

D. M. R. Bentley

From Allegory to Indeterminacy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Positive Agnosticism

Part 2.

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One consequence of Rossetti's increasing concern with matters of love and sex in the eighteen fifties was his concentration, from 1859 onwards, on sensual, waist-length portraits of women in the "Venetian"⁶² manner: *Bocca Baciata* (1859), *Regina Cordium* (1860), *Fair Rosamund* (1861), *Fazio's Mistress* (1863), *The Blue Bower* (1865), the *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1864), *Lady Lilith* (1868) and similar paintings. Not only is the "Venetian" aspect of these paintings an implicit attack on Victorian propriety (since at least the early nineteenth century Venice and her art were regarded with suspicion by the English middle classes), but the focus in them on woman as mistress, as sexual object, confronts both the fantasies and the fears of the male spectators whom Rossetti seems to have assumed as his primary audience from the late fifties onwards. Some of the impetus behind such paintings as *Bocca Baciata* ("The Kissed Mouth") probably came from Ruskin's growing appreciation in the late fifties of the "deepest qualities"⁶³ of the art and architecture of Renaissance Venice. But, as intimated in the first part of this essay, there were more powerful influences on Rossetti closer to hand in the pagan eroticism of Swinburne and the sensual aestheticism of Whistler, as well as in the pneumatic sexuality of the meretricious Fanny Cornforth, the model for *Bocca Baciata*. Cumulatively,

these influences, coupled with Rossetti's mounting obsession in the sixties with the relation between love (sex) and death (violence),⁶⁴ would take his work—such poems as "Eden Bower" (1869) and "Troy Town" (1869) come quickly to mind—well beyond any pale that could be countenanced by a Ruskinian moral-aesthetic. "Undisturbed by any moral ambition,"⁶⁵ emptied of all but sensual, aesthetic and anecdotal content (the cornflowers in *The Blue Bower*, for example, are a pun on Fanny Cornforth's name), the "Venetian" portraits are remarkable for their frank, at times aggressive and threatening, sensuality. Distinguishing nearly all the women in these paintings is the narcissistic self-absorption of their sensuality: their eyes, combined with their activities (combing hair, playing musical instruments, feeling and producing "pleasurable sensations"⁶⁶), signal their awareness of being seen and their awareness of providing pleasure. These are paintings of surfaces and people that are almost entirely emptied of intellectual content and transcendental significance; neither encouraging nor confounding the percipient's interpretative urges, they encourage him to remain a mere spectator, a voyeur. In no sense *symboliste* works, these paintings are, like their poetic equivalents ("The Song of the Bower"[1860] being the prime example), the closest that Rossetti came in art to implying his acceptance of negative, unenquiring agnosticism—the agnosticism that "holds," in the words of the *OED* definition, "that the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena is unknown and . . . unknowable. . . ."

It was almost inevitable that Rossetti's positive agnosticism would impel him to seek egress from the *cul-de-sac* of art-for-art's-sake into which he ventured in the period following 1859. One of the first results of that egress is the painting entitled *Venus Verticordia* that he began in 1864 but did not complete until 1868. That *Venus Verticordia* is a thoroughly *symboliste* painting and, as such, the direct ancestor of such later works as *Sibylla Palmifera* (1866-1870) and *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-1877) is evident, not merely from the host of esoteric or idiosyncratic symbols in the picture (of which more in a moment), but also from the quizzical and penetrating eyes of the Venus herself. Neither the self-absorbed eyes of a Fazio's mistress or a Lady Lilith nor the other-oriented eyes of a Blessed Virgin or a Saint Anne, these are eyes that look sympathetically and enquiringly at the spectator.⁶⁷ Simultaneously drawing the spectator towards her and forcing him into himself, the eyes of Venus Verticordia both reinforce and threaten his sense of personal identity by placing him in a position where the desire



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Venus Verticordia

for self-actualization and the desire for extinction seem to become one and the same. This figure whose golden apple is at once reward and destruction is the *symboliste* femme fatale, the figure who, in Frank Kermode's words, is "unimpassioned, wise in its whole body, that attracts unbounded passion."⁶⁸ The interactive eyes are paramount in such paintings as *Venus Verticordia* because, by fixing the viewer's eyes on her own, the *femme fatale* asks him to entertain the possibility that the reality she represents and the consequences she entails exist at the core of his own being. But what does *Venus Verticordia* represent? What is the "intricate spiritual reality"⁶⁹ in this *symboliste* painting?

As in the case of Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*, the title of Rossetti's painting provides a misleading clue to the identity of the *persona* depicted in the work. For surely *Venus Verticordia* depicts, not the Venus who, according to Lemprière's *Bibliotheca Classica*, was "surnamed . . . *Verticordia* because she could turn the hearts of women to cultivate chastity" (*Letters*, II, 727n.), but something more akin to the Venus Discordia (Até, Eris) who originated the events leading to the Trojan War by tossing a golden apple—later Paris's golden apple—into a banquet of the gods. (By Ruskin's description in *Modern Painters* V, there issued from Paris's "evil choice" of Beauty over Power and Wisdom at his famous "Judgement" "the catastrophe of the Trojan war, and the wanderings of Ulysses,"⁷⁰ both of which are alluded to by Rossetti in the accompanying sonnet to *Venus Verticordia*.) Whatever her accurate surname, Venus is depicted in Rossetti's painting in a perfumed garden of sexual symbols, most famously the full-blown, pink roses whose "coarseness"⁷¹ so revolted Ruskin. With "her seductive apple and luscious naked breast, and her suggestive gesture grasping Eros's arrow" she is also, as Peter Gay says in *The Bourgeois Experience*, "unusually sensual even for Rossetti's sensual work. . . ."⁷² Coexisting with the destructive and sensual elements in *Venus Verticordia* is an eschatological dimension whose images are the halo and the butterflies—the halo being a traditional sign of sanctity and the butterfly being a conventional emblem of the soul.⁷³ Could it be that these transcendental signifiers align *Venus Verticordia* with what has been emerging as the eschatological hope of Rossetti's positive agnosticism—the hope for the continuation of human love after death? What, then, of the figure of the blue bird plucking mulberries in the background of the painting? Is the bird an emblem of transitoriness,⁷⁴ or possibly a reference to Elizabeth Siddal, whom Rossetti used to call by birds' names in the early days of their

