

## Dante's Dream: Rossetti's Reading of the *Vita Nuova* Through the Lens of a Double Translation

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### Abstract

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's work as an interlinguistic and intersemiotic translator of the *Vita Nuova* reveals much about his characteristic adaptation of Dante to the new sensibility of Victorian poetry and art. After translating the episode of the dream of Beatrice's death into English, Rossetti goes on to illustrate it in an early watercolor version (1865), and then in a final monumental oil (1871) which will be closely examined in this article. By focusing on both phases of Rossettian translation this article means to show how Rossetti derives from the Florentine a distinctively Dantesque iconographic repertoire which he then develops into a post-Romantic set of poetics. It is precisely in the distance between Dante's poetry and Rossetti's double works of art that the latter's understanding of and autonomy from Dante has to be traced.

Keywords: Dante Gabriel Rossetti; Dante Alighieri; *Vita Nuova*; intersemiotic translation; interlinguistic translation; Victorian literature and art; Pathetic Fallacy

One of the most crucial episodes of the *Vita Nuova* is Beatrice's death as dreamt by Dante. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's deep love of Dante Alighieri, inherited from his father Gabriele,<sup>1</sup> led him to an early reading and translation into English of this chapter of the Florentine's 'rubrica'. He set to illustrate the passage in 1848. The project, however, was soon laid aside and resumed between 1855 and 1857, when the artist made a watercolor of the same episode, *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*. Rossetti started to work on the last version of the painting in 1871. His interlinguistic translation of the episode, including the Dantesque prose passage and the 'canzone' "Donna pietosa e di novella

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<sup>1</sup> An exiled patriot from Naples and supporter of the liberal constitution, Gabriele Rossetti (1783-1854) lived in England from 1824, where he spent his life teaching Italian Literature at London's King's College. His works on Dante Alighieri centre on an esoteric reading of the Florentine, with undertones ranging from the markedly political to the overtly mystical. At the core of Dante's works Rossetti envisioned an initiatory mind's religion which worked for a radical regeneration of spirituality away from the temporal power of the Church.

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etade", together with the two versions of the painting, delineate the course of Rossetti's artistic development, with their visual and verbal elements combined in an ever enriching process. This essay will first examine Rossetti's work as an interlinguistic translator and then relate his translating strategies to the process of intersemiotic transfer. It will be clear, then, how Rossetti's own poetics come to actively interact with Dante himself, insomuch as to achieve a definite autonomy with respect to its source text.

A close look at the original text by Dante is essential. In the prose passage (chapter XXIII according to Fraticelli's edition, 1906), the young Dante has an awesome vision, a dream in which Love leads him to Beatrice's deathbed. His last farewell to her is preceded by an apocalyptic scene, in which the sun is obscured, the earth quakes, birds fall from the sky and angels fly on high singing to the Almighty. Differently from what happens elsewhere in the *Vita Nuova*, the work being marked by a typical vagueness of description, this passage abounds in iconographic details, accurately drawn by the Florentine Poet to make its own imagery more vibrant. The dream seems even more real than reality itself. Dante goes on to describe the central part of the dream, in which he sees a group of weeping women around Beatrice's deathbed, covering her lifeless body with a white shroud. Next, the youth finds himself in his own room and he proceeds to beseech Death to carry him away into the afterworld. The passage is dear to Rossetti first of all because of the richness of its imagery, to whose density the details of the following song "Donna pietosa e di novella etade" ("A very pitiful lady, very young") definitely contribute. Every iconographic detail featured by the Dantesque narrative represents in fact the literal pre-text for an addition and multiplication of sense through Rossetti's most typical strategies of translation, which we will now consider in more detail.

Being himself a poet, Rossetti's most challenging instance of interlinguistic translation is that of the Florentine's song, rather than the latter's prose passage. It will therefore be most illuminating to start by examining how the poet-painter proceeded in his English version of the Italian 'canzone'. The peculiarities of Rossetti's style as translator of Dante are in fact more easily traceable in the verse translation, where, in order to shape a metrical and rhyme scheme close enough to the original, he avoids a word-for-word rendering, thus complying with two of the most renowned among his tenets on translation.

In the preface to his volume of translations from the Italian Primitives, *The Early Italian Poets* (1861), Rossetti describes his translating strategy as aiming at fidelity rather than precise interlinguistic literality. Rossetti believed in fact that a faithful (and therefore, not strictly literal) translation is always to be preferred to a literal one, for poetry ultimately resists scientific exactness (Rossetti 1861: viii)<sup>2</sup>:

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

Though originally referred to his activity as an interlinguistic translator, Rossetti's concern for fidelity of rendering can be broadly related to his work as illustrator too. The commitment to a faithful interlinguistic rendering of his Italian originals acquires in fact a far wider resonance when referred back to the next tenet on translation Rossetti devised for his activity as a poet-painter. The following distinctive trait of Rossetti's work regards in particular his intersemiotic transmutations, and consists of the technique he himself defines as "Allegorizing on one's hook". With this expression Rossetti refers to a precise strategy through which the illustrator enriches with new information, according to his own initiative, the semiotic material given to him by the source text: writing about his illustrations for the Moxon Edition of Tennyson prepared during the late Fifties, Rossetti argues that "one can allegorize on one's own hook on the subject of the poem, without killing, for oneself and everyone, a distinct idea of the poet's" (Rossetti 1967, I: 239). Though respectively referred to his typical approach to interlinguistic translation, in the first case, and to intersemiotic translation, in the second one, these two principles end up being fused by Rossetti and indifferently applied to both translating processes. Far from indicating a lack of systematic application of rules, Rossetti's free resorting to both of these tenets regardless of the translating field for which they first seem to be created sheds light on the importance he placed on the overall process of translation, a practice that transcends for him a single media or artistic

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<sup>2</sup> "Rossetti seems, understandably, to have settled for preserving the appearances of the poems he translated" (Gitter 1974: 353).

