

**Part One: Mnemosyne, Mimesis and Semiosis**

One cannot really describe Pre-Raphaelite man as a type, as one can Pre-Raphaelite woman, with her full lips, superabundance of hair, languid or aggressive expression, and generously dressed as she always is in a vaguely medieval or Renaissance mode, surrounded by masses of flowers. She is not of Millais nor of Hunt; she is the sole creature of Dante Gabriele Rossetti. She is typified particularly by his portraits of Jane Morris, and although she appears only in Rossetti's later paintings, she is the one destined to remain in the collective memory as the archetypal "Pre-Raphaelite Woman". It is as if she had set herself apart from her creator, and gained that identity in her own right.

D.G.R. was, to a far greater extent than his colleagues of the Brotherhood, a painter of women. He began with the models closest at hand, namely his mother and sister, whom he depicted in a religious atmosphere with lilies, angels, haloes and modest clothing. Later he picked up his models from the street, painting them among exotic flowers, in luxurious full-sleeved dresses. At the end, as we have said, he lovingly portrayed Jane Morris, the wife of one of his best friends, William Morris, as a terrifying, pagan, mysterious goddess of love: Astarte Syriaca. She stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Virgin Mary of his first two oils. And, between these two extremes, between the parental image and that of adulterous passion, stands Elizabeth Siddal, his wife, his Beatrice.

The process of symbolization of autobiographical data in general and received symbols is obvious and clear: the sister became the Virgin Mary, the pale Elizabeth Siddal became the beloved Beatrice, and Jane Morris, his last model (when he was ill, on drugs and almost impotent) became the unattainable yet overwhelming Astarte Syriaca. This was no mere transposition of everyday life into pictures, these women were his models. He knew and loved them in painting them. They were already part of his artistic experience.

The symbolic motivation of these three periods is consistent with Rossetti's current attitudes. The a-sexual love and religious devotion for the mother and sister are expressed in *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*, *Ecce ancilla Domini*; the spiritual love for the delicate Elizabeth, *Beata Beatrix* and then the desperate passion for the proud and enigmatic Jane, *Astarte Syriaca*.

We know that the relation between the creator and his creatures, the painter and his pictures, is always complicated by the relationship between the artist and his models. We remember William Morris ac-

# How to KILL YOUR BEATRICE and LIVE WITH YOUR GUILT

*The words  
and pictures  
of  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti*

■ SERGIO FACCHETTI

tually writing on a picture of his wife Jane: "I cannot paint you, but I love you". D.G.R. painted because he loved these women who were his models and his inspiration; unlike Morris, he loved them because he could paint them.

Certainly this process of idealization, this abstraction from reality, and reference to it only through a very long series of symbolic mediations, mediations that are almost literary in their source, is typical of D.G.R.'s painting. In the symbolic and allegoric meaning of his works he is similar to his master Dante, and dissimilar from his colleagues. Let us take a moment or two to look at them: Firstly Millais' first Pre-Raphaelite picture illustrated Keats' poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*. Keats borrowed the idea from a story in Boccaccio's, *Decameron*, (*Isabella da Messina; novella quinta, giornata quarta*). It shows twelve people sitting down to supper, and a servant standing nearby. Isabella is accepting one half of a blood-coloured orange from a loving Lorenzo. Her brothers display their evil natures, one staring with suspicion at the two lovers, the other kicking his sister's dog. While the blood coloured orange can be taken as symbolic of the love and death story, there is general agreement about the realism of the painting: in the splendid "Gothic dope" (as Timothy Hilton describes him) who serves at table; in the almost photographically rendered features of the old woman near Lorenzo, but, above all, in the stretched leg of the brother who is kicking the dog, his chair twisted in a precarious balance.



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI *THE GIRLHOOD OF THE VIRGIN MARY*.



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI *ASTARTE SYRIACA* 1877



It is this very precariousness, this movement captured in a glimpse, which is the real strength of the painting. We see the painting as the act of fixing the fugitive moment of reality. In *The Rescue*, painted in 1855, we look at a snapshot, as it were, which captures the actual moment of deliverance from the fire of the two children, while in *Ophelia*, painted in 1851/2, we have a strong visual image of a bird's nest among the meticulously delineated nature surrounding the pale corpse of Ophelia. Each painting is a fragment of a story, precise in its description, accurate in its detail. We could call the relation between each picture and the story to which it refers metonymic. Being unable to follow the diachronical sequence of the events, the painter chooses a fragment, the most significant one, and charges this part, in its synchronicity, with the meaning of the whole.

