

**T**he Other Side:  
**Themes of Swedenborgian-spiritualism  
in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's  
*The Blessed Damozel***

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*This article will explore two expressions of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting The Blessed Damozel and the poem of the same title. This will elucidate how the expression of these notions is in tune with previous scholarship by D. M. R. Bentley suggesting that the Damozel is a fantasy for the character of the lover, and subsequently, probably for Rossetti himself. The two ideas explored will be the retention of human form after death, and communication or spiritual presence between married partners after death separates them and one remains living.*

**T**he Blessed Damozel painting (figure 1) was begun in 1871 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the painting having been commissioned by one of his faithful patrons William Graham. It was based on the poem which Rossetti first composed in 1847, one of his most important, which he would continue to revise for many years. Having been influenced by the markedly dissimilar poem 'The Raven' by Edgar Allan Poe, The Blessed Damozel story inverts the concept of a pastoral elegy, having the deceased as the subject of grief. The 1850 version of the poem has been chosen for this article due to later revisions not substantially altering the meaning of the story itself. It may also be argued that since this version was published at a date close to its original composition when Rossetti was a late adolescent, it is a truer expression of his ideas.

In the painting, which has two tiers demarcated by its frame, the Damozel leans out despondently over a gold bar in heaven as she longs for reunion with her earthbound lover who is still alive.



Figure 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*, 1871–1878, oil on canvas, 136.8 × 96.5 cm, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum. Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

In the lower tier, her lover gazes up towards her, and she looks off into the distance echoing a sense of hopelessness. She appears to be brooding, lost in thought as she anxiously holds her own finger and lightly slumps to one side. The representation of heaven is quite peculiar, as behind the Damozel we can see numerous embracing lovers. Heaven, thus, is a place for lovers, either already together or to be reunited. The adage of heaven bringing eternal peace, tranquility or

rest, does not apply to the Damozel, who despite existing in heaven, cannot find peace until her lover joins her there. In fact, in the pictorial, she is seemingly mocked by her surroundings, which serve to reinforce the torturous nature of her isolation.

This idiosyncratic, even codependent dynamic is shared by the gentleman on earth, who also remains in a ponderous state. Both characters are left waiting and hoping in their separate worlds, emphasized by the hard line of demarcation from the gold frame, and by grammatical techniques in the text, unable to meet again despite their prayers. It would be inaccurate, and too morbid, to suggest that the Damozel wishes the gentleman to die, for she simply wants reunion. Likewise, he shows no inclination towards death. It appears that both await some kind of divine intervention to bring them together again.

Both painting and poem express, through a complex yet perceptibly aesthetic bent, the desire for spiritual and physical reunion. Since the poem acts as the precursor

to the painting, it tells the same story. A thorough analysis of each will not be explored. Instead, I will examine prominent themes of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism in each. As Swedenborgian-Spiritualism was more of an indirect force diffusing through Rossetti's early family life and his London circle,<sup>1</sup> the reasoning behind its inclusion will not be explored. Instead, I will discuss some marked correlations between the painting, poem, and Swedenborgian-Spiritualism, with a disclosure of how these are imparted through copy and painting, and how this supports Rossetti's penchant for fantasy.

#### THE RETENTION OF HUMAN FORM AFTER DEATH

Almost all the people who arrive from this world are as astonished as they can be to find that they are alive and that they are just as human as ever, that they are seeing and hearing and talking, that their bodies are still endowed with the sense of touch, and that nothing at all has changed.<sup>2</sup>

Like Swedenborg's assertion that after death we retain our recognisable human forms, in poem and painting, Rossetti conveys the same notion. Looking to the visual portrayal, all characters, including the Damozel, the lovers in the background, the trio of angels, and the earthbound lover, are ostensibly in human form. Despite the Damozel's ethereal glow and crowning stars, it would be necessary for the observer to understand the poem/story to recognise the preternatural or heavenly setting. This might be why Rossetti chose to include a portion of the poem on the gold frame, to ensure the fantastical setting and scenario is understood. The physicality of the poem itself is conspicuous in the content, which will be noted further on, and this is extended to the painting. Not only is the Damozel leaning over the bar, but she is holding her finger, and her attire seems to be carried to the side as if by a gust of wind. This curiously drifting garb implies that a breeze can exist in her setting, and although this may well also hold symbolic meaning, it adds a sense of physical lightness to her clothing and thus, subsequently, a sense of physical weight to her being.

