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This article focuses on the importance that D.G. Rossetti attributed to the re-semanticization of Dante's work, his visual translations of the Vita Nuova proving most revealing when adhering less to their source text. The translating strategies adopted by the poet-painter in his illustration of The Salutation of Beatrice (both in his 1849 and 1859 versions) reveal how Rossetti's post-Romantic anxiety of incompatibility between sign and referent is perfectly reflected in his conception of the sister arts, engaged as they are in an endless chase game. If the value of tradition and translation lies for Rossetti in discontinuity rather than in homogeneity, then the Vita Nuova proves to be the most inspiring book thanks to its ability both to take on and to infuse new meanings to Rossetti's own production.

The son of a Dante scholar, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was destined to be drawn within the circle of the Florentine from his early boyhood. In his criticism of Dante his father Gabriele Rossetti had envisioned an esoteric reading of the Florentine's works, with undertones ranging from the markedly political to the overtly mystical. Leaving Naples in 1821, Gabriele Rossetti's experience as an Italian expatriate in London deeply influenced the way he approached the writings of Dante. Allegory is crucial to Gabriele Rossetti's exegetical work on the Florentine poet, allowing him to adapt Dante's «parlare oscuro»¹ to his own social and political context. As argued by Raffaele Giglio,

La lettura del Rossetti, con l'aiuto di quanti altri autori hanno preceduto Dante, mira a rendere il valore della Commedia molto più terreno e pratico rispetto al valore escatologico cristiano che l'altra critica [...] ha visto rappresentato nel poema sacro².

Gabriele Rossetti was particularly interested in the allegorical figure of Beatrice and in its possible integration to the new reading he gave of Dante's work: the «gloriosa donna» was set by the Italian scholar at the core of an initiatory mind's religion which worked for a radical regeneration of spirituality away from the temporal power of the Church³. Beatrice resulted as the object of such a cult, an allegory of *Filosofia* itself.

Both as a poet and as a painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti improved on his father's understanding of Dante: his revision of Gabriele Rossetti's poetics results from his discarding the latter's political implications while increasingly concentrating on the erotic theme of the *Vita Nuova* in particular. Somehow echoing Gabriele's view of Beatrice, allegorical and literal figure at once, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's conception of love derives in fact from a marked co-existence of spirit and matter, the love experience remaining the only possible validation of the reality of something outside of the self⁴. As in Gabriele's case, it is the allegorical interpretation of Beatrice which allows for Dante Gabriel Rossetti's new reading of the Dantesque narrative, this time adapted to the Victorian's programme of enquiry into the dynamics of the love experience. In the words of Stephen Spector, love becomes Rossetti's main concern for it provides «the basis for a significant relationship between the subjective and the objective worlds»⁵.

To completely understand Rossetti's revisionism of Dante, though, we need to take into account the other half of the coin in his overall artistic education. Besides his Italian literary ancestry, his poetics are generally informed by his belonging to an English line of tradition: as underlined by one of the most important among his first Italian commentators, Enrico Nencioni, Rossetti was inspired by artists like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats in the revolutionary message of his art⁶. My purpose here is to draw into sharp focus how this specifically English line of descent came to concretely influence Rossetti's recovery of the Dantesque narrative.

As the epigone of an English Romantic tradition of poetry, Rossetti first of all shares with his literary precursors a fear of being born too late, of representing the last stage in a development of literature which could only evolve into extinction. The imaginative arts had suffered from the rise of such self-conscious sense of belatedness since the early and mid eighteenth century: the general fear was that poetry had extinguished itself, that names such as Shakespeare or Milton had «left nothing to say about nothing or anything»⁷. As M.H. Abrams brilliantly illustrates, German Idealism identified the solution to such doomed teleology in an adaptation of the cyclical conception of history held chiefly by Neo-Platonist thinkers to the linear conception of progress of the Biblical narrative and of the Enlightenment. The «Romantic spiral», as the critic defines it⁸, is the result of this combination. The Romantics' call to poetry starts therefore as an attempt to recover the narratives of a past and more natural literature in the hope of renewing the forms of representation of modern art and to subsequently grant them a future. Yet, it is as a failed attempt to go back to that longed-for Golden Past of

