

## ROSSETTI'S LETTERS: INTIMATE DESIRES AND 'SISTER ARTS'

Federica Mazzara

University College London

The Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti rarely exhibited his own paintings and only very late in his career did he publish his poems — after they were recovered in 1868 from the coffin of his wife Elisabeth Siddal, into which he had put them seven years earlier. Also, rarely did he talk publicly about his own art. The medium Rossetti reserved for such comments was that most intimate of written forms: the letter, private correspondence. The editor of Rossetti's letters, William E. Fredeman, who recently collected them in nine volumes, writes that Rossetti's correspondence presents "the entire human network on whom he depended and with whom he shared his domestic, professional, and intimate identity" (Fredeman, 1: xxvii).<sup>1</sup>

What I want to demonstrate in this article is that the unexplored world of Rossetti's letters, his most private and intimate form of writing, presents an interesting expression of the meeting between the two arts, poetry and painting, whose relation is also a matter of intimate union, a 'sisterhood' in fact. At the same time, the letters themselves perform a compromise between the two spheres of the private and the public. In the past decades, Rossetti's letters have been made available to the public, giving an insight into Rossetti's very personal view on his own art.

All Rossetti's art is strongly marked by his desire for placing poetry and painting, word and image, in a close relationship. His literary art is driven by a continuous search for 'images' that could embody his personal emotions. As he writes in a letter to his friend Gordon Hake: "As with recreated forms in painting, so I should wish to deal in poetry chiefly with personified emotions; and [...] shall try to put in action a complete *dramatis personae* of the soul" (Fredeman, 4: 449-50). At the same time, his paintings are reflections in a poetical mirror, they give 'flesh' to his poetical desires.

Rossetti was also an avid writer of 'Sonnets for Pictures.' At the beginning of his literary career he collected some sonnets on paintings by other artists that he had occasion to contemplate during his first trip abroad in 1850 to Paris, Bruges and Ghent (in particular, he wrote sonnets on paintings by Memling, Giorgione and Ingres). Throughout his career he never stopped experimenting with the combination of the two arts, as if he could not find any alternative artistic expression. He balanced this 'liminal' position with much frustration, feeling he was not dedicating enough energy

---

<sup>1</sup> Only seven out of the nine volumes have so far been published.

to any of the two arts. In a letter dated 1854 sent to William Allingham, Rossetti wrote: “I believe my poetry and painting prevented each other from doing much good for a long while—and now I think I could do better in either, but can’t write, for then I shan’t paint” (Fredeman, 1: 214).

This urgency of making the two arts communicate led Rossetti to search for a form of art that could allow him to articulate this relationship in a clear way. He found this in what will become known as ‘the double work of art,’ a combination of poetry and painting in a unique work, usually expressed by a painting accompanied by one or more sonnets, commonly inscribed on its frame.

This combination of words and images makes the reception of Rossetti’s double works particularly challenging, since, the contemplating gaze on his canvases cannot disregard the words on the frames — or, occasionally, words drawn on the canvas itself. The words, intimately framing the painting, work together with the image depicted, extending, most often, the conveyed meaning.

Rossetti gives a very enchanting definition of what could be considered the function of the accompanying sonnet. In a letter concerning a double work — combining his painting *Sibilla Palmifera* and the sonnet *Soul’s Beauty* — he writes:

I have somewhat extended my idea of the picture, and have written a sonnet (which I subjoin and shall have put on the frame) to embody the conception — that of *Beauty the Palm-giver*, i.e., the *Principle of Beauty*, which draws all high-toned men to itself, whether with the aim of embodying it in art, or only of attaining its enjoyment in life. (Rossetti, *Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, 56)

The sonnets relate to his pictures in various ways. One function, particularly interesting for this analysis, is one that could be defined as the ‘ekphrastic function’ that aims at describing the image, conveying, in its rhetorical function, different degrees of intimacy and closeness between the two arts.

Apart from the sonnets on paintings there are many other ekphrastic dialogues taking place in Rossetti’s production. These can even be found in interstitial spaces, in more uncommon discursive forms, such as the already mentioned correspondence that Rossetti kept daily with friends and family members, in which we find several examples of verbal description of visual works.

