

XXI

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La Vita Nuova: Examining the theme of love in two of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's most famous works, the poem, *The Blessed Damozel* and the painting, *Beata Beatrix*

This essay will trace, briefly, Rossetti's engagement with, and treatment of love. The *Blessed Damozel* was composed well before the death of Elizabeth "Lizzie" Siddall, Rossetti's wife, however, it shows that Dante Gabriel Rossetti "Rossetti" was obsessed with the idea of forever love well before *Beata Beatrix*. The poem, *The Blessed Damozel*, is about love and death, but most importantly, about love. The painting, *Beata Beatrix* was chosen because of the story it portrays, that of Dante Alighieri and Beatrice Portinari, and its parallels with the life and story of Rossetti and Lizzie.

*"In that book which is my memory,
On the first page of the chapter that is the day when I first met you,
Appear the words, 'Here begins a new life'."*
Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*

The nineteenth-century critic, essayist, and fellow poet Leigh Hunt wrote to Rossetti, stating that 'if you paint as well as you write, you may be a rich man.' It was no secret that Rossetti was a skilled and passionate poet, painting with words as vibrantly as he did with watercolours and oils.¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti ('Rossetti') was born in London, 12 May 1828, and lived in England his entire life. Rossetti was originally named Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti. His family and friends called him Gabriel, but in publications he put the name Dante first. His father, an Italian political refugee, was a poet and Dante² scholar, and from 1831 Professor of Italian at King's College London. Rossetti was brought up in a very artistic household. He was the brother of poet Christina Rossetti, the critic William Michael Rossetti, and author Maria Francesca Rossetti. Rossetti was part Italian, and this presumably connected him with his namesake Dante Alighieri, the famous Italian poet. Dante would prove an important source of artistic inspiration, and even obsession, throughout Rossetti's

¹ See <http://preraphaelitesisterhood.com/dante-gabriel-rossetti/> [accessed on February 17, 18, and 19, 2017]

² Dante Alighieri, Philosopher, Scholar, Poet (c. 1265–c. 1321). The author of *La Commedia (The Divine Comedy)*, considered a masterwork of world literature. He was born Durante Alighieri in Florence, Italy, to a notable family of modest means. [<http://www.biography.com/people/dante-9265912>, accessed on February 17, 18, and 19, 2017]

career, and it is assumed that this was because of Rossetti's father's interest in Dante's works *Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia*, which would have a lasting influence on Rossetti's life and work. One could see how Dante's work could affect Rossetti, the power of Dante's influence is clear from the first sonnet from *La Vita Nuova*:

Joyous Love seemed to me, the while he held
 My heart within his hands, and in his arms
 My lady lay asleep wrapped in a veil.
 He woke her then and trembling and obedient
 She ate that burning heart out of his hand;
 Weeping I saw him then depart from me.

Rossetti's entered Sass's Drawing Academy in 1841 and subsequently joined the Royal Academy Schools as a probationer in 1844, becoming a full student in December 1845. By 1847 he was considering careers in both poetry and painting. He was briefly a pupil of Ford Madox Brown in March 1848. In August 1848, he moved with William Holman Hunt to a studio in Cleveland Street and around September that year founded, along with Holman Hunt and Sir John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He also finished his translation of Dante's *Vita Nuova* in October 1848. In 1849 and 1850, respectively, as part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti exhibited his first important paintings, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*³ and *Ecce Ancilla Domini*.⁴ At about the same time Rossetti met Lizzie, a milliner's assistant, who became a model for many of his paintings and sketches. Rossetti and Lizzie were engaged in 1851 but did not marry until 1860. It is not known why they didn't marry until 1860, however, it was always thought that it was perhaps because of her ill health, his financial difficulties, or simply an unwillingness on the part of Rossetti to undertake the marriage commitment. They did get married, and in February of 1862, after only two short years of marriage, it is thought that Lizzie took an overdose of the sleeping medication laudanum and died. It has again been said that it was probably a suicide, though there is no evidence to substantiate this claim.

