Infinite putting off

Promise, triumph and decline as recorded by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti
THE CORRESPONDENCE OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI
The formative years, 1835–1862
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With the death of Wordsworth, and the posthumous publication of *The Prelude*, 1850 was a year for looking back. With the accession to the Poet Laureateship of Tennyson, and the publication of *In Memoriam*, it was also a time for looking forward. And balancing nimbly on this historical pivot, Dickens steadied himself in front of a painting at the Royal Academy which was itself both a return to the artistic past and a statement of intent: Millais's "Christ in the House of His Parents". In "Old Lamps for New Ones", he described what he saw:

> You behold the interior of a carpenter's shop. In the foreground of that carpenter's shop is a hideous, wry-necked, blubbering, red-headed boy, in a bed-gown, who appears to have received a poke in the hand, from the stick of another boy with whom he has been playing in an adjacent gutter, and to be holding it up for the contemplation of a kneeling woman, so horrible in her ugliness, that (supposing it were possible for any human creature to exist for a moment with that dislocated throat) she would stand out from the rest of the company as a Monster, in the vilest cabaret in France, or the lowest gin-shop in England.

Like most good jokes, Dickens's writing is slyly intimate with what it condemns. The muttered aside about Mary's "dislocated throat", for instance, signals his irritation with the perceived tendency of Pre-Raphaelite artists to build up their paintings as a series of discrete figures and objects drawn from life, a jigsaw puzzle of experience, but without these separate elements being resolved into a coherent composition. At the same time, the way this dislocation is described, in a sentence that telescopes out its relative clauses to push Millais's compositional details still further apart from one another, allows Dickens to be amused as well as irritated, complicit as well as hostile, as if recognizing that the gradual discovery of connections between seemingly distinct characters and events is also the motor that drives his own narrative style. Most significantly, perhaps, even the unflattering description of Mary as a "Monster" is not altogether unsympathetic to Millais's aims, because Dickens's choice of word retains a faint and troubled echo of its original sense, meaning "a portent" (from "monere", to warn). Preserved in the continuous present tense of the painting, Mary's kneeling attitude is offered to the viewer as both a figure of her later suffering and a model of response.

Millais's painting provides a thoughtful example of what Ruskin had famously characterized as the human ability to see more than first meets the eye: "To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion – all in one". For Millais, as for many of his contemporaries, "prophecy" was imaginatively as well as grammatically central to Ruskin's triumvirate of values, and in this context the "Pre-" component of "Pre-Raphaelitism" did more than set a benchmark. It also set a tone, because much of the art that tried to follow Ruskin's advice – from Henry Alexander Bowler's "The Doubt: 'Can These Dry Bones Live?'" to William Holman Hunt's "The Awakening Conscience" – ended up depicting contemporary lives that are played out in the shadows cast by future events. The paintings and drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in particular, often look like a set of languorously elegant variations on the shape of things to come. From his first completed oil painting, "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin" (1849), through to a late work like "The Blessed Damozel" (1875–8), Rossetti repeatedly chooses to focus on expectations, prospects, a sense of perspective that works in time as well as space. This interest in the future takes different forms as it stretches across his career. It can be seen in miniature in the short story he contributed in 1850 to *The Germ*, "Hand and Soul", in which a fictional artist paints with the thought of greatness before him, "weak with yearning, like one who gazes upon a path of stars". It can also be seen in more fragmented forms in his early letters, many of which feature earnest plans and self-cajolings for the work that would secure his "name and fame".

Of course, Rossetti was not unusual among ambitious young men in doing much of his thinking in the future tense, as when he boasts – at the tender age of twenty-four – that he is "far, far in advance of the age". Nor was he unusual in being confident of his early promise ("he never doubted of his call to exceptional effort in life", according to Holman Hunt, even if he sometimes doubted of his response to this call), or, as a result, in making more promises to his clients than he could honourably fulfil. But what does mark Rossetti out is the fact that so much of this life is now almost illegible to readers who know what history had in store for him: the addictions, the unhappy love affairs, the unconventional ménage and menagerie, that have retrospectively darkened Rossetti's self-assured beginnings with the looming presence of his sadder, older self. In the eyes of posterity, at least, he seems forever to be trembling on the edge of disaster; as he observed of one letter in 1856, his writing has a tone "which now seems almost like a foreboding".

