization signals their unique elevation above other words whose referential power is much narrower. They are, in a sense, more emblems than verbal forms of an abstract concept, and as such, they completely escape any sort of concrete definition. Words like “Mother”, “Dove”, “Love”, gain their religious connotation only when set in a religious context – which in the poem they are. And yet the mental images produced by intellectual process on the part of the reader come out as blurred, vague, intangible. And it is beneficial for the poem if they do, for in that way the poem retains its infinitely mysterious quality, comparable to that of the painting, and they put across the enormous mystery that surrounds Heaven, life after death, even death itself. These concepts are not mere names – there are large masses of content which are concealed behind them. None of the possible meanings for them, extracted from those masses, can span their whole referential potential.

The proper names, of course, are capitalized because the orthographical rules demand it. However, just like in the case of the “concepts” I discussed above, their capitalized first letters alert the reader to the sense of mystery that is undeniably contained in the poem. The names of the five maids are highly allusive and it requires special knowledge to find out who they were, whether or not were they really attendants of Mary, what relation to Mary’s “groves” they have, or whether their names carry some special signification. If one does not attempt to unearth these meanings, the names remain mysterious, “closed.” “Mary”, of course, is generally known; yet she is not given any sort of image in the poem – throughout, she is but a liminal figure that is unseen, yet her presence is felt; just like the “Dove” of the fifteenth stanza. On the other hand, the five names are visualized as sitting circlewise “with bound locks and foreheads garlanded” and depicted as weaving birth-ropes for the newly dead. This brief description of them brings them closer to the inner eye of the reader – and yet they remain the shadowy unvisualized figures they are, precisely on account of the richness of content that is hidden behind their very names. The reference to the names being “five sweet symphonies” presents the content as deceptively simple and innocent – and yet there is much more to them if one scrutinizes them closely, be it their unique composition, musicality, and rhythm, or the allusions to the actual saints and martyrs. Either way, perceiving the capitalized words in this way can greatly influence the understanding of “The Blessed Damozel.” Realizing the misty, far-off regions of Heaven, as well as the vagueness of the present figures and symbols whose capital letters attract the attention of the reader, one’s awareness of the dreamy, supernatural setting of the poem can be thus amplified. This colours one’s understanding of the whole poem. Moreover, the foregrounded words encourage imagination and lend the poem its particular dream-like, heavenly, dazzling atmosphere heavy with symbolical meanings as well as hidden meanings, that permeates both the poem and the painting.<sup>298</sup>

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298 It is worth a remark that the capitalized words are, apart from a few pronouns, all nouns. Nouns and adjectives have the

By incorporating capitalized words charged with imaginative meaning, the poem both *looks* and *is* dense. The density is in its allusiveness (which is as allusive as it is elusive), but also in the “look” of the poem on the page. Nevertheless, the typographical arrangement of the poem still holds a lot more that deserves to be analyzed. McGann notes that Rossetti paid the closest attention to the graphic design of his texted works: as a result, he continues, the decorative and apparitional forms of book design and typography embody ideas and conceptual content.<sup>299</sup>

### Foregrounded Signifiers: Punctuation and Imitative Meter

As for the actual architecture of the poem, the phenomenon of capitalization would be useful to pair with that of punctuation. The analysis I aim to carry out would be based on a thorough structural examination of “The Blessed Damozel” by Vogel in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Versecraft*. In it, Vogel demonstrates the close, yet subtle cooperation of the typographical structure of the stanzas with the matter the individual stanzas are concerned with. My intention is to work off Vogel’s analysis and add some of my points, especially in the area of capitalization and punctuation which, I would argue, contribute to the structural meaning of the poem a great deal. For the poem indeed works on multiple levels – as a poem with a prominent associative visual content hidden in its words, as a typographical structure (a statue is a fine simile), as a painting (the linear structure, the main focus, the three dimensions, reading it from top to bottom), and as a poem *per se* as far as scansion goes – and my aim is to explore these levels, as closely as possible.

There are many instances of this phenomena to be found in poetry: Hilaire Beloc’s “Tarantella” whose rhythms and repetitions readily imitate the dance which at the same time is evoked verbally in the mood of the poem, or even Robert Southey’s “Cataract of Lodore” in which the rapid succession of genitives, especially from the fourth stanza onwards, imitate the cascades of rushing water – and the manner in which the water falls, bubbles, rushes, rolls and races, corresponds exactly to the way the stanzas reiterate the succession of genitives. In Stanza IV they come in pairs, and so they do in Stanza V; the next stanza features triplets, while in the last one the torrential water is represented by strings of four genitives per line. The preceding stanzas introduce the source of water in irregular arrangements full of internal rhymes, imitating the uncertain movement of a water spring that has not yet gathered momentum, and neither has developed into a steady current yet. In this respect the poem’s form

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highest potential of carrying a great associative content – they are always at the core of lyric poetry, and by being used in descriptions, their meanings are rich in nuances, connotations, and associations that engage the reader’s imaginative faculties.

<sup>299</sup> McGann 72.

follows both the shape of the widening torrent *and* the sound the water makes as it rushes along at Lodore.<sup>300</sup> The poem effectively exploits the potentials of the English language to form genitives, as well as the availability of the rich variety of their possible endings, as a means to imitate physical motion. It is difficult to determine whether the poem should be evaluated as a skillful example of “word-painting”, or dismissed it as a childish play with sense and sound. Nevertheless, its vivid depiction of the water's dynamic movement from a trickle of thin water-spring to an accelerating massive body of water ought to be appreciated. It may be beneficial for the present purposes to showcase briefly the internal mechanisms of the “Cataract of Lodore” and the manner in which both subject matter and form are married in a cooperative relationship, where the form informs the matter and vice versa. It is nonetheless remarkable that all of the genitives imitating the motion can be more or less directly related to the way water really rushes; it can “thread and spread”, “whiz and hiss”, “sprinkle and twinkle and wrinkle”, etc. The individual words in turn imitate the rhythm of ripples on the water surface; the four genitives in the last part imitate whole waves – and we may imagine the roaring sound the mass of water makes in this steady flow. Thus, sound, sense, *and* the visual effect on the page join together to cooperate in the vivid evocation of what the poem describes. The genitives are either amphibrachic (“collecting, projecting, receding”) or trochaic (“shocking, rocking, darting, parting”). Later on, the poem also starts employing amphibrachs (“retreating, delaying, advancing”), in accord with the way the torrential water widens.

#### RHYTHM

Collecting, projecting,	“-ecting”	. . . . .
Receding and speeding,	“-eding”	. . . . .
And shocking and rocking,	“-ocking”	. . . . .
And darting and parting,	“-arting”	. . . . .
And threading and spreading,	“-eading”	. . . . .
And whizzing and hissing,	“-izz/ssing”	. . . . .
And dripping and skipping,	“-ipping”	. . . . .
And hitting and splitting,	“-itting”	. . . . .

[...]

Dividing and gliding and sliding,	“-iding”	. . . . .
. . .		
And falling and brawling and sprawling,	“al/awling” - /o:/	. . . . .
. . .		

<sup>300</sup> I thank Prof. Florence Boos for pointing this out to me.

And driving and riving and striving,	“-riving”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And sprinkling and twinkling and wrinkling,	“-inking”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And sounding and bounding and rounding,	“-ounding”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And bubbling and troubling and doubling,	“-/Λ/bbling”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And grumbling and rumbling and tumbling,	“-umbling”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And clattering and battering and shattering;	“-attering”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
Retreating and beating and meeting and sheeting,	“-eating”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
Delaying and straying and playing and spraying,	“-aying”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
Advancing and prancing and glancing and dancing,	“-ancing”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
Recoiling and turmoiling and toiling and boiling,	“-oiling”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And gleaming and streaming and steaming and beaming,	“-eaming”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
And rushing and flushing and brushing and gushing,	“-ushing”	. . . . .
. . . . .		
[...]		

Other two brief examples of this cooperation between the subject matter and the form, this time from Rossetti's works, are provided by Vogel. He calls this phenomenon "imitative meter" which refers to lines "in which the rhythm strikingly accords with the sense, like Pope's famous alexandrine 'That, like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.'"<sup>301</sup> According to Vogel, Rossetti's verse contains plenty of imitative lines. The best example given by Vogel is from "Jenny", in which, he says, Rossetti's poetic ear helps to emphasize details visualized by his painter's eye:

As **Jenny's long throat droops aside**, --  
The **shadows** where the **cheeks** are **thin**,

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301 Vogel 7.

The **pure wide curve** from ear to chin.

The tetrameter is weighted by spondees in the first and third lines: “**long throat droops aside**”; “**pure wide curve.**” These accentuate “the length of Jenny's throat and the wide curve of her jaw, while the lightening of the second line by pyrrhics (“-ows where the”), resulting in only three stressed syllables in that line, accords with the thinness of her cheeks.”<sup>302</sup>

The second instance is taken from “The Card Dealer” whose stanzaic structure is identical with that of “The Blessed Damozel” - that is, it is a ballad stanza extended to six lines rhyming ABCBDB. The stanza features a conventional iambic meter, except, however, for a number “of substituted anapests – ten in fifty-four lines.” Vogel argues that all ten anapests are used imitatively; one of them even gives a rhythmic tilt to a line about music: “As a *tune* / within / a tune.”<sup>303</sup> Another anapest informs a line with the liveliness of play: “With thee / *it is play* / ing still.” A third anapest stresses the swaying motion in: “Beneath / the sway / o’ *the sun.*”

Next, Vogel focuses on the rest of the ten anapests, which are crowded into a single stanza paraphrasing Job 10:22: “to the land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.”<sup>304</sup> The theme of disorder is accentuated by an accompanying metrical disorder, something that shall soon be demonstrated on “The Blessed Damozel”, only in the case of “The Card Dealer” the disorder of both matter and form are produced by the “abrupt plethora of anapests together with a terminal pyrrhic in the fourth line [“-eneth”] and two inverted feet.”<sup>305</sup> These changes result in the crumbling of meter in the last half of the first line:

A land / without / any / order, –  
Day ev/en as *night*, / (one saith,) –  
Where who *lie*/th down / aris/eth not  
Nor the *sleep*/er awak/eneth;  
A land / of dark/ness as *dark/ness itself*  
And of / the shad/ow of *death.*

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302 Ibid.

303 Vogel's version of the poem contains the word “within”, but in my version of “The Card Dealer” the line goes “As a tune *into* a tune” - but it does not make any difference in meter, though.

304 Job 10:22, NIV.

Boos, however, discusses Job 14:2 in her analysis of this passage.

The same source also suggests Amos 5:8 as another possible influence on the part containing “day even as night”: “Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night. .... that maketh the morning darkness... (4:13).” Boos 205.

305 Vogel 8.

So much for the examples of imitative meter; Vogel states that even though imitative meter shows the poet's ingenuity, their occurrence is very limited due to the fact that "ideas can be imitated by analogous qualities of meter only if they contain connotations such as movement, weight, or duration [...]." <sup>306</sup> Nevertheless, imitative meter succeeds in affecting the reader continuously if unconsciously, and when blended into lines with a non-imitative meter, it contributes a great deal to generating an appropriate emotion, whether the readers are fully aware of it or not.

Turning now back to "The Blessed Damozel", there is a similar case of structures cooperating with the verbal content enclosed within those structures. The typographical constellation houses a meaning by itself. Vogel provides a thorough in-depth analysis of all the twenty-four stanzas the poem is made of. I am going to touch just a few major points, though. Elizabeth Jackson in "Notes on the Stanza of Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" has been credited as suggesting that the poem has a "shifting, hesitant rhythm that is practically unique in English verse" <sup>307</sup>, but did not elaborate on that unique quality. Vogel takes over from there and analyzes the way in which the stanza movement is being modified and varied in accord with variations in the mood of the poem. He considers this as a striking example of metrical skill. <sup>308</sup> I have suggested elsewhere the "dynamic stasis" embodied in the poem's progression of the rhyme scheme: A-B-C-B-D-B. The dynamic part is A- \_ - C - \_ - D - \_ where the rhymes literally move, whereas the stasis are the three alternating B-rhymes: \_ - B - \_ - B - \_ - B. The resulting effect is that of movement within a tight structure. <sup>309</sup> Vogel notices the same, adding that this balladic sextet has been "an admirable choice for the poem" since its pattern of alternation both in rhyme scheme and of longer lines and shorter lines, <sup>310</sup> produces the impression of a steady forward progress. <sup>311</sup> Following which, he plunges into the the in-depth analysis of the poem stanza by stanza.

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306 Ibid.

307 Elizabeth Jackson, "Notes on the Stanza of Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel", *PMLA* 58 (Dec 1943), 1053. Qtd in Vogel 91.

308 Vogel 91-92, for the full analysis see Vogel 91-98.

309 Stein considers the core of the dynamism in "The Blessed Damozel" to be in the visual quality of the poetry, for when we approach the poem, we must interpret "the nature and relationship of a number of isolated but vivid details to understand Rossetti's iconography." This cyclical network of interrelationships must be understood dynamically – and the structure of the poem prevents us from adopting a static conception of its universe. Stein 161.

I may also add an interesting observation of Greene's, though not wholly relevant to my current concerns, yet worth a mention. His analysis of "The Blessed Damozel" brings into the discussion the notion that it is due to Rossetti's painter's mentality that he places an extra emphasis on space and movement. Explicitly he says: "[J]ust as a painter can suggest movement or repose through composition, or through the placement of a few restless lines, so Rossetti manages to make the movement of time and the relative emptiness of space almost a visual function." Greene 98. Furthermore, he finds that throughout the poem we are confronted with the temporal and eternal counterpoints: earth and heaven. In this manner, "The Blessed Damozel" can be viewed as poem that balances both "stasis and flux, time and timelessness." Ibid.

310 The alternation between the longer and shorter lines are, to an extent, visually productive as well.

311 Vogel 92.

Basically, Vogel proposes that there are two kinds of stanza used. One of them can be divided symmetrically into three couplets, the division marked by punctuation. Whenever these regular three-couplet stanzas occur, they generate the feeling of “order and calm.” The second type of stanza is irregular – it is used in the more emotional parts that are expressive of disorder and turmoil in one way or another. Their disordered structure enhances the emotion the stanza is trying to put across verbally. It is therefore not surprising that the former kind of stanza is used in the “heavenly” parts of the poem, while the latter is prominent in the “earth” parts – therefore, we have before us two contrasting moods with their corresponding two stanza styles.<sup>312</sup> The division between Heaven and earth is made apparent from the very beginning of the poem and it can be seen also in the painting. The fact that the boundary between the two realms can be perceived even in the stanza structures accentuates the division even more markedly, thus widening the gulf between the two lovers and intensifying the damozel's longing for reunion. Again, the division is threefold: in the painting, in the description of the two lovers and of the rift between them, and in the manner of using two kinds of stanzas.

To illustrate briefly what Vogel has in mind, two stanzas selected from the poem might provide a satisfactory demonstration of the structural function of punctuation. The opening stanza is the best example of the “heavenly” parts. In perfect accord with the sense of the serene and beautiful present in the stanza, the structure is regular, symmetrical, divided neatly into three couplets<sup>313</sup>:

The blessed damozel leaned out	}
From the gold bar of heaven.	
Her eyes were deeper than the depth	}
Of waters stilled at even.	
She had three lilies in her hand,	}
And the stars in her hair were seven.	

The three couplets are quite discernible. They are formed of three complete sentences: “The blessed damozel leaned out from the gold bar of heaven.”, “Her eyes were deeper than the depth of waters stilled at even.” and “She had three lilies in her hand, and the stars in her hair were seven.” It is true, though, that not all “heavenly” stanzas are marked by this high degree of regularity – and yet they can

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312 Ibid 92-93.

313 Vogel 93.

In this respect we are brought again to the notion of “triads” of “The Blessed Damozel.”

be deemed as regular regardless of their slight modifications, precisely because they can be still dissected into three couplets. (For instance, Stanza XV features enjambment of line two; but still the stanza can be perceived as regular.)<sup>314</sup>

As a prime example of the irregularity and chaos in the “earth” stanzas, Vogel examines the first stanza of this kind – that is, stanza IV. Here the serene mood changes suddenly, and the calm, composed description of the damozel in her heaven is interrupted by the lover’s interlude concerning his torment, passion, and longing.<sup>315</sup> The lover’s speech is enclosed in parentheses, suggesting an inobtrusive interruption, rather whispered under one’s breath than delivered in straight speech:

(To one, it is ten years of years.	<i>heavy pause</i>
. . . Yet now, and in this place,	
Surely she leaned o'er me – her hair	<i>interrupted line, syncope in “o'er”</i>
Fell all about my face. . . .	
Nothing: the autumn fall of leaves.	<i>interrupted line</i>
The whole year sets apace.)	<i>heavy pause</i>

Accordingly, the verse turns irregular. The progression of couplets is transformed into “a restless, uneven movement of syntactical units of various lengths, none of which constitutes a couplet, produced by heavy pauses at the end of lines one and five and within lines three and five.”<sup>316</sup> What is also remarkable about the passage is its heavy punctuation that cuts off thoughts, arrests the steady, regular flow that the opening stanza has, producing a ragged, chaotic impression, which can be equated to the internal suffering of the speaker. Vogel admits that the effect of this irregular verse may seem slighter than it really is; but at the same time he attempts to put Stanza IV into couplets. By doing so, he proves that the couplets indeed *do* produce calm and serenity. As a result, Stanza IV sounds like a detached and uninvolved meditation, with a markedly decreased emotional impact. Vogel suggests the following modification:

(It is ten years of years to one

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314 Ibid 95. His in-depth analysis of the individual stanzas is more or less concerned with the examination of irregularities within the “heavenly” stanzas. On the whole, the patterns for the two kinds of stanza remain the same, notwithstanding the minor inconsistencies: they cannot be perfectly regular, that would be unnatural.

315 Ibid 93.

316 Vogel 93.

Who waits here in this place.  
 Surely she now leaned down o'er me,  
 Her hair about my face.  
 Nothing but autumn's fall of leaves  
 As the whole year sets apace.)<sup>317</sup>

Contrasting the original stanza with the “coupletized” one, the difference in resulting emotion is made obvious. The poem generally follows this pattern: the “heavenly” stanzas composed of symmetrical couplets, signaling the peace, quiet, the clear architecture of the place and celestial order up in Heaven, alternate with “earth” stanzas which are stylistically chaotic, syntactically uneven, and sometimes over-punctuated, thus imitating the same chaos and tumult that goes on in those stanzas.

In the poem, Heaven is indeed portrayed as a neat structure: balcony with the gold bar, the rampart, God's house, its distance from the earth and the misty, vague, mysterious atmosphere, with the general impression of heavenly quiet interspersed with brief spells of celestial music and whispers whose effects I have discussed earlier. The orderliness of this structure has been referred to as a “composition” by Greene.<sup>318</sup> He also insists that the eternal moment we are confronted with in the poem is, for us, captured in this very “‘composition’ of lilies and gold bar, concrete damozel and vague backdrop, [...] fixed forever in one exquisite moment of perfect longing.”<sup>319</sup> The very word ‘composition’ connotes order and structure, perhaps even symmetries. The earthly world, conversely, is not depicted in any way that could possibly rival the compositional descriptions of Heaven – in fact, the earth is not described in terms of “composition” at all, but rather is presented as a random accumulation of earthly details in disarray. Vogel's division of the stanzas into two stylistic types can be therefore fully justified.

There are, however, cases of stanzas that could be regarded as mergers of the two styles, corresponding to the ebb and flow of emotion within the given stanza. These are the stanzas in which the transition from a heavenly scene to an earthly one (or vice versa) is taking place. Vogel suggests the following two stanzas as examples of both – Heaven to earth, earth to Heaven:

It lies in Heaven, across the flood  
 Of ether, as a bridge. }

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317 Ibid 93-94.  
 318 Greene 99.  
 319 Ibid 99.

Beneath, the tides of day and night	}	
With flame and darkness ridge		<i>enjambment</i>
The void, as low as where this earth		<i>enjambment</i>
Spins like a fretful midge. <sup>320</sup>		

The first part of the stanza is descriptive of heaven – accordingly, it is arranged in a neat couplet, concluded with the image of a bridge that metaphorically and typographically signals the transition from the elevated celestial realm downwards to the earth ruled by disorder. Thus, the second part portrays the earth as spinning “like a fretful midge”, a restless enough image to be well in accord with the restless pace and arrangement of these four lines. The “earth” part is marked by enjambments and none of its four lines are stopped to suggest a couplet. The other example Vogel mentions is a reverse motion, that is, transition from the earth back to Heaven:

The sun was gone now; the curled moon	}	
Was like a little feather		
Fluttering far down the gulf; and now		
She spoke through the still weather.		
Her voice was like the voice the stars	}	<i>enjambment, but it does not cause</i>
Had when they sang together. <sup>321</sup>		<i>irregularity</i>

Though enjambed, the last two lines of the stanza are the perfect “heavenly” couplet, striking us as orderly, calm and well-structured. Conversely, the first four lines dealing with the lower world of mortals is, again, evidently disordered: the semi-colons interrupt lines one and three, and the enjambment between lines three and four eliminates any possibility of the occurrence of a couplet within those lines. The “earth” part is concluded by a full stop, thus signaling that the disorder is over and the “heavenly” order is restored as we move through the two spheres in imagination as well as in the linear, vertical process of reading the text.

This proves that the structure of the stanzas responds to the emotional mood expressed by those stanzas. The passages concerned with Heaven are regular, or at least strike us as regular, whereas those concerned with the earth are from moderately to extremely irregular. Vogel claims that “the

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<sup>320</sup> Vogel 94.

<sup>321</sup> Vogel 94.

general difference between the two kinds is obviously great enough to affect strongly the emotion of the poem.<sup>322</sup> However, Vogel also notices certain subtle stylistic changes within the regular patterns of what he calls “heavenly stanzas.” These are related to the mood that governs up in Heaven and is prone to change according to the progression of the damozel’s thoughts. Vogel examines stanzas XIII to XXII with special attention given to the internal modifications that take place throughout the passages. He arrives at the conclusion that with “the rising, if decorously restrained, emotion of the damozel”<sup>323</sup>, even the divine structure collapses and crumbles. In other words, the level of regularity within the “heavenly” stanzas corresponds to the current emotional tone. Having started out calm and serene like a picture, the emotional state of the damozel becomes disordered as her thoughts concerning her earth-bound lover deepen her desire and despair. One can increasingly feel the upsurge of her longing, her anticipated happiness, her anxiety before the throne of Christ, and finally her brief misinterpreted joy and the following disappointment ending in tears. Vogel adds that “one feels it not only because it is implied in the subject matter, but also because it is suggested by the slight disturbance of the verse in more than half of those stanzas [XIII to XXII].”<sup>324</sup> Nevertheless, these emotional turmoils reflected in the form of the verse are not as strong and passionate as those of the lover. In heaven, it seems, even emotions are more placid than on the earth: besides, the damozel is rendered lady-like, decorous, dignified, almost reverent. Therefore, the changes within the “heavenly” stanzas are slighter, gentler, more delicately wrought, but still we can make a clear distinction between these two kinds of “heavenly” structures. It is almost as though this dichotomy of stanzas reflected the strength and power of heavenly and earthly emotion, as well as of male emotion as opposed to female emotion.

The analysis does not end here: the last two stanzas, up till now exempted from the analysis altogether, exhibit *both* “heavenly” and “earthly” features. Vogel notices especially the two-tercet main division of Stanza XXIII – the first of these tercets concludes the damozel’s imagined reunion with the words: “‘All this is when he comes.’ She ceased.” Then the second tercet brings about the very climax of the whole poem. The climax is the moment when the damozel believes for a while that the angels whose “light thrilled towards her” are escorting her lover to join her.<sup>325</sup> Though the climax comes up in mid-stanza, it is far more effective than if it were placed at the beginning of the next stanza. The reason for this, Vogel argues, is that the climax seems much more sudden – and therefore more dramatic – when it is put “in the second tercet of a stanza split exactly in the middle, like no other in

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322 Ibid 95. Vogel also adds that the same impression has been confirmed by Professor Baum and many others. Ibid 96.

323 Ibid 96.

324 Vogel 96.

325 Ibid.

the poem."<sup>326</sup>

She gazed and listened and then said,

Less sad of speech than mild, –

“All this is when he comes.” She ceased.

*Pause and tension before the climax.*

**The light thrilled towards her, fill'd**

**With angels in strong level light.**

**Her eyes prayed, and she smiled.**

} *The climax of the whole poem.*

The slight disorder in the last line of the first tercet (line three in the stanza) anticipates the explosion of the climactic passage: everything seems to move towards the grand finale. Elsewhere Vogel comments on the remarkable echoing that occurs in this particular section, intensifying the subject matter and augmenting the soft melodiousness of Rossetti's poem.<sup>327</sup> Echoing threads through the whole poem, though, but is probably most prominent in the climax section as well as in the opening stanza – I shall reflect on the matter of echoing later on.

Stanza XXIV, the final one, blends the “heavenly” with the “earthly” by integrating both the parenthetical utterances of the lover and the description of heaven, the damozel, and her body language.<sup>328</sup> This stanza is also notable for beginning with the damozel's smile and ending with her tears – even this detail, I would suggest, adds to the overall feeling of instability and fragility of emotion embodied in the unusually fractured (yet very symmetrical) structure of the stanza. It is also worth noticing that the lover's parenthetical interruptions envelop the stanza as though the utterances “(I saw her smile.)” and “(I heard her tears.)” were in a way parentheses per se for the whole section. Or are they supposed to convey to us typographically the suggestion that the lover closes his beloved damozel in an disembodied embrace? (We must not forget that the lover's presence in the poem is that of a disembodied spirit, in spite of the mention of his face in stanza IV – the painting differs here, though – which reverses the situation where the deceased should be in the form of a spirit and the living “fleshly.”) With the first utterance acknowledging her smile, the lover embraces the damozel with one arm; with the second utterance about him hearing her tears, he closes her in a full embrace, albeit without touching physically, while at the same time accepting the two sides of her: one smiling and hoping, the other weeping and despairing. Or perhaps it might be understood as a kind of a

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326 Ibid 97.