Perhaps it was because he was Italian, or perhaps it was due to his exposure to the story of Dante Alighieri and Beatrice Portinari that Rossetti was so inspired by the theme, and ideas of love in both his poetry and painting. It has often been said that from an early age, Rossetti was obsessed with the theme of love, and this was perhaps evidenced by some his early works, including the poem *The Blessed Damozel*, which we will come to in a moment. As a true Romantic, Rossetti was said to have understandably preferred the poetry of Keats, the novels of Walter Scott, the works of Blake, Coleridge and Chatterton, the old medieval ballads, and the poems of Tennyson.⁵ Nowhere is this romantic inclination more apparent than in his attitude towards the works of

³ *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* was DGR's first major oil painting. Exhibited in 1849 at the Free Exhibition in London.

⁴ 1849-50, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London.

⁵ Cecil Y. Lang, "Introduction," *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), xiii.

Dante Alighieri, the subject of Beata Beatrix. Though the child Rossetti cared little for his father's Dantean erudition, his father's acquisition of a Giotto portrait and death mask when the boy was only twelve may have piqued his interest.⁶ Rossetti would spend much of his life creating double works, meaning that he would often write poetry to accompany his paintings. We know that Rossetti was influenced by Dante's Beatrice and Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*⁷ when he wrote *The Blessed Damozel* (1850, revised '56, '70, '73). The poem is romantic, yet reeks of yearning, which is synonymous with loss. *The Blessed Damozel* explores the theme of lovers separated by death, yet still connected by love, and who are looking forward to their reunion in the afterlife. This idea of love after death, or everlasting love would take on a deeper meaning after the untimely passing of Lizzie from a laudanum overdose. Rossetti's identification with Dante had reached a frightening new level, and would come full circle with Lizzie's death.

Lizzie's introduction to the Pre-Raphaelite circle led to her appearance in several early works of note, such as *Ophelia* by Millais and *Valentine Rescuing Sylvia* by Holman Hunt. Eventually, she posed only for Rossetti. Over the next decade, she became his muse, his pupil, and his passion. They were finally married in 1860 and she died shortly after. With his wife, no longer a living muse, she becomes an even more Beatrice-like or Blessed Damozel figure, unreachable in the after-life. In his posthumous tribute to her⁸, he painted her as Beatrice on the brink of death. Early in his relationship with Lizzie, Rossetti seemed to idealize her and view her as his Beatrice, the love immortalized by Dante in *La Vita Nuova*. Later works would feature Jane Morris as Beatrice. Rossetti's personal life was closely linked to his work, especially his relationships with his models and muses Lizzie, Fanny Cornforth, and Jane Morris. The Blessed Damozel first, as it is the earlier of the two works, followed by Beata Beatrix.

The Blessed Damozel

*The Blessed Damozel*⁹ is one of Rossetti's most well-known poems. It was first written in 1847, and revised several times throughout Rossetti's life, one would suppose, as a testament of its enduring theme, or perhaps, the regard in which Rossetti would hold the poem. It was published in 1850 in the Pre-Raphaelite journal, *The Germ*. As we know, the poem drew inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, and Dante's *Vita Nuova*. In *The Blessed Damozel*, Rossetti explored the theme of lovers separated by death:

⁶ Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 50.

⁷ See T. Hall Caine, *Recollection of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Kessinger Publishing 2010), p. 384. Rossetti explained, that "I saw that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven."

⁸ The date of Elizabeth's death being in 1862 and the painting being begun in 1863, show that this was a posthumous work, Dante referring to his previous sketches and paintings of Elizabeth in order to create the culmination of his relationship and marriage with his muse.

⁹ See, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1847.s244.raw.html> [accessed on February 9th, 2017].

The blessed damozel leaned out
 From the gold bar of heaven
 Her eyes were deeper than the depth
 Of waters stilled at even
 She had three lilies in her hand
 And the stars in her hair were seven

Lenore

Ah broken is the golden bowl! the spirit flown forever!
 Let the bell toll!--a saintly soul floats on the Stygian river;
 And, Guy De Vere, hast thou no tear?--weep now or never more!
 See! on yon drear and rigid bier low lies thy love, Lenore!
 Come! let the burial rite be read--the funeral song be sung!--
 An anthem for the queenliest dead that ever died so young--
 A dirge for her the doubly dead in that she died so young.

