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Towards Romantic Syncretism: Liminal and Transitory Women in the Work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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Towards Romantic Syncretism: Liminal and Transitory Women in the Work of Dante

Gabriel Rossetti

Throughout his career, Dante Gabriel Rossetti struggled with a poetic and visual synthesis of the ideal with the sensual, exploring and attempting to resolve the “brooding paradox” (Casteras 18) of Victorian sexuality, a feat not easily achieved during an era of such fervent morality. Developing his own Romantic Syncretism, Rossetti presents a synthesis of multifaceted symbolism and allegory in his work, combining pagan and Christian themes to create a liminal space in which the divided natures of his female subjects, their object versus subject-hood, are unified. His approach to Christian symbology via fleshy and aesthetic representation of the female form retains a sense of spiritual transcendence, thus defining a mode of access other than faith to the spiritual, and calling into question the strict orthodoxy and sterility of religion (McGowan 114). Focusing on works that present the female subject in a liminal or transitory state, specifically *Found*, *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, *La Bella Mano*, and *The Blessed Damozel*, this essay will examine how Rossetti represents the transitional void between the pure and profane, the virginal and sexual, erecting a bridge between these previously sterilized and distilled halves of the self in order to reveal their complimentary and mirrored nature. In doing so, Rossetti is able to draw “parallels between physical and epistemological planes,” simultaneously elevating the body and rendering the divine as humanized and approachable (McGowan 116).

Rossetti’s painting and poetry reconciles the Madonna-or-Whore dichotomy of artistic female representation, not choosing between these two distinct realms, but instead depicting an “overlapping sphere, which harmonizes the fragmentary halves” (Casteras

12, 18). As Walter Pater argues, to speak of Rossetti as interested in a purely material representation of the female form is misleading, rather “the two trains of phenomena—matter and spirit—play inextricably into each other” (61). Unfortunately, a large amount of the scholarship surrounding Rossetti’s work fails to identify the ways in which he not only undermines traditional approaches and responses to Christian themes, but also transforms recurrent ideas surrounding spiritual transcendence into a “new strain of thought and emotion within the pale of [...] artistic orthodoxy” (Myers 46). He is not simply rendering the “framework of traditional symbolism [...] inoperative” (McGann 79); rather, he carries forward the inherited content of religious symbolism, allowing it to manifest in new and unexpected ways through an inclusion of sensual physicality and desire. Claims that Rossetti’s representations of the female form are “unhealthily sensuous” (Weatherby 71) and lacking an ideological framework, ignore the ways in which the “human sensorium” (McGann 79) in fact acts as a vehicle for spiritual and sacred discovery through a “centripetal journey into the interior of the self” (Spector 89). Rossetti thus formulates a double vision, or self, in which the fusion of the material and the spiritual is made apparent through the inherent duality and liminal positioning of his women as both subject and object, and subsequent unifiers of flesh and spirit.

Seemingly antithetical to Rossetti’s inclusive “thematics of multiplicity” (Klein 118), *Found* presents a dichotomized sense of morality in which the sexual and the sacred are represented as polar extremes. The two main figures, the ill female prostitute and the strong male farmer, are portrayed in a hierarchal contrast with one another, representing the larger opposing forces of profane sexuality and pure spirituality. Sheathed in a pure and virginal white, the farmer embodies the pure and Christian pastoral, a state free of the

debased sexuality symbolized by the fallen woman in her ornate dress patterned with plucked roses. The figures are depicted interacting in a liminal space, on the border of the city and countryside during the “budding morrow” (1) and “smokeless resurrection light” (4) of dawn. Thus their union is embedded in a spatial ambivalence that, through the hopeful language of the accompanying sonnet’s octave, sets up the potential for a Christian redemption or resurrection for the “love deflowered” (6). Furthermore, the inclusion of a bridge suggests a potential transcendence, or rather unification, of these separate urban and pastoral spaces and the subsequent lifestyles they embody.

However the main comparison taking place in the painting is not between the male and female subjects, but rather, compositionally, the woman is placed on the same diagonal line of sight as the struggling, white calf, and is thus aligned with the animal meant for slaughter through a visual balance. Such a comparison complicates the distilled and hierarchical opposition of the pure over the profane represented by the man’s forceful grasp on the woman, instead drawing parallels between the fallen woman and the future commodification and consumption of the innocent animal.