expression. This must not appear surprising, since Rossetti's aim in weaving his double works of art is anything but a harmonic accretion of meaning through the interaction of different media. On the contrary, and as Lawrence Starzyk underlines, for Rossetti the "verbal ... is rarely a simple analogue of the visual ... the image in the process, in other words, becomes recalcitrant or antagonistic" (Starzyk 2009: 29). Through the Rossettian double-work of art, the process of communication and representation is thus indefinitely expanded in what eerily foreshadows the dynamics of Perice's "flight of interpretants" (Silverman 1998: 50-52). Such characteristic raises to a more explicit level Rossetti's own alertness to the chief crisis his culture was facing throughout the mid and late Victorian age: a crisis in epistemology, and more particularly, a crisis in language, deriving from the Romantics' failed attempt at a reconciliation between man and the outer world. For Rossetti is first of all a post-Romantic artist, and his poetics are fundamentally informed by the experience of poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (Cimini 2010: 249). In the backwash of a secularization of culture which had been brought about by the philosophers of German Idealism at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Abrams 1973: 91-95), the first and second generations of Romantic poets had set out on their quest for a recovery of what was left to human apprehension and understanding, namely nature. In the aftermath of such secularization, the pre-Romantic and typically Augustinian vision of the world, featuring a tripartition of God, man and Nature, had in fact been reduced to a dualism of man and universe:

The tendency in innovative Romantic thought [...] is greatly to diminish, and at the extreme to eliminate, the role of God, leaving as the prime agencies man and the world, mind and nature, the ego and the non-ego, the self and the non-self, spirit and the other, or (in the favorite antithesis of post-Kantian philosophers) subject and object. (*Ivi*: 91)

Most importantly, though, the Romantic experience had been characterized by the poet's failure in his attempted re-appropriation of nature: the more nature is sought for, the more it reveals itself as an impossible goal. Hopelessly severed from both God and Nature, the Romantic poet first, and the Victorian then, are unavoidably trapped within the prison of their own solipsism. Such Romantic legacy informs the aesthetics of natural representation of many Victorian artists, and of Rossetti in particular. If the poets' self-conscious remove from nature

was made palpable in the characteristically anti-natural imagery of Romanticism (Bloom 1970: 9), then the Victorians were faced with the threat of exasperating that anti-naturalness into a distortion of truth. Most significantly, the chief of Victorian tenets on artistic representation is the principle of the pathetic fallacy, the artist's typical

informing of objects other than the self with the self's tendencies. This poetic tendency results from romanticism's need to find companionable forms as local habitations for the artist's diverse and multitudinous tendencies or selves. (Starzyk 2009: 30)

We must settle for a partial, limited projection of our own moods and feelings onto the outer world: a compromise between self-expression and one's emotional control is not only desirable but the only decent choice for the artist (Breton 2013: 21): this is what Ruskin defines as the proper use of the pathetic fallacy. John Ruskin sensed in fact the danger awaiting a projection of man's mood onto nature that is too far indulged. Man and nature, the self and its object, sign and referent never actually meet, and exasperating such severance in any excited state of the feelings can only result in an irrational distortion of truth. In a typical gesture that sets him apart from the majority of his contemporaries, most notably his Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, Rossetti soon came to sense such limitation as an impossible restraint upon the faculties of the belated and post-Romantic artist. It is most significant to consider how such breach of the bonds Ruskin recognized as proper to the pathetic fallacy is to be observed in Rossetti even by an early stage of his career: a similar tendency to exasperate and anthropomorphize the forms of nature into a an utterly unnatural imagery would soon result in his estrangement from Ruskin himself. The exquisitely anti-natural extremes of artistic representation are those Rossetti most relishes in, his depiction of "common things" being always and unreservedly "full of human or personal expression, full of sentiment", in the words of Walter Pater (Pater 1889: 234). His art is increasingly bent towards an exasperation of the impossible escape from the prison of the self. Any knowledge of the reality which lies outside the self is thoroughly denied to man, whose only access to nature is granted by the distorting mirror of art. Again, in the revealing words of Pater

with Rossetti this sense of lifeless nature, after all, is translated to a higher service, in which it does but incorporate itself with some phase of strong emotion. Every one understands how this may happen at critical moments of life...To Rossetti it is so always, because to him life is a crisis at every moment. (*Ivi*: 235)

The crisis Pater refers to is of course nothing but the crisis in representation we are here discussing. It consists, in other words, of man's inability to represent the immediacy of a moment of experience with the external world. Since such attempt at a representation of the world can do no more than record the world's very remove from man (Wagner 1996: 19), art is accordingly reduced to a ritual re-enactment of such abortive act of appropriation: the performative stance of the representational procedure remains the only viable aesthetics that is left to the modern artist. In light of such an impossible communion of subject and object, sign and referent, image and word, the only chance to define a meaning of sorts through art lies in performance and repetition, particularly through the recovery of old and traditional narratives: the elaboration of forms and materials issuing from older times of un-self-conscious art is the only pale guarantee of a new meaning in poetry. The recovery of Dante's narrative perfectly fits into such Rossettian, post-Romantic aesthetics of representation. The Victorian poet-painter, as Warwick Slinn underlines, misreads Dante so that the latter's conventional lyricism becomes gradually absorbed by the "abstractions of its own method, the language of Dantesque idealism and symbol" (Slinn 2003: 65): it is therefore the strangeness of the allegorical machinery underlying Dante's *rubrica* that is most prized by Rossetti himself. His misreadings of Dante are meant to tackle the reader with the sophistication of an unfamiliar set of conventions; the only accretion of knowledge that is to be derived from art according to Rossetti lies in fact in the expanded receptivity which Dante's medieval conventions forces upon a modern and self-conscious readership (Helsing 2008: 3). A number of "unexpected or novel connections" (*Ibid.*) are disclosed by the intensified concentration implied in the cultural swerve separating Dante's *Vita Nuova* from its Victorian afterlife. The post-Romantic, epistemological crisis suffered by a culture of "material and temporal repleteness" (*Ivi*: 10) is therefore fought against through the very material loveliness of Dante's art. Most importantly, it is the recovery of Dante through the double lens of an interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation which engages the reader-spectator into a difficult and self-