unity with nature that Romanticism most characteristically defines itself: to the advancement and the progress of civilization, intellect and culture there is no possible opposition. Nonetheless, it is exactly in this failure to go back to nature and in this being forced to revert to the quest's starting point that the greatest legacy of Romanticism to future generations lies. As Abrams again points out, the very triumph of the Romantic poet consists in recognizing how «the gap between the inordinacy of his hope and the limits of possibility is the measure of man's dignity and greatness»⁹. In its Victorian afterlife, such heightened sense of poetic belatedness was to reach extraordinary proportions: hence, the attempted return to one's literary past, invariably doomed to fail according to the Romantic lesson, became crucial to the poetics of many Victorian artists and to Rossetti's in particular. Oppressed by the thought that everything had already been said, Rossetti's consciousness suggested to him the idea of art as an infinite succession of cycles in tradition. Art and literature repeat themselves throughout a history that appears always more like a book that has already been written, and which risks becoming, to quote from Rossetti himself, a «soul-less self-reflection of man's skill»¹⁰. As Fabio Camilletti argues, the only way to literary progress in such overall picture consists therefore in *exegesis*¹¹, reading tradition while enriching it with an added interpretation, Bloom's «revisionary swerve»¹². Hence the fundamental consequence of Rossetti's initial Pre-Raphaelite phase and of the Brotherhood's programme of renovation of the arts through a recovery of the pure and spiritual «Primitives»: in an attempted «leap over the parental» and authoritative myths of their closest literary fathers¹³, the Brotherhood had set out on its quest for natural and prelapsarian narratives, allowing for deliberately belated readings, or, «mis-readings». Being «simple like a child» if compared to the *Commedia*, Dante's *Vita Nuova* becomes therefore Rossetti's chosen book: on the one hand, by formally reflecting the hoped for open-endedness of poetic tradition itself, the very narrative open-endedness of the *rubrica* is a guarantee of literary continuation for Rossetti, and helps him fight his own anxiety of belatedness; on the other hand, the allegorical nature of the work allows for that same adaptation of form and context that Gabriele Rossetti had been able to perform in his reading of Dante. We will proceed now to consider in more detail how Rossetti matured and changed his own poetics precisely by reading Dante's adaptable and accessible allegory against the narrative of his own aesthetic experience.

As Abrams points out, the secularization of tradition worked out by the Romantics also entailed a reduction of the Augustinian tripartite vision of the world (God-Man-Nature) into a dualism of man and universe:

The tendency in innovative Romantic thought [...] is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, the self and the non-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favorite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) subject and object¹⁴.

Rossetti's personal elaboration of Romantic thought does not result in any sustained enquiry on the disappearance of God¹⁵. Though founded on his hope that «some transcendent power existed, that after death he would find the unity he was denied on earth»¹⁶, his poetic and pictorial art is by no means devoted to the sole question of religious belief or disbelief. Rather, Rossetti's art generally reflects how, with the superseding of Romanticism and of its characteristic attempt to relate the subjective and objective worlds¹⁷, the distance between self and nature grew so consistent as to leave the subject alone and severed from both God and Nature. The Victorian artist found himself trapped within the awful prison of solipsism¹⁸, with only a faint hope of escaping it by means of a redeeming approach to nature or to a hypothetical God. Therefore, the crisis to which Rossetti's art is totally devoted to is not a religious or moral one, but more broadly regards questions of epistemology. In other words, it is ultimately a crisis in language and in its potential to represent the outer world, thus making it intelligible to man himself. If a direct experience of both transcendence and nature is ultimately denied to the Victorian poet, his only access to knowledge and wisdom is represented by the materials of his own subjectivism: the self has become the only knowable universe available to direct enquiry for the poet. Indeed, exploring the depths of one's inner self and artistically expressing them is Rossetti's main task. Such exploration needs now to be carried out without the assistance of a true relation between the subjective and the objective world: to artistically represent one's moods and feelings the only signs Rossetti has got at his disposal are derived from a transfigured and humanized nature. To better understand how this crisis of representation develops into Rossetti's most typical imagery and Dantesque inspiration, let us consider for a moment the most important of Victorian theories on natural representation in the arts. Pathetic fallacy, Lawrence Starzyk points out, is the «informing of objects other than the self with the self's tendencies». This tendency, the scholar goes on to argue, «results from romanticism's need to find companionable forms as local habitations for the artist's diverse and multitudinous tendencies or selves» and is «based on the conviction of man and nature's mutually benevolent accommodation»¹⁹. Again we find ourselves faced with the inescapable ghost of Romanticism here. The idea of a humanized and anthropomorphized world derives precisely from the Romantics' self-conscious awakening