327 Vogel 74.

328 Ibid 97.

dialogue, since the lover's comment, "(I heard her tears.)" is a response to the action above in Heaven? Or a suggestion of the damozel being embraced by her lover's voice? Vogel does not go as far as all that, though; but the reunion of the two lovers at the conclusion of the poem is quite obvious. In no other stanza does the lover enter the passages of the damozel's speech in such manner – this is a unique occurrence. (The three other interjections are separated from the other stanzas.) Due to this fact, Vogel observes that by incorporating the lover's "commentary" into a structure dealing with the damozel at her most emotional, Rossetti has joined the two lovers prosodically, even though in actual fact they remain separated.<sup>329</sup> Although the poem is open-ended and inconclusive, "with the lovers still separated and grieving and with no assurance that they will ever be united"<sup>330</sup>, it does not leave the reader unsatisfied or with a feeling of incompleteness. Quite the opposite: Vogel argues that the structure of the poem compensates for this inconclusiveness by its prosodic, typographic and dramatic features that manage to join the two lovers from the point of view of form, despite the fact that content-wise they remain parted – still longing, still waiting:

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path	<i>The first parenthetical utterance</i>
Was vague in distant spheres:	
And then she cast her arms along	<i>Enjambment</i>
The golden barriers,	<i>The poem started at the gold bar and ends</i>
<i>with it too</i>	
And laid her face between her hands,	<i>The posture is changed: body language</i>
And wept. (I heard her tears.)	<i>The second parenthetical utterance</i>

The last stanza, after the jarring climax of the preceding one, displays a kind of regained, though transformed, balance. After the initial "but", the clauses of the stanzas are joined in a syntactic coordination: "And then she cast her arms along the golden barriers, and laid her face between her hands, and wept." Vogel notices the precise placement of punctuation marks that divide the section into three couplets, which with the parallel parentheses at the beginning and the finish make the stanza "the most prominently symmetrical [one] of the poem."<sup>331</sup> The "distant spheres" remind us indirectly of the vast gulf between the two separated lovers, while "the golden barriers," as I have remarked at the appropriate place, hark back to where we started: the opening stanza in which the damozel leans out from the gold bar. Also, in this manner we are reminded of the fact that both

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329 Ibid.

330 Ibid.

331 Vogel 97.

characters are completely static as far as location is concerned. Yet in spite of their physical stasis, as Vogel has shown, they indeed *are* symbolically reunited. The recurrence of the image of the gold bar also locks the poem “into a circular whole.”<sup>332</sup> Vogel compares Rossetti's inconclusiveness with Keats' “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in which the final stanza is almost a repetition of the opening one (Rossetti uses the opening image in the final stanza as well, though modified, and with a contrasting mood), thus creating an extra symmetry spanning the whole poem, whose overall effect is that of a final equipoise. It is not cathartic in the proper sense of the word, it is not even conclusive in the sense of resolving a challenge, nor is it unsettling – the poem is perfectly counterbalanced in this respect, and the final impression of the poem is that of a melancholic equilibrium.

As Scott claims in *Pictorial Poetics*, style of language can reflect and reproduce the order of sensations (rather than logical connections), and this order is underlined and made more perceptible to the reader by a pattern of symmetries both phonetic and syntactic.<sup>333</sup> This holds true to what I have just undertaken to analyze. The properties my analysis was concerned with both provoke and demand intense visualization whether we are able to realize it or not. By a constant stimulation of the senses through the drawing of attention to the various patterns and structures, the poem ceases to be a purely textual object, and its impact spans across the borderlines between the visual, the musical, and the textual. The imminent result of this kind of “multimediality” is that of immensely accentuating the emotional response from the reader.

#### Foregrounded Signifiers: Echoing and Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance

Having just mentioned echoing in one of my comments on Stanza XXIII, a few points need to be made in regard to that. Though echoing is more of a matter of sounds and musicality and – apart from a potential interest for synesthetes – has little to do with visualization, its occurrence in poetry can have a manifold function. First, as Vogel argues, heavy repetition of certain sounds augments the melodiousness of a given poem.<sup>334</sup> Echoing can also keep shifting the focus to a few key words whose impact becomes intensified by means of constant reminders of their sounds. And, just like putting together stones of harmoniously regular hues to make a mosaic, words containing the same sounds fit together, blend into one another at the edges, so to speak, with the result of a somewhat harmonious effect. Rossetti aimed specifically at a lushness of sounds<sup>335</sup>, even to the point of actually marring and crippling some of his poems in his vehement attempt to achieve this impression. Vogel lists some of

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332 Ibid 98. Stein, moreover, ascribes to the bar yet another function: he regards it as the suggestion of the protective barrier placed in front of paintings in the nineteenth century galleries. Stein 148.

333 Scott 34.

334 Vogel 73-74.

335 Ibid 72.

his less intelligible phrases whose words have been apparently chosen more for the sake of euphony than for sense:<sup>336</sup> “limpid lambent water”<sup>337</sup>, “marshalled marvels”<sup>338</sup>, “the pasture gleams and glooms.”<sup>339</sup>

Nevertheless, “The Blessed Damozel” does not go into extremes of this sort. The poem's gentle echoing produces a pleasant sound without inhibiting sense. Vogel briefly discusses the first stanza of the poem as an example of muted musicality resulting from subtle repetitions.

The blessed damozel leaned out  
From the gold bar of Heaven;  
Her eyes were deeper than the depth  
Of waters stilled at even;  
She had three lilies in her hand,  
And the stars in her hair were seven.

The dominant sounds that run through the stanza in various lines are *l*'s, short *e*'s, long *e*'s, and *r*'s, according to Vogel.<sup>340</sup> To this inventory of repeated sounds, I would also add *b*'s, *d*'s, *h*'s, *t*'s, and *s*'s, although admittedly Vogel lists the most prominent ones. To illustrate clearly the way they thread through the passage and also to stress the impact the echoing has, I would suggest sketching two coloured versions of the stanza. One will highlight the echoing of my suggestion – which is not that much about aural effect than about the visual effects on the page – the other would explain Vogel's echoing.

I. (My suggestion)

The **b**l**e**s**s**e**d** **d**amozel leaned **d** out  
From **t**he **g**o**l**d **b**ar of **H**eaven;  
**H**er **e**yes were **d**eep**e**r **t**han **t**he **d**e**p**t**h**  
Of **w**at**e**r**s** **s**till**e**d **a**t even;  
**S**he **h**ad **t**h**e**e **l**il**i**e**s** in **h**er **h**and,

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336 Ibid.

337 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Soul-Light”, edited with Preface and Notes by William M. Rossetti, *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (London: Ellis: 29 New Bond Street, W., 1911) 84.

338 “Beauty's Pageant,” *ibid*, 80.

339 “Silent Noon,” *ibid*, 81.

340 Vogel 73-74.

And the stars in her hair were seven.

I. (Vogel's suggestion)

The blessed damozel leaned out  
From the gold bar of Heaven;  
Her eyes were deeper than the depth  
Of waters stilled at even;  
She had three lilies in her hand,  
And the stars in her hair were seven.

Evidently, Vogel proposes a less flamboyant type of echoing; nevertheless, it becomes apparent from the two coloured structures that there are certain strands of sounds that are carried from one line into another.<sup>341</sup> The imminent result of such repetition is a sense of consistency, continuity, fluidity perhaps, proportion, but also of mystery, as if in a medieval charm or a riddle – in short, an intensification of the cluster of impressions the poem might make on the reader. Although the whole poem could be treated this way – painstakingly examining each vowel and consonant sound and tracing their recurrent patterns – one stanza may be sufficient in order to demonstrate Rossetti's craftsmanship in these subtle effects. The most effective use of echoing, though, appears in Stanza XXIII, in particular in the passage that brings about the climax:

The *light* thrilled towards her, *fill'd*  
With angels in strong level *flight*.  
Her eyes prayed, and she *smil'd*.<sup>342</sup>

The climactic section intensifies the subject matter by means of heavy repetition of the same or similar sounds. The progression throughout these three lines of the italicized words is marked by a migrating *l* sound in various sound environments. Thus, the word "light" is echoed in "flight", and in "smil'd" as well. By the same token, "filled" gets echoed in the internal rhyme "thrilled." The rhyming consonants of "fill'd" and "thrilled" are later on combined in "smil'd" which in turn uses the vowel of "light" and "flight."<sup>343</sup> Being the final word of the stanza, it somehow seems to me to serve as a merger of all the four preceding sounds, crowding them together within just one word, as if it was a source

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341 Vogel elaborates on the repetition in a more detailed manner, see Vogel 72-74.

342 Vogel 74. As regards the case of "thrilled" and "fill'd", Stevenson mentions Rossetti's use of assonances or consonances that sometimes take form of internal rhyme. Stevenson 75.

343 Vogel 74.

from which all the four words describing the flight of angels could be unfolded – and then folded back in. At this point the verbal echoing actually cooperates with verbal sense: for the damozel's smile is the result of watching the angels rush past her accompanied by celestial light: she takes it as a sign that the angels are on their way to bring her lover into her arms. Therefore, her smile *contains*, or folds in, the action she has seen that made her smile: ergo, her *smile* contains *light*, *flight*, *thrilled* and *fill'd*, as the “*light thrilled towards her, fill'd / With angels in strong level flight*” - the literal description of the sight that put the smile on her face:

smil'd = (light/flight) + (thrilled/fill'd)

The word “smil'd” borrows the vowel from the “light”/“flight” and the ending from “thrilled”/“fill'd.”

I would also like to point out the striking compositional similarity of the words “light” > “flight” > “fill'd” > “thrill'd.” Changing it slightly each time by a modification of the vowel, by changing or adding a sound or two, one can arrive at “thrill'd” from the starting point “light” within just four steps, as if the words were all born out of the same source.

Light + F = FLight => FILL'd => -F/+TH => thrill'd

Repeating these four key words (with an *l* reappearing in “angels” and “level”), indeed increases the tension of the moment which culminates in her smile, the final image of the climactic stanza as well as the final merger of the major echoing sounds.

#### Appendix: *La Damoiselle Éluë*

Having touched upon music in “The Blessed Damozel” several times in my analysis, whether generated by the text or by means of poetic evocation, as an addition to some of the points I made I wish to draw the attention to Richard Langham Smith's article “Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites” from the *19th-Century Music* journal. In this article Langham Smith explores Debussy's translation of “The Blessed Damozel” into music. His treatment of the musical work in relation to Rossetti's poem once again proves how immensely powerful the visual element of the poem is, for *La Damoiselle Éluë* makes direct use of motives suggested by visual patterns.<sup>344</sup> The musical piece is not wholly reliant on the painting of “The Blessed Damozel” because, as it becomes evident from Langham Smith's analysis,

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344 Richard Langham Smith, “Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,” *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 5., No. 2 (University of California Press: Autumn 1981) 106

the musical composition draws predominantly – if not entirely – on Rossetti's poem, in particular on its emotional charge and its subtle nuances of mood, time, and space.

Due to his ongoing interest in the Pre-Raphaelites, typical of many French artists of the period, in 1888-1889 Debussy discovered and set “The Blessed Damozel” as a cantata, *La Damoiselle Éluë*.<sup>345</sup> The composer was known to be interested in Turner and in a genuine medieval view of love, and using plenty of Pre-Raphaelite themes in other works (*Pelléas et Mélisande*, *La Chute de la maison Usher*, *Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien*)<sup>346</sup>; but it was particularly Rossetti's poetry that enticed him enough to attempt a transformation one of his most famous poems into a cantata. A cantata (from the Italian *cantare*, “to sing”) is a work for vocalists, chorus, and instrumentalists, typically based on a poetic narrative, either religious or secular, of a lyric or dramatic nature; it generally contains several movements, such as arias, recitatives, duets, and choruses. A cantata, originally a Baroque musical form, comprises the instrumental and vocal forms of the Baroque, as well as the recitative, arias, and duets of the opera; the dynamic instrumental style of the Italians, and the pomp of the French operatic overture.<sup>347</sup>

Apart from “The Blessed Damozel”, Debussy also started working on *La Saulaie* (which, however, remained incomplete), the setting of which was inspired by Rossetti's “Willowwood.”<sup>348</sup> In both cases, the main stimulus was, of course, the poems' prominent visual content: static scenes filled with inner action, inner drama hidden behind silence often represented by closed eyes, penetrating looks, averted gazes or even halos;<sup>349</sup> with designs, symbols, and details. Even Pre-Raphaelite paintings in general were appreciated by the French artists: they correctly understood their cluttered canvases from a literary standpoint, not from the point of view of visual arts (in which case the paintings would be often dismissed as overdone), and accordingly attempted to use the Pre-Raphaelite symbolism and techniques in other arts apart from painting and poetry.<sup>350</sup> There has actually emerged a “literal Pre-Raphaelite music”, known for a simple, pure style – and according to Langham Smith, best exemplified by Debussy's *Diane*, in which “the silent half-lit forest is evoked with a C#-G# fifth and what we presume to be tremolando strings, with a horn-call buried within this texture.”<sup>351</sup> Silence,

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345 Ibid 96.

346 Ibid 95. Debussy is considered as having been influenced by writers rather than musicians.. Joseph Machlis, Professor of Music, Queens College of the City University of New York, *The Enjoyment of Music: An Introduction to Perceptive Listening*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963) 490. (Machlis' entry on Debussy mentions “The Blessed Damozel” as well, headed under “Impressionism in Music”.)

347 Machlis 405.

348 Langham Smith 96.

349 Ibid 102.

350 Ibid 97-98.

351 Ibid 100.

half-lit, forest, texture, layering – in short, this is in actual fact a description of a Pre-Raphaelite painting when put into music.

In the context of the nineteenth century, the blending of all three arts was a natural outcome of the aesthetic wish to encompass all experience at its maximum intensity; which is also a very Pre-Raphaelite sentiment. The enchantment by poetry, by music, and by painting was clearly not enough, since all three were, after all, experienced separately. Consequently, the artist reasoned that the effect of all three in combination or in transposition would be much more intoxicating – as a result of that, music drew steadily closer to literature and painting.<sup>352</sup>

Through Debussy's *La Damoiselle Éluë*, Rossetti's visual and literary techniques therefore found their way into music. The musical composition is concerned "with the unveiling of passion after lengthy pictorial description,"<sup>353</sup> very much like the poem itself. *La Damoiselle* and the focal point of the cantata (which is the long solo for the Damoiselle) is framed by silence, for after her recitation of her unsatisfied longings we return to the pictorial description of her silent state – her eyes and smile, as well as the culmination of this intense silence: tears.<sup>354</sup> In the poem, too, the distillation of emotion into the damozel's eyes is concentrated in the final line of the poem, "I heard her tears." In this way, Debussy demonstrates how clearly he understood "the cadence Rossetti intended [...]. The damozel's utter sadness is represented by the chord which becomes associated [...] with 'beauty in sadness': the minor triad with added major sixth."<sup>355</sup> In order to express this visionary quality of the poem (stressed by her silent eyes, viz line 3 and 4 of Stanza I), Debussy uses a diatonic language. The more intense chromatic language, however, is saved up for the climax with *Damoiselle's* tears. Langham Smith describes the opening of *La Damoiselle Éluë* as follows:

The orchestration at the opening is striking in its strangely ethereal registration of the chords: the top has prominent organum-like<sup>356</sup> fifths, while the third is kept low on the viola. A luminous yet grainy sound results - "as if lit from behind" (in Debussy's own phrase). [...] The bright *divisi* registration is kept throughout the piece and there are notable moments when high octave doublings, played quietly in the violins, are left unsupported by bass instruments. This "stained-glass" effect was perhaps suggested by Pre-Raphaelite painting, a common device of which was to achieve a luminous presence by painting in transparent colours on a wet white background – literally

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352 Machlis 88.

353 Langham Smith 100.

354 Ibid 102.

355 Ibid.

356 "Organum" is a "medieval procedure", in which a melody is harmonized by another that runs parallel to it at a distance of a fifth or fourth. Machlis 491.

“as if lit from behind.”<sup>357</sup>

Debussy's technique mirrors Rossetti's own way of composition, proving that the permeation of Pre-Raphaelitism into music goes beyond mere décor.<sup>358</sup> The cantata shows a profound response to the several themes of the poem:<sup>359</sup> the emotional fluctuation, its luminosity, its silences, its remoteness, the powerful visual image, even the sense of space and time that I have commented upon in the course of my analysis. In *Damoiselle*, Debussy evokes the poem's temporal dimensions by means of a harmonic language “based totally on white notes,” while the glowing, iconic image is aided by “incandescent orchestration.”<sup>360</sup> The poem polarizes two opposing themes, which Debussy's music readily imitates by the incorporation of two extremes of harmonic language: diatonicism and chromaticism. In *Damoiselle*, themes of sacred and profane love are broadly separated by chromatic and diatonic languages.<sup>361</sup> The gradual suffusion of the harmony with chromatic chords with a tritone at their root is said to convey the “rootless, evaporating vision.”<sup>362</sup> By the same token, the vast gulf that keeps the lovers apart is in Debussy conveyed by a musical exploration of the space between a high B and a bass F, by means of which he reinforces the heaven-earth link that is the very basis of the poem. See the relevant piece of the musical score Langham Smith includes in his article. The said “high B” can be seen on the G-B chord in the treble clef staff; the bass F, in turn, is the whole note at the bottom of the bass clef staff – it is the higher of the two notes of the chord. Just as the poem uses two types of stanza to express verbally the enormous distance between the two lovers, Debussy's score expresses the same musically by the simultaneous sounds of two notes more than two octaves apart.

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357 Langham Smith 102.

358 Ibid 105.

359 Ibid 103.

360 Ibid 104.

361 Ibid. “Chromatic” and “diatonic” make explicit the distinction between the tones that do not belong within the key area and those that do. “Chromatic” refers to the twelve-note scale that includes all the semitones of the octave (in other words, including all the sharps, see page 124); it moves by half-steps. On the other hand, “diatonic” means a musical progression based on the seven tones of a major or minor scale, and to harmonies rooted firmly in the key. Debussy in particular is credited for moving music into regions where the outlines of key were indistinct. In this Debussy follows Wagner who weakened the separation of the key areas by constant emphasizing chromatic harmony – i.e. the in-between, borderline tones. Machlis 266-267.

362 Langham Smith 104.

Un peu animé

La lu - mière tressailit de son cô - té Rem - pli - e d'un fort vol d'anges horizontal. Dans les sphères dis - tan - tes.

etc.

les 1<sup>ers</sup> seulement

pp

pizz.

Debussy provides the Pre-Raphaelite symbolism with space to resonate; and he stills the music with a bar for the orchestra whose motives “attenuate the detail” of the numerical symbols – the “three lilies in her hand” and the seven stairs in her hair.<sup>363</sup> For these details, Debussy uses three- and seven-note motifs. To press his point, Langham Smith again supplies the pertinent part of the musical score, where we can plainly see the application of these three-note and seven-note motifs, corresponding to the symbols of the Damozel's heavenly appearance.

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363 Ibid 102.

RICHARD  
LANGHAM  
SMITH  
Debussy and the  
Pre-Raphaelites

Example 5

The resulting effect is that of the “radiant moment” so often captured by the Pre-Raphaelites – the state of “awareness”<sup>364</sup>, of an epiphany of sorts.

Debussy continued drawing from the Pre-Raphaelites and, aided by the loosened rules of major-minor system of classical music, he managed to put into existence what we may regard as a “Pre-Raphaelite music,” though later on in his career his works started to be permeated by a strong contrast of pain and sanctity as well as by androgynous characters, which is clearly the influence of Swinburne’s sadistic elements.<sup>365</sup> Nevertheless, Debussy’s unfinished attempt at the musical portrayal of “Willowwood” confirms the enormous visual power of Rossetti’s poems, as does Vaughan William’s exploration of the theme of “visible silence, still as the hour-glass” from Rossetti’s sonnet “Silent Noon.”<sup>366</sup>

“The Blessed Damozel” physically exists in three art-forms: as Rossetti’s painting, as his poem, and as Debussy’s musical score. The unifying element of all three is, without much doubt, the visual appeal of the poem – or, shall we say, of the double-work (for we do tend to read the poem side by side with the painting). The poem lends itself to be translated not only into the language of the visual arts, but also into the language of music: and both retain all of its rich texture, its allusions, dimensions, emotions, symbolism, and above all, its “experiential” nature.

364 Gray 23.

365 Langham Smith 107-108.

366 Ibid 102.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it was my endeavour to show that poetry can produce intense visualization by means of formal aspects of the poetic architecture: meter, sounds, consonance, alliteration, capitalization, typographical layout, line length, rhyme scheme, prosody, symmetries, focus on details, repetition, reiteration of sounds or images. All of these features can be found in "The Blessed Damozel" although I have suggested several examples of other poems to demonstrate the powerful function of these subtle effects. It has been shown and demonstrated that, as Vogel puts it, "a structural pattern [is] analogous to that of composition in the plastic arts [...]"<sup>367</sup> which once again recalls the poem's tight association with painting. The "painted world" of the damozel is highly-stylized, decorative and ornamental, filled with compact imagery,<sup>368</sup> yet rich in symbolism and subtle nuances of sensual perceptions, utilizing which the poem brings about a poignant aesthetic experience.<sup>369</sup> Words and poetic forms are what we have at our disposal, and they succeed in communicating to us this very experience by all manner of verbal (as well as formal and stylistic) manipulation.

The divisions and subdivisions of the poetic structure also produce rhythm that lends the poem subtle musicality which amplifies the emotional content by appealing to the senses. I have discussed all kinds of formal aspects of "The Blessed Damozel" from imagery and coloration to the less explored ones such as typography – and by delving deep into analyzing these, it has become quite clear that the emotional impact of poetry can be multiplied by bringing into play other aspects and integrating them, be it imitative meter, word-painting, a particular arrangement of lines, or reiteration of specific symbols or sounds. Stevenson notices the proportional spacing of the poem: out of the poem's twenty-two stanzas, he states, the lover's parenthetical laments from the fourth, eleventh, and seventeenth stanza create a sense of proportional distribution of these "interruptions." I have verified this proportion; the eleventh stanza marks the half: 3 : 6 -middle- 5 : 4. These numbers are the intervals of stanzas before and after the lover's speeches.

The same effect is produced by the reduction of the lover's words in the final stanza to the first half of the first line and the last half of the last one, which, moreover, are balanced in syntax with an amazing exactness,<sup>370</sup> thus contributing to the symmetrical perception of the stanza. And, again drawing on the Ruskinian principles of Beauty in relation to proportion and symmetry, it is only symptomatic of

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367 Vogel 41.

368 Greene 96.

369 Ibid 99.

370 Stevenson 26.

Rossetti's eternal quest for beauty that "The Blessed Damozel" displays such a high degree of symmetry as well as proportion. To summarize the major point about "The Blessed Damozel", I would use Stevenson's articulate observation that Rossetti's "meticulous composition is thoroughly representative of Pre-Raphaelite technique,"<sup>371</sup> which moreover enriches the emotional force and impact of the poem by setting up a sharp contrast "between the serene and static perfection of heaven and the realistic and ephemeral earthly details as the lover wanders in an autumn wood, feeling leaves brush past his face and listening to birdsong and distant church bells."<sup>372</sup> Vogel's stylistic and syntactic division of the stanzas comes in logically at this point, as a natural result of this juxtaposition – and by the act of halving the poem both stylistically and content-wise, we come even closer to the actual painting which is divided in two halves as well.

Thus, in the course of my analysis it has been shown how much similarity there is between the poem and its picture – the painting has been described multiple times as "poetic" and the poem "painterly", referring both to their respective techniques. The painting employs poetic devices as much as the poetry employs painterly devices: the painting uses numerous symbols, gestures, and moments that are echoed and developed in the poem; in turn, the poem focuses on details from the painting by means of vivid evocation, and retains the painting's structures. It appears, therefore, that the sister arts are united very closely in "The Blessed Damozel" and even show their alliance to their mother art, mathematics and logic – for poetry, just like music and painting, works on the principle analogous to mathematical relations: a sonnet or a sestina can be very good examples.<sup>373</sup>

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371 Ibid.

372 Ibid.

373 To wit, the said sestina is a very tidy structure, based on permutations and regularity, with an internal matrix composed of the six end words. These words have to alternate in an intricate way of interlacing the top-line end-word with the bottom-line end-word after each stanza:

going to be	second	1	6	3	5	4	2
	fourth	2	1	6	3	5	4
	sixth	3	5	4	2	1	6
	fifth	4	2	1	6	3	5
	third	5	4	2	1	6	3
	first	6	3	5	4	2	1

This structure is so dependent on mathematical relations that if we attempted to create an "n-tina" with eight lines – or a "septina" with seven, the inner structure would crumble. However, numbers 2-6 can be employed in the same poetic structure as in that of the sestina. The sestina is in fact based on an actual mathematical formula, developed by mathematicians. In order to see whether a given number of lines would work after the fashion of the sestina, all we need is this:  $2n + 1 = \text{prime number}$ , where "n" stands for the number of lines. If the result of  $2 \times \text{number of lines} + 1$  is a prime number, then the n-tina would work like the sestina, which means that the patterning would be distributed evenly and regularly. Thus, the reason why a "septina" cannot exist is that  $2 \times 7 + 1$  equals 15, which is not a prime number. Though the sum of an "octina" (an n-tina with eight lines) is a prime number (17), it does not work either because it self-replicates after the fourth stanza. This problem has been overlooked by Anton Geraschenko and Richard Dore in their article on "Sestinas and Primes."

Anton Geraschenko and Richard Dore in their article on "Sestinas and Primes", March 29 2007.

<<http://math.berkeley.edu/~anton/written/sestina.pdf>> Retrieved April 7 2012. I thank Prof. David Hamilton for introducing me to the article.

