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

*For Malcolm Ross, on his Eightieth Birthday*

Writing in *Symbolisme et poésie: L'exemple anglais* (1947), Louis Cazamian discerned in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's creative career "un progrès intérieur" that took him, "de sa jeunesse pré-raphaélite, à une vigueur d'originalité concentrée, et à un art de suggestion, tout entier tourné vers l'avenir."<sup>1</sup> Since the phenomenon of postmodernism was not evident when Cazamian was writing, the future that he finds foreshadowed in Rossetti's later work is, as even the title of his book indicates, the *symboliste*-modernist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the tradition of Mallarmé, Laforgue, Yeats, Eliot and the early Pound. For Cazamian, a number of sonnets in the final version of *The House of Life* (1881), particularly "The Soul's Sphere" (1873) and "Ardour and Memory" (1879), illustrate "le symbolisme le plus authentique, dont on voudrait que l'intellectualité ésotérique de Mallarmé ne se fût jamais éloignée."<sup>2</sup> In the essay underway, an attempt will be made to follow in both poetry and painting the "progrès intérieur" that took Rossetti by stages away from the allegorical realism that characterizes what he himself called the "Art Catholic"<sup>3</sup> of the Pre-Raphaelite period and towards a suggestive and esoteric handling of symbolism that is, indeed, proleptic of the aesthetic assumptions and practices associated with the *symbolistes* and the classic modernists. Such shifts seldom if ever occur in a vacuum, and in Rossetti's case

the movement from allegorical realism to *symbolisme* is ineluctably connected to the shift in the poet-painter's spiritual orientation from the relatively straightforward Christian transcendentalism and teleology of early, Pre-Raphaelite works like the *Girldood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49)<sup>4</sup> and "St. Luke the Painter" (1849)<sup>5</sup> towards the uncertain theology and idiosyncratic individualism of a later sonnet like "The Soul's Sphere" (1873). From at least the early eighteen-fifties onwards, I shall try to show, Rossetti's positive agnosticism (a term to be defined fully in due course) generated in him a condition of questing uncertainty and eclecticism that led to the creation in both poetry and painting of works characterized by a high degree of mystery, works which, as will be seen, frequently place their readers and spectators in positions of indecision with regard to the meaning of the images that they are confronting. In the first part of the essay, the focus will fall primarily on Rossetti's works of the late forties and fifties, on such pictures as the *Girldood of Mary Virgin*, *Hamlet and Ophelia*, and *The Tune of the Seven Towers* and on such poems as "The Hill Summit," "The Woodspurge," and "Jenny"; in the second part—to be published in the next issue of *The Dalhousie Review*—the focus will fall primarily on such works of the sixties and seventies as *Venus Verticordia*, "The Soul's Sphere," "The One Hope," *Proserpine*, and *Astarte Syriaca*.

### Part I.

Although there are usually no boundaries or rubicons in the kind of gradual artistic and spiritual movement under examination here, there are points when a state of oscillation or tension seems to exist and, hence, when a sense may be gained of the movement's places of departure and destination. One such point occurred in 1855 when Rossetti, in agreeing to produce what eventually became four illustrations for Moxon's edition of Tennyson's *Poems* (1857), declared his intention to choose only those poems where, as he told William Allingham in a letter, "one can allegorize on one's own hook . . . without killing . . . a distinct idea of the poet's."<sup>6</sup> Here in a state of precarious, perhaps impossible, balance are two distinct, even opposing tendencies in Rossetti's art: on the one hand (and clearly by this time in the ascendant position), the individualistic desire to use his ostensible subject-matter (Tennyson's poems) as a pretext for his own imaginative



*[Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery]*

St. Cecilia

concerns and, on the other, the responsible recognition of a necessary fidelity to some knowable other ("a distinct idea of the poet's"). In the terms of Marvel Shmiefsky's *Sense at War with Soul: English Poetics (1865-1900)*, it could be said that there is present in Rossetti's 1855 comment to Allingham a tension between the two tendencies that were to become bitterly opposed in the late nineteenth century: on the one side, an aestheticism that acknowledged no reality outside the self or the work of art and, on the other side, an expressivism (or conceptualism) that commanded art to serve some "other," be it society, morality, religion or the "health and well-being of the State."<sup>7</sup> While Rossetti's description of his approach as "allegorizing" is as revelatory of his expressivist tendencies as his respectful attitude to Tennyson's ideas, his choice of poems for illustration—"The Palace of Art" (two illustrations), "Mariana in the South" and "The Lady of Shalott"—betray an interest in the tension between aestheticism and conceptualism, and a bias towards what Arthur Hallam in his seminal essay "On Some Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poetry of Alfred Tennyson" (1831) had earlier described as the poetry of "sensation"<sup>8</sup>—the self-reflexive poetry of refined emotions, fastidious forms and musical analogues.

An examination of two of Rossetti's contributions to Moxon's Tennyson—his renditions of "The Palace of Art" (ll. 97-100) and of "Mariana in the South" (ll. 25-36)—reveals that in "allegorizing on [his] own hook" he took liberties which result in illustrations of a markedly sensational, esoteric and, arguably, proto-*symboliste* nature. Both illustrations, it may be noticed, participate in the general tendency of the aesthetic movement to shock and titillate the Protestant middle classes: implying a point-of-view that is to an extent voyeuristic, both depict activities that Tennyson's average Victorian reader would not ordinarily have displayed or observed. In the illustration to "The Palace of Art," Rossetti depicts St. Cecilia swooning in the arms of an angelic figure (Tennyson has it that "An angel" merely "look'd at her"<sup>9</sup>) with various allegorical adjuncts whose meanings, though mostly quite clear and readable in the light of traditional iconography and Tennyson's poem (the sun-dial, for example, is a conventional emblem of *vanitas* and the escaping bird is a conventional representation of the soul), are occasionally and cumulatively somewhat baffling. What, for instance, is the precise significance of the malevolent-looking soldier eating an



*[Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery]*

Mariana in the South

apple (?) at the front of the picture-space? In the illustration to "Mariana in the South" Rossetti portrays Tennyson's heroine, not "on her knees . . . / Before Our Lady"<sup>10</sup> as in the original poem, but, more fervidly and sensually, kissing the feet of the crucified Christ. Surrounding her are various adjuncts—the angel, the letters, the mirror, the apparatus and scene in the rear—whose relation to the text is, by turns, clear and esoteric. Allan Life is substantially correct in observing that, while all Rossetti's designs for the Moxon Tennyson "transcend through formal and iconographic means the events they portray," this "does not discount their relevance to the events."<sup>11</sup> It must also be admitted, however, that J. C. Shairp's complaint in his "Aesthetic Poetry" essay of 1882 that Rossetti's poems "lack simplicity and transparency, that they 'require an effort to get at the meaning',"<sup>12</sup> is to an extent applicable to his earlier renditions of Tennyson's poems. Shmiefsky's comment *à propos* Shairp's expressivist castigation of Rossetti is that "Thirty-five years later . . . Eliot would face the same charges against *The Waste Land*."<sup>13</sup> This is a useful observation because, in locating Rossetti in a continuity of esotericism that works its way from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, it suggests that an understanding of Rossetti's own movement into that continuity in the eighteen fifties and later (notably in the revisions of his early poetry that preceded the publication of *Poems* [1870]) may also provide insights into the forces and conditions that eventually gave rise to Eliot's work in the *symboliste* manner and, indeed, to modernism itself.

Before proceeding to an examination of some of Rossetti's works and utterances that point towards the almost simultaneous emergence in his thought and art of *symboliste* practice and an unmistakable agnosticism, the discussion must return for a few moments to the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848-53) and to the transcendental and allegorical vision that characterized the poet-painter's work of that brief period. Since the discussion must, of necessity, be highly selective, it will focus metonymically on one, central instance of Rossetti's iconographic practice in the days of P. R. B.: the figure of the lily as it occurs in such important and typical early pictures and poems as the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, "Ave" and "The Blessed Damozel."

