

TIME IN "THE BLESSED DAMOZEL"

In her Rossetti and His Poetry, Mrs. F. S. Boos remarked of "The Blessed Damozel,"

Some have cried out at the drop in the last verse; at the sudden fall, as it were, from Heaven to earth: the vision ... suddenly narrows, and is darkened down to this solitary bowed figure, and the heavenly music is silenced by her sobs! But this was the characteristic method of the Pre-Raphaelites: they often ended their work in a minor key; content to leave behind no sense of triumphant attainment, but rather a feeling of endless "desiderium," and of endeavour baffled only to begin anew.¹

K. L. Knickerbocker, writing in 1932 on the development of the poem through its several and widely spaced printings and revisions, comments that this difficulty arises only for the critic who "simply has not read aright these verses that express more earthly and genuine than heavenly and specious longing."² Rossetti's heaven "is a place for lovers with earthly passions; it is not inanely peaceful."³ In 1969, Jerome J. McGann, considerably less sanguine, proposes a variation on the same point in "Rossetti's Significant Details."⁴ McGann argues persuasively that Rossetti's use of "Christian detail" deliberately strips the imagery of its traditional, "inherited" content, a procedure which "entirely accords with his belief in love as eros, and with his insistence upon the physical dimensions of love.... A momentary phenomenon, human love always implies further experiences still. Its spiritual value, and its perfection, are defined by the fact that the desire for love remains forever. Rossetti's unconventional use of Christian details is his way of showing us the sublime value of enduring human affections and, correlatively, of man's infinite capacity for sensational response."⁵

Each of these critics remarks on and reconciles from his own approach, the poem's concern with the conflicting states of heaven and earth. McGann, working most closely with the details, presents the most convincing reading and has gone the greatest distance in replying to those critics who either find "The Blessed Damozel" confused or merely pretty. But while giving with one hand, McGann takes away with the other. "A sensibility more committed to moral and rational absolutes than to artistic ones will likely not think much of Rossetti's poetry. Rossetti will seem an aesthete because he places a higher value on images than on concepts.... Rossetti ... forces the reader to attend to the surface, insists that the greatest significance lies