

Light, Architecture, and Awe in Rossetti's Early Annunciations

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WHEN Dante Gabriel Rossetti came to paint "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" in the winter of 1849-50 he brought with him a conception of the Annunciation in which three elements — light, architecture, and awe — play an important, indeed crucial, part. Although several writers, most notably Rossetti's fellow Pre-Raphaelite F. G. Stephens, have drawn attention to the presence of these elements in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!," for their function to be fully understood all three need to be seen as a *gestalt* which the artist used to body forth the profound Mystery of the Incarnation. In the following pages an attempt will be made to show how the three components of what might be called Rossetti's Annunciation *gestalt* can be seen to exist and function, not only in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" but also in a number of the poet-painter's earlier Marian works, particularly in his sonnet on "An Annunciation, Early German."

Sometime in 1847 Rossetti saw an "Early German" painting of the Annunciation at an auction room in London.¹ Standing in front of the painting, or perhaps recollecting it in tranquility afterwards, he composed the following sonnet:

The lilies stand before her like a screen
Through which, upon this warm and solemn day,
God surely hears. For there she kneels to pray
Who wafts our prayers to God — Mary the Queen
She was Faith's Present, parting what had been
From what began with her, and is for aye.
On either hand, God's twofold system lay:
With meek bowed face a Virgin prayed between.
So prays she, and the Dove flies in to her,
And she has turned. At the low porch is one



Ecce Ancilla Domini!

Who looks as though deep awe made him to smile.
Heavy with heat, the plants yield shadow there;
The loud flies cross each other in the sun;
And the aisled pillars meet the poplar-aisle.²

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing which particular painting inspired this sonnet. But from Rossetti's impressions of it we may speculate that it was a minor work of the school — a mid-fifteenth century off-shoot of Early Netherlandish painting — which produced such masterpieces as Roger van der Weyden's famous "Annunciation," now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the same artist's St. Columba Altarpiece from Cologne. Certainly Rossetti's mention of "lilies," of the "Dove [flying] in to" the Virgin, and of the various architectural features of the painting (the "screen" of lilies, the "low porch," and the "aisled pillars") are typical of what, with some licence, he calls "Early German" depictions of the Annunciation.

It is interesting to notice the knowledge of the Marian tradition which Rossetti brought to the "Early German" Annunciation in 1847. Not only is "Mary the Queen" "Faith's Present," but she is also the Mediatrix "who wafts our prayers up to God." In addition Christ's mother has a special place in the Divine scheme. "Parting what had been / From what began with her" she stands in history as a partition between two dispensations of time ("God's twofold system"): the Law (which her purification ended) and the Grace (to which her womb gave birth). There is perhaps even a touch of sacred *drôlerie*, certainly of fancifulness, in Rossetti's description of the "loud flies" which, in anticipation of the crucifixion, "cross each other in the sun" (i.e. form a cross). What is most important to notice here, however, is the emphasis placed in the sonnet, not only on the architectural structures which surround the Virgin in the "Early German" painting, but also on the numinous light and heat which suffuses her at the Annunciation. The day itself is not just "solemn," but warm; and so radiant is the sunlight that the atmosphere is "heavy with heat" and the "plants yield shadow there." We should

notice, too, the "deep awe" which causes the figure at the "low porch" — perhaps the announcing angel — to "smile" with joy at the moment he is sharing. Besides being an appreciation of "An Annunciation, Early German" and a competent poem in its own right, this sonnet contains the three elements — light, architecture, and "awe" — which, together with the lily and the Dove (the Holy Ghost), are the most important features of "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" begun over two years later.

It was on November 25, 1849 that Rossetti began to translate his conception of the moment of the Annunciation into pictorial terms.³ After the clutter of emblematic adjuncts which Rossetti had used to expound his theme in the "Girlhood of Mary Virgin," painted only a year earlier, it is something of a relief to discover how simply the Annunciation is depicted in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" Less than half a dozen emblems have been brought over from the earlier painting. Their collective significance in their new context is — borrowing a phrase from the second of the "Girlhood" sonnets — "to teach / That Christ" (*Works*, p. 173) has at last come to Mary. At the right fore-front of the picture space is the only obtrusively "prominent accessory"⁴ in the painting: the young Virgin's embroidered lily which, now completed, echoes the triadic⁵ lily stem which Gabriel seems to be presenting to the expectant mother of Christ. It may be observed that the middle lily on the stem held by the archangel is a bud about to burst open, about to come into being, like Christ, at the moment of the Incarnation. Between Gabriel and the Blessed Virgin is a haloed dove, the "Holy One," who no longer "abides without" (*Works*, p. 173) as in the "Girlhood of Mary Virgin," but has now entered the room and, like the one in the "Annunciation, Early German," "flies in to her." Through the open window at the rear of "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" a single tree is visible. It matters little whether this tree is a palm, as William Sharp asserts,⁶ or, as seems more likely, a plane or a cedar, for the allusion in any case