to the impossible reconciliation of man and nature. The imagery of Romanticism had eventually constituted the finest expression of the poets' self-conscious remove from nature itself. As Harold Bloom points out, «Romantic nature poetry, despite a long critical history of misrepresentation, was an antinature poetry, even in Wordsworth who sought reciprocity or even a dialogue with nature but found it only in flashes»²⁰. Even though the priority of nature was finally experienced as a feeling of failure and sterility, it was nonetheless asserted by the Romantic poets²¹, and relished as the true measure of Man's dignity. As usual, with Victorianism things take on a darker hue. Once again we see how ideas and tenets of Romanticism end up reaching extraordinary proportions in their Victorian revisions: according to Ruskin in fact such apprehension of nature becomes «fallacious» in so much as it produces a falseness in man's impressions of all external things. Attributing our state of mind to the outer forms of nature is a character of poetical description, of course, but, if indulged too far it risks giving us morbid or false ideas. Though admitting to the necessary mediation of «pathetic fallacy» in any process of artistic creation, Ruskin is however venting his own anxious acknowledgment of a missing correspondence between subject and object in nature. The epistemological break constituted by this missing correspondence of nature and subject grew increasingly relevant to the poetics of mid and late Victorian artists and was mainly referred to the issue of language itself. Language, as Isobel Armstrong notes, becomes by the 1860s the very «site of renewed ideological conflict», reproducing, in its dynamics of form and content, sign and referent, the same incompatibility and inconsistency that had already been observed to lie between man and his feelings and the outer world around him²². As much as Rossetti's art is devoted to the investigation of this missing correspondence between thought and word, referent and sign, it is Walter Pater who most clearly exposes the poet-painter's aesthetics in this respect: Pater significantly describes Rossetti's poetry by drawing from the language of painting, and referring to the «lovely little sceneries scattered up and down his poems» as being the product «not indeed of broad open-air effects, but rather that of a painter concentrated upon the picturesque effect of one or two selected objects at a time»²³. Pater's invoking poetry and painting at once draws into sharp focus Rossetti's own anxiety of incompatibility between sign and referent, masterly reflected in his double-works of art. As underlined by Starzyk, in Rossetti's production the «verbal [...] is rarely a simple analogue of the visual [...] the image in the process, in other words, becomes recalcitrant or antagonistic»²⁴. Rather than contribute to an overall definition of meaning, the sister arts are therefore engaged in a chase game that eerily foreshadows the Peircean flight of interpretants²⁵. The process of com-

munication and representation is therefore indefinitely expanded and becomes impossible to control through what Ruskin defines as the proper use of the pathetic fallacy, a limitation, that is, of our projecting our own feelings and moods on the external world: in reaction to this impossible restraint, Rossetti's depiction of «common things» is unreservedly «full of human or personal expression, full of sentiment»²⁶. Far from being anxious over the irrationality to which an excessive use of pathetic fallacy could lead to, Rossetti rather relishes his own artistic exasperation of the poet's moods and feelings. His poetry results therefore as the quintessence of that failed return to nature that the Romantics had experienced in their turn: his is in fact a second nature where the precise and realistic detail of the Brotherhood's original programme has turned into pattern and ornamentation. As Pater goes on to point out:

[...] with Rossetti this sense of lifeless nature, after all, is translated to a higher service, in which it does but incorporate itself with some phase of strong emotion. Every one understands how this may happen at critical moments of life [...] To Rossetti it is so always, because to him life is a crisis at every moment²⁷.

