On Religious Connotations of Rossetti's Pomes

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Abstract

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was an influential and important poet and painter of the Victorian age of England in the 19th century, as well as a legendary artist in English art history. Through the explanation and analysis of religious elements in Rossetti's poems, the essay tries to reveal the religious connotations in Rossetti's works.

Keywords

Rossetti; Religious connotations; Poems.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was born in London on May 12, 1828. In order to stress his kinship with the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri, he later changed the order of his name to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti received his early education at home and was particularly influenced by Thomas Percy's "Reliques", the works of Sir Walter Scott, and the medieval romances, especially Dante's works. When he was in his teenage, Rossetti attended King's College School and studied art at the Royal Academy. Displeased with the conventional methods of painting taught at the academy, Rossetti left in 1848 to study with the English painter Ford Madox Brown. After a short time of learning, however, he joined painters John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt to found an art organization, The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which intends to imitate the purity and simplicity of the Italian Pre-Renaissance school of art. In 1850 he published his famous long drama monologue, "The Blessed Damozel" in the Pre-Raphaelite journal The Germ. Renowned as a poet and painter in Victorian age, Rossetti has produced a great many of works through his lifetime. His early poem "The Blessed Damozel" is representative of his early poetry and characteristic of his later works, with its sensuous detail and theme of lovers parted by death who long for reunion. The volume Poems of 1870 includes the verses "Eden Bower", "The Stream's Secret" and "Sister Helen", which have been thought as some of the most genius nineteenth-century literary ballads. This poetic volume also contains the poem, "Jenny", which is concerned with a young and thoughtless prostitute, and "The Burden of Ninevah", an acutely pessimistic poem aiming at the enduring faults of civilization. The influence of Rossetti's painting is mirrored by Poems. Just as his literary background prompted his choice of mythological, allegorical, and literary subjects for his paintings, his preference of detail, color, and mysticism colored much of his poetry. Rossetti's second poetic collection, Ballads and Sonnets (1881), contains the completed version of The House of Life, a sonnet sequence primarily devoting to the themes of love, life and death, and many critics praised it as an evidence of Rossetti's mastery in sonnet form. Ballads and Sonnets also includes the passionate, melancholy poems of Rossetti's last years and the historical ballad "The King's Tragedy", a romantic and literary themes reminiscent of his earlier work "Dante at Verona".

Generally speaking, Rossetti is remembered as an influential and colorful leader of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in painting and a significant poet in Victorian age. He was highly praised,

for example, by critics like William Morris, Algernon Swinburne, Edward Burne-Jones, and gorge Meredith. John Ruskin, at least to some extent, regarded him as one of the greatest genius of the age, and Walter Pater, equally remarked that "Of the six men then living who were destined to be famous—Tennyson, Browning, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, and Rossetti—Rossetti was 'the most significant as well as the most fascinating."[1] Arthur Symons thought that Rossetti provided "a kind of leadership in art." [2] William Butler Yeats remarked that "We are all Pre-Raphaelites then," [3] and described Rossetti's influence on his generation "perhaps the most powerful of all." [4]

According to David Sonstroem, Rossetti was "rather alter-Christian than anti-Christian. Although he rejected the institution of Christianity, many of its forms and promises still appealed to him. So, like the courtly poets of an earlier day, he stole from Christianity what he considered of value-its beauties of language, attitude, and situation, and its rewards-and left the toils behind." [5]. As a result, the paper tries to reveal the religious connotations through the analysis and examinations of religious elements in Rossetti's poems.

2. THE RELIGIOUS CONNOTATION OF THE BLESSED DAMOZEL

Since Rossetti's heaven is united with the earthly and heavenly bliss, then what is his road of salvation to that paradise? As what Sonstroem has already indicated in his book, Rossetti and the fair Lady, that "Rossetti was so attracted to the fair lady as savior". However, Rossetti's notion of salvation, in fact, is the beauty of the fusion of fair lady's body and soul, which, at least for him, can lead to the heaven after death. For example, in the poem "The Blessed Damozel", a deceased woman looks down at her beloved from heaven and longs for him. The lady hopes to reunite with her lover in the heaven and then they will come to Mary for granting their love. Under the guidance of Mary, the lady and her lover beseech God for the permission of staying in heaven together thereafter. In this way, the poet will complete his road of salvation by the call of love and beauty of the fair lady, Damozel. At the beginning of the poem, Rossetti depicts the Damozdel's dwelling place and her sensuous beauty of appearance:

The blessed damozel lean'd out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters still'd at even;
...
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn.

