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Therapy or Obsession? Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Problems with His Self

A comment that can often be heard with reference to the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is that in all his works he painted the same woman. A strange enough comment, for there are very decisive differences between the women that appear in his *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* or *Venus Verticordia*, differences obviously coming from the different subjects of the paintings and from the physical differences between the models. On the other hand, all those women, perhaps with the exception of the early canvases for which the model was Rossetti's sister Christina, are disturbingly similar, almost identical, despite those obvious differences. The props may vary, but the female figure in the centre of a Rossetti's canvas remains the same: her naked face with a pair of languorous eyes, the copious hair, the garment, dominate the canvas and the viewer's attention. In a very fundamental way, the woman in Rossetti's paintings *is* always the same one.

There is another aspect of this problem – among the female faces that Rossetti's art is *made of*, so to say, there is one which occupies a privileged position: a face painted and repainted, sketched, drawn, portrayed, imagined and re-imagined, the prototype and the ultimate version of Rossettian beauty: the face of Elizabeth Siddal.

When she was “discovered” by the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, Siddal worked in a London milliner's shop and was a simple, ordinary girl. Her beautiful face and coppery-blond hair attracted the attention of Walter Deverell, who persuaded her to model for his painting. Deverell introduced Miss Siddal to the other members of the PRB and quickly Siddal became the chief model for all the painters – her face can be seen in many of their early masterpieces, perhaps most characteristically in Millais's *Ophelia*, which, as is generally believed, depicts her features most accurately. She was a model for all, but her fate was to become the muse of only one of them – Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

For there is in the story of Siddal and Rossetti an element of what could be termed "fate," or perhaps more accurately, a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that element is the imagined connection between their story and the story of Dante Alighieri. Rossetti identified himself with Dante since an early age – it was in honour to that great poet that he started using his second name as first – and that identification only became complete when his own Beatrice appeared in 1850. The theme of a mourning for a lost love, a love made impossible by death, like the love of Dante for Beatrice, is omnipresent in his work ever since the early poem "The Blessed Damozel," and the two themes are brought together in an unfinished story entitled "St. Agnes of Intercession," a gothic-type, uncanny tale of authorial uncertainty, double identities and lost love, made even more uncanny and frightening if one realises how much it foretells the actual lives of Rossetti and Siddal.

The meeting points between fiction and reality in "St. Agnes of Intercession" are striking, especially that in 1850, when the story starts, most of that reality is yet to happen. The narrator is a young painter and in many ways Rossetti's *alter ego*. His initial interest in painting was kindled in childhood by a book he read at home, which resembles the circumstances in which young Dante Gabriel began his adventure with art, pouring over engravings in books or colouring into outlines of painting.¹ The narrator's artistic creed, which he pronounces while describing his work on his first successful picture, is the same as the idea that animates Rossetti's own artistic manifesto, his earlier story entitled "Hand and Soul" – the narrator of "St. Agnes" tells us, "... all work, to be truly worthy, should be wrought out of the age itself, as well as out of the soul of its producer, which must needs be a soul of the age."² This idea that artistic work should depict the artist's soul is a central one for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and it sheds an additional light on the theme of Dante and Beatrice that his work explores.

The main similarity between Dante Gabriel and his narrator is that in the story, the symbolical identification of Rossetti with an earlier artist becomes an actual and terrifying reality. The narrator of "St. Agnes" discovers, to his horror, that his first successful picture, a portrait of his beloved, is in fact a contemporarily disguised copy from a fifteenth-century Italian painter. The young painter's initial apprehension, provoked by a remark of an art critic that the two paintings are very similar, turns into horror when he faces the painting in question after a long search:

¹ Brian and Judy Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: MacDonald and Jane's, 1977), 15.

² Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "St. Agnes of Intercession," "Hand and Soul" in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, edited with preface and notes by William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), 558.

