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Rossetti's Representations of the Kiss

In his hostile review of Rossetti's *Poems* (1870) in *The Contemporary Review*, Robert Buchanan is particularly offended by Rossetti's representation in language of the physical gesture of the kiss. Buchanan quotes in its entirety the sonnet "Nuptial Sleep," which seems to suggest the experience of post-coital exhaustion through the metonymy of post-kiss exhaustion. Later in the review, Buchanan quotes, out of context, the concluding lines of the first Willowwood sonnet, in which the lips of the absent beloved rise out of her image in a pool and "Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth." Charging the poet with shamelessly revealing "the most secret mysteries of sexual connection," Buchanan does, however, identify a central gestural motif in Rossetti's poetry and, as I shall show, in his art.¹

In his reply to Buchanan in the *Athenaeum*, Rossetti quotes the entirety of the sonnet "Love-Sweetness" from *The House of Life* (XIII, 1870; XXI, 1881).

Sweet dimness of her loosened hair's downfall
About thy face; her sweet hands round thy head
In gracious fostering union garlanded;
Her tremulous smiles; her glances' sweet recall
Of love; her murmuring sighs memorial;
Her mouth's culled sweetness by thy kisses
shed
On cheeks and neck and eyelids, and so led
Back to her mouth which answers there for all:—
What sweeter than these things, except the thing
In lacking which all these would lose their
sweet:—
The confident heart's still fervour: the swift
beat
And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing,

Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring,
The breath of kindred plumes against its feet?²

Rossetti's point is that though the physical experience of the lovers' kiss is here represented, it is declared "to be naught if not enobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times."³ Rossetti answers Buchanan's objections to his kiss sonnets by quoting another in which a kiss in the octet is transformed in the sestet into the kiss of two angelic creatures. The physical meeting of two lovers through a kiss is of little value if it is not also a meeting of the winged spirits. The kiss is thus a moment in which kindred souls interrupt their "cloud-girt wayfaring" and achieve spiritual communion through labial and oral communion, their physical gesture a means of spiritual action.

In Rossetti's poetry and art the kiss assumes a sacramental significance. It, rather than genital contact, is the climax of the lovers' story. Because the kiss is both public and private—a permissably public gesture that signifies private intimacy—it is a rich subject for pictorial treatment. Associated with the organs of breathing and speech, the kiss can readily assume spiritual associations. Indeed Renaissance writers like Pico della Mirandola saw the kiss as an allegorical sign of the union of the human soul with God. Rossetti revives the kiss as significant gesture, but instead of employing it as an emblem of the loving union of human and Divine, the union of the human soul with God, he emphasizes it as the climactic gesture in the lovers' narrative, their spirits thus achieving temporary union.⁴ Significantly, the silencing of human