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The Pre-Raphaelite Journey into the Middle Ages
A Quest for Spiritual Experience

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Abstract. The Pre-Raphaelite artists and poets rejected contemporary conventional style in art, and did not concern themselves with the representation of contemporary life either. They viewed the surrounding social life as sordid, and reached back to the Middle Ages both for technique and subject matter. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and later William Morris found inspiration in late medieval art and literature. They took their subjects from history, legend, religion or poetry, focusing on moral or psychological issues, and expressed fascination for beauty as a value of spiritual nature. This paper examines three of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's medieval fantasy pictures (*The Tune of Seven Towers*, *The Blue Closet* and *A Christmas Carol*), which prompt a meditative and imaginative response through their enigmatic references, and thus attest the mysterious feature of Pre-Raphaelite medieval imagery. The paper discusses their enigmatic nature in the light of William Morris's early dream poems *The Tune of Seven Towers* and *The Blue Closet*, written on the relevant Rossetti pictures. A parallel reading of poem and picture evidences how Pre-Raphaelite medievalism in painting can invite the onlooker for an inner journey through exploring an imagined referential background.

Keywords: cult of the medieval, fantasy picture, mysterious quality

Introduction

Everybody knows the experience of being immersed in a work of art, and how such an experience results in a feeling of spiritual enlargement, i.e. in an experience of understanding some important meaning not only intellectually, but with one's whole self involved. The term "spiritual experience" in this paper refers to non-religious experience, something similar to what readers experience when projecting their minds into the world of a novel, relating to characters and scenes in a way that they gain new insights into truths. Spiritual experience is examined here as the artist striving to discover truths through artistic creation

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and show life as meaningful. The Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists[1] often chose medieval subjects and settings as inspiration to contemplate life's values, and also to mediate them in their works.

Medievalism and the Pre-Raphaelites

In mid-19th century, the Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm for the Middle Ages was closely related to a general cult of the medieval in contemporary culture both in England and on the Continent. A reaction against industrialism, architecture from the late 18th century had been dominated by Gothic Revival style, whose most famous project was the Palace of Westminster (1840–70), designed by Augustus Pugin. In his theoretical works Pugin claims that medieval architecture reflects and transmits a moral force, the principles of Christianity, as the very title of his treatise shows: *Contrasts: or A Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836).

Architectural Gothic Revival inspired medieval themes in art, and when the interior design of the Palace of Westminster had to be decided, it was suggested that the artists rely on Malory as a source for national subjects. For a building of political importance, this represented national identity, as well as historical and political legitimacy. As his three-volume treatise on Venetian art and architecture testifies, *The Stones of Venice,* first published from 1851 to 1853, the art critic John Ruskin, a friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, was an ardent supporter of the Gothic Revival in architecture. He admired the individuality of medieval craftsmanship, as opposed to the mass production of his industrialized age. The cult of the medieval pervaded everyday life in 19th century England to an extent that there was a trend of collecting medieval art objects, so overwhelming that old illuminated manuscripts were dismembered, their miniatures removed and sold individually – not even Ruskin left his collection manuscripts intact. (Fliegal 2002)

In art and poetry, a similar interest for the medieval was a romantic quest for the ideal, the lost virtues of chivalry, such as friendship, chastity, sacrifice, courtesy, and honour. The first decades of the 19th century saw the popularity of the novels of Walter Scott, and the poetry of Keats, Shelley and Tennyson, who also drew on medieval subjects, and their works represented an ideal for

1 The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of seven artists and critics between 1848 and 1853: John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Woolner, Frederick George Stephens and James Collinson. Their major common artistic principle was the return to the style, technique and subject matter of late medieval and early Renaissance art as a source of inspiration. From the late 1850s Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris formed the second generation of Pre-Raphaelitism.