is to the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus, 24.3, 12-14, a text frequently associated with the Virgin: "I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus and as a cypress tree on the mountains of Hermon. I was exalted like a palm tree on the seashore . . . and as a fair olive tree on the plain; and I was exalted as a plane tree." According to F. G. Stephens, Rossetti placed a lighted lamp on the wall behind Mary's head in order that we might "suppose that the Virgin was aroused from sleep, if not from prayer, when the gentlest of archangels appeared [and] the light of Heaven filled the room. . . ."7 Evidently, the lighted lamp in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" functions on two levels. It is both an emblem of Mary's piety and faith (she is, in Rossetti's words, "Faith's Present") and an indication of the time of day (early morning) at which the Annunciation is occurring. Although the cumulative significance of the various attributes and emblems in the picture serve as an adequate and explicit gloss on what is taking place, the crux of any interpretation of "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" must be to explain its *implicit* symbolism. By comparison with the overt symbolism of "Girlhood" the subtlety with which the artist employs light, architecture, and facial expression ("awe") to depict the Mystery of the Incarnation in "Ecce" attests to the extent of his intellectual development in the period between the execution of the two pictures. Undoubtedly, the numerous religious paintings which Rossetti saw in the art-galleries and churches of Paris and Belgium in the autumn of 1849 made a significant contribution to this development. William Holman Hunt would later recall that "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" was painted in the "flush of returning from France and Belgium"⁸ in November, 1849. A close analysis of the painting in terms of the Annunciation *gestalt* of light, architecture, and awe will reveal the truth of H. C. Marillier's contention that Rossetti strove to "put all his thoughts and all his knowledge into it."⁹

William Michael Rossetti's observation that his brother's first sketch for "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" depicting the Virgin

“without any bedclothes on,” “may be justified in consideration of the hot climate,”¹⁰ while true at a literal level, completely misses the crucial significance of heat and light in the picture, a significance which Rossetti sought to embody in its dominant colour: white. F. G. Stephens’ brief but perceptive description of “Ecce” may serve as a convenient starting point for our speculations as to the meaning of the whiteness of Rossetti’s “white picture.”¹¹ “In a chamber whose pure white sides and floor exhibit an intensity of soft morning light,” Stephens writes, “the couch of Mary, itself almost entirely white, is placed close to the wall where dawn would strike its earliest rays, and with its head towards the window.”¹² Several other critics besides Stephens have called attention to the morning light which floods every corner of the Virgin’s chamber in “Ecce” and causes Gabriel “to yield shadow” across the couch of the mystical spouse. William Sharp refers to the “fulfilled dawn”¹³ of the painting and H. C. Marillier observes that “through the open window the . . . bright sun . . . [streams] into the room.”¹⁴ To enable the morning light to enter the chamber the blue arras behind the Virgin’s head has been pulled completely away from the window. There can be no doubt whatsoever that Rossetti arranged the furniture — the arras and the couch — within the Virgin’s chamber in “Ecce” with one end in mind: to signify that at the moment of the Incarnation Christ’s mother was suffused with the radiant light of the morning sun. Indeed, the first of the 1848 sonnets on the “Girlhood of Mary Virgin” outlines precisely the time and place of the Annunciation:

. . . one dawn at home
 She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
 At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed:
 Because the fulness of the time was come.
 (*Works*, p. 173)

Significantly, in “Ave,” Rossetti’s most extended treatment in poetry of the Virgin’s life, he likens her awareness of her destiny to the “birth of light” (*Works*, p. 167). F. G. Stephens’ remark, quoted a few moments ago, that it is the

"light of Heaven" which suffuses Mary on the morning of the Annunciation should suggest that there is more to the light of this "dawn" than literally "meets the eye."

To understand the symbolic significance of Rossetti's Annunciation "sunshine" and, indeed, to explain the position of the blue arras and the presence of the "white bed" in the Virgin's chamber in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" we must refer briefly to a Christian tradition that goes back at least to the beginning of the twelfth century. This is the tradition, traceable to Ivo of Chartres, that links the notion of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church (Ephesians 5,22-32) with the image of the sun as a "bridegroom coming out of his chamber" (Psalm 19, 4-6) to create the magnificently mixed metaphor of the Bridegroom-sun-Son and, in terms of the Annunciation, the figure of the Virgin as the bridal chamber of the sun-Son. It may be observed that Rossetti makes frequent use of the Bridegroom-sun-Son nexus both in his poetry and in his painting. The occurrence of the rather awkward compound "Godshine" (*Works*, p. 662) in the early (c. 1847) "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis" suggests that the sun-Son metaphor may be implicit in the "sun" (where the "loud flies cross each other") in the sonnet for "An Annunciation, Early German" and in the "sunshine" of the first "Girlhood" sonnet. Metaphors (or puns) may be translated most readily into pictorial terms by superimposing one figure upon another. This technique is used by Rossetti to express the sun-Son metaphor in "Dantis Amor" (1861), where Christ's head is superimposed upon the sun at the top-left of the design, and in "Mary Magdalene at the Door of Simon the Pharisee" (1858), where Christ's head is surrounded by a sun-like aureole. Moreover, Christ is described simply as the "Bridegroom" (*Works* p. 214) in Rossetti's sonnet to "Mary Magdalene." Whether or not Rossetti was aware of the scriptural derivation of the Bridegroom-sun-Son metaphor, it is clear that he had a thorough grasp of its artistic application. And it is equally clear that the metaphorical conceptions of Christ

