WORDS ABOUT THE PICTURE: MATERIAL AND METAPHOR IN DANTE ROSSETTI'S INSCRIBED PICTURE FRAMES

Dinah Roe

In considering the relationship between visual art and poetry, Dante Gabriel Rossetti writes: "Picture and poem bear the same relation to each other as beauty does in man and woman: the point of meeting where the two are most identical is the supreme perfection" (*Collected* 1:510). Like the Blakean proverbs it imitates, this statement generates more questions than it answers. Rossetti's slippery and ambiguous phrasing here enacts the difficulties of locating this "point of meeting." The proverb teases us with the possibility of a direct equivalence: "picture is to poem as man is to woman." What destabilizes the comparison is his introduction of "beauty," a term which is never defined, but seems to have something to do with a "supreme perfection" achieved at the "point of meeting where the two" (in this case either picture and poem *or* man and woman, *or* both) are "most identical."

Simultaneously celebrating difference and its erasure, this quotation deepens the confusion by ending on an oxymoron; things are either identical or not – there is no such thing as "most identical." At first glance, this phrase seems desperately unhelpful in discovering what Rossetti really thought about the "relation" pictures "bear" to poems. If ever there were a Pre-Raphaelite sentiment that needed a visual illustration, this is it. While falling short of an explanation, Rossetti's notion of picture's and poem's "point of meeting" raises important questions regarding the painter-poet's practice. Where does he think that picture and poem meet? Where does one end and the other begin?

Focussing on Rossetti's double work, *The Blessed Damozel* (1871-78), I propose that Rossetti's inscribed picture frames can be understood as a "point of meeting" between picture and poem. As threshold spaces which are at once linguistic and visual, Rossetti's picture frames challenge the compartmentalization of word and image, remaking the picture frame into what Richard Phelan usefully calls a "disorientation zone" (163).[1] Andrea Henderson has noted that the artificiality of Rossetti's picture frame makes us "conscious of