Some of this can be put down to Rossetti himself, with his interest in premonitions and auguries (even a poem about telling the truth carries the ambiguous title "Soothsay"), and his conviction that the death of his wife and model Lizzie Siddal "cast a gloom on all the future for me". But when we read in one jovial letter from 1848 that "Hunt & I are going to get up among our acquaintance a Mutual Suicide Association", with its muted warning of the self-reproach that was to follow his wife's laudanum overdose, or discover from another note that Lizzie's slow collapse "makes me feel as if I had been dug up out of a vault", with its small-scale rehearsal of his later decision to retrieve the manuscript of his poems from her grave, it is tempting to enjoy Rossetti's correspondence principally for its retrospective ironies. As we know now what Rossetti did not know then, his innocence comes to seem to us like a pose; accidents take on the air of designs; contingent scribblings are elevated to the status of oracular truths.

And yet, one virtue of his correspondence, the first eighteen years of which are reproduced in Volumes One and Two of *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* edited and copiously annotated by William E. Fredeman, is that the young Rossetti emerges as a distinctly more robust and unpredictable figure than fans of the later Rossetti might expect. Certainly, there are clues about the life to come: the whimsicality that would harden into eccentricity; the fracturing of friendships that would in retrospect make the Pre-Raphaelite "circle" seem like a hollow parody of genuine fellowship and trust; the local outbursts of self-indulgence and self-loathing that would eventually join up to create the character sneeringly described by his great-niece as a "drug-sodden and degenerate wretch". But there is also plenty that does not fit into this neat narrative of triumphant rise and seedy decline.

On paper, as in person, Rossetti is by turns earnest, skittish, stiffly formal, and exuberantly scatological. Many of these letters are comic turns, as when he parodies Tennyson's "overloaded" style, or transcribes the menu currently being offered to English tourists in a Parisian restaurant: "Lobster with sharp sauce according to the bigness"; "Lambs epigram with vegetables". Some letters provide powerful evidence of his sympathy and charm. Others provide equally powerful evidence that, as Burne-Jones put it, he "would have expired if he mightn't tease and be a little cruel". Many provide both at once, as compelling examples of Rossetti's ongoing quarrel with himself. Even on his honeymoon, the touching shift in his correspondence from "I" to "we", as if trying out the idea of coupledom for size, does not prevent him from relapsing into a superbly unapologetic self-centredness: "My wife has been in very fluctuating health . . . . I need not say what an anxious & disturbed life mine is while she remains in this state".

Put bluntly, Rossetti's early letters show the first steps of a writer with a genius for frustrating expectations. Indeed, in their fluctuating rhythms of self-importance and self-rebuke, the solemn and the jokey, many of these letters live down to Ford Madox Brown's exasperated

Rossetti's "La Pia de' Tolomei", begun in 1868 but resumed and finished only in 1881; from *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* by Julian Treuherz et al. (Waanders. 90 400 8915 9)

characterization of his friend's artistic temperament: "diffuse & inconsequent". That edged word "inconsequent" describes more than Rossetti's piecemeal artistic methods. It also hints that an artist who could not see his projects through might not amount to much in the long run; even inconsequence can have consequences. A similar worry hangs over the editor of Rossetti's letters. "As a letter writer", Fredeman admits in his introduction, "Rossetti lacks the sensitivity of Keats, the intellectual and narrative prodigality of Byron, the stylistic energy, fulsomeness, and bawdy humour of Swinburne . . . on the whole his letters tend to be fairly routine and business-like, often perfunctory". As a sales pitch, this is not especially tempting, although Fredeman does continue by pointing out that "each of Rossetti's letters, however lacklustre, forms an essential piece in that 'autopsychological' puzzle that constitutes [his] personality, no less than the creative works on which his reputation as poet and artist rests".

The remaining volumes of this edition should go some way to answering the puzzle of Rossetti, or at least to laying out its pieces, and it is to be hoped that whoever takes up where the late Professor Fredeman left off will continue the project in a similar spirit of candour and care. Once finished, it is certain to replace *The Letters of Gabriel Rossetti*, edited in four volumes by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl and published in 1965–7, which has become as famous for what it left out (some 3,500 letters) as for what it included. Of course, even this new multi-volume edition, which Fredeman heralds as "the most complete and representative ever assembled", will not prevent many letters from slipping between the cracks of the historical record. But perhaps this does not matter. Given the "inconsequent" nature of Rossetti's life and work, the most representative collection of letters may well be one that remains incomplete. After all, for one who was forever "seeking rest and finding none", he was oddly reluctant to finish what he had started.