Like such proximate adjuncts as the lamp (Piety), the dove (the Holy Spirit) and the rose in the glass jar (the Purity of the Blessed



*[The Tate Gallery]*

Girlhood of Mary Virgin

Virgin), the lily in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is an authorized image that Rossetti employs in a fairly straightforward and conventional emblematic or allegorical manner. By tradition, the white (Madonna) lily is an emblem of Purity and, as such, a fitting attribute of the Virgin. In "The Blessed Damozel," it will be recalled, the angelic maiden is bedizened with mutually reinforcing emblems of Purity: a "white rose of Mary's gift," an unadorned "robe" with a "clasp"<sup>14</sup> and, of course, the famous "three lilies in her hand" (*Works*, 3). Rossetti is faithful to the conventional association of the white lily with virginal innocence when, perhaps doubting the interpretive skills of his primarily Protestant Victorian audience, he included in the second of the two sonnets affixed to the frame of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* an explicit gloss on the lily and other aspects of the painting. The *ex cathedra* tone of this sonnet implies a glossator who is entirely confident in his role as exegete:

These are the symbols . . . .

The books—whose head  
Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said—  
Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:  
Therefore on them the lily standeth, which  
Is Innocence, being interpreted.

(*Works* 173)

Rossetti's explicit gloss of the lily in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* should not deflect attention from the more complex significances of the plant in this and other works of the Pre-Raphaelite period. No doubt it will already have been noticed that the lily in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* consists of a many-leaved stem surmounted, like the one in "The Blessed Damozel," by three flowers. Cognizant as he seems to have been of the exegetical traditions whereby the lily of the Song of Songs is interpreted as a symbol of Christ and the "rod out of the stem of Jesse" (Isaiah 11.1) is applied, through the *virga-virgo* pun, to Mary, Rossetti probably intended his triadic lily stem as a representation of the Virgin's (organic) relation to the Trinity. As if to confirm this reading, he describes the Virgin in "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis" (1847; an earlier version of "Ave") as "the most greenly jubilant / Of the leaves of the Threefold Plant" and depicts her in "Paradise / . . . beside



the Ancient Three" (*Works* 661-62). It is worth noting, too, that in the sonnet on the frame of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* Rossetti calls attention to the "'Tripoint'" on the "'cloth of red / I' the centre'" of the painting and explains that each of its "'points'" is "'perfect . . . / Except the second . . . to teach / That Christ is not Yet born.'" Although the reference here is to the two-sided, gilt triangle, hardly visible today, on the "'cloth of red'" behind St. Anne, this "'Tripoint'" is echoed by the "Threefold Plant" that the Virgin has almost completed on the other "'cloth of red.'" When Rossetti turned, shortly after the completion of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, to the painting of *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849-50), he refined and simplified his symbolic system by embodying the significance of the incomplete "'Tripoint'" in the lily itself: in the later painting, the middle lily on the stem that Gabriel seems to be presenting to the Virgin is a bud about to burst open, about to come into being, like Christ, at the moment of the Incarnation.<sup>15</sup>

Even on the evidence of the lily stem in these early works, it should be apparent that in the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Rossetti's use of the lexicon of Christian symbols was both complex and conventional—that is, intellectually rich enough to be engaging, yet straightforwardly traditional enough to be readily understood at some level by a reader-spectator with knowledge of the Christian story, especially as told in the Catholic continuity. W. B. Yeats may not be entirely right in suggesting that the primary function of the lilies in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* is to make "the more important symbols, the women's bodies, and the angels' bodies, and the clear morning light, take that place, in the great procession of Christian symbols, where they can alone have all their meaning and all their beauty,"<sup>16</sup> but his statement has the merit of pointing forcefully to the teleological framework in which Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite work occurs.

In the other sonnet on the frame of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* Rossetti likens the Virgin to "An angel-watered lily, that near God / Grows and is quiet" (*Works* 173). The terms of this comparison, like the very presence of an angel in the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*—an angel with one hand touching the lily stem and another hand on the *caritas* volume—indicates to the spectator that at the time depicted in the painting there was no unbridgeable rift between the realms of earth

and heaven, thing and idea, natural and supernatural. Not only is such a (Medieval, Tractarian) conception of reality at variance with what Eliot would later call the "dissociation of sensibility" (the fall into dualism that many thinkers, including Rossetti and Eliot, took to have occurred at or after the Renaissance), but it also undergirds the painting's sacramental features and its iconic implications. Pre-Raphaelite naturalism here enacts a kind of Viconian *ricorso*, returning through time and space to represent a moment which, though *prior* to the Incarnation, resonates with suggestions of Catholic ritual that indicate an openness to what Northrop Frye calls a "metaphorical" ("this is that") sense of the (real) presence of the divine in the world.<sup>17</sup> Most notable in this regard is the altar-like balustrade complete with flowers and a frontal, a constellation of suggestions of the Catholic Mass that pushes such nearby figures as the trellis-work cross and the hieratic grape vine beyond allegorical or metonymic realism ("this is put for that": "the lily . . . / Is Innocence") towards metaphorical or sacramental identity—an identity which, of course, could only be accepted and experienced by a believing Catholic. It may well be that the metaphysic of imminent revelation and presence that underlies the subject and the aesthetic of both the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* is an index of Rossetti's own state of spiritual expectancy in the late forties and early fifties. Was Rossetti at this time a man who, like the young Mary in *Girlhood*, was awaiting religious revelation while in the meantime dedicating himself to religious art? Since there is no decisive external evidence bearing on the matter of Rossetti's faith in the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood<sup>18</sup> and, moreover, no internal way of telling whether any religious painting issues from genuine faith *or not*,<sup>19</sup> the answer to this question can only be that such pictures as the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* imply an artist who certainly understood, probably entertained and possibly accepted the Christian hypothesis and its implications, both spiritual and artistic.

Before leaving the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* it is worth focusing for a moment on those aspects of the painting that are less symbolic and intellectual than affective and emotional:<sup>20</sup> the facial expressions and physical postures of the Virgin, the angel, St. Anne, and St. Joachim. These are the aspects of the painting that do not simply convey information or intimate significances but, rather, elicit response:

by contemplating the Virgin's face (particularly her eyes), for instance, the spectator can enter into an empathetic give-and-take situation whereby, in attempting to understand, he comes to experience the mental and physical state that could give rise to the Virgin's expression and posture. When time is spent interacting with the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* in this way, there emerges the realization that the common attitude conveyed by the three figures in the painting is one of indifference to individual concerns—an indifference that achieves the power of an assault on individualism. In violation of the egotistical convention of seeing and being seen, none of the figures in the painting looks either at another figure or at the spectator; rather, their eyes and their activities bespeak a concentrated and selfless concern with some "other" that is—true to the metaphysical and aesthetic assumptions of the painting—both physical and spiritual: the angel stares at the lily, emblematic of Innocence; St. Joachim looks to the vine, metaphoric of Christ; St. Anne looks downwards, hands folded in an attitude of prayer. For her part, the Virgin has in her eyes a look that is entirely consistent with the conceptual assumptions of the picture: looking both inwards and into eternity, her eyes convey a dawning of awareness of her inner identity *and* her sacred role.

The implied painter of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* or, to put it differently, the type of artist emulated by Rossetti at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, is St. Luke, the apostle who is cast by tradition as the portrait painter of the Virgin Mary.<sup>21</sup> Sometime before September, 1849 Rossetti apparently produced a design of "St. Luke preaching, with pictures of Christ and the Virgin"<sup>22</sup> and in 1849 he wrote "St. Luke the Painter," the first of the three sonnets on "Old and New Art" that William Michael Rossetti considered "a manifesto—perhaps the best manifesto that it ever received in writing—of the Præraphaelite movement . . ." (*Works* 656). Between exhorting his fellow artists to "Give honour unto Luke Evangelist . . . who first taught Art to fold her hands and pray" and counselling them to "Kneel in the latter grass to pray again, / Ere the night cometh and she [Art] may not work" (the allusion, of course, is to John 9.4), Rossetti states in the octave of "St. Luke the Painter" the theory of symbolism that lies behind the Marian paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite period. When St. Luke "taught Art to fold her hands and pray," he says, She (Art) was initially fearful of rending "the mist / Of

devious symbols," of penetrating the code of fallen reality and thus apprehending the unoccluded light of divinity. Soon, however, Art came to understand "How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day / Are symbols . . . in [a] deeper way" and, hence, was able to look "Through these to God and [be] God's priest." While these lines are notable for their reticence about (1) the actual means of deciphering "devious symbols" and (2) the precise meaning of the world's natural signifiers (it would appear that in both regards a process of revelation is involved), they are quite explicit in their enunciation of a transcendental vision of reality which offers the initiated readers of Nature access to ultimate reality and a sense of artistic purpose. Despite the tentative note in its closing lines (art "might still / Kneel in the latter grass to pray again . . . ") "St. Luke the Painter" is firm in its advocacy of a conceptualist position that would make art the handmaiden of Christianity. Even David G. Riede, who finds intimations of the "symbolist art" of a sceptical Rossetti in "St. Luke the Painter," admits that the sonnet's insistently Christian stance indicates that at the time of its writing the poet-painter was "not yet willing . . . to unmoor his symbols and let them drift to more personal, more subjective, bearings."<sup>23</sup>