Music, too, is based on mathematics<sup>374</sup> while painting is related to geometry: and poetry, I dare say, employs both geometry *and* arithmetics. The relationship between the sister arts in “The Blessed Damozel” is therefore not only complementary, but rather symbiotic: the poem operates as a structure capable of promoting some of the static, framed, sensual impact of the pictorial image. At this point we may once again recall Simonides’ dictum that poetry creates speaking pictures and paintings silent poems,<sup>375</sup> meaning that a painting can embody the mystery that lies beyond the reach of language so that it almost attains the merits of a poem, which is certainly true about “The Blessed Damozel.” The poem asserts itself as a painting, as I have just shown, by maximizing the pictorial potential of language (manifest in the aspects I focused on), while still retaining a fully textual dimension, embodied in the typographical arrangement and prosody: the visual image is mediated through text and textual content and association.

As fine-tune remark to this conclusion, I would like to paraphrase Howard Nemerov’s observation from an essay called “On Poetry and Painting, With a Thought of Music” to illustrate, in a metaphor, the relationship between poetry and painting that might pertain to “The Blessed Damozel.” Nemerov proposes to regard a picture frame as a window that looks out at a world which is past, arrested in mid-motion, stopped, frozen, still – and silent. The literal window of a house, on the other hand, opens a view into a constantly changing, moving, progressing, loud, and intensely imperfect world dominated by Time – and this latter picture frame could be a poem.<sup>376</sup>

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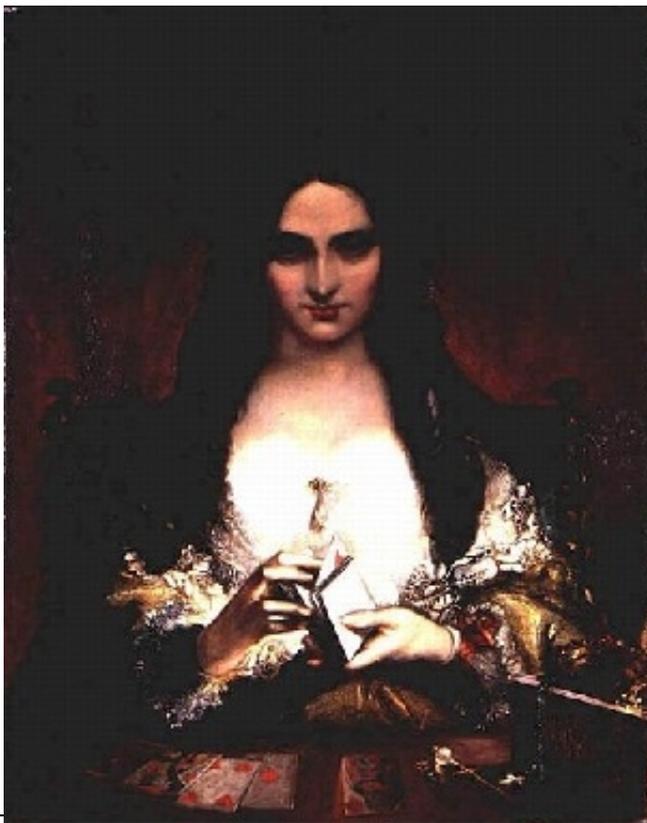
374 And both provide refined, intellectual, yet simple pleasures, according to Helsing 100.

375 Stein 21.

376 Nemerov 9.

## CHAPTER V: “The Card Dealer”: A Study in Symbolism

*Ambition, Cupidité,  
Et déliceuse Volupté,  
Sont les soeurs de la Destinée,  
Après la vingt-première année.  
Calendrier de la Vie, 163C<sup>377</sup>*



<sup>377</sup> Qtd in Boos 255 and Hobbs 70. The latter moreover adds that Rossetti shared with Swinburne the hobby of “writing false medieval mottoes for poems.” Hobbs 71.

<sup>378</sup> Baum xxviii.

Based on the use of the same meter and stanzaic structure (there are also phrases that occur “almost identically in both”), Stevenson indicates that “The Blessed Damozel” and “The Card Dealer” might have been intended to form a diptych, one that would contrast the Blessed Damozel in her celestial paradise with the femme fatale sitting in a dance hall with her lurid jewelery, and menacingly dealing out her death cards. Stevenson 29. In my opinion, this assumption is a slightly over the top, and it is out of the question that these two poems were in any way intended as companion pieces. There is a far too wide difference – not contrast – between them in tone, treatment of the theme, atmosphere, let alone in the female figures around whom the poems are centered.

### Introduction

The next poem to tackle is “The Card Dealer.” To begin with, one of the most noticeable aspects of the poem is the fact that it uses the same stanzaic structure as “The Blessed Damozel” - the extended ballad stanza rhyming A-B-C-B-D-B. Both poems also use the same meter.<sup>378</sup> The similarity does not end here, though. The poem is based on an actual painting, though not by Rossetti; or, rather, it has been inspired by one. The painting is called “The Wish” or “The Fortune-Teller” and was painted by Theodore

von Holst (1810-1844), a German Romantic painter. Rossetti was known for keeping a reproduction of the painting in his room.<sup>379</sup>

### She

The picture represents “[...] a beautiful woman, richly dressed, who is sitting at a lamp-lit table, dealing out cards, with a peculiar fixedness of expression.”<sup>380</sup> According to Florence Boos, she is almost like one of the Rossettian female icons, with her vaguely evil beauty and her aura of fatality.<sup>381</sup> Hobbs adds that the chief attraction of such female figures is their combination of mysterious beauty and danger.<sup>382</sup> In this respect she differs a great deal from the innocent, Beatricean beauty of the Damozel. The Card Dealer falls into the broad “group” of Rossetti’s mysterious, inscrutable women. She may be partly Rossetti’s Lilith, Astarte, or perhaps even Jenny – or Swinburne’s fearsome Dolores, inspiring terror and awe at the same time.<sup>383</sup> Although it cannot be determined once and for all whether or not the solitary figure dealing out cards represents evil, her mysterious nature may even rank her among the slightly less known category of Rossetti’s types: the gypsy or the Jewess.<sup>384</sup> The idea of the Card Dealer being a gypsy or a Jewess is in my opinion quite accurate: the association with fortune-telling of sorts, the abundance of her jewelery, the connection of gypsies with occultism, and her accumulation of gold beside her hand, all these seem to allude to the fact. “The Card Dealer” has also been said to resemble the description of the portrait of Sidonia in Meinhold’s *Sidonia the Sorceress* (the name already implies a feminine mystique), a work that Rossetti regarded as one of the greatest he had read.<sup>385</sup> The character of Sidonia is wicked and beautiful, and in the book she is

represented in the prime of mature beauty – a gold net is drawn over her almost golden hair, and her neck, arms, and hands are profusely covered with jewels. Her bodice of bright purple is trimmed with costly fur, and the robe is of azure velvet .... Her eyes and mouth are not pleasing, notwithstanding

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379 Boos 200, 255n2. Hobbs 65.

380 Ed. by William M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir*, 2 vols. (London: 1895) 45-46. Qtd in Hobbs 65.

381 Boos 200. Howard 55.

382 Hobbs 65.

383 For a fine account of the tradition of *femmes fatales* in the nineteenth century, see Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (New York: Meridian 1956)

384 Hueffer 138.

385 Boos 200. In Rossetti’s own words in a letter to Allingham, September 17, 1854: “I’ve been greatly interested in *Wuthering Heights*, the first novel I’ve read, and the best (as regards power and sound style) for two ages, except *Sidonia*.” *Family Letters with a Memoir* I, 224. Qtd in Boos 255n3. There is a painting of Sidonia by Burne-Jones, whom Rossetti introduced to the book. Ibid. The same is mentioned in Bullen 174. The latter explicates in more detail the reasons why *Sidonia the Sorceress* was such a source of attraction for the Pre-Raphaelites – he clearly attributes it to the *fin-de-siecle* “bad sublime” implied in females in whom are mixed extreme beauty and extreme evil. Sidonia is said to pursue a life of violence and crime, and is eventually executed as a witch. A certain degree of witchcraft may be also implied in Rossetti’s figure of the Card Dealer, at least until it is revealed whom she serves and that she is merely a cog in the machine of Death. At best, the Card Dealer has a witch-like appearance.

Rossetti’s fondness of *Sidonia* is also documented in Helsinger 126-127 and 290n17.

their great beauty – in the mouth, particularly, one can discover an expression of cold malignity.<sup>386</sup>

It is quite apparent why Rossetti was so enticed by the portrait, for it contains all that he adored, celebrated, and often painted himself: golden yellow hair (Rossetti was known for having something of a hair fetish<sup>387</sup>), sexually aggressive appearance, jewels, cruelty, elaborate costume. The Pre-Raphaelite relish for flashing jewelery and objects with a metallic shine is going to be mentioned presently; and “The Card Dealer” is a fine example of incorporating flashing gems to enhance the visual effects of the described objects in the scene. Curiously, Helsinger in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* includes an excerpt – in fact, several – from *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë, which is said to be inspired by Meinhold's *Sidonia* as well. Oddly enough, one of these excerpts can be related to “The Card Dealer.” It concerns the scene in *Villette* in which Lucy Snow regards the picture of Monsignor Paul's long-dead fiancée: “But her chief points were her jewels: she had long, clear earrings, blazing with a lustre which could not be borrowed or false; she had rings on her skeleton hands, with thick gold hoops and stones – purple, green, and blood-red. [...]”<sup>388</sup> The choice of colours for the Gothic portrait of a deceased woman is peculiar because Rossetti selects the same, even with the specific hue “blood-red.” Either this triad of colours was a straightforward borrowing from *Sidonia* in both cases, or the choice was made with respect to the Gothic air of the portrait: perhaps “purple, green, and blood-red” are three colours that best denote death, or fear, or both.

At any rate, “The Card Dealer” should not be taken as Rossetti's verbal translation of the Van Holst picture – Hobbs stresses that the poem must be understood as Rossetti's interpretation, “a personal, creative response to the world of the picture.”<sup>389</sup> And just as Rossetti the poet is busy interpreting the picture, so is the speaker of the poem as well as the potential reader. The reader, as well as the narrator, is in fact “an interpreter confronting a framed space, an already structured and populated aesthetic realm that both extends and limits his own imagination.”<sup>390</sup> The structured and populated and framed space suggests a painting. The imagination encouraged by contemplating this picture is limited according to what is depicted on the canvas, while at the same time it can be productively expanded by it, led by the clues and hints into new imaginative dimensions.

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386 Boos 201. Also qtd in Bullen 174.

387 Bullen 130, 139.

388 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: New American Library, 1987) 366. Qtd in Helsinger 290-291n17.

389 Hobbs 66. The same source moreover adds that in his letter to Ford Madox Brown, Rossetti mentions one of Brown's pictures that “constitutes together with an engraving after that great painter Von Holst, the sole pictorial adornment of my room [...]” (March 1848, *Family Letters with a Memoir I*, 36. Qtd in Hobbs 66. This may justify Rossetti's genuine enthusiasm for the picture.

390 Hobbs 66.

Due to its close association with the Von Holst painting, the poem exhibits a strong visual potential, though perhaps of a slightly different kind than that of "The Blessed Damozel." In the present analysis, I shall once again concentrate primarily on the visual content of the poem and on the ways it stimulates the mind's eye. Although the poem does not refer to Van Holst's painting directly, nor is it designed to resemble it in any way, the painter's hand that wrote it leaves many detectable traces on the poem: namely, in dealing with the closely observed details, in the poem's vivid pictorial descriptions, in its dwelling on symbols, colours, sensations; in paying attention to textures and surfaces (such as hair or cards), and last but not least, in accommodating the structure of the stanzas to suit the matter contained within. In this case the phrase "the liquid inside is formed by what it holds" is not applicable; it is exactly the other way round, the jar is shaped by the liquid contained within: here it bulges, over there it caves in. The anatomy of the poem is therefore not to be viewed as a firm construction that holds its shape no matter what, but as an elastic, yielding matter that bends the way the content of the poem demands it.

### Stanza I

The poem opens with a series of sweeping close-ups, focusing on one detail after another, piecing together the whole scene. We enter into the poem's world through the entrance of the card dealer's eyes in Stanza I. Here we are confronted head-on with the mysterious figure and the opening scene takes us right into the middle of action. The rhetorical question of the first line, "Could you not drink her gaze like wine?", drops several clues for us, apart from a possible Biblical reference of the next line: her gaze is concentrated, placid, intense, glinting, reflecting light just like wine in a glass goblet, perhaps even toxic; in any way attractive and dangerous at the same time,<sup>391</sup> very much like the figure herself. Rossetti here mingles sensory experiences in a way similar to synesthesia.<sup>392</sup> One is seized with desire for those staring eyes, even so much as to want to "drink" it, and while doing so, one becomes intoxicated with the hypnotic power of that fixed, steady look – a "knowing" look which engenders fascination, trepidation, and feverish yearning to know what is behind those eyes that "unravel the coiled night / And know the stars at noon." This metaphor implies her tremendous sagacity and clairvoyance, for she can literally "see through" the nocturnal darkness as clearly as though it were noon. At noon there are no stars visible – but she *can* see them. Boos adds that there is a possible connection to a familiar motif from the Apocalypse due to the simultaneous presence of a woman, moon, sun, and stars, a common enough combination in Rossetti's poetry: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head, a

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391 Hobbs also finds the comparison of the liquid stare of her eyes to wine very powerful: "Her eyes seem as deep and cool as a glass of dark wine [...]" Hobbs 67.

392 Boos 202.

crown of twelve stars. (Revelation 12:1).<sup>393</sup>

The opening zoom-in on her eyes – or, more precisely, on her *gaze*; for we do not know how her eyes look like or what colour they are – hypnotizes the reader right from the beginning as he contemplates the intensity of the penetrating stare. The intensity is slightly alleviated in the course of the stanza as the Card Dealer blinks in a very composed, indifferent manner: “Yet though its splendour swoon / Into the silence languidly / As a tune into a tune.” The hypnotic effect of this musical lilt has been commented upon already – its musicality is produced by the repetition of the whole word (which carries the main stress on /u:/) that forms both a rhyme proper and an internal rhyme. This is said to be one of Rossetti's characteristic decorative and emphasizing devices.<sup>394</sup> In the context of the poem, the twofold structure of the fourth line (“As a tune into a tune”) almost suggests her blink: “As a tune”, the eyelids go down, “into a tune”, the eyelids lift again in a motion as smooth and unruffled as the blending of two melodious lines into one. Her eyes gracefully “swoon” into the silence behind her eyelids, as if her eyes were *not* silent when open wide, but producing sound, or vibrations that could be heard. The “music” of her eyes is counterpointed with the music of silence when they turn inwards in a blink for a second: time seems to be slowed down, so as to allow the two “tunes” to intermingle in one single act of a languid blink in slow-motion. The largeness of the eyes is also implicitly emphasized. Closed eyes imply silence and knowledge, as Langham Smith suggests; dilated eyes, in turn, are at once wanton and profound - “the lamps of the soul.”<sup>395</sup>

The first stanza also alludes to the whole setting which is a tavern, or a club, depicted on the backdrop of a deep night (“the coiled night”). We can imagine her located in the middle, like the mighty Sphinx herself, with unsaid riddles in her gaze, steady and clam and still, while all around her there is music playing (hinted at with “as a tune into a tune”), wine is being consumed, entertainment goes on – then Stanza III panoramically surveys the whole setting, revealing to us the hot atmosphere of a tavern at night.

### Stanza II and Hair

From the disturbing gaze of her eyes in a single detailed description we focus next on the gold “heaped beside her hand” in a sort of medium close-up, for in this shot we can see both her hand and the gold lying next to it. Again, the spotlight is on a metallic object. We do not know whether the heap is composed of coins, or just of unrefined gold (Hobbs calls the gold “earthly imitations of the stars

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393 Ibid 202-203.

394 Stevenson 76.

395 Langham Smith 97.

and sun of the first stanza<sup>396</sup>, so we may as well understand the heap metaphorically as a pile of the stuff that sun and stars are made of), but in any case it surely produces a glamorous play with light in an otherwise dark tavern. A heap suggests a disarray, a random arrangement of objects: and even if the gold meant “coins”, a disarray of coins makes us visualize a marvelous display of glittering, sparkling metallic edges: an almost glowing heap of precious metal. From this splendid spectacle our eyes follow her hand which is placed next to the gold, confirming that the riches belong to her and she has them at her disposal right now as they are intended to be a prize. A prize immediately connotes a winner as well as a loser – we may take the hint and guess that there is very likely a game going on, a game with great riches at stake. The “dreams that wreath her brows with magic stillness there” refer to her second sight – in conjunction with the game, it may be assumed that she knows beforehand who will win and who will lose. The winner is the one who is able to “unwind that woven golden hair.” This takes us back to the notion of the riddle, as if indeed the Card Dealer were the legendary Sphinx.

The linguistic focus is, according to Hobbs, on the word “rich.” This “magic adjective” is located at the center of the stanza, with waves of significance flowing outwards from it:<sup>397</sup>

The gold that's heaped beside her hand,  
In truth **rich** prize it were;  
And **rich** the dreams that wreath her brows  
With magic stillness there;  
And he were **rich** who should unwind  
That woven golden hair.

Due to the close proximity of all three identical adjectives “rich” to the inevitably Rossettian hair (whose mention moreover closes the stanza), we may automatically assume that the woven golden hair has the worth of the prize, that it is as rich as the dreams and as the rich man capable of unwinding that (rich) hair. To squeeze in another “rich” between “that” and “woven golden hair” seems almost inevitable, automatic. The adjective “rich” becomes contagious and pervasive after three repetitions that it almost hangs on our lips and minds when we come to the image of the Card Dealer's hair. The meter of the line does not require an extra stress; yet we do not have to put it into the line or pronounce it. The charm of this intrusive adjective is in its occurrence on the mental level – and also in

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396 Hobbs 68.

397 Hobbs 68.

our own expectation that the woven golden hair would be thick, to put it mildly, since such emphasis is given on it. (The hair image is naturally foregrounded by coming last in the stanza.) Also, why else should one be rich if he were able to unwind woman's hair, if it were not thick enough to pose a difficulty? In light of Rossetti's obsession with hair and with physical acts involving hair, the involuntary intrusion of "rich" into the last line actually makes sense.

We may now recall Bullen's observation concerning Rossetti's fondness of female hair as "an agent of engaging destruction."<sup>398</sup> Rossetti often painted women engaged in the act of tending to their loosened hair, whether weaving it, combing it, or merely touching it or having others touch it: *Fazio's Mistress* (1863), *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1864), *Morning Music* (1864), the drawing of *Desdemona's Death Song* (ca 1878), *Christmas Carol* (1957-1858)<sup>399</sup> or the very *Lady Lilith* (1864-). The same source also cites from a letter by Mrs Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton in 1859:

I had a good deal of talk with [Rossetti], always excepting times when ladies with beautiful hair came in. ... it did not signify what we were talking about or how agreeable I was; if a particular kind of reddish brown, cr pe wavy hair came in, he was in a moment struggling for an introduction to the owner of head of said hair. He is not as mad as a March hare, but hair-mad.<sup>400</sup>

His fondness of that "particular kind of reddish brown, cr pe wavy hair" can be plainly seen in some of his paintings: "La Ghirlandata" (1873) boasts of bright orange hair, "Proserpine" (1877) has dark chestnut cr pe, "La Pia d Tolomei (1860-1880) has glistening ringlets of reddish blonde, "The Roman Widow" (1874) has smooth red hair, while "Monna Vanna" (1866) is wavy auburn, just like "Venus Verticordia" (1864-1868), or "Pandora" (1869). Luxuriant female hair is also very much on display in "The Bower Meadow", "Bocca Baciata", or the golden-haired, ringleted "Helen of Troy." On average, Rossetti depicted mostly that "reddish brown" colour Gaskell mentions in her letter.

Elisabeth Gitter also adds that "the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation

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<sup>398</sup> Bullen 130, 139.

<sup>399</sup> There is a poem by Swinburne called "A Christmas Carol" whose subscription reveals that it has been "suggested by a drawing of Mr. D.G. Rossetti." *The Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, n.d.) 88. It might turn out to be an interesting appendix to the present study to analyze poems which were inspired by Rossetti's paintings/drawings, but which were *not* written by Rossetti.

<sup>400</sup> *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1966) 580. Qtd in Bullen 130.

Nevertheless, according to Elisabeth Gitter, Rossetti was certainly not the only Victorian who was fascinated by female hair. The attention lavished on female hair and its physical properties (colour, texture, length, style, curliness) across the Victorian literature proves that female hair was seen as an important indicator of character, an outward sign of woman's identity. Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", *PMLA* Vol. 99, No. 5., October 1984, 936-54: 941.

implied in its display [...] [for] the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness", which may once again link the mysterious, dangerous, demonic Card Dealer with the sexualized Lilith, Jenny, and the androgynous, aggressive Astarte Syriaca of both the eponymous poem and painting.<sup>401</sup>

Yet another view upon the matter of hair is offered in connection with Rossetti's "Body's Beauty" which features the figure of Lilith. In this poem, Bullen states that "the conjunction of 'snake', 'tongue', 'hair', and 'gold' combines aggressive fetishism and materialism [...]"<sup>402</sup> In the case of "The Card Dealer", we have only the close connection between 'hair' and 'gold',<sup>403</sup> and that in a very tight relation: her hair is golden, and both the heap of gold and her hair are mentioned within one stanza. In her analysis of "Body's Beauty", Christensen makes yet another observation that may be easily applicable to "The Card Dealer": "[...] gold, whether of hair or coin, is a source of evil."<sup>404</sup> The indication of fetishism, materialism, greed, ostentatious display of splendour, sexual desire, eroticism, and therefore a positive threat to masculinity, is definitely present in the poem, though on a very subtle level: The Card Dealer is still a long way from the imposing Astarte.

Therefore, if a man were to "unwind / That woven golden hair", it would mean that he would "unmask" the Card Dealer, literally "unwind" her secret, getting at her female core, seeing the wellhead of her supernatural power, and by doing so, allaying the imminent threat to his masculinity. Such enterprise has the value of the whole golden heap that the Card Dealer owns (which has, by implications suggested by Bullen and Christensen, evil connotations). Nonetheless, as she still owns it, it is clear that nobody has as yet attempted to unwind that hair without failing at it. The hair represents a riddle, the source of her power over all mortals, it is the embodiment of her mystery, winded and coiled as it is. It also denotes her evil nature, for as Gitter observes, while the angelic woman's hair was her aureole or her metaphorical crown, the evil woman's hair became a "glittering snare, web, or noose" in the Victorian imagination.<sup>405</sup>

### Stanza III

Stanza III reveals the whole scene in a panoramic shot: a trajectory can be now traced from Stanza I to Stanza III, in the course of which our eyes are first drawn to her unflinching gaze, then zoom out to

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401 Gitter 938. Qtd also in Bullen 131.

402 Bullen 138-139.

403 Though Florence Boos adds the snake into the list as well, stating that the snake is suggested by both her hair and the night that "must be uncoiled, perhaps as a snake." Boos 202.

404 Christensen 68.

405 Gitter 936, 943.

the metallic treasure at her hand, and finally the whole panorama is unfolded in pull-back shot. A scene opens before us of the interior of the tavern. She indeed sits in the middle, "around her, where she sits, the dance / Now breathes its eager heat." The atmosphere is painted with a concoction of emphasized sensations: heat, breath, light noise of the dancers' feet, heartbeat. These are the only images of human life in the poem.<sup>406</sup> It is quite symptomatic that the Card Dealer is seated symbolically amid the dance of life whilst dealing death, as Howard points out.<sup>407</sup> All in all, the tavern is full of hectic, energetic, feverish activity, strongly contrasting with her stillness and composure.<sup>408</sup> In lines four and five, the sound of the dancing feet merges with the sound of the falling cards she shuffles and deals out "on the bright board" (indicating a source of light somewhere near her, illuminating a surface), and we zoom in on whatever activity is going on in her hands.

#### Stanza IV: Gems

Following which, in Stanza IV, we are again focused on a series of minute details as the Card Dealer shuffles and cuts the cards, sifting them through her fingers. The dominant details of this stanza are her fingers, the cards, and then the triumphant "great eyes" of her rings, echoing the staring eyes she has. We can perhaps assume that she does not even look at her hands as she handles the cards, that her gaze is still fixed upon either the narrator, or into the vast space, having visions of the stars at noon. The "great eyes" of her rings watch the manual action for her. In this respect she gives the impression of being almost inhuman, or even statue-like, if you will. A special attention is given to tactile sensations – the soft and slow motions of her fingers and the smooth polished surfaces of the cards – while the visual imagination is stimulated by the lustrous cards, the play of "swift light-shadowings", and finally by the gleaming gems on her rings. By implication, the precious stones of her jewellery produce an ever flickering glitter because she keeps moving her fingers delicately – the stones with their cut-edge surfaces are never allowed to stay still. We can imagine them catching lights incessantly, the sparkle and scintillation echoing the "stars at noon." The cards are like little mirrors, "and each one as it falls reflects / In swift light-shadowings, / Blood-red and purple, green and blue, / The great eyes of her rings." In this stanza, a special emphasis is given on gems and colours and their beauty. The poem drips with colour in this section – James Richardson has a point when he says that Rossetti's colours bleed.<sup>409</sup>

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406 Boos 203.

407 Howard 55.

408 Boos proposes that the "golden-haired card-player" of Rossetti's poetry has very much in common with the female figure of Coleridge's "Nightmare Life-in-Death" of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Apart from a quite noticeable resemblance of rhythm and diction, both poems share the "fevered atmosphere, 'beating', moon, stars, sun, and vivid colours." Boos 201-202. Rossetti enriches it furthermore with emphasis on gazing, swooning, and languidness in connection to wine and, possibly, intoxication.

409 James Richardson, *Vanishing Lives: Style and Self in Tennyson, D.G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and Yeats* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988) 113.