From these two stanzas, it reveals Rossetti's obsession with the beauty of fair lady: the body leaning on the gold bar, the deep attractive eyes and the yellow-like long hair. In addition to this, the lilies in hand, the flowing ungirt robe, white rose and seven stars in hair, all which have vividly portrayed a beautiful picture of a palpable beautiful lady similar to an earthly beautiful woman. However, as the fair lady in the poem has been deceased and dwelled in the heaven, and the images of "lilies", "white rose" and "stars" centering around the heroine, readers can effortlessly perceive the holy and religious meaning of them, which implies that the lady's beauty is spiritual and holy. Therefore, the female beauty in Rossetti's heart is the unity of sensuous and spiritual beauty. What's more, in Rossetti's moral code, only can this harmonious fusion of body's and soul's beauty lead poet's spirit to the source of beauty, the

heaven, and only in which the poet's soul can be saved. In the successive stanza of poem, the poet pays a tribute to the splendid and sublime beauty of heaven:

It was the rampart of God's house
That she was standing on;
By God built over the sheer depth
The which is Space begun;
So high, that looking downward thence
She scarce could see the sun.
It lies in Heaven, across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and darkness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.

In heaven, there is no alternation between days and nights, the beauty of heaven results from the eternity of cosmos. Since the heaven is the dwelling place of God and holy beauty, so God is the host of heaven. Therefore, God is equal to the source of divine beauty and Him himself become the divine beauty. In this poem, the Damozel and his beloved are coming toward God for salvation, and they are consequently in pursuit of the Beauty for redemption. From this aspect, it reveals the Rossetti's ethical thought that the divine Beauty and God is melted and united. Beauty is God and God equals to Beauty, which reflects Rossetti's aesthetic ethics. Furthermore, in order to further his ethical view that his salvation is resulted from the harmonious melting of spiritual and body's love, Rossetti portrays the earthly-like love in heaven:

Around her, lovers, newly met
Mid deathless love's acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
Their heart-remembered names;
And the souls mounting up to God
Went by her like thin flames.

Heaven here is filled with embracing couples. The activity of heaven is actually earthly, corporeal love. This love has become spiritual, though, because it's based on the love and desire for the union of two souls and two bodies, not just a lust after the physical. In Rossetti's fantastical mind, however, true love is spiritual and smiled upon by God. The damozel's earthbound lover primarily desires union with her spirit rather than with her body sexually. All these moral thoughts radiate Rossett's ethical view that the road of salvation for people comes from the appreciation of female beauty and love, not from the Christian God. Anyway, in Rossetti's ethical code, the traditional God has given place to another Deity, the Deity of Beauty. Finally, the Damozel and her beloved accomplished their mission of salvation through the pursuit of love and beauty:

When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,

And bathe there in God's sight.

In Rossetti's another poem, “The Portrait” (1847), he also set the poem in the situation of “The Blessed Damozel”, an earthly lover thirsting for heavenly reunion with his beloved. The same as “The Blessed Damozel”, the state of heaven is the reunion of love: “at death the lover's soul ... Enters in her soul at once, and knows the silence there for God.” [7]The beloved's eyes are spoken of as 'the spirit's Palestine' Heaven is portrayed as holding its breath to hear 'the beating heart of Love's own breast', which beats, in its thirsting, with a strength of 'the iron-bosomed sea'. Again the salvation of the lovers has accomplished through the love of their union of soul and body.