conscious act of attention, the only possible moments of cognition art can still lead the reader-spectator to (*Ivi*: 3). Clearly, indeed, the episode of Dante's dream acquires a new resonance if re-considered in the light of my discussion up to this point: the mirror structure of the Dantesque episode, whose narrative is articulated both as prose and as verse, is appealing enough for an artist like Rossetti, who lived to explore the articulated nooks and passages lying between different cultures, arts, media and literary genres. Even before being actually engaged in his own translation of the passage, Rossetti sees in the double-representation of Dante's experience a first instance of that chase game in which sign and referent are forever engaged: by interlinguistically and intersemiotically transmutating Dante, Rossetti aims at exasperating the patterns of variation which the Dantesque episode already featured in its original form. My purpose here is to consider each instance of Rossetti's "allegorizing" or swerving away from Dante in order to draw into sharp focus how such missing correspondence between translated text and Dantesque original is unfailingly deliberate. Let us therefore begin by considering his interlinguistic rendering of the 'canzone'.

The first instance of Rossetti's non-literal approach to the translating process is evident in the third stanza of the song:

Qual dicea: "Non dormire",  
 e qual dicea: "Perché s'è ti sconforte?"  
 Allor lassai la nova fantasia,  
 chiamando il nome de la donna mia.  
 Era la voce mia sì dolorosa ... (11-15)

The 'nuova fantasia' ('new fantasy', translation mine) of line 13 is translated as an eclipse, "With that, my soul woke up from its eclipse" (Rossetti 1861: 269). The choice to add the image is not merely motivated by matters of rhyme and rather represents the first instance of a typical Rossettian use of the pathetic fallacy, revealing the translator's intention to connect the youth's gloomy mood to the darkness of an awesome scenery, filled with omens. The darkening of the sun, in fact, was there in the prose section of the *Vita Nuova* chapter (Fratricelli 1906:86), which reads "pareami vedere il sole *oscurare*", and it is later reaffirmed in the fourth stanza of the song, "Poi mi parve vedere appoco appoco/ Turbar lo Sole ed apparir la stella" ("The while, little by little, as I thought,/The sun ceased, and the stars began to gather", 49-50). In the

1871 painting such obscurity is focused on glimpses of Florence perceivable beyond the room's walls, and in the 'artificial' illumination of the setting, where only a small lamp affords a little light. The English translation of the 'canzone' just mentioned then precedes this particular chromatic reprise in the painting. Thus the "eclipse" of line 13 triggers a number of sign multiplications which not only reverberate through Rossetti's following transmutation of the episode into its pictorial version, but which reach back to Dante himself and his prose passage: Dante and Rossetti result therefore as associated by a specific sign constellation (McGann 2003: 44-45). Moreover, this choice reveals Rossetti's own resolution, ever stronger during his career, to attribute an iconic value to the signs of verbal language, and to transfer the symbolism of the linguistic system to the visual signs that shape the canvass.

Another crucial element is found in the fourth stanza of the 'canzone': when referring to his dream, Dante calls it "vano immaginare, ov'io *entraï*", line 44, thus endowing the whole vision with that vividness and thickness of colors and images referred to before. This happens because of the use he makes of the verb 'entrare' ('to enter', translation mine), with its very concrete connotations. This time Rossetti's translation is literal, maintaining the same perception of materiality conveyed by the Italian verb in the corresponding English 'to step into'. His translation ("the uncertain state I *stepped into*") reveals how Rossetti means to preserve the mood of the source text: the concreteness of the original passage constitutes in fact the material and beautiful strangeness of the Dantesque allegorical machinery. It remains, in other words, the only guarantee that is left for a post-Romantic, self-conscious readership to experience those moments of cognition implied by an attentive reading of the *Vita Nuova* itself. Though remaining close enough to the 'littera' of the original, and therefore lacking those elements of addition to the source text referred to before, the accurate translation of this passage helps Rossetti convey his personal reading and interpretation of the whole chapter: what he seems to be suggesting here is that the dream itself is for him more revealing than the waking state. As Joan Rees explains in her analysis of "The Portrait", Rossetti's aim in creating a poem or a painting consists in freezing the moment in time, to be able better to examine and to return to it time and again.

The picture creates a world of its own. [...] The poet takes the whole experience deep into his mind and there, in some psychic region, he [...] approaches a vision of timelessness of crucial experiences existing eternally in spite of time. (Rees 2010: 29)

The intersemiotic shift further enhances the tactile strength of the scene. The perfect symmetry of the painting, the ‘Keatsian’ kiss never reaching Beatrice’s cheek, the whole setting of the work, create an impression of suspended time in which the reader is taken by the hand (as Love himself takes Dante), stepping into it to examine the episode in the land away of aesthetic eternity. Moreover, its huge size turns the picture into a real “life-porch into eternity”<sup>3</sup>, a place one has the actual perception of being attracted to and included into. To go back to the ‘canzone’, then, even when apparently literal, Rossetti’s interlinguistic translation is meant to add a new dimension to the original significance of the text: what for Dante had been a verb simply determining space and movement, in Rossetti becomes the indicator of a whole conception of art, which needs to be concrete and appealing to a readership that is getting ever detached and removed from the art-object itself.