In what is typical Rossetti fashion, a woman appears in a graceful posture, with seemingly mysterious looks, languishing, and replete with symbolism. According to George Eliot, the poem's purpose is 'to praise the human love of man and woman.'¹⁰ Like Poe's Lenore, the damozel¹¹ has died and Rossetti introduces her to us as she looks down upon her lover from heaven. Rossetti later told Hall Caine 'I saw that Poe had done the utmost it is possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven.'¹² Here we can see that Rossetti articulates a kinetic dramatization of the mutual longing between the living and the dead, and the fitful yet powerful communicative circuit that might still connect them. Rossetti seems to imagine such a connection as at once spiritual and embodied, partaking of heavenly grace and yet reliant on an abiding carnality. Crossing the bar of heaven, the damozel has gone to paradise; leaning back over it, she confirms her loiterer's status in a sub-heavenly mezzanine from which she just might send a desiring lament back to earth.

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path
 Was vague in distant spheres:
 And then she cast her arms along
 The golden barriers,
 And laid her face between her hands
 And wept. (I heard her tears.)

¹⁰ See Clyde de L. Ryals. "Modern Philology." *Modern Philology*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1967, pp. 173-175.,

¹¹ An archaic form of damsel.

¹² See Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, *ibid.*

There are shades of Dante's *Vita Nuova* that can be detected here, except where Dante's sainted Beatrice was a courtly love, Rossetti's damozel desires both a romantic and a physical union with her lover. Here the damozel represents an idealized love, but she is not remote and unattainable like Beatrice, she is far closer, not out of reach. He continues, making her appear to be flesh and blood, even leaning against the golden bar of heaven so long that '...her bosom must have made/ The bar she lean'd on warm.' Dante first saw and fell in love with Beatrice when he was nine years old and would later write about his instant love for her in *Vita Nuova*, saying 'Behold, a deity stronger than I; who coming, shall rule over me.' Dante loved Beatrice from afar for the rest of her life.

From *The Blessed Damozel* through the production of the 1870 *Poems* and beyond, Rossetti explores the theme of love, which was ever present in his works. This is evidenced by the fact that even though *The Blessed Damozel* was first written in 1847, it appeared with revisions in 1850, 1856, 1870, and 1881. We know that Rossetti was inspired by Poe. Poe, Rossetti said, 'had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved one in heaven.'¹³

Beata Beatrix

Beata Beatrix is a dazzling and beautiful painting that holds enough sway to captivate the viewer immediately. The work is enchanting, haunting, and fascinating. The painting immediately invites the viewer to study the painting and explore the story being told, for Rossetti was a masterful storyteller with his paintings. Rossetti draws a parallel in this picture between the Italian poet Dante's despair at the death of his beloved Beatrice and his own grief at the death of his wife Lizzie. Dante Alighieri recounted the story of his unrequited love and subsequent mourning for Beatrice Portinari in the *Vita Nuova*. This was Rossetti's first English translation and appeared in 1864 as part of his own publication, *The Early Italian Poets*. Rossetti's inspiration was Dante's *La Vita Nuova*,¹⁴ which explores the Italian poet's idealised love for Beatrice and her premature death.

There are several questions that immediately come to mind when one sees *Beata Beatrix* for the first time: who is this woman, and what is she thinking? Who are the strange, blurred figures in the background? What is the relevance of the dial, and of the dove and the poppy? The answers to these questions are all really easy and quite straightforward, for the artist provides us with the answers himself; according to Rossetti,

¹³ See Caine, *Recollections of Dante* Gabriel Rossetti.

¹⁴ See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix* c.1864-70, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/dante-gabriel-rossetti-beata-beatrix-r1104876>, accessed 04 March 2017.