In arguing that at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood "every detail in Nature" was "a sacramental embodiment of spiritual reality" for the young Rossetti, Humphrey House astutely relates the "status of symbols, allegories and emblems" in the poet-painter's early work to the "theologically sacramental" symbolism of Dante and to the "sacramental doctrine in the Oxford Movement."<sup>24</sup> For the next phase of the present discussion—an examination of the "unmooring" of Rossetti's symbols—the likely sources of the conception of nature and symbol expounded in "St Luke the Painter" are of less importance than two matters: first, the obvious applicability of the symbolic theory of the sonnet to such early works as "My Sister's Sleep" and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* where the dawning "day" is a symbol "in a deeper way," *is* in a sacramental sense the incarnate Son-sun; and, second, the obvious *inapplicability* of the same symbolic theory to most of Rossetti's later poems and paintings, particularly those of the early sixties such as "The Song of the Bower" (1860) and *The Blue Bower* (1865) where no transcendental reality is implied or intimated, but, in marked contrast, a woman in lush surroundings is represented simply for sexual and

decorative purposes. When in 1864 Rossetti described the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin* to Ford Madox Brown, one of his earlier mentors, his judgment of it as being "the work of quite another 'crittur' . . ." (*Letters*, II, 534; "'crittur'" being suggestive of Whistler's influence on him) indicates how far he had travelled both aesthetically and spiritually since the days of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. From proclaiming Art the handmaiden of religion he had moved, arguably through the intermediate stage of making one art the servant merely of another (for do not the illustrations to Moxon's Tennyson prepare the way for an art that is unabashedly self-referential?), towards forms of aestheticism and, later, *symbolisme* that were in part derived from his contact with Whistler, Swinburne and others and in part contingent upon developments in his own spiritual life. Symptomatic of these developments is Rossetti's attitude to the "Old and New Art" sonnets in the late sixties and his revision during the preparation of *Poems* (1870) of "St. Luke the Painter." While excluding all three sonnets from the version of *The House of Life* included in *Poems* (1870), he permitted "Saint Luke the Painter (*For a Drawing.*)" to appear among the "Sonnets for Pictures, and Other Sonnets," but with one, very telling, change: whereas in 1849 the phenomena of nature had been "symbols . . . in a deeper way,"<sup>25</sup> by 1870 they have become "symbols . . . in some deeper way." The reason for the greater sense of uncertainty in the *Poems* (1870) version of the sonnet is that, whatever the depth and strength of his commitment to a Christian view of the world at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti was by the late sixties a long-standing agnostic in everything but name.

By a curious coincidence that probably has less to do with chance than with the religious temper of the mid-Victorian period, the year in which Rossetti was preparing *Poems* (1870) for publication was the same year, 1869, in which Thomas Huxley coined the word agnostic to describe someone who, in the *OED* definition, "holds that the existence of anything beyond and behind material phenomena is unknown and (so far as can be judged) unknowable, and especially that a First Cause and an unseen world are subjects of which we know nothing." Defined in these terms, agnosticism bears little relation to Rossetti's conceptions of reality and symbolism, except, perhaps, those that are implied in his most purely art-for-art's sake works of the late fifties and sixties—*Monna Vanna* (1866), for example, and *Monna Rosa*

(1867). In what sense, then, can Rossetti be described as an agnostic? Recent research and thinking by such theologians as Karl Rahner, Heinz Schlette and Claude Geffré have discerned "definite variants and nuances within agnosticism";<sup>26</sup> specifically, these and other writers have drawn a distinction between the sort of negative agnosticism<sup>27</sup>—an unbelief born of uncertainty—that is typified by the *OED* definition of the term and a more open—or positive—agnosticism that is closer to scepticism than to atheism and, in any event, far removed from the indifference to religious and spiritual matters towards which Huxlean agnosticism tends. As a positive agnostic, Rossetti inhabited a universe in which, by Jacques Sommet's account, "uncertainty about God and the meaning of life takes the form of a quest which does not despise the searchings or the certainties of others, but does not copy them either."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, a remarkably accurate account of Rossetti's spiritual orientation from the early fifties onwards (if not earlier) can be drawn from Sommet's generic description of a positive agnostic: sometimes tending towards faith with a recognition of transcendent reality, he also tended, at other times, towards negative agnosticism, with an acceptance of the incomprehensibility of the universe. "I had better tell you frankly at once that I have no such faith as you have," Rossetti told the "religious *exalté*" James Smetham in December, 1865, adding by way of explanation: "Its default in me does not arise from want of natural impulse to believe, nor of reflection whether what I should alone call belief in a full sense is possible to me" (*Letters*, II, 582). Neither capable of sustaining belief nor content in unbelief, the mature Rossetti was a man in search of intimations of immortality that might lead to certitude. Open-minded, all-questioning, and given to the hope that it might be possible to come to knowledge and certainty of the existence of states "beyond and behind material phenomena," Rossetti very evidently embarked in the early fifties on a journey that would take him into some of the darker regions of what Sommet calls "the universe of positive agnosticism"—a universe in which many channels to the "unseen world" were available (including the spiritualism with which Rossetti began to experiment in the mid-sixties and the hermeticism with which he appears to have been familiar by the early seventies), and a universe to which the enigmatic, evocative and exploratory mode of *symbolisme* seems not merely a suitable but an inevitable response. Surely it is no mere coincidence that in 1853-54,

at precisely the time of the dissolution of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti wrote his first and most extended poem in the *symboliste* manner: that "darkly skeptical"<sup>29</sup> essay into a "Vaporous, unaccountable, / Dreamworld" of "Poet's fancies" where human "Love" alone is "Master" (*Works* 70-73) which originally bore the proleptically Whistlerian title of "Nocturn" (later "Love's Nocturn").

It is entirely consistent with positive agnosticism that, though he began writing such poems as "Love's Nocturn" in the early fifties, Rossetti continued in that decade and the next to treat of Christian themes like *The Passover of the Holy Family* (1849, 1855-56) and *The Annunciation* (1855), while also interrogating the *personae* of his paintings and poems about such matters as the epistemology of revelation and the apprehension of the supernatural. Interrogations of this kind are, in fact, undertaken in works of the Pre-Raphaelite period and earlier, though there the balance tips, albeit tentatively, towards the affirmation of a Christian perspective. In the version of "Ave" ("Mater Pulchrae Delectionis") that probably dates from "early, 1847" (*Works* 661), a speaker who locates himself in the nineteenth century (and may well be close to Rossetti himself) guardedly affirms that he is able through "love" to glimpse the Blessed Virgin in heaven: "I think that at the furthest top / My love just sees thee standing up / Where the light of the Throne is bright," he says, "The peace of nineteen hundred years / Is within thee and without thee; / And the Godshine falls about thee . . ." (*Works* 662). Between its inception in 1847 and its publication in *Poems* (1870), "Ave" "was subjected to a great deal of alteration" (*Works* 661), some of which could be revelatory of the darkening of Rossetti's positive agnosticism in the fifties and sixties. Whereas in "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis" the speaker is certain at least that "love" is the channel through which he apprehends the supernatural, in "Ave" that certainty is replaced by a question, addressed by the speaker to his "Soul," of whether it is "Faith, or Love, or Hope, / That lets [him] see [the Blessed Virgin] standing up / Where the light of the Throne is bright?" (*Works* 168). This epistemological uncertainty is reinforced in the *Poems* (1870) version of "Ave" by the question of whether the youthful Mary was herself a recipient of revelation and, if so, of how that revelation occurred. After pondering the matter of whether the young Virgin "knew," "discern[ed] confusedly," or had "not yet the knowledge" (*Works* 167) of the sacred events in which she was

destined to play a central role, the speaker of "Ave" gives his explicitly subjective solution to the problem: "I think," he says, "the whisper crept / Like growth through childhood . . . / Things common to the course of day, / Awed thee with meanings unfulfill'd" (*Works* 167).

