

## D. H. Lawrence's *Love Poems and Others* and Pre-Raphaelitism

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As Christopher Pollnitz notes, poems from D. H. Lawrence's *Love Poems and others* (1913), such as 'End of Another Home Holiday', 'Troth with the Dead' and 'The Drained Cup', quote directly from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet sequence *The House of Life* (1881) and his poem 'Sister Helen'.<sup>1</sup> Whilst other poems in the collection do not directly quote lines from Pre-Raphaelite poetry, they suggest a sustained engagement with Pre-Raphaelitism around the time of their composition. In *The White Peacock*, and his letters from 1909-1911, Lawrence frequently refers to Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art, mentioning his fondness for William Morris's poetry collection *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858).<sup>2</sup> Poems such as 'Wedding Morn', 'Kisses in the Train' and 'Michael Angelo' suggest a complex and nuanced engagement with Pre-Raphaelite poetics, drawing on the Pre-Raphaelite portrayal of femininity, sexuality and the interconnectedness of art and poetics.

All three poems focus on notions of sensuousity and sensuality through the representation of the body, and particularly in 'Kisses in the Train' and 'Michael Angelo', the act of kissing. This is most explicit in 'Kisses in the Train', where the persona sees the Midlands 'revolve through her hair', her 'pulsing throat', 'beating breast' and smells the 'scent of her flesh'.<sup>3</sup> The beloved's appearance is seemingly fashioned from Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. Rossetti, in his poetry and paintings like *Bocca Baciata* (1859), similarly enhances the sensuality and

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, Notes to The Poems, *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence: The Poems*, Volumes 1 & 2, ed. by Christopher Pollnitz, James Boulton, M. H. Black, Paul Poplawski, John Worthen, Rosetta Books (2018) Kindle edition, p.958, p.989 and p.1004.

<sup>2</sup> In 1911, Lawrence tells Louie Burrows that he has been reading William Morris's 'Defence of Guinevere', noting that he is 'rather fond of Morris. That should please you'. D. H. Lawrence, 'To Louie Burrows, 29 August 1911' in *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence, Volume 1*, ed. by James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), pp.298-299 (p.298).

<sup>3</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'Kisses in the Train', *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence: The Poems*, pp.148-150, li. 1, 5, 6- 11.

femininity of the represented figures, particularly through an attentiveness to their hair, mouths and details of dress. In his poem, 'The Blessed Damozel', with which Lawrence was familiar, the Damozel's mystical body is invested with symbolic significance, namely the 'three lilies' in her hand, the seven stars in her yellow hair and a 'white rose of Mary's gift'.<sup>4</sup> As a spiritual body, the Damozel continues to assume a fleshiness that makes her mystical body become physical, as the golden bar she leans 'her bosom' across is made 'warm'.<sup>5</sup> In both poems, the beloved become corporeal and spiritualised figures, assuming an presence-in-absence.

As Pollnitz notes, reviewers of Lawrence's collection, 'contrived dismissive-ness with enthusiasm', focusing on the irregularity of the verse and his treatment of sexuality which was 'disparaged as obsessive or commended as vigorously realistic'.<sup>6</sup> Ezra Pound, in his 1913 review for *Poetry* magazine, wrote: '*The Love Poems*, if by that Mr. Lawrence means the middling-sensual erotic verses in this collection, are a sort of pre-raphaelitish slush, disgusting or very nearly so'.<sup>7</sup> Pound's remark takes more issue with the eroticism associated with Pre-Raphaelitism, rather than the Pre-Raphaelites themselves. Pound aligns Lawrence to a Pre-Raphaelite sensibility and individualism. Pre-Raphaelite poetry, similarly to Lawrence's *Love Poems and others*, was denounced for its weirdness, intellectual weakness and its obsessive treatment of sexuality. In his rebuke of Pre-Raphaelite poetry for its eroticism or fleshiness, Pound must be aware that he is echoing Robert Buchanan, who in

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<sup>4</sup> Rossetti, 'The Blessed Damozel' in *D. G. Rossetti's Poetical Works*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey 1903), (pp.232), 5-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.233, 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Pollnitz, 'Early Reception, including *Love Poems and Others*', *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence: The Poems*, pp.782-783, (p. 783).