William Hunt's semiotic technique is similar in *The Awakening Conscience*, painted in 1852. He paints the actual "moment of truth" as we see the woman, her eyes alight, in the very act of rising from the chair, leaving her lover's arms. Here it would seem that Hunt tried to paint symbolically, with a moral implication. In *The Scapegoat*, 1854, Hunt paints the actual animal in a desolate Palestinian landscape. Thus the scapegoat, which is of course an important symbol with great psychological significance for humanity, is reduced here to its simple origin. And in *The Light of the World*, Jesus is in fact depicted holding a lamp. The metaphor is concept transformed into figure of speech, and if the painter wants to portray the concept he has only to transfer the figure from speech to his canvas, and in doing so the figure of speech becomes a real figure - Jesus who is the Light becomes Jesus Holding The Light. We are accustomed to this in contemporary comics where the author depicts anger in the speech and thought of his characters, by smoke (to burn with anger), hatred by the skull and crossbones, and a "brilliant idea" by a brightly shining electric light globe with radials around it. To be a realistic painter is a very difficult task. Hunt for example in his religious pilgrimage to Palestine, camped near the Dead Sea. He had to buy many goats before finishing his painting, because they did not survive the harshness of the desert. However, he didn't throw them in the Gehenna - it was a much more sensible idea to eat them. He found the problem of the Light equally difficult - the original oil lamp did not give out enough light, so he had all the trouble of fixing up a gaslight, which apparently gave off an unbearable amount of smoke and smell. Still undaunted, he then tried one which was incandescent, but, alas, was unpaintable. Nor was the hardship only for the artist, the human models for these real-

istic paintings often suffered too. We have all read about poor Elizabeth Siddal nearly dying of a cold, and yet being made to lie for many hours in a bath of cold water to model the unhappy Ophelia.

D.G.R.'s painting was never as technically perfect as was Millais' work. It may sometimes have been near an even, beyond the bounds of *Le Mauvais Goût* but it was certainly never as naive as Hunt's. In his first oil, *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary* (1848/9) he already shows his bent for symbolism rather than the "narrative fragments" produced in the same year by his two Pre-Raphaelite colleagues (Millais' *Isabella*, and Hunt's *The Eve of St. Agnes*). Rossetti's leaning towards symbolism or non-realism was due to the considerable literary skill he possessed; also his lack of academic and technical skills in painting could have proved an insurmountable obstacle any serious attempt of realism. For we cannot say that *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary* is either narrative or realistic in the way the other two paintings are, although the features of *St. Anne and the Virgin* are very naturalistic; the likeness to the models, his mother and sister was considered accurate by those who knew them. Yet, if a "narration" is a logical-chronological sequence of events, this painting is definitely not a fragment of a narration. The space in which the four figures of the painting are fitted, (Mary, Anne, Joachim and the small winged angel) could hardly be called realistic. They are set on the "classical" space of two orthogonal planes (i.e. making a 90 degree angle, a sort of T) and slightly inclined to the horizontal line that faces the beholder. The small angel is in front of Mary, but on the same line as Anne. Joachim is on the same line as Mary, but facing in the opposite direction. However, the focus of the painting is on the geometrical disposition of Mary and Anne: they are sitting at the meeting point of the two planes, Anne being almost a frontal figure, and Mary a profile; and, like the planes on which they are placed, their knees too are perpendicular. They are two sitting "Madonnas", knee-to-knee, two single self-sufficient figures. The narrative relationship in which the two figures are involved is rather vague: Mary is embroidering a lily, Anne is watching her. The actions are not important: primarily Mary and Anne are historical figures - the purely iconic level of the painting prevails over the narrative. In looking at Millais' "Isabella" we have previously mentioned that the literary source for this painting was Keats' poem of the same name, based on a story in Boccaccio's work. Hunt's "The Eve of St. Agnes" was also based on a poem of Keats of the same name; the poems are well-known, and largely narrative in style. Rossetti, however, chose to be very different from his colleagues in this regard; he wrote his own



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI MONNA VANNA 1866



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI 1849 -50



pre-text, a sonnet, rather like a Church litany, a hymn of praise, a eulogy of the Virgin:

*This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect  
God's Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she  
Was young in Nazareth of Galilee.  
Her kin she cherished with devout respect:  
Her gifts were simpleness of intellect  
And supreme patience. From her mother's  
knee  
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;  
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.*

*So held she through her girlhood; as it were  
An angel-watered lily, that near God  
Grows, and is quiet. Till one dawn at home,  
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear  
At all, yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;  
Because the fulness of time was come.*

The traditional litanies used in Catholic churches to recite the praise of the Virgin: *Turris Eburnea* (Tower of Ivory), *Vas Spirituale* (Vessel of Spirituality), *Rosa Candida* (Mystical Rose), are bold metaphors. The poem of D.G.R. does not quite reach this level, but his text is filled with rich adjectives (blessed, pre-elect, faithful, hopeful, strong, wise, quiet, circumspect) and the qualities attributed to the Virgin are: "Simpleness of intellect, supreme patience, strong in peace, in duty circumspect" (it could be interesting to speculate on how many painted icons originated at the iconic level of religious language: e.g. *agnus dei* [lamb of God] once a figure of speech, eventually became a much-used traditional iconic symbol.)

Roman Jakobson has pointed out that the mainspring of narration is association by contiguity: i.e. narration moves from one object to another in some way contiguous with it. The dimension of contiguity is linearity, or time. Metonymy is constructed by contiguous association whereby an object is designated through another object linked to the first by contiguity or proximity. Therefore narration has a close affinity to metonymy. Poetry has more affinity with the metaphor. On the formal level poetry is governed, not by the rules of contiguity, but rather by those of similarity; linear time is broken by the recurrence of sound similarity; and metaphors are the substitution of the name of one object for the name of another in some way similar.

This poem of D.G.R. is not completely without the dimension of narration, i.e. of time. Its sign is the past tense, the tense of narration: "she was young in Galilee". The

symbols, i.e. the metaphors, do not fit into the very slight narrative dimension of the poem. However, the painting is rich in these, and, perhaps because of this, the painting has no vestige of narrativity. The symbols alone say what must be said. These symbols were born as pictorial, and, while he felt that the painting was "descriptive" of the first sonnet, D.G.R. deemed it necessary to write another sonnet to "describe" the painting itself.

*These are the symbols. On that cloth  
of red  
In the centre is the Tripoint; perfect each,  
Except the second of its points, to teach  
That Christ is not yet born. 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.*

*The seven-thorn'd briar and the palm seven-  
leaved  
And her great sorrow and her great reward.  
Until the end be full, the Holy One  
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved  
Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord  
Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.*

So we have two levels in the picture, let's call them "narrative" and "iconic"; just as we have two poems, two texts related to the painting. The first text, the narrative, written before or during the actual work, written in the past tense, as we have already said -

"She was young in Galilee"...and the second text, written after the composition of the painting; this chronological posterity being also a subordination of the written text to the picture. This second text is a "comment", an explanation of the symbols in the painting, and the sign of the comment being the present tense. "On that cloth of red/ In the centre is the Tripoint." If the text is dependent on the painting because it explains it, then the painting is dependent on the text for its "iconic" meaning.

We would not know what the red cloth meant if we had not read the text, because the symbolic objects are in fact camouflaged in the narrative level of the painting. Strange as they are, they could be mere objects in the room where Mary, watched by her mother, is copying a lily on a scarlet cloth.

We have two texts and two different levels because of their temporal incompatibility. To return to Jakobson, narration is in the dimension of contiguity, of temporal

linearity, while symbols and metaphors are in the dimension of similarity. The symbolic iconic level does not agree with the linearity of the narrative one. As we know from Freud and from Levi-Strauss in myths and dreams time does not exist. The symbolic lecture breaks with the linearity of time. In the Old Testament the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac is analogous to the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament. To use a Jungian concept, past, present and future are unified in achronical synchronicity.

The cross and the other symbols of the passion are already present at this moment in the girlhood of the Virgin. Through a process of condensation, what is told in the horizontal syntagmatic dimension of narrative time is projected in the vertical paradigmatic achronic dimension of the symbols. In spite of their difference as texts, the two sonnets have nevertheless a similar beginning. "This is..." "These are..." The deictic pronouns clearly refer to the painting. In the first poem that is the only reference to the picture, the following lines being an autonomous narrative text. In these pronouns the words meet the picture. Yet the picture itself is full of words. Words are written on the books stacked on the floor - the names of the Cardinal Virtues and of the three theological virtues - "Fortitudo", "Temperantia", "Prudentia", "Spes" (Hope), "Fides" (Faith) and on the golden book, the top most one, the word "Caritas" (Charity).