courtship?⁷⁵ Are the mulberries an allusion to the ill-fated love and immortal union of Pyramus and Thisbe as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? Is there any significance to the fact that two butterflies have detached themselves from Venus's halo and alighted on her arrow (masculine) and her apple (feminine)? As well as collocating desirability and destructiveness in a way that is highly disconcerting to a common-sensible percipient, *Venus Verticordia* challenges the would-be interpreter with obviously significant adjuncts that are difficult, if not impossible, to induce into a coherent and stable reading of the painting. With its enigmatic iconography, its mystifying title⁷⁶ and its engagingly central figure, this is a genuinely *symboliste* work—an end-result of the gradual removal from simple allegory that Rossetti began in the early fifties.

The suggestive and riddling quality of *Venus Verticordia* finds its poetic equivalent in such arduously full sonnets as "The Soul's Sphere" (1873) and "Ardour and Memory" (1879) where, in Cazamian's view, Rossetti achieves an authentically *symboliste* quality that even Mallarmé was not able successfully to surpass. "The Soul's Sphere" opens in indecision—"Some prisoned moon in steep cloud-fastness,— / Throned queen and thrallèd; some dying sun whose pyre / Blazed with momentous memorable fire" (my italics)—and quickly moves into a series of questions that serve to involve the reader in the introspective enquiry underway:

Who hath not yearned and fed his heart with these?
 Who, sleepless, hath not anguished to appease
 Tragical shadow's realm of sound and sight
 Conjectured in the lamentable night? . . .
 Lo! the soul's sphere of infinite images!

(Works 95)

The sensibility that is here presenting and examining itself is insomniac, obsessive, solipsistic—abnormal in terms of the standards cherished by the Victorian middle-classes. In Ruskin's words once again, this is an art that "minister[s] to morbid sensibilities," that tickles and fans the "soul's sleep." With the reference in the sestet of the sonnet to "The rose-winged hours that flutter in the van / Of Love's unquestioning unrevealèd span," it is also an art that is openly agnostic in its interpretative assumptions. Not only does the sonnet's sestet acknowledge an inability to determine even the ambiguous meaning of the images in the soul's sphere, but it also indicates that the significance of any one of these images depends entirely on the

personal and circumstantial reading that is given to it. "What is this . . . to me?"—Pater's question in the "Preface" to *The Renaissance*—is the underlying question of "The Soul's Sphere"; however, it is a question surrounded with teleological hopes and ateleological fears:

What sense shall count them? Whether it forecast
 The rose-winged hours that flutter in the van
 Of Love's unquestioning unrevealed span,—
 Visions of golden futures: or that last
 Wild pageant of the accumulated past
 That clangs and flashes for a drowning man.

(Works 95)

When there is no stability either outside the self or within it but only a questioning search for such stability (positive agnosticism), then what is here called "the soul" (it could equally well be termed the mind, the memory, the fancy) becomes a realm of images that are infinite because their meanings are unfixed, unstable, multivalent and, therefore, uncountable: it becomes what Barthes calls, in reference to the plural text, "a galaxy of signifiers."⁷⁷

In a manner quite similar to the Barthian play of meaning, Rossetti's "infinite images" and "different moods" provide the occasion for musings that are by turns morbid and erotic. As the ensuing sonnet, "Inclusiveness" (1869), in the *House of Life* (1881) has it:

What man has bent o'er his son's sleep, to brood
 How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—
 Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes
 Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?

(Works 95)

Although the possibilities advanced in this passage seem to be the product of an ever-changing world in which any thought is permissible, there is a degree of censoriousness in the framing of its questions—"What man has . . . ?" is very different from "What man has *not* . . . ?"—that indicates the operation of a value-system in the sonnet, a value-system predicated, as the sestet of "Inclusiveness" makes plain, on the otherworldly orientation of the positive agnostic:

May not this ancient room thou sitt'st in dwell
 In separate living souls for joy and pain?
 Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
 Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;
 And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
 Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

(Works 95)

That Eliot selected from the final line of this sonnet a fragment ("lidless eyes") to shore against his ruins in *The Waste Land*⁷⁸ is less important to the present discussion than the *symboliste* and agnostic qualities of the sestet of "Inclusiveness"—its suggestion that, however changeable, subjective, relativistic, and unstable a "living soul's" world may be or seem, that world may nevertheless furnish the mental images that occupy the soul throughout eternity. Here fully achieved is the questioning and questing, hopeful and fearful, *symboliste* poetry of Rossetti's positive agnosticism.

