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LOVE AND LOSS RECONSIDERED

TWO DIVERGENT VERSIONS OF D. G. ROSSETTI'S *DANTE'S DREAM AT THE TIME OF THE DEATH OF BEATRICE*

Rossetti executed two divergent versions of this subject: one in watercolour in 1856 and another in oil in 1871. The latter became his largest oil painting as well as one of the very few multi-figured late compositions he has ever painted, which is not surprising since this canvas is a replica of an earlier design.

These paintings clearly represent the double change in Rossetti's art between the 1850s and the 1860s-1870s. It was the alteration of the female figure, the person of the beloved - when Elizabeth Siddal's place was taken by Jane Morris in Rossetti's heart - on the one hand, and the development of his style and technique on the other. The difference of execution in terms of technique is insignificant from this point of view, as it is in terms of a higher level.

The subject is taken from Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Rossetti chose a few lines to explain his composition:

These idle fantasies
Then carried me to see my lady dead;
And when I entered,
With a white veil her friends were covering her;
And in her mild look was a quietness
Which seemed as if it said,
I have found peace.

(Surtees 42)

The settings of the two versions are identical. They follow those interiors Rossetti had composed for his Dante subjects. The viewer finds himself in the middle of a room open at both sides and on the top. The side-walls diverge and open the front of the chamber. Next to the back wall Beatrice lies on a sofa that is partly pushed into the depth of the room. Two women standing at the ends of the bed hold a flower-covered shroud above her dead body. An angel of love is leading Dante into the scene, and - since he is not a worldly creature - bends to Beatrice and kisses her before Dante. The floor in the foreground is covered with red poppies, the symbols of laudanum and death induced by that drug. The composition might recall 14th-15th century Netherlandish paintings, which depict religious subjects - such as the adoration of the Magi, scenes from the life of Christ and others - as they are commonly placed in stalls, inns or other half-open buildings. The opened side-doors and roof give a sight of the town around and of nature and the sky.

The first version is very close to those mediaeval pictures, particularly in terms of simplicity, brightness of colour and open composition. On both sides, the room is opened to the town, and so it is through the ceiling and three small windows in the wall behind the bed. Rossetti describes this early version as a foreground-background composition with the figures in the foreground and "a good deal of accessory matter" all around (Surtees 42). However, the composition could be rather regarded as one of his two-dimensional ones, where the layers are set behind each other and no perspective acceptable links are given. The connections of the figures within each layer are built up by their limbs or by the objects they touch. There are five layers in this design. The first one is Dante alone representing earthly life in a heavenly scene. The second layer is taken by Love and the woman attendant on the left. Beatrice and the other female figure make up the third layer in a similar way; the back wall of the room and the view of the town set the fourth and fifth layers. The only direct link between two layers is Love holding Dante's hand, so emphasizing the connection of the worldly and transcendental lives in a dream. Its central setting also stresses the importance of that relation. On the right Rossetti tried to achieve the same level of connection by leading curving stairs from the room towards the view of the town. Nevertheless, the deformed bend in the middle of the staircase and its false proportions prevent the viewer from having that illusion of connection. This watercolour - as well as many of his others - gives the impression of an illustration from a pop-up book with its folded figures and enchantment.

The colouring system is that of his watercolours. Soft and bright colours are used, and the gloomy shades melt into each other as there are no strong outlines to break them. The tonality is rather monochromic here. Emerald green dominates the scene, with some patches of cobalt blue and slight touches of jade. In terms of tincture the figures create a mass of cold sea-colours: blue and green. Neither the small particles of Beatrice's white robe, nor the pale shades of contrasting vermilion and red can break the greenish veil that almost covers the painting. Still, the brightness of the colours and the softness of the brushwork compensate this monochrome and create a pleasant cool harmony. The brown of the back-wall and the reds and golds of women's hair cannot contrast with the greenish-blue draperies, but give a solid frame and a modest rhythm to the composition. Death becomes as quiet and peaceful as pale the red poppies on the floor are. Beatrice's calm face, neatly held hands and her unexpressingly closed eyes strengthen the effect. This watercolour is fairly luminous. There is no exact source of light, the entire design - both the interior and the exterior - is soaked by some fluid brightness.

The composition is very light and pleasant. Air fills the room as we feel the soft breeze coming in through the open doors, windows and the ceiling. The greens of the figures' robes are accompanied by the greens of nature. Vivid branches are let in through the ceiling and rich trees can be seen through the windows. This arrangement gives nearly an open-air effect. The harmony of tonality and the lightness of design make the painting homogeneous. The figure of Love is distinguished only by his blue gown in contrast with Dante's black coat. The greenish shades of his black gown and the pale reds of the sleeves and cap cannot provide strong distinction. Earthly life is as close to the heavenly one as it is possible on this canvas. The sitter for Beatrice's figure was Mrs James Hannay and the right-hand attendant was possibly modeled on Annie Miller (Surtees 42). Rossetti started this picture when Lizzie was in Nice - so Gay Daly says - and:

Annie Miller modeled for one of the attendants, and Lizzie must have been chilled when she saw this work on Gabriel's easel.