<sup>7</sup> Ezra Pound, 'Of *Love Poems and Others* by D. H. Lawrence' (1913), *Poetry* <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=65887>> [Date accessed: 15 November 2019], (pp.149-152, p.149).

his famous 1871 review dubbed both Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite associates, as 'the fleshy school of poetry'; attacking them for their determination to 'extol fleshiness'.<sup>8</sup> Pound had himself, attacked Buchanan in his poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) as abusing Rossetti and Swinburne.

Lawrence, like the Pre-Raphaelites, moves away from the male gaze of 'Kisses in the Train' to a self-conscious identification and articulation of desire by a female persona. This is the case for 'Wedding Morn', which like Morris's 'The Defence of Guenevere', is a dramatic monologue, imagining the morning after the persona's wedding night. The poems explore a knowing female sexuality and power. Guenevere is on trial for her life, defending herself, using her beauty to distract her accusers, inviting them to 'see my breast rise/ like waves of the purple sea' and to observe 'through my long throat how the words go up/ In ripples to my mouth'.<sup>9</sup> In 'Wedding Morn', the persona expresses her longing 'to see him sleep/ In my power utterly' and 'then he will be mine, he will lie/Revealed to me.'<sup>10</sup> As with the Pre-Raphaelites, the literary and the visual are closely aligned in Lawrence's poetry through his use of language and imagery. In 'Wedding Morn', 'the morning breaks like a pomegranate/ In a shining crack of red'.<sup>11</sup> In this poem and elsewhere, Lawrence, and Rossetti, connect the pomegranate, with its significance to the Persephone myth to female sexuality. Although written ten years later, in the introduction to the 'Fruits' section of the *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* Collection (1923), Lawrence states that 'fruits are all of them female, in them lies

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Buchanan, 'The Fleshy School of Poetry: Mr D. G. Rossetti', *Contemporary Review* 18, (1871), p.335.

<sup>9</sup> William Morris, 'The Defence of Guenevere' in *The Pre-Raphaelites: From Rossetti to Ruskin*, ed. by Dinah Roe, (London: Penguin 2010), pp.193-204, (p.201), ll. 226-7, 230-31. Similarly, the Blessed Damozel's prayers petition for the reunion with her earthly lover, depicting a sensuous longing which seeks for both his redemption and for communion with him, awaiting his death in order to fulfil her desire.

<sup>10</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'Wedding Morn', *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence: The Poems*, pp.83-84, li.25-26 and 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.83, .1-2.

the seed. And so when they break and show the seed, then we look into the womb and see its secrets'.<sup>12</sup> In Rossetti's *Proserpine* (1874) painting the combination of Proserpine's full red lips, her flowing hair and green dress, and her pose, with the rosy flesh of the pomegranate creates a sultry and sensual atmosphere. In Lawrence's poem, it becomes a symbol of awakening.

Lawrence's interart aesthetics is exhibited in 'Michael Angelo', as a mediation on the artist and the process of art. Like Rossetti, Lawrence had a lasting fascination with Michelangelo. Lawrence's 'Michael Angelo' and Rossetti's 'Michelangelo's Kiss' explore the notion of spiritual and physical creation, by focusing on the kiss, which is both a life force and death. For Lawrence, God is in the living moment, not detached from his creation and sculpting, with his 'warm' hands and 'kissed thee to a passion of life, and left life in thy mouth'.<sup>13</sup> For Lawrence, Michelangelo emphasised the divine moment in his sculpture by delighting in the glory of the body. Rossetti explores art and romantic love, and the love of art itself. In his sonnet, Michelangelo kisses the hand of his 'muse and dominant lady', Colonna, who is dying. The references to 'her' relate to both 'the Soul' and 'Art', through which Rossetti explores the dichotomies and interconnectedness of Michelangelo's soul, art and his beloved.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> D. H. Lawrence, Introduction to 'Fruits', in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, (New Hampshire: Sparrow Black Books 2008), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'Michael Angelo', *The Cambridge Edition of The Letters and Works of D. H. Lawrence: The Poems*, Rosetta Books (2018) Kindle edition, pp.93-94, li.5, 13-14

<sup>14</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in *D. G. Rossetti's Poetical Works*, p.224, li.7 (preceding sentence), and 9-10.

Lawrence's depiction of romantic love points to a continuity with Rossetti's and Morris's poetics, their interdisciplinary aesthetics and consciously responds to the duality between the mystical and physical in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and art.