Something of the same spirit of inquiry into the epistemology of revelation is present in the sonnet that Rossetti wrote in 1867 for *The Passover of the Holy Family*, the unfinished water-color that he designed in 1849 and executed in 1855-56. Although there is assurance in the octave of the sonnet regarding the typological significance of the activities depicted in the painting ("Here meet together the prefiguring day / And day prefigured"), there is in the sestet an agnostic but open attitude to the question of whether even Christ was aware of His destiny: "What agony's crown attained, / What shadow of Death the Boy's fair brow subdues / Who holds that blood wherewith the porch is stained . . ." (*Works* 210). That Rossetti by turns questions and accredits revelation (at least for Christ, for the Virgin, and for his speakers in "Ave" and "The Passover of the Holy Family") is as consistent with his positive, open-minded agnosticism as is his use in "Sudden Light" (1854) of the sense of *déjà vu* ("I have been here before, / But when or how I cannot tell . . .") to explore the possibility of a pre- and post-existence: "You have been mine before,—/ How long ago I may not know. . . . And shall not . . . time . . . our lives and love restore / In death's despite . . ." (*Works* 200). It could be said that a rhetorical signature of Rossetti's positive agnosticism is his use, as here, of verbal and syntactical structures such as "I *may not* know" (rather than "I cannot know") and "*shall not* time?" which contrive to doubt and to question the whole matter of transcendental significance and post-existence while at the same time leaving the door very much open to a confirmation which, if received (even through a conventionally suspect channel like spiritualism) would transform an agnostic into some sort of believer. Without unduly anticipating the discussion of subsequent pages, the point can be made now that the period 1869-70 was a crucial one in Rossetti's life, not merely because of the preparation and publication of *Poems* (1870) at that time, but also because in the autumn of 1869, while staying with Scott at Penkill Castle he apparently received the evidence he needed to awaken or reawaken his hopes for a life after death.



Such poems as "Love's Nocturn" and "Sudden Light" do not provide the only evidence pointing to 1853-54 as the time when Rossetti, now living with Elizabeth Siddal in Blackfriars and more removed than ever before from the High Anglicanism of his mother and sisters, underwent the interdependent shifts in spiritual orientation and symbolic practice that would eventually bring him personally and artistically to the darker regions of the universe of positive agnosticism. External evidence to the same effect is provided by William Bell Scott, who had come to know Rossetti in the late forties as a poet and painter of Catholic subjects—the "Songs of the Art Catholic" that Rossetti had sent him in November, 1847 and the Marian work that he had seen on a visit to the painter's studio in the winter of 1848-49. In the summer of 1853, Scott met Rossetti for the first time in over three years, and his comments are extremely illuminating. Sensing that the young poet-painter was "in transition," Scott observed in his diary:

. . . in the course of my experience of him he has changed his entire moral nature and views of life. . . . With regard to his poetry, the spirit that had made him choose "Songs of the Art-Catholic" as a general title died out.<sup>30</sup>

And Scott continues in another entry:

From the time of [William Holman] Hunt's success [c.1853] D. G. R. . . . gradually underwent a surprising development. His curious materialistic piety disappeared, burst like a soap-bubble, and the superficial prismatic colours vanished into air.<sup>31</sup>

As if extending Scott's observations, Hunt himself noticed that by the mid-to-late fifties Rossetti had "completely changed his philosophy . . . leaving Stoicism for Epicureanism" and painting "women of voluptuous nature with such richness . . . that they were a surprise, coming from the hand which had hitherto indulged itself in austerities."<sup>32</sup>

Amongst the poems shown by Rossetti to Scott in the summer of 1853 were two sonnets which, though written in that year, seemed to the older man to evidence yet the spirit of the "Songs of the Art Catholic." Dedicated one to each of Rossetti's High Anglican Sisters, Christina and Maria, "The Church-Porches" sonnets are controlled by a contrast between, on the one hand, the "dust" and "heavy sunshine"

of the "evil street" and, on the other, the "Silence, and sudden dimness, and deep prayer" (*Works* 198) of the church to which the three have come to worship. Not only is it significant that Rossetti decided not to include the highly personal and pietistic "Church-Porches" sonnets in *Poems* (1870) but also that, when revising the first of them for inclusion in *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881), he emphasized the aesthetic aspects of the church, changing the "gothic church door" of an earlier manuscript to the more craftsmanly "carven church-door" of the published version.<sup>33</sup> Here, writ small in the history of the first of "The Church-Porches" sonnets is the vacillation between reverence and aestheticism that characterizes Rossetti's entire *oeuvre*. The second of "The Church-Porches" sonnets was not published during the poet-painter's lifetime, but it, too, is interesting in terms of its creator's spiritual development. Although ostensibly descriptive of an actual departure from a particular church, it sounds a note of more general "regret and trepidation",<sup>34</sup> "The priest abideth as is meet / To minister," but, however much the poet and his sister may wish to remain within the church "for prayer," they have "no more to sing / Or say," and so must exit into the "heat" and "mist of the street." Indeed, there is about the second of "The Church-Porches" sonnets the sense of a wistful but necessary turning away on Rossetti's part, not just from a particular High Anglican church, but also from the Anglo-Catholicism which, as earlier intimated, lies in the background of the symbolic assumptions and practice of such works as "St. Luke the Painter" and the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*.

Something of the same wistfulness is present in another sonnet of 1853, "The Hill Summit," which may also have been shown to Scott in the summer of that year. When seen in conjunction with "The Landmark," written a year later in 1854, "The Hill Summit" points once again to a connection between the transition in Rossetti's spiritual orientation at this time and the shift in his aesthetic practice from allegorical realism to *symboliste* undecidability. In the octave of "The Hill Summit," where Christian terms and images such as "feast-day," "altar," "vesper-song," and "fiery bush" are used to describe a sunset, there is still a strong sense that Rossetti is being true to his Pre-Raphaelite conception of material form as the vehicle for spiritual significance. In addition to employing something very like the sun-Son metaphor of *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, Rossetti here alludes explicitly and

straightforwardly to the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3-4:

This feast-day of the sun, his altar there  
 In the broad west has blazed for vesper-song;  
 And I have loitered in the vale too long  
 And gaze now a belated worshipper.  
 Yet may I not forget that I was 'ware,  
 So journeying, of his face at intervals  
 Transfigured where the fringed horizon falls,—  
 A fiery bush with coruscating hair.

(Works 98)

In the sestet of the sonnet the speaker regrets that, though he may linger for an "hour" having "climbed and won this height," he must soon "tread downward through the sloping shade / And travel the bewildered tracks till night." Beside this sense of having reached a peak and entered on a decline, there is in "The Hill Summit" a curious combination of spiritual certainty and uncertainty: after castigating himself very much in the manner of the Christina Rossetti of such poems as *The Prince's Progress* for "loitering" rather than striving, and, moreover, having confirmed a past but sporadic awareness of Christian significances, the speaker acknowledges that he must soon embark on an uncertain journey into the darkness—a darkness whose significance (and this too is telling) remains at the close of the poem unexplained and uncertain. A far cry this from the explicit association of dark nights and dark landscapes with various Biblical passages in poems of the Pre-Raphaelite period from "St. Luke the Painter" to "The Card-Dealer."<sup>35</sup>