(Daly 69)

Although it was not Liz to inspire this setting, Rossetti painted Beatrice in a way that recalls many drawings and pictures modeled on her. The long, auburn hair, the fine features of her face, the small hands and her dove-like appearance make one believe that she could have been Lizzie as well. Rossetti might have had

her in mind when he painted Beatrice. But Beatrice had left Dante as Liz did Rossetti; first through ill health, then through death. Furthermore, she could not give Rossetti - before their marriage in particular - what he wanted, so he found other women for his pleasure. Annie Miller was one of them, and Rossetti kept seeing her during the early years of his relationship with Lizzie. If that figure had been modeled on Annie Miller, that would give a reason why she is looking up into Dante's face instead of turning her eyes towards Beatrice as everyone else does. Since Dante is depicted in profile, one cannot be sure whether he is looking at his beloved Beatrice or his eyes meet the sweet attendant's eyes: or both. This duality could have been a characteristic feature of Rossetti's mind at that time.

Nevertheless, he never stopped searching for his Beatrice, whom he seemed finally to have found in two women. First in Elizabeth Siddal during their short marriage and especially afterwards, when only sweet memories and longing remained. Then Jane Morris became Rossetti's Beatrice, his Proserpine and his everything.

As early as 1863 he wanted to change the painting, though the alterations were meant to be technical ones at that time:

The Dante drawing is unchanged ... but I find much in it which I could now revise greatly to its advantage should you wish it. However I know that if I once began on it I should do so much in the way of heightening its colour & removing stiffness, smallness of execution etc. in parts all over the picture, that it would be a week's or a fortnights [sic] work to me ...

(Surtees 43)

By 1863 Rossetti reached a stage where he did not find his previous minute and sometimes monochromatic style satisfactory. He wanted the grandeur of expression that is characteristic of his art in *Beata Beatrix*. Though the soft shades are still present on that canvas, the design became more grandiose. As he could not take up the replica of *Dante's Dream*... for another couple of years, the later oil version of 1871 was altered in terms of his late style.

Rossetti kept the setting of the earlier version, but he changed nearly everything else. Colouring, as his first aim to revise, became more dramatic and more vivid at the same time:

... from the stiff quaintness of the earlier mediaeval style to the fully rounded, thoroughly confident Renaissance style of the later work.
(Faxon 205)

Draperies and figures were re-drawn in a harder but more expressive way. Some interior-details were re-designed and new symbols were added:

The design is the same as that of the water-colour but elaborated with additional symbolism and accessories, notably in the introduction of two doves with crimson plumage, and in the circular flight of angels bearing away the soul of Beatrice (upper centre). On the wall above the brier flickers a dying lamp; a scroll on the left records the lamentation of Jeremiah: "Quomodo sedet solo civitas".

(Surtees 44)

While the earlier version was an open one, Rossetti closed this composition to create a circular design of a confined place. All his pictorial means emphasize this effect in the painting. First of all, he broke the openness of the room by narrowing the views to the town. That townscape background was flat and tapestry-like, yet it gave a wide and open effect, the result of pale, sunny colours and lights. The gloomy scenery is darker and sharper here. On the right, the houses are built up in a larger scale, and the stairs are turning inwards instead of leading out to the open-air:

... whilst to add in a small measure to the realisation of the design I [Rossetti] built up carved in wood for him a circular staircase in Florentine style of structure that he wished to introduce.

(Surtees 44)

Reality is of less importance here, but the objects reflecting it are better designed and more "real" than they were in the watercolour. The earlier version was meant to show reality in a dream, but it became more of a vision than any kind of earthly setting put in the world of fantasy. Rossetti wanted to depict a transcendental scene - similarly to *Beata Beatrix* - a later version of the subject. Heavenly atmosphere is present here that is linked to the world of mortals by a few objects from everyday life. Rossetti composed *Beata Beatrix* in the same way. The atmosphere is emphasized by the closing of the scene, which continues on the left of the room. There the view is blocked by the red roofs and the shaded walls of some neighbouring houses. The windows of the back wall are completely

abandoned and the weak light of the lamp cannot substitute the brightness of the sun. Nor can the green garlands on the dark brown wall give the freshness of the trees depicted in the earlier version. The only open space is above the ceiling, where a circle of angels are floating, which stresses the heavenly character of the composition.

