

SYMBOL AND THING IN ROSSETTI'S *DANTIS AMOR*

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Is it still possible to paint when the bonds that tie us to body and meaning are severed? Is it still possible to paint when desire, which is a bond, disintegrates? Is it still possible to paint when one identifies not with desire but with *severance*, which is the truth of human psychic life? (Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 136-37)

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Dantis Amor* (1859) (fig. 1) was commissioned as the central panel of a cabinet for William Morris's aesthetic Red House. It is a curiously anachronistic piece. At first glance, it appears as yet another avatar of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism but it may just as well appear as a self-conscious Whistlerian "study in blue and gold" (Morse 456). On the one hand, it recalls a rigid Christian iconography. On the other hand, its flat geometry, bold colouring, and strong diagonal look forward to the Symbolist aesthetic of Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon* (1888), evoking yet questioning the synthesis of sacred and profane, self and other. This equivocation, I will argue, extends into the painting's apparently straightforward meaning. From the inscription on the diagonal in an earlier study taken from the last lines of the *Paradisio*--"L'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle"--one might assume that the painting simply asserts the unifying powers of love. Yet, upon closer examination, the work focuses not so much on some neo-Platonic "love which moves" as on an erotic "love between man and woman that suffers separation" (Ellis, 115). Furthermore, both the painting's position in the tripartite *The Salutation of Beatrice* and the sundial at its very centre highlight the death of the beloved, such that the visual text reflects Dante's "new perception born of grieving love" (Rossetti's translation; 346). Like so much of Rossetti's oeuvre, it is a work of self-mourning which questions the very idealism it displays.

Within this new-found perception there also appears, I will argue, an awareness of the limits of representation or art's "failure" before "phantasy sublime" (Rossetti, 346). My remarks are, then, concerned with the ways that the painting (and some relevant poems) at once reflect Rossetti's eroto-epistemology and his confrontation with what George Moore called the "great artistic question" of the age: the choice between "the symbol, or the thing itself" (142). Beyond the well-