The combination of certainty and uncertainty present in "The Hill Summit" is also apparent in "The Landmark" where, as the title itself begins to suggest, the speaker assumes that at least certain objects in the external world are significant as points of orientation in a (teleological) journey towards something or someplace. This goal-seeking speaker expresses surprise and disappointment at the discovery that his progress through life is not being sign-posted in quite the way he had been led to suppose. The sonnet begins with a startled question, "Was *that* the landmark?" (Works 97), and the discomfited and destabilized speaker goes on to admit that he had expected to be guided by a sign

of traditional, unequivocal significance: he has thought "Proud piles should mark [his] station . . . / As altar-stone or ensigned citadel."<sup>36</sup> As even the Christological word "station" and the auxiliary verb "should" indicate, the speaker's earlier expectations had been underpinned by the assumption that pattern and purpose of an easily recognizable nature existed in his world. He now realizes, however, that his "landmark," his point of turning, was a "foolish well" into which he had merely thrown stones "to send its imaged skies pell-mell, / (And mine own image, had I noted well!)". The suggestion here of a playfulness that creates disorder in the objective and subjective realms is strong, as is the sense of having encountered an allegorical and sustaining phenomenon ("the foolish well") and failed either to recognize its significance or to draw upon its sustenance. Whereas the speaker of "The Hill Summit" had resolved to stay awhile on the "height" "And see the gold air and the silver fade / And the last bird fly into the last light" (*Works* 98), the speaker of "The Landmark," with no "light" or "bird" to detain him, resolves to recommit himself to journeying through life in a way that is reverential, teleological and, by implied contrast with his sportive behavior earlier in the poem, resolutely humble, serious, and unself-centred. As has probably been observed, the conclusion of "The Hill Summit," with its suggestion of a merely aesthetic response to the world (a world nonetheless conceived, perhaps again with a debt to Christina Rossetti, as in its last days), points more accurately towards developments in the late fifties and sixties than does the more resonantly Christian conclusion of "The Landmark." However, it is worth quoting from a letter of July, 1858 to Charles Eliot Norton to reaffirm that, for all his aesthetic tendencies, the Rossetti who wrote "The Landmark" a year *after* "The Hill Summit" would always retain the nostalgia or yearning for religious and allegorical certainty that is characteristic of the positive agnostic: in "*Pilgrim's Progress*," he told Norton, "the pleasant names of Heavenly places really make you feel as if you could get there if the journey could only be made in that very way,—the pitfalls plain to the eye and all the wicked people with wicked names. I find no shady hill or vale, though, in these places and pursuits. . . . It seems all glare and change, and nothing well done. . . . I see it is always to be thus with me" (*Letters*, I, 340).

A number of the poems and pictures from the early-to-mid-fifties indicate that at this time of darkening agnosticism Rossetti was by stages questioning and severing the connection that he had taken largely for granted during his Pre-Raphaelite days between images (whether natural or artistic) and fixed, recognizable significances of an allegorical or spiritual order. Although several examples of these tendencies could be assembled, a small selection will suffice for the purposes of illustration and discussion.

When visiting Northern France and Belgium with Hunt in the hey-day of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti had shown total confidence and awareness of convention in reading the allegorical and spiritual significance of such Christian paintings as *A Virgin and Child* and *A Marriage of St. Catherine* by Memmling but, in contrast, had revealed himself to be much more uncertain and idiosyncratic in interpreting such non-Christian works as Mantegna's *Fête Champetre*) and Ingres's *Ruggiero and Angelica*. In the appreciation of Mantegna's painting, for example, he treats Apollo as a surrogate reader who responds, not rationally to the ". . . allegorical dance of women" depicted in the work, but sensually to the women's physical presence:

Scarcely, I think; yet it indeed *may* be  
 The meaning reached him, when this music rang  
 Clear through his frame, a sweet possessive pang,  
 And he beheld these rocks and that ridged sea.  
 But I believe that, leaning tow'rds them, he  
 Just felt their hair carried across his face  
 As each girl passed him. . . .

(*Works* 188)

Here sensual and emotional response ("The heart's . . . pulse") is privileged over rational and interpretative effort ("the mind's labour") in a telling inversion of the traditional hierarchy of reason over passion as expounded, for example, by Sir Henry Taylor in the well-known Preface to *Philip Van Artevelde* (1831). The reason for this may reside in an understandable uncertainty on Rossetti's part about the intellectual or spiritual "meaning" of Mantegna's truly baffling painting. Be this as it may, by 1851 something of the same uncertainty is being manifested by Rossetti in the face of Christian images. Confronting Leonardo's *Our Lady of the Rocks* in that year,<sup>37</sup> the poet-painter addresses the

painting in a manner that manages to be at once reverent, allegorical, agnostic, and darkly subjective: "Mother, is this the darkness of the end, / The Shadow of Death?" he asks (in an allusion to Job 10.22), "and is that outer sea / Infinite imminent Eternity?" (*Works* 171). Misinterpreting the figure of St. John the Baptist in the painting as the soul of one of the dead, he offers in the sestet of his sonnet a morbid and personal meditation on its spiritual implications:

Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,  
 Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered souls  
 Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through.  
 Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols,  
 Whose peace abides in the dark avenue  
 Amid the bitterness of things occult.

(*Works* 171)

As the addresses to the Virgin and Christ in this passage reveal, Rossetti's thoughts in 1851, however sinister and idiosyncratic in this sonnet, nevertheless occurred within a Christian framework that encouraged him to look, not merely *at* an image or picture but also, and more important, *through* it with eyes that sought an allegorical and spiritual significance. Here again, as in "St. Luke the Painter" and the early Marian works, is evidence that at the time of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood Rossetti—to borrow Pater's description of Fra Angelico—"would have shrunk from the notion that what the eye apprehended was all."<sup>38</sup>

No such shrinking is evident in "The Woodspurge," the brief and much-anthologized lyric that Rossetti wrote in 1856 from what appears to be a more darkly agnostic perspective than anything previously completed. In "The Woodspurge," the poet-painter's intention seems to have been to describe a moment of intense awareness when the mind, sharpened but emptied by sadness and exhaustion, fixes upon a small detail which, owing to the circumstances of its perception, leaves a permanent trace in the mind of the percipient:

My eyes, wide open, had the run  
 Of some ten weeds to fix upon;  
 Among those few, out of the sun,  
 The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be  
 Wisdom or even memory:  
 One thing then learnt remains to me,—  
 The woodspurge has a cup of three.

(Works 205)

To the present discussion it matters little whether "The Woodspurge" was suggested to Rossetti by an occurrence in his own life or, as has sometimes been suggested, by an illustration in a botany book.<sup>39</sup> What is important is that, in presenting the woodspurge as a merely edeitic image, Rossetti raises two possibilities that would have been very troubling to many of his Victorian readers: (1) the possibility that human life is not necessarily a vale of tears in which sorrow is part of a process of education or soul-making whose end-product is "Wisdom"; and (2) the possibility that human character is not necessarily the sum of events in the past that are retained in "memory" for later use. Consistent with the ateleological implications of these possibilities is the use in the poem of a natural phenomenon whose overtones of the Christian trinity ("three cups in one") are all but muted by the tonally flat and noncommittally factual nature of its presentation. "The poem gives no meaning to the landscape beyond its mere existence," writes Carol T. Christ in her study of the relation between *Victorian and Modern Poetics*; "It introduces the possibility of a religious interpretation . . . only to refuse the significance offered."<sup>40</sup> "The Woodspurge," observes Riede, "embodies in a peculiarly pure form one kind of poetry that may result from a loss of faith in the visionary."<sup>41</sup> A simple contrast between the treatment of the trinitarian lily-stem in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and the treatment of the "cup of three" in "The Woodspurge" gives a vivid sense of the shift in Rossetti's symbolic practice and spiritual orientation in the early-to mid-fifties, and indeed (as Carol Christ argues) a vivid sense of the significance of that shift in the movement towards the realist and objectivist strains in modern and postmodern poetics.

It is a small, but nevertheless important, step from the emptying of images and events of extrinsic significance that occurs in 1856 in "The Woodspurge" to Rossetti's playful subordination in the 1858 sonnet "Beauty and the Bird" of a Christian allusion to a profane and sensual subject. After sketching a scene in which a beautiful woman (the actress Louise Ruth Herbert)<sup>42</sup> rewards a song-bird by proffering it a

seed on her tongue, Rossetti compares the situation to the one in "The Prioress's Tale":

. . . like the child in Chaucer, on whose tongue  
 The Blessed Mary laid, when he was dead,  
 A grain,—who straightway praised her name in song:  
 Even so, when she, a little lightly red,  
 Now turned on me and laughed, I heard the throng  
 Of inner voices praise her golden head.