The implied poet of "The Soul's Sphere" and "Inclusiveness" is no longer, as in the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a type of St. Luke, a painter of the Virgin Mary who apparently accepted the allegorical, transcendental, and teleological assumptions of the "Art Catholic." Rather, he is a poet who is as certain of uncertainty as he is uncertain of certainty—a quizzical seeker and speculator who, like many of the subjects of paintings from the late sixties to the early eighties—*La Pia de' Tolomei*, *Dante at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, *A Roman Widow*, *Orpheus*, *Proserpine*—seems to be searching for a person and a certainty that have been loved and lost. Inhabiting a grey, purgatorial realm in which heaven and hell were assumed yet invisible coordinates, Rossetti was condemned (or free?) in the last decade or more of his life to enact various permutations and combinations of certainty and uncertainty, not least, it would seem, in the realm of poetic form. Like "The Soul's Sphere," "Ardour and Memory" (the second *symboliste* sonnet mentioned by Cazamian) contains in the adjective "infinite" with which it concludes a word which signals the poem's commitment to suggestiveness, indeterminacy, and incompleteness, its centrifugal refusal to rest within the limits of the known and knowable. In the case of "Ardour and Memory" the word "infinite" also occurs within a context of generic simultaneity that could be said to reflect in small the formal ambiguity of *The House of Life* itself: when the rose is gone from the "rose tree," the sonnet concludes, the plant's leaves will ". . . flush all ruddy . . . / With ditties and with dirges infinite" (Works 96). While refusing to

"circumscribe" its suggestions, and to allow "the reader . . . [to] conceive their limits," *The House of Life*, like "Ardour and Memory," also "holds its perception of infinite resonances in forms which, by their extremely 'finished' quality, affirm the presence, though not the comprehension, of unity, law, and meaning."⁷⁹ Although *The House of Life* is generically ambiguous in both its versions (in 1881 it consists of one more than a neat century of numbered and "extremely 'finished'" sonnets), in *Poems* (1870) it explicitly announces its status as a poem of mixed genres and as a poem *en route* to a destination that is, in a sense, both certain and uncertain: "Sonnets and Songs / Towards a Work to be called 'The House of Life'." What is being articulated in this important headnote in *Poems* (1870) is nothing other than the ambiguous and questing form that Rossetti's poetry had to take in order to reflect the positive agnosticism of the life behind it.

Both *The House of Life* (1870) and *The House of Life* (1881) conclude with "The One Hope," a sonnet that is of intense interest to the present discussion, not merely on account of its terminal position in both versions of Rossetti's sonnet sequence, but also because it was written early in 1870 during a critical period in the poet-painter's artistic and spiritual development, and, beyond this, because it constitutes a particularly condensed and important statement of the hope that characterized the poetry and painting of his last years—the hope for an afterlife founded on eternal love. That Rossetti gave hope the prominence he did in the latter stages of his life was in many ways the inevitable outcome of his positive agnosticism: hope for eternal life may, after all, exist with a dubious or even non-existent faith provided, of course, that there has not been, as there emphatically was not in Rossetti's case, an abandonment of religious speculation and eschatological yearning.

In the first two lines of "The One Hope," the word "vain" (*Works* 108) is repeated three times, establishing a mood that recalls Ecclesiastes 1.2, where the word "vanity" is used to describe all human activities—Rossetti's "vain desire" and "vain regret"—in the face of death where "all is vanity" (Rossetti has "all is vain"). With the third and fourth lines of the sonnet comes the first of the three questions which comprise the octave. "What shall assuage the unforgotten pain," asks the speaker, "And teach the unforgetful to forget?" This question may apply either to the living, burdened with grief after a death, or to the dead burdened with memories in hell or purgatory. Of these two possibilities the second, bringing to mind as it does the terrible burden of memory that Dante gives to souls in the

Inferno and (to a lesser extent) the *Purgatorio*, receives some reinforcement from the second question, "Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet?", which Paull Franklin Baum has seen as "a hint of Purgatorial delay"⁸⁰ to be suffered by the soul before it enters into paradise. The word "Peace" comes to this context with associations from the New Testament that Rossetti elsewhere (in "The Staff and Scrip," for example, and "Jenny") employ with a full consciousness of the word's mortal and eternal implications.⁸ Similarly, the "sunk stream" brings to mind the "long stream" (probably issuing from the "fountain of life" in Revelation 22.6) at the conclusion of Rossetti's early poem "On Mary's Portrait"⁸² and the Lethean stream of the *Purgatorio*, XXVIII into which Dante must immerse himself (to erase his memory of sin) before entering paradise. Whether the "sunk stream" or "The One Hope" is Lethe, the river of forgetfulness or—as John Lindberg has suggested—Acheron, the river of "oblivion . . . which unblessed souls may not cross"⁸³ (and of course the *symboliste* suggestiveness of the poem allows it to be both), it seems certain that its waters will "teach the unforgetful to forget," thus solving the problem of intolerable or untoward memories. The third question of the sonnet's octave advances the hope that the soul will find itself in paradise immediately, without having first to traverse the purgatorial regions: "Or may the soul at once in a green plain / Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain / And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?" The connection between the "sweet life-fountain" in these lines and the "fountain . . . of life" in Revelation 26.6 probably needs no elaboration. The same cannot be said, however, for the less biblical and more obscure figure of the "dew-drenched flowering amulet," a symbol whose very presence here among the poem's primarily Christian and Dantean references reinforces the personal and syncretic quality of "The One Hope."