### Metals, Gems, and Jewels

In fact, we may give full credit to Florence Boos for noticing the attentive treatment of various small colourful objects – be it the fruit of Christina Rossetti and Keats, or just simply the stars, lilies, roses, garlands, clouds and flames of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Hers is also the suggestion that the Pre-Raphaelites were known to have admired and appreciated jewels and gems. Rossetti in particular is said to have used for his imagery “a range of colors which to him express richness – ivory, pearl, gold, colours which suggest metallic or gemlike properties as much as actual color,”<sup>410</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite admiration of jewels and gems, furthermore, has influenced Walter Pater and the Decadents:

A metal or gem seemed a refining of elements, a concentrated essence, the attempt to pass beyond ordinary expressions of material form. Most are formed by violent heat; there is an affinity of ideas with Pater's famous 'gem-like flame', a Heraclitean concern with the composition and decomposing of elements expressed in the extremes of jewels and fire.<sup>411</sup>

The said Decadents and Symbolists were keen on gems and jewels almost to the point of obsession; a striking example could be Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, which moreover employs musical patterning and a strong visual component, or Des Esseintes' vividly rendered admiration of Gustave Moreau's *Salome* in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours*:

Diamonds scintillate against her glistening skin. Her bracelets, her girdles, her rings flash. On her triumphal robe, seamed with pearls, flowered with silver and laminated with gold, the breastplate of jewels, each link of which is a precious stone, flashes serpents of fire against the pallid flesh, delicate as a tea-rose: its jewels like splendid insects with dazzling elytra, veined with carmine, dotted with yellow gold, diapered with blue steel, speckled with peacock green.<sup>412</sup>

Another classic example is to be found in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the description of Dorian's study of jewels,<sup>413</sup> influenced by Huysmans. On the other end of the cultural spectrum, the medieval delicate attention to gemstones can be found in Chaucer's “House of Fame” which, I think, deserves an exemplary excerpt as well, as paraphrased by Alexander Pope in 1711:

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410 Boos 66.

411 Boos 66.

412 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*, trans. John Howard as *Against the Grain* (Kessinger Publishing LLC, 2005) 48.

413 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Signet Classic: New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1962) 148-149.

Full in the midst, proud *Fame's* Imperial Seat  
 With Jewels blaz'd, magnificently great;  
 The vivid Em'ralsds there revive the Eye;  
 The flaming Rubies shew their sanguine Dye;  
 Bright azure Rays from lively Saphirs stream,  
 And lucid Amber casts a Golden Gleam.  
 With various-colour'd Light the Pavement shone,  
 And all on fire appear'd the glowing Throne;  
 The Dome's high Arch reflects the mingled Blaze,  
 And forms a Rainbow of alternate Rays.<sup>414</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelite fondness of gems is something that truly fascinates me. Florence Boos' remark is the only extensive mention regarding precious metals and stones that I have encountered in my study of critical material on Rossetti. It is true that gems and jewels are highly decorative, both as physical objects and items of poetic imagery – and the Pre-Raphaelite art *was*, to a high degree, decorative: as the most illustrative example, we may think of the famous herbal detail in the background of Millais' *Ophelia*. And it is also true that gems are attractive for their luminosity and constant play with light – for it is mainly light and its reflections and refractions that makes their precisely cut (or naturally rough and broken) surfaces glitter and gleam. Especially when emphasis is given to precious metals and jewels in poetry, the visual imagination is stimulated and encouraged to picture their brilliance.

A fine instance could be the “blood-red and purple, green and blue” stones adorning the rings of the mysterious card dealer this chapter deals with: “Her fingers let them softly through, / Smooth polished silent things; / And each one as it falls reflects / In swift light-shadowings, / Blood-red and purple, green and blue, / The great eyes of her rings.” As stated above, here the images of the dancing reflections and the “great eyes” of the rings are immensely evocative of the graceful movements of the Card Dealer's hands, of her gentle fingering of the cards, and of the sensually appealing visual effect of the shine of the cards in combination with the gleaming and scintillating jewels. (Rossetti was said to have intended to make these colours “throb” against half-closed eyelids, making them ache with confused lights, as he wrote in one of his letters. His aim was to portray the state before death but he admitted at having failed at this: “I suppose it is dangerous for a man who has not the advantage of dying to attempt a description of death, and afterwards unfortunately there are obstacles in the way.”)

414 Ed. by Henry Walcott Boynton, *The Complete Poetical Works of Alexander Pope* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1903) ii. 248-57. Qtd in Hagstrum 228.

It is also worth considering Théophile Gautier's collection *Enamels and Cameos* in which he stresses the transformation of a piece of nature into a refined, chiseled object of sheer beauty.

415 William Michael Rossetti, ed. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir*. 2 vols. (London: Ellis 1895) 1:46. Qtd

Stevenson provides another good example of the use of jewel imagery / jewel metaphor in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, and that in Christina Rossetti's "The Dead City".<sup>416</sup> To illustrate Stevenson's point, here follow lines 120-125 of the poem:

The great porch was ivory,  
And the steps were ebony;  
Diamond and chrysoprase  
Set the pillars in a blaze,  
Capitalled with jewelry.

Though Christina was not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite group, something of her brother's poetic visions must have rubbed off on her, because throughout her poetry we can trace strong pictorial and melodic patterns that invest her richly coloured scenes with a Pre-Raphaelite authenticity, such as "Serenade" or "Summer", the latter presenting a rich parade of decidedly Pre-Raphaelite emblems.<sup>417</sup> Christina Rossetti's "Summer" deserves an illustrative excerpt; along with it, I include two segments from her "Goblin Market":

	<i>"Summer"</i>	<i>"Goblin Market"</i>	
fine,	<p>[...] With a chain of bud and blossom;  Twine red roses round her hands; Round her feet twine myrtle bands. Heap up flowers, higher, higher, Tulips like a glowing fire, Clematis of milky whiteness, Sweet geranium's varied brightness, Honeysuckle, commeline, Roses, myrtles, jessamine; Heap them higher, bloom on bloom Bury her as in a tomb.</p>	<p>[...] Apples and quinces  Lemons and oranges Plump unpecked cherries – Melons and raspberries Bloom-down-cheeked peaches Swart-headed mulberries Wild free-born cranberries Crab-apples, dewberries, Pine-apple, blackberries Apricots, strawberries – All ripe together, [...]</p>	<p>[...] Our pomegranates full and  Dates and sharp bullaces, Rare pears and greengages, Damsons and bilberries, Taste them and try, Currants and gooseberries, Bright-fire-like barberries, Figs to fill your mouth, Citrons from the south Sweet to tongue and Sound to eye [...]</p>

Also cf. lines 176-195 of Christina's "The Dead City":

*lines 176-180*

*lines 181-185*

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also in Riede, *DGR Revisited* 57 and Cooper 87-88.

416 Stevenson 82-83.

417 Stevenson 82.

All the vessels were of gold;  
Set with gems of worth untold.  
    In the midst a fountain rose  
    Of pure milk, whose rippling flows  
In a silver basin rolled.

*lines 186-190*

Grapes were hanging overhead,  
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;  
    And in panniers all around  
    Yellow melons shone, fresh-found,  
With the dew upon them spread.

In green emerald baskets were  
Sun-red apples, streaked and fair;  
    Here the nectarine and peach  
    And ripe plum lay, and on each  
The bloom rested everywhere.

*lines 191-195*

And the apricot and pear  
And the pulpy fig were there,  
    Cherries and dark mulberries,  
    Bunchy currants, strawberries,  
And the lemon wan and fair [...] <sup>418</sup>

Note Christina's signature manner of compilation of objects. We may again easily recall Millais' *Ophelia* and its famous "lesson in botany."

These poems contain passages that frankly recall Keats and his listing of sensuous descriptions (again we may juxtapose Keats' banquet in "St. Agnes" and Christina's "Goblin Market"). These passages prove Christina Rossetti's aptitude in the Pre-Raphaelite art of precise detail.<sup>419</sup> Unlike the first excerpt from "The Dead City" (lines 120-125), there is no reference to "real" gems in the poems, but she treats the fruits as though they were precious jewels, not only tasty and agreeable to handle, but also aesthetically pleasant on the eye, as the goblins would say.

With regards to the examples I have just provided, the category of jewels in my opinion does not extend to gems and precious metals only. As I have already proposed, without sources of light, gems with their axially cut or completely smooth faces (or with any kind of surfaces, for that matter) would not be gems, and their attractive quality would be lost. Therefore, the connection of jewels with light and shade is, for me, just another way of understanding the above-mentioned painterly technique that Rossetti used, one in which special attention is given to the dichotomy of light and shadow, their constant battle and opposition, which is in fact the very basis of any painting at all. Objects of the same quality as gems and jewels, e.g. inviting play of light, being able to diffuse light by their translucency or reflect light by their shiny surfaces, and being depicted as small, round and spherical, could also be things like eyes, moon, bubbles, tears, stars, sun, drops, dew, crystals, amulets, tokens, sea-shells, pebbles, conches, enamels – but also glazed surfaces such as glass, mirrors, water, ice, icicles, pools, wells, and ponds. All of these translucent or glittering objects in fact create the main bulk of Rossetti's

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418 Qtd in Stevenson 83. The entire poem is in my opinion worth an analysis in the Pre-Raphaelite context as it contains plenty of their techniques and imagery.

For lushness, also cf John Keats' "To Autumn."

419 Stevenson 84. The suggestion of contrasting stanza XXX of "The Eve of St. Agnes" with the refrains from "The Goblin Market" is mine.

recurrent images of lucency all across his *oeuvre*. And, as it is in the case of Keats and Christina Rossetti's "The Goblin Market" and "The Dead City", small fruit that glistens with juice and its smooth and polished surfaces (like the cards in "Card Dealer") glow when exposed to light. So do "lucent syrups" or anything that either reflects light, or is translucent. Such "lucent syrup", when exposed to light, changes into a glowing gemstone. These objects can appear in both painting and poetry, exercising the same effect upon the viewer or the reader – and that is of stimulating all the senses, attracting the eye (for gems and jewels invariably have that effect), wondering at their beauty, especially if such objects are brightly coloured (which e.g. fruits invariably are<sup>420</sup>). The hand wants to touch, the mouth wants to taste, the eye wants to examine it in full light and admire the colours. Nevertheless, this similarity goes only skin-deep, for the largest difference between fruit and gems is, obviously, the fact that gems are purely aesthetic, spiritual, as it were; whereas fruits involve and suggest physical processes as well as temporality (fruit may spoil). In a pictorial representation, though, both can be depicted in a similar manner, whatever the other implications. The emphasis is put on the beauty of colour, shape, and light, which are features that fruits and gems share.

As Helsinger stresses, colour is "a powerful sensory impression with a basis in physical stimulus"<sup>421</sup>; and is "used in a lyric way to increase sensory and emotional awareness of a moment of time."<sup>422</sup> These are the ways colours are used in Rossetti's poetry. By the same token, images of glistening objects – whether they are jewels, gold, metal, water, or mere bubbles – heighten one's sense of time just as well, due to the fluctuating reflections of dancing light on their tiny slanted (or convex and concave) surfaces and their emanation of unstable, ever-changing light. And as far as colour is concerned, its advantage of calling to mind the visual chromatic manifestation of it when employed verbally in poetry as a part of imagery, its use can definitely fall under the heading of "painterly techniques" employed in poetic art.

Besides, if we think of the ultimate gem/jewel object that displays all the properties of the above listed glistening objects of Pre-Raphaelite relish – stained glass – we hit the nail on the head, so to speak. For stained glass connotes religion, devotion, reverence, dignity, the Middle Ages, mystery, the depiction of religious scenes and Christian figures (i.e. noble subjects), compositions of various colours, translucency producing a mysterious effect of subdued light diffusing through the dim and dark atmosphere of the church, mosaic pictures composed of coloured segments of glass, symmetries,

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420 Besides, fruits also carry another important connotation: in Dante's *Purgatory*, fruit (*pome* - apple) is the symbol of the highest good, or God, in whom alone true happiness can be found. *Purgatory*, Canto XXVII, line 115. Alighieri 293.

421 Helsinger 84.

422 Ibid 82.

proportion, rich texture and density – and all these properties are characteristic of Pre-Raphaelite painting.

It is also worth a remark that stained glass appears in John Keats' "St. Agnes Eve", the ultimate favourite poem of the Pre-Raphaelites. See stanza XXIV:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,  
All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.<sup>423</sup>

It is a small wonder, then, that Edward Burne-Jones was known for making stained-glass designs<sup>424</sup> – but so was Morris, and to a lesser extent, also Rossetti himself. Jeremy McGann even claims that Rossetti's turn to the Middle Ages and early Renaissance involved not only the study of Italian primitive art, quattrocento art, and the study of illuminated manuscripts, but also a study of stained glass.<sup>425</sup> The latter had such a vast influence on his composition of colour fields on canvas that John Ruskin could not help noticing the influence of stained-glass lighting in paintings such as "Beata Beatrix:" "Its light is not the light of sunshine itself, but of sunshine diffused through coloured glass."<sup>426</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelite stained-glass designs are, according to Helsinger, very illustrative of the effects of strong, glowing colour, contrasted with a more or less neutral background. The Pre-Raphaelites used "deep, gem-like colours in a palette dominated by a ruby red and a deep blue-green (interspersed with touches of gold, flesh colour, and paler greens) [...] dark reds, golds, blues, and greens [...]"<sup>427</sup> What I find quite striking is the fact that the combination of red, blue, and green is often used for the

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<sup>423</sup> *Essential Keats* 54.

The striking similarity to a Pre-Raphaelite design was noticed by Grant F. Scott in *Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*. G.F. Scott comments that here Keats attempts his own Pre-Raphaelite painting. Grant F. Scott, *The Sculpted Worlds: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* (Hanover NH: University Press of New England, 1994) 89.

Also commented upon by Helsinger 96.

<sup>424</sup> Helsinger 60-61.

<sup>425</sup> McGann 66, 126.

<sup>426</sup> Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin* 3, 12:162. Qtd in McGann 98.

<sup>427</sup> Helsinger 60-61. Some of these stained-glass panels are now on view in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

stained-glass designs – and gems of these colours appear in “The Card Dealer.” The possible significances of this triad of colours are going to be discussed in due time. In the Gothic centuries, stained-glass was used in churches as a gateway for the Divine light. To distinguish this light from normal broad daylight, coloured glass cubes started to be used (not panes: cubes are thicker and light is diffused in a different way) – colourless glass simply would not do to filter God’s glory. The manner in which the colours were selected and then put into the mosaic soon developed into actual systems and rules: red signified the light of Creation or the Sun, Darkness was blue, etc.<sup>428</sup> The immaterial light ablaze with palely tinted colour in the ecclesiastical interiors was seen as a luminous manifestation of Heaven, and God’s glory emanated out of that.<sup>429</sup> Stained glass was understood as a medium of light “whose production of tinted light later on nourished the idea of ‘gothic gloom’ as a figment of the Romantic imagination.”<sup>430</sup> In this regard, in the Early Christian era even glass became a vehicle for mysteries: glass as a substance came to be seen as belonging to the family of stones and metals.<sup>431</sup>

As far as stained-glass and Rossetti go, E.C. Stedman in *Victorian Poets* mentions that a cluster of Rossetti’s followers established their own kind of poetry which Stedman terms “Stained-Glass poetry” (another class of Rossetti-derived poetry was “Debonair Verse”). Though Stedman does not enlarge upon this marginal class of poetry in greater detail and it is almost impossible to unearth any further information on them, it is nonetheless quite clear that this particular poetic group incorporated cognates of Rossetti’s versatile poetic manners, together with the Keatsian influence that comes as a part of the package, so to speak. According to Stedman, “Stained-Glass poetry” is associated with themes of chivalry, romance, mysticism and balladry of foreign literatures, especially French.<sup>432</sup> The name “Stained-Glass poetry” already implies its liaison with the lyrical use of colour: William Strode compared “colour’d Imag’ry” to stained glass windows.<sup>433</sup>

To fine-tune the topic of jewels, neither Boos nor Helsingier mentions a very important implication of the jewel imagery. The lectures of Lafcadio Hearn, collected in *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, provide useful contextual information which considerably elucidates the Pre-Raphaelite fascination by jewels and gems. According to Hearn, then, in the Middle Ages there was a “great belief in the virtue of jewels and crystals of a precious kind, [...] in the magical power of rubies, diamonds, emeralds, and opals [...]”<sup>434</sup> The ancient beliefs in the power of gemstones had existed from great antiquity in the

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428 Gage 50. Hence, possibly, the opposition of red and blue.

429 Ibid 69-76.

430 Ibid 69-70.

431 Ibid 64, 72.

432 Stedman 477.

433 William Strode, “On Fayrford Windowes,” *Poetical Works*, ed. Bertram Dobell (London, 1907) 25. Qtd in Hagstrum 113.

434 Hearn 83.

Orient, and had been accepted also by the Greeks and Romans; they were the interest of charlatans, folk healers, or oracles, as well as of alchemists or astrologers. The medieval Crusades revived this interest since talismanic stones were brought back from Palestine by pilgrim-knights.<sup>435</sup> In turn, the love of luxurious jewels and stuffs came to Byzantium with the Roman army of the Emperor Constantine who wore “diadems, pearls, and precious stones.”<sup>436</sup> Some of the stones imported to Europe by the Crusaders were marked with Arabic characters, which the ignorant people estimated to be characters of magic, or tokens of occult power. Moreover, to the medieval man, the Arabic world itself was a region of magically perfumed mystery and appealing sensuality: hence also the evocative locations of Lebanon and Samarcand in “St. Agnes Eve.”

Precious stones were widely put to magical uses in the Middle Ages, the most well-known of which is crystallo-mancy – the art of seeing the future in crystals, glass, or the transparent substances of jewels.<sup>437</sup> The presence of the divine in jewels is also briefly discussed in the historical context of the Middle Ages by Woolgar in *The Senses in Late Medieval England*.<sup>438</sup> According to the source, jewels had an ecclesiastical significance because they were connected to the twelve jewels of the Tabernacle and to the heavenly Jerusalem whose walls were decorated with jewels as it is written in Revelation 21:9-21.<sup>439</sup> Though each stone was assigned to one of the Apostles and then to their Christian virtues, the idea of magic properties of some gemstones originally came from Islamic countries.<sup>440</sup> Light shining from a jewel was deemed to have healing powers, and by the same token, poor moral quality of a wearer might corrupt such a gemstone.<sup>441</sup> Gemstones were invested not only with curing powers but people incorporated them into superstitions and rituals – a crystal engraved with a naked woman, mounted in a ring twelve times the weight of the gem, surrounded by amber, aloe, and pennyroyal was said to make the (usually male) wearer attractive, and if a woman placed it under her head, she would dream of whatever the owner of the ring wished.<sup>442</sup> These practices may sound like something John Keats might have written in one of his quasi-medieval poems, and it is no wonder if they do.

The link between these mystical practices and the Pre-Raphaelites now becomes apparent: not only are jewels and gems light-friendly and beautiful in their liquid coloration and scintillation, but as instruments of divination they are also invested with mystical powers that are in some way attuned to

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435 Ibid 83.

436 C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (Prentice-Hall, 1972) 10. Qtd in Gage 61.

437 Hearn 83. Hearn adds that crystallo-mancy is still practised in Egypt, Arabia, India, and Persia – or at least were in 1915-1917 when Hearn delivered his lectures.

438 Woolgar 52, 150-151, 272.

439 Ibid 155.

440 Gage 72.

441 Ibid 267.

442 Ibid 52.

the Higher Powers, whatever that may mean to the medieval man. The virtuous and mystical properties of precious stones can be traced back to the twelve gems that garnished the walls of the Holy City in Revelation 18, as it has been suggested already – we must not disregard the heavy reliance on the Scriptures by the medieval people. The references to the heavenly Jerusalem were made especially when considering the colour of stones; a great number of rituals was associated with the colours, and with the order in which they were laid as foundations.<sup>443</sup>

The stones' mysticism is furthermore reinforced by their actual characteristics: they are usually full-bodied, or at least convex, allowing one to see what is inside them without being able to remove it (e.g. air bubbles, occasional cracks or cloudings). A medieval peasant – in days when science was unable to explain many a physical law or a phenomenon and everything was explained in terms of religion (and if religion was short of explanations, then miracles and magic came in) – might be struck by their similarity to solidified water or to ice that is not meltable, which may place these objects somewhere on the borderlines between physics and metaphysics; or even forthright in the region of miracles. Their ability to diffuse light and rays as well as their transparency makes them apt objects for divination: one can tell fortunes with the aid of a clear crystal ball (whose roundness is supposed to represent the terrestrial globe)<sup>444</sup> or by gazing through a crystal at a flame – which, due to the lucent body of the crystal, appears distorted and some of its characteristics are enhanced that would not be perceived by the naked eye. Light, moreover, carries a very important New Testament connotation: Truth.<sup>445</sup> Light, especially bright and blinding, was a manifestation of the divine for the medieval man.<sup>446</sup> Apart from Truth, the medieval aesthetics also connected light and Love. By the same token, Life and Light were seen as cognate concepts as well.<sup>447</sup> In turn, light – and colour – were two essential aesthetic values stressed in medieval aesthetic doctrine, and were amendable to verbal rendering.<sup>448</sup> Hagstrum includes an example of Dante's joining Love with Light, stating that the imagery of the "Paradiso" is in one sense the culmination of the medieval icon:<sup>449</sup>

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443 Woolgar 170.

444 Hearn 85.

Also, Max Nordau in *Degeneration* quotes F. Paulhan's claim that that magic, sorcery, as well as astrology and divination respond to a need of human nature – the object is to be able to act upon the external and social world. The need for explaining the phenomena of the outside world actually "invented" sorcery and magic. F. Paulhan, *Le nouveau Mysticisme* (Paris, 1891) 104. Qtd in Nordau 218.

445 Ephesians 5:8-10: "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord." NIV. The same is implied in Woolgar 167, Gage 26, 52-3, 56, 58-61, as well as Hagstrum 45, 54, 56.

446 Woolgar 151.

447 Gage 26.

448 Hagstrum 56. Light as a substance of colour is also discussed in Woolgar 156-

449 Ibid 55-56.

The “Paradiso” presents us with the music of singing, burning suns, with light that sparkles like the rays of the sun on clear water; with a river of light, glowing, tawny (“fulvide di fulgore”) between its banks, painted in all radiance of spring, from which issue living sparks like rubies set in gold – an image that suggests Byzantine interiors. These luminous shapes sometimes assume the form of a cross, and sometimes wheel in circles of flame, purer and more intense at the center than at the periphery, circle within circle of flame and light. Finally, at the climax, intense, primal, and cosmic light overpowers all the senses: “pura luce”, “luce intelletuale”, and “luce viva.” [...] The pure intellectual light is “piena d’amore.” Light and love are joined; and love, as fully as light, has had its progression throughout the vision.<sup>450</sup>

Even Dante was said to show himself particularly fascinated by the passage of rays of light through transparent surfaces, such as glass, but also – as John Gage claims – by their reflection from polished surfaces<sup>451</sup> which strangely pairs him with Rossetti who was apparently captivated by the same.

In relation to gemstones which to us obviously reflect light, which is the reason they shine, the medieval belief was widely held that these objects were themselves sources of light, and that, because of the divine quality of light, made them “objects of virtue in their own right.”<sup>452</sup> The origin of the medieval interest in lustre lay precisely here; due to their quality of emitting light and the association between light and Truth (and Love – Love always seems to be paired with Truth) particular regard was paid to jewels, stones and precious metals.<sup>453</sup>

The prismatic flames and rainbow gleams were therefore considered as next to miraculous, and thus positively divine. And because they emitted light which was associated with Truth, not only were gemstones often studded into surfaces in reliquaries, shrines, and places of worship,<sup>454</sup> but their power of revealing the truth by means of light constituted the very substance of crystallomancy. Hearn discusses crystallomancy in relation to Rossetti’s lengthy poem “Rose Mary” in which a precious stone, referred to as beryl, is used for divination. This particular beryl came from the East and has cloudings inside of it, and hidden among these cloudings are a number of evil spirits, who were enclosed in the jewel by magic and can make the future appear visible to any virtuous person who looks inside the stone.<sup>455</sup> It is without much doubt that the Pre-Raphaelites knew of the medieval trend of crystallomancy; the proof is the consulting the beryl stone in “Rose Mary” – or John William

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450 Ibid 54.

451 Gage 77.

452 Woolgar 150.

453 Ibid 150-151.

454 B. Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998) 36-8. Qtd in Woolgar 52, 151.

455 Hearn 85.

Waterhouses' late painting "The Crystal Ball."

Therefore, the image of bejewelled rings in "The Card Dealer" seems to be an apt choice with respect to the subject matter of the poem. The fortune-teller, dealing out cards, wears jewels on her hands – by association with crystallogancy, these gems, described in detail, may be perceived as tokens of her prophetic powers, accentuating her mind-reading abilities, reminding us of her connection with the Powers That Govern.

Apart from the jewels' obvious beauty, for the sake of better understanding of their use by the Pre-Raphaelite artists, it is also necessary to point out that despite all chiseling they are, after all, objects of nature. Even a chipped-off piece of glass had been separated from the rest by a physical – and therefore natural – process; to say nothing of the well-researched atomic structure of precious stones. Though on the atomic level gemstones display geometrical regularities, when perceived by the naked eye, they are markedly irregular, if they were not chiseled or otherwise refined. Irregularity is in this case a virtue: though in a somewhat far-fetched way, we may be reminded of G.M. Hopkins' essay *On the Nature of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue*, in which it is made clear that an irregular chestnut leaf – one with seven leaves in its fan – is more beautiful in comparison with another that has six leaves and is perfectly symmetrical. The reason for that, to put it bluntly, is that "nature knows best." An object to be admired is one in which symmetry converges with asymmetry. A chiseled jewel, on the other hand, is basically a harmonious, aesthetic object, in which we can see the marriage of sheer regularity embodied in the cat's cradle-like structure of flat faces and straight edges (perfection) with natural material that is imperfect by default. The purely nature-made matter is held within the shape of a polyhedron that lends it an illusion of sheer perfection – a concentrated essence with spiritual, mystical, and metaphysical implications. Cut translucent gemstones with multiple facets encourage dichroism, scintillation, miniature reflections, and other light effects, thus bringing it closer to both water and fire, and to the perfection of Heraclitean fire – the notion that a soul is composed of fire and water.<sup>456</sup>

Boos is not completely explicit about this, but hints at a "Heraclitean concern with the composing and decomposing of elements expressed in the extremes of jewels and fire."<sup>457</sup> I have developed her idea with regards to the jewels' consistency. In a translucent gemstone, the two contradictory elements are unified in an artificial manner: the water-like consistency of the stone allows the passage of firelight.

