

FLESH VERSUS SPIRIT: DGR'S "THE PORTRAIT"

"The Portrait" is one of Rossetti's early poems written in the line of Robert Browning. It is worth analyzing because it cannot be accepted at face value as a glorification of an ideal lady, but is more convincingly read as a dramatization of the age-old war between the flesh and the spirit. That Rossetti wishes to dissociate himself from the speaker of the poem is very clear from the opening line,

This is her picture as she was:

which is strongly reminiscent of the first line of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess." "The Portrait," like "My Last Duchess," is an objective study of a diseased soul, revealed to us subtly as the speaker indulges in a dramatic monologue about his dead lady.

"The Portrait" examines the psyche of a painter who falls in love with a beautiful woman, consummates his relationship with her, then loses her through death. This is his description of the portrait he painted of his lady:

*In painting her I shrined her face
'Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
Hardly at all; a covert place
Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.*

*A deep dim wood: and there she stands
As in that wood that day: . . .*

These lines indicate that the speaker worships his lady as a goddess—"I shrined her face / 'Mid mystic trees." But she is a dark, demonic goddess, for she stands in a dim wood where light hardly ever falls, and where the suggestion is of death and terrible unearthly inhabitants—there are nameless shapes, wandering living flames and self-encounters that mean, according to legend,

impending death. The wood is demonic, a kind of hell, and the lady, shrined within this strange setting, acquires a mystic aura of evil, though the painter seems to be totally unaware of this effect.

The relationship of the painter and his lady is strongly sexual, though this is only hinted at, in deference to Victorian taboos:

*That day we met there, I and she
One with the other all alone;
And we were blithe; yet memory
Saddens those hours, as when the moon
Looks upon daylight. And with her
I stooped to drink the spring-water,
Athirst where other waters sprang:
And where the echo is, she sang,—
My soul another echo there.*

*But when that hour my soul won strength
For words whose silence wastes and kills
Dull raindrops smote us, and at length
Thundered the heat within the hills.
That eve I spoke those words again
Beside the pelted window-pane;
And there she hearkened what I said,
With under-glances that surveyed
The empty pastures blind with rain.*

*Next day the memories of these things,
Like leaves through which a bird has flown,
Still vibrated with Love's warm wings;
Till I must make them all my own
And paint this picture. . . .*

The natural scene harmonizes with their sexual thirst and the fury of their love, and the phrase "at length / Thundered the heat within the hills" is a veiled sexual reference, more appropriately a description of the sexual act than a thunderstorm (there are no hills mentioned in the landscape, moreover: the setting is the "deep dim wood"). Sexual also is the reference to "leaves through which a bird has flown." The next day, the memory of this sexual union prompts the lover to paint his lady's picture.