As a result, Rossetti's religious ideal through the fair lady as his salvation indicates that, “he was rather alter-Christian than anti-Christian.” On one hand, Rossetti inherited the Christian religious doctrines that human being is sinful and should be saved through God. However, according to Rossetti's ideal, the God of Christian has been replaced by the deity of Beauty, the Beauty of the harmonious union of fair lady's soul and body. On the other hand, Rossetti's paradise after death is composed by heavenly and earthly bliss, and he fills heaven with earthly beings, feelings, and activities, which discloses Rossetti's rebellion against the traditional Christian doctrines and his new religious thoughts.

3. THE PARADISE BLENDED THE EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY BLISS

At the time when fair ladies began to make their place in Gabriel Rossetti's imagination, he kept thinking his Beatrice, the largest group composed of heavenly lady as his saviour to the heaven. As what it has been mentioned above, while Rossett was translating Dante's “Vita Nuova”, he also composed his “The Blessed Damozel”. In the poem, although the Damozel was in heaven, it seems that she still owned her humanity in Rossetti's poetry and Rossetti also made a detailed physical description of her at the beginning of the poem:

The blessed damozel lean'd out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters still'd at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.
Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem.
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift,
For service meetly worn;
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn. [6]

From the lines, readers can perceive damozel's hair color, the appearance of eye, the way she wears her hair and her rob. They can also hear her speaking and know the warmth of her bosom. Obviously, the appearance of lady is earthly. In the meantime, even in heaven, Damozel still owns the emotions of a sweet and sensitive girl: She feels innocent wonder at heavenly things, strives for her earth-bound lover and finally cries at the end of the poem. Apparently, the Damozel in the poem is the melting of earthy and heavenly girl. On the other hand, although the setting of heaven is supernatural and mysterious, the activities and merriment of heaven are similar with that on earth. What the blessed Damozel enjoys and desires is nothing but a good time earthly: “To have more blessing than on earth, in no wise: but to be; /as then we were, —being as then, at peace. Yea, verily” . What is more, the earthly passion of lovers not only leads to heaven, but

an actual heavenly state as well. The differences between earthly and heavenly bliss are only in duration: "—only to be, as then awhile, for ever now, / Together, I and he". Another difference is Rossetti's euphemistic description of love game:

And we will step down as to a stream,
And bathe there in God's sight.
Then will i lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abashed or weak:
And the dear Mother approve
My pride, and let me speak.

As a matter of fact, Rossetti always saw heavenly bliss as earthly, human love and filled heaven with earthly beings, feelings and activities:

Around her, lovers, newly met
Mid deathless lover's acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
Their heart-remembered names;

Consequently, Rossetti's bliss in heaven after death is, more often than not, the much more same state as that on earth. The ethical tendency of Rossetti displayed above has showed his ethical code against the traditional Christian moral codes. According to Christianity, people should abandon the earthly pleasure and pursue the pure spiritual happiness in the heaven after death. It believes that the pursuit of earthly love and enjoyment is sinful. Therefore, Rossetti's deprecation of the traditional moral thoughts that fetters the human being's nature reveals Rossetti's humane care for the people in that age.

4. THE NEW TRINITY AND INCARNATION

From the above statement, we can be aware of that Rossetti tries to build up a new religion of beauty and set up a new ethical value the divine aestheticism. The new religion, just like the traditional religions, regards deity as the ethical code for human beings' behavior and admits the validity of the man's sensuousness. In Rossetti's mind, it has its own new conception of trinity and incarnation. In Christian theology, the Incarnation usually refers to the embodiment of God, the Son in human flesh as Jesus.