The crisis Pater refers to here has been brilliantly described by Miller as Rossetti's perception of a «cutting off before from after, and dividing the moment too within itself»²⁸. The materiality of language, Jennifer Wagner suggests in her study of Rossetti's sonnets, allows for a reconstruction of the moment which is, however, nothing but a monument, an encrypting of the moment itself²⁹. As the attempt «to represent the immediacy of a moment of experience can do no more than record its absence»³⁰, art is reduced to a ritual re-enactment of such encrypting. And here we get back to Dante's relevance in Rossetti's aesthetics of representation. It is the allegorical construction of Dante's narrative which proves most valuable to Rossetti. Acts of aesthetic consciousness, Elizabeth Helsinger points out, are understood as the finest moments of cognition by Rossetti, who thus attributes to the very conventionality of allegory as fundamental importance³¹. As Warwick Slinn underlines, in Rossetti's misreading of the precursor, the conventional lyricism of Dante's narrative is gradually absorbed by the «abstractions of its own method, the language of Dantesque idealism and symbol»³²: besides the potentialities of its open-endedness, which projects its fulfillment outside the narrative itself (Dante's meeting with Beatrice in the earthly Paradise), Dante's *rubrica* is most valued for the allegorical machinery on which the narrative is weaved. By wearing the allegorical artifice on their sleeves, Rossetti's misreadings of Dante awaken the reader to the conventionality and aesthetic sophistication of the text; the reader's receptivity is thus expanded by the very strangeness of

the medieval conventions resorted to by Dante and which Rossetti resumes. The cultural residue resulting from such recovery concretely forces on the modern reader an intensified concentration and receptivity disclosing to him a series of «unexpected or novel connections»³³ in the work of art. The new revelations that a medieval and allegorical work like Dante's *Vita Nuova* can still disclose to contemporary, Victorian readers regard the very nature of language and of its renovated function in the context of a post-Romantic set of aesthetics. By pointing to Rossetti the only path to transcendence in the very artistic convention he resorts to, Dante offers to him the perfect model for a ritualistic conception of art: the concrete referent for which the linguistic sign stands for, the moment that is, is sacrificed in the process of artistic representation, for «the benefit of a higher power»³⁴. For the Florentine, the most important and tangible referent, Beatrice, had lost its concrete importance once inserted in the narrative of the *Vita Nuova* and, most significantly, once faced with its new allegorical interpretation. As in Dante's figural reading of reality there is no meaning before the objects and signs of the narrative other than the one lying beyond the narrative, so does Rossetti believe in a projection of meaning beyond the sign itself. It is therefore in the very material loveliness of his art that Dante gives Rossetti the chance to overcome the epistemological crisis suffered by a post-Romantic art and culture which was based on a sense of «material and temporal repleteness»³⁵. As Dante's project had been to demonstrate the operation of a preventive spiritual order through his retrospective reading of his youthful *rubrica*³⁶, so does Rossetti aim at identifying in poetry the only faint hope of a transcendence of history. Since all that was left for the modern artist was exegesis, Rossetti proceeded to read and illustrate Dante's *rubrica* throughout his career, developing his own poetics on the foreground of Dante's narratives, and finding the real value of an impossible tradition in translation itself.

Before moving to the illustrations from Dante that this article will particularly focus on, a pen and ink drawing began in 1849 (Rossetti, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1849-1850, pen and ink, 39.5 x 67.7 cm, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University: <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/297538>) and an oil on which Rossetti set to work in 1859 (Rossetti, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1859-1863, oil and gold leaf on conifer wood, 101 x 202 x 10.9 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa: <https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/the-salutation-of-beatrice-0>) let us now consider in more detail the precise strategies through which Rossetti's translations are conducted. His exegetical reading of Dante is both interlinguistic, in his translation of the *Vita Nuova* (which is included in the 1861 volume *The Early Italian Poets*), and intersemiotic, in the illustrations of the abovementioned translations

(which he produced all along his career). Rossetti's intervention on Dante's narrative is organized according to two main tenets on translation, on which it will be here enlightening to focus for a moment.

