

SIMEON SOLOMON AND DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

Simeon Solomon's personal iconography, created in his prose tale A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep (published in 1871) and in pictures related to this book from about 1870 till his death in 1905, is heavily influenced by his literary friends: Algernon Swinburne, Walter Pater, Oscar Browning, and especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti, the strongest personality in the Victorian 19th century among poets and painters alike, influenced both the ideal Solomon strove after and the method he used to reach this ideal, i.e. a succession of separate visions.¹

In this article, I will try to answer the following questions: what was the influence of Rossetti's iconography on Solomon? How important were their personal relations in this respect?

On page 78 in Solomon's sketchbook now at Ein Harod (Israel) -- praised by G. P. Boyce, E. Burne-Jones, W. Crane and W. M. Rossetti² -- there is a drawing entitled "Chiaro and his Soul from D. G. Rossetti's 'Hand and Soul'" (fig. 1). The drawing shows a man seated, with his hands folded in his lap and with closed eyes. A woman sits beside him; she, too, has her hands folded together. She looks at the man, while a radiance surrounds her head and her hair. The caption states that the man and the woman represent Chiaro and his Soul. The picture is based on the following passage from Rossetti's story:

"And when she saw him lie back, the beautiful woman came to him, and sat at his head, gazing, and quieted his sleep with her voice."³

Rossetti wrote the story in a few days in 1849 or 1850; it was published in January 1850 in The Germ, the magazine of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In 1860 he had the story privately printed for distribution among his friends. It relates how the painter Chiaro dell'Erma fails to express his ideal in his art. Alone in his room, he then has a vision of a woman who proves to be his Soul. She tells him to paint her: in this way, she -- his ideal -- will always be before his eyes. Chiaro records the vision he has and falls asleep: the moment shown by Solomon. The conclusion of the story shows that the recorded vision -- the painting -- may call forth another visionary experience, in this case for the narrator. This is the function of the picture, symbolizing Rossetti's own paintings.

Now Solomon does not show the most important event in the story, the painting of the Soul, which Rossetti wanted to illustrate himself.⁴