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the Pre-Raphaelites. When in 1857 the Moxon illustrated edition of Tennyson's *Poems* was published, it included 30 woodcut illustrations by the three leading Pre-Raphaelite artists – Dante Gabriel Rossetti contributed 4, John Everett Millais 18, and Holman Hunt 7 – besides the 24 illustrations by four other Victorian artists. Other notable pictures on medieval subjects painted by Pre-Raphaelite artists in the late 1840s and early 1850s were John Everett Millais: *A Dream of the Past – Sir Isumbras at the Ford*, inspired by a short, metrical Middle English romance, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *The Wedding of St George and Princess Sabra*, based on the medieval legend of St George, and Holman Hunt: *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and the Orsini faction,* referring to the same story of a political figure in 14th century Italy as the libretto of Wagner's early opera. In 1857, Rossetti offered to paint the ten bays of the Union Society Debating Hall in Oxford with designs from subjects in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. In this "Jovial Campaign," (McGann, 2) he painted the murals with his new friends, William Morris and Edward-Burne Jones, whom he met the previous year, and they together formed the second generation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The Pre-Raphaelite fascination with the medieval might have been more than what it is usually considered, i.e. idealization of a past culture as a form of dissent, rejection of the industrialized contemporary world, which they considered dirty, and dominated by material interests, a reason why they hardly ever painted contemporary subjects. It was certainly related with their desire to paint pictures that had reference beyond themselves, to stories from literature or the past. However, the Pre-Raphaelite interest in the medieval was possibly also due to the rich symbolism of medieval culture. Symbolism of numbers, colours, shapes, animals and flowers, etc., in heraldry and religion, permeated everyday life in the medieval age, and was also present in frescoes, manuscript books and paintings, thus providing a treasury for the Pre-Raphaelite artists in their endeavours to visualize subjective experience and suggest its inscrutability at the same time. Medieval symbols carried a certain element of mysteriousness to the 19th century, both because of the time gap, i.e. some of the intellectual background to interpret them had been lost, and because many symbols were polysemic, i.e. had more than one or two meanings, and sometimes had contradictory meanings, so their interpretation was context-dependent and free. The Pre-Raphaelite artists chose to view the human world through the lens of mysterious medieval symbolism, as it suggested more than could be revealed by the modern viewer accustomed to lifelike representation of reality in landscape painting, portraiture and still studies, or to representation of stories and characters from the Bible.

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Fantasy pictures – Rossetti's watercolours of 1857

Most Pre-Raphaelite paintings had recognizable subjects, from Arthurian legends, Shakespeare, and Dante, but the following three watercolours of 1857 by Rossetti are known as fantasy pictures with no referential background: *The Tune of Seven Towers, A Christmas Carol,* and *The Blue Closet.* As to their subject, the most easily recognizable common features of these fantasy pictures are the presence of enigmatic characters in situations suggesting a narrative background which, however, remains unidentifiable, of characters depicted in the visual context of decorative objects carrying symbolic meanings. In these pictures the artist seeks to evoke a sensation induced by the music that the characters are playing, however, without the intense sensuality of Rossetti's art in the 1860s and 1870s, when many of his pictures show female beauty with a musical instrument. As to their composition, these small watercolours were painted in the style of medieval frescoes, or perhaps more importantly, in the style of manuscript illuminations with warm and rich colours, using flattened forms, where the elements are crammed into narrow spaces with no shadows, so the tight arrangement of the compositional elements creates an almost claustrophobic image (Faxon 1992, 59). The three watercolours can be seen as the artist's attempts to create a kind of art where the message is communicated through formal qualities rather than through a narrative or didactic content.

Although its narrative background is unclear, *The Tune of Seven Towers* has a more or less identifiable subject. Its title refers to a fortress (Yedikule Fortress) in Istanbul built in 1458, with dungeons for prisoners. Its subject, a doomed love affair, is decipherable through symbolic elements in the picture: there is a pennon on a lance, on the left, with the images of the seven towers; the lance is stuck in a bucket, and cuts diagonally across the entire picture, which is thus half crossed; there is a boy in the window placing a bough of holly, a symbol of marriage, on the lady's bed, which contrasts the sadness on the faces of all the three central characters, who have no eye-contact; the woman behind the seated lady, in a servile posture, obviously has some fatal illness, as suggested by the skin of her face; the knight is resting his arms in deep thought on the handle of his sword stuck in the floor, while his built looks rather strong in contrast to the poor thin lady playing the zither, whose haggard body and frail fingers also suggest imminence of death. The composition bears some resemblance to Renaissance Ecce Homo paintings, like Andrea Solari's *Ecce Homo* or Titian's *Ecce Homo* portraits. These images are cut diagonally by the reed "they smote him [Christ] on the head with," as written in Mark 15, 19 (King James Bible), suggesting that Christ is destined to die, and show Christ with an averted gaze, looking away from the centre, which conveys his sorrow over the doomed fate of humanity for its rejecting salvation. The averted gaze of Christ is similar to how Rossetti represents the woeful melancholy of his