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456 Boos 67.

457 Ibid 67.

Although a shining gemstone contains physically neither water, nor fire, the nature of the gem creates an illusion that there is “liquid fire” or “burning water” in it. G.M. Hopkins' poem “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire” perhaps may be interpreted in this light as well, with regards to its final image of an “immortal diamond.”

Taken altogether, even if the Pre-Raphaelites were not entirely aware of the potentials of gemstones, the chief attraction of them may have well been precisely what I have just suggested: a rare alliance of mystery, beauty, spirituality, nature, colours, translucence, as well as their small size that is pleasant to handle or perhaps even the clinking of them when they are scooped. All this could have contributed to their love of gemstones – and with respect to the passionate admiration of everything that is tiny, round, hard, colourful, luminous, sensuous, it is small wonder that this love has extended to objects that share some of the gems' characteristics, i.e. fruit, metals, glass, or certain objects from nature that I have enumerated above. There is something infinitely appealing about things which are used as details, and which, in themselves, contain a number of minute details as well – you look close to see the detail and want to look closer to see the details of that detail, or to feel it by touching it: the facets of cut gemstones, the texture of metals, surfaces of glass or water, the mellowness of fruit, the luster of diamonds, the fragility of a bubble. (Or, the stars in the damozel's hair that can be counted, or the fine cloth stitched with golden thread.)

#### Stanza IV: Colours

Boos links the flashing colours to the “glints of the coiling water-snakes in 'The Rime', although these move in tracks of 'shining white' and burn 'blue, glossy green, and velvet black,’”<sup>458</sup> again calling up the possibility of a Coleridgean echo in Rossetti's poetry. More importantly, though, it has been recorded that Rossetti made considerable changes in the poem in the process of his habit of endless re-writing and editing. Originally the colours of the gems were “crimson and orange, green and blue.”<sup>459</sup> Rossetti allegedly settled on “blood-red and purple” primarily for the colours' stronger emphatic quality as well as for their ability to enhance the dramatic, ominous, and deathly undertone of the poem. Boos also sees a connection between the biblical mannerism of listing of jewels and Keats' (and Tennyson's) use of gems and diamonds to enhance the impression of the exotic, adding that “further

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458 Boos 204.

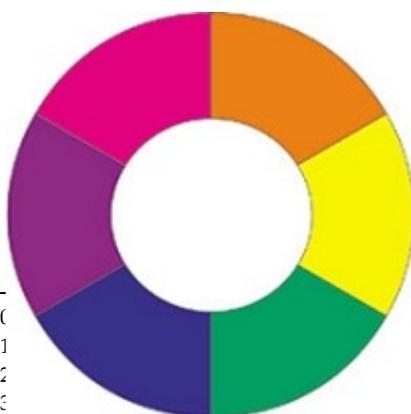
459 Boos 254n1, Hobbs 69, 69n53.

The poem appeared in an early form in the *Athenaeum* of October 1852 while still listing “crimson and orange, green and blue” as well as including a different arrangement of the stanzas; the final, revised form was published in 1870 – and this improved form already featured “blood-red and purple” in lieu of the less evil “crimson and orange.” Boos 200, 254n1, Hobbs 69n53.

examination of Romantic and Victorian taste in jewel-allusions might reveal interesting shifts.”<sup>460</sup> Rossetti does not specify what precious stones the Card Dealer's gems are, but with regards to their colours they may be, out of the jewel-listing from Revelation 21:20, a jacinth or a ruby (blood-red), amethyst (purple), chrysoprasus or beryl or chrysolite (green), and topaz or turquoise (blue). The combination of thus coloured gems may be perhaps reminiscent of Alphonse Mucha's decorative series “Precious Stones” which feature Ruby (blood-red), Amethyst (purple), Emerald (green), and Topaz (in Mucha, topaz is depicted as orange though, but orange has been considered by Rossetti as an option for “The Card Dealer” as well). Although Mucha belongs to the Art Nouveau movement, the affinities with the Pre-Raphaelites and Symbolists are to an extent quite discernible. There are definitely traces of the two latter movements in Art Nouveau, though Art Nouveau is clearly distinct from both. David G. Riede in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti Revisited* claims that in the graphic arts, the line of influence from Rossetti leads “very clearly through Burne-Jones to Aubrey Beardsley in England, and to Gustave Moreau and Alphonse Mucha in France.”<sup>461</sup>

Artists like Gustav Klimt, Aubrey Beardsley or especially Edward Burne-Jones provide a bridge between these three classes of art. At any rate, there must be something deeply enticing in that particular combination of red, purple, green and blue/orange colours. It may be something about the relationships between them, for red and blue are primary colours (along with yellow) from which all other colours can be derived and mixed.<sup>462</sup> Red is said to be the counterpart to blue<sup>463</sup>, though Helsingier contradicts this view by proving that the true opposite of red is green.<sup>464</sup> In any case, if we mix red and blue, the result is purple. Purple, in turn, may be regarded as a counterpart to green (on the assumption that we pair red with blue) which is also a derivative colour, created from blue and yellow. In this way, we may figure out an oppositional formula operating among these four colours: (red X blue) = (green X purple), which may perhaps help us to explain the alluring quality of this

particular colour combination. Although it has been proved that red has its counterpart in green, the human mind cannot help but make contrastive pairs out of what is available to it in its automatically conditioned search for symmetry – thus, blue and red, purple and green – because, for a number of reasons, the opposition of blue X purple would *not* work.



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460  
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463  
(2009) 634.  
464 Helsingier 102.

sh Colour Terms: Colour-based X-phemisms,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 41, 626-637

Helsingers survey of the development of thought on colour in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* proves that the primary colours should be paired by with “secondary colours”, as she calls them (i.e. green, orange, purple), ideally on a colour wheel where the pairings would be red X green, yellow X violet, blue X orange. She argues that most of the nineteenth-century theories of colour harmony rested on the basis of chromatic progression – a term, Helsingers stresses, that music borrows from colour. A chromatic scale in music is a full octave composed of twelve notes (see the analogy with six colours)<sup>465</sup> which are a semitone apart, the smallest musical interval: C, C sharp, D, D sharp, E, F, F sharp, G, G sharp, A, A sharp, B – and back, C, B, B flat, A, A flat, G, G flat, F, E, E flat, D, D flat, C:



A full chromatic scale.

Therefore, scheme of colour progression was called “chromatic scale” and it was a six-colour wheel with three primary colours alternating with three secondary colours, introduced by J.-F.-L. Merimée in his 1830 study *De la Peinture à l’huile*, and brought to England in the form of a translated version by Sarsfield Taylor.<sup>466</sup> The foundation of this colour scheme was rooted not only in the contemporary theories which started to shape actual laws and “grammar” of colour (e.g. Goethe’s 1810 *Farbenlehre*), but also in Newton’s study of colours, as well as “in the most stunning of natural phenomena, the rainbow.”<sup>467</sup> Helsingers moreover adds that the laws of colour harmony were immensely popular both among artists and among paint dealers, one of the latter of which was striving to develop the brilliant coloration of early Netherlandish and Italian oil painting – and this particular paint dealer developed exactly those pigments upon which the Pre-Raphaelites relied later on.<sup>468</sup> What was behind the colour theories was simply the fact that the complementary pairs of colours not only satisfy the eye’s need for symmetry and harmony, but they also offer pleasure of simple sensation independent of intellectual apprehension – the same effect that music produces, inviting further investigations on the matter of music and colour and their harmony and analogy.<sup>469</sup>

In the case of “The Card Dealer”, out of the said colour wheel we have the opposition of red X green,

<sup>465</sup> Twelve is also a number that stands for completeness: in the chromatic scale, all twelve notes are represented. Twelve is also associated with other things that reinforce the sense of completeness of the number: e.g. twelve hours of the clock, twelve apostles of Jesus, twelve months of the year, etc.

<sup>466</sup> Helsingers 103. J.F.-L. Merimée, *De la Peinture à l’huile* (1830), trans. W. Sarsfield Taylor as *The Art of Painting in Oil, and in Fresco, with Original Observations on the Rise and Progress of British Art, the French and English Chromatic Scales, and Theories of Colouring* (London, Whittaker, 1839)

<sup>467</sup> Helsingers 101.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid 103. Also see George Field, *Chromatography, or, A Treatise on Colours and Pigments, and of Their Powers in Painting*, new ed. (London: Tilt and Bogue, 1841).

<sup>469</sup> Ibid 102.

and blue X purple, with the more positive and glowing orange and yellow missing – we do not have to go too far to gather that these two colours were probably eliminated on account of their optimistic connotations and too much brightness of their hues, since “The Card Dealer” is basically sombre in tone. Yellow and orange gems would most likely clash with the darksome atmosphere of the gambling den, though with orange, blue would have its counterpart. As said, orange was originally intended by Rossetti for one of the gems; then, we might say, the colour harmony would be in accord with the generally acknowledged rules of colour harmony: crimson (red) X green, blue X orange. We may even venture to suggest that this was Rossetti’s first instinctive choice, his unconsciously grabbing for the most harmonious effect among the four colours. Nevertheless, upon the revision of “The Card Dealer”, orange was dropped for the sake of the more grave purple colour, thus disrupting the colour harmony on one side, yet still retaining some of it in red X green. The substitution of orange by purple, and therefore the elimination of the brighter, joyful yellow and orange from the chromatic spectrum, may cause the reader of the poem to be disquieted by the manifest lack of harmony between blue and purple (as his eyes automatically pair red and green), just as a card player might be disconcerted by something hardly identifiable around the figure of the Card Dealer. At any rate, with regards to the poem’s use of colour we can talk of colour harmony and the skillful manipulation of it.

Connotations of these colours may play a certain role as well, but as Helsinger often remarks, to determine a symbolic connotation of a colour is a clumsy business<sup>470</sup> as colours are generally very elusive and the scope of their possible connotations is endlessly elastic. It is indeed difficult to prove that the frequent depiction of gems in Pre-Raphaelite and Romantic poetry is not a mere sensory indulgence. Yet, a certain degree of signification is necessary to be ascribed to colours, with regards to the intense visual quality typical for this kind of poetry (as well as to its aim to accentuate the emotional impact by appealing to the senses – and gems and jewels present the best instance of stimulating the visual imagination).

#### Stanza IV: Number 4

What is also noticeable about the poem is its recurrence of quartets. There are four colours, four “sins” enumerated in Stanza 7 (desire, greed, violence, murder – or, in Howard’s words, “human insatiability and greed”, “human delusion and illusions”, “human violence”, and “the inevitable fact of death”<sup>471</sup>), and there are also four suits in the pack of cards. It would be pointless to make connections among these three quartets though, but it again tells us something about the careful structuring within the

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470 Helsinger 84.

471 Howard, *Poetic Development* 54.

poem: just like “The Blessed Damozel” was filled with triads, “The Card Dealer” operates in foursome. After all, the nature of a pack of cards demands it, just as the number 4 may be indispensable when describing a hand that deals out these cards – rings may be worn properly on four fingers of the hand only, excepting the thumb that is placed opposite the rest of the fingers and therefore separated anyway. Howard in *The Dark Glass* ventures as far as to consider the poem divided into four parts:

Stanzas 1-4, the basic descriptions of the image (the card-dealer in her setting); stanzas five and six, the players (the image now becoming explicitly symbolic); stanza seven, the significance of the cards; stanzas eight and nine, the game which is played (the climax of symbolic significances coinciding with the end of the poem).<sup>472</sup>

Howard's division is moreover quite proportionate: (1 2 3 4) : (5 6) : (7) : (8:9).

With respect to all this, the number four seems to carry a mystical significance for the poem – all the more if we connect it with four fingers and four suits in a deck of cards. Why are there four suits in a pack of cards? Have they originated from four external objects, or are they supposed to symbolize something with four levels? Or is it merely the result of a mathematical necessity, as with four suits all kinds of permutations are possible, unlike, say, with five or three suits only? There may be endless answers available to these questions. Due to their mysterious combinatorial and algebraic potential, playing cards serve as a very frequent symbol of mystery and unpredictability, odds and Fate, good fortune or loss, chance and change: in this respect, playing cards can be matched with the proverbial roll of dice. The vast scope of significance of a deck of cards – and the many inviting analogies with cards – can be accommodated to almost anything.<sup>473</sup>

#### Stanza IV: Atmosphere

The cards in the poem have been said to be charged with hypnotic power<sup>474</sup>, largely because of their flitting and lurid reflections. These shimmering reflections, together with their rhythmical falling upon

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472 Ronnalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1972) 8-9.

473 A further investigation into the matter of game metaphor in Victorian poetry may yield interesting results, especially with regards to the Victorian fondness of parlour games, be it draughts, chess, or backgammon – the master-metaphor of this sort is probably embodied by Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

For interesting and clever paralleling of a deck of playing cards and the Bible, I recommend a talking-blues song called “Deck of Cards” by T. Texas Tyler.

474 Rodolphe Louis Mégroz, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter Poet of Heaven in Earth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929) 52. Qtd in Howard, *Poetic Development* 52.

the “bright board” engender certain ominousness, like a literal version of “Alea Iacta Est”, another proof of the popularity of gambling metaphors in matters of life and death. This is further amplified by the sibilance of the stanza: “Smooth polished silent things.” Howard also notices the implied inscrutability of both the Card Dealer and the cards – the odds, in short.<sup>475</sup> The mysterious nature of the Card Dealer – we can view her either as a demonic being who deals in death, or simply as a seeress – moreover serves as a connecting link between the realistic (a game being played in a tavern) and “the supernatural machinery” (the game of Life). For this unique combination several critics lavished high praise on the poem<sup>476</sup>

Thus she sits, adorned in jewels, and deals out cards. The jewels, death, darkness, and the beating hearts are reflected in the falling cards in two ways: as symbols representing the individual suits (diamonds, spades, clubs, and hearts);<sup>477</sup> but the glazed cards also reflect physically the shine of the gems on her rings. By association, the cards also reflect everything that goes on all around their bearer, that is, the rhythm of the beating hearts of the dancers and of her fellow players, the darkness of the tavern, and the abstract notion of death that hovers over the whole poem, though it is not explicit until the archaic and Biblical Stanza VI. Stanza IV ends with a sweeping close-up on her lustrous gems, their colours radiant and seductive, yet evil and sinister, summing up synecdochically the whole persona of the Card Dealer: simultaneously beautiful, bejewelled, golden-haired, and desirable; and yet dangerous in her unpredictability and prophetic powers.

#### Stanza V

The following stanza is swarming with questions. These questions are slightly alliterative, which, however, may be simply due to the nature of English interrogative and personal pronouns and certain prepositions:

Whom plays she with? With thee, who lov'st  
 Those gems upon her hand;  
 With me, who search her secret brows;  
 With all men, bless'd or bann'd.  
 We play together, she and we,

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<sup>475</sup> Howard, *Poetic Development* 52-53, *The Dark Glass* 9.

<sup>476</sup> Harold L. Weatherby, “Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti”, *Victorian Poetry* II, 11-19 (Winter 1964) 18. Qtd in Howard, *Poetic Development* 55. The source praises the poem for establishing a firm connection between the symbol and its meaning (cards and death) while still managing to maintain its consistency throughout the poem. Howard, *Poetic Development* 55-56.

<sup>477</sup> Boos 206. Diamonds = jewels, Spades = death, Clubs = darkness, Hearts = heartbeat.

Within a vain and strange land:

Nevertheless, in combination with the employment of a syntactic structure that links together all the lines, the effect is somewhat hypnotic, if not mind-numbing, as if one were resigning himself to the incontrovertible fact of being obliged to play, like it or not. The syntax of the stanza is also remarkable for its branching out with inclusions: "Whom plays she with? With thee, who lov'st those gems upon her hand. With me, who search her sec'd brows. With all men, bless'd or bann'd. We play together, she and we, within a vain and strange land." It is like telescoping an idea the opposite way – the focus keeps widening. At first the narrator points to the reader, then to himself, and then includes "all men, bless'd or bann'd", finally spreading out the scene from one-to-one and two-to-one groups of players to the image of all men at all engaged in a play with the demonic Card Dealer, on the backdrop of "a vain and strange land." This extends and echoes the zooming-in-zooming-out quality of the first four stanzas. At the same time, by broadening the spectrum of her "victims", we are offered the narrator's moral interpretation of the Card Dealer as the inscrutable figure of Death, an interpretation applicable to all mankind.<sup>478</sup> She is not a judge, nor a law-giver – she merely deals out the cards, knowing "the card that followeth", but on what principle she operates, that remains unknown. The poem has fatalistic overtones, so perhaps the Card Dealer represents Fate<sup>479</sup> – and very likely she does, especially if we connect the notion of Fate with the unwinding of her golden hair in Stanza II. We may recall the Three Goddesses who in folk mythology spin threads representing fates of mortals. Elizabeth Gitter notes particularly that the Victorians thoroughly explored ballads, fairy tales, Teutonic and classical myths in which golden hair often stands for something precious and sacred. She gives the example of the tangle-haired Frau Holda, the *frīðoweþba* who oversees spinning and rewards industrious girls with the gift of combing pearls and precious stones from their hair.<sup>480</sup> Due to this link, Gitter continues, "the female arts of hair combing and spinning or weaving are connected."<sup>481</sup>

Therefore, the Card Dealer's headful of hair may be full of weaved threads. Again, this image at once suggests the incredibly luxuriant hair she has (abundant enough to satisfy Rossetti's crave for beautiful hair – a curling and tumbling mass of hair that is commonly seen in his paintings), just as it indicates that whoever manages to "unwind / That woven golden hair" would subsequently find out the grand secret of life, and he would literally have his hands in the fates of all men – and he would be indeed rich. Transplanting the mythological practice of weaving threads of fate from common

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478 Hobbs 69.

479 Howard is inclined to the notion of the medieval Wheel of Fortune. *Poetic Development* 51, *The Dark Glass* 9.

480 Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. James Stallybrass. 3 vols. (New York: Dover, 1966) 3: 966-967, 2:464. Qtd in Gitter 936.

481 Gitter 936.

spinners to female hair appears to be very Rossettian: the symbolic quality he bestows upon female hair almost invites the idea of blending the pleasurable action of touching a woman's hair<sup>482</sup> with the challenging prospect of overpowering Fate by doing so. The idea of such strong symbolism of the weaved golden threads interacting with sensual pleasure, almost erotic implications, and a rather terrifying female presence, sounds like a suitable topic for a Pre-Raphaelite painting.<sup>483</sup>

### Stanza VI

As said, in Stanza V, the Card Dealer fades from view as we are confronted with the narrator's questions and answers – the last line guides our inner eye gently into the desolate and disordered land, “a realm of harsh allegory”, as Hobbs puts it.<sup>484</sup> The line echoes Job 10:22. The depiction of the chaos is executed by using archaic, Biblical language, evoking its Scriptural source. In this stanza, the notion of death is finally given contours: “Where who lieth down ariseth not / Nor the sleeper awakeneth; / A land of darkness as darkness itself / And of the shadow of death.” Being relocated from the warm, heartbeat-filled tavern with its dance and games, this dark and hopeless land almost seems to be the inverted image of the tavern. In the tavern, there are certain rules to be observed, certain behaviour is to be followed – even the image of the dance is suggestive of rules and patterns. The “vain strange land”, on the other hand, has no rules whatsoever, and it is moreover governed by death, as opposed to the liveliness of the tavern. It is as though we were allowed to catch a fleeting glimpse of what life is really like – not the self-indulgent entertainment of the tavern, but a place of utter darkness, “where who lieth down ariseth not.” By engaging one's imagination, it may be perhaps possible to regard this barren landscape as the homeland of the Card Dealer, the place she wandered from like a Romantic Gipsy fortune-teller, or a Jewess, and the place upon which her gaze is fixed in the two openings stanzas – and the place where each of us inevitably ends.

Stanza III, as opposed to Stanza VI, is full of lively movement and circumstantial detail: dance, breath, eagerness, heat, falling of the dancers' feet, falling of the cards, heartbeat. In turn, Stanza VI presents to us an image of virtual motionlessness and dullness: “day even as night” refers to a complete stasis of time. The two motionless figures – one that lies down and does not rise again, and the other the eternal sleeper – accentuate the sense of lifelessness, darkness, stillness, of that place. We do not have

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482 Hobbs also considers the act of touching female hair as producing sensuous pleasure: “[it is] tempting but involving and treacherous,” adding that golden hair as the metaphor for the entrapping net of lust is also used in Sonnet LXXVIII of *The House of Life* as well as in “Eden Bower.” Hobbs 67-68. He does not, however, analyze the hair's significance any further than that, although the idea of entrapment fits in with my interpretation: for Fate certainly entraps a person as in a snare from which he cannot escape except by death.

483 To the best of my knowledge, this interpretation of the Card Dealer's hair has not been suggested by any of the critical sources and materials I have had at my disposal.

484 Hobbs 69.

to go far to interpret this disordered land as something close to the Biblical “valley of death” (commonly known also as “the shadow of death”) of Psalm 23.

### Stanza VII: Cards, Symbols, Colours

Having surveyed the vision of this hopeless land, we come finally to the key passage of the poem. The symbols are uncovered here and their meanings are explicated. It has been already pointed out that the jewels, darkness, heartbeat, and death of the first four stanzas are reflected in the four suits of the deck.<sup>485</sup> Nevertheless, it is only here that the symbols are properly unraveled. Rossetti makes use of the two meanings of each colour: hearts and diamonds are depicted as red on playing cards - ♥ and ♦ - and these symbols are connected to greed and desire (Hearts) and to human illusion (Diamonds), according to Howard<sup>486</sup> though I would also draw on the association of diamonds with jewels, and suggest material wealth, riches, money, which indeed *can* make the base seem brave. The black symbols, ♣ and ♠, are in turn connected with the more violent imagery, that is, human violence (Clubs) and death (Spades).

It is generally known that playing cards are white vertical rectangles marked with red and black symbols: two suits are red, two suits are black. With respect to the importance of colour in Pre-Raphaelite poetry, expounded in great detail by Elizabeth Helsinger in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, it may be appropriate to pay attention to the specific coloration of the playing cards. Hearts and Diamonds represent the less malicious “vices” in “The Card Dealer” - and these are signified as red. Whereas Clubs and Spades which carry monstrously violent associations for the poem, are depicted as black. The red colour appears to be symbolic of sexuality, the white of life, and black of death, although Christopher Nassaar in *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* claims that all three colours are deathlike.<sup>487</sup> However, as symbols are “free”, there can be no definite interpretation of these colours.<sup>488</sup> Colours are enormously slippery as symbols and they have a vast range of possible meanings – more so because the interpretation of colours is very much dependent on the given cultural, historical, and even political context. On the other hand, it would take no great effort to see the connection of the white colour to death, since dead bodies are bloodless and cold, and therefore white, which makes perfect sense. Red might stand for blood. Red, however, may also denote Mars, symbolic of war. Black is obviously death. All in all, these three colours carry the connotation of aggressiveness. They also create a high contrast with one another, though it may be

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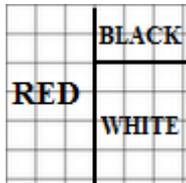
485 Boos 206.

486 Howard, *Poetic Development* 54.

487 Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1974) 106.

488 Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1880s* (London and New York: Routledge 1993) 7.

true that the connotation as to the aggressiveness of this tricolour might be due to its association with the Nazi Germany – which has no connection to Rossetti at all; yet on the other hand, the colours of the Nazi flag must have been probably chosen for the symbolic value that is achieved when the three colours are in combination. These are, however, mere speculations. Nevertheless, Nassaar's comment about the “deathlikeness” of red, white, and black sheds some light on the Card Dealer's cards as instruments of destruction: both in their symbolic meanings and as the inevitable result of playing with her. According to John Gage, black, white, and red are the most fundamental colour triad in Africa and Asia and also throughout Europe; in a study of the most salient terms in modern fiction, these three have been found to be used far more than any others.<sup>489</sup> Gage furthermore connects red, black and white as composite parts of purple, “the hue of a dark rose” which Pliny the Elder seen as sharing with gold the glory of triumph,<sup>490</sup> and the purple dye – especially Tyrian purple, the imperial dye – was the most prized hue in Antiquity because it spangled gold-star medallions. And after all, the point of card-playing is the prospect of eventual triumph – and triumph, if we understand it as being symbolically carried by the purple colour, comes from the mixture of white-black and white-red cards. As believed by Democritus, purple was mixed from red, white, and black: red largest in proportion, black smallest, and white intermediate; like this:



It is nevertheless true that the coloration of playing cards is given and fixed by convention – and whoever first chose their colours did not probably ascribe any symbolic meaning to them, or at least not consciously, though the notion of purple (connoting triumph) as being mixed from red, white, and black may have played a role as well, even if unwittingly. In my view, however, there is a great likelihood that red and black were chosen to mark the individual cards precisely because of the high contrast against white and against each other, as I have mentioned above. In accord with the assumptions of the high contrast and the potential aggressiveness of the three colours – as well as the far-fetched symbolism of triumph of the tricolour – the combination of red-white and black-white cards fits well into the poem's framework of ever-present death. Death is contained not only in the figure of the Card Dealer, but also in her cards – and thus in her hands – by way of their colouring.

Apart from the colour associations of red and black, Rossetti also uses the two meanings of each symbol, literal and metaphorical. The symbolic ambiguity has been noticed by Howard as well.<sup>491</sup> Literally, heart stands for the locus of human passions, diamond for a jewel, club for a truncheon,

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489 Gage 79.