"Tot dolores tot gaudia" - (So many griefs, so many joys) - these are the words inscribed on the scroll tied to the seven-leaved palm lying on the floor. The legend "Sis laus Deo" (May God be praised) is carved on the portable organ beside the hassock. The common quality of these words is their mimetic camouflage, as the symbolic objects, in the narrative level of the painting. The haloes around the heads of the Saints, Anne, Mary and Joachim are not at all mimetic, but a purely iconic convention. Nor are the names inscribed on the gilded circlets mimetised - "S. Maria S.V.", "S. Anna", "S. Joachimus". It was a tradition in the making of icons to write the names of the Saints on the haloes until the fifteenth century. Later, both haloes and names were gradually omitted when the paintings became more realistic. By re-introducing this tradition D.G.R. gave to his work that archaic and unnaturalistic "allure" which made it so different from the work of his colleagues.

What is the effect of putting words in a



picture? First of all, of course, it breaks the illusion of reality that the picture gives us. Painting, that most mimetic of the arts, tending often to confuse itself with reality, is reduced to its essence as "sign". Putting words in pictures is not only mixing two different codes, but also emphasizing what pictures and words have in common: to refer to something else, to be symbols, signs. Here we have not just any *two women* sitting together; these two women actually symbolise what their names and the words say—St Anne, The Virgin Mary. Through the use of words the mimesis is broken and the figures enter into the chain of "semiosis".

That the first function of painting is not mimesis but this "semiosis", anyone can appreciate from the fact that children are often inclined to write the names and meaning of their drawings and paintings underneath them. It is this intention, to make a statement, that gives a picture its meaning, not the fact that the picture is "similar" to what is referred to. And we still depend on words when we ask for the meaning of a picture—we may even be looking for those particular words—the title. The need for a title that we always have within us shows us that we want to know not what the painting "represents", which should be evident from the painting itself, but what it "means". The very necessity for titles shows us that words are the first form of symbolisation, and the symbols in a picture still depend on them. The insertion of words in paintings underlies this symbolic (i.e. semiotic) nature of pictures.

We sometimes forget, because of tradition and the old concept of western art as a "mimesis" of reality, that the "mimesis" was originally not the goal, but only a means of imaging, probably rooted in deep cosmological religious belief. As Erwin Panofsky has pointed out, the difference between Egyptian and Greek funerary art consisted in the fact that Egyptians wished to provide for the "future" of the dead rather than glorify their past life. The very immobility of Egyptian statues bears witness to the fact that they are not meant to portray a human being endowed with actual life, but to reconstruct a human body to be enlivened forever by a magical power. The Greeks, concerned with life on earth rather than with life in the Beyond, and apt to burn their dead instead of mummifying them, reversed this outlook. The Greek expression for tomb is *mnema*, that is, a memorial: and classical sepulchral art became accordingly *retrospective* and *representational*, whereas Egyptian sepul-



DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI BEATA BEATRIX 1863



JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS STUDY FOR ISABELLA 1849



chral art had been *prospective* and *magical* (*Studies in Iconology* page 183). I would claim that all Greek Art, not only the funerary, had one of its main functions in memory: the muses were daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory. So the similarity, the mimes to which the image referred, was the best way to remember it. Yet the target was not similarity, but religious compassion and memory, the idea that immortality can be achieved through art.

Memory can be equated with what we have called "semiosis": to signify something is nothing else than to remember, or to make memorable that something: a "signum" is for something else the "signatum". No semiotic activity would be possible without memory. To remember someone in his/her absence is to remember his/her name. It is in the act of identifying, of remembering, that words and images go together.

It was the main goal of religious art to identify and to remember, so any picture of a saint would have been useless without his/her name, i.e. the possibility of identifying him or her. The value of an icon lay not only in its beauty, but in its significance, its reference to the saint. That is why the names of the saints were "in" the painting. That is why we still need titles for paintings. There is nothing as powerful as a name to remember, to identify, to signify a person or a thing.