"Very early in life", Rossetti's first biographer noted, "he formed the resolution that the sun should never set without having witnessed something done by him in some branch of work." But Rossetti was always better at making resolutions than sticking to them, and the paintings and poems he went on to produce repeatedly bear the marks, or feel the absences, of his talent for "infinite putting off". Believing that pictures were "all the better the longer they are in hand", much of his painting was actually repainting, almost as if he had decided that "painting" was better as a verb than a noun. As a poet, too, many of his works continued to be works in progress. Rossetti himself came closest to explaining his methods of composition, in an offhand comment to William Allingham: "My original poems are all (or all the best) in an aboriginal state, being beginnings, though some of them very long beginnings". By this, of course, he meant simply that he was sketching out some new fragments of verse, but a strong case could be made for thinking that Rossetti continued to view all his poems as long beginnings. Despite the bluff disapproval of William Morris, who dismissed his "fidgety fretting over old ground" as undesirable and unnecessary, Rossetti remained committed to working on "the flea-bite principle", building up a poem through layers of small accretions, and could rarely resist giving these flea-bites a good scratch in his revisions. Even after they were finished, his poems remained open-ended. In part, this is because he recognized that the actualities of verse could never be adequate to his erotic and literary ideals, as when he refers in one letter, scornfully and enviously, to Coventry Patmore's "love which never finds its published close". In part, too, it is because Rossetti's poems retained an air of provisionality even in their published forms; *The House of Life*, for example, is typical of his finest poems in being studded with questions, which are important precisely because they cannot (yet) be answered.

One question these poems raise that does need to be answered, though, is over a suitable choice of reading text, and here Rossetti's protracted compositional tinkering presents an especially tricky case for editors. One solution, which Jerome McGann takes in his ongoing internet project *The Rossetti Archive*, is to be as unchoosy as possible. Although the first two instalments of the *Archive*, posted in 2000 and 2002, focus on Rossetti's 1870 *Poems* and his 1861 volume *The Early Italian Poets*, the ultimate aim is to reproduce every original text in which Rossetti had a hand, together with many of the contexts that may have guided his hand. It will be a magnificent resource. But it does not yet justify the claims that McGann makes for and on it in his printed selection, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Collected Poetry and Prose*:

> Since *The Rossetti Archive* makes available all documentary states of all of Rossetti's works, as well as multiple copies of many, the reader of this edition should know that the present texts are those designated in *The Rossetti Archive* as "Reading Text". This designation, in *The Rossetti Archive*, was determined by exhaustive comparison of all available and relevant documents. Readers interested in assessing these choices can consult the editorial materials in The Rossetti Archive.

Actually, the reader of McGann's edition may first want to know that the much-trumpeted *Archive* is not finished, that his printed texts are not always identical with his electronic "Reading Texts" (*The House of Life*, for example, is printed here as a conflation of the 1870 and 1881 texts, whereas the "Reading Text" in the *Archive* is taken exclusively from the 1870 *Poems*), and that there is as yet no identifiable section on "editorial materials" that would allow for the sort of critical scrutiny he suggests. Nor is it true of the printed version that "The chosen text is indicated in the editorial notes here supplied for each work". These notes get off to a promising start, with some helpfully thorough bibliographical information on the early poems, but thereafter the reader is largely left to infer from the phrase "collected thereafter" that the reading text is taken from the 1870 or 1881 *Poems*. Perhaps McGann takes it as read that any editor would want to reprint the text that contains an author's final revisions, although this would be a surprise to readers who have enjoyed his earlier polemical essays on the need to restore literary works to specific historical occasions. Jerome McGann's edition is a handsome volume, and it comes with a typically forceful critical introduction, but from the world's leading textual authority on Rossetti it is something of a disappointment. It may be that *The Rossetti Archive* will yet make everything clear. But it seems premature to publish a book that asks to be read in conjunction with something that does not fully exist.