490 Ibid 25.

491 Howard, *Poetic Development* 54.

spade for the garden tool for digging in the ground. Metaphorically, the four suits tell tales of crimes committed for the sake of money (red suits) or insatiable passion (black suits).<sup>492</sup> We – that is, all humanity – play with these cards, for we all crave, we all greed, we all have violence inherent in us, and we all die. These are the facts of life. Rossetti makes it quite clear that nobody who lives can escape these cards; just as nobody can be absolutely free of these four “sins”. Throughout the human life, we all handle our desires, greed, violence, and death, every single one of us – some are dealt a hand full of hearts, another’s hand may be rich in clubs – but eventually the card that beats all the others is of the suit of Spades. Mankind is driven by desire, greed, and violence which means both constant striving and progress, but also great disasters, causing broken hearts, all sorts of crimes, wars, theft, the eternal struggle for power. (Cf. Canto III of Alexander Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” in which Belinda engages in a card game. This game is described in terms of a heroic battle.) Perhaps we may detect some Old Testament echoes in Rossetti’s symbolism of the four suits, for these “crimes” have been with mankind ever since the dawn of history. Humanity is permanently impelled towards conflicts, most likely because of some deep fondness for combat deeply ingrained in human nature. And by the same token, passions are the by-product of the human need to multiply and continue through next generations, and if we take it from a Christian point of view, this is an obligation too. The poem is very pessimistic in tone, although some of the pessimism is checked by the notion of Justice – it may sound cliché, but there is no other way around it – and that is the simple fact that everybody must die. Among the cards that are dealt out for everyone to play with all their lives, is (apart from desire, greed, and violence) also death.

The Card Dealer eventually beats everyone, regardless of what hand her victim holds. We can imagine her knowing all manner of card tricks fashioned to outsmart and outguess everyone, managing to make a loser even out of one who has a flush. In fact, the principle of card games is very similar to that of drawing lots: pure chance. And that is by far not all – how about the numbers depicted on each card, how about the “face” cards, how about Aces? What significance *these* may have in the Life game? Though it may seem irrelevant for this analysis, the deck of cards in the Card Dealer’s bejewelled hands is thought-provoking enough as to lead one to further discussions of the implicit symbolism. For numbers, as well as colours, are very broad symbols – and in a deck of cards we have *both* colours and numbers, with the stock figures of Kings, Queens and Jacks in addition. Thus, if Hearts represent Desire, how much Desire is contained in Two of Hearts, or Three of Hearts – or, on the other hand, in the Queen of Hearts? Is the Ace of Spades the ultimate Death-Card? Is the Jack of Diamonds a sign of very good fortune? And what game is Life? Is it like Poker, is it like Pinochle, is it like Blackjack? Or is

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<sup>492</sup> Boos 206. I have added the division of red and black suits.

it completely unlike any commonly known card game? What rules are there? Is it possible to cheat, at least for a while, before one gets defeated by the Card Dealer? Is it possible to go through the game and avoid unnecessary risk and danger of losing prematurely? What if one is dealt an Ace of Spades together with an Ace of Hearts – does that mean one dies of too much Desire? Do the numbers of cards in a hand add up? The idea of life as a gambling den from where no one escapes alive surely necessitates and justifies asking all these questions – which may as well have been the purpose of the poem, after all.

### Stanza VII: Structure

As for the structural properties of Stanza VII, we may briefly turn back to “The Blessed Damozel” and to the idea of disordered stanzas. There is no real point in dividing the “Card Dealer” stanzas from the point of view of order versus disorder, because the poem is too short to present in an elaborate manner two colliding worlds (or moods) that keep interacting with one another – but just like in the former poem, in “The Card Dealer” the structural arrangement of the stanza reflects dramatic tension. Moreover, the two poems use the same stanzaic structure and rhyme scheme A-B-C-B-D-B. The first four stanzas – one of the four parts of the poem, according to Howard’s suggestion<sup>493</sup> - display a high degree of regularity. There is only one enjambment in Stanza I (“yet though its splendour swoon / Into silence languidly”) and the individual lines flow smoothly and fluently, without any dramatic interruption signaled by punctuation or sudden twists, turns, or shifts within the line. The questions of Stanza V and VI slightly crack the placid structure, while Stanza VII positively shatters it as it presents the climax of the poem. This stanza is filled with dashes, semi-colons, commas, signs of abruptness, quick succession of images – and in stanzas VIII and IX the regular structure is slowly restored as the poem finishes with the word “Death.” To link these stanzaic anomalies with the four-partite structure that Howard professes the poem has, a pattern emerges:

<u>Stanza</u>	<u>Structure</u>	<u>Groups of Howard's suggestion</u>
I	regular	} Group I
II	regular	
III	regular	
IV	regular	
V	less regular	} Group II
VI	less regular	
VII	irregular	} Group III
VIII	becoming regular	} Group IV

<sup>493</sup> Howard, *The Dark Glass* 8-9.

For some reason, Howard in her analysis also insists on isolating Stanza VII<sup>494</sup>, just like I tend to do in mine. The seventh stanza seems to stand out among the rest, both formally and content-wise. Now Howard's divisions within the poem become understandable, though hers were thematic divisions and mine are stylistic. That said, by contrasting two independently carried out experiments with dissecting the poem into parts from two different perspectives, it becomes apparent that the matter and form in this respect seem inseparable and closely tied with one another. The stylistic shifts are merely a form of response to the action, tension, thematic focus, and emotion within the stanzas. At the height of the emotional climax – which, I would argue, comes in Stanza VII – the originally orderly structure is loosened, the syntax becomes more abrupt, the imagery more dense, the shifts quicker:

	What be her cards, you ask? Even these:--	A question and an introductory tag
	<u>The heart, that doth but crave</u>	Monosyllables
mid-line	<u>More, having fed;</u> the diamond,	Enjambment; diamond part starts
	Skilled to make base seem brave;	Spondee in “make base”
structure:	<u>The club, for smiting in the dark;</u>	} The two lines are identical in } first they name the instrument, then
its purpose	The spade, to dig a grave.	

The monosyllables of the last line close the stanza with three sharp iambic strokes: The **spade** / to **dig**/ a **grave**.

The quick succession of images is fairly reminiscent of the cards sifting through the Card Dealer's fingers and consequently falling on her “bright board” - and very likely they do so, in our imagination at least, as our inner eye surveys the individual suits and their proper connotations (if we still tend to view them as merely card symbols), or the instrument and its use (if we are more literal-minded). The two final images, “the club, for smiting in the dark”, followed by “the spade, to dig a grave” contribute two violent brush-strokes as a finishing touch to the emerging picture, with all its ominous flavours of vices of human nature. The progression from “heart”, through “diamond” and “club” to the “spade” is also strongly suggestive of a possible trajectory of criminal action: at stage one, there is

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494 Ibid 8-9

merely desire, heart's discontent. Then comes greed and actual acquisition of wealth by all sorts of means, or the craving remains unsatisfied (diamond). Both the satisfied and unsatisfied greed easily turns into violence – satisfaction prompts the greedy heart to want more and more at any cost at all, dissatisfaction in turn makes us exasperated due to the target still moving out of our reach (club), from which it is but a short step to either murder, suicide, or death (spade). Even if we do not realize it fully when reading the list of suits and putting to them their appropriate connotations, something of a logical sequence may form before our inner eyes. Once again this proves that the eye is always led towards patterns, as it involuntarily seeks symmetries and logical sequence wherever it can find it, to avoid being lost in utter chaos and disarray.<sup>495</sup> The search for structures and order is inborn in us – this topic was also taken up by I.A. Richards in his psychologically tinted criticism – according to him, all art provides structures for “organizing our impulses.”<sup>496</sup>

### Stanzas VIII & IX

The two remaining stanzas, VIII and IX, elucidate the content of Stanza VII. Stanza VIII exhibits a syntactic construction that is clearly discernible in Stanza V as well – the optical zooming is in operation again. After an initial question, “And do you ask what game she plays?”, the narrator answers again by first pointing at himself (“With me 'tis lost or won;”), then points at the reader (“With thee it is playing still; [...]”), after which he points at some other participant (“with him / It is not well begun”), concluding again by pointing collectively at all humanity (“But 'tis a game she plays with all / Beneath the sway o' the sun.”). The ensuing impression is that of the reader, the narrator, some random player, and the Dealer, sitting at a round table – as the narrator answers the opening question, our eye scans the foursome company at the card table: “I, you, him, she; all.” The parts of the answers are formed in such a way as to create an effect of rotation with the constant reiteration of “with <pronoun> 'tis/it is”, that it actually ceases to be a rhetorical rotation but a visual one, too:

And do you ask what game she plays?

**With me** 'tis lost or won;

**With thee** it is playing still; **with him**

It is not well begun;

But 'tis a game she plays **with all**

Beneath the sway o'the sun.

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495 Cretien Van Campen, *The Hidden Sense: Synesthesia in Art and Science* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2007) 75-76.

496 See I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World, n.d.) 228-238. Also qtd in Stein 6.

Also notice the symmetry of the six-line stanza: line 1 and 6 frame the visual image conveyed by the syntactic patterning of lines 2-5.

As for the card-game whose play the lady oversees, Boos reminds us that the poem's early version bore the second title, "The Card-Dealer, or Vingt-et-un" (French for "twenty one"), and Rossetti was said to perceive allegorical significance of *vingt-et-un*. However, Boos does not elaborate on what the significance was.<sup>497</sup> This French card game, however, corresponds to the regular Blackjack, in which the goal is to accumulate cards of a higher count than that of the dealer, yet without exceeding twenty-one. These are great limitations for the players – just as one is limited in life by circumstances, rules, and laws. This even more enhances the figure's imposing dominance over the players whose cards' count must always be lower than hers, or exactly twenty-one. Perhaps Rossetti saw a magical quality in that number – again, like with colours, the symbolism of "21" is so wide that it cannot be narrowed down to just one particular meaning. "21" can be viewed as the sum total of 1+2+3+4+5+6; it is a Fibonacci number, too, but these are properties inherent in the very nature of the number, and very likely do not connote any esoteric meaning. Possibly if we saw the number as the result of 3 x 7 (both magical numbers and both also used in "The Blessed Damozel" in her three lilies and her seven stars), the symbolism might make more sense; but we may as well understand the numbers as 9+9+3, or 9+7+5, or any other compelling combination of odd (and therefore magical and sacred) numbers, and still never arrive at a fully convincing interpretation.

In the final stanza, IX, the narrator speaks to the reader directly. He assumes a doomed voice with markedly archaic diction; a voice of one who is at the point of losing – for he knows the principle of the game as well as the tricks the Card Dealer plays on her "victims": "Thou seest the card that falls, – she knows / The card that followeth: / Her game in thy tongue is called Life, / As ebbs thy daily breath: / When she shall speak, thou'lt learn her tongue / And know she calls it Death." The stanza is not only addressed to the reader – the narrator's fellow participant in the game – but it also explains to us the reason of the Card Dealer's silence. Howard considers the end of the poem as ironic because the speaker says that what we call Life, she calls Death,<sup>498</sup> referring to Albert Edmund Trombly's assumption that "perhaps, after all, the life and death of the individual are only kindred activities of the great Oversoul,"<sup>499</sup> yet conceding at the same time that the poem "has no connection in either its

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497 Boos 206. It has been also said that lady of the picture (personifying, according to her, intellectual enjoyment) is supposed to be playing, "since twenty-one is the age at which the mind is most liable to be beguiled for a time from its proper purpose." Boos 255n8, Cooper 88.

498 Howard 54.

499 Albert Edmund Trombly, "Rossetti Studies: The Lyric," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, XVIII, 341-349 (October 1919) 343. Qtd in Howard 67n13.

tone or treatment with the optimism of Transcendentalism.”<sup>500</sup> The poem is indeed profoundly pessimistic, as I have suggested before, though the pervasive pessimism is in my opinion mitigated by the meek acceptance of the facts of life, of the incontrovertible result of each game that is played against Death, of the sheer impossibility of getting at the strings of Fate by untying the weaved threads in the Card Dealer's luxuriant hair, of the inevitability of losing – as well as of the knowledge that one *must* lose eventually, no matter how hard he tries to outsmart the Card Dealer. The reader is encouraged to accept these facts in the same way – meekly, apologetically, with no further questions asked, since the basic principle of the game has just been explained. Hobbs claims that the narrator merely recognizes the omniscient power of the Card Dealer but he fails to understand the game fully<sup>501</sup> - this appears to be a logical argument because nobody can understand the game except the one who can overpower the “oracle of fatality”<sup>502</sup> by uncoiling her hair. The poem would probably fail, if by exactly defining the principles of the game it were stripped of its intriguing and mysterious aura: nobody must know, not even the cleverest scholar. The final word that falls with a sinister thud, is “Death.” Quite appropriately it is located at the very end of the poem.

#### “Visions” & Summary

Hobbs notices the cyclical nature of the theme and the circular movement of perceptions in the poem.<sup>503</sup> This extends my suggestion of the game's participants sitting at a round table, according to the manner in which Rossetti's narrator introduces the players and then reports on the state of their individual scores. The theme, in Hobbs' opinion, is cyclical because it concerns “the nature of man's tragic fate that remains unknown to him until it is revealed in the game of life.”<sup>504</sup> Unknown things, we may suppose, prompt us to ask again and again – hence the cycle. The poem also opens with references to swooning, languidness, coiled night – all of which can be directly or indirectly related to death (swooning as a “false death”, languidness as preceding death, coiled night resembling the sleeper in Stanza VI) – and it also appropriately ends with death, completing a cycle. Even swooning evokes a circular motion, and so does “coiled night.” Thus, the cycles are thematic, structural, and also contained in the very words that make up the cyclical shape of the poem.

All in all, the poem presents a single image, described through a number of visually potent details: be it jewels, sensations, a deck of cards with all the subtle symbolic meanings and their soft sounds as they fall, manifestations of life and death, dance, brilliant colours, reflections of light, soft sounds, the

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500 Howard 67n13.

501 Hobbs 71.

502 Boos 206.

503 Hobbs 66.

504 Ibid 66.

roughly sketched interior of a tavern at night as opposed (or perhaps related) to the sinister suggestion of the “vain strange land” - and above all, the slightly demonic, otherworldly figure of the Card Dealer, who is a kind of an oracle, a fortune-teller, a figure representing Fate, Death personified, a seeress, prophetess, sorceress, magician, trickster, demon, clairvoyante, seductress, temptress, visionary, all rolled into one.

She is essentially unknowable, unreachable, belonging into those far-off regions of the “vain and strange land.” In this way, the link between her and Rossetti’s “demonic” women is quite appropriate. The dominant number of the poem is four, as it behoves the four suits of playing cards and their corresponding instruments with *their* connotations. The poem could be also divided into four sections, each dealing with a different aspect of the whole scene. Although the poem is a text, the inner eye is inevitably led along the vistas of cinema-like shots, zooming in on single details even as minor as the reflections of gems on the glistening surfaces of the cards as they fall upon her “bright board”,<sup>505</sup> and then zooming out again to survey a larger portion of the scene, or the whole panorama. This visual effect is echoed in stanzas V and IX. In the former, the narrator introduces the players, beginning with addressing “thee”, then counting himself in, then including all mankind. By the same token, in the latter stanza the narrator informs us about each participants' progress of the game, beginning this time with himself, then addressing “thee”, mentioning “him”, and finally referring to the fact that all must play. In the end, the poetic vignette closes with the single word “Death” in the last line.

According to Hobbs, the speaker “thrusts himself into the world of the painting, receiving her stare as if it weren't meant for him alone.”<sup>506</sup> Just as the speaker is “sucked” into the picture by the powerful magnetic gaze of the Card Dealer, so is the reader, for the gaze is evoked very vividly – besides, the reader is soon listed among the participants of the game. The Card Dealer is said to “spin an atmosphere” with her gaze,<sup>507</sup> which to me seems slightly over the top, although it may be a succinct way of suggesting her magnetic power of attracting (and hypnotizing) both the narrator and the reader – but I would not go as far as to equate it with “spinning an atmosphere” because, I believe, we are not confronted with her gaze head-on. To me, the eyes of the Card Dealer appear to be penetrating enough but not quite clearly focused on anything in particular, for who can stand Death staring into his face without flinching? According to my own interpretation, the Card Dealer's eyes are about as

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505 The objects mirrored in the cards is in my opinion a very graceful image: it focuses in on an almost absurdly tiny detail and elaborates on it – and if we consider how small a reflection that must be, how barely noticeable must be the reflected glints of the flashing gems on the already small playing cards, the described detail actually becomes something like a detail of a detail.

506 Hobbs 67.

507 Ibid 67.

focused as the Blessed Damozel's of the eponymous painting: that is, open, staring into the space, and at the same time very intense. Unlike the innocent Beatricean damozel, though, the Card Dealer's eyes have a considerably more sinister and inhuman expression; possibly they are also of some unusual colour. It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the colour of her eyes might be either dark purple or light yellow – like wine, indeed – and just as liquid, glassy, and intoxicating in the effect of their gaze: attractive, desirable, and yet dangerous and destructive. Be that as it may, to visualize the image of a visionary's eyes requires the employment of one's imagination, and the poem succeeds in encouraging it steadily by its emphasis on mystery and on the supernatural in combination with the real. However, Hobbs continues that

[t]he fluid “splendour of her gaze gracefully pours forth from beyond her bright eyes, flowing into the empty space of the wordless picture, as the directed curve of a melody pauses an instant and then moves on.<sup>508</sup> Its visionary power can, in effect, turn night into clear day, and dim the distracting glare of the sun. It can pierce through appearances to the underlying reality and travel cosmic distances.<sup>509</sup>

In this excellent description we can see, once again, that the possible direction the Card Dealer stares is the otherworldly realm of the “vain strange land”, which is “the underlying reality.” Hobbs describes the poem basically in terms of a painting. This is indeed quite suitable as the poem exhibits noticeable traces of the painter's hand as regards visualization, and its images are arranged in a very Pre-Raphaelite fashion.

Unlike “The Blessed Damozel”, “The Card Dealer” uses no overspanning framing devices, and it is also less complicated in that it does not switch between two different worlds but depicts a single scene. The central image is, like in Rossetti's paintings, the figure of a mysterious woman with abundant hair and numerous sexual implications. And, like in Rossetti's paintings, the details are well-wrought and depicted with attention; the poem is saturated with symbolic meanings, and the whole unbordered poetic picture blends at the edges into the darksome background (the indistinct, blurry backdrop of the tavern), with the main source of light illuminating the central female figure and all the gleaming details that surround her (the heap of gold, her jewels, her cards), so characteristic of many paintings by Rossetti.

## CHAPTER VI: “My Sister's Sleep”: The Fine Art of

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508 Howard appears to take the “tune into a tune” part literally.

509 Hobbs 67.

# Transposition.

## Introduction

“My Sister’s Sleep” is another visually – as well as aurally - stirring poem. Unlike the former two I have analyzed in the two preceding chapters, this poem has no counterpart in a painting, nor has it been inspired by one. Nevertheless, it still contains very poignant and intense series of picture-like scenes, depicted in an almost cinematic manner. In a way, “My Sister’ Sleep” is practically a micro-movie, complete with a setting, an unfolding of a scene, series of close-ups contrasted with panoramic surveys, with a clear sense of space and time, and with characters who have lines to speak. Like the other two poems, it is rather thin on plot, although, as Howard points out correctly, there is “a very short chronological sequence of events, amounting to a small plot with recognitions and reversals.”<sup>510</sup> As it is the case with Rossetti’s other narrative poems, “My Sister’s Sleep” is rendered in the “simple, coloured, concrete, angular style of the Pre-Raphaelites,” writes Lord David Cecil, whatever the term “Pre-Raphaelite” means for him.<sup>511</sup> The poem is, again, contemplative in tone, virtually a vignette of a picture; it presents to us a single scene, enclosed in a single setting, with minor developments within that scene. It is not entirely arrested in a single moment, though it is centered around an emotionally draining notion of the death of the narrator’s sick sister, and this moment is stretched to last for the temporal duration of the whole poem. The principal emphasis is given to sensory perception, be it sight or hearing; and to emotions, too, poetically enhanced by Christian allusions embedded in the text. Many sources refer to the poem as belonging to the “Art-Catholic” type of poetry. Though its religious relevance is of little concern to the analysis I am about to carry out, as my chief focus is going to be the visual content of the poem, I would elaborate upon the Christian allusions and Art-Catholicism in due course.

## Form

Formally, “My Sister’s Sleep” is written in iambic tetrameter, with fifteen stanzas composed of enveloping rhyme ABBA, best known by Tennyson’s use of it in *In Memoriam* (published a few years later than “My Sister’s Sleep”<sup>512</sup>) in which Tennyson exploits the effectiveness of this stanza for a subdued elegiac poem.<sup>513</sup> Lines featuring B-rhymes are marked by indentation. Characteristically, this rather undemanding stanzaic structure suits the poem’s air of medieval simplicity. Structurally, it is by

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510 Howard *Poetic Development* 43.

511 H.J. Massingham and Hugh Massingham, eds, *The Great Victorians*. Lord David Cecil, “Dante Charles Gabriel Rossetti” (London, 1932) 8-10. Qtd in Stevenson 55.

512 This is the “*In Memoriam* stanza used before *In Memoriam*”, as Richardson puts it elegantly. Richardson 102.

513 Stevenson 25.

far much simpler than “The Card Dealer”, let alone than “The Blessed Damozel”; content-wise, however, it is just as complex as the two, filled with tension, emotion, images, symbols, and small detail. The Pre-Raphaelite attention – decidedly painter-like in method – to these aspects contributes significantly to the creation of a mood, enhanced by the hints of strange meaning beyond death and implicit Christianity.<sup>514</sup> It contains a narrative, however brief and sketchy, “of a naïve speaker reacting innocently and with an appropriately naïve approach to religion.”<sup>515</sup>

### Art-Catholicism

Perhaps for these reasons the poem has been often classed as “Art-Catholic.” This label denotes a Christian art which seeks to portray and illustrate Catholic teachings, but not necessarily in parables: its aim, however, is didactic as well as instructive. David G. Riede argues that Rossetti as a poet was first properly labeled an “Art-Catholic”; the label “Pre-Raphaelite” came shortly afterwards. Both, however, can be viewed as basically closely bonded, as Rossetti is credited with contributing the elements of Art-Catholicism to the Pre-Raphaelite endeavour. Moreover, both labels “suggest a desire to escape the flux and uncertainty of the nineteenth-century skepticism and relativism, to return to the certainties of dogma and the simplicity of an earlier era.”<sup>516</sup> According to Riede, Rossetti was never a believing Catholic, but his – perhaps instinctive – adherence to Art-Catholicism was the natural result of his Italian heritage, his love of Dante and the *stilnovisti*<sup>517</sup> whom he translated as a part of his poetic apprenticeship. Art-Catholicism reflected his love for an ideal woman and for medievalism, best if combined, as well as his mixed Anglo-Italian inheritance.<sup>518</sup> “My Sister's Sleep” is often taken as the best example of his Art-Catholicism in poetry. Soon, however, Rossetti rejected the label, having become disillusioned with its moral implications and inclining towards agnosticism instead, and as a result of that, Rossetti eliminated four particularly religious stanzas from the poem. In these four deleted stanzas, the speaker and his mother pray, finally finding plain Catholic religious consolation.<sup>519</sup>

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514 Greene 103.

515 Ibid 103.

516 Riede, *Vision* 19-20. This echoes my polemics about Pre-Raphaelitism as an essentially “escapist” movement in Chapter II.

517 A term commonly used for the 13<sup>th</sup> century poets of Dante's circle whose poetry Rossetti translated, such as Cavalcanti, Guido Delle Colonne, Rinaldo d'Aquino, Cuiillo d'Alcamo and many others. Derived from the name of the style, *Dolce stil novo*, Italian for “sweet new style”, also referred to as *stilnovismo*. McGann 34, 36.

518 Riede, *Vision* 20.

519 Riede, *Vision* 80-81. The source gives an example of two of the deleted stanzas:

Silence was speaking at my side  
With an exceedingly clear voice:  
I knew the calm as of a choice  
Made in God for me, to abide.

I said, “Full knowledge does not grieve:  
This which upon my spirit dwells  
Perhaps would have been sorrow else:

Even though the revised version is rid of most of the “religious element”, Riede still regards it as “a straightforward religious lyric, whether or not Rossetti himself believed in its consolation”<sup>520</sup> while at the same time arguing that if compared with the early version, the revised poem is “darker, more somber, more skeptical” and that the revision helped to shift the focus of the poem on the body and sensory experience, whereas the early version was centered mainly around the soul.<sup>521</sup>

On the other hand, Greene argues against the possibility of the poem's being religious, even though it uses the language of religion as a source of tension. His major objection is that the fact that the girl died on Christmas day comes “almost as an afterthought” and that a proper religious poem would require more emphasis on the juxtaposition of the simultaneous events.<sup>522</sup> Instead, Greene sticks to H.L. Weatherby's disapproval of the poem's validity of Christian symbols such as the halo, the cup, the wine, the angels who sang on the first Christmas, and other obvious suggestions inherent in the Christmas setting. The reason for that is the poem's alleged lack of the elevation of meanings which the Christmas morning setting could provide.<sup>523</sup>

There are definitely clear religious overtones in the poem – after all, “My Sister's Sleep” is narrated from a traditional Christian point of view, set in a Christian household, acted out by positively pious family members, and the advent of the girl's death is so well-timed as to coincide with the midnight of Christmas Eve – the birth of Christ. The collision of these two events at precisely the moment just after midnight rings in the Christmas day, opens the question of double-birth<sup>524</sup>, aptly recalling to us the five garlanded maidens of “The Blessed Damozel” who sit in a circle, and “into the fine cloth white like flame / weaving the golden thread / To fashion the birth-ropes for them / Who are just born, being dead.” “My Sister's Sleep” takes the heavenly rebirth from the other end.