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characters in the three fantasy pictures. The onlooker familiar with the artist's biography is in an easier position to recognize the theme of *The Tune of Seven Towers,* since the model of the lady, Lizzie Siddal, Rossetti's wife later on, was a laudanum addict, who died two years after their marriage, in 1862.

A Christmas Carol shows a young woman, also modelled by Siddal, dressed in red and seated in the centre. While playing a clavichord, she is having her hair combed by two damzels standing in symmetrical arrangement, just like the two holly trees in barrels striped red and black, to the left and right. The clavichord in the centre is decorated with some sprigs of green leaves as well as with scenes of the Annunciation and Nativity. Together with the colour arrangement of black and gold tapestry behind the central figure, which then forms a carpet beneath her feet, the composition suggests harmony. The characters' delicate melancholy gazes reflect their self-absorbed delight in their activity and the Christmas music played by the young woman.

A Christmas Carol inspired the first ten lines of Charles Swinburne' poem of the same title (Marillier 1899, 83), and William Morris, the first owner of the two other watercolours, wrote a poem of the same name both to *The Tune of Seven Towers* and to *The Blue Closet*. Rossetti, however, said that Morris's poems were "the results of the pictures but do not tally to any purpose with them, though beautiful in themselves" (Rossetti, William 1889, 44). Obviously, William Morris focused on the effect of the macabre in the painting, and composed his song, *The Tune of Seven Towers*, with a similar ambience: fair Yoland sends her lover, Oliver to the Tune of Seven Towers, allegedly to fetch her clothes, in fact, her purpose is to cause his death.

What do these watercolours have to do with spiritual experience? Before examining *The Blue Closet,* it might prove worthwhile to consider Rossetti's artistic manifesto as defined in his early prose tale *Hand and Soul*. Written in 1849 and published in the first issue of *The Germ*, the monthly journal of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the tale features a young Italian artist Chiaro, who is searching for true art. First he finds it in religious devotion, and then in beauty, until finally he has a vision of a beautiful woman, who says to him, "I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me and know me as I am" (Rossetti 2003, 314), and later she adds, "Chiaro, servant of God, take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus as I am..." (316). At this moment, as if in an epiphany, he understands the purpose of art, which is to represent the artist's soul through expression of beauty. That partly explains why almost all of Rossetti's paintings feature beautiful women. The prime significance of Chiaro's experience for us, interested in traces of spiritual experience in Pre-Raphaelite art, is *how* his insight into the true purpose of art happens to him.

Chiaro's experience seems very much to correspond to the 'process definition' of spiritual experience used in mental health counselling. Author of books on

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counselling psychology Elfie Hinterkopf proposes the definition of spiritual experience as an event of the following three phases:

– First there appears "a subtle, bodily feeling with vague meanings" which can be located in the body,

– Then this bodily feeling with vague meanings "brings new, clearer meanings", i.e. the client may receive a new, explicit meaning in an act of epiphany, which may include transpersonal experiences,

– Finally, "a spiritual experience involves a transcendent growth process."

Exactly the same happens to Chiaro, who is sitting in intense contemplation of his art, and experiences bodily sensations:

– "…the fever encroached slowly on his veins, till he could sit no longer and would have risen; but suddenly he found awe within him, and held his head bowed, without stirring. The warmth of the air was not shaken; but there seemed a pulse in the light, and a living freshness, like rain. The silence was a painful music, that made the blood ache in his temples" (314).

– Chiaro has a transpersonal experience, accompanied with strong bodily sensations, when his soul appears to him in a vision as a beautiful woman. She tells him that she is an image of his own soul, and he has a feeling of oneness with the vision, "as he looked, Chiaro's spirit appeared abashed of its own intimate presence; and his lips shook with the thrill of tears" (314). The woman says to him: "seek thine own conscience (not thy mind's conscience, but thine heart's), and all shall approve and suffice" (314). Later on she instructs Chiaro, "…take now thine Art unto thee, and paint me thus, as I am, to know me […] Do this; so shall thy soul stand before thee always, and perplex thee no more" (316).

