The genius behind the first Pre-Raphaelite movement, an inspirer of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones and an underestimated poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) is also rightly identified as one of the sources of British aestheticism and a founding figure of European symbolism. But too often he has been treated as either poet or painter, and when I tried to bring the two together in the context of his dramatic life, a remarkable pattern emerged. What has been missed in accounts of this saturnine, anglicized Italian is the vital spring of his work.

In some respects a Romantic, he didn’t just intuit the overwhelming importance of sexuality in life, he made it his lodestar in life and art. The result was a sort of epistemology-cum-aesthetic grounded in libido, a consummate outsider, he ploughed a lonely furrow and was hounded to an early grave by public depression from his father; he was paranoid about the shadow of the Vita Nuova. Rossetti was a complex and contradictory emotion, and inwardly, his refusal to conform created a strong sense of personal alienation. In one sense all of Rossetti’s work is an expression of a struggle between the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit, between desire and conscience, and between the demands of society and freedom of the spirit. As a child he lived in a realm of kings, knights, ghosts, and legends. When he grew up, instead of turning away from these stories, they came to mean more and more to him. He ransacked the myths of Greece and Rome, the stories of the Middle Ages, and the legends of King Arthur for the expression of human desire. In this way, figures like Venus, Helen of Troy, Mary Magdalene, and Isolde came to represent the embodiment of the power of the libido. In his youth this power was called ‘love’ and it was in the poetry of Dante that he discovered its various shades and strengths. Above all, the character of Beatrice, guiding, gentle and benevolent, embodied the principle of love. So when in 1852 he met the strange redhead Elizabeth Siddal, she became his Beatrice and the couple acted out their nineteenth-century lives in the shadow of the Vita Nuova. Yet even now love for Rossetti was a complex and contradictory emotion, and when Siddal first appeared in a painting in 1852, Beatrice Meeting Dante at the Marriage Feast, that tension was apparent. Though the picture is filled with emblems of ripeness and fulfilment connected with the overwhelming importance of sexuality in life, he made it his lodestar in life and art.

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In a startling new biography of Rossetti, JB Bullen reconsiders why he was important.
marriage feast of the title, the principal subject involves 
discord in love. Beatrice stands at the centre with Dante 
and his friend Guido Cavalcante to the right. A 
malignant story about Dante has made her jealous 
and she refuses to acknowledge his salutation; he, in turn, is 
startled and hurt. The conflict is expressed in the stark 
line of the wall that vertically divides the picture, 
marking their physical and psychological separation.

New realms of desire opened up for Rossetti in the 
mid-1850s. He was asked to provide some illustrations 
for a collection of Tennyson’s poems, many of which 
were based on the legends of the Round Table. Going 
back to the originals, Rossetti discovered forms of 
desire very different from those in the poetry of Dante.

Le Morte d’Arthur offered a world where love was 
complemented by lust, where fidelity and betrayal went 
hand in hand, and both often led to violence and 
destruction. The watercolour Arthur’s Tomb (1855) 
gathers together some of these themes in a masterpiece 
of erotic tension. Lancelot violently demands a last kiss 
from Guenevere above the sculpted image of Arthur in 
a space so claustrophobic that the figures cannot even 
stand. The triangular relationship is replicated in the 
pattern played out between three heads, one 
theatrical to the right. A 

He began a series of female studies, 
exploring the paradoxes of sexuality

Verticordia, Lilith, Monna Vanna – the women of these 
paintings were frequently mythological and exotic, but 
with their luscious red lips, long enervated hands, and 
soulful, yearning expressions they are not so much 
portraits as emblems of desire. One model emerges 
most prominently from among them; Jane Morris. She 
and William Morris came from Kent to set up business 
in Queen’s Square, London. In the mid-1860s, Rossetti, 
then living in Chelsea, began to see more and more of 
them, and to make the most delicate and tender studies 
of Jane. Out of the passionately coruscating affair that 
followed came some of Rossetti’s most memorable 
paintings and his most explicit poetry. In a late work, 
Astarte Syriaca (1875), Jane is cast as a figure of primal 
sexuality, a Syrian Venus that predates the Greek 
and Roman goddess of love. Rising powerfully out of the 
darkness in a flimsy dark green dress, she bears down 
upon the spectator. As the accompanying sonnet 
suggests, her ‘twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon/
of bliss’ – her breasts and vagina - while her ‘love 
freighted lips and absolute eyes’ exercise a mesmeric 
control over her subjects. Rossetti’s relationship with
which he expressed that desire. Unlike most of his contemporaries he dared to explore the insistent pressures of sexuality, and to link them to spiritual aspiration. At a time when orthodoxies preached repression, he boldly claimed that the demands of the flesh were as important as those of the spirit. In this task the female form dominated and women in all their moods, strong and assertive, submissive and compliant, seductive and voluptuous, became the vehicles for the representation of the erotic life.

In his poetry, too, Rossetti’s subject was always women; the courtship of women, the adoration of women, and the loss of women. In his imagination, some of these women became more important than others. Beatrice, Guenevere, Mary Magdalene, and Isolde were what he called “dramatis personae of the soul”. In life and art he projected his anxieties, his pleasures, and his needs onto women so that Elizabeth Siddal, Jane Morris and others became for him Beatrice, Guenevere and Isolde. But this was a perilous activity filled with psychological danger. His passion for Jane Morris changed the course of her life and transformed her into a famous icon of Pre-Raphaelite beauty, but his treatment of Elizabeth Siddal, though it made her, too, an emblem of Pre-Raphaelitism, also acted as a catalyst for her suicide.

Critical writing usually divides Rossetti between the poet and the painter. Rarely are the two impulses treated as coming from the same source, and so often the connection between them is overlooked. Yet, I think that the springs of both can be found in his fascination with the working of the libido. Many of his contemporaries, to say nothing of later critics and some scholars, found this exploration of desire unacceptable, and on a number of occasions it was denounced as pornographic. But the demise of his reputation was not caused by scandal. The rise of Impressionism and then Post-Impressionism with its stress on ‘significant form’ made his work seem irrelevant. Finally it was strangled by the cool abstraction of European modernism and revived only in the 1960s in the form of languid posters for the walls of a new generation of self-styled romantics. With hardly a nude in his oeuvre, the erotic charge of Rossetti’s painting was entirely missed. Even now he remains somewhat misunderstood, though one clue to his greatness lies in the title of his most famous sonnet sequence The House of Life. Such a house has in it many rooms and Rossetti explored them with unprecedented candour. Some were sexual, others spiritual. But his mission was to transcend the Manichean division that separated flesh and spirit and, through the visionary power of art, reconcile these fundamental elements in human experience.

JB Bullen is Professor Emeritus at the University of Reading, where he has taught English Literature and art history for more than 25 years. Rossetti: Painter and Poet by JB Bullen was published by Frances Lincoln in October (£13.99 hardback). A major exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelites begins at Tate Britain in 2012.

To claim one of five free copies of Rossetti: Painter and Poet, visit www.oxfordtoday.ox.ac.uk/rosetti