William Michael Rossetti defined his brother’s attitude concerning letters in the following words:

My brother was a rapid letter-writer, and on occasion a very prompt one, but not negligent or haphazard. He always wrote to the point, without amplification, or any effort after the major or minor graces of diction or rhetoric. [...] As a correspondent he was straight-

forward, pleasant, and noticeably free from any calculated self-display. 'Disinvolto' would be the Italian word. (Rossetti, *Family-Letters with a Memoir*, xii)

The letters present at least three types of ekphrastic techniques. The first is what I call 'the performative technique,' which tends to render the images vivid and dynamic. It is as if the words animated the scene depicted the figures move as if they were actors or puppets on a theatrical stage. The description of *Cassandra* contained in a letter sent to Colonel Gillum is a significant example of this:

The "Cassandra" subject I hope one day to paint. I mean her to be prophesying the death of Hector before his last battle. He will not be deterred from going, & rushes at last down the steps, giving an order across her noise to the captain in charge of the soldiers who are going round the ramparts on their way to battle. Cassandra tears her garments in rage & despair. Helen is arming Paris in a leisurely way, & he is amused at the gradual rage she is getting into at what Cassandra says of her. Other figures are Andromache with Hector's child, the Nurse, Priam & Hecuba, & one of the brothers who is expostulating with Cassandra. Hector's companions have got down the steps before him & are beckoning him to follow. (Fredeman, 4: 175)

In cases like this, the description makes the painting vivid as if Rossetti's hope and desire was to see his figures move, live, which is also one of the oldest desires of the ekphrastic mode and probably of language in general: to transform the dead, passive picture into a living creature. This is comparable, as it were, to what W.J.T. Mitchell, in a very important essay on *ekphrasis*, has defined as "the ekphrastic hope:"

This is the point in rhetorical and poetic theory when the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* and the sister arts are mobilized to put language at the service of vision. The narrowest meanings of the word *ekphrasis* as a poetic mode, "giving voice to a mute art object," or offering "a rhetorical description of a work of art," give way to a more general application that includes any "set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye." (Mitchell, 153)

Many of Rossetti's descriptive letters aim at satisfying this hope, but there is another function of *ekphrasis* contained in these letters that has a different purpose, explicating the symbolic dimensions of the painting. This function can be defined as the 'expounding technique.' In this case the *ekphrasis* works as a critical apparatus, such as in the description of *Proserpine* [FIG. 31] contained in a letter sent to W. A. Turner in 1878:

[...] The picture represents Proserpina as Empress of Hades. After she was conveyed by Pluto to his realm and became his bride, her mother Ceres importuned Jupiter for her return to earth, and he was prevailed on to consent to this, provided only she had not partaken of any of the fruits of Hades. It was found however that she had eaten one grain of a pomegranate, and this enchained her to her new empire and destiny.

She is represented in a gloomy corridor of her palace, with the fatal fruit in her hand. As she passes, a gleam strikes on the wall behind her from some inlet suddenly opened, admitting for a moment the light of the upper world; and she glances furtively towards it, immersed in thought. The incense-burner stands beside her as the attribute of a goddess. The ivy-branch in the background (a decorative appendage to the sonnet inscribed on the label) may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory. [...] (qtd. in Sharp, 236-7)

Rossetti's verbal description integrates into the painting information about both the topic and the symbolic element invested in the painting. The description, in this case, is very detailed and aims at enlightening every single detail depicted on the canvas. He seems to use this type of ekphrastic technique, which we also often find employed in his sonnets, in order to justify his choices concerning the subject, and the setting, as a sort of verbal appendix to his paintings.

The third technique employed in the ekphrastic letters which I want to bring to the fore is also the most important one for the present analysis due to its close relation to intimacy in Rossetti's art, to his private, intimate life, to which only occasionally he offers access. This is the technique that I would call 'revelatory.'

A pertinent example is the letter Rossetti sent to his friend William Bell Scott in 1859 concerning *Bocca Baciata* [FIG. 32], a very provocative painting for its time. *Bocca Baciata* represents a turning point in Rossetti's artistic production, it inaugurates a new phase in his style and in his aesthetics. When Holman Hunt, the other important figure of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, saw this painting for the first time, he immediately realized that Rossetti was abandoning the original beliefs of the movement,

based on medieval and religious styles and topics, in order to embrace a very different artistic approach more closely related to a Venetian and voluptuous style and to more earthly subjects. Hunt's reaction to *Bocca Baciata* represents the epitome of the reluctant Victorian reception of Rossetti's later works. Rossetti, Hunt declared, is "leaving monastic sentiment for Epicureanism" (Hunt, 111-2).

