

# D .G. Rossetti's Trip to Paris and Belgium: A Journey Between Past and Present

Raphaël RIGAL

June 2, 2023

---

## Abstract

In 1849, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt undertook a trip to France and Belgium, with the specific goal of visiting art collections in Paris, Brussels, Bruges, Antwerp and Ghent. Despite not being as exotic as the expeditions of Richard Burton or David Livingstone, this trip was particularly meaningful, not only because of the context (the early years of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and soon after the 1848 Revolutions) but also because it was related by Rossetti himself, who wrote a series of poems during the journey and sent them in letters to his brother William Michael and some other members of the Brotherhood. These poems, collectively gathered under the title “A Trip to Paris and Belgium”<sup>1</sup>, focus on different aspects of the trip: some of them describe the journey itself, by boat, train, or coach, from London to Antwerp and back; some of them describe places and events, for instance their arrival and connection in Paris; some others let transpire historical and political commentary under a sheen of monumental ekphrasis.

This paper will focus first and foremost on one major characteristic of these poems: the contrast between travel poems properly speaking, that is to say the texts describing the journey, and what I would call “static poems”, the texts written in the places visited. This contrast will be used as the basis to study the Pre-Raphaelite ambiguous modernity, and Rossetti's artistic blend of the fast-paced movement of modernity and the contemplative remembrance of things past. This will help identify two hallmarks of Pre-Raphaelitism, which are the use of progress and modernity to get closer to an ideal (and idealized) past, and the omnipresence and necessity of movement, even in seemingly static poems. This reflection might be extended to the Victorian era in general, torn between a longing for Progress and a quest for the past, in order to reestablish the position of Pre-Raphaelitism not only as a proto-modernist attempt by semi-outcasts, but as an artistic cristallisation of a whole era.

---

<sup>1</sup>I will rely on McGann's 2003 *Collected Poetry and Prose* and to the extended sequence that is included there; references might still be made to earlier editions, such as the sequences published by William Michael Rossetti in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.