The picture is about half the size of life: it represents a beautiful woman, seated, in the costume of the painter's time, richly adorned with jewels; she holds a palm branch, and a lamb nestles to her feet. The glory round her head is a device pricked without colour on the gold background, which is full of faces of angels. The countenance was the one known to me, by a feeble reflex, in childhood; it was also the exact portrait of Mary, feature by feature. I had been absent from her for more than five months, and it was like seeing her again.³

As if it were not enough to have unknowingly copied an early Italian masterpiece (of course there is a deep current of authorial anxiety of influence here, carefully analysed for instance in Elizabeth Helsinger's *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*), the woman represented as St. Agnes turns out to be an exact copy of the narrator's fiancée. Finally, the narrator's eye is caught by the mention of that Italian painter's self portrait in the gallery catalogue, and when he walks up to see it, comes "face to face with [*himself*]!"⁴

The narrator's discovery of the two portraits understandably shatters his calmness and self-command. From among the possible explanations for the whole story, however, he chooses that which is obviously impossible and in that, very Rossettian:

That it *was* my portrait, – that the St. Agnes was the portrait of Mary, – and that both had been painted by myself four hundred years ago, – this now rose up distinctly before me as the one and only solution of so startling a mystery, and as being, in fact, the result round which, or some portion of which, my soul had been blindly hovering, uncertain of itself.⁵

The swiftness with which the narrator moves from fear to an agitated acceptance of that impossibility is no less striking than his readiness to identify himself completely with the Italian painter whose work he mysteriously copied. The young painter is terrified at his discovery of this doubled double identity and the shock he goes through, the "tumult of spirit," brings upon him a serious health collapse.

There is, however, in this discovery and the young man's reaction to it, something of a hidden pleasure. The feeling he experiences on seeing his fifteenth-century "self-portrait" he describes as "the most lively and exquisite fear,"⁶ the double meaning of "exquisite" suggesting pleasure and pain at the same time.

³ Rossetti, "St. Agnes of Intercession," 564.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 566.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

It is as if the shock of having perpetrated an involuntary, unconscious act of plagiarism, were being alleviated by the recognition that his works, so similar to those of the Renaissance Italian painter in sharing "a certain mental approximation,"⁷ were this way automatically becoming works of art endowed with the objective value of the masterpieces they so closely resembled.

"St. Agnes of Intercession" is a prophetic text not only with reference to Rossetti's relationship with Elizabeth Siddal but also to his general artistic life. The very description of the fifteenth-century painting of St. Agnes, with angels in its ornamental background, resembles more Rossetti's watercolours from the 1850s than actual Italian paintings from the fifteenth century, while the comment in the gallery catalogue on how the picture was produced provides an accurate, if at times cruel, description of Rossetti's usage of the face of his beloved in his paintings:

The present picture, though ostensibly representing St. Agnes, is the portrait of Blanzifiore dal l'Ambra, a lady to whom the painter was deeply attached, and who died early. ... [she decided that] Bucciolo should paint her portrait before she died; for so, she said, there should still remain something to him whereby to have her in memory. ... On the third day, while Bucciolo was still at work, she died without moving. After her death, Bucciolo finished the portrait, and added to it the attributes of St. Agnes, in honour of her purity.⁸

It is in one of Rossetti's most successful paintings, *Beata Beatrix*, that this sad link between art, love and death becomes realized.

Dante Gabriel celebrated his love for Elizabeth Siddal as a return to the story of Dante and Beatrice, seeing (or imposing) the resemblances between them as making the ordinary love-story between a working-class girl and a young painter something more, giving it a deeper meaning by putting it in a relationship with the important past; as John Dixon Hunt interprets it, "to paint his wife as Beatrice meant that, first, Elizabeth Siddal acquired the symbolical associations that Beatrice had for Dante Alighieri and, second, that Dante Gabriel was trying to heighten his own emotional existence by identifying himself and his wife with another, more moving relationship."⁹ It is no wonder Rossetti chose such a patron to identify himself with – in his Anglo-Italian family home, Dante was something of a household god, *the* ultimate poet, and surely in Rossetti's eyes to become a real poet was to become like Dante, thence the early identification.

⁷ Ibid., 563.

⁸ Ibid., 565.

⁹ John Dixon Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination 1848-1900* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1968), 188.