In seeking a specific referent for the "flowering amulet," Lindberg connects "The One Hope" with *Sibylla Palmifera* ("Soul's Beauty"), painted in 1866-1870, and, thence, with the Cumaean Sibyl. Thus he identifies Rossetti's "amulet" with the talismans granted by the Sibyl to her "favoured devotees," giving them "free passage over Acheron into the Elysian Fields."⁸⁴ Such an association may well be correct. But there is room here to suggest another "flowering amulet" that might have been in Rossetti's mind when he wrote "The One Hope." At the close of one of the poet-painter's favorite works, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,⁸⁵ when the heroine, Polia, is apparently united after death with the hero, Poliphilus, she confers

upon him a "coronet of flowers."⁸⁶ Significantly, the final union of Polia and Poliphilus in the *Hypnerotomachia* also takes place by a sacred fountain and, earlier in the book, by a different fountain another flower had been washed in a stream to purge Poliphilus of lust. Even more significantly, when the two lovers of the *Hypnerotomachia* are finally united, Poliphilus petitions Venus to "establish their love in a perfect and perpetual union."⁸⁷ This final scene in the *Hypnerotomachia* accords well with Rossetti's observation, in a letter of March 18, 1870, that "The One Hope" "refers . . . to the longing for the accomplishment of individual desire after death" (*Letters*, II, 821).

An illuminating contrast between Rossetti's early and later handling of significant natural images could be drawn from a comparison between the allegorically precise figure of the lily-stem in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and the suggestively unspecific symbol of the "flowering amulet" in "The One Hope." More to the point, however, is a recognition that the very vagueness of the later symbol is, as is so often the case in *symboliste* poetry, a challenge to the interpretative imperatives of the poem's readers. Thus Lindberg invokes the leaves upon which the Cumaean Sibyl wrote her prophesies as a referent for the "scriptured petals" through which the "wan soul" "Peers breathless for the gift of grace" in the "golden air" of the sonnet's octave. And Baum argues, probably correctly, that the "'sculptured [*sic*] petals' . . . are again the 'amulet'"⁸⁸ of the sestet. Sharing Baum's perception, William Michael Rossetti and Jacques Savarit suggest that the "scriptured petals" are those of the hyacinth, the flower which "the Greek fancy assumed . . . to be inscribed with some lettering, indicating what is to be the boon accorded to the Soul as its portion in eternity."⁸⁹ The fact that this flower (related to the *Scilla non-scripta*, the bluebell) was supposed to have been created by Apollo from the blood of Hyacinthus (Endymion), whom he had accidentally killed, and "inscrib'd with woe" (to quote "Lycidas") accords well with William E. Fredeman's elegiac reading of *The House of Life*.⁹⁰ Despite the pagan associations of the hyacinth, and *pace* Baum's curious remark that the "imagery of the sonnet is quasi-conventional and need imply no Roman [Catholic] leanings anywhere,"⁹¹ there is reason to doubt that the words "grace" and "scriptured" in the sestet of "The One Hope" were chosen for their Christian resonances. Of course, a flower bearing a woeful message, be it pagan or not, would be inimical to Rossetti's "One Hope," and this might explain why, in revising the sonnet in 1880, he substituted "alien" for "written" in the last lines:

Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
 But only the one Hope's one name be there,—
 Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

(Works 108)

With regard to the "one Hope's one name" which the speaker longs to find inscribed on the hyacinth, critical opinion has been divided. On the one hand, W. M. Rossetti has assumed that this is "the name of the woman supremely beloved upon earth" (Works 659), and, on the other, Baum has conjectured that the "one Hope's one name" is "Love itself."⁹² Neither of these suggestions is wrong, nor are they mutually exclusive. For surely Rossetti's "one Hope" is for the attainment of eternal Love with the beloved. This is the hope on which *The House of Life* closes both in 1870 and in 1881.

On the evidence not merely of "The One Hope," but also of three other poems written in 1869-1871, "The Stream's Secret" (1869-1870), "Hope Overtaken" (1871), and "Love and Hope" (1871), it would appear that in 1869-70 there emerged, or re-emerged, in Rossetti's thought something very near to a belief in an afterlife of eternal love. As "The One Hope" and the following lines from "The Stream's Secret" reveal, however, Rossetti's hopes in 1869-70 were still couched in the tentative and questioning tone of the positive agnostic:

Alas! shall hope be nurs'd
 On life's all-succouring breast in vain,
 And made so perfect only to be slain?
 Or shall not rather the sweet thirst
 Even yet rejoice the heart with warmth dispers'd
 And strength grown fair again?

Stands it not by the door—
 Love's Hour—till she and I shall meet;
 With bodiless form and unapparent feet
 That cast no shadow yet before . . . ?

(Works 117)

In view of the repeated appearance in Rossetti's work of 1869-1871 of the hope for a continuation of love beyond the grave, the question is not unjustified of whether any decisive event, or combination of such events, occurred at this time to give him grounds for supposing that life exists after

death. The answer to this question, though it rests—as the foregoing lines from "The Stream's Secret" already intimate—on Rossetti's superstitious acceptance of Spiritualism and related supernatural phenomena, must be yes. From several of the poet-painter's friends and colleagues, it is known that from the middle sixties onwards he was experimenting with spiritualism in an attempt to call up the spirit of his dead wife.⁹³ There is some evidence to suggest that Rossetti's acquaintance with spiritualism, like that of the Brownings, dated from the time when it crossed the Atlantic in the fifties. But R. L. Mégroz is probably right in saying that Rossetti's "interest and experiments in spiritualism were . . . stimulated by the undying sense of loss"⁹⁴ that followed the death of his wife in 1862. William Bell Scott regarded his friend's "faith"⁹⁵ in spiritualism merely as an aspect of his physical and psychological deterioration. Yet at times even the rational Scott was at a loss to explain some of the extraordinary events that Rossetti believed to be signs of his wife's continued life beyond the grave.