First of all, the preface to *The Early Italian Poets*³⁷ illustrates Rossetti's translating strategy as aiming at fidelity rather than precise interlinguistic literalness: according to the author, a faithful translation is to be preferred to a literal one. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Poetry not being an exact science, literalness of rendering is altogether secondary to this chief aim. I say literalness, —not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing. When literalness can be combined with what is thus the primary condition of success, the translator is fortunate, and must strive his utmost to unite them; when such object can only be attained by paraphrase, that is his only path³⁸.

Though what follows in this article is an analysis of Rossetti's intersemiotic translations of Dante, the poet-painter's commitment to a faithful interlinguistic rendering of his Italian originals must be kept in mind: its orbit of reference expands drastically when related to the fidelity of transmediation which Rossetti's next tenet introduces us to. The second principle formulated by Rossetti consists in fact of his «Allegorizing on one's hook» technique. More specifically related to his work as an intersemiotic translator, the expression refers to a precise strategy through which the illustrator enriches with new information the initial semiotic material given to him by the source text. As noted by Rossetti himself, while commenting on his illustrations of Tennyson for the Moxon edition, «one can allegorize on one's own hook on the subject of the poem, without killing, for oneself and everyone, a distinct idea of the poet's»³⁹. Though the above mentioned rules are formulated respectively for his interlinguistic and intersemiotic activity, they are often fused by Rossetti, who indifferently applies them to both translating processes. Rossetti's free resorting to both of these tenets regardless of the translating field for which they first seem to be created sheds light on his own anxiety over the ultimate mismatching of original and translation, sign and referent, Dante and himself. They moreover testify to his resolve to appeal to any possible means that language and the visual arts have in store for him in order to satisfy the «extreme longing after a visible embodiment of his thoughts»⁴⁰ which underlies his whole production. Both the 1849 and 1859 illustrations of *The Salutation of Beatrice* reveal the importance Rossetti attributed to the re-semantization of Dante's works, his reading of the *Vita Nuova* proving most revealing when adhering less to the source text. It is therefore such a kind of addition to the precursor that

I am going to highlight in the two Rossettian illustrations that follow.

Both versions of the episode are divided into two panels: the left one shows Beatrice's salutation to Dante *in terra*, third chapter of the *Vita Nuova* according to Fraticelli's edition⁴¹; the right one is referred to Beatrice's salutation *in Eden*, which takes place in the thirtieth canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*. A central partition features Love presiding over the two meetings, and can be referred to Dante's dream in *Vita Nuova*, third chapter, which follows the earthly salutation in the narrative.

To start with, I'll examine the earthly salutation panels. Rossetti works without details about the concrete setting of the scene, Dante's *Vita Nuova* being marked by a general vagueness of setting description. He therefore proceeds to fill in the gaps left by the source through his allegorizing technique. The 1849 version is marked by a clearly Medieval inspiration, and evokes in the simplicity of its verticalism the quintessential purity and spirituality of the «Primitives». With its graphic style, the drawing perfectly fits in Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite phase of the early fifties: the model's physiognomy, moreover, anticipates the ethereal traits of Elizabeth Siddal, Medieval muse of the Brothers. The style of the drawing presents all the traits Giuliana Pieri attributes to Rossetti's early production as follows:

Il segno è preciso, i profili netti, le figure spigolose e rigide, l'attenzione ai dettagli anche minori della composizione rispecchia a pieno l'intenso realismo che caratterizza I giovani Pre-Raphaelite Brethren e che fu lodato da John Ruskin, e allo stesso tempo ricorda il primo Rinascimento toscano e specialmente le tavole di Carlo Lasinio delle *Pitture a fresco del Campo Santo di Pisa*, uno dei modelli formative più importanti per I giovani Preraffaelliti⁴².