as the Bridegroom and the morning sun and of the Virgin, the immaculately pure bride, as the chamber of the sun-Son are crucial to a full understanding of "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" Not only do these metaphorical conceptions explain the architectonic construction of the painting, the position of the white bed and the blue arras in relation to the open window in the Virgin's chamber, but they add resonance even to the colours of the bed and arras. White and blue signify, respectively, Purity and Faith, two virtues which are particularly appropriate to the bride of Christ at the Immaculate Conception. (Of course the blue arras also stands in for the Virgin's traditional hieratic blue cloak.) Since we are at pains to establish the importance of light and architecture in Rossetti's depiction of the Annunciation we may now summarize these two aspects of "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" Firstly the sunlight itself not only symbolizes but, in a very particular and real sense, is Christ; and, secondly, the window through which the sunlight enters the Virgin's chamber (and, indeed, the Virgin, herself the "Gate of Morn") is both the means and the symbol of God's entry into the house of human experience.

One more aspect of Rossetti's treatment of the Annunciation in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" remains to be considered — the "awe," the mixture of numinous fear and holy wonder, felt by the Virgin at the entry of God into her personal world. We have already noticed the "deep awe" which Rossetti ascribes to the figure in the "low porch" in his sonnet for "An Annunciation, Early German." And the lines from the first of the "Girlhood" sonnets in which the Virgin "felt awed" when the "fulness of the time was come" have already been quoted. In "Ave," too, it may be observed, Mary's "awe grew deep" at the moment of the Annunciation and, even before that, she is "awed . . . with meanings unfulfill'd" as the immense, personal significance of "God's high secret" (*Works*, p. 167) gradually dawns (the entirely appropriate word) on her. It is almost to be expected, then, that the physiognomy of the Blessed Virgin

in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" should convey a sense of what G. P. Boyce, when he first saw the painting, described as "growing religious awe."¹⁵ Her head is tilted slightly forward, recalling the "meek bowed face" of the Virgin in the sonnet for the "Early German" Annunciation. The face itself carries very little shadow on an almost translucent skin, with the result that our attention is focused on the profound darkness of the Virgin's eyes which seem to look inwards, in wonder, as well as at the lily stem in Gabriel's hand. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that Rossetti's sonnet on "A Marriage of St. Catherine" by Memling (which he saw in Bruges in November, 1849) provides, in its description of the "awe" which "possessed [St. Catherine's] eyes in thought" (*Works*, p. 190) at the moment of her mystical marriage to Christ, an entirely appropriate comment on the expression of the Blessed Virgin in "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" At this point it seems almost trite to note that, by many accounts, "awe" is the "very starting-point and fundamental element"¹⁶ of religious experience. And yet the repeated occurrence of "awe" in Rossetti's early depictions of the Christian Mysteries, as much as his carefully reasoned use of light and architecture, indicates once again how thoroughly he understood the significance and symbolism of the Incarnation when he came to paint "Ecce Ancilla Domini!" over the winter of 1849-50.

In the last analysis, it is probably true to say that nowhere is Rossetti's prodigious understanding of the Christian tradition in art more vitally evident than in his handling of the Annunciation *gestalt* of light, architecture, and awe in his paintings and poems of the late 'forties and early 'fifties.

NOTES

¹See, William M. Rossetti, "Notes," *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Ellis, 1911), p. 661.

²This and subsequent quotations from Rossetti's writings are taken from *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed., with a Preface and Notes by William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), in this instance p. 166. Hereafter cited as *Works*.

- ³See, William Michael Rossetti, *Praeraphaelite Diaries and Letters* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1900), p. 235. Hereafter cited as *PRDL*.
- ⁴William Michael Rossetti, "Notes on Rossetti and His Works," *Art Journal*, 46 (1884), 151.
- ⁵Cf. the "Threefold Plant" in the early (c. 1847) "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis" (*Works*, pp. 661-62) of which the Virgin is "the most greenly jubilant" leaf. The suggestion is that for Rossetti the three-flowered lily stem was a type of the Trinity.
- ⁶See, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan, 1882), p. 134.
- ⁷*Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1894), p. 56.
- ⁸*Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Macmillan, 1905), I, 193.
- ⁹*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Life and Art* (Rev. ed. London: G. Bell, 1904), p. 21.
- ¹⁰*PRDL*, p. 235.
- ¹¹*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, eds. Oswald Doughty and J. R. Wahl (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), I, 122 and 124.
- ¹²*Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 56.
- ¹³*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*, p. 134.
- ¹⁴*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial . . .*, p. 26.
- ¹⁵Cited in Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), No. 44 ("Ecce Ancilla Domini!").
- ¹⁶Maud Bodkin *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies in Imagination* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 229.
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