The alteration of the figures is not only formal, they have different attitudes as well. All the present ones participate in the scene of the watercolour. They turn towards and look at the dead Beatrice, who lies passively on her bed. Everyone feels pity for her, and the maidens - one in particular - feel sympathy for Dante, too. Though they concentrate on her, she has no organizing power, not even great or specifically distinct significance in the composition. All the participants are of equal importance and compositional value. Such an arrangement underlines the widening effect of light and colours and creates a broad, open and non-concentrated composition. The canvas of 1871 is closer to the portraits of that decade and it is really "worlds away" from the earlier version. Beatrice is the absolute centre of the design in the oil painting. Her full red lips kissed by the Love-angel are echoed and reinforced in the effect by his scarlet robe and wings. Dante is seemingly watching her, but a closer look betrays him. He is gazing in front of him, as if he were travelling in his thoughts and memories. All the figures depicted on Rossetti's late canvases have the same far-looking eyes. The maidens do not even look at Beatrice. They are the secondary figures (or "heroines") in the paintings in Rossetti's late period, supporting characters, or more often they are ornamental equivalents to drapery, flowers or jewels. All the poppies, the birds and the persons function as ornaments here. In this sense, this painting is almost a simple portrait of Beatrice, since many of those late designs present some other figures of no significance beside or behind the actual figure of the picture. Nevertheless, these figures are not composed in different two-dimensional layers any longer. Real human bodies are covered by more plastically drawn robes, which results in a sculpturesque effect. The characters - or decorative statues - form a very delicately set pictorial group in this painting. Dante stands closer to the bed and he is in motion towards his dead lover, however unconscious or dream-like this motion is. He is literally led there by Love, whose bending is softer and more roundish than it was before. He is holding Dante's hand with twined fingers and is kissing Beatrice on the cheek - nearly on her lips. She is not a passive participant here, since she seems to turn her face towards Love as if she had long been waiting for that kiss. Her portrait is altered from Lizzie's - or

Lizzie-like - features to Jane Morris' face. Her hands are not plainly put together for prayer. The gesture recalls Beatrice's hands in *Beata Beatrix*, but it is inevitably Jane's who was the model for this composition. The face shows the same expression that Beatrice had in *Beata Beatrix* and her long, bending neck is typical of Jane again. Rossetti seemed to have found his Beatrice in Liz, then in Liz and Jane and finally in Jane. Since the picture is a replica of an earlier setting from Liz's times, the mixing of the two *femmes* is not surprising here. Beatrice acts as an absolute centre of the composition, and so she has a very strong organizing power. This late design is more about love lost through death, but refound in the ecstasy of a transcendental dream. The watercolour version told a ballad of peaceful and Christian mediaeval death, where the senses are shut out. Heavenly and earthly love, sensuality and everlasting trance are depicted on this late canvas, which are expressed by the colouring as well.

The richness of colour, especially that of the clothes, is turned deeper tonally, as Rossetti painted this picture in oil. Monochrome robes replace the vivid colours of the former design, and their thorough elaboration causes darker shades. In addition, a more dramatic effect is reached by the rhythmical composition of contrasting colours. The colour-rhythm also provides plasticity in the design. Genderless and non-significant colours - gloomy greens, smoky browns and pale yellows - are used here. The attendants' robes are kept in emerald green, though they gained a deeper shade. Dante's coat is still greyish-black and it has green overtones, which separates him from the attendants and keeps him on earth by its tincture. Nevertheless, its plasticity fits the well organized composition of the figures, and creates the interference of the two worlds.

Beatrice's plain, auburn hair is replaced by the great mass of blond curls, which is the first step in the development that led to Jane's large veil of ebony black hair. Her white gown is much more emphasized here as it is falling to the floor. Her pale complexion and golden hair expand the brightness of her figure. She provides the "sunbeams" in the painting. Apart from the weak or limited light that comes from outside, her beautiful face and transcendently enlightened body shine in the room. Besides Beatrice's shining figure in the middle, Love's scarlet robe provides a dramatic contrast to the dark greens and browns of the painting. He is the well-known Love-figure from *Beata Beatrix*. As he kisses Beatrice's burning lips, he lights the fire of love that is burning continuously and eternally in Dante's - and so in Rossetti's - heart. The central setting of that burning colour suggests Love's importance and its sensuous character as well.

Love is heavenly and earthly, spiritual and sensual at the same time, as it was in *Beata Beatrix*. Death takes human souls to a higher level of existence, but fleshly pleasures are not expelled from that world. When they are at the border, human beings come into a trance that will last forever, as they will live happily and lovingly. That is why death is signaled by Love's scattered echoes. Some ruby birds, the heavenly messengers of death, fly here and there in the room, while the blood-coloured, bright poppies are glittering like small lamps on the floor. Both symbols were present in *Beata Beatrix*, though the poppy was white for purity there. Her innocence is expressed by her white robe on this canvas. Everything tells about love in this closed scene. The birds are flying inwards. Love holds flowers in his hand replacing the palm leaves of sanctity and martyrdom. Their scent - together with the odour of the poppies and the may-flowers on the veil - parallels the incense-burner of later designs. The vision creates a heavy atmosphere loaded with symbols, yet its mood is not unpleasant. The circular composition of figures and symbols is repeated in the garland of angels that take the departed's soul to Heaven. Those floating angels in the open-air provide the way out of this closed scene, and they melt love and death into a heavenly trance up there.

Although this painting is multi-figured, as it is a replica of a much earlier design, its late style shows the approach to the icon-like quality Rossetti reached in 1864 by painting *Beata Beatrix*. That was the first step towards the closed, circularly composed picture-sonnets that determined his late decades.

References

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