Placed on the right half of the picture plane, the calf can be read as associated with the Christian and spiritual themes embodied by the morally erect male, and as such the animal takes on a sacrificial significance. Yet Genesis 15:10 states that God requested the sacrifice of an old heifer, as such the slaughter of the young calf becomes a disturbed image in relation to Christianity, imbuing the religious aspects of the work with an over-zealousness that extends itself beyond obligation and thus verges on the pagan.

Consequently, the calf more closely resembles the blasphemous worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32:4, which resulted in the self-corruption of those who turned their backs

on God in favour of its golden presence (New King James Version, Exodus 32:7). As a result, the imminent and pathetic death of the calf mirrors that of the prostitute, who leans against an unkempt grave,¹ revealing similarities between the sexual and religious aspects of the work, which are rendered inoperative and desolate when alienated from each other. Therefore, Rossetti subverts what was originally understood as a basic duality between the profane and pure, illuminating the division's problematic nature and exposing it as an arbitrary polarization (Klein 156). He instead advocates for a syncretic harmonization of these two opposed attributes, in which "physical love is analogue of spiritual love" (McGann, "The Bitterness of Things" 116).

The refusal or inability of the two past lovers to join once more in their "mutual pledge" (9) of "gloaming courtship" (11), is emphasized by the female subject's concluding and autonomous cry in "Found (For a Picture)". Occupying a once transitional space between love and consummation, the two figures have since split from each other, dividing their mutuality into two distinct subsets of love, eros and agape, or the profane and sacred. As such, when the man discovers the "deadly blight" (5) of his past love and attempts to drag her from the street, and assumedly towards a Christian redemption, she cries out: "Leave me- I do not know you- go away!" (14). The physical (woman) and spiritual (man) consequently remain sterilized from one another, unable to reconcile their opposing natures through the stubborn one-dimensionality of their allegorical significance.

¹ The accompanying sketches of *Found* depict Rossetti's intention to paint beyond the wall on which the prostitute leans a cemetery ground overwrought by vines and weeds, suggesting that the presence of those who have been buried there have been long forgotten. As such the prostitute is revealed as being unloved and uncared for. ("Found" Rossetti Archive).

A similar division between man and woman takes place in the Petrarchan sonnet “Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee (For a Drawing),” in which the octave and sestet are divided into the two opposing voices of the mundane male lover and the epiphanic Mary Magdalene. The negating lover tries to call the woman back to the ornate and seductive “banquet-house” (3), demanding that she “be [...] all a rose” (2) and submerge herself in a purely sexual demeanor and space. However, Mary Magdalene finds her own autonomous voice in the turn of the sestet, mirroring the final line of “Found (For a Picture)” and exclaiming: “He needs me, calls me, loves me: let me go!” (14). Therefore, both Mary Magdalene and the prostitute in “Found” exercise a stubborn and hostile attitude towards the male lover, but in “Mary Magdalene” the woman is detaching herself from a purely physical and erotic love, rather than the possible Christian redemption of “Found”.

The division between the flesh and spirit in “Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee (For a Drawing)” is not so clearly defined as in “Found (For a Picture)”, and instead certain elements of physicality are carried over into Christian worship. The sonnet evokes a sense of longing for Christ, introducing an element of passion, albeit safely virtuous, in which Christ is brought into the realm of the bodily. The clasping and kissing of His “blood stained feet” (13), and His described desire for the touch of Mary Magdalene, “For His feet my kiss/ My hair, my tears He craves to-day” (10-11), combines the flesh and spirit in a holy union, advocating a bodily and arguably sensual presence in Christian devotion. Thus, the sestet’s application of physical attributes to a description of Christian worship results in “the material and spiritual [becoming] fused and blent: if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what

is material loses its earthiness and impurity” (Pater 61). And so, the spiritual turn of Mary Magdalene becomes humanized, allowing her bodily presence to lose its purely sexual definition and instead become elevated through self-reflection and a desire for transcendence. Ergo, Rossetti embeds the figure of Mary Magdalene with the capacity to simultaneously transcend the bodily and physically enact the spiritual; thus, she embodies his theme of Romantic Syncretism.