Another important detail in the Rossettian interlinguistic translation (with consequences for the way the painter will later visually translate the whole episode) is to be found in line 50, fourth stanza. In the source text we find a description of the sun and the stars that seem to be crying together (emphasis mine):

*Poi mi parve vedere appoco appoco  
turbar lo Sole ed apparir la stella,  
e pianger egli ed ella. (49-51)*

Rossetti’s translation reads:

The while, little by little, as I thought,  
The sun ceased, and the stars began to gather,  
And each wept *at* the other. (49-51)

The preposition Rossetti uses here, unlike the Italian conjunction ‘ed’, implies mutual compassion between the two celestial bodies, which appear to be anthropomorphized in an attitude of shared human

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<sup>3</sup> Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, “Memorial Thresholds” (11).

sympathy that is more marked than in the original. This detail becomes crucial if contextualized in Rossetti's complex poetics and related back to his characteristic breach of the proper bonds Ruskin had imposed on the use of the pathetic fallacy. Though apparently unimportant, such translating choice is an early clue to what would become Rossetti's profound delight in the artistic exasperation of the poet's moods and feelings. Anything but concerned about a possible and desirable balance between his self-expression and his emotional control, Rossetti everywhere discerns signs of his own exasperated isolation and solipsism, even back in Dante's work. Though intimately harboring his awareness of man's isolation from nature, Dante Gabriel Rossetti recognizes in the apocalyptic passage by Dante a reflection of the writer's most intimate self. The exasperation of the natural element in the face of nature's irrecoverable stance generally results in Rossetti's increasingly "anti-natural" imagery, a trait which he inherited again from his Romantic precursors. As Harold Bloom argues, in fact, "Romantic nature poetry, despite a long critical history of misrepresentation, was an antinature poetry, even in Wordsworth who sought reciprocity or even a dialogue with nature but found it only in flashes" (Bloom 1970: 9). Not only does Rossetti translate such features into his English version of the Dantesque episode, but he exaggerates the complicity of the heavenly bodies, making them cry 'at' each other. This detail sheds light on the way Rossetti will later illustrate the dream episode. For our present purpose, it is sufficient to anticipate how the painting's background reflects the desolation shared by the sun and the moon: the windows that stand on the two sides of the room show a forsaken city, sharing in its deep isolation the utter pain of the young Poet. Again, Rossetti intervenes in the translated text in order to pave the way for his later visual rendering of the episode, quintessence of his post-Romantic re-reading of Dante and of his poetics.

Another interlinguistic deviation from the source text, which becomes relevant to an intersemiotic analysis of Rossetti's work, occurs in line 67, stanza five. Here we have the core of the vision, the moment when the young Poet finds himself facing the corpse of Beatrice (emphasis mine):

*L'immaginar fallace  
Mi condusse a veder mia donna morta;  
E quando l'ebbi scorta,  
Vedeo che donne la covrian d'un velo. (65-68)*

The Rossettian interlinguistic translation shows one detail in particular which overtly anticipates the later intersemiotic rendering of the passage:

These idle phantasies  
Then carried me to see my lady dead:  
*And standing at her head*  
Her ladies put a white veil over her. (65-68)

In the original song, line 67 simply referred to the moment Dante perceived the dead Beatrice ('and when I saw her', translation mine). Translating the said line as "standing at her head" could be motivated by mere rhyme. However, the addition of a new clue on the perspective *whence* Dante sees Beatrice sheds light on that "allegorizing on one's own hook" technique which constitutes Rossetti's most crucial principle in his illustrations of Dante. In Rossetti's translated text, the scene displays its characters in a much more concrete way than Dante's text had done. Again, what needs to be highlighted here is the augmented emphasis Rossetti lays on the work of art as a material object, the verbal expression moving swiftly towards its visual *after-life*. The shift between different media always represents for Rossetti a chance to multiply the signification implied in the original text. Details that are scarcely mentioned or utterly omitted in the source concretely take shape in the translated text and afterwards in the illustration. Rossetti frequently resorts to this kind of explicitation; thus the Dantesque vision, though detailed if compared to the rest of the *Vita Nuova*, becomes in Rossetti even more accurate in determining the position of the two ladies covering Beatrice with a shroud, and anticipates therefore the actual collocation of the figures in the later canvas.

Finally, in line 79 Dante implores Death to carry him away to the afterworld, "Vieni, che'l cor ti chiede". Rossetti translates the original 'cor' ('heart') as 'soul' ("My soul entreats thee, Come"), another choice which does not seem to be motivated by rhyme or metrics. To fully understand the cause of such a distance from the source text, one should bear in mind the meaning the author assigns to the experience of love, a true revelation of the poet's most intimate self. Being left with his sole

self, and severed from both God and Nature, the post-Romantic poet looks at love as the only “basis for a significant relationship between the subjective and the objective worlds” (Spector 1971: 432). The importance of the love experience as an attempt to evade man’s prison of solipsism determines Rossetti’s unflinching partiality for Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, the Florentine’s account of his early and earthly love for Beatrice. However, love ultimately negates that hoped-for escape from a tautological and sterile isolation of the self, and the poet is left with a sense of his own isolation coming doubly strong onto him. As is the case for sign and referent in Rossetti’s art, the beloved remains forever distant and unknowable for the artist: this notwithstanding, Rossetti’s quest for his beloved women is ever on the go, thus again testifying to the poet-painter’s unmistakably Romantic descent. Just as Wordsworth had recognized the very power of the modern poet in the awareness of his own limitations, so does Rossetti stick to his quest for an escape of solipsism in a stubborn exasperation of solitude through a projection of his moods onto his beloved women. Both spirit and senses are engaged in this quest for otherness, for the dualism of mind and matter is annulled in the poet’s quest, which needs the unflinching aid of any power that can be invoked, be it natural, human, or spiritual. Love therefore constitutes an inevitable instrument of enquiry into the soul, and it is for this reason that translating ‘heart’ as ‘soul’ is relevant to Rossetti’s personal ‘reading’ of Dante: where the heart stands for the sensual and erotic side of the love experience, the world ‘soul’ stands for the spirituality that same experience entails, a combination that is envisioned by Rossetti as the only source of progress in human knowledge for the modern poet. Undeniably, though, Rossetti shows a partiality for the path of the senses: the growing isolation that the poet is gripped by can only be fought against through the material concreteness of the arts. As Elizabeth Helsinger argues, the real knowledge that modern art and poetry can provide according to Rossetti consists in living through the feelings and to be aware that one is doing so (Helsinger 2008: 35-36). Though never engaged in a sustained reflection on religious questions (Marucci 2003: 741), Rossetti was nonetheless ready to believe that the only possible transcendence of reality and history lied along the path of the senses. Sensually experiencing love grants the modern and self-conscious poet a last hope of a «momentary contact with the immortal» (Rossetti 1967, II: 727). The delicate balance of senses and spirit, soul