(Works 204)

Here indeed, remembering the Yeats passage quoted earlier, is the placement of Christian materials in a decorative relation to what is now for Rossetti the more important subject of woman and sensuality. What Rossetti has in effect done is to use a Christian theme, a miracle of the Blessed Virgin, as an image of magnification to apply an intensity of praise to an event and a person in his own private world. In the process, of course, the Christian theme is trivialized and the relationship of central importance ceases to be that between man (or woman) and God or between material things and spiritual qualities. Of central importance now are surfaces as manifestations of feelings within isolated individuals who hear only each other and themselves: ". . . when she, a little lightly red, / Now turned on me and laughed, I heard the throng / Of inner voices praise her golden head." In "The Woodspurge," "Beauty and the Bird" and other works like them, Rossetti—to borrow the terms of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, II—cuts the Aesthetic faculty (Aesthesis) loose from the Theoretic faculty (Theoria), thus preparing the way for an art of amoral sense-perception or, in Ruskin's denigrating description, the arts of "mere amusement, [the] ministers to morbid sensibilities, [the] ticklers and fanners of the soul's sleep."<sup>43</sup>

A pictorial example of Rossetti's increasingly unconventional (not to say teasing and morbid) use of Christian images in the mid-to-late-fifties is to be found in *Hamlet and Ophelia*, the highly-finished pen-and-ink drawing conceived, apparently, in 1854 but not executed until 1858. (Hamlet, it is worth opening a parenthesis to note, was a favorite character for the poets of the *symboliste* movement, from Gautier to the early Eliot.<sup>44</sup>) Rossetti's drawing illustrates the scene in *Hamlet* (Act II, scene i) where the Prince, feigning madness and having just delivered the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, accuses Ophelia of sexual impurity





[*British Museum*]

Hamlet and Ophelia

("are you honest?", "get thee to a nunnery," and so on). As depicted by Rossetti, the couple is in an "oratory" where Ophelia, sitting with "the devotional book which her father gives her to read"<sup>45</sup> in her lap, has come to return some letters ("remembrances") to Hamlet. By Rossetti's own account, *Hamlet and Ophelia* was intended, not merely "to represent" a particular "incident" in Shakespeare, but also to "symbolize the character and situation . . ." <sup>46</sup> and, indeed, "the play" itself (*Letters*, I, 223). These are ambitious as well as *symboliste* aims, and it is interesting to observe how Rossetti attempted to achieve them.

At the centre of the picture, Hamlet is himself depicted with his arms outstretched along a carved screen. Below his left hand, in a recessed cupboard, is a small crucifix. Besides being an appropriate accoutrement for an "oratory," this crucifix serves as a silent and, perhaps, ironical gloss on Hamlet's posture, which is that of Christ crucified. From Hamlet's cruciform posture, the spectator is presumably meant to understand that Hamlet is suffering an obscure, psychological crucifixion of his own—which is both like and unlike Christ's original sacrifice. (Also gesturing towards martyrdom are the carved Catherine wheels<sup>47</sup> in the lower part of the picture space.) From the curvilinear shapes behind Hamlet's head (in back of his mind, as it were) to the placement of the "sacred book" in Ophelia's lap and the prominent and phallic handle of the Prince's sword, the picture contains many suggestions of Hamlet's sexual preoccupations. Also notable in this regard is the fact that with his right hand Hamlet is plucking the petals from the roses on the bush at the left of the picture space. One of these has fallen from the bush and this, together with his plucking of the other roses, is doubtless an allusion to Hamlet's obsession with the notion that Ophelia (whose dress is patterned so as to echo the roses) is a fallen woman/flower, like the central figure ("Yesterday's Rose") in *Hesterna Rosa* (1850-53),<sup>48</sup> Rossetti's illustration of *Philip Van Artevalde*. Such significances, though not particularly obscure, are nonetheless more private and less accessible than the meanings of the images in, say, the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*.

Where Christian allusions are present in *Hamlet and Ophelia*, their function is frequently personal to the point of indeterminacy. On the carved screen between the Prince and the rose bush is depicted a scene drawn loosely from Genesis 3 and inscribed "ERITUS SICUT [*sic*] BONUM ET MALUM." At the centre of this carving is the Tree of

Knowledge encircled by a crowned snake and guarded by two angels with flaming swords. Below, on the upturned seat of a misericord (the arms of which are decorated with the pagan "image of Eternity," a snake biting its own tail<sup>49</sup>), is a further carving inscribed UZZAUS. This depicts the incident in 2 Samuel 6.6-7 where Uzzah touched the Ark of the Covenant and was forthwith struck down by God. According to Rossetti himself, the "Tree of Knowledge, and the man who touched the Ark and died" in *Hamlet and Ophelia* are "symbols of rash introspection."<sup>50</sup> They refer, presumably, to Hamlet's introverted musings on death, suicide and sexual impurity, and, beyond all this, to his "rash" desire to touch untouchable truths and to possess unattainable, forbidden knowledge—knowledge, for instance, of what lies beyond death. Whatever their precise relation to Hamlet's character or to the play as a whole, the biblical carvings in *Hamlet and Ophelia*, like the crucifix, the setting (the "oratory"), and, indeed, Hamlet's cruciform posture are hierarchically subordinated to the picture's primary concern with the psychological processes of the introverted self; here again, in Ruskin's terms, is an art that "ministers to morbid sensibilities"—a *symboliste* art in which Christian figures are employed, not conventionally, but in a highly suggestive, personal, and esoteric manner. *Hamlet and Ophelia* was, of course, executed at about the same time as the ill-fated Oxford Union frescoes where it is Guenevere who in Lancelot's dream assumes the pose of the crucified Christ, this time with the apple of temptation in her hand. By confounding such categories as temptation and redemption, and sacred and profane love, syncretic works like *Hamlet and Ophelia* and the Oxford Guenevere, place the spectator in a baffled state of undecidability. Unable to discern an uncomplicated transcendental significance in such pictures, the spectator becomes, if only temporarily, himself an inhabitant of the universe of positive agnosticism.

It was during his close association in the late fifties with Morris and Burne-Jones (the three worked together with Swinburne and others on the Oxford Union frescoes in 1857-58) that Rossetti produced his most thoroughly *symboliste* paintings of the decade—such dreamy, musical and enigmatic pictures as *The Blue Closet* (1857) and *The Tune of the Seven Towers* (1857). Whereas in the case of the *Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, and even in the case of *Hamlet and Ophelia* and the Oxford Guenevere, the story that precedes the painting is keyed by the



*[The Tate Gallery]*

The Tune of the Seven Towers

presence of a "disambiguating" or "specifying" title<sup>51</sup> (and would likely be known to an educated general viewer), in the case of *The Tune of the Seven Towers* the spectator is given no such reliable clues to the painting's content. The title of the painting (also given to a mysterious poem by Morris) refers to the seven towers on a banner at the left of the picture space, an image that is thus invested with an aura of significance that the percipient tries in vain to translate into a precise meaning. More frustrations are visited on the percipient of *The Tune of the Seven Towers* by the presence in the painting of a number of conventional figures such as the scallop shell (an emblem of pilgrimage) and the orange branch (an emblem of marriage) whose allegorical meanings are evoked but not confirmed. Driven to the conclusion that *The Tune of the Seven Towers* is an intensely private work whose significance was known only to the artist and his *coterie*, the frustrated percipient may be led to conjecture the meanings of its apparently significant images: the scallop shell refers to Elizabeth Siddal's travels in search of good health at this time, the orange branch refers to Rossetti's thoughts of marriage to Siddal and so on.<sup>52</sup>

Other features of *The Tune of the Seven Towers*, most notably its narrative and affective aspects, may push the percipient towards the articulation of a more abstract transcendental significance for the painting. As his eyes and thoughts move to and fro in the confined space of the painting, noting, for example, the look of introspection on the faces of its central figures and the act of placing the orange branch on the recessed bed, the percipient might conclude that *The Tune of the Seven Towers* is "about" the mystery of sanctified or spousal love. Moreover, he might attempt to buttress this conclusion by reference to other paintings of the Oxford period such as *The Wedding of St. George and the Princess Sabra* (1857) and the *Dantis Amor* (1859-60) that Edward Lucie-Smith placed on the cover of his popular 1972 study of *Symbolist Art*.<sup>53</sup> For the present purposes, the main point about all this is that the *symboliste* qualities of Rossetti's paintings of the late fifties—their varying degrees of syncreticism, suggestiveness, and esotericism (as well as their frequent evocations of music)—do seem to have behind them the artist's concern at this time with human love as a channel to grace and immortality, a concern that is by no means inconsistent with a questing, positive agnosticism. Three poems of 1859, "Even So," "A Little While," and "A New-Year's Burden," are

similar to the paintings of this period in evoking the transcendental possibility of a Dantean love that ". . . will . . . bring the lovers heavenward," but none of these "melancholy lyrics of lost love"<sup>54</sup> ends by affirming such a possibility. Here is the beginning of "A Little While," with its secularized allusion to Christ's words of hope before the crucifixion in John 16.16 ("A little while, and ye shall not see me; and again, a little while, and ye shall see me"<sup>55</sup>) and its sense of occluded and possibly no longer existent transcendental possibilities:

A little while a little love  
 The hour yet bears for thee and me  
 Who have not drawn the veil to see  
 If still our heaven be lit above.