One such event to which Rossetti attached more than usual importance occurred in the autumn of 1869 when he was staying with Scott at Penkill Castle. Rossetti was convinced that a chaffinch, which allowed him to pick it up while he and Scott were out walking, was a manifestation of his wife's soul. According to Scott, he exclaimed: "it is my wife, the spirit of my wife, the soul of her has taken this shape; something is going to happen to me."⁹⁶ An echo of this incident may be heard in a versicle that Rossetti wrote over ten years later, in 1880:

This little day—a bird that flew to me—
Has swiftly flown out of my hand again.
Ah have I listened to its fugitive strain
For what its tidings of the sky may be?

(*Works* 246)

When it is borne in mind, not only that Rossetti was used to calling his wife by birds' names, but also that in the traditional language of signs birds, like butterflies, can symbolize the "winged-soul," then it becomes easier to appreciate the significance that the poet-painter attached to the chaffinch incident of 1869. And if it is further borne in mind that by virtue of his positive agnosticism Rossetti continually kept his essentially empirical epistemology open to intimations of the supernatural, then it is also easier to appreciate how an event such as the chaffinch incident that appeared miraculously to violate ordinary expectations in an observable manner

would have constituted compelling and portentous evidence of the supra-real for him. When the opening of Elizabeth Siddal's coffin to exhume the so-called "lost" manuscripts in October, 1869 reputedly revealed ". . . all that golden hair undimmed in death" (*Works* 86), Rossetti may well have had all the evidence he needed to convince him of an afterlife. Apparently, this conviction grew throughout the seventies, for in his last days Rossetti told Scott: "I believe in a future life. Have I not had evidence of that often enough? Have I not heard and seen those that died long years ago?"⁹⁷

It is difficult to doubt that the chaffinch incident of late 1869 had a bearing on the expressions of hope for a "future life" that come to prominence in *Poems* (1870). The incident may also have given impetus to Rossetti's use of winged figures (birds, butterflies, angels, schematic wings) as symbols of the soul, of love, and of hope in the seventies. An angelic figure holding a bird appears in the preliminary study for *The Bower Meadow* (1872), a painting which, though it has been described as meaningless,⁹⁸ seems to depict a spectral form moving across a landscape originally intended for a picture of *Dante and Beatrice in Paradise*⁹⁹ towards the world of real objects and real women. Viewed in terms of spatial recession, the closest figures in *The Bower Meadow* are the most corporeal, suggesting perhaps that the spectral form is coming to meet the spectator, the absent male of the painting, who exists in the truly real world. An equally enigmatic oil of 1873, *La Ghirlandata*, is set in a "forest clearing after sunset,"¹⁰⁰ where a green-robed lady plays a harp adorned with a garland of roses while two angelic figures listen from the surrounding foliage.¹⁰¹ By inscribing the harp in "The Lady of the Garland" with images of the "winged-soul" and including in the background of the picture the same blue bird (transitoriness? Elizabeth Siddal?) that figured in *Venus Verticordia*, Rossetti's purpose may have been to suggest that the inspirational power of love outlasts both time and death. Two winged figures also appear in *La Bella Mano* (1875), where they attend a "maiden-minded" lady, a "flower of Venus' own virginity" (*Works* 253), as she washes her hands in a scallop-shaped basin containing the ". . . pure and proper element / Whence . . . the Lady of Love [that is, Venus] . . . / Was born." The contemplative mood of the virginal lady in *La Bella Mano* is directed upwards, and one of her attendant angels (or Amors), holding a clean white towel significant of her purity, follows this gaze with the "eyes upcast" of "Hope" (*Works* 74) in the opening sonnet of *The House of Life* (1881). In

The Roman Widow (or *Dis Manibus*) of 1874, the spectator seems once more to be in the presence of the Rossettian hope for reunion with the beloved after death. Here a Roman widow plays an "elegy"¹⁰² to her dead husband on two harps while behind her stands her husband's tomb fronted by a garland of rose-blossoms and encircled by her marriage girdle. Not only do these paintings with their musical images and tones exude a delicate mood of sorrow and yearning, sadness and hope, but they also seem to exist on the borderline of the known and the unknown, the real and the imaginary, the quick and the dead.

The poetic equivalents of these evocative pictures, and of others such as *The Death of Lady Macbeth* (1875), *A Vision of Fiametta* (1878) and *Desdemona's Death Song* (c. 1878-1881)—all of which reflect Rossetti's latter-day concern with death and immortality—are the lyrics entitled "Parted Presence" (1875), "A Death-Parting" (1876), "Adieu" (1876), "Alas, So Long" (1881), "Insomnia" (1881), and "Spherical Change" (1881), where the melancholy themes of memory, regret, past love, passing time, and approaching death are dominant. In these poems, too, the reader encounters Rossetti's hope to be reunited with the beloved after death. "Parted Presence" concludes on the image of "Two souls no power may sever / Together . . . for ever" (*Works* 224). And in the second stanza of "A Death-Parting" there is mention of " . . . a secret sign / In the held breath of the day's decline" (*Works* 225) when the dead beloved's " . . . very face seemed pressed . . ." to the speaker's. The last stanzas of the three lyrics of 1881 ask essentially the same, obviously heartfelt, question—the central question of the final stage of Rossetti's positive agnosticism—in three different ways:

Ah! dear one, you've been dead so long,—
 How long until we meet again,
 Where hours may never lose their song
 Nor flowers forget the rain
 In glad noonlight that never shall wane?
 Alas, so long!
 Ah! shall it be then Spring weather,
 And ah! shall we be young together?
(*Works* 234)

Is there a home where heavy earth
 Melts to bright air that breathes no pain,
 Where water leaves no thirst again
 And springing fire is Love's new birth?
 If faith long bound to one true goal
 May there at length its hope beget,
 My soul that hour shall draw your soul
 For ever nearer yet.