## Part Two :The Stolen Picture of Elizabeth Siddal

Oscar Wilde never believed that Elizabeth Siddal, the beloved sitter and wife of D.G.R., committed suicide or died because of an accident; he held to the view that she was killed by D.G.R. According to Wilde, Rossetti shouted "Here, take the lot", thrusting a bottle of laudanum in her hand. Of course, we have no proof-not even that Wilde ever pronounced on this matter, because D.G.R.'s major biographer, Oswald Doughty, in reporting it, gives no source. However, we know how disappointed these Pre-Raphaelites were by the discrepancy between the idealized concept they had of their models and their reality. And we remember Ruskin, who is said never to have consummated his marriage, fearing that, unlike all the works of art he had seen, his wife Effie (who, as you know, later married Millais) might have pubic hair. Unlike the real Beatrice, who had had the decency to die prematurely, Elizabeth Siddal although chronically ill, and her funerary portrait almost ready, persisted in the

idea of living.

It was no wonder that D.G.R., like everyone who kills the thing he loves, helped nature to imitate art, real life to fulfil his archetypal dream which

needed at this moment the dramatic conjunction of death and love. That is why he *could have* given her a generous dose of laudanum. If D.G.R. did not actually help her to die, he was certainly anticipating her death from the very beginning of their marriage, dreaming about it in a melancholic daydream that was so typical of him. It was the same morbid dream as the tender Latin poet Tibullus enjoyed-full of self-pity and the languid pleasure of suffering. Maybe it was not by chance that D.G.R. made one portrait of Elizabeth (among the hundreds) as the lover of Tibullus-Delia-in the same abandoned pose, her eyes half closed-as he used later for *Beata Beatrice*. *Beata Beatrice* is the most beautiful and famous of all the Siddal portraits. It represents the beatitude of Beatrice in the peace of heaven. In a letter of 26th March 1871, D.G.R. wrote about the subject to a friend:

*You are well acquainted with Dante's Vita Nuova' which illustrates and embodies symbolically the death of Beatrice, as treated in that work. It must be remembered, in looking at the picture, that it is not at all designed to represent death, but rather to render death under the resemblance of a trance, in which Beatrice seated on a balcony overlooking the city, is suddenly swept from Earth to heaven. You will remember how much Dante dwells on the desolation of the city in connection with Beatrice's death, and for this reason I have introduced it as my background, and made the figures of Dante and Love passing through the street and gazing ominously at each other, conscious of the event, whilst the bird, a messenger of death, drops a poppy between the hands of Beatrice: She sees through her shut eyelids, is conscious of a new world, as expressed in the last words of the Vita Nuova-"Quella beata Beatrice che gloriosamente mira nella faccia di colui qui est per omnia saecula benedictus".*

The *excusatio non petita* of D.G.R. that it is not at all intended to represent Death very curiously denies what everyone has always seen in the picture-a funerary monument in memory of the artist's dead wife. To this, the closed eyes of the woman, the metaphysical landscape with the figures of Dante and Love in the background and the deadly morbid charm that emanates from the picture all contribute. But what appears to us as a funerary monument was not

begun *after* the death of his wife, in February 1862, but *before*. the canvas was left unfinished even in 1864 (the actual date written on it), but it was not in fact finished and delivered until 1870.

D.G.R. had already imagined death of a sister in his poem *My Sister Sleeps*, and the death of Beatrice, as well as Dante's dream of the death of Beatrice, are the most persistent among the Dante-esque themes.

A water-colour entitled *Dante's dream at the time of the death of Beatrice* was begun before Elizabeth Siddal's death (the date on the picture is 1856). Ruskin worried that in his confused and grieving state after her death Rossetti might have rubbed it out, but, according to the evidence, the picture was not actually finished until 1864. A larger reproduction in oils was made of the water-colour in 1871, i.e. much later. It is the largest oil D.G.R. ever painted - 83cm x 125cm. In the water-colour a certain Mrs. Hannay sat for Beatrice; in the oil painting Beatrice has the features of Jane Morris. By the time Evelyn Waugh wrote his Biography of D.G.R. this oil was the best known of all Rossetti's work. Waugh wrote, "Reproductions of it of varying sizes can be found in almost any picture shop". Certainly Beatrice's death was a favourite theme among the subjects he took from Dante. At the very beginning of his career (in 1849), he did a pen and ink drawing entitled *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*. The subject of the picture is Dante drawing an angel illustrating a passage in the *Vita Nuova*:

*On that day on which a whole year was completed since my lady had been born into life eternal, thinking of her as I sat alone, I betook myself to draw the semblance of an angel...*

A copy of this was later made in water-colour (in 1853), and the head of Elizabeth Siddal is recognizable in the young woman behind Dante. D.G.R., like his master, often dreamed of a lover having lost his beloved. A portrait of the dead beloved is the subject of the poem *The Portrait*, written very early, in 1847: "This is her picture as she was:/It seems a thing to wonder on,/As though mine image in the glass/Should tarry when/myself am gone" Image and reality are confused; she is not the living woman, "And yet the earth is over her". Not only is she real, but later, in stanza five he says, "My soul another echo there". His soul is an echo of hers; here we have almost the contrary of the Platonic theory of art. As we know, Plato condemns art because art is an imperfect imitation of nature, which is in itself an imperfect imitation of ideas. So art



is an imitation of an imitation, and therefore imperfect twice. But, according to D.G.R., the *portrait's soul* goes beyond the real body to take the real essence of things. This is the power of art.

Let us repeat the passage of this psychodrama: 1. Her image is a real "she";

2. Her image is also a mystical experience. Therefore, this image is closer to her real essence, her soul, than the real "she" could have been; 3. My own soul is depicted in her soul. The poem seems to anticipate biography, yet it is rather an aesthetic manifesto. D.G.R. had already expressed similar concepts disguising aesthetic theory in autobiographical fiction in the short story *Hand and Soul*, published in the first issue of the PRB Journal *The Germ*. It tells of Chiaro d'Erma, a Tuscan painter; of his struggles and disappointments with fame, faith and the moral purpose of his painting. His own soul appears to him in the shape of a woman exhorting him to paint from the heart, wherein he will find God and all good works. He embodies this woman in a picture, and the narrator of the story, D.G.R. as a tourist visiting the Uffizi, finds the picture with the words: *Manus animam pinxit*, and the date, 1239. Reflected images can become independent and real, often more real than the persons to whom they refer, because in the image lies the soul. Not only the soul of the portrait, but the soul of the artist himself. The portrait of the dead beloved can appear as the portrait of his own soul. In this game of mirrors and pictures, and the duplication of images, we find the persistence of death. In the story, the woman portrayed is a duplication of the painter's identity. She is his very soul. In the poem there is almost the same concept. But why is the woman portrayed as dead in the poem? This is never clearly explained; it is only inferred from the reference to her in the past tense. This is a picture of her as she was, and even if she is not dead she is no longer there. The woman and her picture cannot stay together—the picture makes her presence superfluous. The picture, which is real, makes the real person unreal; it creates a monstrous duplication of what is already a duplication of the painter's soul. It is this very monstrosity of a duplication of a duplication which brings about the necessity for her death.

During his sad honeymoon in Paris, D.G.R. drew *How They Met Themselves*, an illustration of the legend of the Doppelgänger. Two lovers walking in the forest meet their doubles (which was considered to be a foretaste and sure sign of imminent



JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS THE RESCUE 1855



JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS OPHELIA 1851-52



death. It is one of D.G.R.'s many dreams of the death of his wife, and a clear expression of how death is rooted in the idea of the double.

Certainly the duplicated image will survive her death. That is the superiority of the picture over reality: the picture will last through the years. He pointed out that "in all the years that they would look on her must come to me".

All these themes, the confusion between art and life, the portrait as portrait of his own soul, and death as related to it, would then become, as we all know, favourite topics for Oscar Wilde; no doubt that is why we find the tradition of Wilde's claim that D.G.R. killed his wife spurious. Wilde was fascinated by the writer, painter and murderer Thomas Griffiths Wainwright, to whom he dedicated a much admired remembrance called *Pen, Pencil and Poison*, because, as he said, regretfully, "*Crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation.*" Wainwright, whose favourite poison was arsenic, poisoned his stepfather, his mother-in-law and his sister-in-law; he was caught, forced to leave his beautiful collection of majolica and his busts of Mark Antony, and sent as a convict to Tasmania.

