

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S
"HAND AND SOUL" RECONSTRUED

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In his *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, T. Hall Caine draws attention to a letter in which Rossetti states that his short story-cum-art manifesto "Hand and Soul" was written "all in one night in December 1849, beginning ... between about 2 A.M. & ending about 7," and then likens its composition to a painting by J.M.W. Turner:

In such a case a landscape & sky all unsurmised open gradually in the mind – a sort of spiritual "Turner," among whose hills one ranges and in whose waters one strikes out at unknown liberty. But I have found this only in night-long work, which I have seldom attempted, for it leaves one entirely broken, & this state was mine when I described the like of it at the close the story. Ah! ... how long ago! (Rossetti, *Correspondence* 9:116; and Caine 134)

This Romantic version of the composition of "Hand and Soul" as an unexpected and rapidly emergent process, which was repeated by William Michael Rossetti in the 1911 edition of his brother's *Works* (679), needs to be taken with a generous pinch of salt, for, while doubtless true about Rossetti's exhaustion on the morning after some five hours of writing, his account is not entirely accurate. Nor should William Michael's statement that the story is "purely a work of imagination" be treated differently. Although understandable as a (failed) attempt to ward off autobiographical readings of the story, it belies elements in all three parts of "Hand and Soul" – its historical preface, its contemporary epilogue, and its biographical account of how the fictional fourteenth-century artist Chiaro dell' Erma came to paint a picture of his own soul – appear to be indebted to material that Rossetti may well have consulted during the story's composition, especially if that took place, as was the case, over a longer period than one night. Even in the letter quoted by Caine, Rossetti admits "an exception" to his statement that "Hand and Soul" was written "all in one night in December 1849": "an opening page or two" – probably the historical preface – were written either earlier or later, almost certainly the former. Moreover, as William Michael recorded in his journal