(Works 234)

* * *

O nearest, furthest! Can there be
 At length some hard-earned heart-won home,
 Where,—exile changed for sanctuary,—
 Our lot may fill indeed its sum,
 And you may wait and I may come?

(Works 236)

After seeing in these three stanzas something more of the obsessive yearning for the "accomplishment of individual desire after death" that characterized Rossetti's final years, the reader will have no difficulty in fully understanding why, in painting the large oil of *The Blessed Damozel* in 1875-1878 and in revising this youthful poem for publication in 1881, Rossetti rethought its heaven to accommodate ". . . lovers newly met / 'Mid deathless love's acclaims" speaking "evermore among themselves / Their heart-remembered names."¹⁰³

No consideration of Rossetti's final years and of the longing for an after-life that characterizes them would be complete without some discussion of *Proserpine*, the large oil of which the poet-painter produced no fewer than eight versions, together with a water-color replica and an accompanying sonnet, between his nervous breakdown and attempted suicide in June, 1872¹⁰⁴ and his death in April, 1882. Rossetti's almost continuous concentration on Proserpine in the last decade of his life seems almost inevitable: associated with the same cyclical pattern of death in winter and rebirth in spring that underlies such poems as "The One Hope," "Hope Overtaken," and "Alas, So Long," Proserpine also has as an identifying adjunct a cut pomegranate, a traditional emblem of the hope for immortality that Rossetti had used in two Christian paintings of the fifties: *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* (1852) and *Fra Pace* (1856).



Proserpine

[The Tate Gallery]

Although Rossetti's concentration on Proserpine in the seventies may simply have been the consequence of his obsession at that time with death, rebirth, and immortality, there is also the strong probability that a knowledge of hermeticism, particularly of the Eleusinian mysteries in which Proserpine of course plays a central role, contributed to his fascination with a figure to whom Swinburne had long since introduced him, if only in the "Hymn to Proserpine" of *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Rossetti would have had to look no further than Karl Otfried Müller's *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (trans. 1840, 1858) for an account of the significance of the Eleusinian mysteries, and of the part played in them by Proserpine (Persephone):

. . . when the goddess of inanimate nature had become the queen of the dead, it was a natural analogy which must have early suggested itself, that the return of Persephone to the world of light also denoted a renovation of life and a new birth to men. Hence the *Mysteries of Demeter*, and especially those celebrated at Eleusis . . . inspired the most elevated and animating hopes with regard to the condition of the soul afterdeath.¹⁰⁵

In the accompanying sonnet to *Proserpine* (1872), the goddess's wintry situation is underscored by a basic dark (cold, sorrow) / light (warm, hope) contrast. In the place of shades, Proserpine is the wife and queen of death, but she remains immortal (the painting includes an "incense-burner . . . as the attribute of a goddess" [*Works* 635]), and she gazes furtively towards the "cold cheer" of a ray of sunlight, looking and listening "for a sign" of the warmth, color and light of the "upper world" (*Works* 635). Without belaboring the point, it may be observed that Proserpine, with her eyes and ears open for tidings of another world and another spring, is both a figural type of "Hope, with eyes upcast" and an objective correlative for the poet-painter's own "not altogether unhopeful"¹⁰⁶ positive agnosticism.

Proserpine also appears, a more desolate and distraught figure than in the painting that bears her name, in Rossetti's unfinished drawing of another theme which may well have recommended itself to the poet-painter on account of its hermetic associations: *Orpheus and Euridice* (1875). To a certain extent a woeful counterpart of *Proserpine*, *Orpheus and Euridice* depicts the moment when "laurelled Orpheus" (*Works* 76), the poet whose myth of descent and re-ascent also provided the basis for a palingenic mystery rite, turns to look at Euridice, thus failing in his attempt to rescue

her from Hades. Taken together, and in the context of two major features of Rossetti's life in the seventies, his flirtation with suicide and his yearning for a continuation of love beyond the grave, *Orpheus and Euridice* and *Proserpine* can even be seen, like certain poems of this period, most notably "Cloud and Wind" (1871),¹⁰⁷ as morbid meditations on the ways and means of ensuring the "accomplishment of individual desire after death"—the former suggesting that a lover impatient for a glimpse of the beloved can endanger their final union and the latter implying that a tenaciously "clinging memory" (*Works* 635), symbolized in *Proserpine* by a tendril of ivy, can at least provide comfort until "Love's Hour" of rebirth and reunion.

Another painting of the seventies that seems to participate in hermetic and palingenic ideas is *Astarte Syriaca* (1875-1877). The story of the Assyrian Venus who pursued her lover, Tammuz, into the infernal regions after he had been killed by the boar of winter is a structural and occult relative of the myths of Proserpine and Ceres, Orpheus and Euridice and, of course, Venus and Adonis. *Astarte Syriaca* has been described as "the summation of Rossetti's career as an artist";¹⁰⁸ certainly, its sheer size (72" x 42"¹⁰⁹) gives it an "awe-inspiring" and "genuinely humbling"¹¹⁰ quality which places it, like "Love Enthroned" in the opening sonnet of *The House of Life* (1881), "far above" Rossetti's other paintings and personifications of his last years. "What mystery here is read / Of homage or hope?" (*Works* 232) Rossetti asked of Botticelli's *Primavera* in 1880, and the same question may well be asked of his own *Astarte Syriaca*.