Furthermore, there exists an aesthetic and pictorial division in the sonnet’s accompanying painting *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*, reinforcing an understanding of the female subject’s liminal and transitory state. Christ is represented in a traditional and iconic form with a flat and abstract aureole emanating around his sharp profile, a visual contradiction to the elaborate realism and depth of the surrounding scene of banquet-goers. Thus space is introduced in the work as a defining element of sexual versus spiritual values, so that “spatial recession locates negative values whereas the icon of the head of Jesus is a positively charged gravity center” (“Mary Magdalene” Rossetti Archive). Rossetti is therefore able to visually represent a Romantic Syncretism through the inclusion of traditional iconography alongside a Renaissance-like depiction of sensuality, and the pivotal depiction of the transitional figure of Mary Magdalene, who races across the scene and thus bridges the gap between these opposing forces and the liminal space between the two moments of post-epiphany and pre-fulfillment.

Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee was created five years after Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*, sharing thematic similarities in its representation of the liminal space between the subject’s moments of epiphany and self-fulfillment. In Hunt’s work, the separation between sinful sexuality and Christian virtue

is uncomplicated, and the turn from one to the other is obvious. The external and internal realms are clearly demarcated by the gilded borders of the mirror and the reflected window, and although the mirror does compress these two spaces into one visual plane, they still exist in high visual contrast and thus unequivocally divide the sacred from the sexual. Therefore the liminality of Hunt's pictorial space is not quite as apparent as in the work of Rossetti, and his female subject does not retain, or carry over with her to Christian faith, a sense of physicality or bodily presence. Rossetti, on the other hand, portrays an awakened conscience that blends the past materiality of the subject with her future spirituality, binding together the moments of sin and salvation so that spiritual transcendence becomes "transubstantiated through the erotic" (McGann 86).

The painting *La Bella Mano* makes use of a mirror in a similar manner to Hunt's painting, collapsing pictorial space to create an increased sense of the liminal and transitory state of its female subject. However, in *La Bella Mano* the mirror reflects the same interior space, connoting a sense of the divine through its halo like function rather than its reflection. In fact, the mirror reflects what could be considered purely sensational and passionate imagery, placing the sexually suggestive scene of a roaring fire and disheveled bed behind the woman's head, and subsequently rooting her divinity in a base sexuality. In this way, the divided and liminal self of *La Bella Mano*'s female subject is redeemed through an amalgamation of the profane and pure in a sacramental union, evading the sterile death of *Found*'s polar extremes and expanding upon the introduction of physical elements to Christian worship in *Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee*. It is through the balance and harmonization of the sexual with the spiritual that Rossetti's Romantic Syncretism is able to take form, changing the pictorial and poetic

discourse surrounding transcendental signification to include a human-based dialogue of the double or spiritual self (Klein 118).

Finally, the work *The Blessed Damozel* is another example of Rossetti's simultaneous division and unification of the sexual and sacred, depicting a bordered representation of the earthly and heavenly realms of two lovers. The relationship formed between the subjects and the spaces in which they are portrayed is one of close inheritance and transmission, feeding each other in a way that exemplifies the thematic depth of meaning and Romantic Syncretism in the work. In the poem-painting, the Damozel remains reluctant to move from love as eros to agape (Klein 185), leaning against the bar of heaven towards her lover below, "Until her bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm"(45-46). The metonymical treatment of heaven's golden bar, and its representation of the Damozel's continued physicality even after death, transforms heaven into "a realm of physical experience" (Klein 185). Moreover, the figure remains in a liminal state despite her obvious transcendence to a heavenly realm, occupying a position of both spiritual and sexual potential while committing fully to neither. Her transitional state is emphasized by the dual action of her hands,² the right of which tightly grasps the white and trinitarian lily, symbolizing her pure nature, while the left hand lies loose beneath the flower's stem. Her loose grip correlates with the speaker's description of the lilies that "lay as if asleep" (47), exposing the female subject's relaxed relationship with Christianity, and providing a concentrated visual moment of her liminality and

² The contrary depiction of the female figure as both subject and object to herself is not uncommon in Rossetti's work, and is often depicted through the hands of his woman which occupy a dual function. For example in *Proserpina*, the two hands of painting's subject act against one another. One hand lifts the sinful fruit to her lips, while the other attempts to restrain the figure from partaking in its condemning temptation.

double self. Similarly, the male lover below occupies a position of relaxed virtue, lying languidly in his earthly plane with his hands clasped above his head, as if prisoner to the Damozel above. He passively stares up towards his lost love, relinquishing autonomy and action in favour of a state of pure anticipation and waiting.