– Chiaro manages to move beyond his former view of art, and the narrator makes clear the effect of his growth process, as he describes how Chiaro spent the rest of the day working with intense introspection: "And Chiaro did as she bade him. While he worked, his face grew solemn with knowledge" (316). After his work was done, he felt "like one just come out of a dusk, hollow country, bewildered with echoes, where he had lost himself" (316), which means that he learnt to work with the same all-consuming concentration. All this is a description of how intense focusing results in a spiritual experience producing a transcendent growth process.

The comparison between a sensation of being immersed in the process of artistic creation and being "lost" makes one wonder if such a peculiar state of mind, necessary, as Rossetti states, for producing meaningful art, can be attained by conscious effort. As all aspects of the human mind are mediated by the brain, there has been a growing interest in neuroscience between the connection of spiritual experience and the working of the brain, which is testified by the researches of Fenwick (2004), Newberg (2010),Wildman (2011) and a recently published volume of studies on this subject edited by Walach, Schmidt and

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Wayne (2011). In his definition of intense experiences Wildman underlines the neural aspect of the experience:

> Intense experiences involve strong and broad neural activation, corresponding to existential potency and wide awareness, involving both strength of feeling and interconnectedness of ideas, memories, and emotions in such a way as to engage a person with ultimate existential and spiritual concerns and leverage significant personal change and social effects. (Wildman 2011, 104)

Newberg, who researches religious experience, relies on computed tomography images to show how the human brain is affected by concentration. The frontal lobes of the brain are involved in focusing attention and the parietal lobes are responsible for the sense of orientation in space and time. The various parts of the brain are, however, interconnected, so a high degree of concentration blocks sensory and cognitive input in parietal lobes, which results in a decreased sense of space and time (Newberg 2010). This seems to explain why intense introspection or immersion in a subject creates a feeling of being "lost," as described by the narrator of *Hand and Soul*. Rossetti's artistic manifesto drew on the artist's intense introspective concentration that would enable him to paint his own soul. Consequently, the student of Rossetti's art is intrigued by the question whether the artist's intense introspective concentration is reflected in the composition in any way. Is it possible to examine Dante Gabriel Rossetti's third watercolour of 1857, *The Blue Closet*, from this perspective? What are the benefits of this approach?

The artist's intense introspection reflected in the composition of *The Blue Closet*

As *The Blue Closet* does not refer to anything proper beyond what it represents, yet suggests a lot more, the theme of the picture remains enigmatic. It invites interpretation through contemplation or intense focusing, but will remain elusive enough not to allow its meaning to be specified. Four ladies are depicted in symmetrical arrangement of shapes and colours, with two playing the clavichord, and two standing against a blue tiled wall, singing from musical notes. In a letter, Rossetti referred to the subject of this picture simply as "some people playing music" (Hill 1897, 201). Rossetti's contemporary and friend Frederick George Stephens interpreted the theme of *The Blue Closet* in terms of synaesthesia, as association of colour with music, and supported his idea by linking certain colours in the picture with the visualized musical instruments. To Stephens, the

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scarlet and green evoke the unheard sound of the bell, and the softer crimson, purple and white correspond with the notes of the lute and the clavichord, while the blue on the walls and floor accord with the flute-like voices of the girls (1894, 42). Associations between colour and music, based on the shared emotions that they evoke, have fascinated humans since the ancient Greeks, and there have even been attempts at artistic syntheses of colour and music grounded in the correspondences between them, e.g. the opera *The Bluebeard Castle* by Béla Bartók. Whereas it is generally believed that colour and music can independently carry emotional valence, though most often subjective, it is rarely individual colours and sounds that trigger a psychic response, but their combination in a context. In Rossetti's picture the arrangement of colours and instruments is indeed suggestive of their linkage, as Stephens pointed out. Seen against the backdrop of the artist's cult of the medieval, however, the picture offers a broader perspective of interpretation.