(*Works* 206)

The most extended poetic index of Rossetti's troubled concern with the relationship between mortal and eternal love is "The Staff and Scrip" (1849; 1851-53?), the literary ballad in which, in almost a parable of sanctified secularization, a pilgrim who has a firm Christian faith but no direct knowledge of God transforms himself into a knight in order to serve the beautiful lady, Queen Blanchelys, with whom he eventually achieves an eternity of love in the "imperishable peace" of "Heaven" (*Works* 63).

Just as Rossetti's "progrès intérieur" from the allegorical realism of the Pre-Raphaelite period to the *symboliste* suggestiveness of the Oxford days and later can be charted using the known chronology and changing assumptions of such works as "The Hill Summit," "The Woodspurge," *Hamlet and Ophelia*, and *The Tune of the Seven Towers*, so this same journey into the universe of positive agnosticism can be discerned in such works as *Found* and "Jenny," which evolved by stages during the early and middle stages of Rossetti's creative career.

"Jenny" is a case in point because, according to William Michael Rossetti, it was ". . . begun before the end of 1847 . . . finished towards 1858, but again revised late in 1869" (*Works* 649) after being exhumed from Elizabeth Siddal's coffin for publication in *Poems* (1870). Not surprisingly, the portion of "Jenny" that Rossetti's brother dates from 1847 is assured and allegorical in its interpretation of the sleeping prostitute; it is, of course, the portion of the poem that is most straightforwardly aligned with the Christian story and tradition—the

lengthy, Miltonic simile that likens "Lust" to a sleeping "toad" that entered the earth at the Fall and will endure there until the apocalyptic end of time (*Works* 41). Markedly less teleological and more agnostic are other portions of "Jenny" in which the self-questioning and all-questioning speaker casts doubt on the Christian view of evil both in his perception of the prostitute as "a riddle that one shrinks / To challenge from the scornful sphinx" and in his view of human life as the playground of "blindfold fates" (*Works* 40-41). While Rossetti was at pains, in response to Robert Buchanan's *ad hominem* attack in the famous "Fleshly School" article, to dissociate himself from the speaker of "Jenny," this does not mean that the "young and thoughtful man of the world" (*Works* 619) who speaks the poem (and who is an admirer of such things as Italian art) does not reflect many of its creator's concerns. Indeed, when the speaker asks himself what possibility "Of sweet forgetful second birth / Remains" for Jenny and, looking towards Heaven for illumination, finds none ("All dark. No sign on earth / What measure of God's rest endows / The many mansions of his house" [*Works* 40]), it becomes as evident as anywhere in the poem that he inhabits the same darkened universe of positive agnosticism as did Rossetti in the fifties and later. Interestingly enough, both the speaker in "Jenny" and the lady in "The Staff and Scrip" are readers who are frustrated in their attempts to discern transcendental significances in their worlds: with her "head upon [his] knee" like a book, the sleeping prostitute remains a "cipher" (*Works*, 36, 41) to the scholar in "Jenny"; and when the Queen in "The Staff and Scrip" goes to the dead pilgrim's scrip in the hope of finding "letters writ to calm / Her soul" she finds "Only a torpid balm / And dust of palm" (*Works* 62), the unrevealing remnants of the pilgrim's own apparently un Revelatory pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

A pattern that is to an extent parallel to the one just observed in "Jenny" is to be discerned in the various compositional sketches for what Rossetti called the "eternal"<sup>56</sup>—that is, interminable—*Found*, his one attempt in painting to put art at the service of society. Corresponding to the Lust/toad simile in the poem are the early (1853-55) sketches for *Found*, where biblical quotations and quite conventional emblems—the gutter, the fallen rose, the nesting sparrows—combine to indicate God's concern for the fallen woman and the ultimate achievement by the repenting sinner of a heavenly reward (the text of Luke

15:10—"there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth"—is inscribed on a tombstone in the 1853 composition study). In the oil painting that Rossetti left unfinished at his death there is evidence of a shift away from religious to sexual concerns: none of the purely Christian emblems are painted in, but the phallic commentary of the curbside stone in the early sketches has tumesced into the well-endowed cannon-cum-bollard of the unfinished oil. (In "Jenny," it may be noted, the dominant strain of sexual imagery is vaginal rather than phallic, for the prostitute is repeatedly linked with a flower whose petals are "spread," "unclose[d]" and "curled apart" in its hot-house "garden bed" [*Works* 38].)

The increasing prominence of sexual imagery in Rossetti's poetry and painting of the fifties and sixties has been frequently remarked by his critics, and is worth remarking again here on account of its obvious relation to the movement in the poet-painter's work from the conventional and apparently pious to the sensual and potentially disruptive. If there is, as Alistair Grieve has argued,<sup>57</sup> a phallic significance to the lily-stem in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* it is discreet and, in any case, appropriately incarnational: the Word, after all, is being made flesh at the moment depicted in the painting. Considerably less discreet and doctrinally justifiable is the sundial in front of the swooning Beatrice in *Beata Beatrix* (1862-70), Rossetti's "tombstone to his wife."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, in the sundial in *Beata Beatrix* there is an instance of the collocation of significances that marks Rossetti's shift from allegorical realism to *symbolisme*: both a conventional emblem of the passage of time and a surprising salute of a sexual nature,<sup>59</sup> the sundial functions in a *symboliste* manner to resist or subvert a straightforward reading of its significance in a painting which, in any event, confounds any attempt to place Beatrice's ecstasy into either a strictly religious or a strictly sexual category. Much the same process of confusing categories can be seen in Rossetti's revisions to "The Blessed Damozel" in the sixties and later so that its heaven becomes, to a Christian reader, an unsettling compound of *agape* and *eros*, a place able to accommodate both the Blessed Virgin and "lovers, newly met" (*Works* 4).<sup>60</sup> By *Poems* (1870), for example, the damozel who, in *The Germ* (1850) version of the poem, plans to petition Christ for no more than a continuation in Heaven of the "peace" that she and her lover had enjoyed while



together "on earth," has resolved to ask Him instead to eternize their earthly love:<sup>61</sup>

Only to live as once on earth  
 With Love,—only to be,  
 As then awhile, for ever now  
 Together, I and he.

(Works 5)

Far from abandoning a religious orientation in favor of his sexual and aesthetic concerns, Rossetti shows over and over again in mid-career a tendency to graft the latter onto the former in a syncretic manner that seems entirely consistent with a positive agnosticism whose hopes were increasingly centred on the possibility that earthly love might transcend death.

(This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will appear in Volume 70, no. 2).