The bodily is further combined with the ethereal, not only through the “ungirt” (7) Damozel’s liminal state and the two lovers parallel positioning in relation to one another, but also by Rossetti’s very physical portrayal of heaven as a “stately pleasure dome” (McGann 86). Surrounding the Damozel are erotic portrayals of “lovers, newly met” (37), whose bodies interlace in a warm and muddied palette of complimentary colour, intertwining orange-and-blue with red-and-green forms in an orgy like union amidst the secluded shelter of rose bushes. As such, what is heavenly and ethereal becomes humanized, such that the sensual and fleshy body conversely takes on elements of the transcendental (McGann 85). And so in *The Blessed Damozel*, Rossetti is able to define heavenly paradise through human qualities and attributes, while simultaneously retaining a sense of “the spiritual tradition behind the images” (McGann 86), so as to create his own syncretic “divinized human love: sensational in effect and sublime in value” (McGann, “Rossetti’s Significant Details” 87).

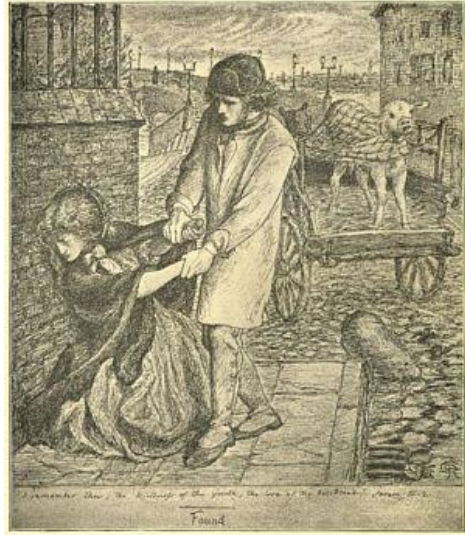
The simultaneous transformation of heaven and earth, leaves the “gold bar of Heaven” (2) questionably human and indistinct, dissolving the borders between the dead Damozel and her still-living male lover. Despite the parentheses separating and preventing a direct communication between the male lover’s speech and that of the Damozel, as well as the physical division of the painting’s diptych form, the lovers’ faith still occupies a “zone of liminal contact between the fleshy and the spiritual” (Danahay

381), and thus they maintain an awareness of one another's presence as evidenced by their physical gaze and positioning. Therefore, through liminal contact and representation, the Damozel can be read as a Mediatrix figure for Rossetti's Romantic Syncretism, replacing the Virgin Mary in the intercessory role of connecting man with God, defying the distancing barriers between the earthly with the spiritual realms.

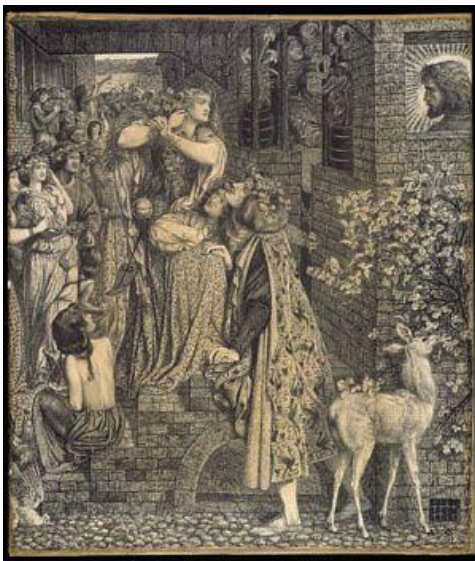
In conclusion, responding to a post-enlightenment concern for the disappearing deity, and the division of the body from the soul, Dante Gabriel Rossetti unites religious faith with a fleshy sensuality, merging the spirit and body into one indistinguishable framework. He creates in his work a double vision, in which the sexual and the sacred are recombined in a "transformed whole that partakes in both spheres" (Casteras 11), thus placing the female subject in liminal space so as to extract the occult from the human face and form (Myers 50). Ranging from *Found* to *The Blessed Damozel*, this essay explored how Dante Gabriel Rossetti's notion of Romantic Syncretism and "serious beauty" (Pater 60), evolved, approaching Christian themes through an ever increasing sensual and critical lens.



Found, c. 1854
Dante Gabriel Rossetti



Found, Pen and Ink, c. Unknown
Dante Gabriel Rossetti



*Mary Magdalene at the Door of
Simon the Pharisee*, c. 1858
Dante Gabriel Rossetti



The Awakening Conscience, c. 1853
William Holman Hunt



La Bella Mano, c.1875
Dante Gabriel Rossetti



The Blessed Damozel, c. 1875-8
Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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