Though belonging to the most purely Pre-Raphaelite phase of his career, the drawing already bears the signs of a maturation that was close at hand for Rossetti, and does it in the details the poet-painter adds to the source: the boy inserted in the scene wears clearly Renaissance clothes, as the women accompanying Beatrice do. Renaissance inspiration is also suggested by the naked statue in the far background. To confirm such a foreshadowing, the 1859 version features a much more easily recognizable model: Jane Burden will appear from now on with an ever increasing incidence in Rossetti's paintings, a symptom of the most significant development in the poet-painter's production. With her appearance, this passage from the *Vita Nuova* undergoes a further re-reading, being now related to a Renaissance marked by tones that are far richer and more sensual than the Pre-Raphaelite Middle Ages. Since the Siddal-Burden pair neatly corresponds to the Medieval-Renaissance one, it is clear how Dante has here worked for Rossetti

as the backbone against which to develop a specific set of poetics. The shift Rossetti's art underwent from Ruskinian to Paterian principles is wholly concentrated in these two illustrations and its importance springs from the meaning that the love experience assumed for the poet. The erotic theme of the *Vita Nuova* represents the work's main attraction for Rossetti, who conceived of the experience of love as the only possible way out of the prison of the self: however, though constituting the most traditional escape from the self's tautological sterility, as Spector notes, love is unfailingly experienced by Rossetti as a form of failure, eventually throwing him back to that same prison of solipsism which he had initially set out to evade⁴³. The other, the woman, remains unknowable throughout the very experience of love. The more Rossetti is alerted to such obscurity the more he strives to bridge the gap between subject and object by resorting to all the possible and concrete means that he has got at his disposal. The poet's increased isolation is fought against by his appealing to the very physicality of the arts. In the words of Helsing, Rossetti realizes how «to live through feelings and to be aware that one is doing so [...] is the kind of knowledge [...] that art and poetry can provide»⁴⁴. His effort to «re-embod[y] Dante's works in his pictures»⁴⁵ through an ever increasing concreteness of description and setting corresponds to his ever increasing concern for a sensual apprehension of love: the exasperated repetition of his models' traits is one of the most evident symptoms of his endless chasing after the very object of his love, the very referent of his art, and his being doomed never to reach it. In such a chase, the dualism of mind and matter is annulled, for the poet's quest needs the unflinching aid of any power that can be invoked, be it natural, human, or spiritual. Indeed, the coexistence of spirituality and sensuality entailed by love is gradually revealed to Rossetti as the only source of progress in human knowledge: thus the eroticism of coeval paintings like *Bocca Baciata* (1859, oil on panel, 32.1 x 27.0 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) or poems like *The Song of the Bower* (1860) follows such a general development. The path of the senses progressively turns for Rossetti into the only hope of a «momentary contact with the immortal»⁴⁶. The love narrative of Dante's *Vita Nuova* functions therefore as a perfect and flexible frame to the rising importance sensuality acquires in Rossetti's poetics and which is reflected in the fundamental shift towards a richer Renaissance his art was unfailingly heading towards. The features of Jane Burden epitomize such a development. Since all the significant illuminations of soul within Dante's *Vita Nuova* are used by Rossetti to highlight poetic development, as argued by Ronald Johnson, so the Victorian's swerve away from Dante lies in his experiencing love also «physically [...], not just conceptually [...] as Dante experienced it»⁴⁷.