"Incarnation which literally means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh, refers to the conception and birth of a sentient creature (generally a human) who is the material manifestation of an entity, god or force whose original nature is immaterial. In its religious context the word is used to mean the descent of a god, embodiment of the logos, a divine being or the Supreme Being in human form on Earth." [8]

According to Christianity, man is born with his original sin and Jesus Christ substituting sinful man was nailed on the cross in order to free human kind from agony. In this way, God saves His subjects through the fleshed Jesus. This is the connotation of traditional incarnation of Christianity. In the new religion of beauty, Rossetti also believes that human being is originally sinful and need salvation via a divine thing. However, his salvation is not through Jesus Christ, the flesh embodiment of God, but fair lady. As in Rossetti's ethical ideals, he regard fair lady as his savior, who just acting like Jesus in Christianity, so in Rossetti's mind, the new incarnation refers to the fair lady as the embodiment of the deity (Beauty) to become savior. This new conception of incarnation has been vividly depicted in Rossetti's early poem "the Blessed Damozel". In the poem, the poet, Damozel's beloved, was saved through the love of the deceased Damozel in the heaven. In this case, the fair lady Damozel has been treated as the embodiment

of deity (Beauty), just like Juses as God, and finally, the poet was led to the front of God (Beauty) and was eventually permitted to stay in the heaven permanently with his love. In the meantime, during the forming of new conception of Incarnation, Rossetti also invented his new idea of Trinity. According to Christian theology, "The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead." [9] Similarly, in Rossetti's religion of beauty, it has its own innovated concept of Trinity. He treats the Beauty as God of Christianity, fair lady as flesh Juses and love as the Holy Spirit. In the poem Soul's Beauty, Rossetti has paid his tribute to the deity of Beauty:

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,

Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw

Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,

I drew it in as simply as my breath.

In these verses, readers can see Beauty has posed the supreme position in Rossetti's life. Meanwhile, in Rossetti's words, "love is the interpreter and mediator between God and man" [10] through love the true revelation is made,

Nor I myself know all my love for thee:

How should I reach so farm, who cannot weigh

To-morrow's dower by gage of yesterday?

Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be

As doors and windows bared to some loud sea,

Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray,

And shall my sense pierce love — the last relay

And ultimate outpost of eternity?

For this is Love discerned to be something that lies beyond the region of this world's wisdom or desire — something out of proportion to earthly needs and causes that we know. Here is the point where the lover's personality seems to be exalted to its highest, and at the same moment to disappear, as poet perceives that his individual emotion is merged in the flood and tideway of a cosmic law:

Lo! What am I to Love, the lord of all?

One murmuring shell he gathers from the sand —

One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand.

yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call

That any hour-girt life may understand

This call, by its very nature, is heard in one heart alone, this "touch of powers primordial" is nontransferable to other souls. The eyes which, to the lover's vision, "The sun-gate of the soul unbar, /being of its furthest fires oracular " can send this message to the world only through sign and symbol; the "bower of unimagined flower and tree" is fashioned by Love in such hearts only as he has already made his own.

5. THE PURSUIT OF UNITY OF BODY AND SOUL

As the influence of Italian poet Dante, Rossetti inherited Dante's humane thoughts, like the pursuit of earthly pleasure, as a part of his ethical code. When Rossetti was nineteen, he translated Dante's many works. He not only longs for Dante's perfection of divine love, but also starves for the earthly sensuous love of Dante's kind. As a result, in his many poems, Rossetti explicitly expresses his fancy for earthly love, as well as the pursuit for spiritual love. For

instance, in the poem “Nuptial Sleep”, Rossetti directly and boldly depicted the passion for sensuous love:

At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:
And as the last slow drops are shed
From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.
Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start
Of married flowers to either side outspread,
From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burn red,
Fawned on each other where they lay apart.

In these verses, Rossetti immediately expressed his passionate love and paid a tribute to the body's love and human beings' life. Meanwhile, since his portraying of body's love is bold and bald-faced and also beyond the acceptance of Victorian ethical code, so Rossetti has been entitled the poet of “The Fleshly School of Poetry” by the contemporary critic Buchanan. However, in Rossetti's real intention, he not only pursues sensuous and body's love, but more essentially, the spiritual love:

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,
And their dreams watches them sink, and slid away.
Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams
Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;
Till from some wonder of new woods and streams
He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.