Edward Lucie-Smith has done a considerable service by placing color reproductions of *Astarte Syriaca* and *Dantis Amor* on adjacent pages of his 1972 study of *Symbolist Art*. The same cosmic symbolism of sun, moon and stars is in the background of both paintings. But while in *Dantis Amor* the sun and the moon are specific in significance and separated in space (the former, emblazoned with the head of Christ, is in the top-left corner of the design, and the latter, emblazoned with the head of Beatrice, is in the bottom-right), in *Astarte Syriaca* a sun and moon, symbolic perhaps of the male and female forces of creation, are moving into conjunction behind what can only be Venus, the star of evening (death), morning (rebirth) and, of course, love. "Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon," says the accompanying sonnet of 1877, stands "Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen / Ere Aphrodite was" (*Works* 226). In gestures that are tantalizingly erotic,¹¹¹ the goddess of love seemingly holds aside and prepares to unfasten the "twofold girdle" that twice encircles her lush green dress,



[Manchester City Art Gallery]

Astarte Syriaca

emphasizing the sexual parts of her body " . . . the infinite boon / Of bliss whereof the heaven and earth commune." Behind the supreme "Mystery" whose "Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes" reconcile "The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune" stand two of Astarte's votaries: green-winged figures whose own postures and adjuncts—both have eyes "upcast" and both carry a lighted torch¹¹² entwined with a semi-evergreen vine¹¹³—suggest that they may have been intended by Rossetti as symbolic representations of his hope for the continuation of love after death. Even the "predominantly green" that grows "progressively lighter and more intense from the bottom to the top of the picture" symbolizes both hope (the SPES volume in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is green, and in "Hope Overtaken" hope is "garmented in green" [*Works* 88]) and the "regenerate love"¹¹⁴ which comprised the goal of Rossetti's one hope towards the end of his life.

Barbey d'Aureville, the French critic who gave both Baudelaire and Huysmans the famous choice between suicide and Christ, might have put the same dilemma to Rossetti. There are indications that after his attempted suicide in 1872, the poet-painter turned again as part of his quest for spiritual certainty to the Christianity that had been so important to him in his early life and in the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The same Rossetti who in the fifties had written "The Woodspurge" and painted *Bocca Baciata*, and who in the sixties had respectively delighted Whistler by endorsing the paganism of the classical world¹¹⁵ and shocked Dean Stanley by championing the vices of Neronian Rome,¹¹⁶ would in the seventies counter the accusation of "irreligion, or rather of not being a Christian," with the indignant retort; "'Do not my works testify to my Christianity?'"¹¹⁷ Although in 1876-1877 Rossetti apparently resisted the attempts of his mother and sisters to effect his conversion to Christianity,¹¹⁸ "in his later days," says Arthur Benson, "his thoughts turned much on the personal relation between God and man."¹¹⁹ This was the Rossetti who, in January, 1880, told William Sharp that he could "conceive no higher Ideal than the Christ we know" (*Letters*, IV, 1699), who, in 1878-1881, wrote "The White Ship" and "The King's Tragedy" (and contemplated a ballad on Joan of Arc¹²⁰), and who, in revising and expanding *The House of Life* for inclusion in *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881), placed the "Old and New Art" sonnets together and towards the end of the sequence. William Michael Rossetti noticed that after 1879 his brother was "fully convinced, or re-convinced, of immortality; and . . . that from this belief he never afterwards receded." "I cannot say with any accuracy what he supposed

immortality to consist of," wrote William Michael, but he allowed that seemed to include "a period of purgation and atonement . . . comparable more or less to the purgatory of Roman Catholics."¹²¹ And William Be Scott records that in 1881, less than a year before his death, Rossetti wanted a "priest" to hear his confession and "to give him absolution for his sins. With almost the same breath, however, he admitted that he could "make nothing of Christianity."¹²² This contradiction, though it provoked the wifery of Scott, typifies the combination of uncertain certainty and certain uncertainty that is characteristic of Rossetti's positive agnosticism. "Michael Scott, in conceiving Rossetti to be an extreme agnostic, only took account of one half of his mind," writes William Michael of his brother's request for absolution; "My brother was unquestionably sceptical as to many alleged facts, and he disregarded formulated doctrines, and the practices founded upon them. . . . On the other hand, his mind was naturally prone to the marvellous and the supernatural, and he had an abiding and very deep reverence for the person of Christ."¹²³ It was this combination of scepticism and openness that made Dante Gabriel Rossetti an inhabitant of the universe of positive agnosticism and initiated the "progrès intérieur" from allegorical realism to *symboliste* suggestiveness that this essay has attempted to place on view.

NOTES

62. Rossetti to G. P. Boyce, quoted in Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 69 (No. 114).
63. *Modern Painters*, V (1860; rpt. Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: 1888), xi.
64. The first of Rossetti's *femmes fatales* of the sixties is to be found in *Joseph Accuse Before Potiphar* (1860), but more obvious examples of the convergence of love and death in female form are such works as *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860-1861) and *Lady Lilith* (1868).
65. This is Pater on Botticelli, *The Renaissance*, 55.
66. *Ibid.*, ix.
67. In the accompanying sonnet, Venus's eyes have the clairvoyant ability to follow ". . . the track / Of that which in thy spirit they can see" (*Works* 210).
68. *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 62.
69. John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination, 1848-1900* (London: Routledge, 1968), 179.
70. *Modern Painters*, V, 314. Ruskin's description of the goddess of Discord as "double-minded" accords well with Rossetti's conception of her in the sonnet to *Venus Verticordia*.
71. Quoted in Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 99 (No. 173).