The problem of identity in Rossetti's art, in poetry as in painting, occupies a central position. His poems often make use of his personal experiences and feelings, and there is always the question to what extent the text we are reading is a poetic creation, and to what an expression of the poet's own, personal feelings.¹⁰ Because of its immense load of such private material, his poetry is often traced back to particular events in his emotional life, and many of the poems can be read as comments or reflections upon his actual experience, especially his relationship with Lizzie Siddal or Jane Morris.

But even if Lizzie Siddal reappears in Rossetti's poems, she more importantly animates his paintings. Rossetti's fellow PRBs all say that he painted and drew her face almost obsessively, and indeed there is an immense number of his sketches of her from the period of their engagement and short marriage. They all show a delicate woman in loose garments, whose pensive face is surrounded by a mass of hair. It is a face that positively haunted Rossetti even after his wife's death – it reappears in his paintings also after 1862, and perhaps the best illustration of this tendency is *Beata Beatrix*, begun when Siddal was still alive, and finished after her death, thus becoming a sort of tribute to her and to their love.

The painting represents Beatrice in the moment of transition between this world and heaven, in a sort of trance in which she sees the unseen with her half-closed eyes. There is a smoothness and mistiness in the painting, blurred contours and smooth brushstrokes, yet Lizzie's features are recognisable in the central figure. Siddal modelled for the painting and her face is portrayed as the face of Beatrice; but in real life, it was the face of Beatrice that Dante Gabriel saw in the face of Lizzie Siddal. Like in "St. Agnes of Intercession," the question is: Who are we looking at?

First of all, there is the Lizzie/Beatrice double identity, to which the painting is a kind of monument. Rossetti's identification with Dante, completed by the appearance of a Beatrice, was brought, painfully, to a completion by this Beatrice's untimely death, and it is this moment of death that is symbolically portrayed in *Beata Beatrix*. Beatrice in-between two worlds, surrounded by a light which does not actually shine on her, with the white poppy in her hands strangely suggestive of the opium which killed Elizabeth Siddal – the two women have become united in the painting, the double identity brought together into one. We are looking at Elizabeth Siddal modelling as Beatrice portrayed as Elizabeth Siddal. The identification comes full circle to where it starts from.

Yet the picture is hazy and the facial features of the central figure appear as if hidden behind a veil. Can we be sure it is Elizabeth Siddal that we are looking at? There is a similarity with other portraits of her produced by Rossetti – the shape

¹⁰ This problem is of course present in perhaps any piece of poetry; the uniqueness of Rossetti's texts is that the tension between the intimate and the public is created deliberately and used as a poetic device.

of the chin or the quality of her hair, the shape of the eyelids. But the similarity is not so obvious anymore if the comparison includes paintings by other artists: Millais's *Ophelia* or Hunt's *A Converted Christian Family sheltering a Christian priest from the persecution of the Druids*. Siddal's face in those paintings is different, somehow more girly and her figure more petite than in the portraits done by Rossetti, it is closer to those descriptions that other Pre-Raphaelite Brethren have left of her. Finally, there is one portrait which contrasts most shockingly with the Rossetti's – Siddal's oil-on-canvas self-portrait from 1854. The face which looks out of that round painting is strikingly unlike any of the Pre-Raphaelite faces, it is, as Lynn Pearce describes it, an "austere and more 'Quakerish' presentation of herself [which] exists as a significant touchstone against which all Rossetti's studies may be read."¹¹ There is no "objective" evidence against which we could check the truthfulness of Siddal's artistic portraits. Naturally, Pearce's feminist reading of Rossetti's art as oppressively masculine vindicates Siddal as a victim of his male egocentrism; what the self-portrait might as well be testifying to are Siddal's mediocre artistic talents, her lack of skill with oil paints, or perhaps even her mental troubles. Whatever it is, however, that made her portray herself so harshly, does not obscure the obvious fact: Elizabeth Siddal did not look like what she did in Rossetti's pictures of herself. Who is it, then, that we are looking at?