As it is, we can see that Rossetti true love is the melting of body and soul, a sort of divinity aestheticism. This ethical view reflects that Rossetti is disaccorded with some traditional thoughts chaining the nature of human kind, and encouraged people to bravely pursue the earthly pleasure. In another poem, “Love-Lily”, Rossetti's ethical ideal of the unity of body and soul also has been embodied as following lines:

Between the hands, between the brows,
Between the lips of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born whose birth endows
My blood with fire to burn through me;
Who breathes upon mu gazing eyes,
. . .
Within the voice, within the heart,
Within the mind of Love-Lily,
A spirit is born who lifts apart
His tremulous wings and looks at me;

In this poem, Rossetti believes that the "spirit" is born between the hands, the brows and the lips of Love-Lily. Meanwhile, from the verse we can see that the "spirit" is also born within the voice, the heart, and the mind of Love-Lily. Therefore, in Rossetti's mind, the spiritual things are always melted with physical ones and also come from the physical world. In other words, it is the unity of body and soul.

6. CONCLUSION

Dante Rossetti, more often than not, has been praised as an extraordinary leader, important and influential poet and painter both in two artistic areas in Victorian age. Meanwhile, he is also a controversial figure because of his bohemian way of life, Italian heritage, English traditional culture conflicted with his anti-Christian ethical thoughts and ideals, and the mysterious death of his wife, he bury his poems in her dead wife's coffin and later decision to exhume her coffin to regain the poems, his drug addiction, nervous break down and his seclusion until his death, etc. All of these facts of Rossetti's life arouse people's great curiousness and disputes. During his short lifetime, Rossetti has created an abundance of poems that basically can be classified in two categories — lyrics and epic. The House of Life, fully published in 1881, is the representative work of Rossetti's lyrics. The work consists of 102 sonnets that recorded Rossetti's sense and feelings for life, love and death. Chinese scholar Qian Qing had commented his poems that although Rossetti's poetry is hard to understand, his artistic achievement in sonnet sequence can be paralleled with that of Shakespeare. Anyway, in his poetry, Rossetti desperately pursues the sensuousness of voicing and coloring of words, which reflects his inclination to the aestheticism both in his work and mind. In the meantime, his poetry is fully featured by graceful images, musical rhythm and meaning of paintings. Since Rossetti's works obey the principle of "nature", in his early period, just as Walter Pater remarked that Rossetti's poetry mainly describes the wonderful things of that he was perceived in daily life.

On the other hand, the age when Rossetti was growing up is the peak time of England and he was also titled the empire of sun-never-down. During the period, the Britain came into the world power after many political and economic reformations in the early 19th century. Meanwhile, people underwent a dramatic change in terms of ideology and values, and they gradually became suspected about the traditional ethical value systems as the rapid development of science and technology. Under this circumstance, Rossetti tries to improve the previous ethical thoughts that are unsuitable for humane nature, and put forward a new ethical value, the religion of Beauty. The new ethical value is centered on fair lady's beauty and the melting of body and soul, and also takes the form of Trinity of Christianity as a part of his new thought. Just as Riede in his essay, "David G. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision" pointed out that

"Rossetti's poetry was, much more often than not, love poetry, but it was rarely, if ever, only about love — love itself is a metaphor for the condition of desiring. Whatever autobiographical elements may be found in Rossetti's poetry, the love he described is never simply the love of Gabriel Rossetti for Lizzie Siddal, or for Fanny Cornforth, or for Jane Morris; rather it is, like the love Shelley described, a love for an ideal of perfection." [11]

In fact, this "an ideal of perfection" implies Rossetti's ethical ideal of Beauty, and love indicates the Holy Spirit in Rossetti's religious mind.

Generally speaking, Rossetti attempts to set up his own religious belief of Beauty and improve the traditional ethical system with his own religious ideals. In his fantasy kingdom, Rossetti believes that the sinful humankind can only be saved through fair lady's beauty. With the new religious view of salvation and the melting of body and soul, Rossetti expressed his opposition against traditional Christian thoughts—the salvation through the God and the abandonment of earthly happiness. At the same time, Rossetti also tries to disprove the popular Utilitarianism and money-worship in Victoria age with his new religious ideas. He advocates vigorously the spiritual holy Beauty to replace human greedy for material wealth. These two aspects reflect and reveal Rossetti's idea of humanism.

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