

## INTRODUCTION

The life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is one of the best documented of all nineteenth century artists. This is largely owing to William Rossetti's devoted record-keeping on all matters pertaining to his family and also to Dante Gabriel's romantic reputation, which drew a number of his wide circle of associates into print after his death. Yet, despite this, there are still certain areas of Rossetti's life that remain a mystery. Rossetti's fame, based upon the extravagant and even notorious rumours which surrounded him, largely eclipsed in the popular imagination the talents of his former friends Holman Hunt, Millais, Burne-Jones, Morris, Swinburne, and Bell Scott. Much of the time Rossetti the man disappears behind the myth, more a cipher than a true personality.

After Rossetti's death, his close friend Theodore Watts-Dunton (then named Theodore Watts) was expected by the Rossetti family to write the 'official' biography. This he never did, and the gap was later filled by William Rossetti. Watts-Dunton's reason for not writing a biography was that he believed that Rossetti, both the man and his ideals, was best portrayed through the study of his poetry and painting, stating that the reader 'will know Rossetti . . . as intimately as it is possible to know any man whose biography is written only in his works.'<sup>1</sup> He no doubt recognised that the term 'autopsychology', which Rossetti had applied to Dante's *Vita Nuova*,<sup>2</sup> applied equally as well to Rossetti's own works.

The focus of this study is on the intellectual life that informed Rossetti's work, and which in turn leads us to a better understanding of the man who created it. Without exception, writers on both the poetry and painting of Rossetti acknowledge his use of symbolism, but little attempt has been made to determine its nature, content, and sources. My aim is to show that Rossetti's symbolism provides, from an early stage, a coherent and consistent system within his art, whether word or image. For instance, his first oil painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849, was accompanied by two sonnets entitled *Mary's Girlhood (For a Picture)*, the second of

which opens, 'These are the symbols', and goes on to explain them. With this, Rossetti determines the practice of a career, although from here onwards he leaves his audience to interpret his symbolism. It is my aim to examine and identify this symbolic language and its sources. Rossetti's symbols compose a language-system with its own syntax and semantics, and I will attempt to show that it is a system derived from a well established, though generally unfamiliar, tradition.

In order to place Rossetti's symbolism in context, we need to look to the past. In the art and literature of the Middle Ages, the symbolic worlds of religion, magic, and superstition overlap and walk hand-in-hand with the physical world. The marvellous overflows into the actual. The art of the Renaissance is replete with allegory, symbol, and emblem, all pointing to different and higher states of mind and being. In the much later art of William Blake we are presented with worlds inhabited by angelic presences and spiritual beings. We do not question that an alternative language in the form of symbol is present in the art of the Renaissance, or that the artist is drawing upon accepted symbolic traditions and employing them in his work. However, when we reach the area of late nineteenth century art, even where a symbolic method is recognised, it has not been the subject of intensive scholarly investigation. This book attempts to redress the balance.

Rossetti clearly stands apart from his contemporaries in having a unique vision, both in his writings and in his visual art. In his later life, as his influence spread, he gained imitators. Through his friends and pupils, Edward Burne-Jones (then plain Edward Jones) and William Morris, a new school of Aesthetic art developed in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The Aesthetes, as their title implies, made their art a cult of the mystical Ideal of Beauty which ultimately derives from Plato.<sup>3</sup> Although they used symbolism extensively, they were not Symbolists in the European sense, the British Aesthetes largely retaining a distinctive vision of their own. An understanding of Rossetti's work is the key to a comprehension of this later school of art. Kathleen Raine, in her studies of William Blake and W.B. Yeats,<sup>4</sup> charts the sources and traditions from which both drew, and which provided the essential symbolic language they used in their work. This book will seek to demonstrate that Rossetti stood in a direct line between these two artists, and drew from precisely the same traditions.<sup>5</sup>

In his youth, Mediaevalism exercised the most profound intellectual influence upon Rossetti. His primary interest during his teenage years was in Dante (after whom his father had named him) and the poetic tradition of the Troubadours. Rossetti's researches into obscure texts in the British Library produced his translations from the early Italian poets, which he later published as his first collected work in 1861. Around the years 1859-62, he became increasingly receptive to the influence of the Renaissance, and this becomes apparent in the style of both his writing and painting

from this time onwards. A third area of influence, that of Rosicrucian alchemy and its symbolic language may be added to this, as I shall demonstrate. Rossetti employed a symbolic language that was well established but had largely been discarded and forgotten.