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<sup>1</sup> See more about Swedenborg's indirect influence in Rossetti's life in Anna Maddison, 'Conjugal Love and the Afterlife: New Readings of Selected Works by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Context of Swedenborgian-Spiritualism' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Edge Hill University, 2013). Rossetti's father kept Swedenborg's literature in the family home, and many of Rossetti's London circle were influenced by him.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Afterlife, A Guided Tour of Heaven and Its Wonders* (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2008) p. 12. Swedenborg Foundation Ebook. It is important to note that Swedenborg claims that people appear exactly as they did on earth in a transitory phase, before changing physically to become more reflective of their personalities, but they are still recognisable when changed.

Despite having crossed over after her death, she is rendered as possessing a life-like density, a corporeal substance that is enhanced to the viewer by the delicacy of the silvery garment in motion and even the surrounding tiny pink flowers. Furthermore, her size in terms of scale in the painting underlines her physicality, but also could be said to visually elucidate the heaviness and sizeable nature of her sorrow. The dichotomous portrayal of heaviness and lightness, stillness and motion, large and small, and light and dark, all emphasise her human form. Other than a light glow, the characters in the upper portion of the painting have no blurry or faded technique applied to them, but as will be explored, the Damozel appears as a fantasy, not as the legitimate appearance of a real person.

The poem itself has descriptions of the Damozel that D. M. R. Bentley has noted to be ‘excessively physical and sensual’.<sup>3</sup> Rossetti recognises her physical attributes, such as her eyes, her hand, and hair, from the outset. The poem separates the characters through technicalities; the narrator’s voice has nothing to distinguish it, but the lover’s voice is parenthesised, and the Damozel’s voice is in quotation marks.

However, despite these mechanisms to establish differentiation, it has been argued that all of the voices belong to the lover, and that they all interlock to form part of his collective vision. Thomas H. Brown has stated that we ‘ought to view all three as the self-contained, single consciousness of the earthbound lover himself’.<sup>4</sup> The culminating stanza of the poem supports this theory, as the narrator and lover’s voices become curiously enmeshed as if part of the same thought process (the narrator not being separate or objective from the situation). Furthermore, perhaps the most controversial stanza of the poem, elucidates the percipient’s fanciful vision:

And still she bowed herself, and stooped  
    Into the vast waste calm;  
Till her bosom's pressure must have made  
    The bar she leaned on warm,  
And the lilies lay as if asleep  
    Along her bended arm.

This description, which is revealing of the imagination through terminology such as ‘must have’ and ‘as if’, could signal that as human beings, the earthbound lover included, we cannot envision an afterlife or the spirit of a person that is not imbued with physical attributes from our living reality. Brown has touched upon this briefly, stating ‘the

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<sup>3</sup> D.M.R. Bentley, ‘The Blessed Damozel: A Young Man’s Fantasy’, *Victorian Poetry*, 20.3/4 (1982), 31–43 (p. 40). Jstor.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas H. Brown, ‘The Quest of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in “The Blessed Damozel”’, *Victorian Poetry*, 10.3 (1972), 273-277 (p. 247). Jstor.

particularity of physical detail throughout the poem becomes a means for him to conceptualize the existence of the non-physical, spiritual sphere'.<sup>5</sup>

Sensuous descriptions by Rossetti extend from physical appearance to the retention of bodily warmth, the latter being intrinsically associated with the living, driving the reader to consider that the lover's vision might, in fact, be a fantasy based on a memory, or more likely, a fantasy for the poet himself. The misery of the Damozel, the inversion of the grieving subject, and the physicality of the rendering in both pieces leads the observer to question whether the vision is heavenly at all.

Most importantly, although the lover's dialogue is trapped in parenthesis to reflect his constrained situation, the lover distinctly gets the last word, evincing his importance in the poem. While it might be considered that the Damozel is depicted in a human form, so may be a vision based on a memory, she is no ordinary woman. Upon a closer inspection, particularly of the painting, the blend of influences belies the life-like depiction. Some symbols in the painting such as the stars and lilies are a reference to Rossetti's 'political heritage',<sup>6</sup> which might be said to move the Damozel further away from being considered to be a real person.

Furthermore, Rossetti's penchant for an idealised fantasy woman has been widely recognised, including by Tim Barringer who writes, 'Rossetti created a decorative and sensuous world of the imagination quite at odds with the Pre-Raphaelites'<sup>7</sup> and that 'he concentrated increasingly on the pursuit of an ideal, sensuous beauty, in images of long-haired and languorous women'.<sup>8</sup> Jan Marsh has also commented on how the poem 'The Portrait', composed around the same time as 'The Blessed Damozel', was an 'intensely imagined vision'<sup>9</sup> since Rossetti had no romantic relationship during this time. The key term here is imagined: one might argue that the Damozel's physicality is part of the lover or poet's fantasy, she is a dream woman of sorts.

#### COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MARRIED PARTNERS AFTER DEATH SEPARATES THEM

Those who have lived truly conjugal love are not separated by the death of one since the spirit of the deceased partner dwells continually with the one not yet deceased, and this until the death of the latter

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas H. Brown, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup> Stars/lilies as a reference to Italy longing for liberation in Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: painter and poet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1942), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites: reading the image* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> Barringer, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Marsh, p. 24.

when they meet again and reunite and love each other more tenderly than before because in the spirit world.<sup>10</sup>

The delight of truly conjugal love not only endures to old age in the world but after death becomes the delight of heaven and is there filled with an interior delight that grows more and more perfect to eternity.<sup>11</sup>

In the pictorial, the scale of the Damozel might be said to present her spiritual presence in the lover's life. She looms over him, about four times the size of his depiction, adding to the inescapability of his physical and spiritual position. The size of the Damozel could also be said to represent the amount of focus the lover is directing towards her. Rather than paying attention to his worldly surroundings, his gaze is fixed upward on the vision of her.

Whether the vision is a result of grief or a legitimate spiritual connection resulting in a visitation, the painting does more to emphasise a perpetual bond due to its inherent static nature. Here, it is easy to decipher a correlation with Swedenborgian-Spiritualism regarding marriages based on true love extending beyond this life. Although we do not know the marital status of the characters, conjugal love becoming the 'delight of heaven' is lucidly echoed by the upper portion of the painting, that while potentially erotic, leaves ample room for interpretation. Helene E. Roberts has asserted that Rossetti erected physical barriers (the gold bar of heaven) to 'place his heroines beyond the coarser reflections of lust',<sup>12</sup> that he attempts to spiritualise sexual desire in a similar way to how Swedenborg distinguishes desire within marriage from other kinds of desire.

Intriguingly, the male's whole body is laid out in the painting, whereas the focus for the women, especially the Damozel, is on their faces. Roberts adds that while the Damozel is desirable, she is 'beyond the realm of lustful thoughts [placed] into a sphere more elevated, more spiritual, more emotional'<sup>13</sup> and the countenance as a point of emphasis by Rossetti could be said to suggest a less sexual, and more conjugal love.

As stated previously, the spirit for Rossetti remains in physical form, suggesting a continuation of sexual love, but in a way that eludes simple lust and enters into wider themes of immortality and the spiritual. If we consider the size of the Damozel to be the size of the lover's preoccupation with her, it might suggest a minimisation of his own individuality in the context of his own life. He appears to be lost in the vision, and

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<sup>10</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, *Love and Marriage on Earth and in Heaven: Extracts from the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg* (Swedenborg Society, 1964), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Swedenborg, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Helene E. Roberts, 'The Dream World of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Victorian Studies*, 17.4 (1974), 371–393 (p. 377). Jstor.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, p. 378.

‘checked-out’ of his physical experience. But a painting can do no more than present one fixed moment.

This contrasts with the text of the poem, in which Rossetti’s use of the past-tense suggests the vision of the Damozel has ended, and so perhaps is not a continual presence. More on this will be noted later on. It might even be argued that the past-tense usage emphasises the poem’s dramatic and entertainment value, almost like campfire-style storytelling. There was wide audience interest in spiritualist matters,<sup>14</sup> so given the popularity of theatrical orations by mediums claiming to channel spirits, it is possible that Rossetti’s use of the past tense reflects a potent cultural current. While the Damozel’s spiritual presence may be fixed and enduring in the pictorial, like Swedenborg’s aforementioned quote on married partners separated by death, the poem by Rossetti suggests she is a more fleeting presence.

The aforementioned consideration of a Swedenborgian-Spiritualist style of conjugal love is buttressed in the poem, wherein the Damozel states that she wishes for the couple’s reunion to be divinely judged and approved by Christ himself, revealing her faith in the legitimacy and innocence of the relationship.<sup>15</sup> More striking is how the poem contains textual hints that are indicative of an impermanent communicative presence.

Unlike the still image, or Swedenborg’s assertion of a continual or unbreakable presence, the poem is incongruous in this regard. It is written in the past tense, denoting a recollection, and the whole vision seems to stand alone as an occurrence. The lover reflects on the ‘ten years of years’ the Damozel has been gone, implying the fleeting nature of each year passing by, yet no previous vision or communication with her is accounted for. Their mortal life together is also not accounted for.

The possibility of the vision being a fantasy in the mind of the lover is exacerbated by several instances in the text that underscore the sense of hopelessness that is mostly latent; these are the stanzas in which the lover realises his fantasy of the Damozel’s hair is just falling leaves, and the culminating stanza. Unlike the painting which can only depict a moment in time (in this case it is reflective of the first few stanzas) the poem’s addition of the falling leaves acts as a sudden awakening for the lover, who for a moment is forced to recognise her physical, and perhaps spiritual, absence.