and heart, must be preserved by Rossetti throughout his production. Dante's account of his love for Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*, moving as it does from a concrete apprehension of the 'Gentilissima' towards a new and celestial vision of her, proves to be the most adaptable of all narratives to the rising importance sensuality and spirituality acquire in Rossetti's poetics. Furthermore, it must be pointed out that in the two versions of the painting the features of Beatrice are respectively those of Elizabeth Siddal and of Jane Burden, the two great loves of Rossetti's life. If the experience of love becomes vehicle for a deep knowledge of the artist's soul, then the beloved woman is the most precious emblem of such a love, and, consequently, of such an exploration of one's intimate being. In other words, she becomes a synthesis of heart and soul. The fundamental coexistence of heart and soul must be kept in mind for it will structure the imagery of the Victorian poet and painter throughout his career: significantly, it is from Dante that Rossetti derives the premises of his distinctive aesthetics, which set him aside from any other Victorian artist and grant him a lasting originality.

Even as an interlinguistic source-text, Dante is then approached *creatively* by Rossetti, who strives to adapt his Italian precursor to the new contingencies of his modern sensibility. The additions and innovations to Dante as a literary pre-text will be even more clearly traceable in the intersemiotic rendering of the *Vita Nuova* episode, where Rossetti most strikingly *swerves* away from his precursor, increasingly realizing how real explanatory power rises from distance rather than from proximity to the source (McGann 2000: 23). The visual translation of the *Vita Nuova* passage by Rossetti will now be examined, specifically the late monumental oil. A few references to the ekphrastic annotation written by Rossetti himself to his 1871 version will be helpful:

The subject of the picture is drawn from the 'Vita Nuova' of Dante, the autobiography of his earlier life. It embodies his dream on the day of the death of Beatrice Portinari; in which, after many portents and omens, he is led by Love himself to the bedside of his dead lady, and sees other ladies covering her with a veil as she lies in death. The scene is a chamber of dreams, where Beatrice is seen lying on a couch recessed in the wall, as if just fallen back in death. The winged and glowing figure of Love (the pilgrim Love of the *Vita Nuova*, wearing the scallop-shell on his shoulder,) leads by the hand Dante, who walks conscious but absorbed, as in sleep. In his other hand Love carries his arrow pointed at the dreamer's heart, and with it a branch of apple-blossom, which may figure forth the love here consummated in death,—a blossom plucked before the coming of fruit. As he

reaches the bier, Love bends for a moment over Beatrice with the kiss which her lover has never given her; while the two dream-ladies hold the pall full of may bloom suspended for an instant before it covers her face for ever. These two green-clad women look fixedly on the dreamer as if they might not speak, with saddened but not hopeless eyes. The chamber of dreams is strewn with poppies; and on either side of the recessed couch two open passages lead to staircases, one upward one downward. In these staircases are seen flying two birds, of the same glowing hue as the figure of Love,—the emblems of his presence filling the house. In these openings, and above where the roof also lies open, bells are seen tolling for the dead; and beyond in the distance is the outer world of reality—the City of Florence, which, as Dante says, ‘sat solitary’ for his lady's death. Over all, the angels float upwards, as in his dream, ‘having a little cloud in front of them;’—a cloud to which is given some semblance of the beatified Beatrice.<sup>4</sup>

This gloss reveals much about the strategies followed by the artist in his intersemiotic translation of the episode, let alone standing out as a further mirroring of the original Dantesque prose passage: it will be therefore often referred to as the most genuine expression of Rossetti's intentions in visually translating Dante's chapter.

Now let us proceed to the 1871 oil. The dreamlike mood of the passage is visually recreated by Rossetti through more than one device. The first impression one gets of the Rossettian work is that of a “chamber of dreams”, an unearthly scene, as the artist himself argues in his note. The chamber of dreams is timeless, neither ancient nor modern, apparently belonging, in its rigid symmetry, to a reality that is far from that of everyday life<sup>5</sup>. It is in the eidetic and topological organization of the painting, that is in the disposition of lines and object in the canvas, that the first precise choices of translation are to be perceived (Greimas 2001: 203-204). The artist is determined to reflect the feeling of estrangement experienced by the young Poet of the *Vita Nuova* (his being projected in an unknown and suffocating room) in the alienating and unnatural symmetry the whole visual work is built upon. At the centre of such a complex symmetry stands Love, a pivotal character for Rossetti, who is always concerned about conferring on the god a distinct concreteness and vividness. Love is portrayed in the act of exhorting the

<sup>4</sup> The Rossetti Archive: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23p-1881.broadside.rad.html>

<sup>5</sup> “The chamber wherein she lies dead is as much a portion of his imaginative conception as aught else. It is a large room, not exactly of medieval and still less of modern aspect” (Sharp 1882: 222).

Poet, reminding us of the words he addressed to the youth in the song, line 64: “Vieni a veder nostra donna che giace”<sup>6</sup>. The line is visually translated in the concrete gesture with which the god takes Dante by the hand and leads him unto his dead beloved.