During the Renaissance, a symbolic language of allegory and pageant was common throughout Europe, despite endemic religious differences. This language of court art was more a symbolic aesthetic of idea and reference, rather than a literal representation of reality. The iconoclastic idealism of the Commonwealth and the foundation of the Royal Society under the patronage of Charles II marked the triumph of the empirical method. This was the Age of Reason, not imagination; of science not mysticism.<sup>6</sup> Essentially this new attitude firmly re-established the Aristotelian *organon* – a tool for the descriptive communication of facts and arguments – as opposed to the Platonic ideal in which language functions symbolically through simile and metaphor as the only adequate way by which the mystical experience may be communicated.<sup>7</sup> This materialistic disposition became irreversibly entrenched under the Hanoverian succession: the Protestant ethic was based firmly on reality, labour, and the creation of material wealth. This outlook was reflected in British art until the Romantic period, when artists and writers such as Blake, Turner, Shelley, and Coleridge, sought another vision entirely. It was the Romantic literature of the picturesque and the Gothic that Rossetti loved as a child. His uncle, John Polidori, had travelled with Byron as his physician and was the author of *The Vampyre*, a tale attributed for some time to Byron. The Victorian psyche, however, was schizophrenic: the British character was (and still is) basically phlegmatic and pragmatic. The Empire was founded on military power and scientific advancement; this was the age of the machine and the factory, of the manipulation, transformation, and fabrication of material substances as the foundation of capitalistic wealth. Yet, beneath this emphasis on the immediate and the real, there was in the Victorian psyche a distinct tendency towards the spiritual, the macabre, and the supernatural. No doubt this was because the majority of the urban workforce consisted of displaced poorly educated agrarian workers in whom superstition and folklore were more enduring and vital influences than was that of rational science. The poor quality of Victorian lighting and the common consumption of opiates would have also had some influence. This was the great age of church building and of the ghost story, one in which angelic presences overwatched the child. Victorian art, in general, does not celebrate the age of the machine and advancing technology, but rather turns its back upon it. These were, after all, the principal oppressors of the human spirit.

Pre-Raphaelite painting might at first sight appear to be committed to

the literal representation of reality in its obsessive depiction of minutiae. But herein lies a paradox. This super-realism is not dedicated to the depiction of material reality alone, but rather points to the supernatural animation of Nature by God. This attitude is often derived from Ruskin's teachings, but behind Ruskin lies an older tradition stemming from the writings of Giordano Bruno, and the German mystic schools of Jacob Boehme, and his contemporaries, the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Bruno taught that God's revelation lay in Nature. Boehme, like St Paul, was dazzled by sunlight which induced a visionary insight in which he saw all Creation transfigured in its true splendour. Both Boehme and the Rosicrucians taught that God revealed himself in two texts, the Bible and the book of Nature. Light, as in the paintings of Turner – those paintings which had first inspired Ruskin<sup>8</sup> – must be seen in Pre-Raphaelite painting to carry a religious or mystical charge. Hunt and Millais invented the technique of painting on a wet white ground in order to produce the most intense jewel-like colours possible.<sup>9</sup> Light is the supernature of God himself. This is a definitive Rosicrucian concept derived from the most ancient origins, via Plato and the Cabala. Like Boehme's vision of Nature, the Pre-Raphaelite concentration on super-detail defined by light, is produced by, and is intended to communicate to the viewer, a revelation of God in Nature, expressed through sign, symbol, and signature.