The turning point inaugurated with this painting was described by Rossetti in a letter to William Bell Scott as follows:

I have painted a little half-figure in oil lately which I should like you to see, as I have made an effort to avoid what I know to be a besetting fault of mine — & indeed rather common to Pre-Raphaelite painting — that of stipple in the flesh. I have succeeded in quite keeping it at a distance this time, and am very desirous of painting, whenever I can find leisure & opportunity, various figures of this kind, chiefly as a rapid study of flesh painting. (Fredeman, 2: 276-7)

At this point in his career, Rossetti was desirous of realizing more "flesh painting[s]," because he understood that this type of representation, to a higher degree than the previous ones — characterised by religious or dantesque subjects — was able to express his intimate vision of art or, as he defined it elsewhere, his "inner standing point." The latter expression was used by Dante Gabriel Rossetti for the first time in a note for the poem *Ave* where he wrote: "This hymn was written as a prologue to a series of designs. Art still identifies herself with all faiths for her own purposes: and the emotional influence here employed demands above all an inner standing-point" (D. G. Rossetti, 23 note). But, most importantly, it was evoked again by the poet responding to Buchanan's attack on his 1870 volume of poetry.<sup>2</sup> Concerning the poem "Jenny," Rossetti wrote that "the motive powers of art reverse the requirement of science, and demand first of all an inner standing point" (W. M. Rossetti, *The Collected Works*, 1: 484).

Jerome McGann has interestingly investigated the concept of the "inner standing point." He defines it as one of Rossetti's key aesthetic ideas. It shows how intimate his relation was to both arts and to the imaginative figures of his works. According to McGann, in the "inner standing point," "the acts of the artist — poet and painter — are as much the subject under study as any of its manifest, referential forms" (132).

All Rossetti's art, seen from this perspective, becomes a revelation of a very private and intimate world. Most importantly, for Rossetti, an "inner standing point" is not simply a feature of a

---

<sup>2</sup> In 1872, Buchanan had attacked what he called "the fleshly school of poetry" (Buchanan).

particular genre or poetic form, but a fundamental requirement of all art. The letter itself becomes an important tool for Rossetti to reflect on his “inner standing point.” In this respect, Rossetti uses the epistolary correspondence to investigate himself as an artist. In other words, he uses his letters as means for reflecting and rationalizing his double-being as a painter and a poet. In so doing, the letter becomes a sort of intimate self-analysis. Let us consider, for instance, some fragments of the letter he sent to his friend Gordon Hake concerning his double work *Lady Lilith* [FIG. 33]:

My own belief is that I am a poet (within the limit of my powers) primarily, and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures: only painting being — what poetry is not — a livelihood I have put my poetry chiefly in that form. On the other hand, the bread-and-cheese question has led to a good deal of my painting being pot-boiling and no more — whereas my verse, being unprofitable, has remained (as much as I have found time for) unprostituted [...]. I am glad you like *Eden Bower*. I think that poem, Jenny, a Last Confession, and The House of Life, are the things I wish to be known by. I should particularly hope it might be thought (if so it be) that my poems are in no way the result of painters’ tendencies — and indeed I believe no poetry could be freer than mine from the trick of what is called ‘word painting.’ As with recreated forms in painting, so I should wish to deal in poetry chiefly with personified emotions; and in carrying out my scheme of the ‘House of Life’ (if ever I do so) shall try to put in action a complete *dramatis personae* of the soul. (Fredeman, 4: 449-50)

The letter contains very important statements on the relationship between the double work of art and intimacy. Here Rossetti’s “inner standing point” is clearly expressed: his poetical and painterly figures are the result of “personified emotions,” as he asserts, that is of physical and emotional intimacy.