In Hobart Town he painted the *Portrait of a Lady* which Major Power, the military commander of the city, sent to his sister Lady Blessington. According to Wilde, Wainwright's art was far more subtle and suggestive than that of the painter-protagonist of Zola's novel (who, after committing a murder, painted impressionist portraits of perfectly respectable people, all of whom bore a curious resemblance to his victim), because Wainwright "*had contrived to put the expression of his own wickedness into the portrait of a nice, kindhearted girl*". But in Oscar Wilde's book *The Picture of Dorian Gray* we find a very interesting symmetric difference from the pictures of D.G.R. Once again, there is the theme of the portrait as a portrait of the painter's own soul. Here, unlike the story of D.G.R., the *sitter*, Dorian Gray, kills his *painter*, Basil Hallward! The reappropriation of his own picture by Dorian Gray is complete. The painter who has depicted his own image through the image of the *sitter* does not exist anymore. But the same did not happen for D.G.R.'s *sitter*-her picture became the "me" of its painter.

In contrast to the changes Dorian Gray's picture undergoes along with his sins, we

find many pictures of Elizabeth Siddal. In this regard, let us read a few lines from a poem written by D.G.R.'s sister Christina, entitled *In an Artist's Studio*:

*One face looks out from all his canvasses,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:*

*Not as she is, but was when hope shone  
bright;*

*Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.*

It was not by chance that it was a woman who caught, in her poetry, with feminine sensitivity, the character of the relationship between D.G.R. and his beloved *sitter*. Not as she is, but as she fills his dream; woman as the receptacle of man's projections. The idea of Platonic Love -the coming together as One of two souls- results in fact in one taking possession of the other. This was not of course the fate of Elizabeth alone, rather it was that of the many Beatrices throughout the history of art and literature; they are a mute presence, speaking only through the voice of their men.

It has already been pointed out that the relationship between the historical Dante, the Alighieri, and his Beatrice, consisted only in a greeting. That was their only form of communication and reciprocity. But when Beatrice rejected the greeting because she thought she might be betrayed, Dante does not stop loving her. Love is an internal experience for the lover; love is self-sufficient; the beatitude of love does not depend on reciprocity. "*Amore... ha posto tutta la mia beatitudine in quello che v'è venire meno*" (love has set my beatitude in what cannot be taken away from me).

The happiness of the lover is in the expression of praise for the beloved, without any expectation of reciprocity or gratitude. Love becomes a purely internal and intellectual experience, abstracted from the reality of the beloved. The next step in this sequence is the death of the woman. If not a biographical reality, it is a doctrinal necessity, to allow the process of idealization to develop - her sanctification. At this stage her real presence could only be an obstacle to this process, which is entirely carried out in the mind of the man.

Coming back now to our D.G.R. and his Beatrice, the one thing we cannot say is that they have a good understanding, an equal and reciprocal relationship. We will never find this in the small incidents in their lives which have been recorded in the many

good biographies of D.G.R.; but let us look at it in the pictures themselves: The different symbolic meanings of frontality and profile in pictures have been noted by Mayer Schapiro. Figures in profile tend to relate to each other in a narrative dimension, and to ignore the beholder. A profile in a picture is a sign equivalent to the third person, and the past tense in a written text: these are the signs of narration. The profile figure is predominantly narrative. Conversely, a frontal figure tends to relate directly to the beholder. It has the character of reciprocity, that which in language is indicated by the first and second person, and the present tense. In the conversation the "I" becomes "you" and vice versa, as long as the sender of the message becomes the receiver. The "I" is the sign of the one speaking, the "you" the sign of the person to whom the "I" is speaking.

The frontal figure in a picture tends to have a symbolic meaning. In fact, as we know from an analysis of *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*, the language of symbols refers to the present tense. Frontality, as we know, is the typical style of the religious icon, or of portraits that convey a political meaning such as hierarchy or the importance of power. The frontal figure is seen by the beholder from the external point of view of third person and past tense. The frontal picture speaks as an "I" to the "you" of the beholder in the present tense. This becomes more evident when frontality is accentuated by the direct look from the face of the figure to the viewer. The beholder seems to see and to be seen at the same time.

Now if we look at the many pictures of Elizabeth Siddal, what prevents a perfect frontality is her way of looking - she is always depicted with downcast eyes. She is, as in the *Beata Beatrix*, looking down with half-closed eyes, someone we can see, but who cannot see us. She does not have the sign of reciprocity. During these years Beatrice became an iconological type, pale, shy and humble, according to her literary model. After abandoning the model of Beatrice, D.G.R. mastered the full frontal face, and at the same time left behind every trace of narration in his work. His pictures no longer depend on literary texts. He no longer illustrates his beloved Dante, or the Arthurian Romances. All this comes to an end with the death of Elizabeth.