Love is represented by Rossetti according to Dante’s depiction of him, though not in this very passage: not confining himself to the mere description to be found in the episode itself, Rossetti seems determined to draw ideas and details from the whole of the *Vita Nuova*. Developing from the ‘amoretto’ of the watercolor into the man of the 1871 oil,<sup>7</sup> Love finally appears in the later canvas as the “figura d’uno signore, di pauroso aspetto a chi lo guardasse” (Fratlicelli 1906: 54) that we find in the third chapter of the ‘rubrica’, long before Dante’s dream<sup>8</sup>: anything but the little cherub of Rossetti’s first version. This represents the first instance of Rossetti’s refusal to concentrate on a single episode whence to draw all the information he needs to re-read Dante, and his resolve to consider the Florentine’s ‘rubrica’ in its totality. Love’s attire is an additional feature which Rossetti draws from another passage of the *Vita Nuova*. In Rossetti’s 1871 painting, the god wears pilgrim clothes, exactly as he does in chapter IX of the Florentine’s ‘rubrica’, where the divinity appears “come peregrino leggermente vestito, e di vili drappi” (*Ibid.*: 61)<sup>9</sup>. Love’s pilgrim clothes anticipate the importance given to the figure of the wayfarer in Rossetti’s poetry, and attest to the latter’s capacity to transform originally Dantesque iconography into the means of a totally modern significance: in the centrality attributed to the pattern of the life-journey, Rossetti’s poetry is again quintessentially Romantic, recovering from poets like Keats the fundamental structure of an internalized quest romance, that “basic tendency to conceptualize the course of human aspiration as a quest” (Waldoff 1985: 43). In *The House*

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<sup>6</sup> “Come and behold our lady where she lies” (Rossetti 1861: 271).

<sup>7</sup> “Love’s first incarnation was young Edward Hughes, nine-year-old nephew of Arthur, before his face was ‘discarded as having too much of the Greek Adonis about it’. Then came sixteen-year-old Johnston Forbes Robertson, son of a dramatist known to Rossetti. [...] ‘At the first sitting I remember he said “I am sorry, my dear Johnston, there is no beautiful creature for you to kiss.” I can feel my blushes now”’ (Marsh 1999: 409).

<sup>8</sup> “The figure of a lord of terrible aspect to such as should gaze upon him” (Rossetti 1861: 226).

<sup>9</sup> “Clothed lightly as a wayfarer might be” (*Ibid.*: 236).

of *Life*, human existence is often conceived as a long and difficult path, a strong reminiscence of Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. From his Italian models, the English poet-painter had also drawn his typical conception of Love, divinity of eros and soul and god of mutability and change, as the subtitles to the two sections of the Rossettian 'canzoniere' overtly reveal.<sup>10</sup> Rossetti's iconographic elaboration of the character of love and of the topos of the journey testifies therefore to his deliberate resolve to define a "sign constellation" (McGann 2003: 44-45) which brings together his literary original and his own allegorizations of it: his peculiar reading of Dante results from a deliberate superimposition of Medieval literary conventions and topoi and images that are quintessentially Romantic.

There are details used by Rossetti to depict Love which he himself devises through his "allegorizing" strategy: apart from Love's main attribute, namely the arrow he bears in his hand pointing at Dante's heart, Rossetti adds a branch of apple blossom, meant to take on a symbolic meaning. As specified by the painter himself in his ekphrastic note, the branch (emphasis mine) "*may* figure forth the love here consummated in death – a blossom plucked before the coming of fruit". Floral symbolism is employed by Rossetti in the painting, in order to compensate for the absence of other iconographic details of the original text by Dante that have been neglected, such as the crying women that gather round the Florentine or the birds that drop dead onto the floor. Apart from this observation, though, a more specific point has to be made here with reference to the addition of the apple branch and its shedding light on the importance symbols assume in Rossettian art. Symbolism for Rossetti always involves an exegetical process in which the beholder becomes fully responsible for the determination of the ultimate meaning of art (Camilletti 2005: 31-32): in the inevitable self-referentiality of modern literature, the work of art then finds its new *raison d'être* in the process of self-knowledge and education it offers the beholder to undergo, an exploration of those "dark passages" poetry was to enhance according to one of Rossetti's most illustrious precursors, John Keats (Keats 1958, I: 281). Rossetti's note thus introduces a simple suggestion as to what the branch "*may* figure forth": the detail's symbolic quality actually implies an active participation of the reader-beholder in the ultimate

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<sup>10</sup> Respectively titled "Love and Change" and "Change and Fate".

determination of meaning. In other words, the branch is there to take on the significance that the reader-beholder will need to attribute it, therefore functioning as the trigger for an exegetical process which represents the ultimate justification for the existence of any work of art.

The use of symbolism is clear in other iconographic elements of the painting, generally contributing to define the mood of the place where the action is set. The room has an opening in the ceiling, whence a crowd of angels, carrying Beatrice's soul to heaven on a white cloud, can be perceived. These cherubs appear in Dante too, recovered by Rossetti to delineate the correspondence between heaven and earth, outer and inner space, high and low which represents one of the most important conceptual and narrative bases of the *Vita Nuova*. In the depiction of this particular setting Rossetti works without help from the Italian Poet, thus becoming the one responsible for making explicit what in the source text remained unsaid. At the two opposite sides of the room there are two staircases, one leading upward and the other downward (thus reflecting again the two main movements that define the whole structure of Dante's poetry). Two openings behind them reveal glimpses of a deserted Florence, incarnation of the "sola civitas" of Jeremiah's *Lamentations* (I, i). The recurrence of contrasting elements in the topological symbolism of the "chamber of dreams" contributes to reaffirm that duality of spirit and matter that lies at the core of Rossetti's conception of art and life