Rossetti’s revelatory technique articulated in his ekphrastic letters is also a means to express his own hidden desires, especially when they are used for describing pictures of his second phase, inaugurated, as mentioned before, by *Bocca Baciata*. In these pictures and in their related poems, the subjects are usually beautiful women. They are commonly presented as sensual figures staring out at the viewer as perfect *femmes fatales*, or, as McGann has it, as “Medusan pictures,” a gallery of dark “stunners” (152), “[...] forms of desire in which the artist and his work move through an indeterminate

set of inner standing points" (*ibid.*). But most uncannily, these models are the exact copies of the real models, who were also all Rossetti's mistresses. Just to recall the most desired of them all: Jane Burden Morris lent her face to most of the figures of Rossetti's mature paintings. Jane was the wife of his friend, William Morris, nevertheless, she was probably the woman that he loved most. His desire for her is present in every aspect of his artistic expression and his paintings appear as photographs of her taken, as it were, from different perspectives. Henry James noticed this mysterious likeness between the woman and the figures on the canvas. In a letter to his sister, he wrote:

Oh, ma chère, such a wife! *Je n'en reviens pas* — she haunts me still. A figure cut out of a missal — out of one of Rossetti's or Hunt's pictures to say this gives but a faint idea of her, because when such an image puts on flesh and blood, it is an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity. It's hard to say whether she's a grand synthesis of all the pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made — or they a 'keen analysis' of her — whether she's an original or a copy. In either case she is a wonder. Imagine a tall lean woman in a long dress of some dead purple stuff, guiltless of hoops (or of anything else, I should say,) with a mass of crisp black hair heaped into great wavy projections on each of her temples, a thin pale face, a pair of strange sad, deep, dark Swinburnian eyes, with great thick black oblique brows, joined in the middle and tucking themselves away under her hair, a mouth like the 'Oriana' in our illustrated Tennyson, a long neck, without any collar, and in lieu thereof some dozen strings of outlandish beads — in fine complete. On the wall was a large nearly full-length portrait of her by Rossetti, so strange and unreal that if you hadn't seen her you'd pronounce it a distempered vision, but in fact an extremely good likeness. (Lubbock, 17-8)

The intimate, extramarital relationship between Rossetti and Jane Burden Morris produced an epistolary correspondence between the two lovers, of which only few letters survive. One letter in particular is exemplary. This letter accomplishes its task of explaining the image it refers to, and at the same time, it keeps its intimate code, which is the characteristic of all private letters. The letter concerns a drawing called, not by chance, *Silence*, which, as Rossetti lets us realize in his 'coded' description, is a symbolic embodiment of the secrecy of their sexual relationship:

My dear Janey, I am sending you the 2 autotypes. At some moment you can let me have them again for framing. I hope you will be able to send me just one line to say how you are.

Your affectionate

Gabriel

I copy overpage a label which is to be printed and put on the Silence –

“Silence holds in her hand a branch of peach, the symbol used by the ancients; its fruit being held to resemble the human heart and its leaf the human tongue. With the other hand she draws together the veil encircling the shrine in which she sits.” (Bryson, 71)

Rossetti’s verbal evocation of paintings, such as in this example, were attempts to chasten the power of the image, as a verbal shield against its ability to frighten the viewer’s and the artist’s gaze. In this respect, these verbal evocations are related to another phase or moment of ekphrastic realization, what Mitchell has called “ekphrastic fear:”

This is the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. (Mitchell, 154)

So, if, in some cases, Rossetti uses language in order to express his hope that his painted creatures will come alive, that their flesh might become real, in others, he appeals to language in order to exorcise his hidden fear of facing these “stunners” (McGann, 152), these beautiful medusas, whose gazes might petrify.

The letter he sent to his friend Frederick Stephens in 1875, in which he includes the ekphrasis of five of his paintings, embodies this tension between hope and fear, when he describes *La Bella Mano* [FIG. 34]:

The title may remind Italian readers of the well-known Petrarchian series of sonnets so named by Giusto de Conti. The picture is however simply a painter’s fancy and dependent on pictorial qualities almost entirely. [...] The pictorial object of the work has been to show the brilliancy of flesh tints and whites relieved on a



ground everywhere subdued to the eye, yet everywhere replete with varied colour and material.<sup>3</sup>

Again, Rossetti insists on the importance of flesh, reminding himself of the earthly flesh of the real body behind the painting. In so doing, his personified emotions, his soul's apparitions, are projections of his most intimate, sexual desires and hopes. The language is put at the service of vision. At the same time though, he specifies that the picture is "*simply* a painter's *fancy* and depended on pictorial qualities almost entirely" [italics mine]. In this way, he distances himself from the potential literal realization of his imaginary desire.