The compositions of two of Rossetti's 1857 watercolours, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Blue Closet*, were clearly inspired by medieval visual arts, such as manuscript psalters with ornamental initials of musicians, or manuscript song books like the Portuguese *Cantigas de Santa Maria,* which include detailed miniatures besides illuminated initials depicting musicians. The influence of such miniatures is recognizable in the composition and technique of Rossetti's late 1850s watercolours (Braesel 2004, 41–42). Another obvious source of inspiration is Italian altarpieces with musical angels; e.g. Bernardo Daddi's *Four Musical Angels* has a similar symmetrical arrangement of figures. The Pre-Raphaelite artists regarded painting and poetry as sister arts, and were masters of both, but they did not emphasize a similar sister art link between music and painting, so there must be a message different from this linkage in the two Rossetti watercolours.

In *The Blue Closet* the scene is placed in an enclosed space with almost no depth, thus the focus is encompassed on the four figures and the surrounding symbolic objects close to them. The two pairs of women are arranged symmetrically so as to complement each other in colours, figures and actions. The two maidens singing from musical notes behind the instrumentalists form a mirror-like image due to their head positions and gazes. The two instrumentalists, standing facing each other, are playing with their right hands a double-keyed clavichord placed between them, which suggests a mirror-like image, also underscored by the crossed legs of their instrument. The mirror image of the women is, however, modified by a pair of vertically placed but different instruments: one of the women pulls the string of little bells, while the other woman pinches the strings of a harp next to the bells. The sleeves of the women's clothes are of the same design but of different colours, and the colour of the green sleeves on the left is repeated in the garment of the woman singing on the right. The oriental style headwear of the women on the left evoke the East, whereas the two other figures on the right are

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wearing a crown and a horned head-dress, typical of the West. The blue tiles of the background wall are repeated on the floor, suggesting continuity and integrity. This compositional complementation of symmetrical grouping, echoed poses, colours and complementary clothing styles suggests oneness and equilibrium, the prime quality of polyphonic music, which was invented in the Middle Ages. Polyphonic style means the harmonious cooperation of individual voices with none subordinated to any other, simultaneous lines of independent melody. The spiritual experience that the painting communicates though its composition is a sensation of oneness with music by singing and playing it, the experience of what it is like being *within* music.

The sensation of oneness seems to be supported by the complementary symbols in the picture: the sprigs of holly at the top of the bells and the harp, complemented by an orange lily sprung up from the floor, evoke Christmas and fertility. The blue emblem at the top of the bells looks like a western coat of arms, whereas the emblem at the bottom of the harp shows a crescent and star in a blue field, a symbol of the East also in medieval art. As an example, the coat of arm of Balthazar, one of the three Magi who visited Jesus at his birth, who is known in legend to have been King of Ethiopia, includes a crescent and star in a 1555 manuscript armorial by Virgilius Solis. The star and the moon at the bottom of the harp in Rossetti's picture are counterbalanced by emblems of the sun in a yellow field at the top of the harp and on the clavichord on the left. East and West, the Moon and the Sun together suggest the universe, the oneness of the world, whereas the bells are symbolic of time, a major dimension of the world. There still remain, however, some elements in the picture, whose identity and symbolic sense remain obscure. Is the wheel on the left a part of the instrument or a painted pattern? What is the emblem above the wheel? What birds and other animals are painted on the right hand side of the clavichord? There seems to be a pelican among those shapes, a medieval Christian symbol of protection and sacrifice, echoing the Pelican Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard. The uncertainty of some of the symbolic objects allows the picture to remain a visual image of delicate mysteriousness.

Mysteriousness is a quality that fascinated romantic artists and poets, and Rossetti's first illustration was made to a poem whose main effect rests on the mystical link of interference between supernatural events and earthly actions. The 1855 edition of William Allingham's book of poems, *Day and Night Songs and The Music Master*, includes Rossetti's illustration for *The Maids of Elfen Mere* (Allingham 1860, 202–204). The poem is a ballad telling about the apparition of three maids, who always come at night, wearing the same white clothes, and sing songs while spinning until eleven o'clock, when they disappear. What links this illustration of 1855 with Rossetti's watercolour *The Blue Closet*? The compositional arrangement and concept is somewhat similar. The maids of Elfen

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Mere share the same face, figure and clothes, their averted gazes are directed into some distant space beyond the spinning room and the time in the village. They are in a timeless, trance-like state, looking half-conscious of their present, being absorbed in the shared activity of spinning and singing. The characters form a semi-circle, and the harmony of their communion is conveyed through their identical faces, figures, clothing and posture.