‘The Picture illustrates the Vita Nuova embodying symbolically the death Beatrice as treated in the work. The picture is not intended at all to represent death, but to render it under the semblance of a trance, in which Beatrice, seated at a Balcony overlooking the city, is suddenly rapt from earth to heaven. You will remember how Dante dwells on the desolation of the city in connection with the incident of her death, and for this reason, I have introduced it as my background, and made the figures of Dante and Love passing through the street and gazing ominously on one another, conscious of the event; while the bird, a messenger of death, drops a poppy between the hands of Beatrice. She, through her shut lids, is conscious of a new world, as expressed in the last words of the Vita Nuova – that blessed Beatrice who now gazeth continually on his countenance, *qui est per omnia saecula Benedictus*.’¹⁵

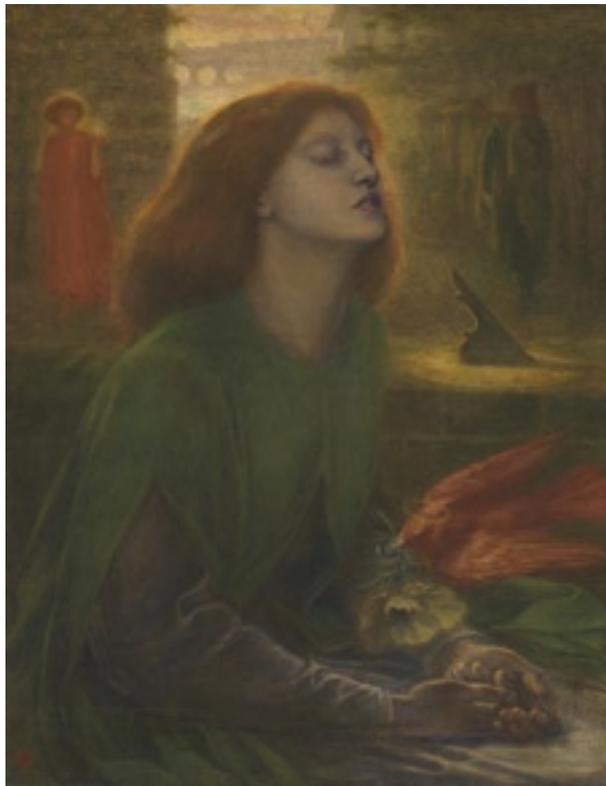


Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*. Oil on canvas, circa 1863-70, 86.4 x 66 cm, Tate. Presented by Georgiana, Baroness Mount-Temple in memory of her husband, Francis, Baron Mount-Temple 1889.

Also, evident from the painting itself, is the fact that it has a double subject, for the principal figure is both Dante’s Beatrice and Rossetti’s Lizzie. The title *Blessed Beatrice*, refers to the end of the *Vita Nuova*. Rossetti painted the intensely spiritual *Beata Beatrix* as a memorial to Lizzie, expressing his love for her as a parallel to Dante’s for Beatrice. The picture is dated 1864, but was worked on over a period of several years. It was said that ‘Everything he [Rossetti] did was undertaken with absolute decision on one hand, and as part of a spiritual pursuit on the other.’¹⁶

¹⁵ Recollections. Ibid.

¹⁶ See McGann, Jerome. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost*. (Yale University Press, 2000).

This painting marks the second time Lizzie was portrayed close to death. In *Ophelia*¹⁷ her hands lie open as she floats along the water. Her hands were open, but neither welcoming nor expecting anything. Again, in *Beata Beatrix* her hands are open, open and ready to welcome the poppies that the Dove (red, the colour of love) is bringing her. The poppies, whose seeds are the source of opium, are an ironic reference to the laudanum that caused Lizzie's real death. The dove, a messenger of love, was associated by Rossetti with Siddal; it bears a white poppy, a symbol of sleep or death and the source of laudanum, the cause of Lizzie's death. In the background is Dante (right) looking towards Love (left), dressed in red and holding a flame. In the background, we see the figures of Love and Death. We also see a sundial, with the shadow on the number nine.