Hobbs notices the similarity as well; in addition, he enlarges on the Christian significance of the death-birth coincidence in “My Sister's Sleep” as follows:

Christ, on the anniversary of his birth, is asked to redeem [the] daughter who is dead unto earthly life

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But I am glad 'tis Christmas Eve.”

These stanzas come from one of the first versions before the revision. *The Germ: Thoughts Towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art, 1850* (New York: AMC Press, Inc., 1965) 66. Also qtd in Riede, *Vision* 81. Interestingly, in the *Germ* magazine the poem comes under the heading of “Songs of One Household”, immediately followed by Rossetti's short story “Hand and Soul.”

520 Riede, *Vision* 81.

521 Ibid 81-82.

522 Greene 102.

523 Greene 102, paraphrasing Harold L. Weatherby, “Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti”, *Victorian Poetry* II (1964) 12.

524 Ibid 100.

but just born into eternal life. This religious paradox of death and life is also central to the mood of "The Blessed Damozel" and characteristic of Rossetti's general concern with the limits of life throughout his poetry.<sup>525</sup>

Moreover, the girl's name is Margaret – could that be a clue that she may be one of Mary's five handmaidens and this is her story of how she died and got into Heaven, was received by the Virgin Mary and thereby elevated to the status of one of her attendants, to compensate for her unjustly early death? Or did Rossetti simply like the name for its sound, or its metrical properties? In "The Blessed Damozel", Margaret – along with Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen and Rosalys – is described as busy sewing robes for the newly born; perhaps the robe for Margaret of "My Sister's Sleep" has just been finished by the four handmaidens and she is soon to join them in their diligent work?

Characteristically, the poem begins with death ("She fell asleep on Christmas eve") and ends with birth ("Christ's blessing on the newly born!") which locks the poem into a cycle. The melancholic tone of the poem is maintained throughout, culminating in a very expressive, yet peculiarly wordless display of grief in stanzas XII-XIV. These exhibit a great deal of body language, facial expressions, gestures and physical contortions of an almost theatrical nature – or pictorial quality, for that matter. The poem could be regarded as a mini-epic, as a narrative segment taken out of a larger story (the girl's death must have been preceded by an outbreak of an illness, very likely a terminal illness, her death must be followed by a disposal of the body and a Catholic funeral and a period of mourning, etc), with all sorts of circumstantial detail that sketch the scene in very basic colours and shapes. The presentation of a fragment of life is typical of Rossetti's visual art, as Nicolette Gray claims; and this single fragment is depicted with enormous intensity. It is "isolated, everything directed inwards, the space confined, colour opaque, picture surface crowded. But the very intensity of the presentation stresses its particularity, its momentariness."<sup>526</sup> This description could be successfully enough related to "My Sister's Sleep" – which is not even a painting, but the painter's hand that wrote it surely shaped its poetic imagery into the form of one.

With regards to the implicit illness of the girl and the grief it causes the rest of her family, we can now understand their need to be anchored in the certainty of Christian belief. The coincidence of the death with the morning of the Nativity<sup>527</sup> merely enhances the dignity of dying in piety (the fact that she dies

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<sup>525</sup> Hobbs 35.

<sup>526</sup> Gray 29.

<sup>527</sup> Howard points out that "the joyous feast of the Nativity [...] is often not without its foreshadowings of death in Christian myth." Howard, *Poetic Development* 44.

in the same way as one would fall asleep, simply by closing her eyes and slipping into oblivion, heightens the elegance and dignity of her death). The connection of the unfortunate girl to Christ is stressed as well, and so is the notion of dying as a rebirth into another life. The concept of Christianity in the Pre-Raphaelite context moreover triggers the association of religion with a host of details that can be often encountered in Pre-Raphaelite art: prismatic colouring of stained glass in churches, with darkness, shadows, light, and mystery, as well as with omens and deep symbolic meanings, ambiguity, the supernatural, dreams, the world Beyond, simple piety, personal intercourse with the Trinity and the Blessed Virgin, and all the guardian saints.<sup>528</sup> Greene adds that Rossetti in his youth was attracted by the mysterious and the esoteric, and the Bible provided an outlet for these passions. The medieval archaism and the simplicity of traditional religion embodied in the Bible appealed to him a great deal, and so did the symbolism of Christianity (though not the actual meanings, as Greene stresses).<sup>529</sup> For Rossetti, Christianity was more of a network of beautiful associations and symbols,<sup>530</sup> rather than a system of belief and practices: to him, it meant the spirit of the church, its hymns and responses, liturgies, the archaic, the medieval, the beauty of the past, the bright colours and rectangularities of stained-glass windows, the innocence of faith – all of which was, in his view, also aesthetic, moral, and “overlaid with mystery, symbolism, and tradition.”<sup>531</sup>

All this, I think, should be taken into account when approaching “My Sister's Sleep”, since the poem is, in Howard's words, “an objective portrayal of human grief and a faith in the supernatural [*not* religious] which transcends that grief.”<sup>532</sup> Rossetti also linked these religious attributes to those of the folk ballad in which he valued especially its striking simplicity, which – as Greene points out – was something that was missing from the world around him.<sup>533</sup> This example shows quite coherently why Rossetti is sometimes classed as the Last Romantic. He definitely works off the English Romantic heritage but as such he is at the same time displaced in a colourless, progressive, industrial Victorian world which by implication affects his poetry quite a lot: the reason he dwells so vehemently on the medieval and the past is nothing more than a sort of escape from the disordered, chaotic world into the more simple and idealized past.<sup>534</sup> Or, more precisely, it may not be that much of an escape than

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528 Nordau 75.

529 Greene 62.

530 Landow, *Victorian Types* 187-188. Rees, on the other hand, reckons that Rossetti uses Christian symbols simply because Dante uses them while investing them with the full weight of grave conviction. Rees 138.

Stevenson argues that in “The Blessed Damozel” the survival of earthly love in Heaven is actually “thoroughly heretical, if not positively blasphemous.” However, according to him, Rossetti was neither defending nor rebelling against religious concepts – he simply utilized these concept for their aesthetic value. Stevenson 27.

531 Greene 63.

532 Howard, *Poetic Development* 46.

533 Greene 63.

534 Also suggested in McGann – in particular “The Blessed Damozel” is set as an exemplary poem that works against the age and culture of the Crystal Palace. McGann 61.

compensation, a retreat into the depths of one's mind where once can find solace in the eternal past, the beautiful, the supernatural, and the innocent, as opposed to the austerity of the Victorian world whose rapid scientific progress just started to shatter the mythological, the fantastical, and the "Shelleyian." If the ample story of "My Sister's Sleep" were placed into the Victorian nineteenth-century context, and the Christian piety were for the most part obliterated, in all frankness nothing much would remain of its poetic force.

In light of these arguments, I would not see the poem as strictly religious or non-religious; I simply choose to withdraw my judgment in this matter, for the poem could be both, depending on what point of view is assumed in the process of interpretation. As such, the poem is suffused with Catholic sentiment which serves as a framework and a backdrop for the depicted scene. The religious allusions are at times very obvious, that is for certain, but in my opinion they do not interfere with the overall meaning of the poem. For me, they have a function similar to that of symbols in a painting: they lend the poem a distinctly medieval flavour, with the characters' humble piety indicating purity, simplicity, virtue; providing a connection to the Eternal, but also implying that in many ways religion is a survival tool and a system of Divine Justice that is to be evoked in times of pain. The medieval mentality and piety are thus glorified and elevated as a set of firm principles that connect one to the Eternal, integrated into everyday life. In this respect, I tend to agree with McGann who compares Rossetti's use of the Christian myth to the manner in which James Joyce uses Homer – Rossetti treats Catholicism in purely artistic terms.<sup>535</sup> Also, I agree with Howard who proposes that the Christian content keeps breaking into realism<sup>536</sup> - and as a result, the poem is neither religious, nor agnostic. It balances on the knife's edge between the loftiness of Christian symbolism and naturalistic detail. After all, the realistic element of the poem is quite discernible – it wasn't printed under the heading of "Songs of One Household" in *The Germ* for no reason, that is obvious.

Art-Catholicism also has a practical function in Rossetti's poetry: that of an organizing principle. Landow argues that Rossetti's explicit and skillful use of religious typology and symbolism "provided him with a means of making poetry and painting into sister arts, while at the same time it permitted him to solve some of the problems inherent in all realistic styles of painting", by which he means that Rossetti makes use of the typology's various capacities to organize time, tone, and manner of proceeding: e.g. in *The House of Life*, but doubtless in other poems as well. The present is sometimes prefigured by perfect – and arrested – moments of the past, and the poem acts out a search for these

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<sup>535</sup> McGann 45.

<sup>536</sup> Howard, *Poetic Development* 43. This is, in a sense, quite right, for Landow confirms the fact that Rossetti, Hunt, and their Pre-Raphaelite associates employ religious typology to "create a symbolic realism." Landow, *Victorian Types* 188.

organizing prefigurations, consequently lending the poem a very elegiac, introspective tone.<sup>537</sup> In “My Sister’s Sleep”, we may consider the timing of Margaret’s death as basically prefigured, predestined – under the surveillance of the Card Dealer with her deathly pack of cards – only to be fulfilled after a sequence of tense anticipation for that fulfillment to finally occur.

### Stanzas I, II, III

The poem opens with the moment of Margaret’s death<sup>538</sup>, again in *medias res*, indicated by the pronominal reference: “She has fallen asleep.” It is *she*, not *Margaret* – without any introduction at all we are plunged into the midst of things, waiting for the secrets and circumstances to be unraveled. Curiously enough, the fact of her death is not referred to as “death” at all; the narrator uses the gentle metaphor of sleep. As it is placed strategically in the first line of the first stanza, it posits the event as the center of the poem: all the rest of the action is going to revolve around Margaret’s death. In this way, Stanza I could be viewed as “a brief exposition.”<sup>539</sup> Stanzas II and III introduce the mother by shifting the focus from the (very likely) shaded corner with a bed over to the work-table lighted with “the glare / Made by her candle”, though she obviously takes good care not to disturb the girl’s sleep with the light. The mother is a doting caregiver, now in the process of pausing in her work (we do not know what kind of work it is, but most definitely some domestic chore such as sewing or stitching – in Stanza VIII we learn she has been knitting the whole time) for the first time that day, in order to say a prayer. As she rises to full view before the mind’s eye, getting up and then sitting back down, the focus is shifted on her work-table with the candle. The scene is slowly unfolding before our eyes, inch by inch – just as if it were being painted the moment our eyes devour it word after word and line after line, beginning with the central image of Stanza I, and then adding numerous details to surround that pivotal image to give it significance, context, and a hint of a story.

### Stanza IV

After the first three stanzas, the narrator who has been passive so far looks out of the window – by doing so, he maps out the geography of the scene, as it were. Due to his single look at the moon without, we are now suddenly aware of finding ourselves in a household – more precisely, in a room populated by three characters: the busy mother engaged in domestic chores at her table, her exhausted son located in the vicinity of the window, and the ailing/dying/dead daughter in the bed, protected from light and therefore quite hidden from view. It may seem as though each character is located in another part of a single room – again, we are presented with a “painterly” composition. The mother

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537 Landow, *Victorian Types* 201-202.

538 Her name is revealed in Stanza XI.

539 Howard, *Poetic Development* 43.

occupies one side of the mental picture, the son is on the other side, and both are clustered around sources of light (the mother with the candle, the son with the moon) that reveal their identity to us. Light, in the medieval context, is almost synonymous with life<sup>540</sup> - therefore it is quite symptomatic that the two living characters are accompanied by light, unlike the girl in her dark corner. Interestingly, all light is kept away from her, though in order not to disturb her "sleep." Both the mother and the son may be imagined in the foreground of the picture. The third character is located in the background, indistinct in her darkness but we may feel her presence throughout the whole poem, largely because of the demands for silence, quiet, and darkness for her sake, as well as because of the aura of sorrow, exhaustion, and anxiety that hangs over the scene.

The focus now away from the mother, in Stanza IV the window is painted, framing a midnight sky with "a cold moon up, / Of winter radiance sheer and thin; / The hollow halo it was in / Was like an icy crystal cup." The detail is depicted with Rossettian elaborateness. Words such as "cold", "winter", "radiance", "sheer and thin", "hollow", "halo", "icy", "crystal", "cup" are almost like dabs of colour on the imaginary canvas, each word adding a new feature to the complete image, which is that of a frosty night full of icy vapours, dominated by the haloed moon whose pale shine is for now obscured by the cloudy mists that envelop it. The mental process of gradual painting with the words as brushstrokes can be imagined as the chronological succession of those words: first of all, we note that it is a cold winter, with a cold moon up, and this moon is radiant, but not giving out any warmth, in fact its shine is weak, "sheer and thin", because the moon is wrapped up in a "hollow halo" that prevents it from giving out its steady light. Then the narrator links the bitter winter with ice, and ice with crystal, and ice and crystal objects with the halo, combining them together in a single glittering simile: "icy crystal cup." Or, to paraphrase this particular image, the spherical moon is placed in a goblet made of either ice or crystal – or of ice as glittering so as to suggest crystal (or, by association, diamonds). It is both cold and elegant, fragile and beautiful, faintly echoing Coleridge's moon imagery. Not only are we reminded here of the Pre-Raphaelite beauty of shimmering gems (this time even connected to a celestial body which is a kind of a gem in itself), but we also have the option of understanding the "crystal cup" image as the poem's first allusion to Christianity. For, as Hobbs notes, before the de-Art-Catholicising revision, the stanza ran as follows:

Without, there was a good moon up,  
Which left its shadows far within;  
The depth of the light that it was in

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540 Gage 26.

Seemed hollow like an altar cup.<sup>541</sup>

The early version is, however, strikingly restrictive in its visual potential, focused more on the image of the chalice with the moon inside – the whole stanza from its very beginning aspires towards the triumphal revelation of the chalice in the last line, depicted up in the sky like a glowing vision of the Holy Grail. (Though the Holy Grail was haloed in a hot, red glare, representing light and life – at least in Tennyson.) Connecting the allusion of the sacred cup with the “wine” of Stanza VI which in this context could be clearly the consecrated wine of the Eucharist, we may successfully start interpreting the poem by picking up religious clues and piecing them together: this is a justifiable ground for regarding the poem as explicitly religious and Art-Catholic. By doing so, however, our perception of the poem as a picture-in-the-making would be largely obliterated, and the “unedited stream of visual images”<sup>542</sup> would bypass us. Very likely for these reasons the allusion to the Catholic chalice was removed from the poem.

The image of the cold moon isolated in its cup may also echo the present condition of the narrator's sister,<sup>543</sup> thus doubling the central image and its impact. Since the moon is of the feminine gender, from the Latin *luna*, we can link it to Margaret. The moon is cold, giving out weak and thin light – and so is Margaret who has just died that very moment, figuratively radiating the last sparks of life that was in her, while her body grows cold by degrees. And, similarly, we see the moon isolated in icy vapours that enclose it in a cup. By the time the narrator looks outside, his sister is most certainly dead already – and enclosed in the mysterious world of the dead, inaccessible to mortals; she is withdrawn from the world of the living and forever separated from them. The separation of the moon in its cup echoes it very closely in fact. Or else, the haloed moon may also give the impression of a diseased moon, quarantined so as not to spread his infection across the whole sky. The moon could also echo the closed eyes of his sister, the eyelid being the wall of the crystal cup. Whatever the interpretation, the connection of the moon and Margaret can be successfully established.

Besides, the narrator is seen as passively contemplating the moon, but in Stanza VI we learn that he has been sitting up some nights, perhaps worried sleepless over his sister's miserable state of health. Therefore, although he sits watching the moon, his thoughts cannot be freed from the contemplation

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541 *The Germ* 66. Also qtd in Hobbs 34n23. Howard adds that by omitting whole passages and dropping four stanzas, Rossetti made the speaker less an active participant and “more a dazed recorder of the scene.” Howard, *Poetic Development*, 66n4. In this way, the speaker at some points almost merges with the reader, for both are merely by-standers, watchers – only the narrator describes and the reader imagines.

542 Hobbs 34.

543 Also suggested, though not elaborated upon, by Hobbs 34.

of his sister, and as a result, the moon and the dead (or dying) sister blend together into one single cold, weak, far-removed image. He is projecting his sick sister into the image of the moon. Just as his sister is distant from him in her present oblivion (brought about by sleep – or death), so is the moon up in the wintry night.<sup>544</sup> If we indeed imagine the poem as a painted scene, which is not difficult given the sequence of images that keep extending the view of the setting and making us aware of its spatial dimensions, the sister is virtually unseen in her dark corner, but the moon is, through the window – thus providing an alternative image of the dying girl, and reminding us, by way of analogy, of her current condition. In this way, the moon becomes a symbol of the sister. This reduplication of images, or perhaps a kind of “layering” – one hidden from view, yet present by implication; the other standing for it as a symbol – in fact invites the visualization of the scene as a Pre-Raphaelite painting: the central image, which is that of death, is contained in the symbol that dominates the window-frame. The window, moreover, constitutes a picture within a picture, for we must not forget the striking similarity and the analogy of a window to a painting. The image of a window with a view in a Pre-Raphaelite painting is a fairly common one.<sup>545</sup>

#### Stanza V

After the narrator looks away from the window after a brief meditation, we are pulled back into the room in Stanza V – the visual focus moves back from the view out of the window inwards, back from symbolism into harsh reality. The size of the room is now clearly defined: small. The atmosphere is defined as well, for that matter: there is no sound whatsoever, only the “subtle sound / of flame” in the hearth. Suddenly we are alerted to the fact that a hearth has just been painted into the small room, giving out sighs of crackling fire, as “by vents the fireshine drove / And reddened.” (According to Hobbs, the flickering motion of the flames is analogous to the ebbing of his sister’s life,<sup>546</sup> which makes sense, for a dying flame is a quite conventional metaphor for physical dying.) Following which, a “dim alcove” is painted above the hearth with a glistening mirror in it. This stanza provides a resonant juxtaposition with the preceding one: just as Stanza IV was cold, lonesome, and otherworldly, icy and crystalline, Stanza V is warm, domestic, with fire whose flames redden (as opposed to the ice of Stanza IV), and with a hearth that has a mirror in its alcove. Hobbs notes that a mirror is a common symbol of the soul in Rossetti’s poetry<sup>547</sup>, another possible link to the state of his sister’s health. Her physical body being dead by now, she has turned into a soul, a disembodied spirit. Putting together the close proximity of the glinting mirror (the soul) located in a dim alcove (Margaret’s dark corner with her

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544 The parallel between the fragility of the moon and the similarly fragile ill girl is briefly mentioned by Hobbs 34.

545 Gray 20.

546 Hobbs 34.

547 Ibid 34.

bed), to the flickering flames (ebbing life) in the hearth, and the dying girl, the resulting metaphor is again heavy in symbolic meanings, complex and composite. Just like in the case with the moon, this cluster of details – another composition within a composition – provide for us an opportunity to look at Margaret, for her body has not been shown yet. Her physical presence is only hinted at; but her body has not been painted into the picture so far, except as a series of metaphorical emblems. By not being explicit about a dead body, and offering us instead surrogate images that tell us about her condition, the presence of death is grimly accentuated.<sup>548</sup> So is the air of unspoken fear that governs the small room.

The atmosphere of the interior is that of oppressive tension, heightened by the deathlike silence that is both required for the sake of the ailing girl, and resulting from the worrisome state of mind of the characters. The silence that is supposed to be healing to the girl is actually terrifying and tense, pulling at the nerves, waiting for them to snap. The two caring relatives keep to themselves, not talking, each withdrawn into their own reveries, but the tension grows denser and denser by degrees. The crushing effect of the tension is accentuated by the lengthening of the moment, as Richardson observes.<sup>549</sup> In his view, excessive attention to detail suspends the action – and description turns into a mysterious performance. Despite the seeming quiet, something is happening but the reader does not know what it is: it may be miniature movements on the souls' level, it may be only the nerves tingling in expectation of something to happen. Again, the feeling of suspension, typical of Rossetti's paintings, surfaces in the poem as a strategic delaying of action by stopping at various details of the interior. There is no doubt about the visual effects these details produce: Rossetti here harnesses the visual to his syntax.<sup>550</sup> The section

Through the small room, with subtle sound  
Of flame, by vents the fireshine drove  
And reddened. In its dim alcove  
The mirror shed a clearness round,

displays a noticeable accumulation of prepositional phrases (“through the small room”, “with subtle sound”, “by vents”, “in its dim alcove”) that virtually equate the syntactic progression with the revelation of the scene.<sup>551</sup> Likewise, the verb “drove” is withheld and released only at the end of the

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<sup>548</sup> Her body is revealed in the last line of Stanza XIV and becomes a part of the picture only *then*; in the first part of the poem she is missing from the composition.

<sup>549</sup> Richardson 102.

<sup>550</sup> Richardson 102.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.* 102.

line, followed by a run-on line that completes it, "and reddened." This part is extremely visually fluent: first we "see" the small room, hear the sound in it; the following line discloses the origin of the sound: the flame. Next, we may try to locate the flame: the sound comes from the vents. Through these, the fire's glow "drives." Now the verb is held up for a little, as if to emphasize the sensual effects of the glow emanating from the vents. The glow reddens, as we learn in the run-on sentence. The line-break indicates a turn in imagery, for now the flame-coloured scene is counterbalanced with the dimness of the alcove, whose mirror, however, reflects whatever is in its way. It is apparent that the narrator sees the mirror as slanted, so that the reflective surface appears silvery and clear to him, reflecting nothing that he could see from his angle, yet reflecting "something", though he is unable to see what it is. The inability to see anything in the mirror hints at his fear of what may happen, augments the suspension that governs the room, and increases the ominous mood of the poem. Is it death reflected in the mirror? The uncertainty he feels? Or is it a bad omen? Something amiss? We cannot tell.

At any rate, by virtue of this carefully calculated composition of the scene, the words as well as syntax become the tools that "paint" it in a very vivid manner. The hushed sound of flame as well as the subdued roar of fire through the vents can be heard quite distinctly in the quiet room: Rossetti's attention to the subtlety of sounds tell us between the lines that the room is tensely silent, so that even these negligible nuances of sound can be heard clearly – just like the mirror reflects "clearness" because nothing whatsoever moves in the room (yet). Therefore, the images of sound and of the clear mirror are not only a mere circumstantial detail – the pervasive sense of tension, silence, and stasis is attached to them as well, for they serve as indexes: hearing the sound tells us about the quietness in the room, while the stilled surface of the mirror, by the same token, betrays that nothing moves. The resulting effect is that of a greatly heightened tension, especially when they are thus acutely noticed by the narrator.

## Stanza VI

In Stanza VI we learn that the narrator is utterly exhausted, having been up some nights, and is now trying to gather some strength from the stillness of the room and the "broken lights." These broken lights may refer to all the light sources that we have seen painted into the picture so far: the candlelight from the mother's work-table, the "sheer and thin" glow of the iced moon outside, and the reddening flames in the hearth.<sup>552</sup> Taken altogether, they are just as strategically placed as the

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<sup>552</sup> The same is noticed by Stevenson 24; to the list of sources of light I have provided, he adds the reflections in the mirror of the bright moonlight streaming in through the window from outside, though I would argue that the mirror reflects nothing that we – or the narrator – could see. The reflection is completely mysterious.

individual characters. With the sense of space we now have, we may imagine each of these sources of light coming in from a different direction: the fire from the hearth, candlelight from the mother, the moon from outside. What is also noteworthy is the simile of the wine – by implication, the enumerated sources of light are either red (the flames), or yellow, golden (the candlelight), or white/pale (the moon), which are all colours of wine. George H. Ford in *Keats and the Victorians* connects Rossetti's employment of colour details in this section, again, to his painter's eye which first looks for arrangement and significant detail, and then works it into poetry with the patterns and grouping of a design.<sup>553</sup> Rossetti is credited as having said that "colour and meter [...] are the true patents of nobility in painting and poetry, taking precedence of all intellectual claims."<sup>554</sup> This reinforces Helsinger's theory that the perception of colours completely bypasses our intellect by appealing directly to the senses, thus providing a straightforward aesthetic experience unhindered by intellectual processes.

The narrator in his exhaustion (and consequent passivity) has been exercising his amazing powers of observation from Stanza II up till Stanza VI – and now he finishes the visual representation of his whereabouts by lighting up the scene for us as a final touch and thus revealing to us the stage. The scene is indisputably patterned in a pictorial composition. The "stage" is actually still unfinished and being in the process of further refinement, however slight, despite the prevalent attention to action in the second part of the poem.

### Stanza VII

In the subsequent stanza, VII, we become alerted to the presence of sounds. They have been part of the setting from the beginning, for no human beings can exist in an enclosed space without making any sounds, but these sounds were very quiet, very gentle: the crackling of the fire, the sound of stillness, the implied prayer of the mother, either half-whispered, or only mouthed soundlessly. Now in Stanza VII, sharp chimes break through the stillness of the room, shattering its quiet. As if a pendulum literally crashed twelve times into the metaphorical glass walls of silence. After a short while the chimes are heard fading away, letting the stillness be restored again. The described ringing of bells paint a clock into the room, revealing that all this time the clock has been ticking away the last seconds until midnight – and we are thus brought sharply out of the lyrical part of the poem into "real time", just as the characters are roused from their trance to the realization that the Christmas morning has arrived.

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553 Ford 122.

554 T. Earle Welby, *The Victorian Romantics* (London: 1929) 132. Qtd in Ford 122 and Cooper 203.

Twelve struck. That sound, by dwindling years  
    Heard in each hour, crept off; and then  
    The ruffled silence spread again,  
Like water that a pebble stirs.

Although the “ruffled silence” spreads again (its ruffled texture referring to the shock caused by the suddenness of the chimes), it is not the same as before. It is now Christmas morning: a new day has dawned. Thus, together with the sense of space, and sense of sounds, we are now aware of time as well.