At this point it is clear what the late William Fredeman, the editor of Rossetti's letters, must have meant when he declared that Rossetti's private correspondence displays "the entire human network on whom he depended and with whom he shared his domestic, professional, and *intimate* identity" [italics mine]. The letters in which the "human network" situates his artistic identity and his art are a set of texts through which his double works of art, especially the later ones, should be read.

Only now that his letters are published, do we have the opportunity to look at Rossetti's works of art — never publicly exhibited in his own lifetime — from the personal point of view provided by the intimate, private, epistolary revelations, that is from his very inner standing point.

Rossetti is an artist of intimacy; intimacy between poet and painter, painting and sonnet, model and artist, model and canvas, word and image. These 'doubles' are not fused into one, but stand in intimate relation to one another, conversing across media. The letters reveal that his artistic experience can be conceived as a constant tension between the private and the public. Even though the letter may be conceived as intimate writing *par excellence*, in the hands of a poet-painter, of course, there is always the possibility that letters may be transferred to the public domain. Just as Rossetti disinterred his private manuscript of poems from the grave of his wife in order to have them published, so his private correspondence is now being exhumed and must proceed to form an integral part of his very private conception and exhibition of his public work of art.

Rossetti's intimate letters, expressing his private thoughts revolving around desired and figurative intimacy between image and text, artist and model, painting and flesh and, I would add, hope and fear, reframe his double works as exhibiting intimate impulses and secret drives.

---

<sup>3</sup> This letter is part of one of the two volumes of Rossetti's letters collected by Fredeman which have not been published yet. A copy of this particular letter was kindly lent to me by Jerome McGann, the director of the Rossetti Archive [www.rossettiarchive.org].

### LIST OF FIGURES

- FIG. 31 — Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Proserpine*, 1874, oil on canvas, 125,1 x 61 cm. Tate Gallery, London.
- FIG. 32 — Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Bocca Baciata*, 1859, oil on canvas, 26,6 x 30,4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts. Reproduced with permission, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
- FIG. 33 — Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Lady Lilith*, 1868, oil on canvas, 96,5 x 85,1 cm. Wilmington, Delaware Art Museum. Reproduced with permission, Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, 1935.
- FIG. 34 — Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *La Bella Mano*, 1875, oil on canvas, 157,5 x 116,8 cm. Wilmington, Delaware Art Museum. Reproduced with permission. Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, 1935.

### LIST OF CITED WORKS

- BUCHANAN, Robert. *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*. London: Strahan, 1872.
- BRYSON, John. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris. Their Correspondence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- FREDEMAN, William E. *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. 7 vols. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002.
- HUNT, William Holman. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. London: Macmillan, 1905.
- LUBBOCK, Percy. *The Letters of Henry James*. 2 vols. New York: Schribner, 1920.
- MCGANN, Jerome. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and The Game That Must be Lost*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000.
- MITCHELL, W. J. Thomas. "Ekphrasis and the Other," in *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994 (151-182).
- ROSSETTI, Dante Gabriel. *Poems*. London: Privately printed by Strangeways and Walden, 1869. NB: A facsimile copy of this complete set of what is known as the "A proofs" is available online on the website of the D. G. Rossetti archive, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org> [last visit June 9, 2008].
- ROSSETTI, William Michael (ed.). *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*. London: Cassell & Company Limited, 1889.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (ed.). *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir*. London: Ellis, 1895.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (ed.). *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. 2 vols. London : Ellis 1886.
- SHARP, William. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A Record and a Study*. New York: Ams Press, 1970.

### ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

THE DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI ARCHIVE [online], <http://www.rossettiarchive.org> [last visit, June 9, 2008]



FIG. 30. Pierre-Antoine Baudoin. *La Lecture*. c. 1760. Gouache on paper. Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris.



FIG. 31. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Proserpine*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 125,1 x 61 cm. Tate Gallery, London.



FIG. 32. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Bocca Baciata*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 26,6 x 30,4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



FIG. 33. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *Lady Lilith*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 96,5 x 85,1 cm. Wilmington, Delaware Art Museum, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, 1935.



FIG. 34. Dante Gabriel Rossetti. *La Bella Mano*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 157,5 x 116,8 cm. Wilmington, Delaware Art Museum. Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, 1935.

FIG. 35. Ambrogio Lorenzetti. *Good Government*, 1348. Detail: *The Sienese Campagna*, Palazzo Pubblico, Council Chamber, East wall. Museo civico, Siena. Photo R. Testi.