Figure 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*. Oil on canvas, circa 1877, 86.4 x 682mm, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.¹⁸

In later versions of *Beata Beatrix*, (Figure 2), Rossetti painted the figures on the background with much more detail but changed the face of Beatrice a great deal. Also, the colour of the dove has changed from red to white while the poppies were changed from white to red. The picture, however, is perfectly comprehensible as a simple representation of Beatrice. It does not depend on recognition of the artist's dead wife for its meaning. In fact, Rossetti stressed the Dantesque subject and not

¹⁷ Millais's painting represents the drowning of Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Lizzie posed for Ophelia in a bath of water kept warm by lamps underneath. [<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506>] accessed on February 19, 2017.

¹⁸ One of several versions of this subject, this painting was unfinished at the time of Rossetti's death and the background was completed by Ford Madox Brown. In this version, the poppies are red, perhaps an explicit reference to opium-derived laudanum. [<http://www.bmagic.org.uk/objects/1891P25> Accessed on February 27th, 2017]

the likeness to Siddal in letters to the picture's buyers. By the time of his death and the memorial exhibition of his works, however, the identity of the portrait was widely known. Commonly read as a memorial to Lizzie, *Beata Beatrix* (1870) takes as its subject Dante's beloved Beatrice, imagined in the autobiographical text of *Vita Nuova*. Rossetti's depiction of Beatrice fuses the quotidian and the supernatural, and it does so in a way that instils the image with a powerful virtuosity and spirituality perhaps exceeding that of other Pre-Raphaelite *femme fatales*.

The golden light emanating from Beatrice envelopes the sundial, compositionally framing her face between her hair and the shape of the sundial. The background provides us with a view of the river Arno, its bridge, with the distant silhouette of the Ponte Vecchio and the Duomo of Florence, where Dante and Beatrice both lived until her death in June 1290. To the viewer's right, the figure of Dante stands in front of a well, representing Beatrice's impending rebirth and his own rebirth as a poet when Beatrice becomes his muse. Dante's figure gazes intently at the figure of Love, who wears a brilliant red dress and who holds a book, the author presumes is a copy of the *Vita Nuova*. Love holds the flaming heart that, in Dante's first dream of Beatrice, Love fed to Beatrice before sorrowfully carrying her with him to Heaven. Rossetti echoes this visionary event by showing Love seemingly beckoning to Dante's figure to follow him off the left side of the picture, perhaps heavenwards. Once you have studied Rossetti, and his life, then the symbolism is clear, resulting in a nod of acknowledgement, and perhaps a feeling of sadness.¹⁹

Conclusion

When Lizzie died, Rossetti, we may believe, found some slight consolation in the thought that this loss of the beloved one drew him still nearer to Dante. The analogy was now complete: Rossetti was now Dante in purgatory, while Lizzie was Beatrice in heaven; and his public confession of his faith is his strangely beautiful *Beata Beatrix*. The pre-eminence of Love as a powerful character typifies both Dante and Rossetti. Lizzie was Rossetti's ideal love; Lizzie was Rossetti's Beatrice; she was Rossetti's Blessed Damozel. It was in Lizzie's beauty that Rossetti saw it all, the past and present, she was his ideal love, she was love epitomised. Lizzie stands as a symbol of art, of love, of Rossetti's love. It was this link that Rossetti had with Dante, and Lizzie's death; which reinforced Rossetti's connection even more, that led to the painting of *Beata Beatrix*; the best of Rossetti's Dante related works and quite possibly the most powerful and enigmatic painting he ever created. Rossetti's inspiration was Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, which explores the Italian poet's idealised, and eternal love for Beatrice and her premature death.

¹⁹ The picture frame, which was designed by Rossetti, has further references to death and mourning, including the date of Beatrice's death and a phrase from Lamentations 1:1, quoted by Dante in the *Vita Nuova*: '*Quomodo sedet sola civitas*' ('how doth the city sit solitary'), referring to the mourning of Beatrice's death throughout the city of Florence. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279> [Accessed March 4th, 2017]

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