Rossetti was a copious reader from an early age, and he developed a penchant for the bizarre, the peculiar, and the supernatural. Besides delighting in popular 'Gothic' literature, he had access to the arcane literature that his father so avidly studied in the pursuit of his Dante studies. This delight in literary arcana was to continue throughout his life, and he was to find fellow enthusiasts in Swinburne and Morris. Dunn, Rossetti's studio assistant, records that Rossetti's interest in everything pertaining to the occult greatly influenced both his own personality and the characteristics of his poetry and painting.<sup>10</sup> Pater similarly states: 'his work, . . . in the faithfulness of a true workman to a vocation so emphatic, was mainly of the esoteric order'.<sup>11</sup> Occultism thus forms a strong element in Rossetti's work, and in this book I examine its importance. I fully recognise the dangers inherent in such a study, but we should not be afraid to confront such a topic. Scholarship is naturally reticent about becoming entangled in the labyrinths of the esoteric sciences, mainly because their value-systems lie outwith verifiable, or quantifiable, parameters. Kathleen Raine perceptively compares the study of occult symbolism to the study of a musical transcript by someone who has never personally experienced the full psychological and emotional impact of the sound the notes record.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Rossetti employs just such a musical metaphor in the poem *During Music*:

What though I lean o'er thee to scan  
The written music cramped and stiff; -

'Tis dark to me, as hieroglyph  
On those weird bulks Egyptian.

But as from those, dumb now and strange,  
A glory wanders on the earth,  
Even so thy tones can call a birth  
From these, to shake my soul with change.

As Dante relates at the end of the *Divine Comedy*, the mystical experience lies beyond the communicative powers of language. Thus recourse is made to symbol as the only viable moment of exchange. Magic inhabits the same sphere as music, poetry, and painting, none of which can be expressed or addressed in totally rational terms. If however, we adopt the approach, as the Neoplatonists did, of viewing these areas as a form of comparative mythology, this problem to some extent recedes. The Neoplatonist would not say 'either / or', but rather, 'both / and'. The apparent contradictions this entails – for instance, a methodology which defies evident reason, let alone good scholarly practice – may perhaps be seen as adding valuable insights into, rather than detracting from, the essence of the system. The paradox is largely one of our own prejudice: academic discipline accepts no problem with Christian scholarship, yet this myth-system is itself replete with the miraculous and supernatural. Christianity is, after all, but a variant of these older and, one might argue, richer set of systems. Magical Hermetic esotericism is a virile and potent science which lies behind, and informs, the glory of the Renaissance. The problem did not then exist for the artist, poet, and scholar (apart from the threat of the Inquisition) who, as Ruskin recognised, could depict the Virgin and Aphrodite in the same figure. The writings of Wind and Gombrich on the impact of magical practices on the art of the Renaissance have been influential, and the specialist studies of Frances Yates have provided an illuminating historical insight into the murky and ill-defined areas of European intellectual and occult thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These studies have inspired an intense flurry of interest in this field. But this approach has not yet been applied to the art of the nineteenth century, where it seems equally appropriate. A.E. Waite's, and more recently, Christopher McIntosh's, works on Rosicrucianism also provide a thorough historical documentation of this phenomenon. While Yates, Waite, and McIntosh supply a reliable historical basis, they do not attempt to assess or define the core beliefs, mythologies, or rituals of Rosicrucianism – that is, the very fabric of its philosophy (or more precisely, theosophy). A fundamental problem is that the tradition with which we are dealing is a sealed one, which deliberately attempts to withhold its secrets from the uninitiated. Likewise alchemy, which disguises its

wisdom beneath a bewildering, and sometimes impenetrable array of symbol, allegory, and metaphor. Added to this is the further complication that Rosicrucianism is mutable; that is, it is no one thing but more akin to an evolving organism. This is largely owing to the fact that, by its own nature, it encompasses so many differing traditions and may thus display varying facets depending upon which group attempts to impose any form of authority upon it. It is not, and never has been, 'set in stone'; its whole purpose is to be truly 'universal' in its approach. With recourse to sources published during and shortly after Rossetti's lifetime, allied with a certain degree of reconstruction, I attempt to both clarify and redress this balance. It is an exploration of these areas of thought in the art of Rossetti, and the sources from which they derive, that forms the scope of this book.