Howard adds that the narrator's perception of silence is intertwined with time (represented by the striking of the clock) at this point, and is now “of a nearly concrete entity.”<sup>555</sup> She refers to Doughty's observation that “My Sister's Sleep” is one of the earliest instances in which Rossetti, “with extraordinary skill, creates a sense of silence and uses it to dramatic effect.” He makes silence a tangible thing through metaphoric language and emphasizes that silence by suggesting nearly imperceptible sounds.<sup>556</sup>

As mentioned briefly at the outset of my analysis, Landow notices a special treatment of time in Rossetti – according to him, Rossetti handles time in terms of prefigurations and their fulfillments.<sup>557</sup> This is clearly a Biblical mode of treating time, and to some extent it can be seen in “My Sister's Sleep”, especially with regards to the temporal structure of the poem. In the first stanza, we are told, from a retrospective, that his sister died on Christmas Eve, but she is not dead until Stanza VII with the clock striking twelve. The way I see it, prefigurations of Margaret's death appear in the symbolic emblems that thread through the first half of the poem: the sickly moon, the slowly dying fire, the deathlike quiet, the fact of it being a deep night, mother's prayers, etc. The tension, too, hints at “something about to happen”: to wit, a prefigured event that inevitably must come up on the imaginary timeline, thus fulfilling its having been set up beforehand.

### Stanza VIII

So far, the first half of the poem has provided the setting for the scene, or “painted the picture”, as I called it, and what we have before us now is a prepared stage. Stanzas VIII to XV present the actors

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<sup>555</sup>Howard, *Poetic Development* 44-45.

<sup>556</sup>Hobbs 66n5.

<sup>557</sup>Landow, *Victorian Types* 179.

upon that stage, who have awoken, fairy-tale style, once the midnight has struck. The striking of twelve indeed serves as something of a cue for the actors who have been, up till now, merely painted figures fixed on their designed places, proportionally distant from one another, creating a pictorial composition. The dying girl's bed and the mother's worktable are nearly counterbalanced,<sup>558</sup> and the narrator balances them even more from his observational post by the window. This creates a neat pictorial constellation of the three characters: two actors are clearly visible, as it is suggested by their proximity to a source of light (a theatrical spotlight, as it were), while the third, a passive "object" (almost), is merely felt to be there physically, yet she is submerged in Stygian darkness, waiting to be illuminated. The distance between the characters cannot be measured, though we can guess at it from the chronological stream of details accompanying the central image – that is, Margaret. Evidently, the mother is close to her, whereas the narrator sits at the opposite end of the room from where he is able to survey the whole scene. The central image is, somewhat absurdly, absent from the composition until she is finally revealed in the last line of Stanza XIV once the occurrence of her death has been confirmed and followed by the emotional eruption on the part of the mother.

The "actors" now begin to act, brought to their senses by the sharp chiming of the clock that slices the silence. Now they move and speak and gesture, and the main focus is on action and sounds. As much as the first part of the poem was lyrical, the second part is mainly dramatic. This "theatrical" impact is derived from and accentuated by the vivid physical recreation of a common-place scene as the setting for the mysteries of human death and divine birth occurring simultaneously. The emphasis, Rees reckons, lies on what can be expressed through simple statement or physical detail<sup>559</sup> - or, indeed, through body language and wordless action. And, along with the sense of space, sound, and time, the sense of motion now enters the picture. In Stanza VIII they are all combined as the focus shifts away from the clock and we zoom in back on the mother:

Our mother rose from where she sat:	place and motion, cued by midnight
Her needles, as she laid them down,	"stage props"
Met lightly, and her silken gown	sound and texture
Settled: no other noise than that.	motion producing sound

### Stanza IX & X

In Stanza IX, the mother speaks out into the silence that ensues after the striking of the clock: "Glory

<sup>558</sup> Stevenson 24-25.

<sup>559</sup> Rees 25.

unto the Newly Born!”, now fully realizing that the Christmas Day has arrived with all its implicit Christian meanings, in spite of it still being “long till morn.” It is a question to be considered as to why they have been so eager to welcome the Nativity Day – probably for the sake of the ailing Margaret? Or just because they are devout Christians who follow the tradition to greet the first second of the night breaking into the Nativity Day? Hobbs offers a possible answer in supposing that “Christ, on the anniversary of his birth, is asked to redeem [the] daughter who is dead unto earthly life but just born into eternal life.”<sup>560</sup> But then, they do not know that she has died when the clock strikes twelve – though the narrator says in Stanza XIV: “God knows I knew that she was dead.” But that may be simply the “prefiguration” Landow speaks of; the narrator reflects upon the situation and realizes he has had premonitions of her death, manifest in his nervous tension. Nevertheless, the mother welcomes the Nativity Day with a blessing (which is both her “recognition of the time and her expression of faith”, as Howard comments on it)<sup>561</sup> and so do the unseen people upstairs in Stanza X: “Just then in the room over us / There was a pushing back of chairs, / As some who had sat unawares / So late, now heard the hour, and rose,” which extends our sense of space by signaling that the house is a two-story one. This is also an intrusion of public into their intimate space<sup>562</sup>, though the invisible presence of other people palpably relieves the tension that has been building up since Stanza I.

#### Stanza XI

The sound of chairs scraping against the floor is too loud, so in Stanza XI, “with anxious, softly-stepping haste / Our mother went where Margaret lay, / Fearing the sounds o'erhead—should they / Have broken her long watched-for rest!” This is in actual fact a quite unnecessary action as Margaret now lies dead – there is a bitter irony in it, and not only that: also pain. The greater the mother's conviction that her daughter only sleeps, the greater the pain at coming to realize that it is not so, that she is, in fact, dead. Howard sees the sad irony in Margaret's death occurring at a time traditionally joyful and hopeful.<sup>563</sup> Hobbs, on the other hand, focuses on the mother's first words which are, according to him, “ironically symbolic of her daughter's yet undiscovered death.”<sup>564</sup> The blessing is soon to be modified to “Christ's blessing on the newly born!” when together with her son she discovers that Margaret has died in the meantime – and by then, Hobbs stresses, the mother will know full well the deeper significance of that blessing.<sup>565</sup>

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560 Hobbs 35.

561 Howard, *Poetic Development* 45.

562 Hobbs 35.

563 Howard, *Poetic Development* 46.

564 Hobbs 35.

565 *Ibid* 35.

### Stanzas XII & XIII

The tempo of the poem quickens as the subjective imagery is now replaced by narrated action.<sup>566</sup> As it has been shown, the intent observation of details delayed and postponed action which now, devoid of description of details (which are at this point unnecessary, since the scene has been set up gradually), is given a free rein. Paradoxically, Rossetti creates a sense of concentration through distraction, as Richardson remarks.<sup>567</sup> There is too much going on at once: scraping of chairs, movement in the room upstairs, the clock has struck twelve, the silence is ruffled, new day has dawned: nevertheless, all of this brings the scene into a sharp focus – this recalls my point about the “actors” waking up from their reverie with the coming of the Christmas morning, as well as realism breaking into the lyrical mood. The mother is depicted as hastening to check on Margaret in Stanza XI, but in the following one the realization of Margaret's death hits her squarely in the face, so to speak: and accordingly, Stanza XII is a sheer display of visual drama:

*She stooped, an instant, calm, and turned;*  
*But suddenly turned back again;*  
*And all her features seemed in **pain***  
*With **woe**, and her eyes **gazed** and **yearned**.*

Note: I have italicized the all the action verbs, underlined the words that mark the abruptness of action, whereas the bold words highlight the expressions for her emotional outbreak at this point.

The stanza is a silent expression of a crushing grief that follows a simple action of looking down at Margaret and realizing with a shock that she is dead. She does not have to say a single word because her body language speaks for her loudly enough without being pathetic. The narrator, meanwhile, hides his face and holds his breath in suspension, likewise silent (Stanza XIII). As he is able to hear “the silence for a little space”, we may presume that the silence must be indeed overwhelming. Again, it may be cliché, but it is that particular kind of loud silence – silence reverberating with emotion – that can be felt in extremely tense, emotionally charged moments. The stanza is very much focused on aural impressions (“spoke no word”, “none spoken”, “I heard the silence”), just as the preceding one was centered around movements and body language. In fact Stanza XII contains almost no word that would not relate to either body language and gestures, or to motion. Therefore, the visual drama becomes, by means of mere verbal depiction, a pictorial image.

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid 35.

<sup>567</sup> Richardson 46.

#### Stanza XIV

The emotional impact of Margaret's death reaches the peak in Stanza XIV in which the mother is depicted as overcome by grief, while the narrator appears resigned to the fact of Margaret's death<sup>568</sup>: "Our mother bowed herself and wept: / And both my arms fell, and I said, 'God knows I knew that she was dead.'" These are words of meek acceptance of Margaret's death as a fact – these are also the only words spoken that refer to the girl's death directly. Otherwise, as Hobbs points out, "what is beyond words is left to the meaningful silence."<sup>569</sup> The poem closes with the exposure of the dead Margaret who has been concealed from view until now – this is also where she enters the picture at last: "And there, all white, my sister slept." Her whiteness once again echoes the moon outside, just like the moon echoed her before. And like the moon, even she now belongs to the night, albeit to an eternal one but just as dark, and she is now as cold and far-away as she (meaning the moon).

With the last stanza, the picture is completely painted. In the final shot, the mother and her son, their emotions spent, are captured as kneeling, "a little after twelve o'clock". The progression of clock time reminds us of how brief a moment the fourteen stanzas portrayed. Before the first quarter strikes, they solemnly utter the modified blessing, by now endowed with a brand new meaning: "Christ's blessing on the newly born!" This short vignette of a single event in a single scene and a single setting is ended – characteristically, with the word "born" (cf the ending of "The Card Dealer"), immediately suggesting the birth of the deceased into her new life. Invoking Christ in this last blessing, a remark made by George Landow in *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* may extend the meaning of this utterance somewhat: Landow deems Christ in the Victorian context to be "the center to which all things move and from which all other things derive their meaning and relative value."<sup>570</sup> According to him, Christ is the "central reality of human history."<sup>571</sup> Therefore, we may understand the blessing not only as a foreshadowing of Margaret's future apotheosis,<sup>572</sup> but also as an indication that Margaret, after her death, will join the whole of human history which centers around Christ – her place will be now in the glorified, idealized, eternal past that Rossetti sought to depict in both his poetry and painting: a fine reward for the girl's earthly suffering and early death. The spiritual rebirth is echoed in Christ's "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" from John 3:2-4.<sup>573</sup>

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568 Howard, *Poetic Development* 46, Hobbs 36.

569 Hobbs 36.

570 George P. Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1980) 39.

571 *Ibid* 39.

572 Not an unlikely outcome, for her death was timed to a very special occasion – the moment when a normal day breaks into the Nativity Day at twelve o'clock sharp – and she has been blessed as "a newly born", indicating that her spirit will continue to "live", though elsewhere.

573 John 3:2-4, NIV.

### “The Art of Transposition”

Overall, the poem achieves its pictorial effect by being constructed as though it were a full-blown Pre-Raphaelite painting: abundance of details, the center image shrouded in mystery, atmosphere veiled in darkness interspersed with light (contrasting lights and shadows); it is linked to the Eternal, filled with symbols of religious implications, with emblems, medieval setting, shaded colours, tension ultimately leading to a pointed climax<sup>574</sup>, intense introspection and observation. The poem is “painted” gradually, beginning at the center, then furnished with a plethora of small details that reveal the whole scene little by little. With regards to the spatial dimensions of the scene, I would see the emerging “painting” as an image taken with a fisheye lens: very broad, perhaps slightly distorted at the edges (which is where the mystery is hidden), encompassing the width of the room. I have attempted to demonstrate the way the poem’s “picture” gets slowly unraveled as we read it. With respect to this “unraveling” effect (especially if compounded with the ever-present suspense), the mental shape of the poem is closest to a coiled object – something that is tensely entwined, producing both tension and a sense of an impending action that may release the lock and let the spiral fly free. I have mentioned before that “The Blessed Damozel” creates this particular tense effect as well, due to its being arrested mid-motion and accumulating tension thereby. Perhaps this somewhat vague, yet perceptible impression was the reason why Lona Packer described Rossetti’s poetry as “‘spiritually coiled and tensed, ready at any moment to hurtle into eternity’, the point of the taut coil being that the further it is pulled back, the more swiftly forwards it will be able to return”<sup>575</sup> Interestingly, words to the same effect were used by Maria Francesca Rossetti when referring to Dante - “‘a first thought often lies coiled up and hidden under a second.’”<sup>576</sup>

The first half of the poem (stanzas I – VII) is lyrical and the stanzas chiefly set up the scene on which the drama of the second half (stanzas VIII – XVI) is consequently enacted. Again, as with “The Blessed Damozel”, the picture is generally static – meaning the scenery does not change – and so is the central figure of Margaret; the only movement comes from the living characters and takes place in the same enclosed space.

Taken altogether, the poem is a painting come alive. Its composition imitates the process of painting, or of watching one, just as reading the poem imitates the process of reading a painting: at first our eyes are drawn to the central image, then to the secondary images which surround it, then to the

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574 The climax of the poem is the mother’s discovery of her daughter’s death. Greene 101.

575 Lona Mosk Packer, *A Shadow of Dante* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963) 3. Qtd in Milbank 136.

576 Qtd in Milbank 136.

marginal images and miniature details, and with each new stanza we become aware of a new detail – or a symbol, emblem – that needs to be examined and related to the whole painting. When we have taken it all in, only then the action unfolds for us.<sup>577</sup> At the same time, the poem displays an almost painterly sense of spatial dimensions. The tension in the poem is enhanced by emphasizing the suffocating silence that enfolds the whole scene, occasionally broken by clicking of needles, rustling of dresses, scraping of chairs, or striking of the clock – the latter also serves as a cue for the characters to begin to act, as the clock that keeps measuring time no matter what happens with human lives<sup>578</sup> signals that a new day has just dawned – and that it is a day with special Christian significance. The silence of the room produces a sense of hushed expectancy,<sup>579</sup> an anxiety-riddled tension, which increases in intensity with each new sound, however subtle, that the narrator picks up from his environment. With respect to Rossetti's aim to produce intensity in art, it may be worth a mention that “tension” and “intensity” share the root morpheme, hinting at their semantic affinity. What is intense in Rossetti's painting manifests itself as tension in his poetry. In his art, tension and intensity are just two analogous ways of using one tool.

Two of the three poems I have analyzed so far, “The Blessed Damozel” and “My Sister's Sleep”, best epitomize the essential effects of Pre-Raphaelite art.<sup>580</sup> The latter poem has been said to be the verbal equivalent of the realistic genre paintings; “more like one by Brown or Hunt than was any canvas of Rossetti's own.”<sup>581</sup> The visual details in particular are skillfully rendered<sup>582</sup> so that the composition and lighting of the scene – as I have suggested before, and Stevenson notices it likewise, thus underlining the validity of my point – are those of an accomplished painter. Nonvisual detail of the poem is expertly handled so as to suggest a faint hush, just above the threshold of perception, by the mere mention of ordinarily ignored sounds such as the crackling murmur of the flame, the quite commonplace and everyday sound of striking of the clock, the clicking of the mother's knitting needles (a tiny, metallic sound, recalling to us again the fascination by metals; the needles may also flash with metallic reflection in the candlelight - also, the act of knitting may be taken as a representation of the temporal progression, reminding us again of the sense of time in the poem), the rustle of silk (another glistening material reminiscent of shiny jewels, precious metal, and bright surfaces, also very likely catching the sparkling lights), the scraping of chairs against the floor up above. Importantly, Stevenson further observes that

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577 Cf my treatment of Keats' and Pope's “itemization” in Chapter II.

578 Hobbs 36.

579 Greene 101.

580 Stevenson 24.

581 Stevenson 24.

582 Hobbs calls the precision of the details “almost Pre-Raphaelite.” Hobbs 32.

the tonal effect of silence and religious devotion is enhanced by the style, for the words are monosyllabic and familiar and the metrical pattern is simple iambic tetrameter quatrains, varied from an ordinary ballad stanza only by rhyming *abba* rather than alternately.<sup>583</sup>

The almost detached, objective tone of the poem conveys to the readers the paradoxical merging of sorrow and serenity, or a tranquil Christian acceptance of death; or, as Stevenson suggests, “the psychological phenomenon of an emotional apathy that often cushions the impact of death, particularly in an environment of orthodox faith.”<sup>584</sup> In his comfortable numbness, the narrator retreats into introspection, allowing us to watch the scene as if from behind his eyes, as his sight wanders aimlessly all over the small room, focusing on one detail after another and thereby “painting” the scene for us: the mother, her work-table, her candle; then he averts his eyes and looks out of the window, contemplating the moon before looking away to the glowing fire in the hearth, and so on. Taken altogether, “My Sister's Sleep” is, according to Stevenson, “a perfect transposition of Pre-Raphaelite realism into words.”<sup>585</sup>

A verbal transposition of art is a recognized phenomenon, extensively researched and pursued by David Scott in *Pictorialist Poetics*, a crucial and invaluable source for the exploration of *ut pictura poesis*. The so-called “art of transposition” is generally connected with 19<sup>th</sup> century French poets, but its principles are by and large applicable to Rossetti as well. Transposition means, roughly, that the intrinsic logics of visual and poetic forms merge into one another at a certain point, the point of convergence being the specific formal patterns used in poetry. Transposition into language can be executed by

a skilful coordination of the poem's formal elements. Rhyme-scheme, phonetic patterns, stanzaic and verse structure together organize themselves into a unity in which picturesque or plastic elements are reconstructed in a manner different from but analogous to that operative in painting. This technique implies on the part of the poet an increasingly conscious grasp of the resources at the disposal of the poetic text, both on the level of *signifieds* (the adaptation of the terminology of visual arts, colour imagery, metaphor) and of *signifiers* (phonetic patterns, visual motifs organized into systems by spatial or formal agencies). Above all, it implies a commitment by the poet consistently to promote the effective *interaction* and mutual reinforcement of the different semiotic systems – thematic,

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583 Stevenson 25.

584 Ibid 25.

585 Ibid 25.

spatial, aural, etc – operative within the poem.<sup>586</sup>

With regards to the conclusions drawn from the analysis I have carried out thus far of the three poems, we can clearly see how immensely important and relevant this definition is. The principle of transposition can be successfully related to and observed in each of the three poems – which explains their visual content – and I have attempted to show it not just in theory, but also in practice, by focusing on and seeking their half-hidden patterns, systems and symmetries, in each poem, on various levels. The art of transposition is probably most strongly felt in the case of “The Blessed Damozel” which is no great surprise as the poem actually exists in two modes: as poetry, and as a painting.

According to Stevenson, “The Blessed Damozel” is a prototype of another type of Pre-Raphaelite picture, the standardized painting of Rossetti’s *oeuvre*: “the decorative portrayal of a single female figure in a graceful pose, suffused with unearthly melancholy and environed by emblematic objects that suggest eternal meanings.”<sup>587</sup> Ergo, although both poems (“The Blessed Damozel” and “My Sister’s Sleep”) can in fact boast of the status of a painting, each is different – they use different means, different stanzas, syntax, divisions, symmetries, different imagery. The biggest split is between the former’s “supernatural” setting and the latter’s “realism” steeped in a straightforward Christian symbolism. On the other hand, the two poems’ points of contact are decidedly the occurrence of an untimely death of a young, innocent, virginal girl, along with a strong Christian undercurrent pertaining to her either having entered Heaven, or being just about to enter it. The general theme of death, common to both poems, is shared also with “The Card Dealer.” Rossetti has been several times accused of overt morbidity in his poetry<sup>588</sup>, though I would not consider his poetry morbid by any means – his depiction of death and dying, especially given the pious circumstances, is graceful and elegant, though producing a sombre, melancholy tone. His obsession with death, particularly with dead belles, is clearly a Dantean inheritance – another possible source might be also E.A. Poe and “The Philosophy of Composition”<sup>589</sup> – and a part of Rossetti’s search for the eternal and the forever beautiful I have discussed before: he seeks timeless beauty forever arrested in its prime and as a bonus elevated to the status of a Marian figure that is to be worshiped, thus creating a woman that is both saintly and

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586 Scott 96. For more on the art of transposition, see Scott 88-115.

587 Stevenson 25.

588 Rees 173-174.

589 After all, “The Blessed Damozel” has been analyzed side by side with “The Raven” many times for reasons of striking similarity and Rossetti’s alleged inspiration resulting from reading and illustrating Poe’s poem: ‘[...]’“Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?” Death – was the obvious reply. [...] “When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” Ed. and with an Introduction and Notes by F.C. Prescott, *Selections from the Critical Writings of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909) 158.

fleshly: a donna angelicata.<sup>590</sup>

Apart from the explicit links to Pre-Raphaelite visual arts, there are also other guidelines in “My Sister’s Sleep”, around which we form our overall impression, particularly the emotional impact of the scene. These are the details of sounds,<sup>591</sup> produced by the “painted” images and giving the scene their appropriate sense of reality. Then, as a counterpoint to these slight and barely audible sounds, is the expanding silence – or, rather soundlessness, as Greene puts it – that is fleshed out with substance, meaning and tension, providing the mood for the poem. Paintings are always silent, they may want to speak but cannot; and the poem basically does the same. Speaking is forbidden for the sake of the dying girl, and it is also impossible because the grieving characters cannot word their feelings: they are too overwhelmed. Silence governs the poem but – unlike a painting – it makes use of several haunting sounds that ruffle the atmosphere full of pregnant silence, in order to amplify the tense mood of the poem. A painting, we may imagine, would execute this effect by purely visual means that are impossible to convey in poetry. In this respect, sounds in “My Sister’s Sleep” are used as a surrogate means for the conveyance of intense emotional content in a poem that is, by definition as a genre, nonvisual. By which I do not mean that it cannot encourage visualization, nor do I negate what I have just shown in regard to the poem’s being a verbalized painting – I merely refer to the basic fact of poetry’s being a textual phenomenon.

### Conclusion

It was my endeavour to show that it is possible to read “My Sister’s Sleep” as though it were a painting, despite the fact that there is no pictorial counterpart to measure it against. Many a critic has come up with the same conclusion as I do: that the poem is indeed a verbal equivalent of a Pre-Raphaelite painting. The technique and method of the poem’s composition plainly prove it valid: Rossetti maximizes the linguistic and poetic means at hand to root the visual image. With the aid of nuances of syntax, rhythm, prosody, diction, rhetoric, and the Pre-Raphaelite attention to small detail, Rossetti presents to us a painting that he has never painted, but wrote it.

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590 Rees 102. Rees moreover attributes the fascination by death of both Rossetti children – Dante Gabriel as well as Christina – to “deep-seated patterns of personality.” Rees 174.

591 Greene 101.

## CHAPTER VII: Conclusion

I have analyzed three poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I have chosen lengthier pieces, each of which can be related to Rossetti's paintings: "The Blessed Damozel" is one of his so-called "double-works", "The Card Dealer" was inspired by an actual painting, though not by Rossetti, and "My Sister's Sleep" is often referred to as a Pre-Raphaelite painting in poetry – there is no pictorial counterpart for this poem, and yet it displays plenty of painterly features in its composition and technique. The analysis concentrated on the visual component of each poem, including colours, spatial properties, treatment of time, scenes, shifts of focus, and many more; but also micro-work with sounds and letters. The parallels to music were at times quite inevitable as well, especially in the case of "The Blessed Damozel." The said poem is a unique work of art because its visual content has been transposed into a painting and a piece of music. These two media, together with the poem, display a noticeably high degree of using similar devices for a poetic depiction of a visual scene: for instance, the emphasis on the spatial division is depicted in the poem by means of two kinds of stanzaic form; the musical composition uses the language of notes (the distance between high B and bass F on the musical staff), and the painting uses a predella and a contrasting size of the two characters to signify the distance between the two longing lovers.

"The Card Dealer" is filled with colours and details that render the poem indeed "painterly." In particular, the stress on atmosphere, shadows, light, gloss, and coloration is precisely what turns the poem into a Pre-Raphaelite painting; it is just as symbolic, metaphorical, and mysterious. The subchapter on gems and jewels was intended to explain the Pre-Raphaelite interest in these scintillating objects, the understanding of which may be helpful in reading Pre-Raphaelite poetry and appreciating their art. Finally, "My Sister's Sleep" is a poem whose ABBA stanzas provide something of "motion-picture frames", as a result of which the poem has distinctive dramatic features. One half of the poem sets up a stage, the rest describes the action. Likewise, special emphasis is put on gestures, body language, and wordless action, proving that the scenes can be perceived as painterly compositions in words.

My thesis also made use of Elizabeth Helsinger's *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (2008) which analyzes coloration in Rossetti and Morris and offers plenty of fresh views upon the matter of colour

and synesthesia in poetry. David Scott's *Pictorial Poetics* (1988) is the most useful source there is on the matter of the visual potential of poetry. I have attempted to demonstrate his theories of foregrounded signifiers, poetic transposition, and coloration used in poetry. Though Scott professes that the best pictorial form in poetry are sonnets, I have not analyzed these in the present thesis; nevertheless, I have done a thorough research on Rossetti's picture-sonnets and an analysis of them is a companion work to this thesis.

The aim of this thesis was to examine Rossetti's ability to conjure up vivid picture in poetry by means of using words and poetic images, which is related to the late Victorian/Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics and the notion of beauty in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century art – this has been the area of my interest since 2007. Apart from these, one of the objectives was also to point out Rossetti's qualities as a (painterly) poet which are often sadly overlooked and depreciated, probably because it is sometimes difficult to understand his poetics and aesthetics – especially when viewed out of context. My thesis tried to elucidate Dante Gabriel Rossetti's aesthetic stances and views so as to make his art more accessible and open to the readers to contemplate and find its fragile beauty.

Therefore, I have attempted to analyze and interpret three selected poems, as well as to explore their sources, implications, and their visual content and potential. The historical context is of great importance as well: the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics is a tell-tale sign of the contemporary times, and the pervasive nostalgia for the idealized Romantic past is even something that we can relate to in our own culture. My analysis was based on an extensive research on Rossetti and many related sources. Though by no means conclusive, this thesis is a part of my research on the 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry and aesthetics.

# Appendix

1.

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