Introspective concentration is suggested in the composition of *The Blue Closet* through the symmetrical and complementary arrangement of elements, figures, objects, colours and emblems, but the main message communicated by the painting, oneness with music, is visualized also in the facial expression of the four female figures. The women singing while holding sheets of music gaze outward, away from the centre, the woman on the left gazes downward, but not on her instrument, and the woman on the right is listening to the soft sounds of her harp with her eyes half closed. The gazes of the four women reflect their self-absorbed presence, as each of them focuses on her part in the music, and at the same time participates in it in communion with the others. The lack of eye-contact between them shifts the emphasis from their physical community of making music to their spiritual unity in the melody, inaudible to the onlooker, which they are performing. One is left wondering what kind of music the women are playing; the holly and the lily hint at Christmas, but rather than the joy associated with Christmas, the emotion of awe is visualized in the image.

Between Death and Heaven – the interpretation of Rossetti's picture by William Morris in *The Blue Closet* (1857)

The mysterious quality of Rossetti's image allowed William Morris to interpret the painted scene in accord with his own sensation, received while focusing on the characters in the picture, which explains why Rossetti called the poem "stunning" (Doughty 1960, 210). To Morris, the averted gazes of the women in the picture communicated a melancholy mood, a sensation of anticipating with fear and hope, and his interpretation in the poem *The Blue Closet* was obviously triggered by this imagined sadness of the characters. The poem with its fairytale-like story is aimed at an insight into the four women's psyche: they are in a state between death and afterlife, waiting for the return of Lord Arthur, the lover of Lady Louise, and are only allowed to sing once a year at Christmas. The characters singing by the wall in the Rossetti picture are identified by Morris as the *Damozels*, whereas the two other women playing the clavichord are Lady Alice and Lady Louise. All the four are singing praise to the Lord, "Laudate pueri," i.e. Psalm 113. There

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are two more speakers, the narrator and Lord Arthur, and there is also one silent character, an evil mermaid, who is not named but simply referred to as 'she'. This mysterious creature, probably a character inspired by the tales of the Brothers Grimm or Benjamin Thorpe's *Yuletide Stories*, keeps Arthur's tears in a casket, so he cannot weep for his Queen. Lady Louis remembers how in the past Lord Arthur came to this tower, knelt down, and sprinkled snow over her head. Lord Arthur complains that he is controlled by a 'she,' and cannot weep for Louise, his eyes have become grey and small, he himself has grown old and feeble. Lady Louise wonders whether Arthur is still alive, and prays to God to let him come to her, as it does not matter to her if his appearance has changed. Arthur arrives, with his eyes blind though blue as in the happy time, bringing the key to Heaven, and invites the women to cross with him the bridge leading to the golden land.

This narrative structure of current situation, preceding events, action and solution is wrapped in an intricate ballad-like texture of varying communicative forms. This is the means by which the poet recreates in the verbal medium of a ballad the evocative quality of both the complex visual relationships and the mysterious symbolism in Rossetti's image. What communicative forms are employed? How are they related to the time levels of the narrative?

In a ballad, action is both dramatized and narrated. The following two major dramatic communicative forms can be distinguished, with shifting relations between the present and the past:

1. Interactive utterances (to elicit responses, either verbal or non-verbal, from a partner whose presence is implied from the context):

– Requests, e.g. the Damozels addressing the two Queens, "We are ready to sing, if you so please;/So lay your hands on the keys," Lady Louise saying, " Sister, let the measure swell/Not too loud," and Lord Arthur, "O sisters, cross the bridge with me."

– Dialogue, e.g. between Arthur and Louise: "O, love Louise, have you waited long?" – "O, my lord Arthur, yea."

2. Monologues:

– Narrating, e.g. Lady Louise recalling the past event of Arthur sprinkling snow on her head.