72. *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, vol. I, *Education of the Senses* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), between 182 and 183.
73. Rossetti uses the butterfly in this sense in his illustration to the "Sonnet on the Sonnet" in *The House of Life* (1881); see *The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. W. M. Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1904), II, facing 94.
74. As it is in a book that was certainly known to the young Rossetti (see William Michael Rossetti, "Memoir," *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters*, 2 vols. [London: Ellis, 1895], I, 85): Filippo Pistrucchi's *Iconologia* (Milan, 1821). See Pistrucchi's No. 6 ("Vita e Morte").
75. See *Letters*, I, 211 and 248.
76. Levinson, "Titles," 36.
77. *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 5.
78. *The Waste Land*, II, 138.
79. This is Jerome J. McGann describing the tension between suggestiveness and form in Swinburne's poetry, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972), 170.
80. *The House of Life: A Sonnet-Sequence by Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard UP, 1928), 224.
81. See Bentley, "'Ah, Poor Jenny's Case. . .,'" 187.
82. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Analytical List of Manuscripts in the Duke University Library, with Hitherto Unpublished Verse and Prose*, ed. Paul Franklin Baum (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1931), 71.
83. "Rossetti's Cumaean Oracle," *Victorian Newsletter*, 22 (Fall, 1962), 20.
84. *Ibid.*
85. For a preliminary discussion of the importance of this book to Rossetti, see D. M. R. Bentley, "Rossetti and the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili," *English Language Notes*, XIV (June 1977), 279-83.
86. *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice, 1499), fol. Fi[v].
87. *Ibid.*, fol. Fi[r].
88. *The House of Life*, 224. It is worth noting that in "The One Hope" the "wan soul" looks "Between the scripted petals" (italics added) for revelation—bypasses, as it were, the material phenomena which, in the mundane world, had constituted for Rossetti both mediators and barriers between the human and the divine.
89. *Works*, 659. And see also Jacques Savarit, *Tendances mystiques et ésotériques chez Dante-Gabriel Rossetti* (Paris: Didier, 1961), 293-94.
90. See "Rossetti's 'In Memoriam': An Elegiac Reading of *The House of Life*," *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library*, XLVII (1964-1965), 298-341.
91. *The House of Life*, 224n.
92. *Ibid.*, 225.
93. See Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle (Cheyne Walk Life)*, ed. Gale Pedrick (London: Elkin Mathews, 1904), 55-56 and William Allingham, *A Diary*, eds. Helen Allingham and D. Radford (London: Macmillan, 1907), 160-162.
94. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter Poet of Heaven in Earth* (London: Faber, 1928), 77.
95. *Autobiographical Notes*, II, 235.
96. *Ibid.*, II, 113.
97. *Ibid.*, II, 307-308.
98. See Hilton, 186.
99. Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 128 (No. 229).
100. *Ibid.*, I, 130 (No. 232).

101. In "Rossetti's Two Ligeias: Their Relationship to Visual Art, Music, and Poetry," *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (Autumn-Winter, 1982), 99, Dianne Sachko MacLeod comments *à propos La Ghirlandata* that in Rossetti's art "... music is clearly associated with supernatural ideal."
102. Rossetti in a letter to F. R. Leyland, quoted by Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 134 (No. 236).
103. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Blessed Damozel*, ed. Baum, xxv, 25.
104. See William E. Fredeman, "Prelude to the Last Decade: Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Summer of 1872," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, LIII (1970-1971), 75-121 and 272-328.
105. *A History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, continued after the author's death by John William Donaldson (Breslau, 1841; trans. London: Longmans, Green, 1858), 237-38. Needless to say, Rossetti would have been acquainted from an early age through his father with hermeticism and related ideas. For evidence of his knowledge of Müller's *History*, see my "The Source of D. G. Rossetti's 'Combination from Sappho,' and some of its Implications," *Notes and Queries*, forthcoming in 1992.
106. Hoxie Neale Fairchild, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Religious Trends in English Poetry IV, 1830-1880 (Christianity and Romanticism in the Victorian Era)* (New York: Columbia UP, 1957), 404.
107. Baum, *The House of Life*, 129 finds a "hint of suicide" in the octave of this sonnet.
108. Hilton, 187.
109. Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 146 (No. 249).
110. Hilton, 187.
111. As Grieve points out in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (*Catalogue*), p. 225 "... the Venus' position is of the traditional 'Pudica' kind and her hands draw attention to her girdle, or alternate links of roses and pomegranates [symbols of sensuality and immortality] which has the power to excite love."
112. An extinguished, down-turned torch signifies death or dead love, as in the study of *Dantis Amor* in Surtees, *Catalogue*, II, 180 (No. 117B). A lighted torch is associated by Rossetti with Helen of Troy; see *Catalogue*, II, 232 (No. 163).
113. Appropriately enough for *Astarte Syriaca*, common jasmine (*officinale*) comes from Persia.
114. Grieve, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (*Catalogue*), 225.
115. See E. R. and J. Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, 2nd ed. (1908; London: Heinemann, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1925), 404.
116. See Arthur C. Benson, *Rossetti* (1904; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1926), 218-219.
117. T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Stock, 1882), 40.
118. See "A Shadow of Dante: Rossetti in the Final Years (Extracts from W. M. Rossetti's Unpublished Diaries, 1876-1882)," ed. William E. Fredeman, *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (Autumn-Winter, 1982), 218 and Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1963), 318.
119. *Rossetti*, 225.
120. See "A Shadow of Dante," 223. Rossetti's oil painting of *Joan of Arc* dates from 1863.
121. "Memoir," *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters*, I, 381.
122. *Autobiographical Notes*, II, 306-307.
123. "Memoir," 380.