Moreover, the reference to Jeremiah sheds light on a characteristic of Rossetti referred to above, namely the artist's refusal to confine himself to the spatial and temporal boundaries of one single episode by Dante: to this observation, a new and critical element must be added. Besides connecting different chapters of Dante's 'rubrica' to illustrate the Florentine, Rossetti in fact appears also concerned in creating a network of connections between *his own* different translations and paintings of Dantesque inspiration. Permeating the whole atmosphere of the Dream oil, the line from Jeremiah's *Lamentations* is inscribed at the bottom of Rossetti's masterpiece of Dantesque pictorial revisionism, *Beata Beatrix*,<sup>11</sup> and constitutes an ideal bridge between the latter canvas and the Dream oil. The connection between the two paintings finds further

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<sup>11</sup> The unfinished painting that was to become Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* was begun by the artist before 1863. Rossetti resumed his work after the death of Elizabeth Siddal (1862), who died by an overdose of laudanum: this drug is extracted from the seeds of poppies. The painting was finished in 1870.

confirmation in the floral symbolism of the poppy. The room depicted in the Dream oil is in fact bestrewn with the said flower, which in Rossetti's poetics assumes a double symbolic value. Besides representing sleep and death, the poppy comes to stand for something even deeper if considered with relation to the poet's personal experience. With *Beata Beatrix* the image of the poppy (reinforced by the quotation from Jeremiah) definitely closes the circle of that ideal coincidence between Rossetti and Siddal's love, on the one hand, and Dante and Beatrice's, on the other. The poppy becomes a symbol of the beloved's death conceived as the indispensable negation of desire within the process of reflection and investigation on the poet's most intimate self. Again Rossetti proves to be the perfect inheritor of a specific Romantic legacy, that Wordsworthian doctrine reversing

the cardinal neoclassic ideal of setting only accessible goals, by converting what had been man's tragic error—the inordinacy of his “pride” that persists in setting infinite aims for the finite man—into his specific glory and his triumph. (Abrams 1970:110)

The impossible love for a dead Beatrice that the poppy symbolizes is nothing but the finest development of the Romantic poetic revolution, which had found its victory in dejection and loss. The floor painted on the canvas is bestrewn with such flowers, representing the ultimate conveyance of Beatrice's soul into heaven. The painting thus features a number of iconographic elements and references to Dantesque episodes other than the principal source-text: the iconographic residue deriving from Rossetti's deliberate allegorizing and additions to Dante results in a cultural residue, the only true cognitive burden that remains after the translating process has taken place (Helsing 2008: 23). These same added details actually constitute the modern quality of Rossetti's vision, eventually turning the painting into a new pre-text to a following network of Rossetian canvasses and poems.

For his portrait of Dante, Rossetti follows the last stanza of the 'canzone':

*Io diventai del dolor sì umile,  
Veggendo in lei tanta umiltà formata,  
Ch'io dicea: Morte, assai dolce ti tegno;  
Tu déi omai esser cosa gentile.  
Poiché tu se' nella mia donna stata,  
E déi aver pietate, e non disdegno.*

*Vedi che sì desideroso vegno  
D'esser de' tuoi, ch'io ti somiglio in fede. (71-78)*<sup>12</sup>

The character of Dante drawn by Rossetti faithfully follows the image reflected in these lines. Rossetti portrays an extremely shy and bashful Dante, with eyes cast down and faltering steps. This depiction suggests an almost symmetrical correspondence with Rossetti's portrayal of Dante in the episode of Beatrice's salutation in Purgatory<sup>13</sup>: Rossetti suggests that, whether in Florence, in Purgatory or facing her deathbed, meeting the 'Gentilissima' never fails to arouse humility. Another element of the original text that the painter faithfully renders is the main chromatic feature of this character: through an anticipation of the lines of the canzone ("Vedi che sì desideroso vegno / D'esser de' tuoi, ch'io ti somiglio in fede", lines 77-78) in the prose narrative of the same chapter, Dante has already declared that he is wearing the colors of Death ("or vieni a me che molto ti desidero: tu vedi ch'io porto già lo tuo colore"<sup>14</sup>). Following the Poet's self-portrait, Rossetti manages to define in the figure of Dante a focal point for his whole canvas, where the rich dyes of green, red and brown dispose themselves in a sort of vortex around the greyish-black of the Poet's tunic, emanation of a mourning that pervades the whole scene. Used to emphasize the lyric intensity of the passage (Helsing 2008: 23), color results as a further declension of that pathetic fallacy Rossetti was so keen on.

The poet-painter explicitly refers to Love in his ekphrastic note to the painting, describing him as he walks "conscious but absorbed, as in sleep", and thus reminding his reader of how this peculiar attitude is not only due to the humility inspired in him by the whole scene, but also to the fact that he is actually immersed in a dream. That dreamlike mood evoked in the Dante passage by the obsessive repetition of terms such as

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<sup>12</sup> "And I became so humble in my grief,/Seeing in her such deep humility,/That I said: 'Death, I hold thee passing good/Henceforth, and a most gentle sweet relief,/Since my dear love has chosen to dwell with thee:/Pity, not hate, is thine, well understood./Lo! I do so desire to see thy face/That I am like as one who nears the tomb" (Rossetti 1861: 272).

<sup>13</sup> For such a comparison, see *The Salutation of Beatrice* (both versions, 1849-50 and 1859).

<sup>14</sup> "Wherefore come now unto me who do greatly desire thee: seest thou not that I wear thy colour already?" (Rossetti 1861: 267).