– Complaining, e.g. Lady Alice describing the current situation, "And there is none to let us go,/To break the locks of the doors below," and Lord Arthur, "I cannot weep for thee, poor love Louise,/For my tears are all hidden deep under the seas."

Meditating with fear, e.g. Lady Louise exclaiming, "O! is he sleeping, my scarf round his head?/Or did they strangle him as he lay there,/With the long scarlet scarf I used to wear?"

Expressing desire by praying, e.g. Lady Louise saying, "Only I pray thee, Lord, let him come here!"

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The intricate combination of varying communicative forms in the ballad-like texture of the poem is further complicated by blending first person and third person viewpoints, like in the opening four lines of Lady Alice's monologue. In this respect, the narrator's line in the middle of the poem, "They sing all together," marks a division, a departure from the situation depicted in Rossetti's painting. From this line on, the verbal texture of its imaginative enhancement by the poet becomes increasingly more complex by the several unmarked shifts of viewpoints. The voices shift, unmarked, between Lady Louise and Lord Arthur, some nine times, which adds to the quality of uncertainty in the poem.

Narration is provided by the narrator's lines, in six rhyming triplets, all written in past tense form. Representing an external viewpoint, the narrator is, however, far from being a reliable, objective storyteller of happenings; instead, he restricts his description to what could be heard and seen, and doubles the uncertainty of the characters about anything beyond the obvious facts. Besides loosely interlacing the line of present happenings, the function of the narrator can be seen in this, in being a means of creating some mystical obscurity. When Arthur is first mentioned by Lady Louise, he is referred to as 'he', and the narrator simply repeats the pronominal reference instead of naming the character in his verse. Typically, the narrator recedes, instead of coming forward to make the situation of the characters clear, which thus remains enigmatic. Although the narrator's repeated references to the knell of the great bell for the dead suggest that the women are dead, Lady Alice talks about their state as captivity, "And there is none to let us go;/To break the locks of the doors below,/Or shovel away the heaped-up snow." Moreover, she continues, "And when we die no man will know/That we are dead," implying that they are not dead yet. The women are "between the wash of the tumbling seas," as the Damozels claim in their second line. First Lady Alice speaks as if they are locked in a tower where there is none "to shovel away the heaped-up snow," a few lines later, however, she exclaims, "But, alas! the sea-salt oozes through/The chinks of the tiles of the Closet Blue." The exact location of the women's captivity is not clarified by the narrator either. It seems that to the Pre-Raphaelite poet, mystery was more captivating than a clear narrative.

There is another way of the narrator adding to the mysterious quality of the poem, which is applying past tense forms consistently, as if all were settled and finished, yet he avoids providing comments to clarify what happened. In all his verses the narrator refers to death, but in a mysterious manner. There was a great bell in the Ladies' tower booming the knell for the dead, because the wind played on the bell, "And ever the great bell overhead/Boom'd in the wind a knell for the dead,/Though no one toll'd it, a knell for the dead." Through some obscure reason, there is a connection between the wind and the death of the characters, as the reader is allowed to conclude, and this creates suspense. Thus the peak point

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in the ballad is when suddenly the narrator says, "…the great knell overhead/ Left off his pealing for the dead,/Perchance, because the wind was dead," which is simultaneous with Lady Louise's meditating and praying with fear and desire. Will Arthur return, or is he dead forever? A red lily that shot up through the floor in the narrator's verse marks a turning point in the narrative: Arthur comes back to help the women cross the bridge to heaven.

Conclusion

The Pre-Raphaelite artists were inheritors of the romantic age. They almost never painted contemporary life, and turned to medieval subjects and art for more meaningful spiritual values. They composed art and poetry with a deliberate attempt to leave the audience guessing, so they painted subjects in medieval settings in search for the effect of mysteriousness. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's early watercolours can be seen as the artist's attempts to create art reflecting the artist's interior world and spiritual experience. Spiritual experience requires intensity of attention, and always ends in an act of learning, i.e. becoming conscious of some significant truth. The Pre-Raphaelite artists and poets regarded art and poetry as closely related modes of expressing artistic and poetic visions. A comparison of poem and image linked by inspiration evidences, as is the case with *The Blue Closet*, that it takes intense imaginative focusing and introspection to comprehend and experience meaning in art and poetry.

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