

William Michael Rossetti's "Greek sonnets": revolt through time and space

Raphaël RIGAL

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Abstract

Despite their friendship and professional ties with several members of the Greek diaspora, the Rossetti siblings rarely mention contemporary Greece in their works. There is no shortage of references to Ancient Greece in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnets and dramatic monologues, or in Christina Rossetti's poetic work; but the political turmoil of 19th century Greece is often shadowed by Italy and France.

Things are different in William Michael Rossetti's collection *Democratic Sonnets*, written between 1841 and 1881. Although they were not published simultaneously with the other poems in 1907, two sonnets initially planned for this collection deal with contemporary Greece. Of these two sonnets, one has previously been transcribed by L. Arinshtein and W. Fredeman, in an article published in March 1971: "The Cretan Insurrection". One of the drafts of the Angeli-Dennis collection at the University of British Columbia could be the other, entitled "Greece" in William Rossetti's papers.

Beside the identification of the second "Greek sonnet", my goal in this paper is to present these poems, and the way they fit in the general corpus of Rossettian political poems. Indeed, all three Rossetti siblings make abundant use of time and space, in a way that makes these concepts politically powerful, and these sonnets are no exception: they feature a blend of classical references and very contemporary echoes, which aims at the creation of an eschatological and performative chronotope in which revolution is made possible. By reading the events of contemporary Greece through the lens of Antiquity, W. M. Rossetti does not so much fetishize Greece as he establishes a bridge between the golden age of the country and its recent reawakening, suggesting the possibility for other countries to follow this path.