Part of the answer to this question can be found in Rossetti's early short story entitled "Hand and Soul," published in the first issue of the Pre-Raphaelite periodical *The Germ*. Written during one night, it is the story of a Renaissance Italian painter Chiaro dell'Erma, another of Rossetti's *alter egos*, and his struggle for perfection in art. Chiaro seeks an ideal to follow, an idea to illuminate his art; not being able to find it in fame, faith and finally, the society, he falls into despair from which he is consoled by an unexpected vision of a beautiful woman "clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment"¹² who, it is revealed, is the image of his soul. The consolation she brings to him is a revelation of the truth he was looking for – instead of turning to great ideas, he should search for inspiration within his own soul. The words the woman speaks to Chiaro are what is generally taken as Rossetti's artistic manifesto:

Chiaro, servant of God, take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me: weak, as I am, and in the weeds of this time; only with eyes which seek out labour, and with a faith, not learned, yet jealous of prayer. Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more.¹³

¹¹ Lynn Pearce, *Woman/Image/Text. Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 47.

¹² Rossetti, "St. Agnes of Intercession," 553.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 555.

The artist should draw his art not from any external influences but from his own soul – this is Rossetti’s artistic creed, and it can be easily observed that this is the direction in which he veered after the initial PRB phase of his artistic life. Unlike his Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, Rossetti was more interested in painting visions out of his imagination than studying nature and painting realistic scenes.

To paint from his soul in the case of *Chiaro* means literally: paint his own soul as she appeared to him. The portrait in the story is described by the narrator as representing

merely the figure of a woman, clad to the hands and feet with a green and grey raiment, chaste and early in its fashion, but exceedingly simple. She is standing: her hands are held together lightly, and her eyes set earnestly open.¹⁴

Thus, early on in Rossetti’s career a picture whose central figure is a woman with beautiful hair and loose garment becomes the ultimate work of art, in terms of artistic as well as symbolic value. Of course the soul of *Chiaro* is not a woman – this is only a symbolic representation, the beautiful woman as the perfect beauty of the soul rendered in a visible form. But it is significant that out of all the beautiful objects in the material world, Rossetti decided to portray the soul as embodied in the perfect female form. This way, “*Hand and Soul*” provides another example of how Rossetti’s early ideas have endured in his work until the end. The initial idea of identifying perfect spiritual beauty with perfect female beauty lingers on in Rossetti’s poems and paintings. It is also there in his portrayal of Lizzie Siddal as Beatrice, who was herself a spiritual love for Dante, a perfect woman out of reach, to be adored and glorified in poetry.

Critics often write very harshly about Rossetti’s treatment of Siddal, concentrating on the double identification with Dante and Beatrice as a means through which Rossetti substituted a perfect vision of a woman for the actual, flesh and blood person he married. The peculiarly artistic disrespect, or even abuse is also more than hinted at in the comments about Rossetti’s use of the female figure, especially the female face, as an artistic theme, and his tendency to adapt his models’ personal features to the ideal he already had in his head. It is the kind of judgment that I wish to avoid, partly because Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a very conscious designer of his artistic image and we will probably never know the truth behind his stories; and partly because even if it is true that the relationship between Siddal and Rossetti was in those many ways so abusive, there is another aspect in it which remains overlooked or not voiced enough.

Because even if we decide to think that Rossetti’s love for the copper-haired beauty from a milliner’s shop consisted in fact in his projecting aspects of himself

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

onto her, which many facts from their lives do confirm, we should also ask, what did that mean for him? Why did a young, energetic, gifted, charismatic young man search for a confirmation of the worth of his love in its (perhaps imagined or imposed) resemblance to a love story from Renaissance Italy? Why did he paint the women he loved, first his wife, then his mistresses or simply the women he found beautiful ("stunners," as he called them with the word he invented), never as they really were, always altered, their features blurred out to resemble that ideal one he could see in his mind's eye?

It could be arrogance that was at the root of all that. But it could just as well be a hopeless search for spiritual perfection, not understood the Christian way, as goodness and personal improvement; but conducted by a man, whose peculiar vision of spirituality construed it as the realm of all that beauty his life and the world around him so obviously lacked. It is a proof, as John Dixon Hunt puts it, of "Rossetti's constant attempts to bridge the gulf between his ordinary existence and the ideal life of imagination."¹⁵ It was a search which proved hopeless with every new attempt, for the beauty he looked for was neither in his soul nor in the faces of those beautiful women that stunned him with their eyes and their hair; an ideal as elusive as that beautiful woman he married, whose beauty it was impossible to capture in painting, even if he painted her as he saw her in her heart, a woman as elusive as the blessed Beatrice – still here with her body, but already somewhere else with her soul, herself and someone else at the same time, like Mary, the fiancée of the narrator of "St. Agnes of Intercession."