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<sup>14</sup> See Cora L.V. Tappan, *Discourses through the mediumship of Mrs. Cora L.V Tappan: The new science, Spiritual Ethics* (London: J. Burns, 1875) and George Sexton, *The Claims of Modern Spiritualism* (London: J. Burns, 1873) as instances of public oration on spiritualism.

<sup>15</sup> The seeking of holy approval in the poem probably would have appealed to the Victorian critics of spiritualism, who had significant concerns about its impact on gendered relationships and marriage. Marlene Tromp has noted Joseph B. Rotherham’s argument from his book *A Warning Against Spiritualism*, stating he feared ‘the collapse of social boundaries’ due to those seeking to ‘satisfy their spiritual, or physical, desires’ in Marlene Tromp, ‘Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (2003), 67–81 (p. 71). Jstor.

Interestingly, however, the following stanza snaps back into the recollection of the vision. By stating 'but soon' to describe the separation, it once again suggests that the dream or vision is over. The ending of the poem, the Damozel crying, truly echoes hopelessness, and there is no indication of the dream or vision being a recognisable occurrence or a perpetual one. If the painting articulates an unending bond due to its unchanging nature, the poem elicits the notion of a passing communication, whether real or imagined.

One could argue that the singular nature of the vision in the poem might be reflective of changing death rituals in the Victorian era, as a 'cult of death' existed wherein a middle-class and Christian reform movement sought to promote a simplified mourning ritual and even cremation.<sup>16</sup> But I would posit that Swedenborgian-Spiritualist themes in both poem and painting help to evidence the notion of the vision of the Damozel being a fantasy. This is because other major themes of spiritualism are not considered in these works. In fact, some notions from Victorian spiritualism such as the favouring of constant personal and societal progress are in direct opposition to the stagnancy of the characters of the lover and Damozel, weakening the potential for contextual links to be made.<sup>17</sup>

If we consider that Swedenborg claims a continual presence of the deceased marriage partner, and we take his claim for truth, we might consider that the continual presence would manifest a sustained meditation on the ongoing experience, death, or the deceased individual. In both pieces the vision is not referred to as episodic, which could further suggest an imaginative experience on the part of the lover. Likewise, although the Damozel is described and painted in a life-like way, the blend of the lover's and narrator's voices in the text, the standalone nature of the experience, and the intense physicality of both pieces help to establish the Damozel as a fantasy.

The painting and poem have a significant time gap between them, yet the painting does not divert from the original poem. This may have been because it was commissioned, and Rossetti may have been expected to closely align the image with the story in the text for the sake of the patron. In fact, the painting shows no indulgence into spiritualism more widely or with regards to the circumstances in Rossetti's own life. Rossetti certainly had an intellectual interest in spiritualist matters, and attended seances as opportunities arose, but it could be argued that his interest was based on its intellectual and entertainment value rather than a profound personal longing for metaphysical understanding.

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<sup>16</sup> See Introduction and Jennifer Leaney, 'Ashes to ashes: cremation and the celebration of death in nineteenth-century Britain' in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. by Ralph Houlbrooke, (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Alex Owen has noted in *The darkened room: women, power, and spiritualism in late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 26 that spiritualists 'pursued an ideal of individual and societal perfection' in accordance with the ethos of continual improvement espoused.



Rossetti had described his excitement about being ‘bogified’ at seances, a humorous term, and the painting shows no reference to his own bereavement from his wife’s 1862 death.<sup>18</sup> The painting was also composed during Rossetti’s intense romantic affair with Jane Morris,<sup>19</sup> and although the model was Alexa Wilding, some of Jane’s features, such as the eyes, can be seen in the Damozel. As previously mentioned, the Damozel not only has symbolic features, but the painting was probably influenced by these two different women: Alexa and Jane. It was also only a year prior to the painting that Rossetti exhumed the poetry he had buried with Elizabeth Siddal. He published the works in the 1870 volume *Poems by D.G. Rossetti*, signifying a desire to move forward in his physical reality, as opposed to a proactive desire to embark on a journey of understanding the other side.

Rossetti’s oeuvre as a whole was markedly aesthetic and had a vast range of influences, none of which have significant depth. In these items, this may reflect that these spiritualist themes did not have a profound influence upon Rossetti. The Swedenborgian-Spiritualist themes considered here prove that Rossetti was interested in the ideas of spiritualism, but not too invested in them. Instead of a thorough engagement with spiritualism, in these pieces, he has used ideas from spiritualism as another vehicle for fantasy articulation and the creation of a fictional woman: one of many fictional women that would serve to typify his creations.

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<sup>18</sup> William E. Fredeman, *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Chelsea Years 1863-1872*, (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 2005), p. 402.

<sup>19</sup> See the letters of Rossetti in Janet Camp Troxell, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 34–35.

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