#### NOTES

1. *Symbolisme et poésie: L'exemple anglais* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1947), 186.
2. *Ibid.*, 190.
3. See William M. Rossetti, Notes in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), 661. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Rossetti's poems are from this text, hereafter cited as *Works*.
4. For the dates of composition of Rossetti's artistic works, I have relied here and elsewhere (unless otherwise noted) on Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).
5. For the dates of composition of the sonnets in *The House of Life* I have relied on William E. Fredeman, "Rossetti's 'In Memoriam': An Elegiac Reading of *The House of Life*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 47 (1964-65), 298-341. For the dates of composition of Rossetti's poems other than the sonnets in *The House of Life*, I have largely relied on his brother's datings in *Works*. Any substantial deviations from William Michael Rossetti's datings have been noted.
6. *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965-67), I 239; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

7. Marvel Shmiefsky, *Sense at War with Soul: English Poetics (1865-1900)* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1972), 25.
8. Hallam's essay is perhaps most readily accessible in *Victorian Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange, 2nd ed. (1959; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 848-60.
9. *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London; New York: Longman; Norton, 1969, 1972), 406.
10. *Ibid.*, 363.
11. "The Art of Not 'Going Halfway': Rossetti's Illustration for 'The Maids of Elfen-Mere,'" *Victorian Poetry: An Issue Devoted to the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, 20 (Autumn-Winter, 1982), 69.
12. Quoted by Shmiefsky, 29.
13. *Ibid.*
14. For the clasp as an emblem of virginity here and elsewhere, see D. M. R. Bentley, "'The Blessed Darnozel': a Young Man's Fantasy," *Victorian Poetry*, 20 (Autumn-Winter, 1982), 38.
15. For more extended discussions of Rossetti's Marian work, see my "Light, Architecture, and Awe in Rossetti's Early Annunciations," *Ariel*, 7 (April, 1976), 22-30 and "Rossetti's 'Ave' and Related Pictures," *Victorian Poetry*, 15 (Spring, 1977), 21-35. See also Herbert L. Sussman, *Fact into Figure: Typology in Carlyle, Ruskin, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1979), 115-36.
16. This passage from Yeats's "Symbolism in Painting" is quoted, but construed quite differently, by David G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1983), 41.
17. This and the subsequent sentence are indebted to Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982), 5f.
18. Although see *Works*, 661 for William Michael Rossetti's assertion that it would be "erroneous" to draw from "Ave" the inference that his brother had a "definite Christian belief, and of a strongly Roman Catholic kind."
19. See Riede, 41f. for discussions of Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite work based on the assumption that he was insincere in his approach to religious matters.
20. I am indebted in this paragraph to two writers: to Anthony Wilden for his discussion of analog and digital communication in *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* 2nd. ed. (1972; New York: Tavistock Publications, 1980), 155-201 and to Walter Benjamin for his observations on seeing and being seen in the nineteenth century as outlined in Anne, Margaret and Patrice Higonnet, "Façades: Walter Benjamin's Paris," *Critical Inquiry*, 10 (March, 1984), 391-419.
21. See Mrs. [Anna] Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848), I, 124-26.
22. "The P. R. B. Journal," *Praeraphaelite Diaries and Letters*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1900), 220.
23. Riede, 41.
24. "Pre-Raphaelite Poetry," *All in Due Time* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955), 155-56.

25. See Riede, 40n.
26. Heinz Robert Schlette, "From Religious Indifference to Agnosticism," *Concilium*, 165, *Indifference to Religion*, ed. Jean-Pierre Jossua and Claude Geffré, Eng. lang. ed. Marcus Leféburé (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark; New York: Seabury, May, 1963), 56.
27. See Jacques Sommet, "Religious Indifference Today: A Draft Diagnosis," *Concilium*, 165, 6.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Riede, 101.
30. *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott, and Notices of His Artistic and Poetic Circle of Friends, 1830-1882*, ed. W. Minto (London: Osgood, 1892), I, 290.
31. *Ibid.*, I, 314-15.
32. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905-06), II, 143.
33. See Riede, 54n.
34. *Ibid.*, 54.
35. The sixth stanza of "The Card-Dealer" (*Works*, p. 174) is virtually a stanzaic version of Job 10.22; see D. M. R. Bentley, "In the Shadow of Death: 'The Card-Dealer' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Colby Library Quarterly*, XVII (September, 1981), 161-69.
36. This quotation is from the early version of the poem in the Fitzwilliam manuscript. In *Works*, 97 the speaker ". . . had thought / The stations of [his] course should rise unsought. . . ."
37. Since there are two "Ladies of the Rocks" by Leonardo, one in the Louvre, Paris and the other in the National Gallery, London there has been some confusion over the inspiration and dating of Rossetti's sonnet. With his assertion that "the sonnet does not relate to the picture in the Louvre, but to the nearly similar one in the National Gallery" (*Works* 663), William Michael Rossetti clarifies the matter of inspiration. But his conviction that his brother's sonnet was composed in 1848 (see *Works*, xxvi) is both mistaken and misleading. During most of Rossetti's lifetime, the English version of *The Virgin of the Rocks* was in the private collection of the Earl of Suffolk, from whom it was purchased by the National Gallery in 1880. Prior to this, however, the painting had been on public view several times, a fact reflected by Rossetti's own recollection, in 1869, that he wrote "Our Lady of the Rocks" "in front of [the] picture in the Brit[ish] Inst[itution] many years ago" (*Letters*, II, 726). An examination of the *Catalogues* of exhibitions at the British Institution reveals that *The Virgin of the Rocks* (called *La Vierge aux Rochers*) was lent by Lord Suffolk for exhibition there, not in 1848 or in any year prior to that, but in the summer of 1851 and then again in the summer of 1858. Since Rossetti was engaged in writing reviews of various art exhibitions at the British Institution and elsewhere in 1850-1851 (see *Works*, 577-86 and *Letters*, I, 102-104), it seems safe to infer that it was at this time that he saw "Our Lady of the Rocks" and wrote his sonnet for it.

38. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1910), 205.
39. See Elizabeth Luther Cary, *The Rossettis: Dante Gabriel and Christina* (New York: Putnam, 1900), 190, where Mrs. Darmesteter (Mary Robinson) is given as the authority for the idea that the inspiration for "The Woodspurge" was drawn from a botany book. The anonymous reader for *The Dalhousie Review* has suggested another source for the poem in Tennyson, *Maud*, II, ii, where the distraught speaker observes that "the mind, when fraught / With a passion . . . intense" will "Suddenly strike on a sharper sense / For a shell, or a flower, little things/Which else would have been past by!" (*Poems* 1081). The similarity between that lyric and "The Woodspurge" may indicate that Tennyson and Rossetti were drawing on a common source (*Hamlet*?) or psychological theory.
40. *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1984), 68,69. See also Jerome J. McGann, "Rossetti's Significant Details," *Victorian Poetry*, 7 (1969), 42.
41. Riede, 57.
42. For the inspiration and date of "Beauty and the Bird," I am grateful to Virginia Surtees, "'Beauty and the Bird': A New Rossetti Drawing," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXV (February, 1973), 84-86.
43. *Modern Painters*, II (1846; rpt. Sunnyside, Orpington, Kent: George Allen, 1888), 10.
44. See Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1981), 205.
45. Quoted from a letter by Rossetti to George Eliot in Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 61 (No. 108).
46. *Ibid.*
47. It is consistent with the broad shifts in artistic and religious orientation being discussed here that Rossetti's 1857 oil of *St. Catherine* depicts a model posing as the virgin martyr in an artist's studio.
48. See D. M. R. Bentley, "'Ah, Poor Jenny's Case': Rossetti and the Fallen Woman / Flower," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 50 (Winter, 1980/81), 177-198 for a discussion of the emergence and significance of the figure of the plucked or fallen flower in Rossetti's painting and poetry.
49. See *Works*, 245.
50. Quoted in Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 61 (No. 108).
51. Jerrold Levinson, "Titles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLIV (Fall, 1985), 36.
52. For these and other conjectures by Alistair Grieve, see the entry on *The Tune of Seven Towers* in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (Catalogue for the exhibition of March 7-May 28, 1984) (London: The Tate Gallery/Penguin Books, 1984), 281.
53. For a discussion of these pictures as pictorial epithalamia see D. M. R. Bentley, "'The Staff and Script' and Rossetti's Pilgrim of Love," *Trivium*, 16 (1981), 107-26.
54. Riede, 74-75.

55. These words are inscribed on the frame of *Mary in the House of St. John* (1858); see Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 66 (No. 110).
56. Rossetti to Jane Morris, quoted in Surtees, *Catalogue*, I, 27 (No. 64).
57. See A. I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Pre-Raphaelite Period* (Hingham, Norfolk: Real World Publications, 1973), 21.
58. Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 179.
59. The phallic significance of the sun-dial in *Beata Beatrix* is remarked by Grieve in *The Pre-Raphaelites* (Catalogue), 209.
60. The evolution of "The Blessed Damozel" can be readily studied in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Blessed Damozel. The Unpublished Text and Collation*, ed. Paull Franklin Baum (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina P, 1937). See McGann, "Rossetti's Significant Details," 50 for the contention that the poem's main subject is *eros*.
61. Riede, 83 makes this point.