The Rossetti family as a whole were intensely literary and this reveals itself in the work of Dante Gabriel. The sources from which he was drawing were almost entirely literary ones. Thus the easiest access to Rossetti's ideas is through his writings, but as I will show, a common system of symbolism informs both the poems and the paintings.

Rossetti's aim, I will argue, is similar to and may have been inspired by the objectives of Renaissance mystics such as Giordano Bruno. In exile from his mother country Italy – he was incidentally born at Nola, not far from Naples, the same area as Gabriel Rossetti – Bruno similarly visited England, where he stayed for some years. During this period, the most productive of his career, he published several works; one of which was *De gli eroici furori* (1585), a book of mystical love poetry charting the progress of the soul through rapture to divinity, which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney. Bruno later travelled on to Germany, where his teachings may well have influenced the subsequent creation of the Rosicrucian Fraternity. Bruno's overriding aim was to create a universal religion based upon the mystical experience of universal love, and the echoes of this pass through the centuries until, as I shall demonstrate, they resurface in the works of Rossetti. Both Bruno and Dante were the adopted heroes of the *Risorgimento*, and so would have held a particular significance for Gabriel Rossetti in his revolutionary exile. Besides Bruno, Rossetti has sources in Platonism; in mediaeval romance, in which mythological allegory plays a vital role; in Renaissance Neoplatonism; in alchemy; in the scholarly investigations of myth and religion in the latter part of the eighteenth century; and finally, in his father's studies in the arcane sciences.

It will be seen from this catalogue that Rossetti's sources are not only vastly eclectic but also widely scattered. The need to provide a thorough assessment of what are, in some areas, remarkably obscure topics – for instance the beliefs and symbolism of Rosicrucianism – require a degree of patience, and even imagination, on the part of the reader. It may thus seem at times that the course of this work is wandering far from Rossetti.

Having laid this groundwork, I shall proceed to demonstrate how the precise and specific symbolism of the Hermetic tradition provides both a vital element and a key interpretative function within Rossetti's art.

We are inevitably drawn to speculate upon Rossetti's purpose for incorporating such specific symbolism within his painting and poetry. For instance, was he using it purely on an eclectic basis because all such obscure and occult notions fascinated him? Or was it perhaps that he was using it with creative purpose, reviving the codified language of former times to recommunicate its perennial message? The two are not necessarily incompatible. There are no immediate or conclusive answers to these questions. Contemporary records and accounts have been meticulously edited to avoid any such sensitive implications – there was an embarrassing number of these within Rossetti's life already, without adding more. When William Rossetti's biography of Dante Gabriel eventually appeared, William Bell Scott bitterly criticised William's ruthless censorship of all private material for greatly depleting the memory of his brother. The real Rossetti stands carefully hidden behind the facade presented by his family, friends, and associates. However, if we follow Watts-Dunton's advice and turn directly to Rossetti's own work, we may to a degree recover some of the missing facets of both his life and art. This is his true legacy. With recourse to other sources explored in the text a far clearer picture emerges of Rossetti's character, knowledge, and intent.

In the following text, the reader will notice that certain words, such as 'Nature', or 'Beauty', are capitalised: this follows recognised and accepted conventions within the context of the 'Stream', and denotes a higher form of significance which attaches to these words – they are, indeed, 'transfigured' over and above their everyday, mundane sense, in a truly Rossettian manner.