Like Chiaro, Rossetti paints what his soul searches for in the form of a beautiful woman. But Chiaro had seen his soul, had talked to her and she soothed him, and the figure in his painting is kind and gentle in her beauty; Rossetti's women are beautiful with a beauty that is dominating, powerful, that commands and controls the viewer's gaze. His women remain out of reach, hidden deep in their own thoughts, like Lizzie Siddal in his drawings and sketches. His paintings display Rossetti's desperate need for identification, the breach between the material and the spiritual that is already felt in "The Blessed Damozel." Like the lover in that poem, Rossetti yearns for that which is out of his reach; not a woman but an ideal, the spiritual beauty with which his soul could identify. When we look at a painting by Rossetti, with the beautiful, dominating female figure in the centre, we are not actually looking at a portrait of a model or of the artist's wife – we are looking at Rossetti's another attempt to paint his soul, another failed attempt to recognise and paint his self.

¹⁵ Hunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Imagination*, 188.

Maria Perzyńska

Terapia czy obsesja? Tożsamość w twórczości Dante Gabriela Rossettiego

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia zagadnienie tożsamości w wybranych dziełach Dante Gabriela Rossettiego. Na podstawie analizy niedokończonego opowiadania *St. Agnes of Intercession* oraz obrazu *Beata Beatrix*, ukazane jest nieustanne napięcie między rzeczywistością i ideałem, dążenie do doskonałego piękna oraz lęk przed wpływem, które to motywy stanowią centralny temat dzieł tego artysty epoki wiktoriańskiej.

Wychodząc od analizy sposobu przedstawienia postaci kobiecej w obrazach i tekstach autorstwa Rossettiego, artykuł ukazuje podstawowe założenie twórcze tego artysty, które brzmi: sztuka powinna ukazywać obraz duszy epoki i tożsamej z nią duszy artysty. U Rossettiego myśl ta wyrażona jest często w formie portretu zachwycającej postaci kobiecej, wzorowanej przeważnie na jego młodo zmarłej żonie Elizabeth Siddal. Drugim podejmowanym wątkiem jest kwestia niemożliwości osiągnięcia tego ideału, czyli niemożliwości oddania idealnego wewnętrznego piękna w dziełach, czy to malarskich, czy to literackich. Świadomość owego rozdźwięku między idealnym i rzeczywistym, duchowym i materialnym obecna jest w dziełach Rossettiego, sprawiając, że w tak wielu z nich podejmuje on temat tożsamości i wykorzystuje motyw sobowtóra.

Maria Perzyńska

Thérapie ou obsession ? Identité dans l'œuvre de Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Résumé

L'article présente la question de l'identité dans des ouvrages choisis de Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Sur la base de l'analyse du récit inachevé *St. Agnes of Intercession* et le tableau *Beata Beatrix*, on a présenté une tension continue entre la réalité et l'idéal, l'aspiration à une beauté parfaite et la peur de l'influence ; ces motifs constituent le thème central de l'œuvre de cet artiste vivant à l'époque victorienne.

En commençant par l'analyse de la façon dont Rossetti présente le personnage féminin dans ses tableaux et textes, l'article démontre le principe créateur fondamental de cet artiste qui dit : l'art devrait présenter l'image de l'âme de l'époque et celle de l'âme de l'artiste qui s'y identifie. Chez Rossetti, cette idée est souvent exprimée sous forme d'un portrait d'une femme ravissante, inspirée notamment de sa femme Elizabeth Siddal, décédée au jeune âge. L'impossibilité d'atteindre cet idéal, c'est-à-dire l'impossibilité de présenter la beauté intérieure idéale dans les ouvrages picturaux ou littéraires est un autre motif employé par l'artiste. La conscience de cette discordance entre l'idéal et le réel, le spirituel et le matériel est présente dans les ouvrages de Rossetti en contribuant à ce qu'il entreprend dans beaucoup d'entre eux le thème de l'identité et applique le motif de sosie.