The central partition features other instances of Rossettian «allegorizing». There are relevant differences in the Victorian's depiction of Love with respect to Dante and a number of details are emphasized in the shift towards the visual. While Love appears in the source holding Dante's burning heart in his hand, «una cosa la quale [parea] ardesse tutta»⁴⁸, in Rossetti's drawing the detail of the flame is so enlarged that it becomes a torch. With its exasperating breach of the pathetic fallacy's proper bonds, the heart-flame shift is crucial: fire becomes in fact the main emblem of love as both a spiritual and a sensual experience in Rossetti's whole production. We find it again in his masterpiece of Dantesque revisionism, *Beata Beatrix* (1864, oil on canvas, 86,4 x 66 cm, Tate Gallery, London), where the god holds a flame, symbol of Dante's soul. Love, soul, death and life: the significance that fire assumes in Rossetti is never certain, and its iconological instability derives precisely from the confusing superimposition of meanings it results from. Its ultimate sense is eclipsed by the mounting importance that the poet-painter attributes to the mere sign: one is never sure whether fire stands for Rossetti's soul or for the burning of his beloved into an untimely death. The illustration of the earthly Salutation proves therefore decisive to define, that is to complicate, Rossetti's whole iconographic repertoire: his translating strategies result in the definition of a «sign constellation»⁴⁹ which transcends the mere episode of the *Vita Nuova* and is echoed again and again throughout his production; most importantly, such strategies aim at reproducing that confusion of sign and referent, symbol and meaning which is so characteristic of Rossetti's art. As already seen above, the experience of love is at the core of such instability of sign and referent; and it is by illustrating Dante's *rubrica* that love comes to represent for Rossetti a wavering intermediary between the erotic experience, therefore concrete and sensual, and an inner though secular elaboration of the latter, a process of enquiry into one's soul. Maintaining the balance between the two constitutes the only chance for Rossetti to keep his quest for self-knowledge alive and always potentially *in-fieri*.

The 1859 painting features an image of the God that is even more rooted in the concrete. Again, the proper limits of the pathetic fallacy are here exceeded through an exasperation of the original detail and a deliberate projection of the author's mood onto it: the sundial held by Love in the first version is now markedly enlarged to occupy all the foreground, thus revealing the vexing concern Rossetti felt about the theme of time and of its inexorable passing. It is not by chance that his whole *canzoniere*, *The House of Life*, was devised around the theme of time and change, with its memorable incipit «A sonnet is a moment's monument». Moreover, the sundial holds a central position in *Beata Beatrix* again. Dante's imagery

turns therefore into a fundamental source for Rossetti's own poetics, transcending the boundaries of the single episode or illustration and becoming a living influence for his production as a whole. Again the poet-painter has concentrated his surplus of experience with respect to the precursor in the iconographic details the intersemiotic passage induces him to add and to make explicit, thus recognizing in the process of translation the only true means of progress within tradition.

The last part of my analysis will focus on the Purgatory panel: in this case the most significant reflection will be about the 1849 drawing. Dante's *Purgatorio* was the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers' favourite *cantica* because of its delicate tinges and for the extraordinary importance given in it to chromatisms. Being a pen and ink drawing, the first Rossettian illustration cannot pay homage to the colors of Dante's Eden. Rossetti's concern about color symbolisms is nonetheless evident in his careful selection of iconographic details, particularly from this key passage of the thirtieth canto (28-33):

Così dentro una nuvola di fiori

Che da le mani angeliche saliva

E ricadeva in giù dentro e di fori,

Sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva

Donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto

Vestita di color di fiamma viva.

The Salutation of Beatrice thus presents the «gloriosa donna» in a cloud of flowers with which Rossetti fills the background of the drawing. The poet-painter operates a significant process of explicitation, and the flowers that remained indeterminate in Dante become in the illustration the very lilies that so often appear in Rossetti's whole iconographic repertoire. The lily is the means of a crucial symbolism in Rossetti's art in its defining a marked contrast to the red roses and sensuality of paintings like *Lady Lilith* (1868). The flower thus allows Rossetti to suggest the presence of the white color even in a pen and ink drawing

establish in the purity of such chromatism a marked contrast to the earthly salutation of the left panel. Beatrice's crown and veil are of course maintained in the illustrations: the latter, in particular, is crucial to an artist who conceives the experience of love as a process of revelation of the poet's soul. The unveiling of the woman is therefore a quintessential symbol of such a soul-agnition. The delicate interaction between verbal and visual signs established by Rossetti's illustrations attests again to the poet-painter's deep belief in art acting as revelation rather than mere creation⁵⁰: the recovery of details such as the lily or the veil with an added symbolic value confirms such a thesis.