'sembrare', 'parere', 'immaginare', 'fantasia', 'fallace', 'dubitoso', is conveyed in the painting by more than just one iconographic element: indeed it is not only suggested by the stiff symmetry that defines the whole composition, but by the attitude of the characters themselves. With their literally dreamy gesture, even the two women bearing Beatrice's shroud help create an unreal scene. Rossetti describes them in his ekphrastic note: "These two green-clad women look fixedly on the dreamer as if they might not speak, with saddened but not hopeless eyes". The symmetrical structure invariably sought by Rossetti for his painting is further reflected in the number of women, though their crucial function lies in their eyes. Their dreamy and almost forgetful gaze contrasts with the grave mood of the whole scene, thus adding to the degree of detachment and unreality conveyed by the composition. However, the adjective "hopeless" used by Rossetti in his note proves revealing at this point. The *Vita Nuova* is precisely concluded on a note of hope and with a new and celestial image of Beatrice, now far from the Stilnovistic principles whence the Poet had first moved. The two parts that make up *The House of Life* end on the same note of hope, as it clearly appears in the two sonnets "Love's Last Gift" and "The One Hope". The way Rossetti depicts the two women bearing Beatrice's shroud then reveals much about his own interpretation of the 'Gentilissima's' death; for him, too, this episode becomes the interpretative key to his own artistic growth, leading him to a notion of death that is conceived no more as mere mourning and bereavement, but rather as a unique and privileged life-porch into a different 'reading' of his experience as a man and a poet, wherefore loss ultimately proves to be the only possible gain in consciousness and knowledge.

Rossetti's reading of Dante is surely motivated by a number of definite interests. First of all, a text such as the *Vita Nuova* is preferred to the *Commedia* because of the relevant meanings it still bears for a 'new' and Victorian target-public. A great interpreter of the Romantic and self-conscious awakening to history, Rossetti welcomes a recovery of the 'primitive' Middle-Ages that embraces the latter's anti-mimetic tendencies, rejecting its realities in favor of an ideal revival of it (Frye 1968: 37). Rossetti recovers the medieval work of Dante in a way that completely differs from what artists such as Ruskin or Holman Hunt were performing during those same years. What they wanted to recover from the Italian 'Duecento' was actually the firm moral and religious

zeal on which all artistic expression was then grounded.<sup>15</sup> Through his translation of the Italian Poet's love story, Rossetti prepares instead the ground for a personal and almost dissenting investigation of his own experience that will keep maturing through the years and will eventually appear in full bloom in his sonnet sequence *The House of Life*. Both the interlinguistic and the intersemiotic translations prove definitely crucial to the development of Rossetti's poetics after his re-reading the Dantesque work. The main resources employed by Rossetti in the double rendering of the original text can be summarized as follows: first, Rossetti is determined to avoid a word-for-word (or image-for-image) translation of all his source texts, firmly believing in the utterly non-scientific character of poetry, on the first place, and of the translating process as well. He therefore applies the method he himself defines as "allegorizing on one's own hook", which implies an addition of iconographic details invented by the painter to those described by Dante, without "killing a distinct idea of the poet's" (Rossetti 1967, I: 239) and which works in accordance to a deliberate breach of the proper pathetic fallacy. Moreover the Rossettian illustrations of Dante usually tend to condense pictorial elements deriving from more than just one episode of the original text into a single scene. Such a tendency reveals the painter's unflinching endeavor to assimilate two entities that tradition had often considered to be at odds: painting with its focus on space, on the one hand, and the literary work with its focus on time, on the other. Originally, his canvases overtly display a 'narrative' character, with their typical mixture of visual and verbal signs. Through the years, though, a synthesis in the narrative component of Rossetti's paintings is clearly to be discerned: his previous love for narrative within his pictorial production is gradually replaced by an analytical approach to the overall

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<sup>15</sup> For further reading about the outdatedness of the original Pre-Raphaelite project, see Fabio Camilletti on *Saint Agnes of Intercession*: "è altrettanto chiaro [...] come Rossetti stia giustificando, in *Sant'Agnese*, la propria inattualità: l'inattualità dei Pre-raffaelliti, la stessa inattualità di cui era stato accusato Ingres, l'inattualità del primitivismo *tout-court*. Ma—e questo è importante—egli non la giustifica con le parole di un Ruskin o di un Holman Hunt: il primitivismo non è cercato, inseguito, perseguito a finalità di rinnovamento artistico, di rinnovamento morale: esso è inseguito in quanto è qualcosa di estremamente personale, e dunque—di conseguenza—necessariamente attuale" (Camilletti 2005: 111-112).

structure of the paintings, which will eventually come to be much more developed in depth rather than in width. *Beata Beatrix* clearly epitomizes such a change, leading Rossetti to the most celebrated phase of his career as a painter. Though finished before *The Dream* oil, *Beata Beatrix* is certainly a later work in conception and represents the climax of the poet-painter's personal reading of Dante, with Rossetti's eventual dismissal of the narrative offered by the Italian Poet, and his imposition of a clearly modern, post-Romantic interpretation to the overall original prose. As argued by Fabio Camilletti, no Dantesque episode can be here referred to the Rossettian painting of Beatrice's ecstasy:

L'ipotesi di partenza non è più un'*auctoritas*: esso può essere smembrato, frammentato, completato. L'opera di Rossetti e quella di Dante si compenetrano. (Camilletti 2005: 121)

At this point of his career Rossetti is mature enough to proceed with a reading of Dante 'without' Dante; yet the Florentine is there, easily traceable in that iconographic repertoire that originates from Rossetti's translations of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, including details such as the dove and the poppy. The extensive range of symbols and iconographic elements drawn from the Florentine constantly re-emerges in Rossetti's later pictorial and poetic production. It would then be impossible to understand the progress of his artistic work without a careful account of his Dantesque phase, culminating with *Beata Beatrix*. A notion of intersemiotic translation becomes essential to understand and fully appreciate Dante Gabriel Rossetti's last artistic phase: canvas and sonnet are continually matched and compared though they never perfectly harmonize. Because of the many questions such a missing complementariness leaves unanswered, an unprecedented responsibility in the process of interpretation is then conferred on the reader-beholder. In the central role attributed to the interpreter lies the timeless allure of Rossetti's art.

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