D.G.R. now embarked upon a sequence of portraits of women staring with a transfixing glance from the canvas. So we see



the parabola from the Virgin Mary to the Astarte Syriaca not as a dramatic change of content in his work (although a constant feature element is the unique female symbol-the "anima" as Jung would say-in her positive and negative aspects: Mary and the oriental goddess, the two antithetical variations) but also as a stylistic shift from the profile, the narrative, to the purely iconic, full face, frontal paintings. This purely iconic dimension is reached also because, at the same time, this change brings the end of the dependence of the paintings on written texts. D.G.R. was never really a narrative painter in the way we have seen Millais or Hunt to be. His way of referring to written texts is never metonymical, rather it is metaphorical or symbolical. When he translates words into pictures he always makes a symbolic condensation of the story.

Symbols and narration can be schizophrenically separated, as in *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*, or they can be perfectly fused, as in *Mary in the House of St. John*, the later subject of which may have been suggested by an early poem of D.G.R., *Ave of 1849*.

The achievement of the gallery of frontally painted women was a kind of liberation for D.G.R., a release from something held back for so long. There is no vestige of narrativity left in these paintings - the symbolic side has definitely won. It is an almost monotonous and monomaniacal symbol - the same woman, in different dresses and with different names, who, unlike the portraits of Elizabeth, stares unendingly at the beholder. We no longer have an external approach, of the third person, but a provocative, connotative "you".

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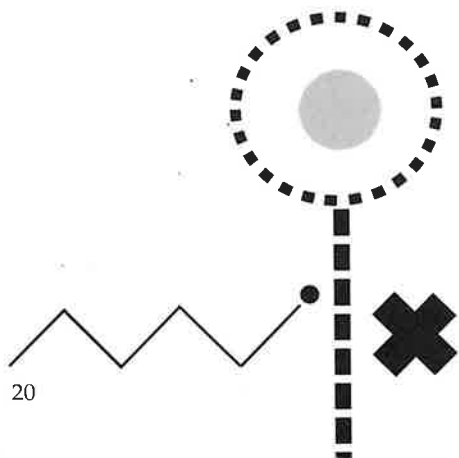
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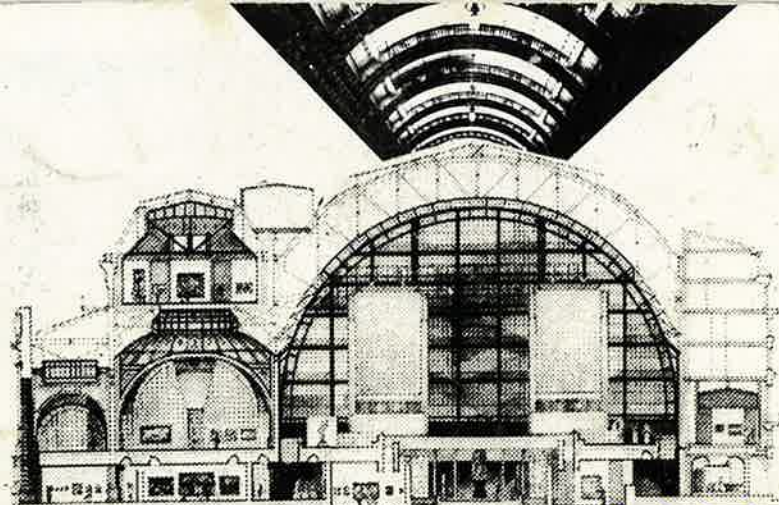


DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI HOW THEY MET THEMSELVES 1851-60





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## ERRATA

Some unfortunate mistakes occurred in this issue:  
1) on page 3 the subtitle of the article "How to Kill Your Bentrice and Live With Your Guilt" should be: "Words and pictures in the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti"; 2) on the same page the fifth title from the top should read: "John Wolsely 1984-87: From Wittenoom to Broome", the author is Josko Petkovic (the name of the author is also missing at the beginning of the article, page 23) The review "Fibre Works 1988" (pages 34-35) is by Stephanie Dimmock.  
We apologize for these errors.





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