This brief analysis of Rossetti's work as illustrator of Dante should necessarily end with a reflection on the value that the poet-painter's production keeps on maintaining for us today. The hybridism of his double work, anticipating so much of our contemporary visual culture, demonstrates how Rossetti foresaw the necessity to look for progress in tradition along the boundaries between different artistic media. At the beginning of this essay I referred to Rossetti's translating strategy as aiming at fidelity rather than precise interlinguistic literality. His concern for fidelity of rendering, however, can be broadly related to his work as illustrator and more generally as cultural translator⁵¹. To quote from Jerome McGann, explanatory power rises in Rossetti from distance rather than from proximity to the source, be the latter a Rossetian poem or painting, or a work by Dante Alighieri⁵². Rossetti thus proves to be a master of Bloomian anxiety, in fully understanding how poetic influence always proceeds by a swerve away from the forerunner, be that Dante himself or Ruskin and his definition of the proper bounds of the pathetic fallacy. Finally, Rossetti's revisionism of Dante works towards a wider redefinition of the Florentine's role as the father of a cultural European rebirth reaching as far as Victorianism. Combining Medieval and Renaissance drives on the foreground of a Dantesque narrative is in fact another way to acknowledge the necessarily double nature of the aesthetic experience, both spiritual and sensual in its essence: as Walter Pater would famously argue in his essay on Winckelmann, conflict is the heart of aesthetic realization, and matter and soul combine themselves through the ages to produce at last «a larger and profounder music»⁵³. Strikingly foreshadowing Pater's theories on the Renaissance, from his earliest production Rossetti considers Dante as the source of a rebirth of both spirit and senses which directly springs from the Middle Ages. Medieval and Renaissance art, in the words of Walter Pater are really continuous; and there is a sense in which it may be said that the Renaissance was an uninterrupted effort of the middle age, that it was ever taking place⁵⁴.

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- 3 G. ROSSETTI, *La Beatrice di Dante: ragionamenti critici*, eds M.L. Giartosio De Courten, Imola 1935.
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- 7 J. KEATS, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, 2 vols., ed. H.E. Rollins, Cambridge MA 1972, I, p. 189.
- 8 M.H. ABRAMS, *Natural Supernaturalism, Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, London 1973, p. 183.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 10 D.G. ROSSETTI, *St. Luke the Painter*, I. 11, in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. W.M. Rossetti, London 1911, p. 99.
- 11 «L'opera di Dante Gabriel Rossetti ha su di sé tutti i segni della decadenza, l'idea che tutto sia stato scritto, che l'arte sia esegesi, disvelamento, operazione magica», F. CAMILLETTI, *Beatrice nell'inferno di Londra*, Lavis 2005, p. 152.
- 12 H. BLOOM, *The Anxiety of Influence, A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford, New York 1873.
- 13 «You could turn [...] against the ancestral source itself and demonstrate [...] that even the classical antiquity had failed sufficiently to develop its own premises», W. J. BATE, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, Cambridge MA 1970, p. 28.
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- 15 «Rossetti, in definitiva, non fu mai scosso dai quesiti scientifici in ordine all'origine e al fine del creato sollevati dagli evolucionisti; né affrontò mai di petto il neocriticismo biblico. Più che quesiti lucidamente posti, passati al vaglio della ragione, anche se non risolti, i suoi dissidi religiosi erano legati a squilibri del tutto personali, non collettivi». F. MARUCCI, *Storia della letteratura inglese, dal 1832 al 1870: Il saggismo e la poesia*, Florence 2003, p. 741.
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- 33 HELSINGER, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, p. 3.
- 34 D.L. CUMBERLAND, *Modelling God, Modelling Resistance*, «The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies», XII, 2003, pp.39-57: 42.
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- 36 J. MCGANN, *A Commentary on Some of Rossetti's Translations from Dante*, in *Haunted Texts, Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, pp. 35-5, p. 37.
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Fig. 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1849-1850, pen and ink, 39.5 x 67.7 cm, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum.



Fig. 2: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1859-1863, oil and gold leaf on conifer wood, 101 x 202 x 10.9 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada.